

**Not a flotation device**



**Peter Frankis**

# **Not a flotation device**



***Mockingbird***

*Not a flotation device*

ISBN 978 1 74027 411 1

Copyright © text Peter Frankis 2007

Cover photo: A non-flotation device, Yass, NSW  
– thanks, Louise – copyright © Peter Frankis 2007

First published in this form 2007 by

**GINNINDERRA PRESS**

PO Box 6753 Charnwood ACT 2615

[www.ginninderrapress.com.au](http://www.ginninderrapress.com.au)

Printed by Pirion Digital, Fyshwick, ACT

# Contents

To the lake again	7
Happy now	15
Hollow	27
Unlimited Prizes	37
In the Emerald Hotel	49
The family Powerpoint	61
The winter parrot	69
Touch	91
38	103
A little turbulence	109
The Martian Gardener	119
What has been written	129

To my father, who taught me that you can't just drift along,  
you've got to be swimming in the current.

## To the lake again

Janey was in the car and the car was in the lake again.

She looked out at the cathedral columns of weed and the parallels of brown light and thought of nothing – no regrets, no concerns, no consideration. She was adrift beneath the surface of thinking and she had about two minutes of air – plenty of time. Plenty.

Water bubbled up through the carpet and poured in through demister vents, soaking everything.

Looking up through the windscreen, she saw the world above as a dinner plate, a porthole into a lighter brighter world.

And then the frowning face of her mother appeared, looking down at her as if she were down a well. ‘I knew you’d end up this way. You were the kind of daughter that was always going to end up in a lake.’ Her mother’s mouth was pressed into a line of disappointment and unsurprise.

Janey began, ‘How can you say that? I’ve always...well, I’ve tried.’ But there was something about distance and all the water between them that stopped her. Maybe her mother was simply stating a fact, the sureness of a mother’s foreknowledge.

Water bloomed around her feet and she smiled kicking about, splashing like a child out in a storm.

She looked up again. Her mother was still there but then her father, heavy and run down as always, took his wife by the shoulders and turned her away without even a glance for his youngest daughter.

Her sister Fel peered down for a moment grinned and tossed a pebble into the lens, causing it to wobble and flex and bend and tremble. Then she too was gone.

Janey raised a hand in half-hearted farewell but the view was already empty but for the long blue autumn sky fringed with the yellow of the turning trees at the lake's edge.

What is this, thought Janey, a parade of my life? I'm not drowning here – well, not yet anyway, although there was a twinge as the waters rose over her knees and spilled exuberantly into her lap. She turned to the passenger seat, where Hugh was frantically tugging at the seatbelt, a wild look in his eyes. Calmly she reached across and clicked his release.

Now he started shoving the car door, leaning into it with woofing noises and then he wound his window down and the lake poured in. 'C'mon,' he said.

'You go,' she said.

'You're crazy.'

Janey knew it was just the fear in him talking. 'I'll be fine,' she said. 'Here.' She pressed the cassette into his hand.

And then he was out and gone through the window, his stupid boat shoes coming adrift, his red socks vanishing upwards the last she saw of him.

How funny that it was that Lucinda Williams tape. Janey didn't much like country music but the lorn voice and pained lyrics spoke to the empty dry blown places in her heart. She used to play it driving along, volume up to 10, windows sealed singing away about highways and yearning and gasoline and starting fires and by the time she'd get to Hugh's place she'd be feeling just fine.

How ironic. It was that cassette, or the reaching for it, that put her in the lake the first time. They'd been driving and careless,



Hugh had tossed it into the back. Later, according to the police report, while she'd been scrabbling about looking for it her knee had knocked the shift into neutral and the car had rolled on into the lake. Simple as that.

And what was Hugh in the driver's seat doing all that time? He was ogling her breast through the side of her top, that's what. Not that she minded but while he was busy perving and adjusting himself and talking earnestly about the future and their life together after he got his law degree they were rolling over the kerb, gone past the edge, heading lakewards.

That was then and this is now.

After Hugh had gone, the lake pushed in and lifted her up in her seat so that her face was up against the roof with the last few litres of air. Her limbs, her legs and arms and her hair were already free, moving in the run of the water. She was ready; now all she had to do was wait. He would come, she was certain. There, out in the lake the diver was already circling, watching out of range.

\*

The first time he was there all of a sudden, up against the glass.

She remembers how he'd raised her up out of the car – that was exactly it, raised her up like salvation – and they'd travelled together beneath the waters. She remembers being still almost lifeless yet conscious and rising towards the daylight and, despite her body's air-hunger, she had hoped that they might never reach the surface, just keep travelling on.

Then she was out of the water with the day glistening all about her. And the diver was speaking to her earnestly while she perched on the concrete lip shivering.

He was quite insistent: 'People think that something magical happens at the moment at which they step off the bridge. They think they'll be transported to some better place on angels' wings or that it's not really happening to them and they can just sit back and watch, like it's TV. That may be,' he said fiercely. 'But I haven't seen any of it. Just perforated eardrums and smashed-up bones and stalky eyes popped out of their sockets.' He talked quickly. At her, not for her to listen but to stop her drifting off into the seductive warmth of hypothermia.

Obediently, she nodded, watching him lying in the water half-in and half-out, his torso propped up on his elbows, his long legs still in the water as sleek and competent as a seal.

What are you? She had wanted to ask but stopped. What kind of question is that?

But it was this question that she thought about later – later when they winched her up in an aluminium stretcher bouncing off the cliff face – later in the ambulance wrapped like a chook in thermawrap – later in the ward while the interns asked their questions and measured her biometrics – pulse, temperature, vital signs, albumen in her urine and said calming things like 'You've had an adventure and 'You're all right now' as if she'd gone deaf or had become an imbecile.

Dr Lineweaver, the psychiatrist said, 'We're going to keep you in for observation.' And there unsaid amongst all the waving weeds of his words was the pleading: 'Please be OK, won't you? You've got no reason now – *to want to drown yourself* – have you?'

Janey had no time for any of this nonsense and lay in the bed looking at the ceiling thinking about the diver. She couldn't get past the contradiction between his lecture and the fact that he was really magic in three dimensions.

Later she slept –

– and woke to find the light gone and her sister perched on the end of her bed smoking.

‘You’ve really done it,’ Fel said, rolling her eyes. ‘Mum’s started freezing.’

‘Jeez,’ said Janey sitting up and reaching for a drag.

They both knew what that meant. Their mother only started cooking and freezing meals – casseroles, soups, suet puddings – in times of direst emergency. They could count the times: when their father left the first time, when her brother was diagnosed and for two weeks before every Christmas. It was her way of coping.

‘It was an accident,’ Janey started. ‘Stupid Hugh. He’s not – ?’

‘You lucked out there. He’s home and is going on and on about the end of his legal career and what a fruit biscuit you are.’

Janey thought that this was a bit of an overreaction but then Fel grinned.

‘You haven’t seen the papers, have you? She held up today’s edition. ‘Here, let me.’ She read, ‘A man and woman had a lucky escape from a late-model Gemini that rolled into the lake yesterday. Now get this,’ her sister pronounced, ‘The woman was found by the side of the lake *in a state of undress* and was taken to St Alban’s hospital. The man has refused to comment.’

‘Undress? I lost my shoes.’ Janey grabbed the paper from her sister and reread the article. ‘Shit.’

Fel chuckled and blew a smoke ring at the green ceiling.

This all happened on a Monday; they let her out on a Tuesday with a box of Normacin (which she tossed) and her sodden handbag; she hung around home on Wednesday, rang work and told them

she had a certificate until next week and went to a disaster movie on Thursday;

Friday she borrowed Mum's car and drove to Hugh's place. 'C'mon, Hugh, let's go for a drive. It'll be OK. '

'It won't be OK. Do you know what this means? If I have a police record, then I can't practise. This fucks our plans, you know. I thought we agreed.'

Janey thought about their plans. For the five years they'd been going out, off and on Hugh had been talking about this stuff: what they'd do together, how he couldn't possibly commit to anything until he'd finished his studies, Yes, it was a long time but the sacrifice would be worth it. To the reborn Janey, this all seemed so flat, so two-dimensional. She pictured them living in a cartoon city: a smiling Hugh in a smart navy jacket holding hands with a dowdy cartoon Janey (how did this happen?). She closed her eyes and noticed how cartoon Janey had been drawn with a downcast mouth and was wearing socks and a lumpy green cardigan. In the next panel, Janey was turning away and the sun had come out and doves were circling above. But now cartoon Hugh was downcast.

'Is that it?' said the real Hugh. 'Things change? There's nothing else? An explanation?'

She knew it was just the anger in him talking. And there really wasn't anything else. The rest was just detail and she wasn't about to explain to him what had happened down in the lake. Instead she told him a story as she drove:

There's a tradition on the Greek islands, once a year at the Festival of the Epiphany where they celebrate St John's baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The local priest brings the crucifix down from the church, strides out onto the pier and throws the gold cross far out

into the harbour. And all the young men of the town rush to dive in after it. Whoever retrieves the cross wins a blessing for a whole year. He's remembered in prayers every Sunday and the old women light candles for him.

It's an act of faith – imagine the cross turning in slow motion as it leaves the priest's hand. See on the priest's face for just a moment a look of doubt – what if it was lost? What if the divers couldn't find it down there among the oyster beds and the cloaking weed? And if the waters were murky or the tides too strong or the divers distracted where would they be? What is a church without a crucifix? Would the congregation sit there on future Sundays all staring at the outline on the wall where it had once hung? What kind of bad luck would certainly befall them?

Imagine the golden cross lying there on the seabed flickering in the refracted sunlight, a beacon to the worthy or the lucky. And through the depths the diver comes.

Hugh shook his head. 'Where do you get this stuff from anyway?'

'Here we are,' Janey said as they pulled up. The sun was brilliant on the water and they looked across at the far shore, the marble buildings all in a row like headstones in a lawn.

Then Janey turned to him.

His eyes widened. 'You're not?'

She grinned, dropped the brake and the car rolled forward. 'Here we go.'

\*

Now with the pressure equalised, Janey opened the car door and stepped out onto the floor of the lake. The mud sucked at her feet and held her shoes fast. A cloud of silt bloomed around her.

He's not here. He's not coming. She pulled free and took a step

then another. Shoeless, she felt sharp shells and grit on the soles of her feet. Well, if the diver wasn't coming, she'd better find the way herself. She looked about and then started moving slowly through the lacustrine world, a place of mud and weed and drowned cars and bug-eyed corpses just beneath our world. Already she was moving with more confidence now, walking towards the brightness over there – walking and becoming as if these were the same thing.

# Happy now

## Satan asks

– Well?

– I never thought much about it. Certainly, I never believed any of this was likely. But I guess it's what you don't know that trips you up. I've always thought of myself as...well...moral.

## clearer

Leonard was well on the path of righteousness and it was giving everyone the shits. You could see it in the way his little eyes sparkled and his pink tongue would dart out and wet his lips when he talked to you. What he'd bought was crap, and disappointment was sure to follow.

I told him as much but my chiding made no impression; his convictions were unassailable. He would lean against my office door, all underarms and shirtbuttons straining and say things like 'Roy, how can you know where you're going without a map?' or 'You've gotta be the man with the plan' and 'It won't happen until it's written down.' And he had goals and was doing mantras daily, getting closer and closer, nearer and clearer and dearer.

The *Manage Your Life* starter kit even came with a little plastic wallet of cards each with a single word printed on it. Every so often, even when he was supposed to be paying attention, he'd flip the wallet out and silently mouth today's selection: 'FOCUS', 'INTENSITY', 'STEELY'.

I told him that all his jabbering and ring-bound manuals weren't getting my work done, and besides by then I had my own transformation to worry about.

## **onion skin**

It began on one of those spring afternoons when perfumed breezes call from shady groves and all you want to do is lie sweet on the new-mown grass squinting up into the sunshine. Instead I was slumped in the second hour of a seminar on the Marginson Sanction. For his own amusement, the head beagle was parading his \$100,000-a-year private school education by discoursing on the Greek derivation of some participle or other, and all the juniors were wagging their tails thinking how one day they'd be up there, and how there'd be some changes then boyo.

Meantime, on the other side of the room, I'd had no luck flirting with Didi, the russet-haired beauty from payroll, so I was staring out the window watching as shadows engulfed the building opposite, consuming the brilliant afternoon and my whole life.

At some point I remember leaning back, running my hands through my hair and...youch!

Feigning gas, I left the meeting and ducked into the Men's. And there in the mirror's reflection I saw them: two inflamed spots just above the hairline. That's great, I thought, boils and craters – the fair moon that was Didi moved further out of my orbit, the likelihood of stellar collisions now even more remote. I rubbed at one and a layer of onion skin came away revealing a hard little white patch. Now I'm thinking oh no, melanoma – payback for all those years fried black on the beach – I'm thinking wart virus, I'm thinking health crisis. Of course back then I had no idea.



## health crisis (1)

Even though the morning newspapers had been headlining the epidemic for weeks now, the commuter express was as chock-full as ever. The feverish driver waved us on past the broken ticketing machine and inside, someone was coughing up a lung and an old man in the pensioner seats was trying to stem the wash from his nose with the sleeve of his jacket. Even the elegant beauty who hung on next to me had it. One minute she was reading something literary and uplifting, smiling a distracted otherworldly smile, and next she's gulping and swallowing, her eyes rolling back in her head. Then her mouth opened wide so that we could see her back fillings and she sneezed, issuing a warm spray, every droplet an ocean of viral ecology, over us all.

Work wasn't much better. Our building has always been bad for aerosol infections. Monday Janey's got the sniffles from her three-year-old who's picked up something from day-care and by Thursday all of Accounts Receivable are out. It's like working in a Petri dish with air-con. And by this time the government had started compulsory home disinfections so, when it was their turn, people had to stay home and wait for the fumigators. That said, most people managed to struggle in: it was still early days.

## 6 good things

– I am not bad.

– Prove it, he says smiling devilishly.

1. I sponsor Lavinia, a five-year-old in Ghana. She writes and tells me how grateful she is and I have a photo of her in my office. Last Christmas I sent her a cardigan.
2. On Saturday, I found a woman's purse. It was a cheap vinyl thing but there was a photo of a cat, a fat tabby yawning up at

- the camera. It must be someone's so I went out of my way to dial the phone number on the back but it was disconnected. Instead I propped it on a fence where the owner could easily find it.
3. I gave directions to an old Aboriginal man the other day who was down from Gunnedah and was lost. His eyes were all milky and he'd been drinking even though it was only 8 in the morning.
  4. I put up with Leonard...
  5. ...and I always give something when anyone's collecting for a morning tea or a going-away present and I never ask for change.
  6. etc.

## encounter

The patches on my forehead had progressed from blistering swellings through tremulous tumescences to eruptions and outbreaks: horns! I was growing horns.

Leonard didn't notice at first. 'What do you think?' he asked, handing me the brochure.

It was from Enquist Corp., the *Manage Your Life* people. This time (for a price) they promised to reveal further necessary keys to success at a weekend retreat. The text was illuminated with gleaming testimonials: 'I dared to achieve...and look at me now', 'The only thing keeping me back was me', 'For a sharper exterior renovate your interior.'

On the back of the pamphlet was a photograph of the tanned and coiffured über-entrepreneur Roald Enquist himself, looking both smugly paternal and provocative: daring you to attend his workshop, daring you not to.

'I *really* need this,' Leonard said. 'They're advertising the level fives and I've got to be ready.' He had been an acting four for thirty-seven months now, an office record.

‘A person can have too much change,’ I tried.

He looked up and noticed my new accessories. ‘Well,’ he said huffily, ‘somehow *you* ’ve managed to change.’

‘But it hasn’t made me happier.’

‘That’s because you haven’t got a plan,’ he replied smugly.

I guess he had a point.

## **authority (1)**

As well as a pair of six-inch scratch-glass horns, after a few days of seated soreness I discovered that I had also sprouted a small pink tail.

Naturally, I tried to disguise these changes: wore baggy shorts and a Bulls cap with holes cut out. I’d creep into work early, keep the light dim, the door closed and try to hide out. But people still noticed and sure enough, come Wednesday there’s Levinson’s EA on the phone – could I just pop up as the Director wanted a word, yes, right now please.

Levinson had a de luxe suite on a sunny corner of level 25 with floor-to-ceiling views out to the harbour: you could see the sail boats lined up like moths on a water bowl. So I’m standing there in an oblong of sunshine, cap in hand my form now obvious. And there’s Mrs Rodent from HR in her orange power suit perched on the rim of one of the black calfskin chairs, lipgloss drawn into a silent O, eyes wide taking me in.

Levinson looked up and smiled. ‘Roy. Sit, sit.’

‘I’d rather stand. It’s...’

He eyed the lump in my pants. ‘Of course.’

And then he did a funny thing. He must have been on one of those negotiating courses because to put me at my ease he stood up. Seeing this, the Rodent got up also. So there we were, all three standing uncomfortably in a room full of deliciously inviting leather furniture.

‘Now look,’ he started. ‘About your...’ He gestured vaguely. ‘There’s not going to...this isn’t going to...be a claim?’

I hadn’t even thought about it.

‘Because something like this, on top of this flu thing, it’d just fuck our premiums, wouldn’t it, Grace?’

The Rodent nodded, pressing her folder tight against her tangerine bosom, never taking her eyes from me.

He continued, ‘Fuck them right royally.’

‘It’s a personal thing,’ I offered.

Levinson seemed pleased by this. ‘That’s it. We’ll call it personal, er...a personal development. What do you think, Grace?’

Grace wasn’t saying anything she was just staring.

## **seducing Didi (1)**

When I got back, the phone was ringing.

It was Didi. ‘I thought you were...well, dull,’ she said. ‘But since you’ve changed.’

‘You’ve noticed – ?’

‘Well, yeah.’

‘Aren’t you – ?’

‘No, not at all. I find it – ‘

‘Disturbing? Unsettling?’

‘Exciting.’

## **television (1)**

After the evening news they had started running an advisory program with an expert panel: a doctor, a chemist and a young priest in a black skivvy. And they’re trying to do the right thing, telling us about boiling water and hygiene.

‘What your viewers have got to understand,’ said the doctor, ‘is

that it's a virus. It's tiny, really teeny-weeny.' He held his thumb and forefinger really close together to illustrate.

'The best thing is bleach,' said the chemist. 'Wash everything in bleach.'

'Lemon-scented or original?' asked the moderator.

'Bleach bleach!' replied the chemist, shirtily. 'It doesn't matter as long as it's bleach, and boil everything for three minutes at least.'

The moderator turned to the priest. 'So this plague, is God punishing us for something?'

The priest shrugged his shoulders. 'I doubt it. Why would he bother?'

## **zone is not a verb**

It was the Monday after Leonard's encounter weekend and first thing he pushed into my office and started blubbing. 'I've lost it,' he sniffed. 'I just don't believe.'

'Have you reviewed your goals?' I asked.

This set off a further storm of huffing and snivelling. 'Yes, yes, YES. Everything, goals, indicators, recited my daily affirmations, I've even rung the last-resort emergency help line but they laughed at me. Laughed! I think they were in a restaurant or something.'

