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Engage the waffle-o-tron, Mr. Sulu!

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Gary McMahon
Hello, and welcome to Pantechnicon Eight.

It’s been busy over here. While putting this issue together we’ve also been working on our first print anthology, The Pantechnicon Book of Lies. The stories are selected, the authors have been notified, and editing has begun.

As a sneak peek, here is the list of authors and stories that made it:

- Grahame Jones – The Way out of the Woods
- Lyn McConchie – The Mare
- P. E. Young – Feedback
- Einar Olgeirsson – Henry
- Rob Hunter – Mark Twain in Milan
- Mark Smith – My Life So Far
- Michael Coen – Ivory
- Rob Sharp – Bleeding Out
- Heather Fleming – The Discovery
- Joe McKinney – Something Permanent
- Catherine MacLeod – The Ace of Chameleons
- Stacey Hirons – Poor Pellig’s Tale
- Adrian Preston – The Doctor’s Wife
- Richard Mosses – The Tarantata
- Thomas Rogers – Dirge for the Living
- Howard Watts – Dodge Sidestep’s Dastardly Plan
- David Brookes – Chipwrecked

The Pantechnicon Book of Lies will be available by the end of 2008, and this is where we move seamlessly on to talk about how you can keep up to date on such information.

After a software update to the Pantechnicon website, we found our previous mailing list no longer worked. Obviously this was a bit poo, but we now have a replacement up and running which is independent of such things. Join up by visiting pantechnicon.net and popping your details in the appropriate box, and we’ll keep you appraised of any competitions, news and goodies we have.

On the subject of competitions, if you’re really quick there’s still time to win a copy of Pathology on DVD. That competition closes on the 15th September 2008. Full details are on the website.

Next, Pantechnicon is going to FantasyCon. You’ll find a variety of our staff and readers milling about at this year’s British Fantasy Society convention in Nottingham. If you’ve never heard of FantasyCon, visit http://www.fantasycon.org.uk/ to find out all about it. The convention gets underway on the 19th September.

And finally, don’t forget to tell us what you do or don’t like about Pantechnicon. If you like the magazine, we’d truly appreciate it if you could tell other readers about it and see if you can entice them into giving it a go.

See you in December!

Trudi Topham & Alasdair Stuart,
September 2008.

EDITORIAL

Trudi Topham & Alasdair Stuart

CREDITS

Editors
Trudi Topham and Alasdair Stuart.

Cover art
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Non-Fiction
Adam Christopher, Jamie Halliday, Gary McMahon, Lee Medcalf, Sean Parker, James Stewart, Howard Watts, F. Owen Williams.

With thanks to
Guy Adams, Mark Morris, Ramsey Campbell.

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The Devil in Chains, Part One

Adam Christopher

For as long as I might live, I hope never again to hear the cicada’s song.

I am, of course, intimately familiar with the rasp and rattle of chitinous plates as they scrape rhythmically against one another. Although not usually a visitor to northern climes, however warmed they may be now by the furnaces of industry, the cicada is instead common to much of Asia and the East. Indeed, most of my field-surgeon experience in the North-West Frontier was accompanied by a continuous chorus of insect communication. But it was that sound, that awful cacophony that assaulted us as we entered the subterranean chamber on the Isle of Man that will forever be held a terrible memory. Never again shall any humble arthropod – be it beetle, bee or dragonfly – be regarded with anything other than, at best, uncomfortable suspicion, and at the very worst, sheer mind-rending fear.

All after a night in the barrow, with the sound of insects swarming. With Bellamy on my left, and Gef on my right, and the Devil in Chains before us.

A Charge of Treason

I first met Alexander Bellamy when he entered the farmhouse kitchen to the attention and salutes of two Lancers, who stood rigidly flanking either side of the main door. Bellamy acknowledged the formal greeting with the casual wave of an officer, and sat at the opposite end of the large country table. Although by this stage of the proceedings I had been unmanacled, I was vexed enough at the situation not to stand and offer a polite greeting. But if Bellamy recognized my silence as a deliberate snub, he did not indicate. Instead, he removed his feathered cap and smoothed down his carefully parted hair, straightened his tunic, and after a moment looked me directly in the eye, face expressionless. Clearly he was expecting me to start proceedings. Versed as I was in military life, I glanced quickly across his insignia in search of an identification tag or number, but found none. Instead, a string of unfamiliar pips was set above the left breast on the black patrol jacket, which was itself decorated with heavy black lace. Although I had been out of the army for some years, I found it strange that I could not seem to identify his rank, or even which regiment or division his uniform signified, although overall the cut and style was familiar. The black of Bellamy’s tunic was only interrupted, aside from the strange pips decorating his pocket, by two brilliant silver buttons at the neck. Without my glasses, now trampled somewhere in a muddy field not one mile distant, my sight is passable but not extraordinary, and I leaned forward slightly to better identify the button inscriptions. I couldn’t see whether they were engraved or embossed, but… wait. A skull, inside a five-pointed-star? Unusual at the very least. And around the edge, a delicate string of rune-like symbols, which I felt I recognized from my own studies of the occult and magical. Good lord, which part of the armed forces used such a device?

I must have been staring at the badges too long, for I was drawn from my thoughts by the officer politely coughing, his hand adjusting the uniform at the neck and temporarily obscuring the silver buttons and their remarkable design. I sat back quickly, cursing myself for being so obvious.

“File, please.”

A third Lancer stood watch behind me, and at Bellamy’s request instantly produced a bland manila folder. Bellamy flipped it open to reveal the single sheet of typed paper within. Upside down and out of reach, I was unable to read this report which apparently contained some salient facts about my own self.

“Mr. Jackson Clarke.” Bellamy’s eyes again fixed my own, his head still inclined to study the report. “Forty-seven years of age. Medical doctor, trained at Royal Infirmary Edinburgh. Late of the Eleventh Hussars, distinguished service in the North-West Frontier province.” Bellamy read the concise history of my professional career, although for whose benefit I was not sure, as he must have been briefed beforehand. Part of the authoritarian show, I suspected. Bellamy paused only a moment then continued.

“Service discharged, dishonourably. You are now science correspondent for the national news magazine The Gazetteer and Times.”

Bellamy turned the single sheet over, and quickly cast his eye down the remaining text without
summarising aloud. Removing a pen from a concealed pocket on the front of his tunic, he made a series of ticks against a few items on the reverse side. Folding his hands together, he once again sat in silence, a penetrating blue-eyed gaze meeting my own.

Despite my precarious position, I could not hold back my natural curiosity, and set about assessing the gentleman on the other side of the table, gathering what clues I could from not only his countenance but the manner in which he presented himself.

Despite his relative youth – mid-thirties, at the latest – this officer clearly held some high position. His calm, efficient manner spoke of a career officer, discipline drilled into him from a young age. Born of a military family perhaps? The parted hair was regulation length but rakish in style; this and a crisp waxed moustache on such a young face spoke of high class and probably a rich social circle, consisting perhaps of childhood friends who, having once shared the school playground, now shared the officers’ mess.

“Mr. Clarke, I hope you appreciate you have caused myself and my men not a little inconvenience. We are here on this island as a matter of both national security and secrecy. The Northern Republic poses a very real threat, and this island is a key position and first line of defence. Our job is dangerous and difficult, and the safety of this island and indeed England itself may well be at stake.” He paused, eyes scanning the sheet again. “As illustrious an organ as The Gazetteer and Times may be, you have overstretched the mark by some considerable margin when you managed – somehow! – to enter a secure military establishment. I have enough on my plate as it is, Mr. Clarke, I really do, without extracting civilians from a potential warzone.”

Although delivered in a firm tone, the dressing-down was not quite as bad as I had feared. I had expected the dull lecture about national security and the danger of our enemies abroad, to be followed by a decidedly unceremonious return to the mainland, carrying a stiff warning on official letterhead addressed to Pemberton, my editor-in-chief, advising him to keep his errant staff well away from Man if he knew what was good for him. Or words to that effect, stated in a suitably military and formal fashion. And once officially admonished, Pemberton would offer a sly tap on the nose and slip a card quietly across the desk, detailing a return route by bribed fisherman. A good story was worth pursuing!

Bellamy was impatient for a response.

“Ah, it’s Doctor Clarke actually. Sir.”

Bellamy’s expression or posture did not alter. The silent seconds stretched to an age. Finally he spoke again.

“Oh. Doctor Clarke is it?” The officer said in sarcastic surprise. “You left the army medical corps a disgrace, and retired from general practice to become a journalist, Mister Clarke. Do you have nothing else to say save an out-dated claim to a qualification? Well, man?”

He certainly knew my history. Lost in thought for a moment, it must have appeared as if I were patently ignoring the officer sitting in front of me yet again. Still Bellamy’s expression did not change, but there was a slight tightening of the skin around his eyes.

“Sir, forgive me, I can offer a full explanation of my actions. I was-”

Bellamy quickly stood and closed the file, bringing my explanation to a premature end. He gestured to the guard behind me.

“Heh. Mr. Clarke is to be placed under arrest and transferred to The Prince Albert Victorious immediately, where he will be confined to the brig. He will be contained onboard until we have finished our duties on this island, after which he will journey with us to Portsmouth where he will answer to the charge of treason before the Tribunal. That is all.”

The Lancer placed his hand on my shoulder. Suddenly, my situation was more complex and far, far more serious than I thought. The Portsmouth Tribunal meant only one thing: the Isle of Man must have been placed under martial law, with Bellamy in charge. Understandable, given the events I had seen unfold in the last day. But treason? Great heavens above. Treason? And wait, transportation on which craft?
“The Victorious?” I asked, quickly. “That’s one of the great destroyers. Surely you mean the craft we arrived on, the Defiant?”

I gestured towards the door, indicating the general direction in which Bellamy’s own small patrol boat, the Defiant, was tethered above the field outside. Still standing, Bellamy opened the file again, signed the paper within, then passed it to the guard behind me. He fixed me with another emotionless stare. Bellamy’s cold manner spoke of something else in addition to high rank. Some kind of special responsibility or attachment, perhaps, and not just because of the situation on Man. Something else. My eyes were again drawn to the occult symbols embossed on his collar buttons.

“The Prince Albert Victorious,” the officer stressed the full and correct name, “Docked at Douglas last night, ready to defend Man in the name of his Royal Highness the Prince Consort. You will be transported to it on The Prince Albert Defiant. Now, perhaps you have a better understanding of the situation?”

I blanched. The Victorious – the Prince Albert Victorious – was the largest and most powerful rigid airship of the Royal Navy. Vast and silver, its underside studded with armaments, it was capable of raining death from ten miles high. The Royal Navy only had two such ships, and if one had arrived at a relative backwater such as Man, then war with the North must be imminent. Bellamy’s outfit was no routine patrol, and I then understood my position with painful clarity. Snooping around a military base in peacetime was one thing. Knowingly entering a restricted area in what appeared now to be wartime was another altogether. Indeed, as Bellamy announced, it was treasonous. Collusion with the North. And as this must, must, have been the start of a military cover-up – for the North had nothing to do with the strange events on the island, of that I was sure – a wave of nausea swept over me as I realized there was probably very little I could do now to change my fate.

And yet, there was something about Bellamy. This was no ordinary officer; strange insignia spoke of some peculiar, esoteric and very special branch of the military. Then, at last, I recognised the button script. Perhaps I had a chance after all!

I had little, if anything, to lose. It was clear now that not only my immediate freedom but my long-term future was in serious jeopardy following my indiscretion at the military base. It was time to put all the cards on the table.

“It’s the ‘ghosts’,” I said, carefully and quietly. My lips were dry and stiff as I spoke, and I ran my tongue along them nervously. Bellamy froze in the doorway, turned, and delicately sat back at the table. For a moment he thoughtfully twisted one waxed moustache tip.

“The ghosts,” I repeated, satisfied that I had the officer’s full attention. “The empty room at the base, the farmhouse poltergeist, the fate of your government geologists. There’s a connection. That’s the very reason I was inside the base, to confirm the link. There is a danger on the island that has little to do with warlike movements in the North, I am sure. We are all in very grave danger, man. But I can help!” My voice rose, and I found myself slapping the table to emphasise the point.

Bellamy nodded, almost imperceptibly. Perhaps I was making progress. Time to leap to a conclusion and hope for the best.

“And if I surmise correctly, you do not belong to any ordinary branch of the military. The insignia at your collar. The inscription is of an ancient text, a spell to protect against evil. Your file there will tell you that I conduct my own research into such affairs, and I think there is much we can discuss about what is going on here on Man. I hope that you may find my own investigations of the past day of interest and importance. They may even prove to be of material value, and if, sir, I might presume as much, I would much rather be of help than of hindrance in whatever mission you have on the island.”

Bellamy sat in silence as the words tumbled out, quickly, but I hoped intelligently. It then occurred to me that my attempt at brokering may have sounded desperate and hollow. I just hoped that the officer was familiar with the details of my past work, summarised perhaps in his file.

Certainly I had discovered much in my short time on the island. A haunting with unique properties, coincidental with a substantial military presence arriving on Man. An apparent mutiny at the island’s
own military base, and walking among it all a most unusual officer in an unidentifiable uniform marked with magical insignias. I sensed I was on the threshold of something both dark and important.

Then, for the first time at our meeting, Bellamy smiled and his whole demeanour changed. Although his posture remained perfect, it appeared as though a weight were lifted from his shoulders, which drooped slightly. He glanced over his shoulder at one of the Lancers at the door to send for tea.

“And that, Doctor Clarke, was what I was waiting for. An interesting series of deductions as well, redolent of an astute mind. You are correct, and I believe we have a common interest in matters that are, shall we say, of a difficult nature to define.

“I must apologise for this charade, but I had to be absolutely certain I was addressing the real Dr. Jackson Clarke of Manchester. As you have discovered, we are facing any enemy here possessed of unique resources, and I could not risk enlisting an impostor to our cause”

I was much relieved, and heartened that I had reasoned correctly. Although a mere staffer of the Gazetteer’s science desk, my own interest and experience in such fields was extensive and, at times, all-consuming. This Bellamy seemed to appreciate.

Tea soon arrived in an army thermos with two tin mugs. Bellamy poured mine first and spoke as I eagerly accepted the warming drink.

“Dr. Clarke, may I introduce myself. I am Colonel-Commandant Alexander Bellamy, as of zero-one-hundred hours commander-in-chief of the Manx forces. As well as the Royal Victorian Naval and Marine Forces, I also have authority to represent, as I think you have estimated correctly, His Royal Highness the Prince Consort and the Society of Arts, on their behalf in matters of the occult and magical sciences. I cannot say more than that, and you will appreciate that any information imparted to you in the course of this investigation constitutes a state secret. Any communication outside of approved circles will be an act of treason.” A reminder of the fate I had narrowly escaped; I gulped my tea gratefully.

“Now that we have our bona fides established, Dr. Clarke, you will tell me everything of what you have discovered on this island.” He sipped his own mug delicately, regarding me in a more friendly light over the rim.

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“Everything, Colonel-Commandant?” I asked.

“Everything, Dr. Clarke.”

A New Assignment

It was Harris who called me into the editor’s office, two days before. Pemberton himself was busy on the telegraphone when I was shown in to the small, file-filled room. I gingerly removed a stack of papers from the guest chair before seating myself, and readied my pen and notepad. An impromptu meeting with the editor of The Gazetteer and Times generally meant fast assignment to a breaking story. Such events were rare for the science desk, and I felt a thrill of excitement as I postulated on what news may have reached us.

Pemberton gestured in a friendly manner as he rushed to end his call. In front of him lay a large landscape notepad, covered in pencil jottings. Beneath, just visible, I could see the front page of a newspaper I did not recognize. The masthead had been folded under and the main headline was partially obscured, but I caught the first two words: ‘Dalby Sensation’. The date was also visible – it was this morning’s edition of the whatever-it-was, the nineteenth of February.

“Thank-you Mr. Lambert. Good-day.” Pemberton placed the tele’s earpiece in its cradle and switched his attention to me.

“Jackson, here’s a treat for you! Take a look at this!”

I took the proffered newspaper and unfolded it to its full length – it was the Isle of Man Examiner. The front page revealed a smattering of local affairs: news of the latest Northern Republic rhetoric on the subject of island sovereignty; a report on a suspicious barn fire; an opinion piece decrying proposed changes to postal zones within the territory. But on the left, a small article was circled in Pemberton’s thick pencil. It was short, with no picture, but the headline was in a somewhat bolder

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typeface than the other news items of the day. One Richard Lambert reported:

“Listen to this story of the occult; to a description of incidents which beggar description, details, as far as we are able to present them, of events which have no equal in fact or fiction; and yet, which are solemnly vouched for by people whose sanity brooks no question. It is the story of what has been elsewhere described as ‘the Spook of Dalby’; a ‘spook’ which is not a ‘spook’ nor, if we accept the word of responsible persons, is it the invention of an unbalanced mental state.”

Intriguing, if somewhat amateur. The text continued to describe a certain manifestation at an isolated farmhouse on the island. The family within had been terrorised by events which bore all the hallmarks of a classic poltergeist haunting – pots thrown, doors locked and unlocked – which, after some months, culminated in the appearance of a small, shadowy form; a mongoose-like animal shape which granted an audience only after the hours of darkness, and which appeared to have the power of speech. So enthralled was the local village by this tiny apparition that the farmhouse had been placed under nightly siege each evening for the past month by rowdy rural types who, convinced that this was local folklore made real, insisted on carrying out a noisy and troublesome appearance of their own to adhere to an ages-old – but probably quite spurious – tradition. The family, although initially pleased with the attention, now found it a genuine impediment to their normal daily activities.

I replaced the newspaper on Pemberton’s desk and exhaled, long and slow. A remarkable, if not completely believable tale. Pemberton read my expression, and taking his meerschaum pipe from the desk, relit it with a flourish. Blue smoke curled from the carved Turk’s head that formed the pipe’s decorative bowl, filling the room with a rich, sweet aroma. The editor anticipated my first question.

“You are asking, are you not, why a national news magazine such as The Gazetteer and Times should be interested in such a strange, parochial item when firstly there would be little interest on the mainland, and secondly this amazing apparition is likely a load of bunkum anyway. Hmm?”

I nodded, “Quite right. This story is interesting but surely a fiction. A lonely family on an isolated part of the island. They crave attention and excitement, invent a charade, and now it has got the better of them. Leave them be, and I’m sure local interest will wane with time.”

I was surprised at my own advice, logical as it indeed it was. The purview of the science desk, of which I was the sole reporter, was to cover not only developments in industry and science, but any other areas of an unusual nature which were, as was well known, of personal interest to the Prince himself. It was Pemberton who had recognized that my previous, home-spun work researching the occult and magical would give The Gazetteer an edge that other periodicals would not have, and it was he that convinced me to create the science desk and ensure that such matters were included in its remit. Rumour had it that old Albert himself was a regular reader.

As such, the story did indeed grasp my attention. Ghost stories were popular, but this sounded more a light entertainment. Unless there was something else afoot?

Either Pemberton was himself possessed of the preternatural gift of mind reading, or I had a habit of unconsciously broadcasting my thoughts across my face. The editor concerned himself momentarily with improving the flame in his pipe, before taking a series of short puffs and then smiling broadly in my direction.

“Yes, leave the poor family well alone,” he agreed. “And so it should be, if it weren’t for the fact that what on the surface looks like a fanciful tale created by lonely and idle minds is but the latest in a string of events on that fair isle which, when viewed as individual occurrences, would be seen as nothing more than diverting footnotes in a book of odd tales. But when placed together in sequence, an altogether more curious affair becomes apparent.”

My interest was certainly piqued. I asked the editor to continue. He indicated the telegraphone on his desk, and puffed some more.

“I was just talking to the principle author of that latest news report, Richard Lambert. Good chap, keen entomologist. Has written extensively on the island’s insect life. While the folk of Dalby appear most concerned with scrambling up dangerous hill
paths to the farm at midnight, desperate to catch a glimpse or even hear some words of wisdom from this ‘Dalby Sensation’ while enacting whatever ‘pagan’ rite was developed that evening in the local free house, there is another ghostly tale unfolding not two miles away. One which has not got much attention at all.

“As you know, the Isle of Man is an important strategic position between England and the Northern Republic – sorry, I’ve asked Harris to unearth a map of the island and surrounding waters but the office doesn’t have one to immediate hand – and the island is thus home to a sizeable military establishment that serves both land and air forces. A barracks to house troops, a monitoring post to observe movements in the North, and a small naval dockyard providing coastal patrols, as well as being fitted out to support larger airships that might arrive. Mr. Lambert has developed a hobby of ingratiating himself into the social circles of the base crew, who, during what must be a decidedly dull tour of duty on the island, are only too happy to accept a few rounds of drinks in an evening in exchange for some idle gossip with interested local folk.”

Pemberton paused. He clearly enjoyed being the central clearing point for any assignments that he had to hand out to the staff of the Gazetteer, but as his long hours confined to the office prevented him from taking part in any field reporting himself, one could hardly blame him for taking what pleasure he could from behind the desk. Certainly, I sensed the story from the Isle of Man was developing into something with a fascinating, mysterious angle.

Two pipe puffs sent heavy smoke towards the ceiling. Pemberton considered the rolling cloud momentarily before recommencing his briefing.

“Probably bad form of Lambert to take advantage, as it were, but a journalist is a journalist. The general mental state of troops on the island seems to be one of abject boredom, so any chance to regale others with exciting information that isn’t a state secret is pounced upon, doubly so if there is, ah, lubrication involved. So, to cut a long story short, the military base is also having problems of a supernatural turn. Indeed, remarkably similar to those at the farmhouse up the hill – equipment being moved, doors and cupboard locked or unlocked. And at night, a small shadow in the soldiers’ mess room. Burly though presumably they are, most of them won’t set foot in that part of the base if they can help it. Instead they’ve established temporary residence in a kitchen attached to the monitor room, in a forward part of the base.”

A fascinating coincidence. Local island gossip perhaps building upon itself? “Interesting indeed. Does Lambert suspect some connection between the two manifestations?” I asked. My question was mostly rhetorical but Pemberton nodded.

“The last Lambert heard, the base CO wasn’t too pleased, and was rather happy to let attention be focused on the farmhouse, however unhappy that may make the farmer and his family.” Pemberton smiled again, and paused for a beat. There was more.

“There has also been an… accident. Well, Mr. Lambert isn’t sure, but just as I spoke to him he was off visiting another nearby location which may offer a third connection in this peculiar little mystery. On top of having to deal with a disruption to normal activities at the base due to a spook of their own, there has been some kind of hoo-hah involving a visiting group of scientists from the Society of Arts, undertaking an academic survey on the island. I’m not sure what field of science, but something archaeological, or perhaps geographical. But it’s being kept very quiet, and we’re the first people outside Lambert’s own paper to hear of this. To top it off, the CO must be bursting a blood vessel, as a boat of special military personnel have now arrived on the island, unannounced, to apparently investigate said accident.

“Lambert is trying to dig up some information on what the scientists were doing on the island and what the nature of their predicament was. But he has possession of a most singular scrap of data. The site he is trying to access – a stone circle, by all accounts – has been mentioned specifically by the spectral voices heard at both the base and the farmhouse. Due to the level of secrecy surrounding the scientists, nobody appears to have made the connection yet. Although Lambert has no clue as to the identity of the military investigators, he suspects the Prince may have a hand in this.”

I slumped in the chair and whistled. A confusing tale, sketchy in detail, but clearly a line of connection could be drawn between the disparate
events. Whether some novel form of incursion from
the North, or a bizarre glimpse of the supernatural
lore of Man, I was already running a feature outline
for the Gazetteer through my mind. I owed both
Pemberton and Lambert a debt of gratitude for
getting me involved in what appeared to be a case
of singular interest, although I was still unsure
as to why we had been invited to collaborate with
Lambert on a piece for national circulation.

“Mr. Lambert then wishes his Isle of Man Examiner
and our own magazine to devise a special article
on recent events on the island? I’m grateful for the
opportunity, but would we not be blocked at every
turn by official secrets? What story is there to tell?”

Pemberton nodded his great, jowled head once
more. “Lambert has been approached by the farmer
at the centre of the turmoil, who wishes to state
once and for all their position, in the hope that
with a full report, local rumour-mongering and
speculation will die away and they will, eventually,
be left in peace. National circulation would be the
best way to achieve this, and Lambert knows of the
reputation of your science desk, Clarke.”

I gestured my appreciation of Lambert’s
judgment. Pemberton continued.

“Also, as you suggest, there is a larger though
more difficult story to expound, involving events
at the military base and quite possibly the fate
that befell the expedition of the Society of Arts.
Certainly the arrival of the special investigators
bodes of a serious matter, and if you play the line
correctly, Clarke, we may well be able to present a
substantial investigation which would make The
Gazetteer, and your column, the most widely read
publication in the Empire.”

I mulled the suggestion over in my mind.
“Although I have no lofty ambition for my journalist
career, I will admit that writing for The Gazetteer
fills me with a certain pride, and an increase in
subscribers would certainly be a positive. How do
we proceed with this investigation? Does Lambert
have a strategy in place?”

Pemberton jerked into action from his recumbent
position in the large editor’s chair and dividing his
large jotter pad into a clean side, began writing
directions in his quick, jagged hand. “Indeed yes,”
Pemberton spoke through clenched teeth, pipe held
rigidly in place. He puffed during each pause of
his speech rhythmically, like a steam engine. “Our
Mr. Lambert is today on a recce to what he hopes
is the accident site. Or at least the location he has
been told about. I’ve taken the liberty of asking him
to book you into local accommodation in Dalby,
initially for three nights, which you may extend
yourself as you see fit, starting tomorrow. If you
catch the ferry at seven in the morning, Lambert
will meet you at the dock and fill you in on any new
data he may have gathered. Keep me informed,
Jack!”

With that Pemberton finished his pipe and
my audience was over. I thanked the editor as
he showed me out of the office, and he gave me
a hearty and silent-mouthed “Good luck!” as
he handed me the jotted note. Harris the clerk
appeared at Pemberton’s side, and the two of them
returned to the office to discuss other great matters
of the day.

Returning to my own desk, I decided to spend the
rest of the afternoon researching the island I was to
visit tomorrow, as I had never once set foot there
myself. Glancing over my notes and the directions
from Pemberton, I felt a fascinating and useful few
days lay ahead.

A Late Arrival

The morning was bleak. A slate sky the colour
of Pemberton’s pipe smoke arced above as I stood
and read the new edition of the island’s Examiner,
picked up on board the ferry from Liverpool. The
airship’s departure from the mainland had been
delayed by a half-hour, due to a forecast of an
extremely severe electrical storm over the Irish
Sea. While larger passenger craft were designed to
handle such atmospheric conditions, the smaller
ferry-class dirigibles generally employed to ply
short routes around the British Isles were at the
mercy of the elements, the conductive nature of
their silver-plated balloons not ideal in stormy
weather. But although the sky was possessed of an
ominous tinge, the thick clouds seemed content
merely to brood at altitude, and the storm itself did
not eventuate. The impact to the ferry’s timetable
was slight, and having caught up time on the short
journey over, I arrived at the dock at Peel only a
quarter-hour behind schedule.
I was surprised, then, to find that my host was not there to meet me. Those in the profession of journalism usually take to extreme punctuality, if not with a tendency to be early for every appointment. But Lambert was not among the small crowd of meeters and greeters that had gathered to welcome the ferry’s arrival, and assuming Lambert’s morning was itself subject to some timetable alteration, I was content to stand at the end of the ferry boarding platform, updating myself on latest developments in the case of the ‘Dalby Sensation’, as reported by my host in the local newspaper.

Except that morning, unusually, news of the farmhouse spook was absent. During my researches of the previous afternoon, I had called up the back catalogue of the *Isle of Man Examiner* with the help of the Gazetteer’s gnarled but kindly archivist, who was delighted to present after less than an hour a hamper of newsprint and small box of microslides that represented the Examiner’s sum output for the last month.

Lambert’s recent feature on the so-called Dalby Sensation, presented to me by Pemberton in his office just the day before, was not actually his first report on the curious affair. Since the beginning of January, nearly every single daily edition of the paper, which itself was published six times per week, contained at the very least a mention of the farmhouse haunting. Large articles, such as the one that had introduced me to the case in Pemberton’s office, were rarer, appearing maybe once per week, centred as they were around Lambert’s personal visits to the family. But even when there were no particular developments of interest to report, the affair was inevitably mentioned briefly in editorials or short, double-paragraphed articles detailing the pratfalls of locals as they scrambled over hill and hedgerow in the dead of night to see and hear the ghost for themselves. In addition, it appeared that the staff of the Examiner were in reality few in number, as one would expect from a quiet, regional new publication, and while the haunting was clearly Lambert’s primary focus, he also provided a fair proportion of other new reports with each edition.