'You were doing so well,' I offered. 'Achieving all that stuff.'

'It doesn't mean shit.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out the card wallet. 'Here, tell me what does *exemplify* mean?' He tore the card in two. 'Or *maximise* or *zone*? What does *zone* mean? It's not even a verb.' By then he had all the cards out and was trying to tear the whole bunch in two but he only succeeded in bending them and turning bright red. 'AaaaAAGHHH.' He threw them to the floor.

Then he turned to me, his little eyes sparkling. 'Roy...am I a *good* man?'

With my horns, goatee and twitching tail I was hardly the right person to be asking.

‘Good is as good does, Leonard.’ It was the only thing that came to mind but it seemed to give him some relief.

I looked down at the strewn cards and the funny thing was that now they all looked the same: THE JOKE’S ON YOU.

## **health crisis (2)**

Although I’d managed not to knock anything over or scratch or tear or rip, my tail had become a problem. Any time I wanted to remain unemotional and detached, it would be standing upright and jiggling about.

And they wouldn’t let me on the bus. ‘Not without your owner,’ said the driver, pointing to a sign showing a dog silhouette bisected by a forbidding red diagonal.

This couldn’t go on, so come lunchtime I headed for St Vincent’s, hopeful that something might be done. But the hospital was overflowing with sniffing sneezing wheezing coughing and gulping citizens, so many that they had spilled out onto the asphalt apron and were sitting on makeshift chairs or propped patiently against rails and walls.

And there at the back of the line was the young television priest, now holding a soggy cloth over his nose.

‘I saw you the other night,’ I said.

‘Unnhunngg,’ he replied without looking up.

Despite his reduced state, I had to ask him. ‘Do you believe it, what you said, or was it just for TV?’

‘Snuhhhh.’

‘Because if God is indifferent, then none of this means anything.’

I’d meant the moaning sea of sickness before us but instead he looked at me, taking in my shape through streaming eyes.

‘Ifffssss gobbbbs sswill.’

‘What?’

‘Gobb, gobb!’

And then clear as a bell I heard him say, ‘It will set you free,’ before re-burying his face into his sodden handkerchief.

I decided not to tell him about Satan.

## **tells Satan**

– So what does it mean?

– You tell me.

– What does the form of something mean? Is a woodpecker that shape because of some inner woodpeckerness descended from the first enumeration of woodpeckers? Or a loaf of bread, or the flash of silver over-leaping a net a certain referent to the original defining idea of fish?

– Form follows function, Roy. He tapped his horns pointedly.

Without thinking, I felt my hands reaching to do the same.

## **seducing Didi (2)**

My transformation was nearly complete: my horns had developed a raking curl, I’d become hairy all over and my fingers and toes had coalesced into tough bony plates. But since office machines were designed for upright bipeds with articulated filaments, photocopying now presented me with incomprehensible trouble.

I was in the utility room pawing at a jammed Xerox when Didi walked in.

‘I thought I’d frightened you off,’ she said, standing right up close so I could smell her perfume and hear all the possibilities in her words.

‘I’ve been busy.’

‘I can see that,’ she replied stroking my mane. ‘Here, let me,’ she said and bent down and reached deep into the copier’s overheated interior with her slim ivory fingers.

It was just then that Mrs Rodent, on patrol, saw us – the monstrously deformed clerk bending over beauty. She panicked, backing along the corridor bawling.

## **authority (2)**

The alarm that had been wailing away for half an hour stopped and in the ringing silence they announced, ‘All trouble has been contained. Please return to your cubicles and continue to work.’

Management’s current position was as unreliable and dubious as all their other pronouncements and so was ignored by the few remaining who huddled together in groups.

Meanwhile, the guards who had been sent to get me were bunched up at the end of the corridor. Someone had issued them with batons and helmets but they weren’t trained for anything like this: they were tentative and jittery peering at us through their riot shields.

I stamped my hoofs and they backed away. On what they get paid I couldn’t blame them but I knew a more committed force would be coming soon enough.

And I had to see Leonard.

We found him at his desk amongst the usual disarray holding a letter – a look of smiling wonder on his round beet-red face.

‘I’ve done it.’

‘It’s time to go, Leonard.’

He handed me the letter. He’d been promoted: after three years finally he had made it.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Didi whispered, her breath close in my ear.

Leonard smiled at us benevolently like a father to his impatient



children: ‘You go on. I can’t. I’ve got so much to do, these new responsibilities.’ His hands scuttled aimlessly over the fan of papers.

### **seducing Didi (3)**

Maybe this was a dream; maybe I was awake at last.

I’m galloping down the corridor with Didi astride my back, her fist in my mane. Unbound, her hair streams behind us like a pennant. Next we’re out in the atrium, the grille is coming down and the alarm is whooping away. But gates cannot hold us, they fly apart. A flick of my will and glass shatters, concrete explodes.

My steely hoofs kick sparks from the road as we gallop through the city of the damned. Everywhere we see how the inhabitants are tormented: signs and billboards of perfection provoke yearning and nowhere is unoccupied – so turning away from desire is impossible. Demons in smart black suits poke the pedestrians with pitchforks, laughing all the time.

Seeing all this, Didi cries out. She’s so sweet.

### **the palace of wisdom**

After a time, we left the city behind and came at last to the sea, shallow endless out to the horizon. So we started walking with only the blue sky and the swell of the clouds to measure our progress. After sloshing through empty days and spangled nights, we came at last to the shores of another continent. We climbed mountain ranges, traversed savannahs and finally we arrived at the celestial realm.

And there was a gate (or a grate) and an angel with a flaming sword waiting for us. She directed us to look through onto Paradise, which seemed to be mostly treed lawns, sprinklers and a white marquee down by a duck pond. We saw our friends, people from the office, our dead and complete strangers chatting away, lolling

about in a kind of amiable purposelessness. The angel raised an eyebrow, as if to say behold the end of your journey, ask and the gates shall be opened.

I would have loved to have seen the look on her face but our turning away was part of the required theatre, like Eve and Adam looking only towards what was ahead of them – drought and digging about and sweat and grandkids running all over. Even today I still imagine all the possible expressions on that Angel's face: annoyance, incredulity, admiration, envy.

Having Satan as a neighbour is not as bad as you might think. He even babysits for us when we go to the cinema and while he sometimes has trouble choosing an appropriate bedtime story, we agree we could have done a whole lot worse.

## **and Satan asks**

– happy now?

# Hollow

Dayna was driving me nuts. ‘But Henry, it’s three in the morning,’ she whined from the darkened bedroom.

‘How can you sleep at a time like this?’ I hunched closer to the television. One day I’m really going to...

‘What’s that?’ she called. ‘Stop muttering, for Chrissake. I hate it when you mutter.’

‘I said there could be breakthroughs.’ Louder this time. ‘The news said for us to stay tuned and that’s just what I intend to do.’

‘Well, why don’t you just marry the news?’ She flumped down in the bed with the pillow over her head.

BACK TO THE STUDIO.

AN EARNEST NEWSREADER TURNS TO THE CAMERA. AN IMAGE OF THE WORLD WITH A DARK CIRCLE OBSCURING THE PACIFIC AND SOUTH AMERICA IS PROJECTED OVER HIS SHOULDER.

NEWSREADER: ...in Stockholm the panel of quantum physicists are struggling to find any certainty at all. The Borscht representative appears briefly but vanishes as soon as anyone notices he’s in the room; things look hopeless. More from Joan Plum.

CUT TO:

JOAN STANDING IN THE SNOW, A DARK GRANITE BUILDING LOOMS IN THE BACKGROUND.

JOAN: With only three days until they are due to report to the

Security Council, the prospects of the panel reaching consensus are dimming hourly. I'm joined by the panel's chair, Professor Wilfred Fensbo... Professor, is it true that at current rates the world will be completely hollow in three years?

PROFESSOR: Our best saddlelite measurements show zee mass of zee earth iz shrinking, und with it gravity. How long vill id take? Zat iz zee ten-thousand-dollar question No? Jah? Eh?

JOAN: Is there anything we can do?

PROFESSOR: Do? No no. I zink we've done enough already, don't you?

'Poopee. Come to bed.' She was at it again.

I am not sleeping while this is going on. I've watched all the big broadcasts – Gulf War one and two, 9/11 (over and over), hijackings, floods, plagues. Every day, every moment the news is renewed with miracles, murders and the moral bankruptcy of institutions and now comes the story of a lifetime – the world being consumed from the inside by some kind of vacuum strangelet particle. They never come right out and say it of course but if they don't fix it we're all going to perish in some horrible spaghetti-like stretching where our toes will go out to infinity as we watch.

'We're all going to die, you know,' I called over my shoulder.

'So what's news about that?' she snapped back.

## BACK TO THE STUDIO.

NEWSREADER: While speculation continues on who's responsible for the hollowing, there's no doubt that things are getting lighter. So how are the unflappable citizens of New Yen City coping? We cross to Ruby Gales, who's downtown for World Nightly News.

CUT TO:

RUBY GALES ON A BUSY CITY STREET.

RUBY: Excuse me, sir, what do you think?

CITIZEN: It's them dang scientist fellas. Guvmint should have pulled the plug on that supercollider when they reached 10,000 KeV. Nothin good was ever going to come of all that tinkering around, smashing atoms about. If we was meant to know the universe's secrets, the Almighty would have said something by now. Stands to reason, doan it?

RUBY: What about you, miss? What's your opinion?

MISS: It's kinda bongo, you know. I mean, look at me, no more diets and I feel OK. World ends, we all end. And all that old stuff coming back. Even Blix my old boyfriend called round yesterday. Hadn't seen him for ten years. He hasn't changed, mind you –

RUBY: And you, sir?

YOUNG EXECUTIVE: I'm with her. Look how high I can jump, whoo...ooooeee...ooo.

It was much the same wherever you went. After months of outrage and blaming and riots; after pillorying the boy-genius who'd actually spilled the demon particle from its hyper-magnetic flask and saw it flash through the containment chamber heading for the earth's core; after all the inquiries and denials and dissembling and endless endless words, people just stopped caring and started mucking around again.

In the low-gravity world, they discovered that while they couldn't fly they were able to take inordinately long steps. Commuters could walk to work in bounding lunar leaps. And despite the health warnings some smart alics eschewed the elevators and boinged right up the sides of their buildings. Then, grinning, they would tap on the

windows of their skyscrapers and ask to be let in. Of course, there was the inevitable run of moonwalking injuries – broken legs and ankles from those who didn't know the difference between weight and mass – but generally there was more stupidity than hysteria.

## AND AT THE STUDIO

NEWSREADER: One of the unexpected effects of the lightening world has been the arrival on the surface of things that were once buried underground. Archaeologists are being run off their feet with reports of remarkable relics from around the world. Dr Ramakrishna Sarasvati from the Department of Antiquities at the Burnt University joins me. Dr Rama, wassup?

DR RAMA: Terry, it's global and it's fascinating. Missing ships – the *Andrea Doria* and the *Marie Celeste* – have arrived in port, three ancient cities have appeared in the Gobi desert, they've finally corralled the Trojan horse and we've had early reports of a land mass rising in the Mediterranean. It's too early to be sure but we're thinking it could be Atlantis.

NEWSREADER: Atlantis rising? Amazing.

DR RAMA: Indeed, but restitution is also going on at a much smaller scale. Why, just this morning I found eleven odd socks as well as a door key which I'd lost three years ago. Pennies and even the odd dollar bill are emerging from the backs of couches all over the city. This could have a significant economic impact...

\*

Three years on and gravity was way down. I'd left Dayna, taken up drinking and moved into the botanic gardens just up from the harbour, where I'd built myself a nice little frond shelter.

One of few things I liked about the lightweight world was the plants. Freed from gravity's rainbow they had thrown themselves into the sky in vegetable exuberance. Miniature decoratives had burst from their planter boxes in flowing carpets of colour; espaliered shrubs had torn up their trellises and clambered up walls, roofs and eaves; and temperate gardens had turned into abundant liana-infested jungles.

So as summer declined into an even lighter autumn I squatted there with my flagon amongst the verdant greenery, an unshaven caterpillar in a crumpled suit. Come winter I'd have to move but it would do for now.

It still grated on me that people weren't taking things seriously. I said as much to Mike behind the bar at The Golem's Thread.

Mike concurred. 'It's them little things,' he said rubbing a glass with a tired green tea towel. 'Take Jolene, my ex. She was an absolute honey, first year of marriage we're as happy as crabs in a bucket. But I was working long hours to get this place started and, well...' He held the glass up to the nicotine light, pinged its rim with his thumbnail put it away and pulled another from the wash. 'If only I'd watched the details. It was all there – one day she passes on kissing me in the morning, next she stops making me sandwiches and suddenly we're doing the divorce-court tango. Turns out while I'd been overtimeing here she'd been cutting the grass with some moustachioed handyman called Raoul.' He put the glass down and leaned on the bar, looking at me intensely. 'Maybe if I'd been paying attention I could have seen the turning and done something to save our marriage.'

What can you say to that?

He poured two long shots and passed one to me. 'Henry, we all gotta pay much more attention.'

We drank to this in silence while, unnoticed in the corner, the TV news clamoured and headlines flashed in the dimness.

Later, on my way out, for no reason at all, I picked a card from the flyblown noticeboard: *Domestic Flying Lessons* and a phone number. That's all it said. I looked at Mike, who was turning his cloth into another glass. 'What's the point?' I said. 'I hate flying. More so without an aircraft.'

He shrugged. 'It'll get you out in the daytime. Anyway, the first lesson's free, so what's to lose?'

So I called.

It was morning a few days later when someone peeled away the roof of my leafy shelter and beamed down at me. It was a woman, definitely a woman. Although from where I lay in my hot green bower, a hammer beating in my skull, I might have died and she was the angel haloed in celestial light sent to bring me home.

'Are you here to...save me?' I mumbled.

'No I'm your instructor. I'm Judith and it's time for your first flying lesson.'

I shouldn't have bothered; I had no aptitude. While she could hang inverted two metres above the ground and sculpt long languid curves in the air, my attempts were graceless clawing tumbles which ended most times with me whumping headfirst onto the lawn.

After the third lesson she gave up. Most of Judith's other students had already moved into the bladder ships so in the afternoon we'd just sit on the grass and drink and watch the boats flying or take in the news on my portable TV.

One time one of the giant ships rolled across the sky, a vast



warty red balloon shadowing the far side of the city. Transports and helicopters swarmed about it delivering stores and the last of the passengers.

‘Don’t you...?’ I asked.

Dumbly, she shook her head as if to say she would never abandon the freedom of grass and sky and sailboats fierce before the wind; or that she so dreaded to meet her father again – how he had hurt her so – and if he were to come round a corner or even if she were to see him on an escalator in some shopping mall up there, it would be too much; or that she was an incurable claustrophobe who would run demented through any ship’s corridors no matter how broad, how long.

CUT TO:

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY. THE SECRETARY-GENERAL IS HOLDING ONTO THE LECTURN TO STOP FROM DRIFTING OFF.

‘Folks, the time is upon us. The advisory panel are pretty certain that gravity will vanish completely in the next few days. So it’s time to lighten up, eh? People, eh? (laughter) The migration into the bladder ships is nearly complete and to any stick-in-the-mud stay-behinds I say it’s time to turn the gas off, put the cat out and make the move eh? (laughter).

Unseen, a piano plays a soft chord and the Secretary-General lifts the microphone from its stand and sings,

All my bags are packed, I’m ready to go  
I’m standing here outside your door  
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye.

The members of the Security Council bob across the stage and join the Secretary-General for the chorus.

So kiss me and smile for me  
Tell me that you'll wait for me  
Hold me like you'll never let me go  
Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane  
Don't know when I'll be back again  
Oh babe, I hate to go.  
(warm laughter, ooohs and applause)

I turned the TV off. Judith and I sat on the lawn drinking what was probably the last cask-chardonnay in the world from plastic cups. It was sweet regret in my mouth but my throat was tight and it overflowed and ran down the sides of my face. Sans gravity there was something inside me moving about. I still had so much left to say: words, all kinds – nouns, verbs, conjunctions – they were all going to come out in a flood. Everyone had better stand back. Maybe it was only a single all-encompassing giant universe-of-a-word. Perhaps it was just a sonorous syllable, a sound. It was moving in me, a huge gas bubble rising out of a restless sea. I was a geyser about to pop my top. Held down for so long – held down by the drink and bitterness and unsympathy and unreasoning certitude about how the world was supposed to work but didn't – and now I was about to vomit it all up. And it felt right, like giving birth.

I tried to help it along by pushing down on my diaphragm and forming my mouth into shapes. I tried an O, then a great distended mouth-stretch with my head thrown back my eyes wide, then a pursed cat's arse. None of these shapes felt right and in the end there was nothing much just a bit of blowing.

Judith laughed.

What kind of conclusion is that? Here I was at the end of the world stinking of cheap wine with one last chance to say something,

literally, and having nothing to shout back into the vacuum, back at an uninterested, disinterested, distant god probably already gone. Nothing. Nada. Barely even a groan.

‘Never mind,’ Judith said and squeezed my hand.

By this time, the water had gone up through the darkening sky and the harbour was a canyon falling into the blue. Soon now it would be our turn but for a while yet we sat on the edge, a pair of dolls holding hands, nothing much inside, propped together against the rising wind.



# Unlimited Prizes

All the talk these days is about luck – who’s got it, how they got it and how it changed their lives entirely. What is luck, anyway? A flipped card, a row of cherries on a poker machine, a bullet coming straight at you, your initials thumbnailed into the lead point? Good luck, bad luck, is there a difference?

For Leonard Quill, luck was a small red plastic key that came in a window-faced envelope that had ‘OPEN IMMEDIATELY’ printed on the outside. Normally, he would have dumped this kind of unsolicited correspondence but today was Leonard’s birthday and he felt unfettered and rash – he’d already given up on the long-awaited publisher’s acceptance letter and smoking (again) and any hope that Eleanor, his wife who’d been gone for two months now, might return unbidden.

So he opened the letter and the little key dropped onto his open palm, and from this everything else followed.

Congratulations, the letter said. Just send this key... And inside was a post-paid envelope.

Where’s the harm, he thought, as he slipped the key into the envelope? It couldn’t hurt he said, as he licked it shut; there was even a momentary what-if frisson. But his internal parents were dismissive: The good don’t get anything for free in this life. Don’t get your hopes up, they said. Rather than argue, Leonard tossed it into the slot and thought no more about it.

Then the prizes started.

First it was a card. Thanks, Leonard, it read. It was strung with a

cubic zirconium on a silver chain. Sure, it was cheap TV-shopping jewellery but it sparkled prettily. Eleanor might like it. It could be a peace offering, he thought, as he laid it on the mantelpiece next to her photo.

The next day there was a brown-paper parcel – a CD from some band he'd never heard of. No docket or return address just a logo stamped on the outside: Unlimited Prizes, the U and the P styled as snakes entwined around a green tree.

The following day it was a book of shopping vouchers, the next a lead crystal vase and then a cordless phone and answering machine. And so it continued – a Booker-Prize-winning novel, twelve scented tea sachets in a teak gift box, a home entertainment system, a wall-size plasma screen TV – day after day.

He tried to pass some of the prizes to his neighbours.

'What's wrong with it?' Janice the single mother across the road asked, eyeing the proffered package.

'Nothing.'

'So why don't you want it?'

'I...I have no need for a tricycle.'

'Broken? Defective? Second-rate? You think that's all we're good for? Well, let me tell you...' and then she started going on about struggle and making ends meet while not being second-class and accepting charity from no one. Finally she closed the door on Leonard and the unwanted prize.

That night the ghosts of his parents came to him while he slept. His mother shook her head and tutted as she peered into the boxes in his bedroom. Nothing for nothing, she recited as if he were a child.

It had to stop. So next morning he pinned a note to the door, blocked up the mailbox and took in the welcome mat.

But the prizes kept coming – small ones bundled under bushes, tall ones nestled in nooks, slim ones slipped into gaps. After a few days, he even stopped opening them, he just brought them in and stacked them wherever he could.

It couldn't go on.

He dialled their number.

'Welcome to Unlimited Prizes,' said the woman. 'To enter today's competition, press 1. To hear yesterday's winners press 2. For account enquiries press 3...' Bonus entry points were 4 and so on.

There were lots of choices but none for Leonard's need to stop winning prizes.

'...then press 17. To hear these choices again, press hash,' she concluded.

Leonard hesitated, finger poised: none suited yet he must choose.

She came on again, this time a little impatiently: 'To assist you, please select an option. To hear the choices again, press hash.'

Again Leonard dithered and the silence dragged on and on, and just as he was about to hang up there she was again; this time she sounded desperate, so he hung on. After a few minutes, there was a click and the sound of an office appeared with conversations and machinery in the background.

'Hello?' tried Leonard querulously.

'Who's this?' said a man's voice.

'I want to talk to someone.'

'You're not supposed to. Let me put you back –'

'Wait,' said Leonard.

'Look, mister, we're sorry you didn't win. Try tomorrow's competition, there's lot's of chances –'

Leonard interrupted. 'I want to stop.'

‘Stop?’

‘The prizes,’ Leonard continued. ‘Twenty-three days now.’

‘And you...?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jeez. You’ll need an appointment for that. Not my area. Sorry.’  
And then he whispered, ‘Dial again and press 57.’

Leonard redialled, keyed the number and listened. ‘This is Dick Laurent. You have an appointment tomorrow morning at six-fifteen sharp.’

\*

Eleanor was the better driver so she had taken the car; Leonard had public transport. He didn’t mind, as he liked the certainty of schedules and transfers. For example, to make tomorrow’s appointment he would have to catch the Early Commuter Express, change at Central and Rye and pick up the Cross-Town Rapid Transit through the tunnels and connect with the 5.15 Limited Stops Deluxe Super Steamer that would get him there with an easy fifteen minutes to spare.

The early bus was full, everyone hunched down in their jackets staring at their boots as the bus ran past houses, windows still dark beneath the spangled sky.

Despite some boiler trouble with the Rapid Transit, he was on time as he entered a wide cobbled square and there in the darkness was a long long queue, hundreds of people, some blowing or stamping against the cold, others as still as statues.

Leonard walked on towards marble steps that lead to huge bronze doors adorned with the Unlimited Prizes serpents. The building itself rose high above the square – arches, vaults and balustrades crowned with a dome now golden in the first light.



Leonard walked up to the small fibro shack on the portico. Inside, a guard was smoking and watching a soccer game on a tiny television. He tapped on the glass. 'I...I have an appointment...for six-fifteen.'

The guard hunched closer to the TV and the Buenos Aires crowd roared as River Platte smacked the ball past the hapless Boca Junior defenders. 'Bastardos.'

'Don't be an idiot,' came a voice from the line. 'We all have.' Another gestured, 'Best get back or you'll lose your place.'

Leonard averted his eyes as he walked back along the line. The end was now nearly at the edge of the square and he had to step quickly in front of a mother and daughter who were about to claim the last spot. Once in place, Leonard glanced back at them. The little girl stared back vacantly; she was dressed against the cold in a pink padded jumpsuit and her limbs stuck out so that she looked like a starfish with a small pursed mouth.

The square brightened and a sharp wind blew leaves across the stones. Six-fifteen came and went, six-thirty, seven, and there they stood, Leonard, the starfish and her mother and hundreds of others as the day rose around them.

The line was never still or quiet – murmurs and whispers rolled back and forth. Sometimes it would rise to a crescendo and someone would yell out 'Yip yip' or 'Aieeee', other times it would sound like the sea pushing up against stones. The line was alive, a single many-hundred-headed organism.

At eight-thirty, something happened, excitement was being transmitted. Someone, it was the guard, was walking along the line talking to each in turn: some he ticked off his list handing them a ticket, others he refused and, as they stepped from the line, their space was quickly absorbed with a shuffling forward step – this, this

was progress at last! Leonard had been busy calculating as the guard approached: what if he runs out of tickets? He leaned out trying to estimate who was ahead of him and the rate of ticket consumption. Then it was twenty people to go, ten, five and then –

‘Quill, Leonard,’ Leonard croaked.

The guard consulted his clipboard: ‘Queen? Quellington? Quince?’

‘Quill, Quill.’

The guard flipped a sheet over. ‘Quetzalcoatl? Quiqui?’

‘Quill.’

‘Not on my list.’ The guard stepped to move on.

Leonard grabbed his arm. ‘Look again, please.’

The guard grumbled and flipped another page. ‘Ah, Quill, Leopard?’

Leonard was beside himself. ‘Yes, yes. That’s it, Leopard.’

The guard handed him a ticket and moved on. 156. One hundred and fifty five ahead of me but I have a number, he thought. He turned to show the starfish but she was watching her mother pass the guard twenty dollars, which he pocketed and handed her a ticket.

It took another half-hour before the guard strolled back towards his hut. At one point he stopped and casually bent to re-tie his shoelaces. Hundreds watched groaning with impatience but willing themselves to silence. Finally, he disappeared back into his hut and then –

With a huge booming, the doors opened. Set free, the line-creature vanished and individual atoms surged forward to cross the portal and enter. And as each passed they reached to their left or their right to brush the burnished serpents – for luck.

\*

The room was huge. Along one side was a counter with windowed stalls each with a clerk attending. The rest of the room was stacked with folding chairs. High on each wall red electronic displays flashed numbers: 21, 99007, 714, 2251, 8, 110, 35019. The numbers weren't in any order and appeared three times only and then vanished. The crowd watched intently chanting each new number: six hundred and ninety-two, eighty-four. When someone recognised their number they'd jump up and rush to over to the counter – Twenty-five oh six. Some would start arm-waving and counter-banging, some would stand quietly as a clerk registered and stapled their documents; some left with nothing, some received a cardboard parcel and one or two were taken through a low door at the end of the counter.

Numbers flashed and were gone, an hour passed and then another.

At one point there was a disturbance. A couple, all blonde tips and furs, had walked straight up to the counter and started loudly with one of the clerks. They believed that their wealth and celebrity entitled them to special standing. The clerk listened politely as first the man then the woman spoke.

'Do you know who he is?' the woman asked.

'I'm sure –' replied the clerk but she cut him off.

'He's famous. He's been on TV, *Lost Highway*.'

The clerk nodded amiably and then the man started. 'Do you know who she is? You don't do you? Well...'

'Look at that,' said the gummy old hag sitting next to Leonard. 'Rich fats thinkin they're special. Well, they'll never get apointmin. Not ahead of us workin folk.'

By now Leonard was convinced that 156 had come and gone: after concentrating for hours on end he'd missed it and now he didn't even have the energy to stand up and walk out.

So when it appeared he couldn't believe it – 156, 156, 156. 'One hundred fifty-six,' the crowd whispered.

He felt like weeping. At last. At last.

\*

'Watch your head.'

Leonard ducked through the door and was lead along to the foot of a staircase going up into darkness.

'Room 156, Mr Laurent.'

At the top of the stairs was a corridor of numbered doors, 6 was across from 914, 2 was next to 46 and so on. And there was 156.

Leonard knocked, grasped the handle and stepped through into brilliance. He was facing a tall window and the early afternoon sun was streaming in. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a desk where a figure, a man in a white linen suit sat eating a fried chicken.

As Leonard approached, the man pushed the food aside, quickly wiped his hands down his shirtfront and offered his hand. 'Leopard? Leopard Quill?'

'Mr Laurent?' Leonard replied.

'Call me Dick.'

They sat and Dick pulled a large file towards him and started flicking through papers with his right hand while licking the last tasty bits from the fingers of his left. 'You've received defective goods? We've been having a bit of trouble with our suppliers. Say the word and they'll be reprimanded and their families flogged.'

Leonard wasn't sure how to take this so he started his explanation.

When he was finished, Dick frowned. 'So really this is about your parents? I'm sorry but I don't see how the company can be held responsible for the Protestant guilt of our customers.'

Leonard nodded. 'But couldn't you just stop?' he pleaded.

Dick came around and sat on the edge of the desk in front of him. 'This is a huge enterprise. We have the most sophisticated logistics in the Southern Hemisphere, probably the World. And once it's set in motion...'

It was hopeless and all the exhaustion and disappointment of the day fell in upon Leonard and he sagged.

Seeing this, Dick reached forward and touched him on the shoulder, leaving a small grease stain. 'Look, it's against procedure but I'll see what I can do.' Then Dick stood.

Leonard was so grateful that he had to stand too, which led to an awkward moment as both men stood close to each other saying nothing, just standing smiling; Leonard could see a smear of chicken fat gleaming on Dick's chin.

He gestured to the door.

'Oh,' said Leonard, backing away. 'Well, thank you, Mr Laurent.'

'Call me Dick.'

'Dick then.' And then Leonard was back in the dimness.

\*

It was dark by the time he got home and he slumped into bed.

His parents came again and while his father was off in a corner tinkering, his mother stood at the end of the bed emphatic in her silvery nightie.

'He said he'd do something,' Leonard protested.

'How,' she asked in that annoying rhetorical style of hers, 'could my fully grown son be so naïve?'

Leonard was too tired to argue so he rolled over into sleep.

\*

She was right of course – the prizes continued. By now there was barely any space left. He pushed them anywhere he could find. The flat ones he laid on the floor and they tinkled and sagged when he walked on them.

He tried extension 57 but a dark aggressive voice told him not to call again. He was so scared that he dropped the phone.

What about their warehouse? Maybe he could persuade someone there to do something. It was right out in the boondocks and required an unusual combination of buses and switchbacks. Even so, he still had to hike the last kilometre through an industrial estate where the businesses were all mixed together – metal fabricators were next to car yards across from adult sex shops behind ceramics warehouses. In some places there wasn't even a pavement and he had to walk in the gutter, leaning close to the fence when traffic approached.

The UP warehouse was a long white cliff, unsigned and unexplained other than the serpentine logo painted on one wall. And beneath the snakes was a door.

Inside was vast and disorienting. Canyons of shelving receded in all directions converging at some dizzyingly distant horizon. The shelves were full of stuff – corridors and corridor of DVDs, hills of computers, mobile phones hanging down on long strings like ripe fruit, gleaming caverns of bubble-wrapped crystal. Occasionally, he would see a machine hurrying down a row or climbing a rack spider-like.

He walked for ages meeting no one, until eventually he came to the far wall of the warehouse and at last, up the back, was a chair with a man in overalls reading a newspaper.

'We're just despatch here,' the man said handing Leonard a mug of tea. 'It's all automated, nothin much fer me to do, 'cept cash my

pay cheque. Computers are all in Omaha or Reykjavik or somewhere, somewhere global, somewhere not here.’

Leonard explained his situation and the man nodded. ‘See your kind in here now and then. Give ’em the same advice – UP ain’t never going to run out, least not in your lifetime. Best you move, maybe to another city.’

\*

They had backed it off the freighter and were rolling it into his driveway when he arrived home.

‘And if you’ll sign here,’ the delivery guy handed Leonard a clipboard, ‘you get your keys and I can get home early to the kids and the missus.’

Leonard stood and looked at it for a while. He walked around and opened the driver’s door. There on the dashboard was a plain white card – Good luck, Leopard. He put the key in the ignition and the engine started with a throaty growl. Fairy lights lit the dashboard and a cool breeze sprung up from somewhere. He sat in the idling car, breathing in sweet upholstery and new plastic and finally finally decided.

\*

He pushed through the drift of parcels around his doorway, squeezed into his bedroom, packed a few things, took the photo of Eleanor and the cubic zirconium and walked out just like that, leaving the front door wide open like a gap in a smile.

And there was the anxiety and regret all travellers feel when they set out – where would he sleep tonight? what would he eat? what would he do for a living? But he also sensed opportunity. And for the

first time in a long while, his parents weren't disapproving; they sat quietly in the back smiling and watching the passing scenery. Things were not yet clear to Leonard but the world seemed to expand in all directions, possibilities rolling towards him as he drove.



# In the Emerald Hotel

## The corpse in the corridor

After nine months, one hundred and twenty-seven flights, one hundred and ten hotel rooms (fawn walls and twenty-four-hour corridors) and two hundred and sixty-five thousand frequent flyer miles, I've arrived on this high plateau called exhaustion. Nothing much grows here: a few leathery-leaved plants, xerophytes adapted to low moisture, low fertility and air freshener and there's us, the travellers.

Here comes one now – dark rumpled suit, uniform tie, cubic briefcase and staring amphetamine eyes.

Dinah says it's all just an excuse to avoid intimacy but she's wrong: I want nothing more than to be held (and to hold), and be close and talk about the day just gone and prepare for the day to come but how can I explain what's happened to me?

'How can I explain?' I ask her photo, which I carry from one hotel to the next. It's such a beautiful image: there she is smiling, hair flying about, our brown dog looking up at her adoringly, and over her shoulder you can see the black restlessness of the trees, the leaves glowing like lanterns.

'You're so fragile,' she says. 'When you're home, it's like you've just been discharged from hospital.'

She's right. Look at me. My body is slumped, muscle tone collapsed, my skin is pale and my hair is blowing away, the bony skull peeking through.

And all these interchangeable places – Dayton, Seattle, Adelaide, Islamabad – are overlain by the question on all our minds: could we sleep here? this conference? this restaurant? the back of this taxi driving round and round? A few minutes, half an hour max, is all we need to be restored.

We kid ourselves. No one sleeps.

## **Slip (1)**

Slip is under pressure. The front desk called saying he'd been asking for me and would I please come down. I found him there in the lobby standing beside the water feature massaging his temples.

'I've found the source,' he says, grabbing my hand and pulling his hair aside to bare his temple.

'You know,' I say, 'your symptoms are all we ever talk about these days. Where was it before? The Best Western in Galveston before Katrina, and then it was your kidneys –'

He stops, my hand hangs in empty space.

Slip is so lost.

'All right, show me,' I say. My finger completes the journey, touching down on the side of his head.

'Here. Here.' He tilts his head towards the light and in the brightness I see through the translucent skin to the plumbing below: blue veins and dark intersections.

'Well?'

'A little red,' I say, pulling away.

'It's infected,' he crows. 'In-feck-ted.' He finds a bottle of tablets from inside his jacket and flips the cap. 'Once you know what you're dealing with –' he dry-swallows three or four '– you can do something about it.'

Slip is a veteran. He's been crossing the globe for years, long before

any of us began. He used to try to get us to think more about what we were doing and why. ‘To make history, you need to understand your own context’ he would say, or ‘Be activists not just bureaucrats.’ Renowned for his epigrams, I remember he once asked us, ‘Which is more beneficial: a lorry passing a factory with a hundred employees or a lorry passing a music school with a hundred students?’ And as we scratched our heads he added, ‘And which is more musical?’

But now he has become eccentric and obscure and our meetings are difficult. Sometimes he’ll lay his head on the table and start groaning or slap his hands down and stand abruptly even though they haven’t finished with the welcoming address. Yet somehow he still manages to meet his quotas and we cover for him: apologise, intervene, smooth those he offends, prop him up. You see, we need Slip: he’s our guide, our great white pointer. If he can survive, we all can, if not we’re doomed.

So I collect his luggage, help him to his room and get him settled. And that’s where I leave him inspecting his temples in the bathroom mirror.

On the way back, I look out into the rain and there’s the swimming pool alive with a fierce blue light. Ambitious little waves are splashing up over the side and the drains are already banked up.

## **Free**

I know: if it’s so bad, why don’t I quit? That’s what you’re asking.

Simple answer: the people. They depend on me, hundreds of them.

‘Work is good,’ I say in my standard presentation. They agree but they don’t understand. How could they? Generations of displacement and subsistence and bartering and scratching about in the dirt, they have no sense of the opportunities within their reach.

I say it again for emphasis, ‘Work is good.’

Sometimes I’m so struck by their ignorance I almost cry out. It’s like watching a family starve right outside a supermarket – the answer is right there, palpable, obvious. Yet all they can manage is to nod listlessly, they’re bored already and they can’t imagine a life better than the one they’re leading now.

But I also see assent in their eyes: they’re willing to trust me.

And that’s enough. I have the papers in my briefcase.

## **Room service**

My feet are always too hot. It’s a handy trait if you live in a cool climate or need to be detected through infrared goggles but mostly it’s embarrassing. I’m overheated and my feet are often wet. It’s worse travelling: while many passengers slip their shoes and stretch their toesies during the flight, I have to confine my damp doggies to their nine-and-a-half double Es.

So when I enter my room, first thing I do is open the mini bar, turn the contents into a bin liner, remove the shelves and sit on the floor with my shoes and socks off cooling my feet, staring at the ceiling and mouthing off: mongrel, she-devil, fuck-face, prick, castrating bitch, dickhead, wanker, shit for brains, cunt, tart, slut, unfeeling inconsiderate bastard, liar, liar...

I am neither a container overflowing with rage, nor do I disrespect them: I love my work, it gives them a chance, a kick at the moon and if that means I have to be away from home for months a year, then...

No. It’s only noise, voided of meaning. Say anything over and over and it soon loses content. I could as easily be reciting a dictionary or reading from the room service menu – it’s just an exercise to stop me thinking while my feet chill.

## Feeling better

So once I start feeling better I get up and explore. I don't know why I bother. World over, hotel rooms are more-or-less identical and everything has been sterilised before I get there. Yet sometimes there's a hint of the previous occupants, I pick up on the remains of their energy, the afterglow of their auras.

Sometimes I'll get a flash on the bed – bedecked with chains and handcuffs. Sometimes I'll be walking down the corridor:

- they caught him there
- shot him where he fell
- drugs. He owed
- no one heard/saw anything
- the body's outline is chalked on the carpet, arms askew, a stain like a rose where the heart –

The thing is they can't move me. There are no rooms anywhere. A convention of dentists is in town and everywhere's booked solid. So it's either spend the night in the parking lot or step over and around and avert your imagination.