Which is why, in the latest copy I now held, I was surprised to find not a single mention of the Dalby Sensation, and indeed no by-lines carrying Lambert’s name at all. When Pemberton had spoken to the island reporter in his office yesterday, it had only just gone lunchtime, and even with a reconnoitre of the site where the secret scientific expedition met a mysterious fate planned for later that day, Lambert should have had ample time to file at least something with his own editor. And, depending on the results of his expedition, it may well have been expected that a stop-press item was called for late publication.

But he had clearly not filed the previous day. It was odd, and broke the pattern previously established, but if Lambert had discovered new links between the mysterious events taking place on Man, then he may well be in the thick of the investigation with a larger, in-depth feature to follow in the next days to more than make up for his lack of work in the interim. Satisfied with this explanation, I then realized that greeting me at the ferry dock may have become a lower priority for him than it would otherwise have been. Folding the paper neatly, I hefted my carpet-bag and proceeded to the taxi rank to continue my journey to my hotel in Dalby alone. As I entered the steam car and asked the driver to take me to The Devonian Hotel, it occurred to me that Lambert had probably left a message there for me to meet him later in the day, no doubt with exciting new developments to discuss which would explain his sudden absence.

The Devonian was, I am pleased to report, not nearly as prehistoric as the name suggested. Dalby itself was a pleasant locale, with the hotel comprising one of the village’s larger edifices. Although the larger town of Peel lay not far to the north, Dalby had seen much growth in recent years – as I had learned via the Examiner – thanks to the establishment of the permanent military base and port on the coast. The village was therefore the closest point on the island for both accommodation, supplies and entertainment for the many employed at the base, of both military and civilian position.

I had hoped to pry some local gossip from the cab driver *en route* to my lodgings, but was hampered by the fact that – unlike the city taxis I was used to in England, where the driver sits in a compartment immediately in front of the passenger – on Man the equipment appeared to be of a certain vintage. The driver sat, therefore, on a platform above and to the rear of the passenger box, much like the old horse-drawn traps from which the steam car had taken its original inspiration. I sat then alone for some twenty minutes, my near silent observation
of the surrounding countryside as we travelled interrupted only by the quiet put-put of the taxi’s steam engine.

I was likewise disappointed to find no message from Lambert awaiting my arrival at The Devonian. Clearly the man from the Examiner had discovered something of great import at the accident site – assuming, that is, that he had indeed been given the correct location and had not, I hoped, been waylaid by the military. The incident was, after all, being hushed up to a not inconsiderable extent, and the site was likely under a heavy guard.

Freed from appointments, I realised I had much of the day to explore Dalby and familiarise myself with the locations described in Lambert’s newspaper reports, a selection of which I had brought with me. So in preparation I installed myself in the hotel bar, ordered a ploughman’s lunch and local ale, and began to re-read key tracts, jotting the names of people and places as I went. Little did I know at that point that my plans for the day were to dramatically alter within the next two hours.

**A Violent Interruption**

Tuesday afternoon in Dalby high street – if you could call it a high street – was decidedly quiet, as expected. Given Lambert’s non-appearance, I decided to make a day and possibly a night of it away from the hotel, and had prepared a small rucksack for a possible vigil at the farmhouse that night. A portable torch with spare solar battery, thermos of hot black tea, thick-cut cheese sandwiches courtesy of the Devonian bar, as well as a furled overcoat, rain hat, and blanket was most sufficient for a night outdoors. In my hand I held my jotter pad, inside the back cover of which a local map was folded, with key locations marked. My plan was to identify two key points – the farmhouse and army base – while it was light, and to press any locals encountered (in a friendly manner) as to the tale of the ‘Dalby Sensation’, the disturbances at the army base, and if anyone had heard about any scientists from the mainland.

It was this agenda I was about to initiate at the local butcher store, when suddenly a great commotion sprung up at the other end of the road. Looking to the west, a pub, The Ballicallin, flanked one side of the road, while a small goods store stood opposite; the remainder of the street lined with stone cottages and a handful of other minor establishments. Just beyond, the road curved out of sight to the left, presumably connecting to the main north-south route of the west side of Man.

It was from around this corner that the shouting came, indistinct at first but progressively louder and more decipherable. Then came the sound of running – many booted feet, in fact, pounding the tarmac surface. One particular set were possessed of a different tone, the runner clearly wearing footwear different to the others.

I scarcely had time for further analysis before a figure in clear distress tore around the bend and headed in my direction. He was clad in dishevelled and muddied tweeds, tucked into sensible walking boots. His white shirt front was rumpled, a large red stain spreading across his chest. But it was his face that was most distinctive. The man was grasped in the fist of terror, eyes wide and protruding horribly from their sockets. His jaw was stretched as wide open as the musculature would allow, tongue lolling from side to side. He moaned loudly, his voice producing a long, steady note that varied only slightly in pitch. He tumbled down the road, arms flailing, a man apparently driven out of his mind with fright.

Behind appeared a squad of soldiers, a full sixteen men in all, bayoneted silver rifles held before them. The one in front – a staff sergeant I think, distinguished from his black-clad men by red epaulettes – shouted to the runner, commanding an instant stop or to face their firepower. This sounded awfully like a final warning.

There was still some distance between the running man and the troops, and it was impossible to judge for how long the pursuit had been maintained. But I was now uncomfortably aware that I was directly in the line of fire; the running man had apparently seen me, and waved. He drew his arms in front of him, almost reaching out for me, as he closed the distance between us. His expression, though still desperate, changed at the sight of me, and his mindless wail started forming half-words. A few more seconds and he would be upon me. Behind, the staff sergeant ordered his men to halt and barked an order to take aim.

There was a fearful crack, and instantly a sharp
metallic smell as the air between the runner and the troops was turned for a half-second to solar plasma. The running man was flung forward towards me, and my heart leapt as I instinctively caught his torso before he hit the ground. Looking up, I saw the soldiers re-shouldering their rifles. The staff sergeant issued orders again, and the troops fanned out along the street while the sergeant and three followers jogged towards me and the dead man in my arms.

No, not quite dead. As I gently lowered him to the road and turned him over, his eyes opened and he looked at me. He was calm, and clawed at my jacket, whispering something in a language I could not translate. A local dialect of Manx Gaelic? I wasn’t sure.

“Mananna mac Lir… Buggane…”

“I don’t understand, man. Do you speak English?”

Ignoring my question, the runner’s whispers grew fainter until he passed into unconsciousness. Instinctively checking his pulse at the neck, I was dismayed to find the man had succumbed to the injuries inflicted by the solar rifle. Military boots appeared at the edge of my vision, and I looked up to see the staff sergeant and his attachment standing over me, rifles pointed. I drew breath to speak but was cut off.

“Thank-you very much sir, your assistance is much appreciated in this matter. It is unfortunate that you happened to get caught up in this, but rest assured this man will receive the best attention.”

The best attention? He was already dead, thanks to them! But the sergeant gestured to his three troops, who scooped the runner’s body up and briskly marched back down the road. I noticed then that the other soldiers had meanwhile been visiting each store and house on the street one by one, probably notifying the inhabitants that it was safe to be outside.

“Sergeant?” I called after the retreating back of the warrant officer, but received no indication that I had been heard. “Sergeant! Look here! Who is that man? What are you doing with him? And why were you chasing him?” No response; I was being pointedly ignored. I continued to call out, and paced down the road after the soldiers, but they showed no sign of stopping to answer. Indeed, as the sergeant and his man-handlers rejoined the main body of men, the patrol made a smart about-face and proceeded at some speed back down the road, the body of the runner lifted off the ground and carried between them. I stopped in my tracks, realising my calls for attention were entirely futile. I stood still for a full minute, long enough for the unpleasant wash of adrenaline to subside and my heart rate return to a more comfortable pace.

I felt eyes on me. Some locals had been drawn by the commotion. They were few in number, and counted among them were the butcher, two ladies from the small goods store, an unidentified worker from another shop or office, and a few residents leaning or simply looking out of open windows or doors along the high street. But they were not, it seemed, looking at the soldiers as they marched off. It was me, in fact, that was the subject of their attention, and - certainly for some - one of extreme distaste given the expressions of many of the onlookers. Not quite in unison the inhabitants of Dalby closed their doors and windows, pulling curtains across to close the street off, or in the case of the shops, pulling down blinds and locking doors.

What had the soldiers been saying? Were the residents warned – or even threatened? Had I been falsely and casually implicated in some way, simply to allow the military to perform a shocking operation in broad daylight and in public view? Easy enough to spread a false rumour about a visitor from the mainland, if it meant they were able to carry out their operation without disturbance. Did that mean my presence had been observed on arrival?

A whirl of questions entered my head. Who was the man? Was there a connection with the scientists? That may explain the heavy-handedness of the soldiers, if a secret operation was in progress. It occurred to me then that Lambert’s failure to make an appearance may not have been due to a busy investigation, but because he may have been arrested in the course of his reconnaissance. I sincerely hoped he had not received the same treatment as the runner just had, if indeed he had been intercepted.

Several minutes passed as I processed the scene I had just witnessed; regaining my senses, I found myself alone in the street, with not a soul in sight,
facing now-closed shops, doors and windows. With a trigger-happy military, Lambert, wherever he was, may have been in some difficulty, and it was imperative that I contacted both his paper and my own editor. The Examiner had no office in Dalby, and Lambert had been based in Peel. Picking my notepad off the tarmac where I had dropped it, I packed it in my rucksack and made haste back to The Devonian.

It occurred to me to try another mainland number, that of my own household. A suspicion was forming in my mind. After a number of tries, each terminated with the distinctive ‘pop’, I had become convinced that the lines connecting the island to the mainland had been deliberately suspended. Whatever operation the military were engaged in, they did not want any information reaching beyond the Manx borders.

“No, no need,” I told the operator. “I have another number, a local one. It is for the office of the Examiner news magazine in Peel. Let’s see if we can establish contact over just a few miles distance!”

I felt a sick feeling as the peculiar ‘pop’ of disconnection sounded after several attempts.Were communications on the whole island cut-off, or was it even just those of the Dalby exchange? I thanked the operator for her patience, and replaced the earpiece in the cradle.

Sitting at the desk for several minutes in silence, contemplating my next course of action, I was startled when the tele rang. Expecting perhaps Pemberton, I reached so quickly for the device that I knocked it to the floor. I scrambled for the earpiece as it rolled under the desk.

“No, Pemberton?”

“Dr. Clarke? I am Lambert. I write for the Examiner. I am pleased to meet you.”

The voice’s peculiar monotone and decidedly odd manner of speech were lost on me, so grateful was I to finally establish contact with my Manx colleague.

“Mr. Lambert! Good lord, I’m pleased to hear from you. I thought you might have been busy with your investigation of the accident site, but I’ve just witnessed the most extraordinary event. I was in the high street of Dalby when–”

“Yes, Dr. Clarke. I have found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse, I will show you.”

“A man was shot, dead, in the centre of Dalby! The military are up to some damned funny business. I think the story here is not the farmhouse spook, but the accident. Something of importance must have occurred to justify such harsh action. On Man, of all places!”

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**A Conversation from Beyond**

I found my reception at the hotel as convivial as it had been when I first arrived on the island earlier that morning. The hotel was set several hundred yards from Dalby’s main road, and clearly the word of the soldiers had not reached it, otherwise I would have been met perhaps with the same cold indifference that seemed to be now possessed by the locals in the street. Casting my bag onto the bed, I went straight for the telegraphone on the desk; picking the earpiece up, the hotel’s operator-cum-receptionist was on the other end within a few rings.

“Switchboard?”

“Hello, this is Dr. Clarke calling from room six. I need to place a call to editorial offices of the Gazetteer and Times, Manchester.”

“Very good, sir.” The young girl’s voice was faint, despite her being seated not far distant from my desk. The telegraphonic system of the Devonian was old and worn.

The operator tried three different numbers I gave, including that of a little-used auxiliary office tele that I had to look up from the depths of my notebook, but had little luck in establishing a connection. The weather, although grey, was hardly of sufficient tempest to affect the connection to the mainland, and on a few occasions it seemed that a connection had been made to my office, only for the line to go inexplicably dead with a loud pop. The young hotel operator was becoming ruffled.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” she said plaintively. “I can’t connect to any of those numbers. I can keep trying if you wish, sir.”

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“A man was shot, dead, in the centre of Dalby! The military are up to some damned funny business. I think the story here is not the farmhouse spook, but the accident. Something of importance must have occurred to justify such harsh action. On Man, of all places!”
“Yes, Dr. Clarke. I have found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse, I will show you.”

It was now that I hesitated. Was Lambert not listening? The line was terrible – Lambert’s voice was high and faint, picked out against a background of white noise.

“I say, Lambert? Did you hear what I said? Important events are afoot. Did you find the accident site?”

There was a pause before Lambert answered, the white noise increasing in volume to fill the void. The delay was reminiscent of calling over an extremely long distance, such as I often encountered when calling the Gazetteer’s London bureau from Manchester.

“Dr. Clarke, yes. I found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse. There is light and colour there. Dr. Clarke.”

Light and colour? But as I drew breath to question Lambert, there was a loud ‘pop’ and the phone went dead momentarily, before the hotel operator picked up.

“Yes, sir? What number would you like?”

“Hello? I’m sorry, I think you’ve cut me off. I was just taking a call.”

I could hear the operator lean over her phone desk and flick a few of the large, heavily-sprung switches up and down. As she sat back, her chin brushed against her mouthpiece.

“I’m sorry Dr. Clarke, no calls have come in today. Do you want me to try those numbers for you again?”

No incoming calls? Curious, but mistaken. The hotel’s switchboard was indeed unreliable.

“No, that won’t be necessary, thank-you.” I hung up.

It was now late afternoon, and looking from my window I could see the oppressive cloud layer had not lifted and it was rapidly approaching dark. Come to the farmhouse, Lambert had suggested. Had he discovered a connection between the Dalby Sensation, which I had yet to hear of first-hand, and the activities of the military on the island? If the family who currently played host to the poltergeist on the farm were innocents caught up in events beyond their ken, it would be well to protect them from the attentions of the military if indeed there was some mysterious link. Secret operation or not, it was my duty as a journalist to report the truth as I saw it, and to stand up for those not able to do so themselves by circumstance.

As the light continued to fade, I began to hear voices in the distance. I was unable to see much from my room as the angle at which the window was set did not offer much of a view over any inhabited area of Dalby, but by all indications the horrid gang of pleasure-seekers was once again heading off to congregate at the farmhouse and disturb – if not downright terrorise – the family through the night. From the reports filed by Lambert, very few locals apparently made the trek up the hill with lamps, resulting in slow and sometime perilous progress in the dark. This would give me a precious time advantage.

I opened my rucksack and hefted my solar torch in one hand. It was heavy, but by its light I judged that it would be possible to find a quicker route to the farmstead, avoiding the crowds and reaching the family ahead of them. I placed the spare solar battery in my inside coat pocket, deciding to leave my pack at the hotel. Forgoing the heavy coat I had brought with me, I instead satisfied myself with a flat tweed cap, and hoped that the night would not be bitter. If I was to travel fast across the hills, I had to travel light.

An Extra, Extra Clever Mongoose

Equipped as I was with light to guide me, I found it easy to both pick my way across the fields that bordered the village and which rose to the hilltop, at the summit of which the farmhouse lay, and to avoid the growing mass of locals determined to make a night out of disturbing a family of their own community for the sake of some half-remembered island custom. Darkness came and the volume of the mob increased as they began to slide around the hillside, tripping and falling over each other. True, there were a few lights bobbing amongst the throng, but such was size of the crowd – well
over one hundred at my estimate – that such puny illumination did little to assist the passage up the hill.

I myself took an easterly path, and found the hill more or less even in slope on all sides as I hiked to the summit. I kept the slow-moving Dalby crowd on my right, carefully shielding my own torch away from them where possible. Within twenty-five minutes of medium exertion I found myself at the apex and looking across the village behind me. Ahead lay a large plateau, at the centre of which stood a meagre collection of stone buildings – a two-storied house, two small outbuildings, and a large, open-fronted barn. The field that lay between myself and the farmstead was intersected by drystone walls and divided broadly into two flanks by a long drive which snaked from the outside the house and away across the field, down the side of the hill opposite to that which I had just climbed. I estimated that the distance travelled along the road from the farm to the village below was considerably longer than the direct route up the hill, a thought which had likely crossed the minds of the gaggle of now-muddied and increasingly vibrant villagers.

Lights were on at the house. I was confident that the villagers were possibly at least an hour away from the farm – they made no apparent attempt at haste, and were hampered not only by the dark but a large gully, no doubt widened by their own progress in recent weeks, which created an effective bottleneck to impede their progress. Satisfied I had time on my side, I replaced the torch in my pack and began to navigate the walled fields towards the main building. The quickest route was again easterly, and skirting the hilltop plateau I was soon within view of what must have been the military base on the beachfront. The edifice was hidden from the main view of Dalby by a series of hillocks which, although reduced to mere silhouettes by the twilight, were clearly artificial in nature. Indeed, one reached almost to the farmer’s field, and at this closer range I could see they were perhaps ancient Iron Age fortifications. I scanned their line down the hillside towards the military base, and noted they continued for some distance near to the seashore before encountering a second large hill. Atop this was some activity – again, only shadowed forms were visible, but a marquee of some sort left edges fluttering in the wind, and the distinctive shapes of two armed men patrolled the periphery, highlighted against the slight brightness of the evening sky. Was this the mysterious accident site?

The military base itself was approximately equidistant between my present position and the marquee, perhaps a mile in either direction, and consisted of a long, single-level oblong, functional in design and lacking any detail whatsoever, surrounded at the perimeter by the standard wire fence. Various smaller constructions were arranged nearby, forming a large enclosed area to the front of the establishment, at the centre of which stood three docking masts for naval airships. Presently one such rigid dirigible was tethered, the silver sides of the balloon glistening wety as it was illuminated from the underside by the yard lights. A few men could be seen, busying themselves in the yard, with several more stationed at points near the main gates of the base and along the seafront perimeter. I also noted that while the seafront portion of the base was brightly lit – and indeed, people could be seen moving within through the large windows – the rear portion nearest the farmstead hill was in darkness. Several large, black windows suggested that this should have been an area in common use, but was apparently empty and quite dark. Aha! The haunted wing?

I now knew the lay of the land a great deal better than from the Dalby high street, and continued to the farmhouse. As I approached, I could hear voices – a man and a woman, talking over each other in what sounded like a minor disagreement, and that of a young girl. I could not make out what they were saying, but the discussion was certainly possessed of some heat. A few solid sounds were suggestive of chairs being banged as people moved around.

Then a fourth voice stopped me in my tracks, so peculiar was it in nature. It was high and melodic, and quite pleasant in tone, but was impossible to establish the sex of the speaker. It was neither male nor female, young nor old – possibly a falsetto male, or maybe female soprano. It came in short statements, each apparently ignored by the others until, suddenly, it announced that the family had visitors. At the same instant I reached the main door, and felt my heart skip as I heard the voice call my own name. This was the Dalby spook!

“Come in Clarke! All are welcome here! The fire’s going and there is tea in the pot!”

The other voices fell silent, and the door was
quickly opened by a thick-set man in his middle age, shirt sleeves rolled up after a day working the field. At first he looked at me with annoyance, until he realised that the spook had spoken the truth. Clearly my appearance was not that of an over-excited, dirt-encrusting local. The farmer broke into a broad grin, and grasping my hand with both of his, virtually yanked me inside.

“Dr. Clarke? From the Manchester newspaper? At last! We’re very pleased to meet you – Mr. Lambert said we were to expect you today. Please, come in, come in, let me introduce you to everybody. You are in luck, too! Gef is here!”

He said this as I was led down a short hallway into the kitchen, a large square room dominated at its centre by a long rectangular pine table. The farmer eagerly proffered me a chair before moving behind his already seated wife, giving her shoulders a supportive squeeze.

“Hello,” I said at last, removing my cap and placing the rucksack on the floor beside me. “I am terribly sorry to arrive unannounced, but it seems I was expected, Mister…?”

“Irvine, John. Please, call me John,” began the farmer, who then indicated each person in the room. “This is my wife Margaret. Get our guest some tea, Margaret! And this is our daughter Valerie.”

The girl sat on the opposite side of the table to me, slightly in shadow cast by the inadequate main light. She was young, perhaps twelve or thirteen, her smile flickering nervously on and off. I tried to smile back in a friendly manner, but my expression froze as an unruly interruption sprung from the shadows behind her.

“Who else?” came the odd voice sharply. I could still not identify the source. Valerie continued to shuffle uncomfortably. All eyes were in her direction.

“Pardon me, but clearly I was expected? I was invited by Mr. Richard Lambert of the Isle of Man Examiner.”

“Bah!” spat the voice. “Foo and pah! Lambert invited you? Please! Invited you to write a cute little story about a cute little ghost. Go hang yourself, Clarke. Go join the throng on the hillside. Get lost.”

I had some experience of supernatural voice phenomenon and their vocabularies, and had expected that if I was to be lucky enough to hear the Dalby spook speak myself, it was likely to be most unpleasant. Gef, as Mr. Irvine had said the entity was called, was fulfilling the stereotype admirably. Valerie’s own behaviour in response to the voice indicated a connection between she and it.

“Gef, what are you? A spirit trapped on this Earth? A noisy ghost bent on causing this ordinary family trouble? I must say, I’ve had quite some experience of the extra-normal and you are nothing special!” Taking a confrontational approach was equally likely to send the tempestuous Gef into a sulk, or may have just been the provocation required to get some more detailed information from the disembodied voice. “Mr. Lambert said you were a talking mongoose, which is as an absurd a suggestion as I have ever heard!” As I chuckled I glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Irvine, and catching their eyes I gave a slight wink. My authority and experience on such matters had obviously been conveyed to the family by Lambert on a previous visit, as they both subtly indicated understanding.

Gef gave a shrill laugh. “Why should I tell you anything? You’re nobody. Go on, slide down the hill. What are you a doctor of, anyway? Bought your degree by wire, eh?”

“I am a doctor, indeed. My speciality is phrenomesmerism.”

At this statement Gef remained silent for a few moments. For only the second time, Valerie looked up from the table and met my eye, the corners of her mouth twitching again into smile. When Gef spoke, his tone had changed from boisterous
impoliteness to thoughtful conversation.

“Phrenomesmerism you say? I’m almost impressed. And go on the ghost-hunt often, do you?”

“I will admit, the study of the supernatural and magical has been a hobby of mine since I was a small boy. Having retired from my primary profession, I’ve found my position at the Gazetteer has enabled me to devote more time to the subject. The days in which we live can be full of wonder and the otherworldly, if you only look for it. Prince Albert himself has a keen interest in the subject – and just look at the situation on the Continent.”

Gef harrumphed. “Ah yes, your Prince Albert. How old is he now? One hundred and sixty-odd? Kept alive by steam and magic, eh? Rebuilding the Empire on the crest of scientific and technological achievement, eh? Still looking for his beloved Victoria, eh? For goodness sake, the humble electron is still much of a mystery to you! And it’s precisely because of his ridiculous stumbling in the dark that I’m here!”

“Why are you here then, Gef? Why have you appeared now, and what has this got to do Valerie and her parents?”

“I am, oh phrenomesmerist, an extra, extra clever mongoose. I’m here because of the fools on the hill! But perhaps you are not as backward as you seem, good doctor. The world is ending, and perhaps you are one of the few to perceive it. You’ve heard my story. You’ve heard about the military base down the hill, I presume? You’ve heard about the hilltop adventures of your Prince’s scientists? Did Lambert call you today and tell you to come and see me?”

“Yes he did, as it happens. I had been expecting him to meet me when I arrived. He was unable to make that appointment, and I was happy to hear from him at last this afternoon. He said to come to the farmhouse at once – I expected him to be here, actually.”

There was a snort from the shadows. Behind Valerie, in the near darkness underneath a kitchen cupboard, I thought I could see a shape moving. Something small, animal-like – like a tail, swishing in annoyance. The shape moved forward, Gef now comfortable enough in my presence to reveal ‘his’ form. It was familiar to me from my time in India – weasel-like, but slightly larger, with squirrel-like bushy tale. A talking mongoose indeed! The sight of it held me enthralled momentarily – the stories of the Dalby Sensation were entirely true.

“There’s not Lambert.”

Gef’s statement snapped me back to attention and, perhaps, confirmed a suspicion that had been growing in my mind. “Who then? An impersonator from the military?”

“Not Lambert either.”

A second later came a sharp knock on the front door. I realised that the sound of the villagers had become increasingly loud, the gang having presumably made it to the fields outside. The knock would, no doubt, be the fastest and most nimble busy-body Dalby could produce.

Mr. Irvine took a deep breath, composing himself. Though the nightly routine was clearly placing a strain on the family, given their drawn expressions, the stout farmer had devised his own method of dealing with them. Muttering reassurances to his wife, he moved to the door, prepared to bellow his usual – unheeded – request for peace and quiet to the crowd.

Valerie’s smile dropped suddenly. Gef spoke again: “Don’t open the door.” It was too late.

At the threshold stood a man I instantly recognized. Medium height and medium build, aged in the late twenties, neat reddish-brown hair, and dressed in country tweeds and thick-soled walking boots. Smiling broadly, he walked into the hallway towards the kitchen as Mr. Irvine, recognising him, let him pass. The man’s stare was fixed at me, seated at the table.

“Dr. Clarke. I am Lambert. I write for the Examiner.”

Mr. Lambert, island reporter extraordinaire. The man who died in my arms in Dalby high street just hours ago.

To be concluded in Pantechnicon Nine, December 2008.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCI-FI AND FANTASY FILM SCORES

From its earliest examples, film has enjoyed the accompaniment of music to aid visual storytelling. These ‘soundtracks’ as they are known today, designed purely to enhance the emotional impact of scenes, have become an integral part of the cinema experience. Over the decades soundtracks have evolved from the black and white era where a single pianist matched mood from below the screen, to full blown orchestral overtures recorded by a hundred or so musicians, to come full circle in some instances where the lone ‘home’ studio composer such as Hans Zimmer and David Arnold can be found composing purely in the digital domain, for their completed orchestrations to be perhaps performed by an orchestra.

From a SF / Fantasy film standpoint the composer is presented with a vast visual gamut far beyond mainstream cinema’s visuals to flex their musical skill with.

Bernard Herrmann realised this potential to use a less conventional instrument for his score to George Pal’s The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951), employing a theremin as a cue to enhance a feeling of threat and other worldliness to great effect. It has now become fairly common practice to utilise the instrument’s unique hollow wavering voice as a comic footnote to the genre, but I still find Herrmann’s use of the instrument a bold step forward to destabilise the expected norm at that time.

The husband and wife team of Louis and Bebe Barron’s score for the 1956 film, Forbidden Planet didn’t use a single conventional instrument. Instead the score was assembled with ‘Electronic Tonalities’ consisting of numerous pops, gurgles and clicks. The work stands out as a bold and somewhat risky interpretation of what a soundtrack can and should be, but even today these electronic sounds compliment the then groundbreaking visuals of Forbidden Planet perfectly, making it hard to imagine the film accompanied by a traditional orchestral score.

The 1960s heralded the use of the full-blown orchestra to underpin SF visuals. Stanley Kubrick took a sideways approach to traditional scoring for his 1968 visual adaptation of Arthur C Clarke’s 2001: A Space Odyssey by including established classical music such as Johann Strauss’ ‘Blue Danube Waltz’ and Richard Strauss’ ‘Also sprach Zarathustra’ as cues. This combination of futuristic visuals with historical music may have seemed a strange marriage for cinema audiences during 1968, but credit must be given to the audacity of such a partnership of diametrically opposite elements that today cannot be divorced from one another.

1968 also saw a landmark score by one of the Sci-Fi genre’s most prolific composers: Jerry Goldsmith’s Planet of the Apes score was once again orchestral, but with a daring use of percussion and wind sections taking centre stage. This approach pioneered the soundtrack as an almost separate entity, removed from the visuals it complemented. Goldsmith’s choice of out of the ordinary instruments within the traditional bedfellows of the orchestra pit creates an assault against the listener’s ears, a sonic barrage befitting the surreal and unrelenting tempo of the scenes it underpinned. Compared to the scores mentioned above (with the exception of Forbidden Planet), it’s hardly Sunday afternoon listening, but provides an interesting question as we move on to discuss the scores of the 1970s.

Should a soundtrack’s musical worth be judged by the criteria as one you can listen to and enjoy solely as music, detached from its parent element? Or is its worth as a soundtrack one that whilst viewing the film becomes part of that whole experience and does not overshadow any particular cinematic element, therefore not intended to be studied separately?

Soundtrack collectors continue to debate this question, arguing that a good score as part of the whole will be noticed only when the director intends it to take centre stage, much in the same way movement of camera or lighting will not leap out to seize the audience’s attention above any other dynamic unless intended. Others counter that musical scoring is a narrative unto itself, providing the audience with foreshadowing of events via subtle themes or leitmotifs, and therefore should follow a melodic musical progression which is easy on the ear when
listened to removed from the film.

This brings us to John Williams, who embraced the leitmotif as an integral ingredient to his scores. The leitmotif can be as simple or complex as the composer desires within the score, but is often a brief melody or rhythm highlighting a particular element such as a character, object or mood.