The reception guy says the mess will be gone by the morning. 'First thing,' he promises. 'By the time you come down for breakfast.' He leans forward, confiding in me, 'Cops said it was real quick. Guy wouldn't have known anything about it.' He leans away distant now. 'Look, mister, why don't you go and have a drink. On us.' He passes me a voucher stamped with today's date.

\*

So I'm propped in the Mermaid Bar watching storm flung newspapers wrap around the legs of fleeing pedestrians. I'm finishing my third

and ready for my fourth while I'm rationalising the inevitable fifth. I'm thinking about calling Dinah, thinking maybe I should text the kids:

(Da-ad!? You're so bad at it.)

b home wed 18 if i can get flight. if they open th  
airport. if it ever stops raining. lv u. b good 2 yr  
mothr.

and behind every door

a tray with a used wineglass, a few drops at the bottom, a small  
red ocean receding

and behind every door

a couple going at it without variety or affection. Neither is going  
to get there. The furniture groans to their rhythm

and behind every door

a terrorist adjusting his backpack, charging up his mobile phone  
or someone like me with their feet stinking up the bar fridge,  
mouthing rude words at the ceiling.

## Storm

It's four a.m. I'm inert on the bed in the dark, not thinking, not  
sleeping. The muted TV shows a dusty street, a car on fire, a woman  
a man sobbing, trouble somewhere.

I feel their sadness radiating through the screen filling the room  
and soaking into my skin, entering my pores.

There's a bang. The room is lit and suddenly the window is  
rattling in its frame.

Rain like stones thrown at the glass over and over. Torrents over  
roofs cascades down the sides of buildings filling gutters pavements  
and trenches gone surge past sandbags drowning basements garages  
and laundries.

## **Slip (2) – ablation**

The phone rings.

His room is a mess.

In his delirium, Slip had gone shopping at a late night hardware store and on the table is a cordless drill loaded with a fine silver bit. There's a blood spray across the wall behind the bed and Slip. He's upright, still in his suit, holding a stained towel to his head, a look of vacant surprise on his face.

‘Jesus. Are you...? How does it...?’

Gently I peel the towel away. There's a small neat hole and as I watch a dark pearl swells from inside, over-tops the wound and slides down his cheek.

I dial emergency, I call reception. No one's answering, there's only the tide on the line ebbing and rushing.

‘It's better, you know,’ he says. ‘Cold. I feel cold but the pressure's gone.’

I find some tablets and hand him some. Jesus. I swallow some myself. ‘I'll go for help.’ And for the second time tonight, I leave him there.

## **The lift is full**

The light comes on and there's a chime. The doors slide apart and a column of water collapses across the carpet and pushes up against the wall opposite.

Now drained, the lift hangs in place bobbing gently: an invitation. The bright recessed lighting, the framed advertisement for the bistro with the two-inch steak cooked just-how-you-like-it, the mirrors reflecting endlessly upon each other: it's all waiting for me. Just step in.

The arrow is flashing away, giving it one more try but no deal,  
I'm hanging onto the rail.

So the doors close.

## **Audrey (1)**

The tide is high and the floor rolls and bucks. I'm inching back along the corridor trying not to slip off into the torrent of the carpet. The walls bulge and tilt and the fluoros buzz and drip. I only just manage to dodge by the body's outline, which has now become a sucking portal into some further darkness.

The swell carries me up against a door. Finally a frame to hold but at the last it opens –

'Well, hello,' she says, getting up from the desk. Her room is identical, of course, yet different – the inverted artwork, the television turned away, the curtains. At least her room isn't involved in the tidal surges outside.

'I just need a moment,' I say.

'I wasn't doing anything much, just working on my novel.'

'You're a writer?' I ask, holding onto the kitchenette and trying not to vomit.

'You look a little –'

'I haven't slept.' (I didn't tell her about Slip, the depth of my exhaustion, nor the fact that the corridor outside was awash.)

'Who sleeps? Drink?' she offers.

'Water.'

She gestures to the sink right in front of me. So I run some water into a tumbler and drink, swallowing half and then spluttering and coughing as I suck the rest into my lungs.

There's a hammering at the door.



It's the guy from reception pushing a trolley stacked high with life jackets. He hands us two.

## **Audrey (2)**

She's lying on the bed. I'm on the floor, my feet in the fridge staring at a similar ceiling: smoke detector, electrical conduit loosely screwed, and the geography of a water stain in one corner.

Three years ago she nearly died.

She was held hostage by a stranger.

He had grabbed her off the street, just down from her house.

'He kept shouting at me, saying filthy angry things as he held this long blade up against me. Then he raped me. Then he tried to set fire to me. He had dowsed me with petrol, cursing me all the time.'

But she escaped.

'It was a miracle,' she whispered. I prayed. And God heard me.'

(The neighbours had heard and called the police.)

'God reached down and turned the circumstance.'

(If the patrol hadn't been passing, if the neighbours hadn't cancelled their holidays at the last moment, if the killer hadn't spilled the matches...if, if, if.)

Knowing this, changed everything.

'For the first year I was in ecstasy. I sloughed off my previous life. I divorced Michael, left the kids; I could never return to that. I got rid of all the things in my life. Until I was empty.'

A vessel.

Ready.

'It sounds insane but I was grateful for what had happened. I knew without something awful like that I would never have... But the rapture passed and now it's all hard to fathom. I do meaningful

things – that’s why I do this work – and I pray. But I’m still uncertain what God intends. And when I get depressed I think that I’ve let him down, that I’m not doing the thing I’m supposed to.’

‘\_’

‘And you?’

I told her about Slip.

### **Slip (3)**

Day is up and with it the flood.

I’m back in Slip’s room. This time with Audrey.

Slip is still in his bloody turban and he’s staring out the window. The waters are high and things are floating by the glass: cardboard boxes, polystyrene cups, a string of oranges. At one point a fat black woman swims past. She’s wearing a floral dress which blooms about her but it doesn’t impede her progress – her arms come over and her feet kick strongly. She sees us peering out at her and smiles and waves before continuing on up the street.

And then the dinghy passes in the stream.

This is what he’s been waiting for. He hurries to the window and pulls it open and the flood falls in upon us, drowning the room.

Audrey and I climb quickly up on the bed, which starts to lift from the floor. The boat is sucked into the window gap and we watch as Slip clambers up onto the sill, reaches an arm over the side and climbs aboard.

‘You’re leaving?’ I say.

‘If you can’t use the door, take the window,’ Slip shouts from the surging boat.

I wade through the current to the window and I call out to him, ‘Will you be all right?’

‘You’ll be fine,’ he replies from the boat. ‘Just remember...’

I strain to hear what he's saying. I can see his lips moving: he must be calling out some important last words but it's too late, he's gone too far. As I watch, the boat drifts further out into the middle of the street where the current whirls him away.

'He's gone,' I say, clambering back onto the bed. 'He's left us.'

'You'll manage,' Audrey replies, putting a hand on my shoulder.

'It's not me I'm worried about,' I insist. 'Anything could happen to him. He's wounded.'

She hops down from the bed and sloshes over to the door. 'You'll get used to it.' Then she too was gone.

\*

## Coming home

By afternoon the sun had come out, doves were flapping about and the waters had receded.

The phones were back on, so I sat on the bed and dialled. 'I'm coming home,' I said. 'For good.'

'Are you OK?' Dinah asked. 'We were worried. The pictures on the TV.'

I reassured her. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'What about...the people?' She was testing my resolve.

'They agree. In fact, they're here with me now.'

And there they were, standing beside the bed as the phone slipped from my fingers. They smiled and nodded as I fell back towards the pillows and, although my eyes were already closed, I sensed that after all this, at last we understood each other. I am a man – human just like them, fallible, always failing to see the thing that's right there in front of me –

– and for now, I'm allowed to sleep.



# The family Powerpoint

## 1. New presentation

The presentation screen is divided into three areas – the slide area, an organiser so that you can quickly arrange your slides in the right order – so you don’t end up blurting something ridiculous at the meal table like ‘We never talk in this family’. There’s also a notes section. No one ever sees the notes section, so you can write up personal reminders, aides memoire, encouragements to yourself (Don’t be nervous. Of course we all want you to succeed. Why do you always have to be the centre of attention?).

At its simplest, a presentation consists of a title slide and a series of slides with bulleted text. In our family you would have a title slide like ‘I love you’ and then a subtitle like ‘I’m lonely’.

Each slide is a container for different types of information. In our family, for example, it could be the container for ‘I love you’, ‘I love you too’, ‘Are you eating?’, ‘Stop, will you?’, ‘You’ve lost weight, those jeans are just hanging’, ‘I’m a grown man, I’m forty-five, for chrissake (!)’, ‘All right, there’s no need to swear. You know it’s only because I love you that I worry’, ‘Well, I love you too.’

‘You should go and see him. (The results aren’t good.)’

## 2. Slide design

There are hundreds of options to make your presentation come alive. There are ready-made templates with names like ‘sparkle’, ‘shopping’ and ‘highway’. The ‘I love you’ slide will convey something different

if you use the 'shopping' or 'chocolate' template rather than 'family' or 'test results'. You can also choose from all sorts of nuanced backgrounds: granite, sandstone, night sky, pacific blue, empty air.

'I just got your message on the machine. How is he?'  
(how are you?)

'Claire, I... (it's that bad that I'm almost sobbing). They're going to try surgery but...'

'That's terrible (acting). Have you seen him yet?'

'Tomorrow. I only got in a few hours ago.'

'How's your mum?'

'She's hanging in there, we're going to camp here, try to get through this together. It's great hearing your voice (I'm lonely).'

'Well give her my love and call me if anything happens, OK? You've still got my number? Yes of course you have.'

'(What kind of question is that? The kind of question you ask a stranger, not your husband of five years.) I will.'

'Your father's in the ICU. You may see some things here, some tubes and monitors attached to him. He's also on a respirator to help him breathe. Sometimes people find all this disturbing.'

'I'll be fine.'

'He's resting now and we've got him on a mild sedative to give his heart a rest.'

'Will he be able to hear me?'

'I'm sure he'll know you're here.'

'Will he...?'

'You'll need to talk with the specialist about that.'

‘Dad, it’s me. Dad? How’re you doing?’ (Jesus, the tubes go right in and you’re so bruised.)

### 3. Text effects

Along with bold, italics and underline, you can also have a word appear on screen. For example, ‘I love you’ could stay on screen while ‘I’m lonely’ could appear briefly and then vanish. Or ‘I love you’ could remain on screen and then as the day wears on ‘I’m lonely’ could become more apparent, finally coming to rest right in the centre of your presentation:

‘It’s tough,’ you say through a mouthful of gristle, munching extra loud (see how tough it is).

‘It’s from that butcher, it’s rosemary and mint (I thought you’d appreciate the effort).’

‘That guy’s too expensive. Have some coleslaw.’ You pile a dripping spoonful onto your plate. ‘It’s good for you.’

‘No thanks. It’s full of sweeteners and preservatives. Here, look on the lid, it’s got preservative 220, you know what that does to my asthma.’ So I take the tomato, the only non-packaged food item in the house, and put it on the cutting board.

‘Nonsense, (my son the food snob) today’s food has never been better, cleaner, full of vitamins.’

I’m thinking about anorexia and Gandhi and those detainees who’d sewn their lips together – food is power. I’m looking at the curled grey chop on my plate – food economics, food politics, food wars. I push the knife against the tomato’s skin, denting it, the structure inside collapsing into juice.

‘Haven’t you got a sharper – OW.’ I’ve pressed harder and the blade had slipped and sliced deep the soft pulpy part of my thumb. ‘Fuck. Fuck FUCK.’

‘Run it under the tap.’ You push your chair back.

For a moment it was your fault: for the knife, you and the coleslaw manufacturers and the vertically integrated corporation that had devised such a long shelf-life rubber tomato and forced every hapless grower into planting their strain or face bankruptcy.

Even as I squeeze my thumb, I know that the cut will be sore and despite everything I feel tears welling up.

‘Let me,’ you say. And although I’m perfectly capable you take my torn wounded hand in yours and lead me over to the sink.

#### **4. Photos and charts**

You can add photos...

Remember?

houses, sunflowers, winter holiday; typing, crying, typing; science, sunrise, (you wanted to be an) astronaut, weightlifting businessmen (here’s dad); hands, footprints, pills (do you have to go on about that) hand shaking, hammer; wedding padlock (it was never going to work, we were different people, we’re still friends, I see her once in a while. She called, said to give you her love).

Charts can quickly convey information to your audience.

You hold the film up to the window for me: ‘What are those light patches, there on his lungs? Jesus, they’re everywhere and under his arms and...’

‘Here’s his lipids, his T-cell count over the last three months and since they started the therapy you see how...’

‘Here’s a chart of the heart’s decline, the X axis shows...’



The house is finally empty, the movers have taken the last of your boxes.

I should have gone out, found some mates and gone drinking, taken in a film – Fellini’s on at the Orpheum, *Underworld* at the megaplex – but instead I got stuck there dithering between rooms while they removed you box by box from my life. Walking about, discovering new emptinesses (now I can bring the chair in here and read, in the afternoons). Even there on the brink we could have talked then, you and I, but you were determinedly reading the *Times* in the kitchen and wouldn’t make eye contact (it was difficult for you too) and too soon it was done: the van gone too late to call back and then we were at the door. A cool peck, your hand on my cheek. ‘It’s for the best,’ you say. (We’ll still be friends, I’ll call you, just give it some time.) (How much time? A week? Two? Just exactly how much time does it take the heart to fade away completely?)

Here is a chart of the heart’s decline: the X axis shows time passing day after day; the Y axis the intensity of the memory – up the top here, where we are right now, I’m all you can think about but it gradually slopes away until...

...you can even add movies.

I was lying on the couch reading Nabokov, trying to get used to my new reading glasses. (‘I don’t like them, the text zooms up at me.’)

‘They suit you,’ you said. ‘You look like an intellectual.’ And then you laughed, ‘Ha.’

I dreamed I've been handed secateurs – large non-slip handles (so you'll be safe) but tiny ineffectual blades and I'm standing at the hedge facing miles and miles of raggedy overgrown bushes (it will take ages).

Something's happened and my face is powdered with slivers of glass, shards are stuck in my nose, my cheeks, sticking out like splinters – a hundred tiny cuts. 'Don't blink,' you say and you're leaning over me, your quilted dressing gown coming down over my face like a wall (I can't breathe). 'You don't want to get any in your eye.' (Get off me.)  
(I can't breathe.)

## 5. Rearrange slides

In slide-sorter view, you can preview your entire presentation as miniatures so that it's easy to change the slide order. The order in which information is presented affects its meaning. For example, 'I'm lonely, (but) I love you,' is different to 'I love you, (it's not enough) I'm lonely'.

'So what we do is simply stop the heart, and the blood flow is transferred to this pump, where it's warmed and oxygenated and returned to the body. The procedure itself is very safe. Heart surgery today is like plumbing, we have good results.'

'A small percentage of patients (four per cent) who have been on the pump report disturbing ideation pre- and post-operative arising from the belief that the heart is the physical location of the emotions and the spirit.'

'Will there be room for my soul in your machine?'

‘Did you see the blackness there?’

‘Can you take the bitterness from my heart?’

## 6. Animation

Keep your presentation lively by using animations to enhance a line of text or an image.

now the story is accelerating, time is rushing by: the sun hurtles along its line, in a moment clouds bloom, storm, clear and the sky becomes a ringing lens again; a square of morning sunlight hurries down the wall, shrinks to a slice on the lino and vanishes around the cleaner’s mop; here in the room the curtain breathes, his breath, another day gone.

And in the room the nurses come and go – ‘You’re still here’, ‘He’s better today’, A difficult night but he’s resting now.’

## 7. Handouts

Slide handouts help those attending the presentation take notes and retain key points for future reference.

All the men in my family have died of heart attack by seventy.

‘But Dad’s only sixty-five,’ I said.

You just look at me. ‘What do you want?’

- To reach over and lay my fingers along the gap zippered closed by a line of Xes – XXXXX from clavicle to sternum.
- press gently into the hollows of the withdrawn flesh

- climb up on the bed, lie down next to you, careful not to disturb anything (take your place, ease out the clamps and spikes (try it on for size)
- to comfort you/be comforted
- to chase down your spirit, now entranced by that far country, your eyes rolling around behind closed lids
- to comfort/be comforted.

‘You can’t sleep here,’ the nurse says as I stumble to my feet, brushing dreams from my lap.

‘It’s not bad, this thing that’s happening to him,’ she says. ‘It’s not a bad thing, it’s just another stage.’

## 8. Save

And I swim and watch my diet and manage my stress and take half an aspirin every day and have check-ups every six months and an ECG once a year – ‘There’s no reason to worry, you’re in good shape and as long as you...’

But I can feel it there, the thing in my chest. A line to my father and through him all the men lined up behind him. A thing like love but darker.

# The winter parrot

It's two a.m and we're in. I've cut the wires, jemmied the window and the next patrol isn't due for another twenty minutes – piece of cake. The puppies are curled, sleeping fish hang immobile in strings of bubbles, the birds are covered.

Concentration camps, you call them.

I'm next to you in my runners with shoe polish smeared on my face. You reach for my hand in the darkness...

\*

*Their uncannily appropriate communication abilities have led many owners to view them like little children. But they are not children. They are incredibly intelligent wild animals with different viewpoints to ours.*

*Dr Danny's Universal Guide to Parrots, Cockatoos and Lories.*

'A parrot?' That's my sister Audrey on the phone. 'Why not try the rest of us humans first? What do you want with a parrot?'

'They talk...you know. And they're smart.'

'Jeez, Gord, Mum won't like this. It'll probably bring on one of her attacks. You know how she is.'

Lear watched from his perch. I didn't like talking this way in front of him so I cupped my hand over the receiver.

'Audrey –' Then I stopped. I nearly said that my mother didn't need to know. But I wasn't going back to pleading, not now, and

anyway, they were bound allies who spoke every day and a parrot would be just another entry in the catalogue of disappointment they were keeping on their forty-one-year old accountant brother/son who has had no romantic prospects since his wife Jeannie walked out on him (and who could blame her, he being such a nong) and who could have done so much better if only he'd applied himself.

Lear looked down at me and yawned.

\*

I had started to visit the pet shop at lunchtimes. I would leave the office at twelve, wander past the retail strip and eat my sandwiches standing at the window of Dave's Pet Emporium. There was always some mischief going on: kittens stalking balls of yarn, puppies gnawing on their tails and rabbits...well, burrowing. Out of the whole gang, my favourite was the hamster, the black and white one who ran his treadmill. What determination: never to advance yet never give up. Surely, somewhere in his tiny brain he must realise that the horizon was fixed and would always remain distant, yet look at the effort, his little lungs puffing away. He was an indomitable Sisyphus of a rodent.

But come Thursday he was gone, replaced by a tank of lumbering tortoises.

'The athlete? The hamster athlete, someone bought him?' I asked.

The guy in the shop looked up from his newspaper. 'Nah, gone to the labs.'

I stood there dismayed.

'Look,' he said. 'First rule in this business is keep rotating the stock. They get about two weeks. If no one buys them, it's off to the institute. We get top dollar for healthy specimens.'