William's score for *Star Wars* in 1977 relied heavily on this technique that was established by classical composers such as Prokofiev and Beethoven. Indeed, the entire soundtrack is peppered with these little melodies as themes for characters, interwoven within the score sometimes by a single instrument, much in the same way a subplot weaves in and out of a novel. The greatest aspect of this score however comes from the sheer range of frequencies Williams coaxes from the 103-strong London Symphony Orchestra: A match well-made, considering the film's visuals, and a wise final choice by Lucas, who originally intended the score to be electronic.

In recent years there have been accusations thrown Williams' way of plagiarism of classical composers. Indeed, there are parallels to be drawn in some instances. Many argue however, that this 'plagiarism' is nothing more than a subconscious influence drawn from Lucas' temp track compiled of classical pieces that Williams studied before he began writing the score.

Having arguably penned one of - if not the - most recognisable main themes in cinema's history, Williams did not rest on his laurels and again used the leitmotif modus with a simple yet unforgettable five-note tune as a theme for alien communication in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. This simple harmonic progression (played on the guitar as harmonics, top E-12th fret, B-7th fret, G-7th fret, D-12th fret, D-7th fret) became a musical entity all to itself, parodied in many TV comedy sketches of the time and used to comic relief as a door keypad entry tone-code in the Bond film *Moonraker*.

The impact of *Star Wars*’ box office success created a flood of Sci-Fi and Fantasy films fast-tracked to the top of production schedules. Obviously they all needed scores, which opened doors for many young composers.

An ex UCLA music teacher named James Horner, aged just 26, found himself scoring for Roger Corman’s 1980 cash-in flick, *Battle Beyond the Stars*. Horner’s approach was traditional, but with a respectful nod toward the works of Goldsmith above anyone else. Corman, notorious for producing films on the cheap, provided a budget for only 62 recording musicians. Listening to Horner’s score today it’s not without its flaws, but it served him well and led to perhaps his most celebrated Sci-fi score, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Stepping into Goldsmith’s shoes following his brilliant score for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Horner’s ability to mimic Goldsmith’s orchestrations were obvious. Thematically the music needed to flow from the first film in a logical progression. Knowing this, and being a fan of Goldsmith’s work, Horner’s score is triumphant; its sweeping nautical flavour proved he was a force to be reckoned with and his ability to match Goldsmith’s thematic style irrefutable, this time working with just 80 musicians under the command of his baton. Horner continued to follow in Goldsmith’s footsteps as he scored *Aliens* in 1986.

As the 1980s saw a deluge of Sci-Fi and Fantasy films hitting the cinemas, several other composers gained acclaim.


Another notable composer, Basil Poledouris, composed the scores for *Conan the Barbarian*, *Conan the Destroyer*, *Robocop*, *Cherry 2000*, *Robocop 3* and *Starship Troopers* before his untimely death in 2006.

But it would always be the big two - Williams and Goldsmith - who would dominate genre scoring. Together they are responsible for the most memorable themes ever heard in Sci-Fi and Fantasy cinema.

It’s almost impossible to imagine films such as *Superman*, the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jurassic Park*, and the *Harry Potter* films without Williams’ wonderfully lyrical main themes. Similarly Goldsmith’s scores for *Capricorn 1*, *Alien*, *Outland*, *Runaway*, *Supergirl*, along with his extensive TV theme scoring for *The Twilight*
Zone, The Man from U.N.C.L.E, Star Trek: The Next Generation (a reworking for his main theme from Star Trek: the Motion Picture) and Star Trek: Voyager established him as a composer comfortable with various musical styles and interpretive ideas.

In recent years Williams could be accused of ‘over-scoring,’ perhaps writing sulphurous filler, far removed from actual musical segues to link scenes. These sections are most noticeable in the Star Wars prequel trilogy and beg the question: Are they of the composer’s own interpretation, or of the director’s?

Sadly Goldsmith’s death in 2004 left a great void for the many fans of his diverse approach to scoring.

Over the past years, composers such as Howard Shore, (Crash, eXistenZ, The Cell, the Lord of the Rings trilogy), Hans Zimmer (Thunderbirds, Batman Begins, Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest, Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End), and Danny Elfman (Scrooged, Batman, Nightbreed, Dick Tracy, Darkman, Edward Scissorhands, Mars Attacks!, Men in Black) have provided outstanding work for us all that relish musical accompaniment to the wonderful images our genre projects upon the silver screen.

Long may the soundtrack continue to complement and enhance the visuals of the cinema experience, in whatever form it takes.
bounds of the Great Treaty, and more importantly to manage the delicate balance between Dark and Light power; the Inquisition makes sure that no side gains a telling advantage in the battle to impose their will.

The Others are humans who can enter an alternate world known as the Twilight, a gloomy parallel universe infested with energy-sapping blue moss at the upper-reaches but which is actually straddled across seven-levels. The depth of the Twilight to which an Other can delve is determined by their magical power. Few Others have been beyond the fifth level of the Twilight. Mage grades run from seven to one with anyone demonstrating powers above grade one described as being beyond classification.

When someone is identified as having the potential of an Other they are given the choice of choosing between Dark and Light. Each person has the right to make this choice and cannot be manipulated by either Watch – at least overtly. Once the choice is made it is final – although this is a rule which Lukyanenko conveniently bends in the fourth book in the series. They are then bound by the laws of the Great Treaty and registered as an Other. In essence, the Light others are not necessarily good, in the classic sense at least. What they have is responsibility to protect humans from Dark Others, whilst those of Dark persuasion have greater freedom.

Each book released thus far contains three novellas intertwined toward a common conclusion. Generally they are told in a first person narrative through the reluctant (at first) Light Other, Anton Gorodetsky. The only exceptions to this so far are the three stories of Day Watch - the second novel in the series - which sees Alisa Donnikova, lover of the great Dark Mage, Zabulon, narrate the opening sequence of events story. The final story in Day Watch is the only instance in the tetralogy to carry no specific narrator, whilst the middle section is narrated by the mysterious Vitaliy Ragoza.

In the Watch series, Lukyanenko has created a world of magic, wonder and no little amount of political intrigue. The Great Mages of the respective Watches spend their time plotting and manipulating the lines of probability whilst always just about remaining within

It should come as no surprise to those familiar with his work that Sergei Lukyanenko is a qualified psychologist. Much of his vast canon, particularly in the Watch tetralogy, deals with moral dilemmas on a grand scale. In Night Watch, which is without doubt his most recognised and acclaimed series of stories; the age-old “good versus evil” argument is to the fore throughout, with the hero of the novels, Anton Gorodetsky, continually questioning the difference between Dark and Light, and whether there is actually a boundary at all.

Lukyanenko was born in Kazakhstan in April 1968. At 24 years-old he graduated from Alma-Ata State Medical Institute, specialising in children’s psychiatry. However, his heart lay in writing and by 1996 he had moved his family to Moscow where his already-growing writing career really began to take-off.

He is a prolific author, sometimes writing two or three novels a year. Lukyanenko’s career began tentatively in the late 1980’s but in only twenty years it has spawned four trilogies, the same number of dilogies, as well as the Night Watch series which is now onto its fourth instalment. Final Watch is due to hit America’s bookshops in June, followed by the UK release later in 2008 (currently scheduled for October). It is this series which has brought Lukyanenko international recognition, catapulting him from cult SF writer to an author of worldwide acclaim.

The tetralogy is concerned with the Moscow branches of the Day and Night Watches. These are effectively supernatural police forces monitoring the actions of their opposing Watch, and the members of these forces are known as ‘Others’. Dark Others belong to the Day Watch, whose role it is to monitor the actions of the Light Others and vice-versa. The respective Watches were set-up as part of a centuries-old accord between Dark and Light aimed at negating the unnecessary bloodshed that had preceded the Great Treaty. One might assume that Light and Dark are akin to good and evil, but in Lukyanenko’s fantasy realm things are not always so simple. To oversee the actions of the Watches the ‘Inquisition’ was created. This is a powerful organisation tasked with ensuring both Day and Night Watches remain within the
the bounds of the Great Treaty. Zabulon for the Dark and Gesar for the Light have been enemies across the Other boundary for centuries. Both have power way beyond the recognised levels of classification, with their actions in many ways akin to that of the political leaders of today. Every word is chosen carefully; every flex of their power part of a grand plan and everyone in their command is dispensable for the greater aims of Dark and Light.

Lukyanenko gives us much to ponder and blurs the indistinct lines between Dark and Light further with some sharp storytelling: in Day Watch a Dark witch chooses to die rather than duel with a Light magician she has fallen in love with; in Twilight Watch, the aforementioned Anton has to contemplate killing hundreds to save millions. At what point is evil good? Likewise, the author’s interesting use of Communism in the same book gives us an indicator to his own politic. In the plot a witch goes into hibernation after setting in motion the events which result in the downfall of Communism; the reason she got involved in the scheme was because the ideology would have been too successful, resulting in man’s advance to an unsustainable nadir and threatening the lives of the entire race of Others whether Dark or Light.

Much of the world created by Lukyanenko draws on myth and legend, an area which offers rich picking for writers in this genre. Unlike many he sees the world of the Others as a subset of reality basing his original fantasy realm in the urban setting of Moscow. As the tetralogy progresses so does its boundaries, with Prague, rural Russia and even good old Edinburgh explored. Zabulon is lifted from the New Testament. Werewolves, vampires and witches can be counted on the side of the Dark whilst Sorceresses and Incubi can be found on the side of the Light.

In Final Watch, Lukyanenko draws still further on legend by introducing Merlin as one of the most powerful mages in history, his power matched only by Jesus in a move which will surely draw much vitriol and condemnation from certain quarters. It is an interesting take to pitch Merlin and Jesus as equals and as being the great mages of yesteryear. The central plot of Final Watch revolves around the legend of Merlin, who is revealed to be the only Other in history to have changed affiliation between Dark and Light. It is believed by many Others that Merlin has hidden an artefact somewhere in Edinburgh that could destroy the boundary between the seven levels of Twilight and reality. A group of Dark and Light Others band together to search for this potentially powerful device which if used could destroy the world – this collective are known as the Final Watch. The motivation for the members of the Final Watch is the belief that the destruction of this boundary will bring back dead Others lost to the Twilight. Many of those making up the Final Watch will be familiar to followers of the books.

The Watch series is but a small part of the Lukyanenko canon, which I cannot claim to have read in full, mainly due to the lack of translation in some cases. It is a fantastic world in which to spend a few hours. The stories run at a pace Tyson Gay would be proud of and contain fascinating plot-lines, augmented with strong characterisation. Comparisons have been drawn with Harry Potter which is bordering on lazy.

Commenting on the opening offering in the series The Guardian described Night Watch as combining “idealism with a world-weary acceptance that the worst will probably happen anyway.”
find that no one is able to convince me of why exactly this film is the masterpiece everyone claims it is. The reviews hang on to the performance of Heath Ledger (more on him in a minute) but almost all mention failings within the film, such as a lacklustre middle act, over-long run time, unnecessary sub plots, a pointless trip to Hong Kong and a waste of a good villain in Harvey “Two Face” Dent. All of which again make me question this apparently flawless film.

One of the more obvious reasons - sadly unavoidable - is the death of Heath Ledger. As abhorrent as it is to suggest it, Warner Bros. marketing appeared to cash in on this terrible event, drawing more focus on Ledger’s performance than perhaps it would have garnered had he been alive. It clearly worked, because amongst the mind boggling hyperbole surrounding the rest of the film is a baffling cry for a posthumous Oscar to be awarded to Ledger. It’s something that looks like it might just happen, thanks to sheer weight of public opinion at the moment. But while the performance is as gloriously over the top as the character demands, no one seems to have much in the way of reasoning for why Ledger’s maniacal performance is more worthy than say, Robert Downey Jnr’s equally lunatic performance as an Australian actor who has cosmetic surgery to become black for a film role in Tropic Thunder. The performance is no less in your face, nor is it any less subtle than Ledger’s, yet Ledger has the public nod for the gold statuette.

So what is going on? Is there some worldwide memo I missed? Or are we in to the final stages of a global invasion of The Dark Knight-loving pod people?

Well as ever it’s back to the fans, the source of a fair portion of this maelstrom of hype.

The clues are there to see if you go looking. Internet Movie Database has The Dark Knight listed as it’s number one movie of all time, with an average score of 9.3 out of 10 registered by over 203,000 voters, of which 30% voted before the movie was even released. Sure, screenings happen, but over 62,000 people getting in to screenings a week before the film launched seems a little far-fetched. Further study shows that the majority who voted 9.6 or above were males under 18, a lot of whom wrote reviews praising the “Dark and Gritty” style of the film. So we’re back at the corner of Dark and Gritty again - that area of
town where comic geeks come to have their love of comics given validation in the eyes of the public.

I have of course covered this need for validation before, but finally it seems to have been leapt on with gusto by the fan community, always ready with a comment of “Comics aren’t just for kids”, combining with the tragic events of January 2008 and Warner Bros. virtuoso marketing campaign (I could practically wallpaper my house with the various different Dark Knight posters) to create a perfect hype storm.

It’s something that I suspect will die down rather rapidly, once this initial burst of fan frenzy and media hyperbole cools, allowing a more reasonable reappraisal. After all let’s not forget that initially The Phantom Menace was rated in a similar way on Imdb, and given similarly glowing reviews by the press (Empire – 5 Stars anyone?) and eventually the hype dies down and a more realistic opinion is reached. As I type, I note on the news this masterpiece has spent only three weeks at the top of the charts in the US, being toppled by The Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor.

“But why are you so down on The Dark Knight?” I hear you cry. Well in all honesty I’m not down on the film itself; only fans’ reactions to it, which seem so overwrought and hyperbolic that it’s almost counterproductive to the genre they love so much. After all, frothing away like a rabid dog about something and blindly pointing at a genuine masterpiece as a comparison without any appreciation of the comparison piece or any way of validating the claims ultimately devalues your opinion in the eyes of more level-headed people. It’s the fan equivalent of the boy who cried wolf, except this time the farmer is asking this:

“So The Dark Knight is the best film ever made eh? Better than Citizen Kane or Godfather II eh? Why? Oh you can’t tell me beyond repeating the words; dark, gritty and Heath Ledger, I see…”

In the end when a genuine masterpiece does appear - and I do believe that one day we will get one in the SF genre - will we be able to appreciate it? Or, given the previous ravings about an overlong superhero movie, will anyone believe us when we proclaim its arrival?
Oh no, petulance won’t get you anywhere. Mother’s eyes get wider with incredulity.

“Sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to,” Mother says finally, pushing Josie through the door. Josie skids on the floor a little and hears the door close behind her.

Josie is now standing in the midst of two upturned dancers, who return to an upright position and glare at her with identical, big blue eyes. She is wondering in her panic if all the dancers look exactly the same, but soon realizes these two are twins.

They are walking away towards the other dancers, now forming a huddle in the centre of the studio. Black flamingos, that’s what they are. Long and lithe and deep jet back.

Josie spots another human girl right at the other end of the studio who looks confused and is looking straight back at her, but it is only her reflection in the enormous mirror.

The eagle-eyed, raven haired teacher has spotted Josie and is getting down from the stage and walking towards her. Josie looks to where the door was, but the whole room is one large mirror and she can’t see the handle.

“Aha Mother is biting.

“I hated it, I was terrible.”

“This isn’t ballet, its Jazz dancing Josie.”

“I can’t dance.”

Josie can feel herself losing. The stairs look very inviting.

“It’s a beginner’s class!”

“If you want to dance why don’t you do it?”

“I’ll do anything as long as it’s not ballet.”

“You used to love ballet.”

Josie is looking down at the bright red carpet of the corridor and then through the open doorway. Mother is trying to persuade her to enter the enormous dance studio.

Young women are stretching, slim Lycra clad legs; one mirrored wall shows their actions in double. The teacher, with her raven hair scraped back into a tight pony tail is fiddling with the sound system on stage, which emits snippets of high tempo dance music. All are bringing back bad memories.

“I’m an adult now Mother, I can make decisions for myself.”

Josie notices Mother has made more of an effort with her clothing. She’s wearing a black, patterned wrap dress, just like her magazines tell her to.

“An adult takes responsibility for her body,” Mother counters.

Josie is feeling trapped. She wants to be an adult and Mother is right; she’s seen eighteen year olds at the gym, but she can’t help feeling relieved she doesn’t have to do physical education any more. She wonders how Mother ever got her in the car in the first place. A different tack, might work. Definitely no pleading - that is for children.

“Just do this one thing for me and I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

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The eagle-eyed, raven haired teacher has spotted Josie and is getting down from the stage and walking towards her. Josie looks to where the door was, but the whole room is one large mirror and she can’t see the handle.

“Are you joining us?” the teacher asks in silvery tones.

Josie looks down at herself in her black dancing gear identical to the others and walks tentatively over to the troupe, telling herself under her breath that she must accept her fate.

She stands on the edge of the huddle. The teacher is now talking about dancing experience, but Josie isn’t listening; she is plotting her escape.

“What’s your name and have you danced before?”

The question is for her.

“Josie, no nothing.”

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“Right Josie No-nothing you might find it hard to keep–” the teacher begins, a light titter travels around the circle, but is interrupted by the noise of the door opening again.

Josie turns her head with the other dancers, to see a plump girl in a grey tracksuit enter the room. Josie sees the door beginning to close. She wants to shout “hold the door”, but can’t think of an excuse to leave before it shuts with a soft swish and blends into the rest of the wall to wall mirror.

“Sorry I’m late,” the girl says as she drops her drawstring bag by one of the mirrors. She begins to put on her dancing shoes.

The teacher raises her overly tweezed eyebrows and returns her attention to the group, looking slightly confused. The black flamingos track the girl’s movements and stare as one entity, their eyes greedily feasting on the extra flesh of her back, but now turning away rapidly when an empty crisp packet falls from her bag, their faces a picture of thinly veiled disgust.

As the girl joins them Josie instinctively looks down at herself. She is a lot slimmer than the girl and is wearing the same clothes as the group, so she begins to feel better.

“Hi, my name is Alice and I’ve been dancing for three years.”

The other girls look at Alice in her grey sweat pants with incredulity and Josie’s heart sinks with the knowledge she is the only one without “the knowledge.” The teacher then tells them to spread out and warm up and the circle gets wider and wider. Without Josie noticing the command, the girls begin to jog and she is now frightened of holding up the line. The pace gets quicker and quicker. Frantic classical music with Iberian overtones and an up tempo beat begins and the teacher shouts something inaudible over the din. The girls seem to be skipping lightly their feet barely touching the ground. Josie hears the thud of her pumps on the wooden floor in time with the beat of her heart, slow lumbering movements.

“Point,” the teacher screams.

It is getting harder and harder to breathe as they continue to leap and Josie notices the girl in front getting farther and farther away. She is just about to give up after too much exertion when the teacher yells something. Josie stops and turns in time to see a girl crouching to tie her lace in Alice’s path and another push Alice, propelling her forwards over the first girl and onto her face. The music stops and everything goes quiet.

“What the hell is going on?” the teacher bellows and the girls innocently shrug their shoulders.

Alice is nursing her hand and clutching at her ankle, but Josie can’t see what is going on properly for the crowd of girls around Alice. Girls.

No longer black flamingos but black vultures waiting for their prey to give up the fight.

Josie hopes this will halt the class, but Alice simply limps out of the mirror door with her belongings over her arm and the teacher demands the girls form three lines and the torture begins again, only this time to a Madonna remix.

Josie is standing at the back finding it impossible to follow the sequence of movements, so instead she moves vaguely like the others in front and gradually becomes mesmerized by their jutting shoulder blades, just visible in the scooped necklines of their black tops. They are like razors just under the skin twisting and grinding with each arm movement and she wonders how they don’t break through. Lithe legs are raised occasionally to meet angular shoulders, the toes so pointed they look like claws. Fascinated with their alien bodies again she misses what the teacher says, but this time it is aimed at her.

“Come to the front and demonstrate the sequence please Josie.”

Pointed chins and bulging eyes turn to face her, no longer beautiful. Their noses seem to have grown unsightly, beak like; their shoulders hunched up to their ears as if awaiting a blow. Definitely vultures. She can feel the colour come to her cheeks as the acid rises in her stomach.

“I can’t, I’m not a dancer,” Josie says flatly to the teacher, annoyed she has been summoned to the front as if she were still at school.

“Chelsea, go through it once to remind Josie how
Chelsea has appeared at Josie’s side, a smaller more delicate version of the others with a pronounced beak. Josie can hear the others move closer on tip-toed feet to get a better look. She has the distinct feeling that the whole class is in on this and again she is the only one without “the knowledge.” She watches the teacher press a button, the music starts and while Chelsea gyrates and turns she tries to think of what she is going to say.

But the sequence has come to an end and Chelsea is still dancing. She leaps into the air, jumps and performs a perfect somersault. The girls behind Josie gasp in awe. She can feel their fetid breath on the back of her neck. The teacher looks excited too, her features becoming bird-like, her hunger obvious. Josie can’t stop staring at the sharp contours of Chelsea’s back as she tumbles around to the music, the gossamer skin stretching more and more until finally it splits and two ligaments stand out from the open wounds. She is spinning now faster and faster until two bone-grey flesh wings unfurl and she begins to float into the air still spinning, before finally landing at Josie’s side, wings enclosed.

“You have to be fit for the day of the dance.” the teacher declares.

Josie is waking up once again to her tired reflection illuminated by harsh neon lights and repeated an infinite number of times in the opposite mirror. She is slumped against another mirror, chin on her chest. Waiting.

She has no idea how long she’s been waiting, it could be days, weeks or months, as the only punctuation of the hours gone by is the appearance of a plate filled with fruit and vegetables sometimes when she wakes, with a note attached to a glass of water saying: “Not yet.”

This isn’t one of those times.

The whole room is one large mirror, with a bar for stretching that runs around the perimeter at hip height. She cannot escape her disappointing form or the torture of her hunger.

The plastic apple in the centre of the floor that had been the size of a pea when she first awoke to find herself here has now grown to the size of a football. It shines with a tempting red lustre and she now fears as she peers at it through half closed lids that her body will devour it whole against her volition. She checks herself and feels better with her own assurances that it is made of plastic. Inedible.

It takes all her energy to get to her feet and once standing she must lean against the bar for support. Something is different about the room. She checks her reflection again and sees she is still wearing her black leggings and leotard. As always she tells herself she is not a dancer and never will be.

Her eyes stray to the door and find it is standing ajar and an odd red light is beckoning her out. She takes tentative steps out of the door and into the ill lit dance studio.

“I’ve got to be fit for the day of the dance,” she whispers, and goes to stand under the red spotlight.
She can just make out an audience. Some seated, some standing. The room becomes a little more illuminated and she can see the seated people. They are wearing masks, pig masks and she can hear them breathing. It disgusts her.

She knows what she must do.

“I am but bone. I am the one you should all look upon.”

Josie hears the black flamingos huddled in the corner gnash their beaks in envy; she feels the eyes of the pigs upon her, and then the music begins.

The slow thud of a double bass makes her feet do wonderful things; she leaps and whips herself around. The whine of a saxophone compels her to spin and high kick, making the yawning pain in her stomach double. In mid air she performs a perfect somersault, not necessary but beautiful. As her body dances of its own accord she spies the teacher. She’s wearing a black feathered head dress, great dark wings spread out in pride and glory.

And now the searing pains down her spine and the tearing of skin. Josie feels herself lift off the ground and she opens her eyes despite her pain. She is hovering. An alien draft blows her hair about her ears and she realizes she is flying.

She opens her eyes wide and looks at her reflection in the hall of mirrors, but she is just the same old, average Josie and she can feel herself dropping quite violently to the floor with this realisation, her wings retreating into her back. The emptiness is so intense she barely hears the snorts and applause the pigs make. One stands forward from the others and removes her mask. She can’t believe it but then she hears a familiar voice.

“That was wonderful darling.”

It is Mother. As Josie struggles to breathe, her face turned to the floor, she is amazed her Mother isn’t horrified by her grotesque form; disappointed she didn’t achieve what she wanted her to achieve.

“But…” Mother begins.

“But what?” the teacher asks defensively.

“Well she’s a bit too thin,” Mother points out. “How are we ever going to get her fit for the Street Dance classes? You need a good, solid bottom for that.”
There are strange people out there who believe that there were zombie movies before George A Romero and John A Russo made Night of the Living Dead. They might talk about the long history of zombies throughout myth and folklore. They might point you towards the voodoo legends of the reanimated dead of Haiti. They may suggest watching pre-Night movies, such as I Walked with a Zombie (1943) or The Plague of the Zombies (1966).

These people should be avoided. Wherever possible they should be mocked. Zombies did not exist prior to 1968. Something like the zombie existed. It even shared the same name, but it wasn’t the true zombie. That was waiting for a pair of twenty-something writers to come up with.

Despite the 40 year career that Romero has carved from Night of the Living Dead, a lot of his success is down to luck and circumstance. Had things gone the way that he originally intended the film would have had nothing remotely in common to the one that we know and love today. Would a film about visiting aliens befriending teenage humans have been as popular as bloodthirsty ghouls trying to eat your liver? Probably not, but that was one of the original ideas for the film.

The whole premise of the movie is constructed to conserve the one thing that Romero and Russo didn’t have; money. The entire movie basically takes place in one location, with a few external scenes to round out the confined atmosphere of the film. It’s a technique that has worked for plenty of other genre movies, from The Evil Dead to Cube. Conserve cash by limiting the sets. Simple and effective.

What Romero and Russo wanted was to make a film that made money. That was the extent to their ambitions. Although it might be nice to imagine that the fabled ‘social commentary’ of the Dead films was there from the start, it’s a myth. It’s not about racism, or Vietnam, or the plight of the lesser spotted Venezuelan hamster. It’s about a hoarde of undead ghouls trying to munch down on the flesh of some people hiding in a farmhouse. Simple. Romero himself has gone on record to say that the reason Duane Jones was hired for the role of Ben was not that he was black, but because he was the best actor that they could get for the part. At no point during the entire film is the ethnicity of Ben ever mentioned. Commentary in itself, or just that the role was originally written for a white man?

The Night of the Living Dead was a phenomenal success. Made for just over $110,000 the last four decades have seen it rake in a whopping £300,000,000. Not bad for a debut movie from a guy that had, until then, only ever directed commercials and the odd industrial film.

It took another ten years for Romero to return to his zombie roots, during which time he directed some less than successful films. The most notable of which was Martin (1977), a modern day take on the vampire myth that was critically acclaimed, but nowhere near as successful as Night.

When Romero did return to the world of the lumbering, flesh eating creatures, it was without John A. Russo. The two men disagreed over what direction their creation should be taken. Romero wanted to do something more meaningful, while Russo wanted to take them down a more comedic line.

Dawn of the Dead was released in 1978 and is widely regarded as the best of the Romero movies (and therefore the best zombie movie overall). Otherwise known as ‘the shopping mall one’ by those less zombie-inclined, this is the film where Romero perfected the social-commentary that he had evolved over his films of the precious decade. While Night was a fundamentally simple movie Dawn was an altogether more complex affair. The movie leaps from the secluded, isolated farmhouse with its minimal cast, to an endless shopping mall. Although he still uses a tight number of cast members to increase the tension of the film, the number of zombies seen here are in much greater number than the ones wandering the countryside.

The characters in Night were very simple (the hero, the villain, the damsel in distress), but with Dawn there are no heroes or villains. These are characters that are just trying to survive. They are altogether more human than the ones seen in the previous movie and more effective because of it. While the world turns to shit outside of the shopping mall the survivors obsess over the trappings of consumerism that have become meaningless. They hoard...
possessions and even steal money, despite the fact that there is nothing left to spend it on. The zombies themselves wander the mall mindlessly, re-enacting the ritual that can be seen in every shopping mall across the nation on every bank holiday weekend. Next time you’re strolling around Manchester’s Trafford Centre or London’s Brent Cross just ponder on the fact that the only thing separating you from the zombies is a pulse.

The only downside to Dawn is the ending. Although it’s not exactly happy, there’s certainly more hope than there was at the end of Night. As originally planned Fran and Peter would not have escaped the zombie-infested mall, but Peter would have blown his brains out and Fran would have shoved her head into the blades of their helicopter. It would certainly have been more in keeping with the rest of the film, and Romero’s ideology in general. There is no hope. This is the end of the world and the main facilitators of it are ourselves.

Although Dawn is every zombie-lover’s favourite film, Romero prefers Day of the Dead. Rather than giving us, the audience, something that we can relate to (the farmhouse, the shopping mall) what we have here is the political world – to most an incomprehensible battle of policies and propaganda that has little meaning in real life. This was Romero’s critique of the 1980’s, where the political leaders of the world were doing their hardest to ensure that no one would see the end of the 20th century.

Most of the film is taken up with people shouting at each other, but this isn’t the drunken argument of every wedding reception; it’s about how to stop the end of the world. In one corner we have the scientists, who desperately want to find a way to stop the reanimation of the dead, but who lack the resources to do it. In the other corner we have the military, who simply want to blow the lot of them back to hell but lack the manpower and bullet power to do it. Neither side is capable of winning, but that doesn’t stop them arguing about it endlessly.

Day of the Dead is the unsung hero of the Dead films. Romero puts everything that he can into it, and succeeds. But what he was trying to instil into the movie was so alien to the audience that, although it is still a very good film, fails to affect the audience in the way that Night or Dawn did. Its very subject matter causes a rolling of the eyes in most people but, at the time that it was made, it was the most important point that could be made.

The year that Romero’s Day of the Dead premièred coincided with Return of the Living Dead, which was based on a book written by John A Russo, the co-writer of Night. The film took the idea that the events of Night really did happen, but were covered up by the government. The resulting film, Night of the Living Dead, was a fictional adaptation on real events. A bit like Erin Brokovich.

The film contains much more humour than the Romero films, mostly of the splatstick variety. While Romero’s movies were commentaries on the society in which they were based, the film based on Russo’s work could be better watched with a keg of beer, pizza and a group of friends. The zombies here were faster. They could talk. They were virtually indestructible and they lusted after brains.

The series of films has marked up an astonishing five entries, the last two of which were filmed in Romania and Ukraine and starred Peter Coyote, who can be seen in such films as E.T. the Extra Terrestrial, Sphere and, um, Patch Adams.

While Romero’s movies have gone on to be lauded by all and sundry, the Living Dead series is pretty much ignored, despite having its roots as firmly established as the social commentary of George.

It took another 20 years before Romero returned to his zombie roots (apart from directing the live action advert for the game Resident Evil 2 in 1998), but in 2005 he added to what had, until then, been known as the Trilogy of the Dead.

Land of the Dead had a budget of $16 million. It had George A Romero in the director’s chair, as well as taking on the writing duties. It should have been the greatest zombie movie ever created. Instead it turned out as one would expect McG’s sequels to The Terminator to result: Loud and brash, but with all the substance of a Pot Noodle.

The film is enjoyable, but only as far as the modern ‘leave your brain at the door’ entertainment goes. The substance is there, but it is slightly off beat. You have the rich living their lives as if nothing has happened, and the proletariat fighting to maintain the standards to which their ‘betters’ have become accustomed. You have Big
Daddy, who is a direct descendent of Bub from Day. The commentary is there, but it’s hard to find.

You can lay the blame at studio interference. Romero himself has said as much. It wasn’t the picture that he wanted to paint. The editing restrictions put upon him were the antithesis of what he wanted to show. The ending, particularly, leaves a lot to be desired. The zombies have decimated an entire city of people, but they should be allowed to continue on their way as they’re “just looking for a place to go”.

Everything is there in the film, but it seems lost when you’re looking for it. You can imagine the studio suggesting ideas to Romero – it needs more action. It needs a villain. Where’s the hero? After the characters that Romero crafted in Dawn and Day what we have here are stereotypes that it’s impossible to care about.

Following his less than enjoyable experience with Universal Pictures, Romero opted to go low (relatively speaking) with his 2008 film Diary of the Dead. This is effectively a reboot for the franchise, wiping out the previous movies and starting from scratch with the zombie outbreak. While it wasn’t received as warmly as the original three films, and the expectation with which Land had been anticipated had met with disappointment, it was the style of filmmaking that Romero chose that played a large part in the criticisms of the film.

Coming the same year that Cloverfield and Rec came out it looked like Romero was jumping on the documentary bandwagon. Although Diary was released after those movies, it was actually made before, but that didn’t halt the copycat feelings towards the film. Romero wanted to reboot the Dead franchise and make it more meaningful to the 21st century audience. It was a good idea, as after 40 years the people that were going to the cinema were predominantly ones that were too young to remember the original movie. It would also mean that more movies could be made, with Romero in complete control over what appeared on the screen, rather than having to pander to studios.

Since Night of the Living Dead was released 40 years ago a total of 13 movies have been made that can be traced back to the original; Romero’s 4 Dead sequels, the 5 Living Dead films, 2 remakes of Night (1990/2006) and the remakes of Dawn (2004) and Day (2008). The legacy that George A Romero has seen grow around him has turned him into a legend of modern filmmaking. While not all of his ventures have been as successful as others (some might argue that he peaked with Dawn of the Dead in 1978) it is amazing that a director that made his first zombie movie at the age of 28 can still have the passion and commitment to continue to make them at the age of 68. His films have led directly to the likes of Shaun of the Dead or Fido, as well as the phenomenally successful Resident Evil series of games and films and the acclaimed comic The Walking Dead. The zombie has never been as strong as it is today, both as a tool for social commentary and as pure entertainment.
The room is pitched somewhere between motel and private hospital. Homey, comfortable and bland, lacking personality beyond that given by two pristine views of an alpine lake, in frames suspended each side of the built in wardrobe, opposite the king size bed.

The bed supports the figure of a man, naked beneath the sheets and horizontal, awaiting instruction.

The instruction comes from the woman, once she has closed the door and placed a dark leather bag on the bedside table, the only object thereon.

“You mustn’t worry about such things.” Her instruction is in response to a question.

The question was “Where am I?”

Consider the woman from the man’s viewpoint for a moment as she replies. What do we see? The woman is young and pretty. She is dressed in a smart uniform comprising a grey jacket, black skirt and white blouse, a Mary Poppins in a fifties colour soap.

She leans forward, her eyes coolly looking into ours, his, as she draws the sheets back.

She stands upright and, still holding the sheets above the man’s feet, looks him up and down.

She gives a tight nod, as if to say to herself “All is in order” and casts the sheets fully off the bed, the fields of white linen flowing through the air to splash down against the wardrobe’s sliding door and transitioning as smoothly from fluid motion to apparent solidity, as does the man’s penis as the woman takes off her jacket in one movement, flinging the austere garment across the room and, sitting down on the bed gently next to him, with her fingertips tracing a line from his ankle, up his calves and inner thigh, across his balls and onto his startled member, which thickens under her touch and, in fits and starts, grows swiftly to its full stature.

The woman is now half lying on the bed, but with both feet on the floor. She looks up into the man’s eyes, watching his reactions to her deft - if clinical - movements. One senses a pride in the results of her handiwork, a feeling that her technique is somehow unique and specific to her. A secret handshake, a digital signature.

She releases him from her practised grip as a driver discards a steering wheel or gear stick when parked, and stands up, her blouse having worked its way out of her skirt on one side to reveal occasional triangles and irregular polygons of flesh.

“I think we can dispense with full penetration under the circumstances,” the woman says aloud. To whom is she speaking? The man does not ask. He merely watches her with a benign and curious grin, chest rising and falling with his breath and his cock lolling aside like a blood hound on a hot day, as...

She removes her blouse as theatrically as she did her jacket, slips off her shoes, slippers really, no tights or stockings, and climbs onto the bed, straddling his waist for a moment while she takes her bra off, burlesque, giving him the works. He raises his arms to touch her breasts and she bats his arms away:

“Lie still.”

Softly. It’s not loaded. It’s an instruction. A direction, as if the encounter is running on tracks.

As if it is a script, man responds on cue as the woman dips down and engulfs his lips with hers. Hands remaining by his sides, he stiffens as she wiggles down his body, her skin cool and dry, his skin warm and slightly moist.

Cold hands grasp his balls and hard cock and she goes down on him like a T. Rex chomping on a lawyer amongst the crushed remains of a comfort station.

Witness the 360 degree dolly track view, extrapolated from multiple static CCTV feeds by ‘beyond high’ powered video processors, centred on the bobbing head of the woman, her hair slipping loose, symbolising freedom. We whirl and enjoy for a moment the spectacle of man and woman locked in passionate interaction.

It’s nothing to the voyeur, but for the casual viewer, we get the idea, movements, however blurred and chaotic they seem through the triple eyes of the camera are familiar, universal, enjoyed. And yet, aren’t things getting a little out of hand?

Is this a new woman? What seemed so loving a
moment ago now seems so violent, so... feral. Snap back from whirlly cam. Steady two-shot of the man and woman, who draws her head up, expressionless, raking her teeth over the man’s snagging flesh.

She turns her head and spits something onto the seventy five percent natural components carpet around the bed and starts to slap the man’s fading erection, at first stingers, then blows. A brief pause to judge the man’s attitude, which is speechless, confused, but un-protesting, before she begins to pound his chest and belly with her fists. The woman’s breath is audible, her shoulders rise and fall, her pupils dilate. The man’s body rocks and bounces against the air cushioned mattress.

She gets off the bed. The man looks at his wilted penis and at her.

“What’s happening?” he says, as she goes to the bedside table and snaps the clasp of her bag.

She reaches in and pulls out what looks like a huge adjustable nutcracker and a pair of heavy duty gloves and looks at him.

“You’re not to worry about such things.”

She raises the huge nutcracker over her head and brings it down on the man’s. The forehead creases at the impact point, folds in and pops out, mostly, but the blow has bent the upper spine and the man appears to look askance at the woman, if only because of the unaccustomed angle of his neck, as he says “No, really, what’s happening?”

The woman snorts at the question’s banality, the first small sign of emotion she has shown us.

She swiftly brings the jaws of the nutcracker to bear on the man’s wrist, spinning the wide flat butterfly affair on a threaded bolt positioned half way down the handles of the nutcracker, tightening the grip so that the flesh is dented till we hear something hard grate or crumble inside.

She screws up her face, grips the nutcracker two handed, and with a professional twist snaps his arm like a rolled up newspaper.

“Lie still.”

It’s hardly necessary. The man twitches at random, childishly confused, fluids seeping.

The woman removes the nutcracker and flings it to the floor. She steps lightly to the bag on the bedside table and pulls from it some of the most disgusting items of torture you can imagine.

Montage.

The door to the room opens and the woman strides out, hair in streaks down her face, naked apart from her skirt. Time has advanced.

A man with a plastic pass hands her a dressing gown into which she slips, asking him “Are we good?”

“We’re better than good. We’re done.”

They walk along the touchline of a forgotten football stadium. To their left, the stands; to their right, rows and rows of modular prefab office units tricked out as culturally neutral accommodation, studded with the black plastic casings of cameras and sensors monitoring the identical and empty rooms for a few final moments and bedecked with trees and vines of cable, roots of a mangrove swamp sucking the sounds sights and data from every room and capillarising it to eager receivers in the canopy above.

She turns and looks back at the playing field from the first of the steps near the corner post. The man with the plastic pass is eager to review the footage. He hurries up the steps to the lighted control booth that hangs perma-shacked to the corner of the stadium wall like an observation deck clings to an airship. Above him, across the ceiling of the hangar like space, a gargantuan spaghetti of data cable mirroring his route.

“It’s quite a sight. A sight to be sure.” Unnecessarily: “When you look at it.”

A silver haired man in an expensive suit worn well, evidently an earl grey of one of the more progressive industries, stands with the woman.

“Awe-inspiring in its own way, isn’t it?”

He wasn’t after an answer.

“An orderly grid of cubes, in three hundred rows of four hundred, each cube containing its own piece of chaos, and yet each chaotic act planned, repeatable, measured, and... perfect. Twelve hundred operatives working day and night for half a year exploring every
possible negative user outcome and guaranteeing perfection. That’s what we’ve achieved, Alex, that’s what we’ve shown today, what we’ve been working to. What’s driven us has been perfection because we could risk achieving nothing less.”

The woman smiles, as at a familiar speech given new resonance by current circumstance.

“When we brought out the first model husband we thought we had it all covered. Waterproof, fireproof, shock proof, fool proof. He – it, was completely safe. You could run a car over one and it would remain completely benign. Harmless. Non-toxic, non-offensive, non-stick for Christ’s sake. Stocks soared, profits boomed and everyone was happy. Until the unpleasantness. They were only defending themselves.”

The woman says as always: “People died. You can’t deny that.”

A pair of men in yellow plastic overalls push a cart along the touchline.

Earl Grey tries: “The machines simply took action to preserve their own physical integrity – they have to be programmed with that or they’ll just walk under a bus! We just got the balance wrong.”

A sort of corpse lies on the cart, exposing its artificiality in ways that a human body never could, semi intelligent long chain carbon molecules of fake flesh clinging to twisted sculptural frames of carbon fibre and memory plastic like the molten material that adheres to the metal frame of a burnt out tent.

Alex: “and some.”

“We didn’t expect such ferocity! Or determination. The model husbands were recreational models! Not punch bags! They weren’t programmed for sophisticated physical action, beyond the obvious.

“But now we are covered. This trial satisfies all the UN criteria. Nothing will provoke these models to harm anyone. The market is ours.”

The men pushing the cart steer it into the tunnel out of sight. One has a sheaf of video wafers in his coverall pocket. From where the woman and the earl grey are standing, the modular cubicles, fill the football field and stretch out like the CGI cubes in a corporate ident. Set by set the lights around each of the cosy metal chaos boxes flick off in silence.

The dark advances across the grid toward them. The cubicle guy will be here tomorrow to take the cubicles away so they can become offices and affordable housing.

Earl Grey says “Now we are covered thanks to you. Alex, you and your team have helped us so much. Frankly we didn’t think you could do it.”

The woman turns towards him, a trifle quickly, as the silver haired man makes a placatory gesture and continues: “We didn’t think anyone could do it. Without some kind of counselling at least.”

The woman shrugs. “It’s bug busting.”

The man begs to differ. “It’s a little more than that – for this kind of higher level test to be realistic, there’s bound to be physical and emotional involvement for the tester, even in the lower key scenarios. Anyway.”

The old man pats Alex on the shoulder.

“You’ll want to go and get changed I expect. Shower. Get back to normality after -what is it? Three months?”

The woman smiles again. It takes her a slight effort and fades fast to neutrality.

“I will be seeing you at the banquet tonight? And your wonderful girls?”

“My operatives. Yes.”

“Lovely. No, and I’m quite serious, I’ve talked to my staff psychologists and they all seem convinced it would be a good idea for you and your girls to have some kind of debrief as it were. Clean the palate. I’d hate for anyone to develop any sort of serious psychological problem as a result of such valuable work.”

Alex is almost frowning. She unties and reties the dressing gown and the frown eases as she turns back towards the tunnel mouth.

“You mustn’t worry about such things.”
[Note: Halfway through writing this article, the news emerged that Thomas Disch had committed suicide. It is truly a shame that life and depression finally got to him. The science fiction and horror genres have both lost a great, if sometimes undervalued, writer. - S.P.]

THE AUTHOR

“T.M.D. has been perhaps the most respected, least trusted, most envied and least read of all modern first-rank sf writers.” - John Clute

Thomas Michael Disch was born in Des Moines, Iowa on the 2nd February 1940. Educated at first in Catholic schools (something that showed up frequently in his work), his family moved to Minnesota in 1953, where Disch first got a taste for literature, poetry and SF. He left school in 1957 and held various jobs, until he reached the age of 18 and enlisted in the army. This led to a breakdown, hospital treatment and discharge, whereupon he again took various jobs to support his ‘writing habit’. He sold his first story, The Double Timer, in 1962.

Disch spent several years living in different places before settling in New York. He was closely associated with the ‘new wave’ movement (alongside Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, M. John Harrison and Michael Moorcock) in the UK, and much of his best early SF work appeared in the famous New Worlds publication.

As well as much short fiction, Disch produced several superb SF novels, including the gloomier than gloomy The Genocides, in which the entire human race is wiped out by an alien race who use the planet for a farm. In the 70’s his novel (or series of closely interlinked stories, depending on how you look at it) 334 centred around the occupants of an apartment block sometime in the near future, and On Wings of Song (which some hold to be his greatest novel, although sales were apparently poor) told of a society where flight was possible, but frowned upon by the religious majority.

In the 1980’s and 90’s Disch turned to horror and wrote what were sometimes referred to as the ‘Supernatural Minnesota’ novels. This (very) loosely connected series consisted of The Businessman, The M.D., The Priest and The Sub and show Disch comfortable re-inventing the horror genre to fit his own unique style. He was also responsible for the children’s book The Brave Little Toaster (which was turned into a successful animated film) and its sequel The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars. Also of interest is The Dreams our Stuff is Made Of, an amusing, often caustic look at the history of SF.

Openly gay since the late 1960’s, Disch’s partner of thirty years, Charles Naylor (who collaborated with him for the novel Neighbouring Lives published in 1981) died of cancer in 2004. This loss, as well as the financial burdens caused by Naylor’s illness clearly took their toll. A collection of poems loosely based around the grief he felt after Naylor’s death entitled Winter Journey is due for publication later this year.

In recent months, Disch was said to have been suffering greatly from depression, something that had afflicted him sporadically throughout his life. His apartment (which he was about to be evicted from) had recently been damaged by fire, and his other property which he had shared with Naylor had been rendered unlivable by flooding. Disch’s Live Journal blog which he had used from 2006 to publish poetry and comment on anything that struck him at the time, was often funny and biting, but didn’t always seem to be the work of a happy man. The last two entries, from the 1st and the 2nd of July were headed Letters to Dead Writers and Inflation/Starvation/Fun.


THE NOVEL

Faust and syphilis, anyone? Camp Concentration manages to combine both in a bizarre, sometimes almost incomprehensible SF novel, first published as a serial in the U.K. ‘new wave’ publication New Worlds. Dedicated to both Thomas Mann (author of Doctor Faustus) and fellow SF author John Sladek (whom Disch collaborated with on the non-sf novel Black Alice), the trajectory of the novel is made apparent before it even starts.

Set in the U.S.A of the near future, Camp Concentration takes the form of the journal of overweight, intellectual poet Louis Sacchetti, whom has been jailed for speaking out as a conscientious objector against a war in the east that presumably owed more than a little to the conflict in Vietnam,
which was dragging on and on at the time the novel was written. The first few entries of the journal are written in a regular prison where Louis has been incarcerated, but he is soon moved to Camp Archimedes and (unbeknown to him) injected with Pallidine, a bacteria derived from syphilis which greatly increases the intelligence of the infected person.

It transpires that he was selected to be there by Mordecai Washington, who attended one of the same schools as Louis many years ago. His role, according to the former General in charge, Humphrey Haast, is merely to observe the actions of the bizarre selection of ailing, partially insane geniuses. To this end, Louis’s journal is typed and copies sent to those that run the place, to help them gain insight into what is going on in the minds of those infected with Pallidine (including Louis himself).

The Faust connection is again made clear as the inmates put on a play of that particular story, during which one of their number meets his unfortunate end. Alongside this, many of the group have taken to studying alchemy, in a hope of producing a cure for their terminal condition.

Moldelcali is one of the next to die, in the middle of an alchemical experiment which was supposed to give the gift of immortal life. Haast also participates, and comes away subtly changed.

It is at around this time that Louis’s journal begins to become more than a little strange. He begins work on his masterpiece, a play entitled Auschwitz: A Comedy which he completes in a frenzied burst of activity. He becomes aware of the fact that he has been hiding from himself - that he has also been infected. Thus begins a brief descent into utter lunacy (a brave attempt by Disch to chronicle the inner life of somebody walking, and overstepping, the fine line between madness and genius). Among others, James Joyce is an obvious influence on this relatively short section of the narrative (Finnegans Wake is mentioned several times in earlier journal entries) but soon Louis’s journal entries become more lucid again.

A female doctor has gone missing from her post, and, judging by a number of newspaper reports telling of bizarre, unsolvable crimes and other highly intelligent acts of sheer lunacy, it begins to look like the Pallidine virus has spread outside the controlled confines of Camp Archimedes...

The climax of the novel (which I shan’t reveal) has been criticised by some as it does not carry the Faust-like theme through to its logical conclusion, but as a conclusion to all that has gone before, it works perfectly well, even if it may seem a little abrupt.

Similar in form and theme to Daniel Keyes’ Hugo Award winning novella of 1960, Flowers For Algernon (later rewritten as a novel which lacks some of the impact of the original story) - another tale told in journal form of a man who has his intelligence artificially enhanced - Camp Concentration takes things in an entirely different direction, with different intentions and a very different world-view. Cynical, often very funny and not as depressing as it could have been if written with less deftness, it is one of those SF novels that lingers in the subconscious long after reading it.

**OTHER RECOMMENDED SF NOVELS BY THOMAS M. DISCH:**

- The Genocides (1965)
- 334 (1972)
- On Wings of Song (1979)
briefly, a parting shot: By the way, everyone: I have breath-herpes, perhaps. Or: I’ve just wet the seat; you’ll be smelling that in a minute. She didn’t smile but she couldn’t deny feeling better. Why not go the whole hog and aim lower? You might want to know I’ll be detonating an explosive in precisely nine minutes. She descended.

The first thing she noted was a group of young men, five or six strong (she was pretending they weren’t there), sitting on a bench outside The Netherfield pub and passing around a parcel of chips. Groups always made her nervous, but she was rattled enough as it was. She felt trapped; telling herself to stop panicking only drove her on to further panic. One of the youths called her ‘Gorgeous’ at the top of his voice; others cackled, one whistled. Gulping damp air hungrily, Mia surveyed the row of shops in the shabby arcade. Some were already closing. This served somewhat to improve the state of Mia’s brain: if she intended to buy anything she would need to do so quickly; it made her concentrate. Shoes. She had the interview in a fortnight’s time and she always bought new footwear for such an occasion.

The light inside Kirsty Heels was too bright but at least the person in charge had had the good sense to leave the heating off. The door closed slowly. Mia had never been here before. Mia and the woman behind the counter – tall, red-haired – exchanged smiles. ‘You’re not about to shut, are you?’ The woman told her to take her time. There were no other customers present, and the saleswoman returned her attention to some reading matter. Mia browsed. She thought about what to wear. Black flats, she decided. She couldn’t choose. She had traded feeling frightened, ill and furious for confused. She plucked down three left-footed flats at random, and sat on the chaise longue, where the saleswoman joined her. ‘I need posh shoes.’

By now the upper half of Mia’s body was flushed, greasy with perspiration; the lower half felt chilled to the sinews. Despite her unwillingness to get caught in the rain, Mia decided she would disembark early and walk the remaining distance home. She moved to the stairwell. She took her mind off some of her panic by considering, albeit

1. The taste of sleep brought Mia to full attention. Her contacts twirled against her eye-skin; she sneezed. Across the aisle, a fat woman tutted; she was waving a baby on her lap, and she tugged the child closer, giving Mia a look of reproof. Mia didn’t see her accuser. She had begun a brisk climb into panic, and she sat up straight on the uncomfortable chair, her small hands pressed together and then writhing over one another, like toads at play. Soon she had blinked away moisture in her eyes and her legs felt cold. The taste made her angry. Mia looked out of the window.

Calm down, she told herself. Chewing gently on her tongue, the better to free saliva that might quench the alkaline flavour, Mia took her own advice. She was sitting on the right side of the third storey of the bus; there was enough space between the seat in front and the vehicle’s wall for Mia’s right hand. She clenched as hard as she could. Her left hand she put on top of the seat in front. The boy in his school uniform, with his hair slicked back and a tuba sitting next to him, turned slightly. Thefts were common on public transport; perhaps he imagined Mia intended to steal his instrument. Nothing was further from Mia’s mind. It was all she could do just to concentrate on staying awake.

‘Zoe, it’s me. It’s urgent.’ Mia’s words stirred the taste around her mouth and the late lunch she’d consumed showed signs of upward mobility. Breathe. She killed the call; went back to holding on to the seat. It was then she noticed how many people were clinging to her private disquiet. Must be some show, she thought, and then set about shooting down the stares with mad looks of her own. The young mother across the aisle proved to be a particularly tenacious observer, however, and one on whose face a greedy form of disgust was perfectly apparent. The two women tried to burn each other down. Only after the parent had turned away did Mia decide to let the woman off: after all, she had a baby to protect.

She couldn’t choose. She had traded feeling frightened, ill and furious for confused. She plucked down three left-footed flats at random, and sat on the chaise longue, where the saleswoman joined her. ‘Can I help?’ She was dressed in a navy blue shirt and a sky-blue blouse; pinned to the latter was a decal that read EMMY. This was pleasing: Mia liked knowing the names of people who served her in shops. Furthermore she liked Emmy’s look: the twenty-something face, the wiry rivers of hair pulled down from a fringe that was otherwise wrenched back and secured as part of a ponytail.

‘I need posh shoes.’
‘Occasion?’

‘An interview.’

‘Fine. They didn’t give you grief, by the way, did they? Outside?’

Mia shook her head. ‘Bit of banter,’ she answered.

‘They’re like kids. Wannabe gamesters... What’s the job?’

‘It’s not a job.’ Mia never had a problem with revealing her secrets to strangers. Being lied to was a privilege you only earned through knowing someone well. ‘My right-to-remain interview. It’s annual.’

Emmy nodded. ‘Where you from?’

‘Somalia.’

‘Been here long?’

‘Five years.’

Emmy grinned. ‘Let’s make it six then, shall we? Size?’

‘Ahh... I need a three for my left and a four for my right. I hope that won’t be a problem.’

‘Not at all.’ Emmy walked away.

Fear returned. She couldn’t go back there. But the taste of sleep was biting at Mia’s tonsils, scouring the insides of her cheeks. When she regarded her appearance in a full-length mirror, she was obliged to blink hard. Her contacts itched. Mia closed her eyes. Don’t sleep. She used her left hand like a claw; she reached up her beige skirt and through the fabric of her panties pinched her labia together with force. This jolted her awake.

Mia stood up. In turn she shook either leg at the mirror, determined to increase the blood flow and retain all sensation in the lower half of her body.

‘There’s good news and bad news,’ said Emmy, reappearing from the wings with four white boxes and the three original shoes in her arms. ‘I’ve got threes and fours in two out of the three of the ones you like.’

Mia shrugged. ‘Decent odds,’ she said.

‘Take a seat. Let’s see what they look like on you.’ Still encumbered by her stock, Emmy knelt at Mia’s toes. She laid out the boxes. Before Mia could kick off her own scuffed footwear, Emmy had laid a light grip on Mia’s right calf and was removing the shoe. The touch was warm. Shocking, too: heat climbed up from Mia’s right ankle. The sensation charmed and scared her. Mia fought an urge to touch Emmy’s head – to gauge the temperature and texture of her hair – but did not fight the urge to glance down the other woman’s blouse. The brassiere was black and plain. ‘Which one first?’ Emmy asked. She lifted lids. ‘This is a four.’ Once more Emmy took hold of Mia’s calf, and the touch was no less precise than before; it was like a massage. Emmy helped Mia on with the new shoe, making Mia wonder if she performed such a service for all of her customers. ‘How’s that?’

‘Comfy.’

Emmy repeated the operation on Mia’s left: the removal of the existing shoe, the gentle replacement. So tired was she that Mia didn’t even worry about what Emmy would think when she saw the wounds. ‘And that?’ the other woman asked, but her face didn’t look up to catch the answer: Emmy was staring at Mia’s knees. Mia felt weak. Uncertainty had blanketed every other emotion, but there was only one way to test a moment, an instinct. Leaning back slightly, Mia went up on tiptoes and opened her knees to allow Emmy a blinkered view down the tunnel of her thighs. Emmy’s face moved closer. Softly she kissed Mia on the left knee and then licked at the inside of her upper left leg, her nose primly perched on the fringe of Mia’s skirt.

‘Not here.’

‘You’ve been sweating,’ said Emmy.

Mia took hold of Emmy’s shoulders. ‘Someone might come in.’

Emmy looked up. It was as if she’d awoken from a lush, fruity dream; she blinked, owlish concentration on her face. ‘I saw you,’ she said in a tone that was meant to imply explanation. ‘Touching yourself. I was watching.’
'You don’t understand,’ said Mia.

‘Is it the mirrors or the shoes?’

‘The shoes?’

‘Lot of people have a thing for shoes.’

‘Well I don’t. Sorry.’ The taste in the back of her throat again. ‘Have I spoilt it?’ she asked, not knowing for sure how events had come to this poor excuse for an apology. Or even what ‘it’ was meant to be.

‘Yes. Do you want the shoes?’ She started to get up.

‘Sorry. I’ve not been feeling well. I’m tired.’

‘You can have them. Mum’ll never notice.’

‘Mum?’

‘Kirsty. She owns this horrible little box and gives me a few bob to manage it when she’s getting herself tarted up at the salon.’ Emmy was exuding an air of strained professionalism. ‘Still, it’s better than Crew,’ she added.

‘Crew?’

‘What those posers outside call ‘em selves. So-called gang. “Join Crew” this, “Fear Crew” that. Load of nonsense. You’d be amazed how many fall for it.’

‘They made me fear them,’ Mia said.

‘Well all right. But you don’t have to live with ‘em every day,’ remarked Emmy. ‘Gang’s only use if there’s another one to fight against, surely?’

‘I suppose so. Anyway... it’s a nice shop,’ Mia continued.

‘The lights are too bright,’ said Emmy.

2. ‘Zoe, it’s me. It’s urgent.’