‘But he was –’ I started.

‘Special?’ he replied. ‘Well, you *could* have rescued him.’

The pet shop was suddenly altered. I looked around: there was sweet trusting innocence condemned, prisoners in every pen and cage.

And that’s when I saw him.

‘Lear. Like the king, remember? Of Denmark,’ the guy said. ‘Lovely bird.’

‘England,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘He was king of England. Got rid of the wolves. King Lear.’

The guy was looking at me warily. I do that: make people uncomfortable but he should know his facts. I changed the subject.

‘Talk?’

‘Talk your arm off.’ He was back into his patter. ‘Has to do with territory.’ He leaned on the counter. ‘In the wild they congregate around waterholes in the early morning, hundreds of them. And they’ve got to know who’s about and who’s related. Their chorus is all shrieking just like...’

He droned on but I was thinking about all those parrots lifting up into the African sky.

‘...and there’s this woman professor in the States has trained hers with over a thousand words and now the damn bird’s using the Internet and has made a documentary –’

‘You’ve seen it?’ I interrupted.

‘The documentary?’

‘The morning chorus.’

The guy looked at me hard for a moment. ‘If you’re taking the piss...’

We regarded each other. Then I looked at Lear: his cage was

a zone of solemn quiet amongst the yapping of the puppies, the globbing from the fish tanks and endless flitting, chirruping and feathering from the finches – from the perch to the floor to the perch to the floor to the perch over and over. Lear was placid, resigned maybe a little depressed. He glanced at me briefly and then bent and scratched with a leathery claw.

‘You want the bird or what?’ the guy asked.

\*

*In the first few days, your new companion has to adjust to many things which can be stressful.*

The first days didn’t go quite as I’d expected. I’d hung his cage in the eastern window with a view across to the park but Lear spent most of his day with his back turned, staring at the wall. Maybe he needed some quiet after the racket of the pet emporium so I let him be. But after two days the silence had become worrisome. At night I’d cover his cage with a baize cloth and in the morning I’d lift it away to find him close up to the bars staring intensely at me.

So I decided to ask at the pet shop the following day. But when I got there, it was festooned with police tape and there was glass and wood shavings everywhere.

The guy behind the counter was talking to a policeman who was writing in a small leather notebook. ‘...busted in the back window and a few rabbits got out but aside from that –’

They both stopped and turned to me.

‘It’s Lear,’ I said. ‘I think...he’s depressed,’

The guy behind the counter slid a slim volume along the counter, *Dr Danny’s Universal Guide to Parrots, Cockatoos and Lories*, and



continued talking to the policeman. ‘So what do you think, this could be an international gang?’

\*

*Your bird needs stimulation. Provide it with an enriched environment and talk to it.*

‘Gordon is going to work now,’ I tried as I was leaving for work.

Lear didn’t even glance at the salary man in the grey suit.

And in the afternoon: ‘Gordon is home now.’

Lear was busy straightening his plumage.

‘Gordon is sitting down’, ‘Gordon is standing up’, ‘I’m sitting down again’, ‘Gordon is going to fricassee a cantaloupe.’

Maybe my environment needed some enrichment too.

We started on music. Contemporary, easy listening, pop, metal, thrash, gothic, garage, trance, country and western, new romantic.

He flapped impatiently.

Jazz – trad, free-form, fusion, big band, Monk, Ellington, Coltrane, Marsalis.

Lear tossed salad at the speaker.

On to classical – baroque, the romantics, the neo-romantics, the minimalists, contemporary, choral, orchestral, opera, quartets, quintets.

It was no use – the bird defecated at Lutoslawski’s prelude, snorted at Beethoven’s piano concertos and cackled at Yo Yo Ma’s soulful cello solos; maybe Lear was not a musical bird.

At the bottom of the shelf was some ambient. So we tried whalesong, shakuhachi, wind chimes and rainforest recordings. At this last, Lear turned and gave an emphatic positive ‘awark’.

Over the weekend I gathered as much recorded Africa as one could buy in the city and we sat there listening to the sounds of monkeys hoo-hooing in an Angolan jungle canopy or a thunderstorm rolling over the Niger plain. Lear brightened and bobbed about on his perch.

I also bought some large leafy plants – monsterias, palms and lianas and a few pieces of African art – a mask from Benin, a Guinean totem. I'd even taken to wearing a small mud-dyed hat around the house – just to get in the mood.

Lear now had the run of the place and he'd started talking or at least quoting from the tragedy of his namesake. 'You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,' he announced swinging back and forth on his perch.

In the evening he would fly down to the stereo and lay his head on the speakers to be as close to the jungle sounds as he could.

\*

*Allow a Grey to play mind games with you and it'll prove who really is the smartest creature on earth.*

It was Wednesday evening and I was standing aside as my mother hobbled into my apartment, pushed the greenery aside with her cane and eased herself with a groan onto the edge of my sofa. Lear was somewhere above in the foliage.

'Since Mohammed won't come to the mountain,' she started. 'The mountain is forced to travel across town in the middle of the night with her bad hip and put up with some dreadful taxi driver. I think he was from Iraq or somewhere and he kept going on about air conditioning and his university degree and he just wouldn't shut up. Well,' she said taking in the plants, the Africanesque decor and the totems.

The totems looked back at her through their blackened orbits and cowry eyes.

‘This one is Fado, the Congolese spirit of fertility,’ I said handing her a cup of tea.

‘Really?’ she replied archly and then she started. ‘I suppose *this* was inevitable after Jeannie –’

‘She has nothing to do with –’

‘I’ve made you an appointment with Dr Flores,’ she continued, ignoring my protest by raising her voice and speaking slowly as if I had gone deaf or become an imbecile. ‘Friday at four. Until then you can come home. You know I keep your room...’

(I had only ever seen the psychiatrist once. I talked to him about Jeannie. ‘She says she doesn’t understand my motivation. She says I won’t risk anything, that I’m a little grey man with no ambition and she doesn’t know what she ever saw in me.’)

‘We can’t all be revolutionaries,’ he replied sagely and gave me a prescription for sleeping pills and told me not to worry.)

‘Flores encouraged my autonomy,’ I said.

‘And what would he know?’ she said irritably.

‘I’m fine, really. All this,’ I soothed, ‘is just to make Lear feel more at home...’

She looked at my little hat.

I was just about to elaborate on the benefits of a stimulating environment when Lear made his entrance.

‘Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low an excellent thing in a woman,’ the parrot declaimed from up in the canopy.

My mother coloured and pulled her coat closed.

He flapped down onto the bookshelf and started towards the sofa turning his head from side to side peering at my mother with one beady eye and then the other like a small grey Groucho.

‘When the mind’s free, the body’s delicate,’ he squawked, and tossed a borlotti bean at her.

‘Now,’ I scolded as my mother pushed to the far end of the couch pulling her handbag close.

‘This,’ she whispered not taking her eyes from the advancing parrot. ‘This is the *bird?*’

When Lear hopped onto the back of the sofa it was too much: she leapt up spilling the tea and with a cry, fled banging the door behind her.

‘Lear!’ I scolded and the rampant bird retreated back to the curtain rail.

‘Does any here know me? This is not Lear: does Lear walk thus? speak thus?’ the bird replied.

‘You’ve really torn it now,’ I said glumly as I picked up the crockery.

‘Really torn it,’ I repeated spluttering and giggling at the image of my poor mother’s frightened face and the determined advancing bird – it was immature, guilty laughter; childish but liberating.

\*

Thirty minutes later and Audrey’s on the phone. ‘She’s over here pale and trembling. Your bird *attacked* her.’

‘Now –’ I began.

Lear was looking at me intensely, tilting his head.

‘What is wrong with you?’ she continued. ‘No. Please don’t tell me. I couldn’t stand it.’

‘I’m sorry, Audrey,’ I stammered. ‘I’ve got to go...away (that’s it)... A trip...business...it’s Africa (of course) a new office...a month. Maybe more.’

‘Have you flipped? And who’s going to look after that stupid bird of yours? I hope you don’t think...we couldn’t possibly, not with Frank’s allergies.’

‘He’s coming with (yes). He’s the reason (yes, yes).’ And I hung up the phone and laughed out loud. Of course.

\*

‘Come on,’ you say. We’re moving through the darkened shop. ‘They’re here somewhere.’

The lemurs, eyes as big as saucers, look to see who’s moving through their jungle.

You are up the back searching but in front of me is a cage with a breathing ball of furs, and there’s a treadmill and someone’s awake. A white hamster is rolling the track gently back and forth, like a runner walking the course, readying himself for the race ahead.

\*

‘Bonjour, hello, this is Your Heart’s Desire Travel. I am Ms Greentree. So...name it.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Lavinia. Call me Lavinia.’

‘Lavinia, I...what was I?’

‘Your heart’s desire? Your pleasure?’ She sighed. ‘Where would you like to go?’

‘Africa.’

‘Ah, Afrique, oui. Africa is eternal and we are flies dancing for just a moment...’ She paused, waiting, then she began reciting.

‘Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea –’

‘Ms Greenleaf, Lavinia, I’m sorry –’

‘There are fifty-four countries in continental Africa not including Madagascar. You’re not interested in Madagascar, are you?’

‘No, I –’

‘That’s good. It’s a dreadful place full of bizarre vegetation and very limited transport options, particularly during the low season.’

‘And this is the low season?’

‘Not quite, but you’re definitely on the shoulder, on the verge, you are on the cusp. A few more weeks and it would have been too late.’

I interrupted. ‘West central Africa, that’s where he comes from.’

‘Who? No. Don’t tell me, this is getting too weird.’

‘He’s a native.’

‘You mean he’s a person of colour,’ she corrected.

‘No, he’s a parrot.’

She was quiet after I finished the story. ‘It’s him,’ she said. ‘No wonder I couldn’t... You must have...’

There was more long silence.

‘Hello? Ms Greentree?’

‘Maybe this will work.’ She was serious and businesslike now we were working on a plan. ‘Equatorial Africa is troubled with revolutions and insurgencies.’

‘Is nowhere safe?’ I asked.

We settled on Abazania and two tickets were purchased, a return for me and a one-way for a Mister Grey.

‘You never know, we might meet,’ she said light-heartedly, and then she was gone.

\*

*Travel can provide opportunities to build a stronger relationship with your bird.*

You may never have heard of Abazania because it is one of the newest countries on the continent but they already have an Only Planet guide. So I read about advances and setbacks, customs and geography, its recipes and hand signals, how to noodle its nuances as the night rolled away thirty-five thousand feet below.

Next to me, Lear burred and quoted Shakespeare to the passing attendants who rewarded him with cashews and pretzels.

I slept for a time and then as I awoke there was a woman in a black leather coat and huge reflective sunglasses bending down and whispering to Lear, ‘Soon now, soon.’

‘I must do what I must, I am bound on this circle of fire,’ the parrot replied.

Her voice. It was... Then she glanced at me, held her finger to her lips and hurried down the aisle.

\*

#### Abazania

...on the western horn of the continent...a short coastline of around 100 kilometres...drive out of the capital Liberatione across an inland plain leading up through highlands to a long plateau... still largely pristine jungle. Ninety per cent of the population are subsistence farmers; the remainder are either entrepreneurs or public servants.

The country’s borders have been drawn and erased by

invaders for hundreds of years, the French from Ivory Coast, then the English, the Germans during the war and finally the Portuguese.

In 2001 under a UN-managed referendum ninety-two per cent of the population agreed that self-rule was better than the current decrepit colonials. The following year, the first democratic elections voted General Leon Mansarray, freedom fighter and local hero to the office of president.

And the sun rose and the plane fell, ran along the tarmac engines roaring, slowed and taxied to a halt and when the noise ceased everyone sat there for a moment in the ringing quiet. Then someone started banging on the door and we stood and shuffled out into Africa, the eternal.

\*

Travelling with a parrot had been easier than you might think and it was only when we arrived at the over-excited terminal building and the customs officer looked hard at my documents that we encountered a problem.

‘Touriste?’

‘Yes.’

‘Touriste sexual?’

‘No.’

‘And the bird? Show me the export permit.’

‘Not export.’

‘No?’

I needed an import certificate but as no such document yet existed



in the new republic there was a problem. The customs officer called his superior and his superior consulted the director. The director sought advice from head office and so on. And while officials conferred and debated and argued and proposed, Lear and I sat stranded in a bare room, the air stirred slowly by a circling fan.

‘Come let’s away to prison; We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage,’ quoted Lear.

Across from us a red-faced man in a blue tropical shirt was mopping his brow. ‘Digby Young,’ he said, offering a hand. ‘Some hitch with my tour,’ he explained. ‘Little bastard assured me he had everything sorted. One thing about the Portuguese, you always knew who were the right people to pay. Trouble with this new mob is they haven’t worked their system out yet. They will eventually but it’s fucked until they do.’

He pulled a photo from his wallet and passed it to me. A young African boy, maybe six grinned back at the camera.

‘He’s like a son. Will do anything to please his uncle Digby.’

Then the door opened and a tall woman in a lemon suit entered. ‘I am Regan, President Mansarray’s adviser. Welcome to the Republic of Abazania.’ She peered into the cage and poked a slim manicured finger tentatively through the bars. ‘This undoubtedly is the parrot.’

As I struggled through the airport with my luggage and Lear, Regan explained that the president was keen to assure Western tourists that the resorts with their wine-glass beaches were open for business. When news of a man with a parrot reached his office, a press conference was quickly arranged. A car with a driver was waiting.

As we were driven through the city, she talked incessantly into her mobile phone, instructing, directing, refusing; one rapid call after another.

So with Lear beside me and Barbra Streisand on the sound system, I stared out at the passing city. The blue-tinted windows made it look as if the city were underwater: bicycles, Hondas, wagons pulled by plodding buffalo, rusting roofs and burnt out buildings, market tables with bananas and paw paw and fish like silver ribbons, children laughing in the gutters and a man with no arms standing over a barrel somehow washing his clothes.

She hurried us to the front of the hall, where cameras and reporters were waiting. 'Let's hope he's not in one of his storytelling father-of-the-republic moods,' she whispered. 'Or we'll be here all afternoon.'

And then a door opened and there was the president – a big man in combat fatigues – striding across the stage. He took my hand and pulled me close, grinning fiercely. 'You're sure it's parrots and not little children that you're interested in?' he whispered, still smiling for the cameras. 'You know what we do to paedophiles in the republic? Paedophiles and communists go to gaol for a long long time. My wife's cousin is the gaol's administrator.' He shook his head. 'He's a complete sadist. Still, you can't choose your family, can you?' Then he bent down and peered into the cage.

'The prince of darkness is a gentleman,' Lear announced and took the president's finger in his beak.

The room was silent. Then the president rose, shoulders shaking with laughter. Everyone cheered and applauded.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the press,' he said, wiping his eyes with a blue silk bandanna. 'Here we have a smart bird.' It reminds me of the story of the emperor's menagerie,' he began.

Tsar Nicholas II of Russia kept one of the largest aviaries in Europe at his palace outside of St Petersburg. It included parrots, toucans,

macaws, hornbills and even a few birds of paradise: birds collected from around the world; undoubtedly it was the largest collection in Europe. The birds were kept in enclosures with ingenious arrangements of heating pipes and warm pools to protect them against the snows of the Russian winter. There they lived behind a black and gold fence for the emperor's amusement.

It was September 1917 and already chilly, although winter was still several months away. A junior keeper who had been reading a Bolshevik pamphlet he'd picked up at a rally down by the docks decided that, rather than keep the birds isolated in their cages, they should all come together in the large enclosure to progress their own class struggle – after all, they had a common proletarian heritage even though by now they were profoundly alienated by the ruling.

But the keeper forgot the vain nature of the birds. So as soon he opened the cages and they waddled out to encounter each other, they started to compare their plumage and quickly became dissatisfied. The blue-fronted Amazonians envied the warm colours of the peach-faces, the green lorries desired the grandeur of the sulfur-crested cockatoos. The small envied the large and the plain longed to be flamboyant. This soon developed into feather pulling as the unhappy birds plucked at tufts of plumage, trying to remove the blues or greens or scarlets that so affronted fashion. Only the grey parrot remained unmoved.

'Aren't you embarrassed?' asked a bedraggled macaw with a large bare patch on his chest. 'You could do so much better with some smart clothes, instead of that drab uniform.'

The grey said nothing.

Others agreed.

'A splash of red,' offered a rosella.

'Maybe a yellow collar and a crest,' proposed a Golden Papuan.

'Yes,' they all agreed, 'you simply *must* have a crest.'

The grey made no reply but cocked his head to stare up at the bars and the gathering clouds.

In only a few hours, the birds had plucked themselves naked in

an orgy of self-critical feather pulling. Feathers rolled around the enclosure in large multicoloured drifts and the pink birds could only waddle about cawing like fledglings until the keeper returned and bundled them back into their individual cages. During the cold snap that followed, many caught colds and sniffles and a few weeks later, when the revolution arrived at the palace, all the birds went ready-plucked into the celebratory pies of the mob.

Only the grey, a true bird of the working class, was spared. Wearing the same uniform as that of the people's revolutionary committee, the grey passed unmolested through the palace gates and off and away into the sky.

\*

'Hello, beautiful.'

We have them. You coo as if they were babies, feeding them sultanas.

Headlights. Coming closer, footsteps and now a torch illuminating the window, an inquiring eye moving across the floor, towards the cages, now empty, opened, obvious. The security patrol is early.

You press your gloved hand against my mouth and neither of us breathe. The bears are restless between us but they don't cry out.

The guard rattles the front door and then...he's walking away, his steps receding.

Luck is with us as he didn't check the back. Now we're off into the night, bears held tight.

\*

The Hotel Americana was a dusty ocean liner beached up against a grove of palm trees. I hung Lear's cage at the open porthole, picked

up the phone and dialled. The line was crackly, broken, ringing then falling silent, ringing again and then:

‘Hello. Gord?’

‘Audrey.’

‘That’s you?’ she said. ‘Gord, where...?’

‘Africa, Audrey, Africa.’

‘Really...?’

‘Really. You’re breaking up.’

‘...she was worried.’

‘Tell her I’m fine. And that I called, OK?’

‘From Africa somewhere.’

‘I have to do this, he...deserves –’

‘...braver than me...a chance you wouldn’t catch me... I’d run and run.’

And then she was gone, the phone’s empty burring in my hand.

\*

The footsteps in the corridor were coming closer, closer, and then they were outside. I opened the door and there she was, the woman from the plane – glasses, coat – bending down to slip a sheet of paper under my now open door.

‘It was him,’ she said turning to leave. But then she remembered something and pulled from her pocket a millet seed spray.

‘It’s you,’ I called as she walked away. ‘From Heart’s Desire. You said we’d meet. I thought you were joking. Lavinia.’

But she was already gone down the corridor.

The paper was a photocopy of a news article, dated a week ago:

*Thieves escape empty-handed. 'What a mess,' says local pet purveyor.*  
It was the report of the break-in at Dave's Pet Emporium.