Zoe sighed. Mia had used these words before, more than once; and very often the matter at hand was important, but urgent? Rarely. Being unable to choose which movie to rent wasn’t urgent. Nor was realising she’d left the house keys in the breadbin. That said, there was something in the tone that lent an uncomfortable weight to the words. The plum-coloured nail of her thumb pinched down on REPLY.

‘What’s up?’ Zoe asked.

‘I’ve got the fear. I’m going into one.’ Mia sounded breathless.

‘Calm.’ This wasn’t what Zoe had been expecting. ‘I’m nearly home. Where are you?’

‘Silbury Boulevard. Near the statue of the black horse.’

‘Wait there. I’ll pick you up.’

‘I’ve got to keep moving.’

‘Five minutes,’ Zoe told her.

‘It’s raining!’

‘It’ll keep you awake. Jog on the spot.’

Five minutes turned out to be an exaggeration, but Zoe completed the journey from Wolverton, where she worked, in thirteen. The brakes were squeaky: they sounded like a harpooned seal. ‘Climb in.’

Mia’s face was awash with tears and raindrops; her makeup sat in doughy blotches from where she had rubbed her chin and cheeks too hard. At the sight of her, a memory stabbed through Zoe’s concern: Mia, when they were both aged twenty-one. Mia had taken the wrong pills. To this day, if the subject were ever raised, she would insist it had been a mistake.

Mia was shaking in the same way as she had on that day. She floated into Zoe’s body; they shared her spasms for nearly two minutes. Mia donated a speech mark of snot to Zoe’s lapel. ‘Now now...’

‘It’s coming,’ said Mia. ‘I’m falling asleep again.’ It was the first clear utterance she’d made, and the clarity frightened Zoe.

‘No you’re not. I’m here.’

‘I could taste it.’
'I’m here. Let’s go home, eh?'

Mia nodded. ‘Home,’ she replied, as though stunned, as though she had never again expected to hear the word, to engage in the concept, or to recognise the beast of that name. ‘We’ll eat early,’ she declared.

They did just that. Mia roasted thumb-thick steaks in foil parcels of butter, peppers, onions and mushrooms. Zoe opened the wine and let it breathe for nearly two minutes while she watched the headlines. A cricketer had been murdered. Mia scrubbed two large potatoes. Another earthquake had raped Istanbul. Mia lacerated a lettuce. More fighting had erupted in Somalia. Mia spun around to watch the television.

Zoe moved up behind her. She hoped Mia would be able to sense the smile on her face: sense it through the hug she now provided. ‘It doesn’t mean you’re needed,’ she said.

‘It’s too much of a coincidence.’ This said as if Mia’s interlocutor was someone selling insurance, a credit card promotion, or a burial plot: the voice was dispassionate. Realism stank.

‘You can’t be certain.’

They ate in silence. Or rather, they ate wordlessly; Dorothy Anthony’s Stable of Bongo and Brass was playing. The women pretended to listen to the rhythms while concentrating on the earlobes of sliced mushrooms, on the lagoons of meaty juices.

‘I want to gaze,’ said Mia. ‘Leave the plates; I’ll do ‘em tomorrow. I’m not going to work.’ She stood up. Paxo, their pet, a four year-old budgerigar, squawked ‘Nuisance’ and then beaked his bell.

‘Let’s have a smoke,’ Zoe suggested.

‘No. I want to see what’s going on.’

At the top of the house was Mia’s laboratory. Zoe was discouraged from entering, which was rich: it was a house in Zoe’s name, and Zoe had no area of her own. Nevertheless, Mia knew she didn’t need to lock the door. Mia drank some grape juice from the small fridge next to the printer. Then she sat at the telescope and broke a nail getting the focus sharp. Focus was weird: it changed regularly. Same sky, she thought, same stars; so why did some nights they look like diamonds and some nights like baubles of pus? On different nights altogether, the sky seemed clean; on some – shadowed, filthy and dull. The sky has a character, thought Mia, and a series of dark grey overcoats. She twisted her nose-stud.

She had popped seven pills that would keep her awake through the night. Mia hadn’t slept for fifty-three months. Her stomach felt full. She felt happy: the taste had receded. Using the mirror on the telescope, Mia removed her contacts. She kept a pair of glasses in every room, and at the end of the day she ensured she returned them. She read the sky.

Downstairs, Zoe was watching a quiz show called The Twitching Curtain. It was designed to assess your knowledge of your neighbours. While watching, she alternated between burning matches and then sucking them when they’d cooled, and thrashing out a kilometre on the bike. She had programmed the machine to berate her if she failed to clock nine kilometres a day. It was doing so now. ‘You’re a herpes-carrier,’ it informed her in the voice of Jamesny Rotten.

‘Get fucked,’ Zoe told it.

The system recognized the pre-programmed insult. ‘I won’t. Get busy, you lardy minge,’ it said.

‘Get fucked.’

‘I won’t. Get busy, you lardy minge.’

Zoe had inherited a pessimistic streak from her mother; it was spliced in among the other, more positive, impulses. She didn’t approve of this pessimistic streak; however, she knew it defined her. Daily she knelt at its throne, and genuflected with a sigh. Nothing lasted. Love failed the final exam. It always had in the past, and Zoe would jump at every shadow in the early stages, sensing portents of doom everywhere. The effects were magnified even further for a week every month, during which her hormones tried new dances. Becoming clumsy as she invariably did at this time, she would read a question mark or a death’s head into the shape of a spilt lake of milk; discern something worse from a shard of crockery every time she accidentally dropped a mug... Was failure looming, or would they endure? With the aid of
There was also the intercultural angle to contend with. Mixed-race set-ups seemed to have a built-in bomb, a dormant leprosy. A cancer, even; and for Zoe, fighting the affliction was a full-time occupation... Zoe struck another match. She watched it burn; she viewed the television screen through the flame and wondered what it would feel like to set fire to the house. Hell with it, she thought and took a cigarette from Mia’s pack, on the coffee table. While inhaling she made a decision. Paxo called ‘Nuisance’ from the kitchen, and Zoe whispered ‘Come what may.’ She was sticking with Mia. If need be, she would fight. Fight for the woman’s long eyelashes; for the fizz of owner-hated hair around her nipples; for the deconstructed left foot. Smiling broadly, Zoe toasted her dedication with a sip of wine and a further drag. She would talk to her all through the night if she had to; she would tease her, keep her waiting, keep her taut. Zoe stood.

The bike had timed ten minutes. Jamesny Rotten said, ‘What are you drinking, fatso? Wine? Million calories a glass. No wonder you’re so obese...’

‘Get fucked.’

‘I won’t. Get busy, you lardy minge.’

With a flick of the wrist Zoe sent the remaining contents of the glass in the bike’s direction. ‘Now you’ll get fat too.’

Outside Mia’s laboratory Zoe paused. She listened for sounds of typing; for humming or whistling (Mia was contradictory in that she didn’t wish to return to her mother country but could not break the link altogether: most of the tunes she summoned up were patriotic songs with titles that translated into ‘New Dawn’ or ‘The Rose With No Thorns’). Nothing. Zoe knocked. Nothing. When she entered the room there was fear in her head, rattling from temple to temple like a squash ball on a court.

The window was open. Zoe crossed to where the curtains were struggling against their hooks; she peered out. Mia was sitting on what had become known as the sunroof: a small, nine metre squared terrace that served no purpose, Zoe had opined, other than to make burglars’ lives easier. It was where a storm of pigeons congregated every lunchtime, like old men around park-square chess-tables. Mia fed them. Before they left for work in the morning (Zoe drove her partner as far as the bus stop) Mia left breadcrumbs and bacon rind on the terrace. She cut the rind into pieces as small as ants: she was frightened of being responsible for choking one to death. Mia had a way with birds. Here she was, right now, at nine in the evening, with the moon sharply focused, with a rook in her arms. A rook. Zoe smiled, but the bird had sensed an unfamiliar presence; it called, it flapped.

Mia released the bird. Its wings churned the air as it made good its escape. ‘Are you coming in or am I coming out?’ asked Zoe.

‘You’re coming out.’ Mia waited until Zoe was halfway through the aperture before adding: ‘And I’ve got something to tell you.’

3. **Children were ordered** to stand near the tank: their parents wanted photographs. Defiance was in the smiles of the people – the people from each generation. On televised news reports, brown eyes twinkled proudly. Two neighbouring farmers, business enemies for their entire adult lives, had been moved to reconciliation in a story that was syndicated worldwide, and offered as a message of hope. They both agreed to siphon the petrol from their tractors; the yield was poured down the tank’s deathtube – the cylinder from which so much destruction had been caused – and a burning rag was thrust into the same nozzle. For a few minutes the tank resembled a dragon, fallen and wounded, and filthily snorting out its final gusts of flame. Then all that emerged was smoke, black and rich. The soldiers who had brought the vehicle to the village were shredded in the teeth of an ancient combine harvester, and abandoned. The slurry they became nourished weevils, crops and wild dogs.

Halima watched it all. She was twelve years old and electrified by curiosity. This, it appeared after a few years of possibilities, was deemed (had been declared, no less, though by which higher power she did not know) the year in which wild things would happen. Nor was she referring solely to the newest violence. She had been wearing a headscarf for seven months. Her brother had been taken. The village – the entire village – had had an operation performed upon it: an unwanted operation, and
one conducted without the courtesy of a general anaesthetic. The joy had been removed. As if a cyst, the joy had been extracted. Until today, nobody had laughed for eighteen months; Halima could not recall the last time she had watched anyone smile. She sat in the dirty field and photographed two dogs fighting over a soldier’s spine.

Her ambition was to find Osman. Her ambition was to find her brother, who was older by two years, and in doing so to refute every scrap of sandpaper logic that whispered that by now he must be dead. Halima wouldn’t accept this until she had smelt his skin, or at the very least engaged with his eyes. Halima placed the camera in her bag. She walked home, dreaming of the city.

Dinner was ready. Her plate had cooled somewhat and her parents had already begun to eat, their faces close to the food. Halima’s father preferred not to use a knife and fork. Between mouthfuls scooped up by his pinched-together fingers, he informed his remaining family there’d be ragged times before there were smooth, but that today marked a significant development. They weren’t to lose hope.

Halima consulted her books. She completed her mathematics homework, sang a song, and smelt her father’s pipe smoke from the lounge. She had often viewed this smell – signifying as it undoubtedly did the close of the working day – as her cue to turn in for bed. She removed her clothes. But she could not rid her nasal passages of the smell of sorghum and blood, no matter how many times she blew her nose while on her back. And sleep dilly-dallied as a result; it took its own sweet time to arrive.

Eventually she dreamed of an apocalypse. The land and the sky were green. Horses had wheels instead of legs. Rice grains were black, and the stars up above were rice grains themselves. Halima – tiny Halima, childlike Halima – she had a gap in her face where her nose should be, and she squatted, whipping a dog, intending it to convey her faster to her destination, wherever that lay. She was yelling...

Suddenly she knew her purpose: she was travelling to the city, to New Trozenxus, in order to sell her photographs. But on the back of a dog? As small as she was in real life (and even in the clasp of the dream she knew this) she was not small enough to use a dog as a means of transport. It was good, she understood, to have this sort of perspective, this grade of cunning. Of sorts, it was a get-out clause. It meant whatever happened next was not her fault and could be sloughed off like an unexpected skin. It wasn’t real.

‘Whoah!’ called Halima.

...And Halima was in an office. The temperature would have been pleasing, surely, only to gadflies and koalas. The blades of a fan moved exhaustedly overhead. A gold polo trophy had melted across the desk – the desk Halima now faced. There was no one sitting in the buxom, muscular chair of dark green leather. Halima noted her eyesight was sharper than it was when she was awake. A bee settled softly into the molten gold, its buzzing effervescing as it panicked. Leaving the desktop again wrenched off its legs and one wing. The bee screamed.

The door behind Halima opened. Although the girl didn’t turn, she knew instinctively that what was entering was far from human. She could smell its backside.

There were two heavy footfalls, a grunt of effort... As it landed on the desk, the thick glue of gold was splashed in a score of different directions. An eruption of gold landed just below Halima’s left eye; she started. It was hot; it cooled quickly. Halima gasped. The animal – naked but for a waistcoat – turned. Apparently it did not wish to present the rucksack of its posterior; instead, still standing, it gripped the edge of the desk, leaning forward. The teeth were rank with bad diet; the ape smelled worse than exertion – worse than sweat. Its penis was twitching and its mouth wrapped itself round her name.

‘Halima...’

A gorilla. She was facing a gorilla.

‘You need us more than we need you,’ it now said slowly.

4.
‘You slut.’

‘Zoe...’

‘How could you? Haven’t I put up with enough?’
Zoe asked.

‘Haven’t I?’ Mia answered.

‘God. I was going to stay up all night,’ said Zoe, ‘with you.’

‘You still could.’

‘Right. Yeah right,’ said Zoe, ‘that sounds logical. Stay up with the woman who sticks a syringe in your heart. Think about it, Mia.’

Mia thought about something else entirely. Mia thought about the time the soldiers had entered her home.

Chocolate night. Distant smudge of watered-down yellow, hanging above the city... This time it was not a routine enquiry; there was more in the soldiers’ veins, on this occasion. They did not knock. Their dirty-cream jeep came ploughing into the side of the house; the soldiers, spiked on amphetamines, had wedged the accelerator to the floor with a golf club. The impact set off, not an explosive, but the radio, which was tuned to a station from Cairo. Carrying machine guns, the soldiers followed the vehicle inside; they barked their orders, with barely suppressed terror in their eyes. She could see it through the pools of dust. They had landed in the kitchen. The table had been shoved against the wall and had lost its two front legs.

There were three of them. And there were three people present in the house, although the soldiers had expected to find four. Mia was collected in an ad hoc fireman’s lift, against which she did not bother to resist. She was plonked on her parents’ bed; her father drew her close with an arm that smelt of diesel, and it was this unfamiliarly protective gesture that shocked her fully to a wakeful state.

‘Where is he? Where is he?’ the soldiers kept screaming.

‘Not here!’ Mia’s father protested.

‘You have him already!’ said her mother. ‘Leave us in peace!’

One of the soldiers found this latest complaint hilarious. The drug made him speak quickly. ‘In peace? Have you been asleep for the last two years?’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ said Mia quietly, though not to the soldiers.

‘Well, you should have thought of that, shouldn’t you,’ Zoe told her, ‘before you started whoring around on me.’

Mia closed her eyes. ‘Please,’ she not quite begged. ‘I didn’t whore around. It was a moment of madness. I can’t believe it even happened.’

‘You’re telling me!’ Zoe got up, as carefully as usual (she was frightened of falling to the crazy paving below) and hooked her left leg onto the windowsill. ‘We’ll continue this inside,’ she declared. ‘I’m getting cold.’

‘I want to be cold.’

‘Stay out all night. See if I care. I’ll lock the window.’

When Mia failed to respond to the threat, Zoe accepted a rich pang of envy to the stomach. She did care. She was slightly drunk but that didn’t change the fact she had spent a fair chunk of the evening in convincing herself that Mia was a cause worth fighting for. Zoe left Mia’s laboratory. She entered the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bath, shivering; when she began to cry she reached for the toilet paper and tugged. The paper gutted forward in arcs, in streams.

Mia remained in Somalia. One of the soldiers – the one who spoke too quickly – was using a strength and an endurance beyond that of most men. He was holding Mia upside-down by the left ankle. ‘What if I bite off her toes?’ he asked. ‘Then will you tell us where he is?’

‘You have him!’ said Mia’s father. At gunpoint he and his wife remained in their marital bed. They were watching their daughter not struggling; they were listening to her not complaining. The soldier moved Mia’s foot closer to his open mouth; his teeth were as yellow as the bedroom light.

Mia felt dizzy. More than the discomfort of being gripped so hard by the ankle, she was experiencing – and trying to combat – a sensation of acute embarrassment. When the soldier had inverted her,
the hem of her nightdress had fallen down around her head; she was now inside a thin tent that smelt of her own skin – on display, a piece of meat.

She’d heard the stories, of course: girls of any age, was what they said. This was why she now struggled, not to escape (futile) but to resist her other leg’s tendency, as it was not supported in the same way, to drift aimlessly. She had to keep her legs together. Her right upper thigh was stretched; it was unfamiliar for Mia to use the muscle in this way. But she was determined to keep contact with the soldiers’ knuckles – keep contact with her right ankle.

‘Please let her go,’ Mia heard, inside her cotton cocoon.

I’m a small girl, she thought. Everyone told her how small she was, as if that might be something she longed to have confirmed; as if being small was desirable. I could hurt him from here.

Hurt him before he hurts me, she thought. She could feel his breath on the sole of her left foot. Before he bites my toes.

‘Please, no!’ Mia’s father said – but there was a swelling in his voice; a richer pulse of panic. Mia sensed movement in the room; it ruffled the nightdress in front of her nose. One of the soldiers had moved close – and Mia’s mother now screamed. What was happening? Mia’s heart rate increased. Something cold was placed on her big toe.

Father said, ‘Don’t shoot her! Please!’

Shoot me? A salty taste flooded her mouth. Mia’s fear got the better of her, and without really knowing what she was doing she writhed. She lashed out with her fist, aiming for the groin of the man who held her.

On the terrace, Mia shivered. The night was doing its frosty work against her skin, but so was the memory. A few doors away, the lid of a bin slammed: someone had deposited their rubbish for tomorrow’s collection. The nose had a fraction of the decibels of that gunshot. Reflexively Mia touched her mangled left foot: the foot with no toes, the foot whose end now resembled a ploughed field.

‘Why don’t you come in?’ Zoe said through the open window. The tear-tracks in the moonlight were icy paths. ‘Mia? Mia? Halima?’

Mia nodded. ‘Sorry. Miles away... Looks like rain,’ she said. She stood up and rubbed her palms together. ‘They couldn’t find him.’

Zoe waited for a second, sifting. ‘Your brother? I know, Mia.’

‘They couldn’t find him. He’d already gone.’

‘I know, Mia,’ repeated Zoe. ‘But we will. I’ll keep you awake.’

5.

Easiest thing would be to forgive and forget. This was why Zoe, come lunchtime, was sitting in her lounge-sized car, looking for a parking space. She always chose the path of highest resistance; this was what made her good at her job. But this wasn’t work. This was love. Zoe was doing this for the love.

She parked on Farthing Grove and climbed out into the grizzling autumn air. She removed chewing gum from her mouth and wrapped it carefully, cleanly, in its original foil, depositing the parcel in a fire-ravaged bin outside Kirsty Heels.

Inside it was bright and cool. A child was having his right foot measured. Zoe walked to the counter and waited for the young woman to finish her call.

‘Can I help?’

This wasn’t the one. Her tag said Kelyeena, which Zoe thought a very pretty name (with uncertain etymology) – so appropriate for such a pretty face.

‘I was looking for Emmy.’

‘She’s called in sick today, I’m afraid. Are you a friend?’

Zoe bit down on the irony, and forced its tone away from her answer. ‘Friend of a friend,’ she replied. ‘Is it possible you could get a message to her?’

‘Sure.’

‘Better still, could you give her my mobile number. Say it’s about the Somalian lady.’ Zoe returned to her car. Having made the break to get out of the
studio for an hour (she never stopped for lunch, for reasons of her own, and how suspicious the team had been!), she was now reluctant to go back so soon. She decided to get a drink. She felt the lure. She felt the pulse that constituted the reason why she did not take lunch breaks. There was a pub a few doors down from Kirsty Heels: The Netherfield. She liked it that the establishment seemed rough; she relished the impact her business suit might make.

Although it was scarcely past noon, the place was full of drinkers, tabloids, bald pates and empty crisp packets as shrivelled as used condoms. Near a gambling machine a group of youths in their late teens or early twenties were talking at volume about the previous evening’s TV offerings. If things didn’t calm down quickly, Zoe thought, there was going to be a fight.

‘A large glass of your finest chardonnay, please.’

The barman was wearing a white vest. His left eye was made of glass. Every millimetre of his skin had been decorated with scenes from the Bible. ‘We’ve got red and we’ve got white,’ he told her.

‘White, please.’

The barman turned to fetch down a suitable glass. Zoe saw his name – Dave – tattooed on the back of his neck in purple ink. She wondered why anyone would feel the need to let everybody know his identity. She accepted her drink with a thank you that sounded false to her own ears. She sat.

The first sip of the day was a relief: delivery into a more comfortable existence. Her cells responded with gratitude. As she moved down her glass, she watched the patrons of The Netherfield at rest. Or perhaps this was work – for them, perhaps, this attendance, this dedication, it was work. Perhaps. She could certainly recall a time when drinking had been a full-time job.

Alcohol was to thank for Zoe’s introduction to Mia. The scene was the South of France. Having finished her A-Levels, Zoe was beating her wings on a two-week holiday in the sun, with a friend from school. She had completed her final exam (the Metaphysical Poets, and as it happened she’d been drunk through that as well), and after taking a drink with her classmates, she went home to throw clothing and cosmetics into a bag. In the morning she would set off, with Greta, for the sea. On the third night the girls attended a beach party. Mia was also present. She had made it that far, on her exodus from Africa.

The phone in Zoe’s handbag rang: ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice?’ by the Beach Boys. UNFAMILIAR NUMBER, said the display above an electronic rendition of the Mona Lisa. Zoe used her thumb and said her full name.

‘It’s Emmy.’ But before Zoe was given a chance to respond, the caller went on. ‘She’s given it to me, you bitch. I’ve got it bad. I’m dissolving.’ Something brittle and static-like in her voice.

‘She’s given you what?’ Zoe asked, a second or two later, when words seemed to mean something again.

‘I don’t know. I’m frightened.’

Tell her straight; tell her not to touch Mia. Tell her to back away. Tell her life won’t be worth living. Use the phone as your weapon and the distance as your shield... But this was the easiest thing to do: to summon anger in the face of your lover’s adultery; to scream into the ear of your challenger. And Zoe shied from the obvious as oil does from water.

‘Where are you?’

‘At home,’ Emmy whispered. ‘In bed.’

‘I’ll come and see you. Come and help. Do you live in Netherfield?’

‘Beanhill.’

It was nothing more than a word on a road sign to Zoe, but she would find it: she would find the address Emmy now provided in a voice that sounded, word by word, increasingly clogged. What burned in her breast was more than curiosity, although that was there too. What burned in Zoe’s breast was a desire, a need, to punish. She returned to the bar and ordered another glass of white wine, which she intended to drink slowly, the better to make the cow wait.
6.

**Twelve flies on a body means it’s dead,** her grandmother had taught her early on – so early on. Grandmother had been dead herself for five years, but Halima took her out walking from time to time. She needed the exercise, or so the twelve year-old believed. Grandmother was with her now, beside the river. And beside the horse: the roan that was entertaining a party of flies a good deal larger than twelve strong. What was more, Halima had only been down to the riverbank’s 45-degree angle for twenty minutes.

‘I told you not to go,’ said Grandmother.

‘No you didn’t!’ Halima protested, and protested with such ugly vehemence that the older woman was obliged to take a step back.

‘Well I thought it,’ she offered sulkily, then remained silent for some time.

In the interim Halima knelt. There was space enough in her grief for her to wonder: why do flies always gather around the eyes? What’s so attractive about them? Poor old Osman, she pined. What have I done to you?

The horse was as dead as its own brown apples, which were lying trussed-up in the hairs of its tail. Lying, also, like punctuation marks or mathematical symbols in the road behind its rump. It had shat itself upon expiration, it appeared. The sight made Halima feel sadder. Poor beast. She was crying. She hugged Osman’s neck. Horse-smell had always comforted the girl, but now it punched pimples onto her scalp. ‘I’m sorry.’

She was four days away from the village. With insects in her hair, she was heading towards New Trozenxus. Some people eat horses, she thought. She couldn’t do that, but what could she do? Can’t leave him here, she thought feverishly. Her mind scratched around for a solution. One image proved more obdurate than others: the image of a role-reversal, with Halima carrying the horse on her back. Halima giggled. Then she started to count the flies on Osman’s lips: one, two, miss a few, ninety-nine, one hundred – that was the joke when they were little. One of the children of the village would cover his eyes and the rest had to run and hide. But the counter would cheat, the children would laugh. Usually. There had been that time, of course, when Muna had been counting – she’d only been six and she’d wanted to play funny, like the other kids. But they’d been angry with Muna; they had knocked her to the ground and kicked her until her right hipbone speared through her cotton dress... Halima was laughing now. It wasn’t the memory that caused such mirth: it was the flies, they seemed to be multiplying before the girl’s eyes. In her head she recited the powers of two. Two squared was four; two cubed was eight; two to the fourth power was sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, one-two-eight.

She was hungry; this didn’t help her state of mind. Four days from the village and she had already eaten her week’s worth of food. Boredom and trepidation had conspired to make her greedy. Now that Halima’s laughter was dying down (she couldn’t double the value of 8192), horror and loneliness was starting to weigh down on the top of her head. Cast adrift; and for the first time since setting off before the birds had started singing, Halima was scared. Guilty, too. If she hadn’t eaten so much, perhaps she wouldn’t have needed to take that break in the shallows of the river. Maybe Osman would still be alive.

Stupid! Why had she come? Why had she spent a fortnight on the collection and storage of food? Why risk public outrage by sneaking into the headmaster’s office at dawn, to break open the filing cabinet containing his weapons? Why had she stolen that pistol? Because of dreams? It was too late to do so – too late by four long days – but Halima told herself to grow up. The bushes were whispery with insect life and snakes; the sun was a blazing semi-colon in a cloak of clouds... and Halima was miles from anywhere, friendless, foodless and quietly desperate.

The road had once been handsome. Before the soldiers came, when the only thing to fear had been rumours, the country had been proud of its thriving economy. Money had gone into the Department for Roads, and battered trade routes had been improved with toupees of tarmac. Now, after months of mortar bombardment and tank deployment, even minor roads looked pocked and mottled, with pieces of bone as decorations. Two days ago, Halima had seen a brain – just a brain – on top of a fencepost, resembling a wet loaf of bread, and of uncertain origin. A rook perched on the brain: a king on his throne. Silently the rook had watched Halima pass by on her horse. Halima had
seen the indentations the rook’s feet had made on the surface of the brain, and she’d wondered how, in the heat, the organ had remained so efficiently preserved. Halima told herself (and possibly Osman, too, and even her grandmother), this was going to be the year the wild things happened.

The road stretched out. Continue towards the city, or sit down, mourn Osman, and wait while her brain fried for some adults to find her? Even if they happened to be soldiers. Third option was to turn around and commence the long trek home. A worm of nausea crawled in Halima’s breastbone. She thought of her parents; she thought, surprisingly, of her schoolbooks. And the thought of what she was doing – or intended to do – the promise she’d made to herself and to them in a farewell letter – to find their son – this made her cough twice and start walking. Walking in the direction she’d been headed.

She was not alone.

The decrepit old road dipped and climbed. When Halima was down in the dip she thought back to Osman; of how she might, strength willing, have shoved the horse down the riverbank and into the water. This achieved, she might even have had something to look forward to on the off chance she reached the city: something other than hunger and fear. Osman’s sweat would be in the water; his dead eyes would see her down the long watery path. Her regret felt as strong as nostalgia. Halima could taste it, too: coppery and vile. Feeling weak, she crested the hill, a suspicion niggling her brain – a suspicion that the forced breaths she could hear might not be coming only from her own mouth. She stopped on the crest. The sight before her made a clutch for her breastbone, and suddenly Halima felt weak at the knees.

Two dogs were standing in her path. One was grey, a mutt, a mongrel; it had an old wound stamped to its left flank. When Halima was able to think again, she thought: Bullet hole. Someone had used this animal for target practice. The dog to Halima’s right, on the other hand, was a handsome beast, with a full coat of lavishly-attended-to brown fur. Both dogs were considerably larger than adult elephants.

‘You’re late,’ said the dog with the brown fur.

7.

Mia was shaking. It happened from time to time: a reaction to amphetamines and to the exertion of staying awake. And to the fear, of course: to the fear whose shawl she wore; the fear she was being hounded by the past, being shadowed, always shadowed, leaned-upon, eavesdropped and analysed. During panic attacks, Mia doubted her own contention that she was living proof human beings didn’t need sleep. She doubted sleep was nothing more than a conspiracy. She questioned her beliefs, sank into a trance of depression.

She made some coffee. Soaked her face in the boiling steam glutting from the kettle. Shit, I fell asleep. The realisation hit her in the gut. Her hands were shaking so badly that the teaspoon rattled in the mug, and it did so with the urgency of a bellringer informing the city the enemy is on its way. Lifting the mug to her mouth, she spilled coffee onto her breasts and lap. She tried to imagine when it could have happened.

Last night she had slept with Zoe, but only (she had believed until a second ago) in the euphemistic sense. Not that Zoe’s tongue or fingers meant that Mia had been forgiven. Far from it, if precedence had anything to say for itself. No; Zoe used sex as a sign of temporary appeasement. There would – and how Mia loved this phrase in English – be hell to pay. Wasn’t that great?