\*

*Being moved to a new flock can be an ordeal, so you should introduce new companions gradually.*

The room was dim and full of shrieking. A flock of parrots, greys, hundreds of them, circled the palm grove in the early morning skies, screeching and calling. As they approached, Lear shrieked out a greeting from the window and the passing birds picked it up and echoed it back and forth. They circled once more and then wheeled off, their calls fading into the background of motors and chickens and squalling children and the noise of the city waking up.

\*

It was still early when I stepped from the cool of the hotel lobby onto the street. Straight away, as if he'd been waiting, a young boy, maybe twelve or thirteen, attached himself to the sleeve of my shirt. He was wearing a Britney T-shirt and a grin and his name was Jesus. He was also without his right hand; a long white scar snaked around his forearm ending in a bulb where his wrist should have been.

'Let Jesus be your guide,' he insisted.

So I bought him breakfast and while we ate I asked him about schooling and his family, and he asked me about King Lear and Shakespeare and wolves.

'Like hyenas,' he concluded. 'He was brave, then, this King Lear.'

And the hand?

‘The poachers took it. When they came to our village they corralled us and took to us with guns and machetes. Being right-handed, I begged them to take my left but they wouldn’t listen. And so that I should have no hope, once they had it off, they nailed it to a tree stump in front of me, laughing.’ He shrugged. ‘So now I drive left-handed. You and your parrot are in very good luck,’ he said, beaming again. ‘My village is called the paradise for parrots.’

Jesus explained that despite the poachers’ threats and the killings, the village had protected the birds and now it makes small money from the moulted tail feathers, which are gathered and sold for ornaments or for medicine.

‘No one goes hungry in our village,’ he said proudly. ‘All it takes is a walk in the forest to collect feathers.’

\*

Although he protested and even produced a filthy piece of paper which he claimed was his licence, I did the driving. So he sat next to me talking to Lear, feeding him paw paw and scratching his neck as we climbed into the hills.

Every so often, he would turn around and peer through the window at where we’d come from. Satisfied, he’d return to playing with the parrot.

Three hours and fifty miles along and there was the village: a row of yellow adobe houses opening onto a bare earth track. As we approached, people came and stood outside their huts and watched apprehensively. But they relaxed when they saw Jesus waving and grinning, and when I brought Lear out, there was applause and a rush forward. The men shook my hand and talked about television and my appearance with the president and offered me cigarettes;

and the women laughed and stroked my arm and lead me through their houses showing me the framed portraits of the great man hung in pride of place in every house, usually over the television sets. Then they showed me their rooms and their gardens and fed me and introduced me to all their cousins.

\*

Jesus came for me while it was still dark. He had brought his younger sister, Maimouna, with him and as we walked through the gloom he explained how she had lost her arm inside a church when the poacher gangs attacked. She was strapped to her grandmother's back and as the grandmother ran away she was shot. The bullet that killed Maimouna's grandmother also took the little girl's arm.

Maimouna just held onto my hand and smiled up at me.

\*

It was a plain unspectacular morning that rose about us – one that had been repeated over and over for as long as the jungle and the waterhole and the palm grove had been there. The morning chorus was well under way, with shrieking and squawking so loud that my ears rang and buzzed.

I held Lear up for the last time and he turned to me, bobbed his head and said, 'The wheel is come full circle.' And with that he stretched his wings, flapped once and was gone up into the palm tops.

Simple as that.

We stood for a while watching and then a breeze caught the tops of the palms, clattered in the fronds and swirled about. Up in the



foliage the birds, hundreds and hundreds of them, beat their wings and around us a snow of grey and white feathers drifted down. Here and there, vivid red tail feathers arrowed into the ground. Jesus and his sister laughed and rushed about in the harvest.

\*

Lavinia was waiting for us on the path on the way back. She kissed Jesus on the forehead, lifted Maimouna into her arms and as we walked she explained. 'There are hundreds, thousands more.'

\*

### POLICE BAFFLED, BEARS GONE

A pair of rare Indonesian sun bears are missing after another daring break-in at a high street pet store. The bears, described as small with a black coats and yellowish snouts, feed mostly on honey and insects and are not dangerous. A hamster is also missing.



# Touch

It began in the airport bookshop. Me, fat and fortyish in the lit. fiction; you, a skinny girl in jeans, T-shirt and baby-girl rubber thongs with little yellow flowers on them. (I didn't even get a good look at you.) You're facing the general fiction and I'm flicking through some pompous anthology of the best stories of whatever year we've finally arrived in – titles, authors, maybe a first sentence or two, flipping pages...while my consciousness zeroes in on you, standing a little too close. I shuffle a quarter step to the left to give you room but you close in and then you – brush, push, touch, plug in – put your fingers right there. I can feel them even now, still burning on my arm: a blaze storming through a small twenty-cent touch rushing down to fill my wrist and hand and then back up my arm heading for my heart, my breathing where it catches and –

stops everything.

– ‘uh’ I say when my breathing starts again.

– ‘uh’ you say as your breath catches too.

There was nothing on my antenna, no recognition, no eye contact. I think when I walked in I may have registered you and boyfriend having some sensible banter about which brick to take for the plane. This time of night all the flights out are long-haul: three hours thirty, five hours and even six-fifteen to Cairns – across the country in the dead of night, below us towns and cities where everyone's asleep. We're all looking for something to get us through the black time in front of us.

And this, this was wordless, electric sex for ten, twenty long seconds.

If I could I would have broken the paralysis that prickled our necks and fixed us there allowing us only to blink, to breathe shallowly.

– I would have leant over maybe to whisper something, to look at your face above me, reach for your hot tears on my neck as I bend over and gift a pearl of spit on your toes, so you'd feel it warm on the bridge of your foot but cooling as it runs down between.

Fiona. Can I call you that, Fiona? Why not? It makes no difference. Any name is just another overlay another thing along with age, time, the relationship you're in, the relationship I'm in and the words typed on your boarding pass and the letters on mine. All obscure the sea of energy between us – the flux and fury channelled through two fingers held on a stranger's arm for an age in an airport bookstore late at night somewhere.

\*

I don't know what's happened to me but since then I have become electrically sexually charged. I am a restless driving circuit of current travelling round and round – looking to discharge anywhere; finding aching pleasure in the accidental contacts of daily life: brushing against a woman in a crowd, handing over change in a shop, shaking hands at meetings: 'This is Ramdas, and Davo from Systems, and this is Eleanor from legals.' Youch.

\*

There's nothing in my domestic life. Susan and I have been married for six years and we're pretty happy. We talk and we're genuinely

interested in each other. Sometimes when she's had a hard day she needs to ventilate about the shortcomings of those she works with: how the director is a disengaged boob who has no idea what's going on, how the finance controller is a sharp conniver and the other managers range from incompetent to emotionally unstable. I know she says these things to get them out of her system, so I never take it seriously and when we meet these people socially I try not to recall her rantings.

When we first met, I promised that we would be sexually uninhibited and have a rich fantasy life. Finally, I wanted to burn away all that silly embarrassment and the repressions that had somehow been transmitted from our parents' generation. For example, I wanted her to masturbate in front of me. I would be sitting in an armchair and I would direct her – faster, slower. I imagined myself dressed in a suit and sometimes I'd push my polished shoe against her knee to open her more fully to my gaze.

And it would be reversed: I'd be there on the bed and I'd do whatever she'd instruct. I would have to obey without complaint or modesty no matter what she asked: take hold of myself, pull my buttocks apart if that's what she wanted.

But it didn't happen like that. We ended up holding each other, being affectionate skin to skin. We liked just lying in the dark hearing each other's breathing. And the sex is nice: I say, 'Oh Susan' while we're fucking and she says, 'Oh Peter' as if she's discovering me all over again. And afterwards we're always tender and solicitous.

But what's going on now is different.

\*

Two weeks have passed and it's become all-consuming. I imagine, and I know this is in my head, but I imagine that everything I say

reveals the cunning, deliberate calculator that I've become. So I'm surprised when people take what I say at face value.

I decide I need a haircut.

Usually I go to Christis for the fifteen-dollar special: 'You want the number 3 or the number 2? Maybe we go the number 2 for the hot weather,' the old Greek says, tearing off a length of toilet paper and stuffing it into my collar before flipping the cloth over me. 'Getting a bit thin up here,' he smirks as the scissors clatter about.

But instead I call Antonia's Salon.

'Who normally does you?' the receptionist purrs at the end of the phone.

'I'll take pot luck,' I say, struggling to keep the trembling from my voice.

Everything about Antonia's is erotic: the smell of shampoo flavoured with coconut and vanilla, the recessed lighting, the thumping dance music and the women's heads, each one beautiful yet vulnerable poking out of their black capes like a row of prizes. There is something about seeing them without the distraction of their clothes that emphasises their beauty, both the young and the older women. And there they are, mirrored several times over so that in a single glance you can see both sides of their faces, their necks, their ear lobes.

Some are being combed and straightened, others are reading magazines with aluminium foil strips in their hair. There is a blonde bent over facing the floor while one of the hairdressers pulls a brush down through her hair over and again – and each time she makes a kind of panting noise: huff, huff.

'So how do you like it?' Gina asks as she pushes her fingers through my hair, shoving it one way and then another.

‘I was thinking of something different, maybe messier on top,’ I say waving my hands over my head.

‘You’re sure I haven’t done you before?’ she asks. ‘I’ve seen a head just like yours recently.’

And then the young girl with the buzzed head and blue ponytail leads me by the cape over to the sink, has me sit back so my neck is stretched out and I’m staring at the ceiling. ‘Not too hot?’ she asks as she runs water onto my head.

Then she starts massaging some kind of cold peppermint goop into my scalp, her strong fingers stretch out across my head, pushing, pressing, probing. ‘Not too firm?’

‘Fine,’ I croak as the waves of pleasure roll down my spine.

\*

‘Mmmm,’ Susan says, reaching up to touch my hair, running her hand across my temple. ‘Much better than your usual.’

I don’t know if it’s because I had so recently been satisfied but there is barely a flicker to her touch and I wonder if there is any hope for us.

Her hand moves down to my ear lobe and then playfully flicks the gold earring. ‘You really should get rid of this. You’re forty now.’

I know that Susan sees me as one of her long-term projects. She intends by cajoling and prodding and gently criticising to make me into a more social, better-adjusted person.

‘Stop,’ I snap. ‘It’s me. It’s part of me. Why do you have to?’

‘Don’t be so...’ she replies backing away. ‘Always so snappy.’

Later. I’m lying in the dark of our bedroom staring at the ceiling and listening to Susan’s breathing like the coming and going of

waves on the shore. It's twelve, one o'clock, and I'm not sleeping. I'm alive and awake and jittery with what I'm going to do next. If I hold my hand up in front of me, it would be glowing and flickering with energy.

I pick the time and I roll out of bed.

Susan mumbles something.

'Can't sleep,' I whisper. And then I'm down the stairs and out.

It's raining. The wipers push the drizzle about and the tyres sound like fat in a pan. Who's out on a night like this? I park in the shadows across the street and watch the slow parade of cars as they crawl past, normal everyday cars: white Magnas, silver Commodores, as well as a souped up Falcon. Once in a while one of them will pull over and a girl will step over and bend down to chat at the passenger's window. The girls are all so young, mostly listening to hip-hop on iPods swinging their arms, tapping their feet.

Not for me.

The club is in an industrial precinct out of town and its name – Heart's Desire – burns bright between the dark looming factories.

Carlo behind the counter isn't leering at my nervousness. 'Just say, whatever you're looking for,' he says.

'The touch...to make contact,' I say.

He leads me down a curtained corridor to a cubicle where there's a low stool before a curtained window. 'You won't be disturbed here,' he smiles and pulls the door closed.

As I get used to the darkness, I notice there's a vinyl-padded hole in front of me.

I pull back the curtain and beyond the glass is a bright white octagonal room. On the opposite side I can see the windows of the other cubicles and like mine, beneath each, there is a hole.



Then the music starts, a door opens and a woman steps in. She's naked. Her breasts sway and hang and there's cellulite across her thighs but her pubic hair has been neatly trimmed into a single wispy arrow. She stands there in the centre of the room and starts rocking to the music but the ridiculous heels on her turquoise shoes make it difficult for her to move, so she kind of shuffles from one foot to the other staring off into the distance looking bored, turning a circle once in a while.

Despite this, her dance is affecting the watchers and one after another erect penises appear through the holes, swaying and bobbing to the music. And now the woman walks around the room and without looking she idly brushes her hand against each, as if she's patting a row of dogs on the head, one after the other.

Now I know what to do. I slip off the stool, kneel down and put my hand through the hole waving it about in time to the music. She's coming around to my window and she reaches down and plays her fingers briefly across my palm. It's electric. All my energy is drawn to her touch. I'm completely focused there in my hand, my whole being has been transferred to my fingers and to my super-sensitive palm.

Round and round she goes and the penises follow obedient to her touch. For some she lingers a moment, giving them an experienced tug or grasping them completely; some ejaculate, soften and withdraw, others remain upright and attentive.

And then she comes back to me, again lightly teasingly elusive. But then suddenly surprisingly her whole hand is completely in mine, palm against palm, fingers entwined, my thumb hot against hers. It's so –

– good –

When I come to, the music has stopped, the white room is empty,

the penises gone. I stand up on shaky knees, clean myself up and leave.

\*

It's early when I arrive home but Susan is already up, padding about the kitchen in her long T-shirt.

She looks at me blearily. 'Where have you been?'

'Couldn't sleep,' I say, pecking her on the cheek.

The clean muzzy smell of our bed hangs about her like an aura.

'You're not getting your insomnia back? Maybe you should –'

'I'm fine, just a little restless.'

She comes over to me. 'I worry about you,' she says, putting her hands about my neck and looking at my face.

Her T-shirt rises up and I lay my hands on her warm buttocks.

'Me too,' I joke, nuzzling her neck. 'Want some tea?' I say, turning to the kettle.

And so we breakfast together and another day comes up.

But all this time all I can think about is the touch of the woman in the white room.

\*

I call Heart's Desire.

'Lucy. She doesn't do one-on-ones,' says Carlo reluctantly.

I explain that all I want is to touch. Nothing else.

It's two in the afternoon and I'm following Carlo upstairs and out along a veranda to a portable room suspended over the car park like

those you see on building sites. Inside, there's a bed and a blue blanket and the room smells of cigarettes and lavender-scented air freshener. Lucy is already there sitting on the bed in a towelling robe.

'We've gotta be done by three, OK, I've got to pick up the kids from preschool.' She smiles, letting the robe slip from her shoulders.

None of this matters – not the room, the creaky bed or cigarette burns on the thin blue blanket. There is only us –

– lying on the bed: she's down one side, I'm down the other.

– staring at the ceiling. It's made of spray-on concrete that has been has formed into little stalactites.

– not touching, breathing in the distance and the rising hum between us. The air conditioner rattles.

'You're not nervous?' she asks.

'No,' I croak. 'You?'

She laughs.

She moves her hand a little closer to mine. It gets to within a few millimetres and suddenly there's a crack. A spark has jumped the gap.

She yelps. Concerned, I grab for her. She goes to push me away but suddenly the electricity is all between us – round and rising up and we're fixed there unable to move – time has stopped, the world is suspended, birds, planes hang fixed in the sky.

\*

Do I feel guilty for deceiving Susan? About going out at night to a sex club? About Lucy? The truth? Not for a moment, not for a second. I'm not indifferent to being caught. In my rational mind I know that I'm going to get my comeuppance soon enough. But I can't think about this reckless, crazy path and where it's leading,

I'm compelled, I'm running out of control, so that it's not even me picking up the phone and begging Carlo for another time with Lucy. Anything, I'll do anything.

\*

Three a.m. and Susan is waiting for me there at the breakfast bench cold and hard. 'It's someone,' she says. 'You're seeing someone.'

'It's not,' I say.

'Not what?' she spits. 'Go on tell me what it's not.' And then she kind of collapses, her shoulders sag. 'I cared so much for you. We had something and now...'

She's right. What has happened to me?

'It's not about us,' I say. 'It's a thing.' I'm so pitiful I start crying.

She looks at my anguished face.

'I'm sick,' I continue.

'You're sick,' she says.

'I'll get help. I promise,' I blub.

She takes my shoulder and shakes my face: 'Will you, Peter? Will you?'

And then the doorbell rings.

It's Carlo. I can see he's upset too but before I can ask how he found me and tell him that now is not really a great time as my wife and I are in the middle of – he pushes past and into the kitchen.

Susan stands as I do the introductions.

'Susan, this is Carlo, he's a friend from work. Carlo, my wife Susan.' I emphasise this, hoping he might catch on, but he's too far gone.

'You must stop.' He fixes me with bloodshot eyes. 'I'm begging you. She hasn't been herself since you started and now, tonight, she

says she won't go on with me and she wants to leave us. Me and the kids. I should beat her, that's what pimps do, isn't it? I raise my fist but she stares back and defies me and then she says she deserves to be beaten and she doesn't care. I can't bring myself to hurt her anyway.'

He leans onto one of the stools and Susan puts a comforting hand on his shoulder while looking sharply at me, again full of questions, full of hurt.

There is only one thing to do.

I grab the car keys.

'There's only one thing to do.' I keep repeating this phrase over and over as I drive around without direction. I take the familiar roads and then turn off at random. I crawl along suburban streets, prowling past houses: some are alive with the flicker of a television, most are dark their doorways like headstones, windows as empty as the eyes of dead men.

Somehow I find my way to the bypass and next I'm speeding down the freeway. I wind down the windows and the night and the cold fills the car. And finally, there is the airport burning bright like a furnace in the dark.

Now I'm in the bookshop. Selecting a paperback at random – my purpose is disguised, my eyes averted to the page while my senses are alive, turned outward, scanning back and forth. My fingers have become super-sensitive antenna trembling in the air for movement, vibrations. And there you are at last coming down the aisle, your turquoise shoes tip-tapping across the floor.



## 38

The bus is going round again.

Last night you wrote, *Meet? Yes. Yes after all this time. Look for me on bus 38 tomorrow. Claire.*

It's four-twenty and I've been riding since noon. And the 38 is going round again: through the shopping centre, right down the ramp, left onto the feeder road, five suburban blocks, then it's freeway. Along the mountain's shoulder and through the rural backblocks – one stop in the middle of a paddock, another at a roadhouse/wheat silo, across the railway and into the new town, cloned ochre houses all lined up. Along the high street, up to the station and then park. Wait twenty minutes – everyone off while the driver (oh my driver) reads the *Tele* and has a smoke. At five to, we're lined up jostling for position noses up against the glass – me too with my crumpled dayrider. Then the doors are open and we're loading on.

This was your idea. Our first face-to-face meeting – full of contradictions, eccentric, tentative and intimate – just like you. We've been talking for months now, our regular Friday chat, banter, persiflage, chitter. Your webpage and mine @ meetme.com. We progressed from mandatory flirtation with double entendre – 'how long has it been?' – to something else, to disclosure and then what? Intimacy? Between us we marked points of intersection and discovery. We were exploring two sides of the same river, corresponding about the contours we had discovered, the width of the channel – our childhood plans; you the astronaut, chemist, marine

biologist on the Great Barrier Reef; me – artist, therapist, writer. The rapids and the dark pools – how your father had ignored you, how I grew up alone, staring at the ceiling month after month racked with rheumatic fever, listening to the kids playing outside.

I love this time of day when low light sweetens the landscape. The townhouses are as pretty and depressing as a Hopper painting, the blonde grasses in the field bent over by the weight of the long sunshine. I'm sitting here with the last of the schoolkids lounging across seats and the first worker bees in their shirts and ties, briefcases on laps, plugged into walkmans and fat action novels,.

Then, like a big old bear, the drunk gets on and hand-over-hand climbs up the aisle to push in next to me.

'You lookin sweet there in your jacket and them gaberdine slacks,' he says. 'You lookin like you're goin to meet someone, like you'll be gettin some tonight.' He grins. His mouth is a fence-row of brown teeth and there's spilled something down his front and the sharp stink of some disaster in his underpants. 'Goin to get some of that sweet ole pussy cat tonight. Fer sure.'

'Look,' I say. I glance at the driver's mirror but there's only sunglasses and (maybe) a small wry twitch of a smile as he leans down and pushes the bus into drive.

We jerk forward.

'Whad? What was that?' He looks about alarmed but then his eyes roll back to me. 'Isss goan be okay, and you,' he pronounced, 'you're awl right.'

Pretending it was my stop, I stood to get past him but he pushed me back down.

'I've got somethin for you.' He reached into the ruins of his coat and from the darkness of its interior pulled out a mud-brown ball



of paper. ‘You a ladies man, you understan all them pussycats.’ He rolled the paper from his cupped hands into mine.

I peeled the paper back. On it was written *We are all someone’s single love*.

He was spluttering and giggling. ‘You know who wrote tha?’ he asked, the laughter sputtering, bursting out. ‘Good ole Proooost. Thas righ, ole Marcello hisself. Now what would Proooost know about love and all them pussy cats? Nuthin. Thas what. Nuthin...’

I was sitting in a bath brimful of smelly oddness: as it washed over me I couldn’t think of a damn thing to say. Suddenly, like a disgusting version of Alice’s rabbit, he jumped to his feet, lunged for the stop cord and hurried up the aisle to get out right there in the middle of the paddock. I was left with the crumpled piece of romance in my hands next to a small pool of urine where he’d been sitting.

Now the light is long gone along with the crush of the commuters. It’s dark and there’s me and a woman in a coat on the bench seat and a couple up the back and this boy gets on, eyes me and is heading my way.

When he hit me, I was busy looking at my reflection growing in his black sunglasses – my big bubble-head, stupid-looking jacket and trousers.

There was nothing in his first punch, it was a glancing nudge across my cheek, but then his right came across and smacked into my ear, which stung and buzzed.

‘This my seat, cunt,’ he snarled.

I slid back and wedged my legs in. It was all slow and detailed – I turned my head and saw the woman in the coat lifting her hand up to her mouth, her eyes wide. I saw the driver in the mirror watching.

Then the boy was above me, ‘Always been my seat.’

I lifted my arms to cover, and his right glanced off and smacked into the metal seat rail.

‘Fuck,’ he said. He said it again and then reached down and grabbed for one of my legs, pulling it straight out.

I sank further into the seat and hung on.

Now I’m curled on the floor and he’s kicking into me but mostly getting my bony arms. ‘Cuntcuntcunt.’ He’s breathing hard now but in the cramped aisle there’s not much room and he can’t get a really good swing. He jumps over me and tries the other foot but it’s no good.

I’m groaning away, kind of in sync: ‘Unnh unnh Huh unnh unnh.’

The bus is stopped and the waiting is all around. He lunges with his left but it lands on my shoulder and glances up over my ear – the ringing one. His balance shifts and he ends up standing astride me and he hacks and spits and it lands warm on my cheek. And then he dances down the aisle, down the steps and is gone.

The woman in the coat comes over and stares but doesn’t offer anything; her fist is still in her mouth and she’s making blubbing sounds.

I put my elbow out and scrabble back onto my seat, feeling better but my ear is ringing. I’ve become a sniffing dripping wreck propped across the seat.

The driver glances in his mirror and I gesture with a wave. The door hisses shut and bus moves on.

You are there at last like a vision, silent as a saint.

‘My stop,’ I slur, and you take my elbow.

I'm giddy and my legs are made of wax but you hold me up.

We're down the steps and I turn back to the driver to say something but he's already looking straight ahead at the road and the darkness ahead.

And there's a wind and the smell of rain in the street.

I can't get my key in the door so you take it from me and your hand doesn't shake at all.

We're inside and I fall across the bed.

I come back to the surface and you're exploring my face with your long cool fingers – wherever you touch me, the numbness peels away and it burns and stings. My jacket's torn and my knees are ripped and you bend over me to lick the boy's spit from my cheek.

We don't talk. We put ourselves aside, our long list of discoveries and our parallel histories. As we strip out of our clothes, we take ourselves off as well, so finally there's nothing in the bed, nothing in the lying down, nothing between us but the sex and the breathing and the sleep that lies across us at last like a sheet.

And in the morning I walk past the computer on my way back to bed and there's your mail: *I was too afraid to come. Forgive me?*  
*Claire.*



## A little turbulence

### The price of vigilance

Take a good look him. Across the aisle in 23D. He's watching Will Smith in *I Robot* on his portable PS2. Plugged in, tuned out, watching the cutesy little drama on the dinky little box, laughing out loud when someone in the film cracks a joke. No one else is laughing but he's having a big old belly laugh. Ho. Ho. Ho. He doesn't realise what he's doing, he has no idea, the jeopardy we're all in.

For the record, he's a normal enough looking: khaki shorts, sandals, a Ralph Lauren polo (pink, mind you), late thirties, dark hair receded into a tuft up front but still plenty of lawn to mow in back. Yellowish complexion – it's what they call olive. Olive? What is that? Some kind of cooking oil? Yeah, the suspect's complexion was the colour of my salad dressing.

As I said normal enough, indistinguishable from any of the other eighty-three passengers on QF481 heading for nowhere, heading right up shit creek.

The plane is juddering and shaking and the fluoros are flickering. I'm in 23C and over there in 23A the big fat guy in a blue shirt is having trouble with his tray table.

'Show him, will ya,' I say to Didi, but she's deep in some Dan Brown conspiracy and isn't interested.

Instead, she gives me that look over the top of her glasses like she's some kind of academic or something. Don't I know that look?

‘It’s the hinge, it keeps on coming unstuck,’ fat-boy whines to no one in particular.

What does he think? That one of them pretty waitresses is just going to pop along by with a toolbox and fix it for him? Here we are bouncing about in the tempest and some overweight slob is whining about his tray-table. They don’t call this economy class for nothing, you know. Back here it’s every man (and woman and child) for themselves.

## **Intercom**

There’s a big old storm outside and we are going down – why do you think the captain keeps on dinging on the intercom – he’s not calling to ask them out or whether they’ve got plans for later on in the evening. Something’s up all right. You can see it on their faces – they’d never admit, they’re not allowed to, but everyone knows we’re in trouble deep.

I’ll say something. I’ll be nice about it. I can be nice and diplomatic. All polite and chummy. Something like: you know now isn’t the time to be watching anything on any personal electronic device that’s interfering with our navigation. Right now we need all the help we can get. I go to lean over but there’s Didi’s hand on my arm.

‘Relax, will you. Don’t get so overwrought,’ she says.

## **Dinner service**

I’ve travelled enough to know, so I’ll let you into a secret: go for the fish, every time. And I’ll tell you why: fish goes off quicker so while they can store and re-heat the chicken or the beef for days if they have to, the fish won’t survive that long, so you know it was done today. Stands to reason.

‘Fish,’ I say when the dinner trolley arrives.

‘Sorry, there’s only the beef with Asian greens or the pasta.’

‘No fish?’

The moment passed and now I’m staring at the empty expanse of my tray table while Didi and fatso are tucking in.

‘Mmmm,’ says Didi. ‘Try some. It’s really good.’ She’s holding up a white plastic fork with some green and brown goop on it, like I’m a baby.

‘It’s the cardamom,’ chimes in 23A.

‘Cardamon, that’s it,’ she says. ‘Have we got any cardamon at home, hon?’

‘How should I know. You’re the adventurer when it comes to the kitchen.’ (Yeah, like her veal tonnato. What a treat that was. The look on Marginson’s face as he spooned the curds onto his plate.)

‘You should have had something,’ says Didi. ‘Now you’ll be grumpy for the rest of the flight.’

## **Going round again**

‘They look like furrows, as if some sky-farmer had been hoeing away.’ 23A has his head squeezed up against the window.

‘It’s architectural,’ says Didi, leaning across his circumference to take a peek.

‘Now they’re islands risen out of a darkening ocean – a sea of grey blue emptiness and these islands. Hey, there’s a town down there, it looks like a reef, jewels, a necklace. Now they’re snowy mammoths all sidled up against each other,’ he says. The imagery just keeps coming with this guy.

‘Hon, what’s the collective noun for mammoths?’ Didi asks.

## Didi goes to the bathroom

‘I’ve gotta go,’ she says.

‘You can’t,’ I say *sotto voce*, keeping my eyes firmly on the suspect. He’s put the PS2 away and has got out his electronic digital assistant and is busy pecking away on the little screen with a plastic pen.

‘What do you mean?’ She’s already working on her seatbelt.

‘Well...OK, why? Why do you want to go to the bathroom?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Don’t be an idiot.’

All right, we can work this. While I’m standing up I can check out what the suspect is doing. He’s tapping away furiously. What’s he writing?

But just then 23A decides he has to go to the bathroom too, so we’re both up and out of our seats while fat boy’s fishing about for the buckle on his seatbelt. So he’s pushing and lunging and groaning all underarms and perspiration and then like an egg out of a bottle he’s into the aisle. I’m ready to start my over-the-shoulder surveillance but Didi’s in my sight line and she’s in no mood to make concessions. So we stand there facing forward, watching 23A making his way up the plane: sideways and then waddling forward and then sideways again, a kind of crab-waltz as he edges past each row. You can tell he’s in a hurry and he’s huffing and puffing. But then from around the curtained corner rolls the drinks trolley. Irresistible force comes face to face with immovable object. For a moment it’s like a bull-fight. Huff and puff goes 23A, pawing at the ground his face turning red. But the stewardess driving the trolley isn’t going anywhere. It’s a stand off – 23A is eyeing the stewardess, she inches the trolley forward, he backs away a half step and now he starts to reverse his progress but he can’t turn around in aisle, so he’s backing up blind and he’s not happy.

I can see the smirk on her face. So I call out that she should



back her trolley out of the paying customer's way. I wasn't crude about it or anything but I made my point and there were murmurs of agreement from my fellow-travellers, someone even clapped.

'What's got into you?' Didi poked me as we all sat down once more.

Fat-boy smiles and leans across offering me his hand. 'Joey Dark. These planes, there's no room.'

'No problems,' I reply. 'We've got to stick together, eh?'

His hand is still wet from the bathroom.

So next thing, the head steward, Adrian, is bending over me breathing peppermints and onions. 'Now, we don't want any trouble on tonight's flight, do we?' he whispers. 'In the interests of everyone's safety I must ask you not to be so disruptive.'

I wanted to give him some signal about my suspicions but Didi stepped in. 'He was only trying to help this passenger,' she said indicating 23A. 'Your staff were quite rude and I think you owe him an apology.'

'Now, hon,' I say to Didi, 'I'm sure the waitress was just doing her job. Isn't that right, Adrian?' I say, smiling up at him.

'Flight attendant,' he says coldly. 'Being a crew member is much more than just waitressing.'

'Absolutely right, and back here we think you're all doing a great job.' I'm trying to appease him but I don't think he knows how to take this.

'So we'll hear nothing more from this row,' he says huffily and minces back up the aisle.

## **Call button**

Do something. That's the slogan, isn't it? If you see something, do something about it, tell someone. But here's the dilemma: let's say

I get one of the crew down here. While she's squatting down next to me as I explain what's what, he'll be alerted: I mean, we're only three feet apart. Now, either he decides to abort his mission given he's been discovered, or, and this is the problem, we provoke his attack. Maybe he'll snatch the crew member while she's still next to me. He could reach over her shoulder and pull her right back so that's she's off balance, kick her heels apart while pushing something sharp at her neck (What? maybe the wineglass from dinner which he's broken into shards). And then they'll struggle together up the aisle. Now I know the crew have been trained not to give in to the suspect's demands, but that doesn't mean shit. What would you do if your friend and workmate appears with a crazy guy in a pink shirt holding a blade to her throat? She'd be looking at you with those frightened doe eyes and you're not going to say, 'I'm sorry I'm not allowed to show you to the flight deck, you'd better just cut her throat right here', are you? Of course not.

A note. I'll write a note.

'Where's your pen?'

Without looking up from her book, Didi points to the overhead locker.

'I've got one in my briefcase,' offers 23A and he starts wiggling about trying to reach under his seat, as if he's ever going to be able to retrieve anything from down there. Poor mutt probably hasn't seen his toes for years and he's going to have to have to face it some time: his briefcase and whatever else is down there are lost to him forever.

'Thanks all the same,' I say, standing and opening the locker and scrabbling about for Didi's handbag.

## **Walking down the aisle**

Here we go. Keep it casual, maybe a stretch and a yawn. I've folded the note into four and it's nestled there in my palm.

The 'toilet occupied' light goes off. Perfect. So I'm up and walking past everyone: a grey-haired couple dozing, a guy playing *Myste* on his laptop, mums reading magazines, tow-headed kids plugged into the movie – some stupid thing with Pierce Brosnan, lots of gags, lots of explosions.

Here's business class and the galley is just ahead. The crew are fiddling around getting the desserts ready for the rich fats: 'More chocolate sauce with your profiteroles, sir?'

I wipe my palms against my trousers. It was something to think about – these few scribbled lines on a page from a cheap notebook are going to alter everything. Probably the procedure is to keep everything calm, continue to play out the roles: finish serving dinner, let the movie run its length. Meanwhile, the first officer would be radioing ahead, on the ground alarms would be going off. 'This is not a drill, This is not a drill.' Fighters would be scrambled, emergency procedures activated and gently, imperceptibly, the captain would nudge the plane onto a new course. One which takes us away from the metropolis, away from skyscrapers and apartment blocks and lines up on a military aerodrome on the outskirts. If everything goes to plan it'll be a quick landing and then instead of pulling up at a terminal, the door will burst open and troops will storm in. Women will scream, some guy will stand up but will be shoved firmly back into his seat and before anyone has really worked out what was going on they'll have him. He'll be down on the carpet with their knees in his back screaming as they pull his arms from their sockets and he'll curse them, curse them in Arabic or something, curse us all.

‘You dropped this,’ he says.

Jesus. Oh Jesus. He had been behind me all the time. I turn around and he’s there holding the note, a wry little smile on his face.

‘It must have slipped from your hand,’ he said.

The paper had unfolded and the writing, some of it was visible.

‘Look, I...’ I started. ‘I didn’t –’

‘Are you all right? You’re a looking a bit pale.’

I held on to the nearest seatback. ‘Stretching the legs,’ I whispered.

‘Are you...?’ He gestured towards the toilet.

‘No, go ahead, I’ll just...’

So he eased past and for a moment we were right up and close. He was a head shorter than I but he looked strong, wiry and compact like a flyweight.

‘You want this? he said, still holding the note, still smiling. ‘Or is it rubbish?’

‘Rubbish,’ I mouthed.

‘Toss it for you?’

I nodded and he turned away.

I staggered back up the plane on trembling knees where Didi and 23A were talking about conspiracies and sinister organisations who would stop at nothing to prevent the truth from coming out.

## **23D stands up**

Finally, at last, after hours of this, we’re heading in for a landing. Everyone’s buckled up with their seatbelts slung low and tight. The flaps are up, the engines whining and the old 737 is kicking and bucking about as we head down into choppy air and so what do you think? He decides that now is the time to stand up. He’s standing up

and looking about. He looks back down the plane and then up to the front as if he's expecting someone – maybe his best friend, maybe an old pal he hasn't seen for ages – to come strolling down the aisle and say, 'Ahmed, buddy, how long has it been?' and slapping him on the shoulder and then they'll just wander off together, walk up the aisle together, arms over each other's shoulder. And the crew would open the door for them and they'd step off looking for a taxi to take them to the nearest bar. And when they get there they're going to line 'em up and knock them back, just like they used to.

He's doing this kind of stretching. He's got this distracted look on his face and he's rolling his shoulders like he's in pain, like there's an injury from some kind of accident, although by now it's all healed over and you wouldn't be able to see the marks where they had beaten him, broken his ribs, ground a stogie against his flesh like he was an ashtray. Maybe, he still gets these sharp shooting pains and he has no choice, he just has to stand. The pains can come on him at any time, they're unpredictable: he could be bowed at prayer or in a taxi or in the arms of some ambassador's wife while the party is going on below in the ballroom and he'd just have to stand up right then and there.

### **There's something in his bag**

This is it, he's making his move. He's opening the overhead locker. One of the crew sees this and grabs the speaker phone: 'All passengers *must* be seated', but he ignores this. Now he's got his bag down. There's something, he's finding something in his bag. I've got to do something. It's me, I'm the guy on the spot. The bag falls to the floor but there's something still in his hand. I'm up now and reaching for him and he sees me and turns. What is it? I keep trying to see but I can't stop looking at his face, at his eyes. The plane hits

a well and lurches down. I'm flying now and my hands close over his. I fall into him, pushing his hands, his arms down, pushing him across the seat. Someone behind me is screaming. Maybe there was a bang, maybe...

### **On the transmigration of souls**

I come awake from the dream about the ambassador's wife and we're still flying. Take a good look at the guy across the aisle in 23C. He keeps staring at me and making notes on a bit of paper...

# The Martian Gardener

## Viv

They hadn't had sex for months, they barely spoke. Three days after landfall, Laney had moved into a storage locker near the humi-lab and now they mostly kept out of each other's way. Viv would see her sometimes, her socked feet sticking out into the corridor the heels worn and stained, twitching sometimes while she slept.

'Three years in that kind of proximity can put a strain on any marriage.' That's what the psych said back at the Cape. She had no idea.

They were thirteen months down, not even halfway, and they hadn't talked for months. Conversation had eroded away like sand in a flood across the cliffs and waddies of Mars –

'The AE35's back on line.'

'Hmnn.'

'Think I'll go EVA, check on the dowsing rod.'

'Unhmm.'

'Hundred per cent failure on batch 247.'

'Sssss.'

Their routine had been designed so that conversation was as superfluous as their PhDs – Viv the biologist, Laney the engineer; they were maintenance drones – they joked that a vacuum cleaner with a few attachments could have performed as well.