Mia continued shaking. Every time she slept she made herself vulnerable. She risked the cancellation of all the bodily effort she had endured: that wasn’t fair. A simple snooze, and she might as well not have bothered to escape from Somalia. The trek – the trucks, the hitchhikes, not to mention the permitted fumbles of feigned appreciation – would all have been to waste. She’d go back. Indeed, on a dozen or so occasions over the last sixty months, she had contemplated giving in. Just surrender; it’s not worth it. But she had always managed to convince herself otherwise. She would picture a colossal astral vacuum cleaner, playing down upon Milton Keynes, her home: sucking back the years as if they were tumbleweeds of fluff. This image made the hard work worth the effort: this image, and the thought of her life slipping back five twelve-month-long chapters. The appropriation of a new identity; the tongue-twisters of a new language; the journey across Europe; meeting Zoe. The ghosts of a wiped
out existence would stumble across the skies, from star to star.

Never again would Mia kill a human. If she refused to let the gorillas into her dreamscapes, they couldn’t force or train her to commit more dreamcrimes. Never again would she wolf on unprotected skin.

So reiterating, Mia took her place on the exercise bike. She pedalled slowly, cigarette in her mouth. The bike admonished her for her filthy habit (Zoe’s programming), but after all she’d survived Mia was less receptive to bullying and insults than Zoe was. Mia told the machine to show some respect. If it didn’t, she would starve it of electricity. The machine shut up. The threat of deprivation was a beautiful one, thought Mia, laughing out loud. Considering her own predicament, she was sure that the statement qualified as irony.

She was in a good mood, then, when the phone rang. It hadn’t lasted long, and it was about to be stabbed dead, but it couldn’t be denied: Mia was in a good mood. This meant, unfortunately, that she wasn’t ready for the call. Not moving from the bike, she said ‘Hello?’ and the mike picked up her voice.

‘Mia Abdi,’ said an officious voice. For a second Mia imagined this was going to be about her interview. ‘My name is Sergeant Haines. Your name is Sergeant?’ thought Mia. ‘I’m calling from the police station,’ he said, padding out the inevitable. ‘I’m afraid I have some bad news. It’s about Zoe Field...’

‘Yes?’ Mia stopped pedalling. The motor whirred on for a few more seconds. That was more than could be said for Mia’s optimism.

‘I’m afraid there’s been an accident,’ said Haines. ‘A road accident.’

‘No.’

‘I’m sorry to tell you this, Miss Abdi.’

‘Please don’t,’ begged Mia. ‘Just don’t. Don’t say it.’

8. It wasn’t on the drive to Emmy’s house, but rather on her swift drive away from it, that Zoe crashed the car. Nor did she have time to regret the alcohol she had so passionately consumed; there were other matters very much on her mind. The universe folded in on itself in a riot of pain and din.

Zoe shouted once for her mother.

Less than two hours earlier, she had arrived at Emmy’s place: a thin, three-storey affair and an authentic slice of history. When the builders had created this hellhole, back in the twentieth century, they had needed somewhere to live for the duration of the construction. These homes had since been the subjects of concerted, genuine-spirited makeover, but the original ghosts – the poor quality materials, the burglarable facades – had endured.

Girding herself for the task in hand took Zoe next to no time. She was drunk. All she had to do was ensure her limbs were moving satisfactorily and this sorry incident would soon be no more than a footnote. She held her breath for ten seconds (she was hiccupping) and rang the bell, which rattled like a pea in a matchbox.

Long wait. The door was opened cautiously. With the possibility of further action (a slamming, for example) remaining visible. ‘Zoe?’

The woman wasn’t even pretty. This damaged Zoe’s ego – with a swift salvo of pins – far worse than would have been the case if a supermodel had arrived to greet the afternoon drafts in her underwear.

‘Yes.’

Emmy nodded. ‘Come in,’ she said, and abruptly turned away from the door. She followed the passageway for three short strides and turned right. Zoe entered; she closed the door and acknowledged the music of the Bee Gees: ‘Staying Alive’. The house smelt of sickness and citron.

‘Take a seat. Drink?’

‘I haven’t come here to be your friend,’ said Zoe.

‘I haven’t invited you here for that either,’ Emmy replied. ‘Drink?’

‘White wine?’ said Zoe through a sigh.

‘I’ve got vodka or gin.’
‘Vodka.’ Remembering her manners, Zoe added ‘Please. Ice and lemon, if you’ve got them.’

‘Two secs.’

It was brought to her: a quadruple or even quintuple measure, in an Empire State glass; there was an Antarctica of ice therein. It was positioned on the right-hand side of Zoe’s armchair.

‘Thanks.’

‘Don’t mention it.’ The tone was pure salad dressing: necessary, but tart. ‘I’d give the fucking Ripper a drink if he came here. Doesn’t mean–’

‘–we love each other,’ said Zoe. ‘Understood. Thanks anyway.’ Weren’t they reiterating their earlier points? Business loomed. There were words that Zoe had to utter before the wall clock’s ticking drove her mad. ‘What did you mean, dissolving?’ she asked. ‘You look pretty formed to me.’

Emmy nodded. ‘It’s mainly on my chest and arse at the mo,’ she answered, sitting down in the opposite chair. She established her position like a hen. ‘And you’re expecting me to say: wanna see? Well I won’t.’

‘What are we doing here?’ Zoe asked. She took a good pull on her drink. In pleasure she gasped and licked her lips. The vodka was chilled and strong, just as she enjoyed it.

‘Okay, you want the floor show? Here goes. Be warned.’ With which Emmy lifted her top to clavicle height.

A moment of stunned silence ensued.

‘Jesus Christ…’

‘... won’t help me now. But exactly.’

Emmy wasn’t dissolving. But beneath the ramparts of green brassiere the skin was in a state that was far from healthy. There was mottling; there was blood-show. At a couple of points – and here logic took a bow to the senses – it appeared as though the skin disguised nothing. It was transparent. Above Emmy’s left hip was a narrow but crystal-clear path of visibility to one of the woman’s pulsing organs.

Not knowing what to say, Zoe sipped her drink. The Bee Gees moved into ‘You Win Again’. ‘I know what you’re thinking,’ said Emmy. ‘You intended to be all butch and territorial…’

‘Butch?’

‘... and tell me never go near your girlfriend again. Thought you had the upper hand. It’s amazing what a disfiguring skin condition can do to change things, isn’t it?’

Ice burned on Zoe’s upper lip. Only when it had become clear that Emmy requested an answer to what ordinarily would have been a rhetorical question did Zoe say: ‘You seem to know a lot about human behaviour.’

Emmy shrugged. ‘I’m doing Psychology at the college.’

Bully for you, thought Zoe. ‘I suggest you get yourself to the doctor. I don’t know what else to say. Yes I do. What makes you think this has anything to do with Mia?’

Emmy smiled. ‘Did you think this couldn’t get any weirder?’

‘Not really.’

‘It’s about to. She came to me in a dream.’

‘Mia did?’

Emmy nodded. ‘Now I know her name, Mia did. She visited me last night. Told me my soul had no chance. Prophetically enough.’

‘You seem to find this amusing,’ Zoe told her.

‘Yeah. And you haven’t seen the really funny bit.’ For a fraction of a second Emmy paused. Zoe inferred from the silence that the other woman was making a decision – doing the calculations, the tallies, the pluses and minuses – of whether or not to allow someone into a secret. ‘Come on,’ said Emmy, standing up. ‘It’s in the kitchen.’

Zoe followed her through, even sharing (although she hated to admit it) Emmy’s unquestionable pleasure at knowing what was about to be revealed. It was like Christmas Day, Zoe thought. As a child
she’d always been delighted by her parents’ excited expressions as she’d torn open her presents.

An odd aroma in the kitchen: medicinal. This scent had been buried under a layer of cleaning product breezes. Here was a woman who really loved to keep things spotless. She looked about the small room. ‘Where?’

‘In the sink. But you’ll have to look hard,’ Emmy warned.

Zoe put one hand on the draining board and the other on the fridge; she leaned forward, squinting into an inch of pistol-grey water, where a lone teaspoon was anchored. She’d expected that medicinal smell to be stronger, with her face nearer the surface. This wasn’t the case.

Aware of movement behind her back, Zoe was halfway to her full posture when she felt the force and dampness of a piece of cloth being applied to her face. That smell: closer now, as close as it could get – sense-blurringly close. Zoe struggled. But Emmy was strong and determined. She held the chloroform-moistened cloth over Zoe’s mouth while maintaining a hold on the woman’s upper body with her other arm around Zoe’s neck. Darkness was pooling in the corners of Zoe’s eyes. Not that she had given up her thrashings. Quite the reverse: desperation had made her powerful; but the wrestle was short lived.

9.

The brown-furred dog was called James Carbon.

‘Pleased to meet you, Halima,’ he had said before offering her his back as a means of transport. What Halima had taken for imperial impatience soon thawed; within minutes of the commencing the ride, she was even defending the dog. Perhaps he had sounded tense as the result of mastering a foreign dialect. Nothing else was real about the situation, after all, so why not direct some more dream logic its way?

Frank Mice. The other dog, the mangy dog, went by the name of Frank Mice. This one couldn’t speak. Halima regarded the inability with amusement.

They were heading for New Trozenxus. A rare but welcome rain was falling – falling as gently as feathers, as though upset by the prospect of causing offence or irritation. Gratefully Halima looked up. She smiled. She’d been staring at James Carbon’s back for the duration of some miles. Enough. She sent a heartfelt blessing to the sky. As a result, ‘You’re a lovely girl,’ said a voice at the back of Halima’s head. The sound of her grandmother’s tones made Halima smile wider. Silently they trudged on. Halima’s hips were wriggling to the dog’s walking rhythm: so different from that of Osman! And the girl was comfortable; not once was she tempted to leap from the tower. It all seemed perfectly prepared; it seemed apt.

The circumference was marked by its hamburger shacks and an oily accrual of motorised traffic. Halima felt both horrified and appeased, like a May Queen on a float. To observe the procession thin children kicking balls stopped doing so, grinning; their parents, or at any rate adults, ceased their roadside bartering, their arguments. They didn’t smile. There were vehicle spare parts establishments; cafes too. There were shops selling foam rubber, hats and pets. Embarrassed, Halima was not sure how to respond to the children waving. She didn’t know if she felt better or worse with the understanding that sitting astride a giant dog was still a novelty. Even here: here in the cultured city.

Still they followed the river, more or less. Occasionally James Carbon would take a detour through a suburb of canvas, where the air smelled of burning beans on a camp stove. But they always returned to the river’s green yawn. And its scent: ancient and yet alive. Grinning bandidos logged her progress towards the heart; Halima even witnessed the aftermath to a violent crime: using a penknife, a man was spooning out a dead man’s eyes. His moustache twitched and writhed in no more then minor irritation. The air thickened with the stench of petrol; it shimmered with the risky pulse of commerce and economic agility.

‘We’re nearly at the Tower of Crumbs,’ said James Carbon. Then he sneezed. Halima sneezed too. You could taste the germs in the air. ‘This fuckin’ city always makes me feverish,’ he muttered on.

Halima knew all the answers she required were on their way. Why query the Tower of Crumbs? With the shoe shops, the fruit stands, the juice bars, the restaurants, there was plenty more to squabble for her attention; there was always that acute sense of embarrassment to cultivate as she became more and
more of a viewpoint, an item – for lorry driver and bus driver (and passengers) alike. Even the city’s insects were circling for a gozz. Traffic made its way through the city’s polluted fibres, through its chambers.

The two dogs – James Carbon and Frank Mice – stopped outside a narrow grey building and briefly glanced up toward the zenith. Mice barked – the first sound Halima had heard him make.

‘Here’s here,’ said James Carbon, settling gently onto his belly.

‘Thanks,’ said Halima, suddenly nervous. What next? ‘Do I get down?’

‘Unless you want to stay up there all day,’ he answered curtly.

After swinging her leg over, Halima slid down James Carbon’s left flank in a brisk abseil. For the first time she noticed the dogs had not been wagging their tails. This worried her.

The tall doors opened as Halima climbed the short flight of stone steps. Her approach triggered off a puff of flowery scent, which helped to calm her for a few seconds. Inside it was cool. The lobby was made of glass. It was the cleanest building Halima had ever entered. She walked towards the desk, behind which a beige woman wearing a headscarf looked up from her screen. She said: ‘Hello and good morning.’

Halima tried to copy the older woman’s smile, and to embark on an adult construction – an adult sentence. ‘I’m told I’ve been expected,’ she said. ‘James Carbon brought me here.’

If she had expected any recognition of the name, the receptionist’s response disappointed her – it squashed that instinct as flat as a pillowcase. ‘Twelve floor. Room 96B. You’ll have to sign in.’ Then she repeated the direction as if Halima had failed to comprehend.

‘Who am I here to see?’ Halima asked.

‘Mort Fega,’ said the receptionist. ‘Thank you.’

Halima still wished to challenge the dream that had waved the starting flag for this entire adventure. ‘And what does he look like?’ she asked.

‘Miss?’

‘What does Mr Fega look like? Please.’

The receptionist took a second to adjust her headscarf. ‘He is a gorilla, madam. So he looks like a gorilla. I’m not sure I understand your question.’

Halima walked towards the elevators. She felt she had aged a year for every day she’d spent on her travels, and then a year for every second she’d spent inside the building. A rock song from the west was playing inside the car. Over the guitars, the elevator’s voice asked her where she wanted to go. She arrived five seconds later. She stepped out.

Children’s voices reached her ears: not words exactly, but shrieks and laughs. It was playtime in the crèche.

Halima knocked on the door. The glass was warm from the temperature inside the room. A fly approached the glass from the opposite direction, as if to see who had come calling, or to escape the monstrous heat. But Halima didn’t pay it any mind. Her attention had been totally claimed by the primate in the green leather chair. It waved her in.

Mort Fega waved her in. The temperature caused Halima to disappear into a momentary shock, far worse than a dousing of ice-cold water would have been. She snapped out of it as Mort said ‘Good morning.’ She thought about asking if they could leave the door open.

As if he had read her mind, Mort added, ‘You get used to it. Take a seat.’

Halima’s fear returned with all the urgency of a repressed memory. It was like something blooming inside her chest.

‘Five years ago,’ said Mort Fega, ‘we didn’t even know it could be girls. We thought it had to be boys.’

‘What couldn’t?’ Halima asked.

And he told her.

10.

Mia had stopped loving English buses. The five-year honeymoon had finished. As a worker she had
always enjoyed their boredom – their predictability, their usefulness, their sense of communion as she learned to recognise the faces of her fellow passengers – but this was no longer the case. Now she hated English buses. They had cheated on her; Mia now associated buses with bad times. Panic attacks, weighty news. Their cumbersome burden through the estates.

She was on her way to Netherfield. Fuck it, she thought, a wormish wriggling appearing in her womb, I’m not getting off. I’ll ride till the end of the line and get shouted at by some scab of a driver for not disembarking. Coffee Hall, Beanhill, Leadenhall was it? Or the other way around? Although she had made the journey from home to work and work to home on countless occasions, Mia remained unsure of the geography of her adoptive city. It was one of the things she most liked about herself.

Matters couldn’t be postponed. Mia stepped off at the hospital and sold her soul to the devil for a safe passage across the V-Road. As fast as she could she walked to the shopping precinct. Spittle was in the air.

There was no ambulance. There were no spectators. The air was as grey as glass at gloaming. The properties were steadfast and defiant. What did you expect? they seemed to say. Bass from a rap record thudded – from the chicken express joint at the toe-end of the parade. The clouds were muscular.

What’s going on? thought Mia, feeling hot. She looked around.

A man dressed for the rain finished his phone call at the line of booths and approached her. He had a scarecrow’s face. ‘You must be Mia.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you remember the Tower of Crumbs?’

The words were an efficient vehicle – every bit as efficient as the buses on which she depended. The words took her back to New Trozenxus. Back to her recruitment...

A world of blood. Mia remembered the feel of the spear she’d pushed through the breastplate of the wailing mechanic. The knife she’d used to remove a baby’s fingers; she could hear the girl’s parents as they whistled their pain and outrage.

‘You’ve led us quite a dance, Mia,’ said the man, reaching into his glistening raincoat. ‘Cigarette?’

‘Who are you?’ Mia asked.

‘Sergeant Haines, if you like.’ He pinched a smoke free of its box. ‘Or maybe you’d prefer James Carbon.’ He sparked up. ‘You’re coming back, Mia.’

‘I’m not. Where’s Zoe?’

‘No idea. I wanted to get you away from the house.’

Mia felt a bright flare of hope. ‘So the bit about the road accident...’

‘Fabrication.’ Carbon exhaled. ‘I owe you an apology for that: thought it best to catch you weak. Now I see I needn’t have bothered.’

Sensing no immediate threat, Mia even risked a smile. ‘Your English is very good,’ she said.

‘Thank you. Just an implant. Are you hungry?’

‘No,’ Mia lied. Absurdly, briefly, she felt superior to Carbon: she had learned from books, and from experience. Like a drought-ravaged flower the sensation withered and died. There had only been one reason to eschew a language implant: she couldn’t afford one. Books and headphones had been her only option. She was sick of only having one choice.

‘There’s a chicken place down the parade. We could have some wings.’

There was also the shoe shop: Kirsty Heels. From this angle Mia could only just see the door, thin as a side of card. Nevertheless, Emmy’s face entered her consciousness. ‘No,’ said Mia. ‘Do you like Indian food?’

‘I’m a dog, Mia. I like all food.’

‘Okay then. You drive.’

James Carbon smirked. ‘How far?’
‘Ten minutes. Westcroft.’ Such was Mia’s relief at learning the news of Zoe’s death had been a hoax that she had yet to feel angry about the lie – or even nervous. Determination was one thing (she wasn’t going back) but that had been there all along. Only while eating did Mia understand that she’d experienced less emotion on meeting James Carbon again than she would have done on a blind date.

They ordered pappadums. ‘So how you been, Mia?’ asked Carbon as he spooned sweet chilli onto a broken-off piece the shape of a door key.

Mia realised she hated the way he used her name in nearly every question. Had always hated it, in fact. ‘Fine.’

Carbon swallowed his mouthful. His eyes were as bright as newly minted coins. ‘You’re not going monosyllabic on me, are you, Mia? Relax! Nice meal...’

‘I’ve been fine. So I said fine.’

‘Fine.’ Carbon rammed a huge piece of pappadum into his mouth and crunched earnestly, his brow furrowed, for a few seconds. ‘Well,’ he said, his breath spicy, ‘if you’ll forgive me, Mia, you don’t look fine. You look tired.’

‘Surprise surprise.’ Mia applied chutney, unable to resist the food any longer. Something yawned inside her belly: it was gratitude.

‘You’ve done well,’ Carbon told her. He could even munch appreciatively, Mia decided at this moment. ‘You were a devil to find. No pun intended.’

‘None received.’

Carbon frowned. ‘What was it I ordered again?’

‘Lamb tandoori,’ said Mia.

‘Ah yeah... You were saying.’

‘Nothing.’

‘No, I was saying: you were a slippery fish, Mia.’ He pointed an arrow of starters at her. ‘I’m not the first to try looking.’

‘What happened to the others?’ Carbon shrugged. ‘Missing in action.’ Like a prizewinner he grinned. ‘Hey, what do you think they’d do if I took a piss in their fish tank?’

‘Serve it up in a sauce. You can’t find him?’

‘Her. And no, Halima, you’re not the only one to work out your masking techniques. But you’ve had the most stamina, I’ll give you that.’

Mia pouted. ‘Who’s Halima?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You just called me Halima. Who is she? My pursuer?’

‘Yes,’ said James Carbon. ‘Slip of the tongue, I apologise.’ It appeared as though he was about to say more, when the main courses arrived, sizzling. The volume in the restaurant dipped: the other diners treated the moment of delivery as reverently as those who were about to consume the food.

After the volume had risen again, James Carbon said: ‘Mia. A question.’

‘Okay. Why don’t you leave me alone?’ Deliberately misunderstanding his request. ‘I’ve got someone who loves me here.’

‘You amuse me. So what was all that in the shoe shop yesterday?’

The knowledge terrified Mia. ‘How would you know about that?’ she demanded. ‘How, James?’

‘Seriously: do you think I arrived yesterday? I’ve been watching you for quite a while, Mia. You’ve got a nice home, by the way.’

‘...Where’s Zoe?’

‘Where did you leave her? At work I’d imagine. How’s your food?’

‘Fuck the food...’

‘An interesting idea.’

‘Where is she?’

‘How would I know?’ For the first time since
their reunion James Carbon seemed annoyed. Mia glimpsed, through the parcel of new human features he’d adopted, a muzzle and a long pink tongue; sharper teeth. ‘Who you choose to share your bed with, Mia, is none of my business, okay? Rely on that. I don’t care.’ With which he ducked his head to the lamb. Although he continued to use his knife and fork, there was now less caution and fewer manners employed.

Mia remembered how to hate him. She remembered the night the drugged-up soldiers had driven into her home; she remembered the darkness, after they’d blown away half of her left foot. That darkness had lasted for days. When she’d felt the prick of the needle in her arm, she’d opened her eyes...

‘My pursuer: Halima. Was that her real name?’

‘No. This is good. Try your food, Mia. We changed her mind. We had to. I lost a lot of face when you escaped – no pun intended. I passed her off as you.’

‘Why?’

James Carbon looked up. ‘Why? Because you escaped. No one had managed before. And I wanted to see how far you would get. I followed you.’

Mia swallowed several mouthfuls of her jalfreezi. Although the taste was good, and she was hungry, she did not enjoy what she was eating.

‘You know what I’ve done, James,’ she said.

‘I do indeed.’

‘And yet you’re not scared of me. Why not?’

James Carbon shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s obvious, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘Because you’re going to have to sleep sometime. Sleep properly, that is. And when you do, I’m close enough to get you. You’re going home, like it or not.’

11.

**A square of light** was getting bigger – getting longer. This was how Zoe was measuring time. It seemed like a civilised thing to do: measuring time. And there was nothing else to do anyway. In spite of the fact that her brain and senses seemed close to an area known as frantic, her body was not up to the transition. Her limbs remained deadened. There was nowhere for her limbs to go.

The light was entering through a spotted window. Beyond the glass grew a few green weeds. I’m underground, thought Zoe with a confident nod. I’m in a basement... She traced the path of light from the glass to the floor and back again; in this path swam a thousand motes of dust. She tried to move.

Upright on a chair, Zoe had been tied into place, using a rope or a cable that pinched at her wrists. Her ankles were shackled to the chair-legs. Outside the lengthening rectangle of light on the floor, there was nothing to see: the basement had been left unilluminated. Did the varying shape of the rectangle mean the sun was sinking or rising? How long have I been here?

Full consciousness was returning. One by one little spots of darkness lit up, and the effect had nothing to do with her eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom. She could smell the rag that had been forced onto her face; a trace of the scent had been placed on her upper lip. A jumbled set of memories slowly shuffled itself into the correct order...

Mia.

Emmy, thought Zoe. I’m in Emmy’s basement. She didn’t shout. Her throat made a click and a whine, as it sometimes would if she had smoked too many of Mia’s cigarette, but Zoe did not shout. Apart from anything else, she wanted more time to think... When she next opened her eyes, Emmy was in the room with her. Emmy had turned on the light. The rectangle had been dissolved in this artificial illumination, and Emmy said: ‘Sleepybones.’

‘I’m awake.’ But Zoe’s voice was groggy and there was a time-lapse: a beat between Emmy’s utterance and a full computation of the delivery. ‘What do you want?’ she asked quietly. She looked around the basement.

‘You were saying some interesting things in your sleep.’

‘Was I now?’

A bench. Tools. Drums of engine oil. An old racing
bicycle, one flat tyre. ‘Like what?’ Zoe asked. A washing machine. Red plastic tub full of black socks and underwear: boxer shorts and knickers... A man and a woman lived here, Zoe reasoned. Where was Emmy’s partner? Was he in on this too?

‘Like stuff about New Trozenxus,’ said Emmy. ‘About Mia.’

There was no point denying what was plain to be inferred. ‘You’re here to take Mia back, aren’t you?’

‘No. I just want to understand.’

Understand what? thought Zoe sorrowfully. She made sure she could feel all ten fingers and toes wriggle. Then she moved her head about until her neck cracked with a satisfactory volume. She was just about to speak. Indignation made her stop in her tracks. Was she wrong or did she have a bargaining point here? ‘I’ll tell you anything if you untie me.’

Emmy smiled. ‘Or what about this?’ she counteroffered. ‘I’ll agree to feed and water you if you give me what I want. How’s that?’

‘I don’t know what you want!’ Zoe protested. The dry air in the basement tasted of dust. ‘How about: Please? Please untie me. Okay? If you’re involved in Mia’s life, then I’ll cooperate. For her sake...’

But something was wrong: the logic was wrong. In Mia’s account, she had been looking for shoes; the shop she had chosen had been entirely a random decision. How could Emmy be part of the tapestry?

Zoe couldn’t answer that. Nor was she certain an alternative was more comforting. If Emmy wasn’t interested in Mia, what did that make her?

Emmy moved back towards the stairs. Zoe followed her with her eyes. The same bottle they’d drunk from earlier was on the fifth wooden step. Emmy picked it up and carried it over to Zoe’s chair.

‘Why not?’ Zoe said.

‘Hold your head still.’ Carefully Emmy decanted some of the vodka into Zoe’s mouth. And again. Again. ‘Enough?’ she wanted to know.

‘Maybe you could just leave the bottle and a straw.’
wasn’t there – but I know it happened.’

‘What did?’

‘Come on. You’re not meeting me halfway,’ said Emmy. ‘Have a drink and tell me what about New Trozenxus.’

Zoe had a drink and told Emmy what about New Trozenxus. This was what she said: ‘There was a counter-intelligence force in Somalia. Still is. They called themselves soldiers but they were nothing to do with the government.’

‘Counter to what?’ asked Emmy.

Zoe shrugged. ‘The government. The peace-keeping forces. You name it. Their only aim, as far as I know, was anarchy. And they had a novel way of perpetrating this. Have you ever heard of somnambular energy?’

‘No.’

Zoe recalled the explorative lectures she’d heard from Mia, and wondered how best to précis the facts. To this day she wasn’t certain she had it all straight herself.

‘Someone worked out how to harness what you burn in your dreams,’ Zoe said. ‘His name was Mort Fega. So what does anyone do when he finds a new form of power? – forms a cult; establishes a fresh way of abusing people.’

Emmy was frowning. ‘But what did he do?’

Zoe drank deeply; there was not much vodka remaining in the bottle and she wanted to ensure she completed the task before Emmy asked for another taste. ‘He found a middle ground: between sleeping and being awake.’

‘Like being hypnotised?’

‘Much bigger.’

12. ‘Imagine this.’

Halima had become distracted by the same fly that had tried to batter its way out through the glass door a half-hour earlier. It was now attempting to read, Braille-like, the words on a wall-mounted medical certificate.

‘Girl?’ said Fega loudly. The certificate rattled against the wall.

‘I’m listening,’ said Halima, scared. Roasting, as well. Despite what Fega had promised, the heat in the office had not become any more tolerable.

‘Imagine this: the human existence – a life, Halima – with the shape of evolution corresponding with it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Not yet, perhaps; you will. You’re a smart girl. You’ve studied your sciences, haven’t you, Halima?’

‘Yes!’ Halima’s tone was proud.

‘You know we started with a one-celled organism. And then the amoeba… and then the hydra… Evolution, my dear. The fish, the amphibian, the reptile, and so on. The mammal. You know all this.’

Uncertainly Halima said, ‘Yes…’

‘Well, we all take after one creature or another. Look at Chinese astrology. Or rather, don’t.’ Mort Fega grinned: on his gorilla face the effect was monstrous. ‘Even you, little Halima.’

‘Even me…’

‘Don’t let it bother you; it’s nothing you can control. And it’s nothing you’ll want to, anyway. It’s in your blood.’

‘What is?’ said Halima, exasperatedly.

‘The animal instinct, darling. And I can help you with anything you want help with.’ Again, the gorilla smiled.

‘I want to find my brother. My brother Osman.’

Mort Fega nodded. ‘We can help with that. For a price.’

‘I haven’t got any money.’

‘We don’t want any. See, we thought we could only
use boys, until we encountered Mia. It was quite a revelation. Our early experiments showed only boys responded to the training. Until Mia…'

Halima was lost. The fly had settled down on Fega’s polo trophy; Halima was waiting for the gold to melt, as it had in her dream. ‘Who is Mia?’

Mort Fega answered, ‘An assassin for the Cause.’

Feeling quite adult about it, Halima made a protest. ‘I’m just a child! I don’t want to know about an assassin.’ But her thoughts returned to the village; the pictures were jerky, amalgamated, distorted, but she saw, heard and smelt the past. The dead winking at her as miniscule muscles spasmed; bodies slow to catch fire, smouldering stinking on makeshift pyres. It was too late to be an innocent; it was too late to go back to her parents. She sat still.