The bio-experiments were completely automated – a seed squeezed from its bubblewrap rolls down the ramp, is barcoded and sprayed with

five ccs of H<sub>2</sub>O on the way to meet its assigned vial, where it plops face up in the gel. And the results, monitored by banks of sensors and cameras, were identical: germination, exposure, germ-line mutation, collapse, putrefaction – eleven hundred and twenty times. It'd still be going if Viv hadn't shoved a screwdriver in the belt drive. Mars was a UV bath in which life struggled briefly and succumbed.

She would have to explain it eventually, some time.

Living here was hard. Peroxides and dust scoured and abraded everything, cold seeped through the floor and into her boots and the ochre and red spectrum dulled the long long days. And now with Laney absent she had to manage on her own.

Even without the five-minute delay a meaningful conversation with the Cape was impossible: they were only interested in appearances, the PR flacks had taken over from the engineers and the pilots.

'How about we see you on screen together once in a while?' Candy, one of the new graduates, tried. 'The sponsors are thinking about doing another ad...' or 'You are heroes. Generations of kids want to...'

Viv was tired most of the time. She'd been tired for months now and on her days off, she'd curl into her crib and sleep for hours and hours.

Not much fun.

So one day, after another bleating vidcast from the Cape about tidying up the station and restarting the experiments, Viv replied, Yes. Why not? In fact, she had already begun, and magically line 1131 had germinated and survived five days, line 1139 had stuck around for twenty days and finally 1148 was still going.

Viv was surprised at how easy fiction was. Of course she'd had to sabotage the telemetry units and Photoshop some video but it



was worth it. Like a flash, the Cape were interested again and the sponsors had commissioned a new ad campaign for their canola seeds: Martian Sunrise. Sales were expected to go through the roof and everyone was pleased; friends again.

Where's the harm, she thought? It's not as though they're going to start cropping here any season soon.

## **Lab notes**

She had catalogued developments in the greenhouse – how one or two of the samples lived longer before perishing. After a while she was selecting some of these strains for cross-fertilisation and some of the second generation were still alive after thirty days. Most of these had sprouted and died but some, a few strong ones, survived bearing daughters who were different, strange, calloused with stems scarred and stamens and pistils grown together. Stoma clogged with dust but a few, a very few, managed in the harsh rays and the soil's high pH.

Soon generations of these will arise, filling the plastic vials and tubs. The gel will be shot with tender shoots and then a leaf, and another and another branching up...until they overspill the benches and run up the wall. One day she'll be walking past, not really paying attention – pushing through the foliage, letting it brush gently against her and she'll come upon it: a heavy leaf-covered fruit. She'll tap on it: hard and woody, a tumorous poddy pod, growing tall as a woman. At first she'll be repelled, cover it up, pulling the vines back over (Jesus, she needed a break...) but as days pass she will be watering the nursery and she'll play the hose occasionally over the thicket and the pod will swell and rustle in its grove –

\*

## Laney

Maybe the noise was inside the light. Laney held her hand up against the sunshine. There was no sensation. A sensor flicked over from minus 60 to minus 58. Nothing.

She remembered looking at some photos of Africa taken with infra-red film – the sky turned black and the grasses and the foliage blown silver, where did these colours come from? And the animals, a chimp, a kudu, a lion looking back at the camera, weary, insensible to the blaze, the brilliance all about them. She moved her hand to eclipse the sun: shadow-light-shadow. Nothing.

She'd been hearing them for months now. Weeks out from landing and still drugged to the eyeballs it had started. Sometimes it was whispers suggesting something elusive; sometimes it was a clanging so loud – hammering on metal – she could only stop it by pushing her fists hard in her ears. She'd squint across at Viv and wanted to shout to her, 'Don't you hear it?', 'Where is it coming from?', 'Don't you want to stuff your hands in your ears too?' But Viv was like that dumb chimp in the photos: nothing, no reaction, outside of her spectrum.

Sometimes it would begin while she was sleeping. Like a tooth gone bad, she'd struggle up to the surface of awareness still groggy and the noise would start in on her straight away. Other times it would be her body working, the autonomous systems pumping and draining from the vessels, the caverns, the great vacancies inside her. She would stand at the bottom of those red chambers as they collapsed and ballooned, a tiny figure in an aluminium suit wandering about with a flashlight amongst the sluggish transport of fluids and gases, the suck and blow of the winds.

## Big blue day

Viv gazed across the plain and thought about metaphors and how they were different when you were inside them:

- this dust,
- this cold,
- this pale weak horizon and the long long day, and
- this struggle to live in this crate – a couple of shipping containers stuck together, a titanium box big enough to hold two girls.

And this in the corner?

- these food wrappers,
- this pair of underpants with the elastic gone,
- these two or three wrenches and bits of plastic crap all shoved together?

Kennedy on that blazing blue morning in 1962 addressing students at Rice University, the speech which announced Apollo and set the tone for all that followed.

I realize that this is in some measure an act of faith and vision, for we do not now know what benefits await us. But if I were to say, my fellow citizens, that we shall send to the moon, 240,000 miles away from the control station in Houston, a giant rocket more than 300 feet tall, the length of this football field, made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented, capable of standing heat and stresses several times more than have ever been experienced, fitted together with a precision better than the finest watch, carrying all the equipment needed for propulsion, guidance, control, communications, food and survival, on an untried mission, to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to earth, reentering the atmosphere at speeds of over 25,000 miles per hour, causing heat about half that of the temperature of the sun – almost as hot as it is here today - and do all this, and do it right, and do it first before this decade is out, then we must be bold.

## Signals

Then it all changed.

‘We’ve got some good news for you,’ they said. ‘We’ve brought forward your return.’

Rescue, recovery, return was bearing down. Kelvin, hero of the outer system, sole pilot of the ship scheduled for a year’s time, was now only two weeks out. He had already swung past Jove and was heading Marswards.

Viv couldn’t help herself. ‘But why? We’re only halfway done. There’s much still to do. The experiments.’

The Cape responded twenty minutes later. ‘Sorry about having to bring you girls home early but I’m sure you will make Kelvin welcome. It was a calibration error. You know in Europe they use the metric system. Seems that all his nav units were made by an Italian subcontractor and no one had checked. Lucky for you we caught it in time. Lucky for him too.’

1 kilometre = 0.621371192 miles

\*

He was there live and up close on the screen.

‘Vivian, you’re quite the celebrity. You know yours is the first success. I thought Mars was inimical and agriculture a waste of time.’

‘It is...inimical.’ Laney was surprised at how complicated a no-delay conversation was.

‘So what’s your secret? You can tell me, we’re on the same team, aren’t we?’

‘No secret, it’s all in the reports.’

‘And you’re still having trouble with your telemetry? You’ve tried the replacements?’

‘Peroxides ruin everything.’

‘Reports can only tell us so much. It’ll be great to see your success with my own eyes. You know what they’re calling you back at the Cape? The Martian gardener.’

\*

Viv reread the printout for Kelvin’s orbital solution: three days, crap.

Laney came in and Viv passed her the paper. She read it and then cleared her throat. ‘Umm...there’s something.’

‘Now, don’t you...’ bristled Viv.

‘It’s not —’

‘— what? Just tell me what is it not?’

‘Not my...*illness*,’ she whispered. ‘It’s outside of that.’

‘How do you know? Isn’t that the definition of...’ Viv trailed off, the words unsaid, her anger deflating. ‘Just tell me, OK.’

Laney was bright and worried, biting her thumb. ‘Underground, there’s something, I can hear it Vivian, machinery, engines down there. I know where it is. We could go. Go right now.’

\*

The day before and there was his ship a small star, an inevitable eye looking down on them.

‘Be with you soon. Maybe we’ll have a Martian salad, eh?’ he joked.

Laney grabbed the headset. ‘Why don’t you fuck off and leave us alone —’ before Viv cut her off.

Kelvin smiled. ‘Was that Elaine? Nice to hear from you, Elaine. You’ve been so quiet recently. We’ve missed your reports. It’s good to hear that nothing bad has happened to you.’

Then the screen went blank.

And time ticked down and computers aligned their calculations, fuel flowed into warming tanks and the machines prepared to de-orbit.

\*

Laney pushed the rover up another rise and the balloon tyres spun for traction up the pebbly talus.

Her voice was close in Viv’s helmet: ‘Nuh, nuh, nuh...’ over and over.

‘They’re getting louder,’ Laney shouted.

‘I’m here, you don’t need to shout,’ she soothed.

‘I said it’s louder now, much LOUDER.’ Laney was holding one gloved hand against the side of her helmet trying to stifle the noise.

Viv tried to take the controls but Laney hung on fiercely.

The rover crested another hill and that’s when they saw it.

The overhang was enormous, some ancient river that had taken softer sediment out of a cliff face and left a huge cavern big enough for a football field, big enough for a town, for a city. As they drove into the cavern, they went down into time, the striations, the shelves and the washaways told of millennia-long cycles of flood and drought, deposition and removal again and again.

After an hour, they left the rover and stepped out onto the cavern floor. They stood in their suits, the fairy lights in their helmets flipping from red into green.

‘It’s here, it’s here.’ Laney walked on into the storm of noise.

And what they found – the tiny remnant machines, the plains of luminous crystals, fields of delicacy collapsing at the slightest touch – must be protected. It was all too precious. This they determined without words; words were not needed. It was obvious. The conviction stood apart from them yet they knew it completely and never suspected that it was anything but their own volition.

‘Better? The noises?’ Viv asked as they walked back to the rover.

‘A little,’ Laney replied dully.

\*

Mars at last. Kelvin smiled, took a step and then stumbled grabbing for the capsule’s ladder. Gravity. Even in the weak two-thirds pull of Mars he had become massive. His muscles were ground down onto his skeleton, joints were compressed, breathing almost impossible. He had to sit panting, trying to recover before stepping out towards the base, only two hundred metres distant.

It took him two hours and he had to rest every ten minutes, gasping with the effort. At one point he stumbled on a small rock and fell, twisting his ankle; he may have even heard a snap as he collapsed, and waves of pain overwhelmed him.

\*

They found him there propped against the hatch.

Immediately, Laney realised he was magic. Somehow he was surrounded by silence and quietness. The noises that had taunted her for months diminished as she approached him: the closer she got, the quieter they became. Suddenly she was filled with hope.

‘Hello, Elaine,’ he said, looking up at her, smiling wanly. ‘I seem to have broken –’

‘Wait,’ she cried but it was too late.

Kelvin turned as the pole smacked into his throat lifted him up and laid him out flat.

‘No,’ Elaine wailed.

But it was too late: Viv was already upon him. The pole in her hands had punched into the prone form, already cracked the armoured faceplate, taken his air, bounced off the cheekbones, pushed the face in.

\*

## **Viv + Laney**

Laney has found some relief by wearing white-noise headphones during the day. She still sleeps in the storage locker most nights; putting her head in the metal framework seems to interfere with their signals.

And the greenhouse is lush with the season’s new growth. Laney waters it when she can but there’s something troubling in the thicket, now grown as tall as a man, swelling and rustling in the grove.



## What has been written

Whatever became of him? That old guy, the writer. Used to work up one of those alleys up from the station. You remember, he had that little folding desk and a canvas chair and he'd write stories for the commuters and tourists. People would ask him to write a story for them – something to entertain, amuse or divert. His fees varied but most days he'd be lucky if he got twenty dollars for two thousand words or so. Still, it was all cash up front and you'd get what you paid for: the stories were formulaic three-act pieces, a bit of character development, a nice touch in description here and there but nothing to write home about. People would tell him what they wanted, or at least what genre they preferred – 'Adventure for junior here, set in medieval Europe with knights and a reptile if you can, something to keep him quiet.' He got a lot of that during the school holidays. And it was sci-fi for the teenage boys, extravagant crime and narrow escapes for the lawyers, tales of intrigue and wild heroism for the public servants and straight romance for the office girls.

Clients would stop by in the morning on their way to work and in the evening their story would be ready. He'd hand it over sealed in a white envelope. Some couldn't wait and tore at the envelope to start reading straight away – as if they were starving and what had been written was a special salad prepared just for them. Others would take their envelope reverentially, as if it contained a clue to their future, and they would take it home and read in secret trying to detect their destiny written between the lines.

Most people liked what he wrote; a few came back and told him so, or to ask a question. But once in a while someone would be pacing up and down the alley ready to complain, when he arrived in the morning. And the old writer would smile a well-practised smile and shrug and say, 'It's only fiction, it's not real.' And then he'd gesture out along the alley and to the city behind it with its fountains and looming skyscrapers, 'This,' he'd say, 'this is real.' And with his well-seasoned shirt and shiny trousers, no one ever dared ask for a refund.

He did a working week just like the rest of us wage slaves: at eight he'd be there already bent over his little portable desk, smoking a sodden rollie, coffee going cold by his side, and he wouldn't usually finish until six, sometimes later. And he'd be at it all seasons: when the sun beat down and the pavements shimmer and men pull at their collars to get some air, and in the winter when ice polishes the sky and pretty girls in coats edged with fur hurry by, he'd be there wrapped in his old army coat. When it rained he would shelter in the Greasy Cat, the café across the alley, but as soon as it stopped he'd be out and at it again.

He was a figure all right, almost an institution. *The Argus* even did a piece on him as part of the 'Colourful characters of the city' series, but the photos were disappointing: they showed a skinny old man bent over his little wooden desk, frowning in concentration. They didn't capture the lively energy in his eyes or the inspirations and insights that filled his work daily. Still, for weeks after, the commuters on their way up the hill would nudge each other and nod in his direction and say, 'There he is this morning, hard at it already.' And there was a sense of pride in having a writer in the flesh working at his craft right there in their city as if it confirmed that along with their museums, marble galleries and sporting temples, they had a literary culture.

His celebrity even attracted the attention of one of the city's many

publishers, who turned up one morning and started talking grandly about producing an anthology, calling his stories ‘street fiction’ and ‘found tales’.

‘Let me write a story for you,’ the writer offered. ‘If you like it, we’ll talk further.’

The publisher was put out by this poor old man placing conditions on his largesse; in his line of work it was the writers who waited on his pleasure. But since he’d come this far he agreed.

‘It’ll cost you \$100 and it’ll be ready this afternoon. Come back then. Up front,’ insisted the writer as the publisher turned to leave.

The publisher’s story didn’t please him at all. It was a pointed parable about a tyrant misusing his wealth and power, neglecting his beautiful wife and denying his people their rightful pursuit of happiness. Eventually the tyrant came to a sticky end when the people, having come to the end of their patience, took matters into their own hands and installed a republic.

Like many authors, the writer never heard from the publisher again but consoled himself with the thought of the publisher paying a hundred dollars for a story worth twenty.

Seasons passed and the writer continued his trade, managing to avoid ABNs and income tax and the wonders of new technology, and he felt he was slowly becoming better at his art. People hardly noticed him any more; he got older, thinner, his coat more tattered, but he was still there at work every morning.

Two weeks a year he’d go and visit his adult daughter and her family down on the coast and spend the time walking by the shore and collecting driftwood and sea-polished glass. Aside from that, he continued.

Until one morning.

The eight-fifteen commuters noticed it first: ‘Wonder what’s gotten into him?’ they asked each other. For instead of his early morning busy-ness, he was sitting at his desk blankly staring at the wall opposite. And in the evening they noticed the same thing. ‘He’s got something big on,’ one surmised. ‘By that frown, I’d say he’s stumped,’ said another. ‘He’s up to it, I’m certain,’ replied a third. But after two and then three days they started to worry.

The writer had refused all new requests for stories and had sunk into himself, barely communicating so deep was his perplexity. And the strain showed; he looked even more drawn and gaunt, he was barely eating and his coat was dishevelled and mis-buttoned.

By the evening of the fourth day it had become so bad that he even forgot to pack up and go home. He just stared at the wall across the alley as night and darkness came down. And it was Beaumont, the owner of the Greasy Cat, who was closing up, who found him rigid in the darkness. After a bowl of soup and a coffee, Beaumont persuaded him to unburden himself. ‘Talking helps maybe,’ Beaumont offered.

It turned out that a week ago someone had approached him for a special story. That someone was Dave ‘The Silk’ Pierce, a gangster with a reputation for a vile temper and murderous acts. More important to the writer was that the gangster was an undiagnosed dyslexic. He couldn’t read and was known to be particularly sensitive about it: a journalist who’d made the most indirect passing reference to it in a recent interview, ended up six weeks in a coma in St Margaret’s, his skull caved in by a chair. Pierce wanted the story to prove to everyone, the press, rival gangs and that Croat mongrel Slobodan Zaja and his five sons that he was no ‘uncultured fool’ who was easy pickings in the current gang wars.

The gangster was to collect his story at the end of the week and he'd paid upfront, a cool one thousand dollars.

'Give him his money back,' Beaumont suggested.

'It's not the money,' the writer insisted. 'What kind of writer am I if can produce easy prose and ready entertainment for the passing crowd but turn to jelly at a real challenge? How do you write something for a man who cannot read?'

'Sure enough it's a paradox,' Beaumont agreed as he pulled an espresso. 'It's as impossible as explaining opera to a mountain goat or air breathing to a goldfish or trying to convey the principles of sub-surface ore extraction to a seagull. Absurd!' Beaumont was getting carried away and he didn't notice the light now burning in writer's eyes. 'Or explaining cabbage to a carnivore or...' His catalogue of improbables finished with the café door closing.

The writer had a night and a day left and for that time he worked first by torchlight and then in the pale light of the morning. Rejected drafts littered the alley and he broke pencils and stubbed biros in his rush. The commuters nudged each other. 'Looks like he's got it licked all right,' they said.

On and on he worked as the sun rose, peaked brilliant overhead and descended down the wall opposite.

Finally, at the appointed hour, Pierce's dark shadow fell upon the little fold-away-table and the writer handed the gangster a white A4 envelope with his name on the front.

'This had better be good,' growled Pierce.

'It was my best work.'

'Was? What do you mean was?' The gangster ripped open the envelope and handfuls of ashes tumbled to the ground.

'I burned it.'

The gangster stretched his prodigious frame, the fury in him starting its short journey, his fists clenching.

‘It was a great story but I made no copies, I promise you that. And you know what passes between an author and client is confidential. It’s sacred, sealed like the confessional. No court can touch it.’

‘Is that so?’ Pierce snarled.

‘The story was about your next crime,’ the writer continued. ‘In fact, it was based on your next murder. All fiction of course but, if a court got ever got hold of it, they’d find enough incriminating evidence and revealing detail to satisfy the most sceptical jury beyond reasonable doubt. It was all there. How you paid in advance. How you came back to collect on this dark night, knowing full well that no matter how good the story, you could never read it. Some paradox, eh? In the last scene, the story describes the final confrontation between the writer and the gangster. How you stepped behind him, even while he was still talking. How his voice broke with worry but he kept talking, talking as if his life depended on it. How once you were behind his back you slipped on your leather gloves to leave no trace and then you pulled out your favourite white silk scarf, the one you’ve used before, the one you keep for those “special” occasions. And smiling now, how you drew it tight across –’

The gangster said nothing, he just looked at the ashes at his feet. In the streetlight he could make out a few letters on the charred flakes, a word or two written black against black. And then a breeze picked them up and scattered them into the darkness, so in the end it was as if nothing had been written at all.