‘Mia ran away from us, Halima, when she was your age. One month she was with us, with the Cause, and the next she had fled. The embarrassing thing about it is, we didn’t even know she’d gone – not at first. She was sneaky; didn’t go as herself. She borrowed someone else’s energy. We couldn’t track her.’

‘I’m hot,’ said Halima. ‘Please could you open the window?’

‘No, sorry; it’s too risky. The glass is bulletproof. Snipers, you see.’

We are still in my dreams, thought Halima, now using the back of her hand to rid her brow of a caul of perspiration. Her clothes felt heavy with damp. Her outlook brightened. Any moment now she would wake…

‘Halima? It was your energies Mia stole,’ said Mort Fega.

Was it worth it for Halima to repudiate the notion? To say she knew no one by the name of Mia? She was breathing noisily – and hard. Of a sudden, in her mind was the face of her brother – Osman was beaming from ear to ear. Mouthing something, his lips at first pursed, then opened a crack, then opened fully as the chin ducked down. He was mouthing Mia. Mia… What are you trying to tell me, Osman? thought Halima. She had closed her eyes for the message. The picture showed her Osman the young man, stroking Osman the horse. But there was something wrong with the film: man and beast kept blurring together, their solidities overlapping, as Brother Osman repeated Mia... until the message reached some sort of conclusion. At this point it began to roll backwards. What Osman mouthed now (the horse meanwhile was inhaling its own snorts) was the sound of the word ‘Mia’ in reverse: ah-yeem. It sounded like the result of one who’d sampled too much fermented rice. Ah-yeem. Dream talk: gibberish. Ah-yeem, ah-yeem... A few seconds passed before Halima heard Osman get one out that was clearer to her ear. The ah-yeem morphed into I am.. I am...

You are what, Osman? Halima was desperate to know.

Eyeballing his audience of one, Mort Fega was still talking. ‘She did it with the help of your brother, Halima. Osman helped her make her escape.’

Mention of the name made Halima sit up straighter. ‘He’s with you?’ she demanded, scarcely willing to believe her quest had borne fruit after all.

‘Always was. Hiding in the one place we didn’t think to look,’ said Fega. ‘Right under our noses. He’d learned to alter his scent.’

Halima was angry. ‘You came to our home for him. I lost my toes.’

‘Yes, Halima.’ Mort Fega glanced away – he looked at his medical certificate. ‘And I’m sorry about that. Truly I am.’

‘Sorry?’ She was panting now. ‘You’re sorry? They were barbarians!’

Fega slammed a fist on to the desk. ‘This is war, young lady. And those who serve in a war are never barbarians. Do not insult me. They are soldiers!’

Halima’s voice was quiet. It hurt her in the gut to say it. ‘They are pigs.’

‘Young lady,’ said Fega, ‘please do not assume you are immune to anything. What you have in here...’ He touched his left temple with a forefinger as black, bent and large as a rotten banana. ‘...is priceless. But that doesn’t make you exempt from
anything. Any more than it did your brother.’

‘I want to see him.’ For the moment Halima ignored the implication in what Fega had just said. Then it struck her. Had they tortured her brother?

‘Impossible for now. But soon, I promise. First you have a job to do.’

Halima shook her head. ‘I’m too young to have a job.’

‘What do you call searching for Osman, if not a job?’

She had nothing to use against that; but Fega appeared eager to have her respond. Voice-free seconds stretched and twisted; Halima had no idea how much time passed. Every second was an hour, but perhaps she had been in the office for over a day already. She wondered what had happened to James Carbon and Frank Mice. Their duties executed, where might they have gone? Were they, in fact, anything more than creations of her own devising? As realistic as the journey here had been, perhaps she had made it all up. Perhaps she remained in bed, safe and warm, thinking about waking up.

Halima considered the construction of her next sentence; it emerged as a well-built conditional sentence. She said: ‘If it means I can make Osman safe, I will do your job for you.’

‘Why do you assume he’s not safe, Halima?’

‘Because he’s fighting for you. You said so yourself.’

‘You sound like you disapprove,’ said Fega, seemingly amused.

‘Do I have to repeat why? I lost half my foot…’

‘We thought you were hiding him. We’re going round in circles.’

He had a point. The past was a lake of dirty water; it would serve her no purpose anymore. Better by far was to follow the river, as she had the way here. Soldiers had done what soldiers do. Osman, she gathered, was alive and well.

‘What’s the job?’ Halima asked, once more wiping her face clean of sweat. She thought of numbers; taking little more than two seconds, she recited the magic number of pi to twenty-five decimal spaces. Homework, back in the village, had been a chore but she had thrown herself into the job. No difference.

‘To find Mia,’ Fega told her.

‘I’m a child,’ Halima complained. ‘What can I do?’

Fega raised himself to full height. Presenting his young visitor with an unimprovable view of his rump, he turned to the window; his eyes and whole head slowly followed the paths of pedestrians and vehicles alike.

‘Who knows her better, young lady?’ he said softly.

‘I don’t know her at all… I’ve got to stand up, Mr Fega. I’m melting.’

Fega turned her way. He lifted his hands, palms up, a few inches – as though giving Mia permission to do what she was doing anyway. ‘The thing is, Halima, we have sensors; we know when people are ready. We know when they’ve moved along their animal-line as far as they can go. We know. It’s there for anyone to see, but no one dares to look. But we know. If that person has got inside him – and now her – the right instinct, the right… pulse, we know when the dreamlife is ready… Halima. Ask yourself this. Could you kill someone?’

‘No! You want me to kill her when I’ve found her?’


Halima felt like crying. So near and so far, she thought as she clenched her small fists together. ‘I’m here to find my brother!’ she almost squealed.

Once more Fega was annoyed. ‘Mia stole your thoughts, young lady! You will know her when you find her. Even with the years between your ages, you know her better than anyone else does. Her given name, before she took on Mia, was Halima, after all. You are her younger version. And you can be a better version when you get to her age. No mistakes. Simply part of the Cause.’
I can’t do anything he wants, thought Halima. Can I fool him into believing I can? No: fool him into believing that I believe I can.

‘Why else would I desire a little girl? Think about it.’

Halima smiled falsely; she didn’t feel it – she didn’t feel in the slightest in a cheery old mood. But she did, as Fega commanded, think about it. The series of crackling insights resulting ushered nothing forth but more questions. Such as: ‘Why are James Carbon and Frank Mice dogs?’

‘Because that’s as far as their evolutionary line has taken them.’

Halima frowned. ‘So they’re human or not?’ she wanted to know.

‘As you or I. That’s a joke.’ Mort Fega sat down again and adjusted himself in the green leather chair. ‘Halima, listen. The animal status means next to nothing, other than the fact that some animals are better at fighting than others. What matters, really, is you can open your eyes to the world between waking and dreaming; it’s a whole new parallel, and one in which we get to know our compatriots’ true identities. Accessing the state is the important bit.’

‘Accessing the state,’ Halima repeated. She chewed the words around her mouth, like a toffee; they tasted good, she was surprised to note.

‘That’s right.’

Halima wanted her family, her maths class, her horse. Above all, she wanted her brother. ‘So tell me exactly what do you want me to do.’

‘To listen.’ Mort Fega picked something from his teeth, examined it, and then pressed it to his tongue. ‘I want you...’

Halima interrupted him. ‘Can I take a photograph of you?’

The gorilla looked puzzled. ‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘To prove to myself we were here.’

Fega laughed. ‘And by “myself” I take it you mean just about anyone! But fire away! It’ll just show a man to anyone else. To most people anyway. Not everyone has the gift.’

Halima was old enough to understand false flattery; when Miss Esma, her Mathematics tutor, red-penned a smiling face onto her work, despite the fact that she had got half of her imaginary numbers and simultaneous equations wrong, Halima was always disappointed. She would have preferred a pencilled frown and an unambiguous: SHIT. True, she knew Miss Esma was attempting to rally the troops (a bad comparison, thought Halima) and to encourage the girls on the back of sound achievement. Even so...

But Halima could taste sincerity when it was portioned onto a plate in front of her. It made something crawl and shrink for cover behind her breastbone. It made her strong. ‘What gift?’

Again the gorilla stood up; this time he had clicking knees, a pronounced hunch, and he now flicked himself behind his left ear... Halima found Fega more threatening when he was standing. More so as Fega loped around the desk. ‘The gift,’ he said – ‘The gift of violence.’

Halima was as surprised by the statement as she was by the anal stench being hissed through Fega’s teeth as he leaned closer. She jumped as he made a sudden move. Fega lashed out with his left arm. His fist closed quickly and tightly. As part of the same manoeuvre, Fega shoved the fist into his own mouth. Halima heard a muffled complaint. Fega had caught and eaten the fly.

He winced. ‘I hate the taste of insects in his country,’ he said.

Halima felt closer than ever to tears. ‘I’m not violent,’ she whispered.

‘You have work to do.’ Fega leaned closer. ‘We’ve examined your dreams, and you’re powerful, Halima. You’re a tiger. You’re an asset to us. All we ask is you try to swell our numbers. Somehow, he have to suppress the oppression that’s going to smother this country. We’re for the good, Halima.’

A few seconds were left. Halima spent them exploring her memory: especially the soldiers that
her village-folk had murdered and diced into pieces in the fields. If Fega was right, was her family wrong?

‘I need somewhere cool to lie down,’ was the first of her requests.

13. **Halima, I need** to talk to you, Mia said.

She was standing on the toilet seat, one knee against the top lip of the cistern; she was opening as wide as it would go the tiny window.

The Halima she wanted to reach was not her pursuer – lost in action, if Carbon had been preaching gospel – because of that young lady Mia knew nothing. No; the person she wanted to reach was her own younger self. Halima had become Mia, but who had Halima been? Names meant nothing. Who had Mia herself been? The younger Mia would have known how to get out of this.

I won’t fit through that, she thought, referring to the window. The yawn of the window from its sturdy frame wasn’t wide enough, irrespective of her slim, petite size. Answering this negative thought automatically, Mia went on, inside her head: You won’t know until you try, will you?

So she tried. While Carbon was waiting in the restaurant, Mia hiked herself up onto the cistern – *Don’t break!* – and squeezed her head through the gap. Impossible, surely! She had seconds. She had left him bombastically clicking his fingers for the bill. Let’s hope the staff take umbrage, Mia had said to herself as she’d excused herself to visit the lavatory. Maybe he’d get beaten up – the living daylights kicked out of him – and this bedroom farce could be over. With a disgruntled sigh, Mia climbed back down. Her shoulders, too wide.

Frustration made her kick the door jamb of the toilet stall. A tall woman applying a refresher layer of make-up looked her way. ‘Lousy date?’ she asked.

Well...’ She slipped her compact into her handbag. ‘If he does everything else the same way he eats I’d say stay away.’

‘The way he eats?’

The woman nodded her head. ‘Half the restaurant was watching him, darling, and probably feeling sorry for you as I was. You looked trapped.’

‘I am.’ Always tell the truth to strangers, thought Mia. ‘I was looking for a way out so I wouldn’t have to see him again.’ She laughed. ‘I sized up the window in there but I’m too big.’

Mia’s interlocutor picked up her bag from beside the basin. She took a step towards Mia, saying ‘My poor girl, that bad?’

‘Worse.’

‘Your first date? Somewhere safe for lunch? Somewhere bright?’

‘Um...’ The truth would tax the credulity of any stranger; because of this, Mia decided to dilute the measure somewhat. ‘I’ve known him quite a while.’ That was vague enough, and not incriminating. ‘But what worries me is I know he’s going to try to kiss me, and I think he’s got breath-herpes.’

‘Ugh. Maximum gross-out. I were you? I’d go out the back way.’

‘I was thinking of that,’ Mia continued, returning to the full truth.

‘Through the kitchen, darling.’ A wicked, conspiratorial grin appeared on her Samaritan features. ‘I’ll try to keep him talking, how’s that? At least until he tries to kiss me. That should give you a few minutes at least. Did you both drive yourselves here?’ Mia shook her head. ‘He drove, didn’t he?’

‘I can’t drive,’ Mia admitted. ‘I catch a bus everywhere.’

‘Then you’re rather in the stew, my darling,’ the woman added, distracted and deep in thought. ‘You won’t get a cab around here unless you call for one.’

‘I’ve got a phone!’ Mia’s voice sounded elated.

The Good Samaritan shrugged. ‘They’d have to come out from the centre or the sticks,’ she said. ‘Could be ten, fifteen minutes. I were you?’
'Yes?' Mia raised her eyebrows; hope sprang eternal?

‘You’re young and you look fit. Run till your boobs ache, darling! Run into the housing estate behind this place.’ She smacked her lips. ‘At least if you get lost you can admire how the other half live. These piles cost an absolute bomb!’

For all the attention Mia got as she slipped through the restaurant’s kitchen, it might have been the case it was employed regularly for emergency egress. Carving knife in hand, before a detonation of pink chicken pieces on a large wooden board, one assistant chef even went as far as to nod in the direction of the door. Mia bid him thanks. The area outside was no advertisement for high stakes of culinary hygiene – a hundred cardboard boxes had been crushed nearly flat and abandoned in a precarious pile, an odds-on near-future demolition if a strong wind had anything to do with it; and a few flies grumbled around oil leaking slowly from a dented, rusty drum – but Mia was in no mind to be concerned about the slivers of unrecognisable meat and portions of congealed rice that had been torn from a high dune of reeking black plastic bags. She made her way through weeds and unmown grass. Lifted the gate’s latch, and stepped out on to Woughton-on-the-Green.

Halima, I need to talk to you, she thought to herself again.

The Good Samaritan’s advice seemed sound, so Mia made a run across the part of the restaurant’s car park that she presumed was only used during festival seasons or very large bookings, for the automotive overspill. Beyond the fringe of concrete was a wide stretch of grass and a few freshly-planted saplings. Not that Mia had banked much on there being a good deal of foliage to cover her running away. While she knew she had a matter of minutes remaining before Carbon grew suspicious, she was at least at the back of the restaurant – perhaps where her tormentor would think last to look.

Still running, her breath hot and stinging, Mia saw the fence looming but moved towards it anyway, as if expecting it to dissolve like a mirage. It did not. This far from the building, from where the outside tables were bolted down for diners on warmer days, from where the same diners’ children could play on a set of swings, a slide or a see-saw, the fence had the ugly, unpainted appearance that brayed NO ADMISSION. And it was taller then Mia’s head. Maybe... She jumped up and gripped the rough wood running along the top; her feet dangled six inches from the grass. Mia tried to pull her own dead weight up the sheer surface of the grey-brown plate, kicking her toes at it for purchase. The effort was futile; a forlorn exasperation made Mia feel dizzy and enervated. It was time – for pity’s sake wasn’t it time, already? – to give up. Carbon won.

Self-pity and self-disgust were brewing in equal portions. As a result of this recipe, Mia kicked out at the fence with her damaged foot. To her utter astonishment, two profound reactions were experienced.

The first was like a shard of glass. Shaped sharp and forged hard, the arrow stabbed into her plump round ball of memories – some of them the truth and some stolen from a different female’s identity – as the pain registered up her foot, to her shin, and into her thigh. A flash, nothing more, this piece of glass; but the memory it carried on its gleam was this: a vision of herself, lying supine on a dirty bed, back in the old country. She is feverish. She is high on medication, adrenaline and uppers; she is holding in her two-gripped palm the very pistol with which she has ended more lives for the sake of the Cause than she has had bedroom partners. She is aiming the barrel at her left foot...

Although it was no time for reverie, the picture struck Mia powerfully. I did it to myself, she thought for the first time in years; to copy the Halima girl...

The second result of the kick was the instantaneous appearance of a roadmap of cracks in the wood. The fence was not as strong as it looked.

Using the other foot this time, and now not in agreement with frustration (her mind was focused on the project), Mia kicked the fence again. There was noise. Not enough, she hoped, to draw attention, but enough; she kicked and kicked. From the other side of the restaurant’s building came a loud, bellowed ‘MIA!’ – at which point Mia knew that James Carbon had seen through the smokescreen and had ventured outside to see if she’d stolen his car somehow.

The fifth of Mia’s kicks broke a hole in the fence.
It was nothing more than a small hole – an image of a handful of sand crossed Mia’s mind along with the knowledge that she needed to dig a well – but it was a beginning. Her assault on the wood became more frantic. At one point, after a particularly savage strike, her foot went right through to the other side, up to the calf. Pulling it back scratched grooves in her skin; she started bleeding. Only seconds had elapsed but Mia knew she was running out of time when she heard her name for a second and third time. Carbon was bound to be lured by the sounds.

With the gap as large and no larger than the toilet stall window had been, useless in other words, Mia readdressed her options and removed the mobile phone from her skirt pocket. Expertly she thumbed for TONES – her menu of choices for possible tunes to hear when someone called – and she settled indiscriminately on the first one, labelled ‘Foxtrot’. It started to bleep its melody, with the volume setting as ever on its top rung. Mia placed the phone through the hole in the fence, on to the grass on the other side. Then without further thought she ran back in the direction of the restaurant’s back entrance. Either the noise of her footfalls, her exhalations, or the simple distance she was putting between herself and her phone was killing the volume of the ringtone. Mia begged silently for a gust of wind to carry the noise Carbon’s way...

Back inside the restaurant’s rear courtyard, Mia searched for a place to hide. Somewhere in among the black bags of rubbish, was an option – albeit a putridly smelling option. But she didn’t want to go inside the building. If Carbon went in there he was liable to do things to people in order to get what he wanted: information. As Mia selected one of the less full bags of refuse, she had time to hope that the Good Samaritan had emerged unscathed; it wounded her slightly to think that she hadn’t considered the woman’s risk one iota. No time! Mia climbed into the oil drum as quietly as she could, hearing first the faintest whisper of an electronic foxtrot, and then the thud of heavy footsteps beyond the closed-in courtyard. Squashing herself down into the few inches of acrid cooking oil at the bottom of the drum, Mia placed the rubbish bag on her head. It would look, she assumed with a prayer, like a drum stuffed with crap.

She waited, heartbeat heavy. Long seconds dragged and Mia listened for signs of life beyond the courtyard. All she could hear were sounds from the kitchen – pans jousting, the scrape of metal objects, the deep-throated rinsing noise of an industrial dishwasher – until it came to her ears: one of any number of possible alternatives that would have satisfied her as beautifully.

Carbon had found the phone that he would presume Mia had dropped while she’d crawled through the gap in the fence. He screamed: ‘BITCH!’

14. ‘That’s some pretty decent muscles,’ the man said, ‘that story, like.’

‘Oh good,’ replied Zoe, the sarcasm sluiced dead by the slurring of her voice; ‘I do like my stories to have a bit of muscle!’

A beat. Then the man laughed. ‘You’re all right, Zoe.’

‘Excellent. So perhaps you can let me go.’

‘Not yet. Crew ain’t seen you yet and ting.’

Zoe had taken it as a sign that she was being at least partly trusted when her environment of incarceration had shifted up the house, from the basement to a small back room that held a bank of turntables, two-foot-high speakers, trailing wires, and box upon box of vinyl twelve-inch records. She was in the home of a DJ, a ‘spitter’; she was handcuffed to the feedpipe of a painted green radiator, the warmth against her skin being welcome as the alcohol in her system went about its duty of thinning her blood.

‘Who’s Crew?’

The man who’d arrived thirty minutes earlier stared down at where she sat slumped on the floor, her arms pulled to her right. On his face was an expression of the purest incredulity. ‘Who’s Crew?’ his voice climbed. ‘Crew’s not a person, Zo; Crew’s Crew.’

‘Okay. What is Crew then?’

His face went soppy with pride. ‘My boys,’ the man said. ‘My massive. My selective. Crew is family and ting.’

The old resilience in Zoe was at the surface. ‘And
does Crew know that Crew’s going to be facing five years in prison for hostage taking and ting?’

‘Crew don’t care. You’re fighting a cause. You look for enemies if needs.’

‘I see.’ Where have I heard something like that before? Zoe wondered to herself. Still brave from the booze, she added: ‘And what time does Crew intend to arrive? Is Crew punctual?’

He couldn’t be as old as twenty, reasoned Zoe. Wasn’t it a given that she could out-talk the young man and make him see the error of his ways?

‘Crew’ll be here when the moment’s brewing.’

‘Jesus. Do you parents know you’ve learned this new language?’

‘Do yours?’

What was that supposed to mean? ‘I haven’t got any parents,’ Zoe said.

‘Well then, neither have I.’

‘I think I preferred arguing with Emmy.’

‘Emmy’s passed her test,’ the young man replied. ‘She’s resting.’

‘What test?’

The young man took up position behind his turntables. ‘The clue is,’ he instructed Zoe as though she hadn’t spoken, ‘to leave ‘em on all the time. When you’re out. They collect the energy in the silence. This’ll sound fresh as a daisy.’

Zoe very nearly didn’t want to know, but she asked anyway. ‘What will?’

The answer to your question. In spit-form.’

‘Christ…’

A button was depressed, a knob was gently twisted: a bass drum, snare drum, two bass, snare drum – BOM-dee-BOMBOM-dee – blasted from the speakers and the young man, who now in the form of rhyme finally revealed his own name, picked up the microphone dangling by its cord over the U-shaped stalk of a wall-mounted upturned lamp. He spat.

‘My name is Rick V and I’m talking to you…’

No, you’re not, you’re shouting at me. Pump down the volume, thought Zoe, fidgeting without much hope against the handcuffs. They were made of pink plastic, these handcuffs; they had a soft pink fur around the shackles. Bedroom bondage; most likely breakable, given enough time.

The pretentious tosh of the rap eventually subsided. Clearly pleased with his performance, Rick V was grinning like a window-licker.

‘That’s called “The Initiation”,’ he announced.

‘Other spitters beware,’ Zoe nodded, thinking quickly. ‘Rick V, could you do me a favour if I’m going to be kept here. Could you turn up the heating? I’m freezing on the floor here.’

‘Oh, okay. You really liked it?’

‘I loved it,’ she told him though she’d scarcely been able to discern a word. One chimed. It chimed again. Initiation. ‘You’re trying to join the Crew.’

‘Not the Crew. Just Crew. I’m trying to join Crew.’

Zoe fidgeted again. ‘And I’m your ticket in, aren’t I? You have to do something to earn your place. Am I right?’

Rick V performed an unnecessary dance on the spot. ‘Gotta prove your place and ting,’ he answered. ‘It’s not a sports club, Zo.’

‘Suppose not. Yes. Ten years for hostage taking and Section 18 will make them take notice. Congratulations. I’m sure you’re in. Apart from one ting.’

Rick V’s expression spoke more of suspicion than anything else. ‘What’s Section 18?’ he asked with his eyes squinted together.

‘Uncalled-for violence. Piercing the skin.’

The young man held up his hands. ‘I ain’t touched you!’ protested Rick V.

‘Not me you haven’t. But what about Emmy? I
saw the marks, Rick. Trying to tell me you haven’t knocked her around from time to time?’ Zoe attempted to smile but it wouldn’t come. ‘Between us? I don’t think she wants to be Crew at all; I think you had to convince her hard to knock me out. And that’s where we come to the real problem with your initiation, Rick…’

‘What?’

‘Apart from bellowing at me through a microphone, pal, you haven’t done anything to justify your place in Crew. And I’ll tell ‘em so. Let me go.’

Rick V paused for a few seconds before making for the door. ‘You’re not going anywhere, Zo,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll get the heating up.’ He turned on the threshold. ‘How come you know about the law anyway?’

_I don’t remember_, Zoe thought. ‘Common knowledge, Rick,’ she answered. Something Mia told me at some point? Must have been.

Evidently Rick V adopted a hands-off approach to domestic arrangements. At the top of his voice he roared for Emmy to increase the temperature in the house... Zoe had no choice but to jump at the barked order. Soon, she thought, soon. The radiator would heat up and yes, it would be uncomfortable – but with the rise in degrees the plastic handcuffs would have to weaken. Wouldn’t they? Rick V returned to the room. He was pointing a finger.

‘All I have to do is repeat what you told me and Emmy. You get me?’

‘Right. As if I’d say that lot again.’

‘You will if we convince you hard enough,’ Rick V said.

Zoe put on a front; she laughed out once. ‘You didn’t buy that, did you?’

‘Don’t play it and ting. You were telling the truth, and I think Crew’ll be very interested in using what you got to its advantage, Zo.’

Zoe frowned. ‘Who exactly are you fighting, Rick?’

‘We’re taking control of the streets.’

‘From who, though?’

‘From anyone who gets in our way!’ Rick V replied.

The accusation of partner-beating had been at best a wild poke in the dark; though there hadn’t been a denial there were times when a silence could hit as hard as a stone. Yet... hadn’t Zoe _seen_ something on Emmy’s skin – hadn’t she thought – yes, _thought_ – she’d seen organs inside Emmy’s body?

‘I need to have something to drink,’ Zoe told her captor.

‘We’re out of vodka. Thanks for that, by the way.’ Rick V re-established his position behind the decks. This time he did not rely on a pre-recorded drum and bass; there was already a record on one of the turntables. ‘That’s a big chunk of my Income Support, you know!’ He dropped the needle in the groove.

‘I meant like a glass of water.’ Zoe’s words were drowned by the noise. Cupped hand behind the right ear, Rick V gave the ‘pardon-I-can’t-hear-you’ mime, mouthing _What_? Zoe shouted, ‘Take some money from my purse!’

That’s not a bad idea, she could see him contemplating. Bless his heart but his thought patterns were so simple to read and follow. If indeed he was expecting members – maybe founders – of Crew, it wouldn’t do for them to arrive and have nothing awaiting them on the social niceties front.

Rick V nodded his head and left the back room. Zoe chanced an attempt at escape. Moving as swiftly as she was able, she shuffled on her bum, inching her legs under the bridge formed by her wrists secured to the radiator. In this way, curled up though she was, she had her feet against the wallpaper. She pushed back as hard as she could. It was like using the rowing machine: the muscles at the top of her legs stretched and strained.

The noise in the room was outrageous: more rap music. In spite of that, however, Zoe imagined she heard something else sewn into the din: a collection of sounds from beyond the open door of her prison. It wasn’t only the high-pitched complaints of the pipe against which the chain of her bracelets was pulling, though that was loud enough. Was he
beating on her again? Zoe wondered; she went on to
the belief that ten years would be too good for scum
like Rick V, regardless of how immature, misguided
and even innocent he was.

That was pain. No doubt about it in Zoe's mind –
none whatever – that yelp was riddled with agony.
Except... it had sounded like male pain. Go girl!
thought the captive, her legs now all but straight;
as a consequence her back was bent in a curve, her
hands still secured. But the pipe was groaning.
Could it be, in such a short time she had managed
to distort the pipe by a fraction? If so, it wasn’t
what Zoe had expected. She’d imagined the cuffs
giving way first – giving way quite easily. Sex toys
were made of sterner stuff these days, obviously.
The next effort squeezed a low moan of dismay
from her throat.

Finished; it was over. Zoe could feel him – sense
his presence behind her back, although how
close she wasn’t certain. Musty smell; something
different, she wasn’t sure what. He had caught her
fighting her bounds. Not for the first time, but for
the first time in at least half an hour, Zoe panicked.

Instinctively moving closer to the wall, she
bundled herself up into as tight a ball as her frame
would permit. She screwed her eyes tight. She
felt him approach; she couldn’t hear his footfalls,
deadened as they were by thin carpet and the roar
of a rapper spitting urban angst. When she opened
her eyes again she could smell his odour stronger, as
proximate to her skin as her own perfume. He was
leaning over her body – and a knife came into view
to the right side of her head. Its blade was murky
and red. She couldn’t scream. No was the only word
she had. But she couldn’t scream. She was dead, and
she knew it.

The blade reached past her, as if to prick the wall.
The hand that held it was red as well, spotted on
the top joint of its thumb and on its fingernails. Zoe
was shaking her head – as the blade balanced on the
chain between the handcuffs. Pressure. Snick! went
the chain. The knife blade cut straight through.

'You're free.' The voice was not Rick V's. It
certainly wasn’t Emmy’s. Trembling madly, Zoe
twisted on her backside and did her best to move to
one side, knowing that the motion was pointless. If
he wanted to, he could... She looked up – into a face
frozen free of emotion. The dark eyes, if anything,
gave away a scintilla of sadness, and even that only
for a second. 'You're free.'

The man shifted the large to his left hand. He
extended his right, in order to help pull Zoe up from
the floor. 'We have to go, Halima,' the man said.

Too stunned to correct the identification, Zoe
accepted the hand and was dragged up, her legs
shaking from the fright, the cold floor and from
sitting in one position for too long. Wordlessly she
followed her saviour into the hallway. Her own hand
went to her mouth at what she saw there.

Rick V was lying half in and half out the doorway
to the front room. If the gash in his belly spilling
blood that was staining his hoody didn't kill him,
the slice across his throat, gurgling with popping
red bubbles as he attempted to speak most surely
would. He was using what remained of his strength
to writhe. Emmy, on the other hand, had already
given up the battle. She was lying on the stairs, the
slit down her back as straight and perfect as the zip
of a dress.

'He told me his boys were coming. Crew? I want
them to find him alive.'

Together they left the house. There were no
thoughts – no successive, sensible thoughts at any
rate – in Zoe's mind and so she didn’t think too
much as she stumbled, numb-thighed, with hot
shins, in the direction of her car. Then a thought
struck her; she voiced it. 'I can't drive. They took my
handbag.'

'So?'

'The keys are in it!' Zoe shouted.

'I've got your keys,' the man replied. 'Which ones
are they?' Saying this, he pulled from his left trouser
pocket two bunches of keys. 'I picked up whatever
they had on the rack by the door.'

'Neither of them! We have to go back!'

'We can’t, Halima! His Crew might be here any
sec...'

But Zoe was already retracing her steps; the
dissipating effects of the alcohol she’d taken in
were still potent enough to give her sufficient nous
to comprehend that she couldn’t be leaving her handbag at the scene of two murders. Containing as it did her passport, driving licence and security fob for work, it wouldn’t take a great detective to place her in the house of horrors.

‘We can take their car!’ she faintly heard.

She saw the bag near the chair in which she’d originally been sitting, in the front room. She saw it from the threshold, and now tensing the muscles of her stomach, she stretched her legs to bound over Rick V’s motionless body. She had all but cleared the gatekeeper’s physical bulk when Rick decided on one last act of insurrection against logic. His left hand reached out for a grip...

It caught Zoe’s ankle. The woman screamed – the noise finally emerged – and the contact was enough to knock her off balance, mid-flight. Zoe fell to her knees, her left ankle remaining in Rick V’s grasp. Grunting and puffing like a steam train, Zoe kicked at Rick’s head with her other foot, blood smearing all over her work shoes and tights. She clasped hold of her bag. It might not have been as heavy as she’d have appreciated, but when she thumped it down onto her assailant’s face the shock was ample to force the man to let go.

What was it – the impending sense of release? the mashed terror? – that formed the words in Zoe’s mouth? She said coldly, ‘And your lyrics are shit too.’ To the din of a drum and bass track whose equal Rick V would never now compose, Zoe exited the house for the second time, not truly anticipating seeing her rescuer waiting for her – admittedly agitatedly.

‘Come on, Halima!’ he called.

‘I thought...’ She’d thought he would have taken one of the other cars, that’s what she’d thought, but he’d waited for her. Why? Who was he?

‘Who are you?’ Zoe asked, skittering a key into the ignition with shaking fingers, missing twice before securing the slot. She turned it. Fired the revs.

The new man in her life chuckled sweetly. The bubbling-brook sound of humour chilled Zoe’s marrow. She’d heard it before. She raced to the end of the road and pulled out without checking in either direction. Her fingers were vibrating on the steering wheel, and with shock Zoe realised she’d wet herself.

‘Don’t you recognise your own brother, Halima. I’m Osman.’

There was stillness and silence. The car moved quickly – away from Netherfield – if she never saw that damn fucking place again in her life it would be too soon – towards the centre... or where? Home? She thought of Paxo, in his cage, calling ‘Nuisance’ but secretly pleased to see one of his owners home early from work. The streets were blurry. *I shouldn’t be driving, Zoe* thought.

‘You were trying to find me but I found you, Halima. Always contrary!’ And the man name of Osman chuckled harder, louder, his body quaking.

Zoe cast a glance over at him. ‘Will you please, for God’s sake, put that knife away?’ she asked him, her tone exasperated and aerated. *Knife?* Pictures of Rick and Emmy... but also earlier pictures, forcefed to her at this instant. A ride along a long road – much longer than this one, and unpaved. Human detritus as markings and milestones. A rook perching on a brain. Two big dogs, one could talk, a gorilla in a stifling office – Mort Fega; the Cause...

She did it with the help of your brother, Halima. Osman helped her make her escape... ‘He’s with you?’ Zoe whispered... Always was. Hiding in the one place we didn’t think to look. Right under our noses. He’d learned to alter his scent. ‘You altered your scent,’ Zoe carried on whispering.

‘Pardon?’ said Osman.

‘But I didn’t lose my toes!’ she shouted. ‘It can’t be me!’

‘Drive safely, Halima!’

‘It can’t be me! It was Mia who lost her toes!’ Erratically, suicidally even, Zoe jockeyed between other cars, past the college, and turned left on to the faster moving H8. The gas station whipped and curled behind Zoe, to her left; she all but ignored it, the station was nothing but a tumbleweed. Zoe’s eyes appeared wild and bloodshot in the rearview mirror; the sight briskly gave her the willies. She thought back to another mirror: the full-length example in the bedroom she shared with Mia.
Peeling off each other’s sports clothes; the session on the automated bike is over. They are laughing. They are lovers. They are comfortable together. Their sizes and shapes are compared: their bellies, bottoms and breasts. And their similarly disfigured left feet.

Halima was angry. ‘They came to our home for you. I lost my toes,’ she accused, ‘and all the time you were fighting for their Cause. Did you understand what you were fighting for?’ She turned to face him. ‘I feel sick. You make me.’

‘I had no choice, Halima. Watch the road!’

‘You helped her escape, didn’t you?’ Zoe was raving on. ‘That’s what Mort Fega told me. Then they sent me after her. I was supposed to bring her back...’ A car horn beeped at her, its driver unimpressed with her skills on the road. ‘Fuck you back,’ she muttered. ‘Did I really meet Mia in France?’

‘Yes. Yes, I swear... You’ll have to slow down.’

‘She changed my dreams,’ Zoe muttered – or Halima did – or maybe no one did. The meaning of the sentence was rich with possibilities, granted; but the words themselves meant nothing. ‘Where’s Mia now?’

‘In danger. John Carbon got tired of waiting for you, Halima.’

The very mention of the name was enough to petrify the woman steering the motor. A knee-jerk reaction made her stamp on the accelerator. There was too much traffic, she told herself, and it was all too near.

So it wasn’t on the drive to Emmy’s house, but rather on her swift drive away from it, that Zoe crashed the car. Nor did she have time to regret the alcohol she had so passionately consumed; there were other matters very much on her mind. The universe folded in on itself in a riot of pain and din.

Zoe shouted once for her mother.

15.

**The heat inside** the oil drum was overbearing. Mia had failed in her attempts to zone out, to disconnect her mind from the present reality. But she was tugged, in the head, between two addictive focuses. If she didn’t want to think about now – about the threat of James Carbon – her masochistic self tugged her back to Somalia – back to the Tower of Crumbs. The heat was similar: the oil drum and the office. *But those aren’t my memories; I stole them...* It didn’t matter; as deeply rooted in her conscience were the memories as cancer in an organ.

How long had passed? Mia moved the rubbish bag on her head a few inches so that a chink of light illuminated her womb-like world. Her left wrist was naked; somewhere she had lost her watch – or she hadn’t put it on in the first place. Once more, it didn’t matter; she had no idea when she’d left the house anyway, or how long she had spent arguing with James Carbon.

For her Lazarus-like rise from the stinking drum Mia had an audience of three. Two were young men, dressed in the black, sharp-creased trousers and immaculate white shirt of waiters everywhere. The third was the Good Samaritan. Her eyes and Mia’s eyes met and held. Something was needed to break the silence. One of the waiters did the honours. ‘He gone,’ the boy said.

Mia was helped out of the drum by the other waiter. Because of the way she’d crouched in the remains of the oil, her shoes, ankles and upper back thighs were wet with grease; she stank to high heaven. Her left foot throbbed from her initial kick at the fence; her right foot, despite the more heartfelt attack on the same with which she’d used it, did not complain – it was right at home, executing that kind of assault. She had done it so many times in her history, and not on inert planks of wood. All for the sake of the Cause she didn’t get... All for demands in code and in explicit language both. She’d been a soldier – and she had done what soldiers do. But not once had she truly comprehended it.

‘Nice boyfriend you’ve got there,’ said the Good Samaritan. Mia didn’t know how to respond. Should she run? She could run: that was it.

‘I’m so tired,’ she thought aloud.

‘Not surprised. Do you know he hit me?’

Mia shook her head. ‘I’m sorry about that,’ she
‘But I kept him busy as long as I could,’ the woman continued, the ghost of a smile at her lips suggesting that she had in fact enjoyed the contest.

‘I owe you something.’

‘No you don’t, unless it’s a change of clothes, darling. Forgive my brusqueness, dear, but you are rather on the whiffy side right now...’

Mia laughed. ‘I’ll change my clothes with pleasure.’

The other woman made a snap decision. ‘Come on, I’ll give you a lift,’ she said. ‘Where do you live?’

‘Conniburrow.’ Although the offer was sorely tempting, there might be another issue that should be under discussion. ‘Aren’t you here with anyone?’

‘Just the team. Working lunch, once a month: helps to keep up morale.’ She took hold of Mia’s right arm. ‘Come on. They’ve gone back to the office.’

‘I don’t want to get you into trouble...’

‘I’m the manager, darling; I don’t do trouble.’

Again, Mia laughed. ‘You’re doing trouble now.’

‘Thank you, boys!’ The Samaritan waved to the nonplussed waiters over her shoulder. Remembering her manners, Mia copied the words if not the action. There were tears in her eyes; her body felt heavy and weak. The older woman took the lead, her heels clicking on the path, and the two women walked around the building in the direction of the main car park. ‘It’s the husband’s car, I’m afraid, mine’s in for a service. The Testostocar.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ said Mia. ‘God, I hope I don’t get the seat dirty.’

‘You can sit on Bertie’s blanket. That’s our dog.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ repeated Mia. She could find no better words to say.

‘Give it a good slam,’ said the other woman from the driver’s seat. ‘Thirty grand for a jam jar and the bloody doors are faulty. My name’s Kim, by the way.’

‘Mia. Nice to meet you.’

Belated an introduction as it was, the women shook hands. Kim told Mia her hands were shaking and that she wasn’t surprised either; what a baboon the poor girl had ended up with for a date. (Gorilla, thought Mia; evolution, thought Mia; the Tower of Crumbs, Mort Fega...) Mia agreed with a quiet yes.

‘Where is Zoe? Mia oozed backwards into the seat. ‘Have you got a phone?’ she asked. ‘I have to call my friend.’ Mia was looking straight ahead.

‘Right there. Hands free.’

It had been a long time since Mia had needed to prod in the number, but the pattern her fingers made was confident and speedy. In the car the dialling tone was comforting loud.

‘Hello?’ a voice said eventually, just as Mia was expecting the slide into voicemail. It was a man’s voice. Frank Mice has found her, thought Mia.

‘Where’s Zoe?’ Mia demanded angrily.

‘There’s been an accident. Are you Mia? The phone says Mia.’

Mia’s body was cold. She sensed Kim’s worried glance. She said, ‘Where?’ and the voice answered, ‘H8, A5 roundabout.’

‘We’re five minutes away,’ Kim remarked, immediately indicating right to perform an illegal U-turn in a bus lane. ‘I’ll get you there.’

An ambulance was already at the scene of the carnage – it had been sent from the nearby hospital, at Netherfield. As Kim pulled her car over to the grass verge by the side of the road, bumping up the kerb with little regard to the Testostocar’s suspension and alignment, Mia heard another siren – a fire engine, perhaps – in the distance, but getting closer. Mia had her seatbelt unfastened before the car had come fully to a halt. ‘Be careful of the traffic!’ she heard Kim call behind her. Mindful of earlier instructions, Mia slammed the passenger side door.

There was indeed a good deal of traffic; this, despite the fact the accident was not obstructing the road. Mia’s eyebrows slotted together as she
frowned her worry and fright; she had seen Zoe’s car. Along with another vehicle, it was mangled and crumpled on the roundabout itself. Mia swore under her breath, and waited for a break in the line of cars streaming slowly from the right to trace round the island; though her legs ached she made a good break for her destination, already picturing the collision in her head from the positions of the cars. Evidently Zoe’s vehicle had struck a car that was also coming from the right. The impact had pushed them both up onto the roundabout.

Mia climbed onto it herself. She was hoping for an official of some sort – a paramedic, anyone! – to stop her: in truth she didn’t want to have a good view. No one did. The car that Zoe’s had struck was the shape, more or less, of a boomerang, its left side entirely caved in. A man Mia guessed to be in his fifties – the driver, presumably – was sitting by one of the many bushes that had been planted on the roundabout, visibly quaking but apparently unhurt. A paramedic in a bright yellow coat was leaning over him, offering palliative care in the form of words. Zoe’s car, similarly, was a wreck.

The two people inside (two?) were not moving. Disregarding the feelings of the passenger for a moment, Mia strode over to the driver’s side, where the other paramedic was holding her hand through the shattered side window. For some reason Mia pictured a man in a kiosk, doling out a ticket.

‘Get her out of there!’ Mia screamed.

The paramedic was as old as the other driver in the accident; wisdom scored in the lines of his face told Mia he had seen it all before – he was used to hysteria. Very calmly he informed her: ‘The door’s buckled. We’re waiting for the fire service.’ The siren, Mia realised, was almost upon them. She felt impotent; her tiny fists were shaking at the air around her waist.

‘What about him?’ Now she looked into the car properly, past Zoe (breathing in gulps, mouthing words in another language), to the passenger: a man with close-cropped rook-black hair, his midriff coated with a patina of blood, a sense of enchantment on his face. ‘My God,’ whispered Mia. ‘Osman.’

The name brought a fluttering of eyelids to Zoe; she was waking up in fits and starts. ‘We found him,’ she managed to say.

At the same time the paramedic was also speaking. ‘The passenger was carrying a knife, we don’t know why. The collision drove it into his leg. I’m sorry.’

‘Osman,’ Mia repeated. All this time... Her face was pure query mark and indignation as she looked up at the paramedic while remaining bent at the waist and not needing to speak a single word.

The paramedic said, ‘He bled very quickly if that’s any consolation.’

Tears had been pent up for too long. Mia released them. Through the following squall she said to her partner, ‘You’ll be all right, Zoe...’

‘It’s Halima, Mia. Halima, not Zoe. I’m not angry. I love you.’

‘I love you too. Please hold on.’

‘We found him.’

‘I did nothing. You found him. Keep awake!’ Mia squeezed Zoe’s hand – unless she squeezed Halima’s. She wasn’t clear on the point. It struck her very briefly as ironic, the fact that for once the roles were reversed: it was Mia doing her best not to let Zoe close her eyes, rather than the other way round.

‘He found me. I couldn’t find you, but he found me. It’s funny.’

Mia smiled. Keep her talking, she thought. ‘It is funny, Zoe.’

‘Halima. I’m Halima. Zoe’s dead. She died in a car crash.’

Was it Mia’s imagination or did the woman with whom she had shared five good years appear slightly younger in this light? Maybe the aroma of spilt blood was jabbing her senses; she wasn’t sure. No, she was sure; something was drifting away from the woman’s features. She was looking slightly... girlish. Mia rifled through her stolen thoughts and dreams; she closed her eyes, breathing in Halima’s scent – and the scent of chocolate. The smell of pollution in New Trozenxus had made the girl think
about chocolate.

‘We’re going back there, Mia,’ Halima breathed. ‘You and I.’

It was not the time to speak of James Carbon, so the best Mia could offer was a simple platitude. ‘They’ll never take us back, Halima,’ she said – and the name sounded smooth and clicked into place in her mouth, in her head. For the first time she could smell the alcohol on Zoe’s breath.

The fire engine had arrived. ‘You’ll have to move aside,’ the paramedic to her left informed Mia, a light hand on her elbow. ‘They’re here with the chainsaw to release your friend.’

‘We’ll go,’ Halima told her, squeezing Mia’s hand, ‘by choice. We’ll go to the Tower of Crumbs. We’ll go...’ She breathed deeply; a dribble of blood left her mouth and rolled down her chin. ‘We’ll go as soldiers, Mia.’

‘Don’t speak...’

‘And we’ll do as soldiers do. Not for the Cause: to kill the Cause.’

‘I love you...’ said Mia again.

‘I know.’

‘And I did it because I love you.’

‘I know that too,’ Halima told her. ‘Hush now; my rescuer’s coming. Where’s Osman? Osman saved me. Where’s he gone?’ She was babbling.

‘I’ll be there when you wake up.’

To kill the Cause, thought Mia, though not in response to Halima’s question – or perhaps it had been Zoe’s final question. They would live in the same skin; die there, too. Don’t think like that. Instead Mia thought of Halima’s thoughts of Osman... Mia straightened up – her back clicked – and she accepted the paramedic’s professional embrace. The words were like an ointment; the words burned and then salved the itch and distress. To kill the Cause. Who would be first? Through her mind’s eye Mia viewed the simian bulk of Mort Fega, falling storey after storey from his sweatbox in the Tower of Crumbs. At the window, Mia and Halima – the former a younger woman, the latter the child whose only future had been pilfered and warped.

But there was one enemy so very much closer. Mia gritted her teeth. After watching the fireman don a pair of wide goggles and rip up the saw, Mia chose not to view anymore of the here and now. She closed her eyes. Perhaps she’d sleep. Only with her subconscious could she be sure once again to summon James Carbon. The difference was, this time she would be ready.
When I was asked to write this column, my basic brief was to start by discussing my experiences as a small press horror writer and see where that took me. So, I suppose I should begin by talking about the things affecting me and my work at the minute. Please forgive me if I digress (it’ll happen a lot), but I’ll get round to some kind of point eventually. Or maybe I won’t. We’ll see.

I had a good year in 2007. Made a few good sales, saw a lot of stories reach print. The high point, however, was when both Stephen Jones and Ellen Datlow contacted me to let me know they’d chosen stories of mine to be reprinted in their respective “Best Of” anthologies. As the saying goes, you could’ve knocked me over with a feather...

Of the two, I think the Jones one made the most impact on me personally. I’ve always bought *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* – it’s the single essential annual genre title, the one I cannot do without. I might not agree with all of his choices, but Jones is a savvy editor and there are always some interesting pieces of fiction to be found in anything he’s put together.

Now, these sales came along when I was at a bit of a low. The small press – the specialist press, as some like to call it – was beginning to depress me. Too few copies of books sold (certainly on the UK scene), too few real quality markets, too many so-called writers being published before they’ve properly mastered the craft.

I even found myself believing that the small press is, as has often been said, a field where mediocrity is celebrated and genuine talent and vision are largely ignored – a field where there are three times as many writers as there are potential readers, which means that everybody is trying to sell but nobody wants to buy.

The thought of being stuck there, labelled a small press writer forever, depressed me. Maybe, I thought, it’s time to hang up my quill. If no-one outside a small clique of readers is interested enough to read my work, perhaps I should just call it a day. Perhaps I’m just not good enough to make it to the next level – whatever that even means.

To be brutally honest, a lot of the limitations and occasional petty politics of the market had drained me of the seemingly boundless enthusiasm I’d possessed when I entered it five years before. New sales no longer excited me, and even holding copies of my own books in my hands failed to generate the old frisson of delight. I wanted my work to be read by more than a handful of hardcore genre fans (God bless them, whoever they are). Was this too much to ask? Was I merely becoming blasé about the whole independent publishing scene?

Those emails from Datlow and Jones proved that the answer was no. The old magic returned: I was excited about writing all over again. Validation from my peers had broken through the wall of self-doubt and let me see that I might have some small modicum of talent after all...

So the question now is, where next? How can I move on to that fabled next level? Do I get an agent, and if so, how do I get an agent? I’ve had a tiny taste of the mass market and now I want more.

I guess that’s really what this article is all about: what do you do to reach a wider audience, to get your work noticed beyond the often constricting parameters of the small press? Answers on a postcard, please...

I suppose the logical step would be to get an agent to tout my work to the bigger publishing houses, but that’s a lot easier said than done. A couple of award nominations and appearances in the aforementioned “Best Of” anthologies count for little in the closed world of the literary agent. It’s less about the quality of a writer’s work than what fits at the moment, what the agent thinks they can sell. Which is fair enough, I suppose; they are running a business not a charity for struggling artists. It doesn’t help that my work is probably classed as a “hard sell”. It’s bleak, character-based horror, and most of the horror titles on the shelves at Borders are either vampire books featuring female serial characters or thinly disguised crime thrillers.

Plan B would be to hit the few mass market publishers open to unsolicited submissions with my novel and wait a year or two for a response. Again, it isn’t perfect, but what else can you do? Where does one go from here?
I wish I knew, but there’s no writer’s rulebook. No handy little pointers exist to tell you where to go next. You just have to wing it and see what happens, and have faith in your own abilities.

I think it was Dennis Etchison who said that writing is a profession of deferred gratification – you wait a long time for anything to come of the things you write, and the only way to cope is to move on to the next one. Keep writing, keep knocking at the door, and keep putting the words down on the page.

Oh. It looks like I’ve answered my own question. Sort of.

Gary McMahon
Leeds
August 2008
Boris Deluge had a talent. The more socially cohesive person might say that everyone has a talent, but this is not strictly true. In many regards it is a barefaced lie, as there are vast numbers of people that are completely useless at every endeavour in life. It is not to say that these people have bad lives and experiences – in fact many become successful managers with well known fast food franchises and spawn equally talentless children who contribute much to the continued existence of the economy.

It was a talent that had almost gone unnoticed, as it lay in a niche not covered by the national curriculum. It was not a career that parents yearned after for their children. Boris was not naturally gifted academically. He was good at most subjects during his schooling but excelled at none. His mother (sole parent and constant burden for Boris from birth) had hoped that he would, one day, show an aptitude for medicine and become a doctor. She wished for this, she frequently told him, because she finally wanted to be proud of him.

Boris was mediocre at sports. He was never the last person to be called during the preliminary team picking stage, but nor was he the first. He was not bad enough to be a goalkeeper, but also never saw action as a striker. He was mostly assigned to defence, although he was occasionally promoted to midfield if one of the better players was ill.

His talent was not discovered in school. It came about while his mother recovered from the bottle of gin that she had consumed over the course of a three hour drinking session one Sunday afternoon. Boris Deluge, 15 years old, had been left to his own devices. He had no friends to go out with (something that had never struck the teenager as strange – it was simply the way it was), and no family to call upon. There were no siblings to cause terror with, and so he was forced to rely upon his own ingenuity for inspiration. As his mother snored on the sofa Boris took himself off upstairs, intent on exploration. His birthday was coming up and he had yet to grow out of the urge to search for presents. Beneath the bed and behind wardrobes, normally the home of banal bric-a-brac for the majority of the year, suddenly held the possibility of Indiana Jones-like treasure when a present giving day was coming up. There were never any presents to be found, but Boris was a hopeful young man.

He took off the top of the lipstick and twisted it out. It was a deep red. He had seen his mother putting it on (it was the only lipstick that she owned) for weddings and parties and the like, but she always seemed to use too much and, much like a four year old learning to colour in a picture, unable to keep between the lines. Boris brought the lipstick up and dabbed at his bottom lip with it. It felt sticky, but not unpleasant, and left a blob where he had touched.

This was the start of Boris’s talent. It was the discovery. It would remain a secret talent for many years, mainly due to his mother walking into the room half an hour later. She had woken from her slumber with an urgent desire to urinate, and had staggered up the stairs to the toilet. Motherly instinct being what it was (even in a woman like Mrs Deluge); she could tell, halfway up the stairs, that Something Was Wrong; that Boris was Up To Mischief. Boris was too engrossed in his activities to hear the not exactly stealthy approach,
but jumped to his feet when she burst into the room. He jumped even higher when she started screaming.

The beating that he received was not truly severe, although it was the worst that Boris had ever suffered. His mother preferred psychological torture to physical, but would make an exception when the need arose. Boris ended up in bed without his supper, a very sore bottom and a red-raw face from the scrubbing that his mother had inflicted.

Over the course of the best thirty minutes of his life Boris had applied the lipstick carefully, and with an innate skill. Next he applied the foundation, and then dusted his face with a beige powder, the name of which eluded him. How he knew to do these things was a mystery that would never be explained. His hands simply picked up the items and used them. He applied blusher to his cheeks, then eye shadow and carefully ran a pencil across his eyelids; this was the hardest part as he couldn’t help but blink. The mascara was surprisingly easy, but he was unaware of the training that most women had to go through to achieve the results that he managed quite naturally.

He had cried himself to sleep that night, and his mother had cracked open another bottle of gin while calling her sister to complain about the gay-boy son that she had somehow managed to raise. Her sister, a schoolteacher of many years, suggested beating him regularly, and possibly sending him into the army. Boris’s mother had agreed, although, after a couple of more large Gin and Tonic’s, she had to admit that he had looked beautiful.

But Boris was not gay. He liked girls (proof of which could be found in the magazines hidden at the bottom of his closet), although they did not like him. He got no sexual thrill from applying the make-up. He did not feel that he was finally complete when he gazed at his painted face. He was not a transvestite or transsexual (though he did not really know the words to describe his not-state), and the answer was much simpler but all the more unbelievable, should his mother have taken the time to ask the question.

He had painted his face with make-up because there had been no one else to do it to. The only canvas that he had to work with was his own, and so he had used it. The results had been marvellous, for a fifteen year old boy, and while his backside was aching and his face had lost a few layers of skin he dreamed happily that night of painting faces and making people look beautiful.

The death of his mother five years later led to the discovery of his talent. He had nurtured his abilities over the years, always in secret. There had been Beauty classes to take in college, but even Boris knew that this would be frowned upon by his peers. He avoided their critiques with his anonymity, but to be the only male in a class of girls learning which skin tone suited which bronzer would be the shove that brought him into their gaze. He had, instead, studied Sociology, English Literature and Psychology. They sounded academic enough to pacify his mother, and he was intelligent enough to do well in each of them, always wishing that he could be in the room with the girls, learning how to apply make up. He felt like an artist denied the use of paintbrushes.

The head of a mannequin that caught his eye in the window a charity shop was the focus of his attention. He tested his skills on the plastic skin, and his model never complained when he washed her down with bleach. By the time his mother collapsed in the kitchen after a massive embolism he was a master in theory, but not in practice. He was sure of his skills, in the same way that a young teen is sure that they will be a great lover because of the daily masturbation they had indulged in.

Boris’s confidence, however, was grounded in reality.

His mother died whilst he was on a trip to Plymouth. He was travelling down from London with his Sociology class to see a series of lectures ranging from feminism to the Opiate of the Masses. Time of death was recorded as within 2 minutes of Boris leaving the house, as the popcorn he had put into the microwave for her as he left the house was still there when he returned three days later. As was his mother, on the kitchen floor.

The cat had, unfortunately, gotten a little hungry and had devoured most of her left foot.

The following days were lost to Boris. He contacted his Aunt to inform her of her sisters death and received the first offer of the traditional ‘if there’s anything that I can do, don’t hesitate to ask’. As Boris had never had to deal with death before he was unaware of the fact that this was empty offer, and made the mistake of calling her the next day
to request help with the funeral arrangements. She ‘wished that she could’, but unfortunately she was ‘a little bit busy’, but if there was anything else that she could do that didn’t involve time, effort or money she would be pleased to lend assistance.

The funeral arrangements themselves were a mystery to Boris. He couldn’t remember a single part of them, but had been assured, after the fact, that it had been a wonderful service that his mother would have enjoyed. If she hadn’t been dead, of course. Boris had simply agreed with everything that the funeral director had suggested, which seemed to work in his favour. It wasn’t until the director suggested he come to view his mother at the home that the idea even occurred to Boris. The director told him that it frequently helped with the grieving process, which Boris was all in favour of.

He visited the night before the funeral. His intention had been to arrive early in the morning, but after finding inane things to do all day (the washing up, hoovering every carpet and curtain in the house, alphabetizing his DVD collection and the like) he finally arrived at eight in the evening. He was led to the viewing room by a young woman that he hadn’t seen before, and Boris was thankful that she did not attempt to give him her condolences. Quite honestly he was sick of them. Boris had come to realise that it was an automatic response, as predictable as Pavlov’s drooling canines, but less meaningful.

The room was simple, and much smaller than he had imagined. The walls were painted magnolia, and there were some tasteful paintings of flowers on the walls. Three plastic chairs were lined up on the wall. Boris looked at all of this before he rested his eyes on his mother. The top half of the coffin was open. His mother was in the dress that he had provided (it was the one that she wore during the summer, and he had always thought that she looked beautiful in it), with her fingers entwined on her ribs.

He covered his mouth when he looked at her face, and fled from the room immediately. He did not speak to the woman who had shown him in, and ran out into the rain. Whoever it was that was in the coffin was not his mother.

In under two hours he returned, soaking wet and carrying the box that had caused him to go to bed with a sore bottom so many years before. Once again the young lady granted him entrance, although this time he had to wait for them to bring his mother to the room from ‘the resting place’. Once he was allowed to see her he requested that he not be disturbed.

At a little after midnight on the day his mother was to be buried Boris came back out. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and he had scars of different colours on his arms. He had been calmer then, and thanked the young lady for her help. Unknown to him she had called her father (the kindly funeral director that had helped Boris so much over the last few days), and he was stood behind the office door, waiting to pounce should Boris cause any trouble. It had already been decided that they would not press charges against the young man if he should ‘become emotional’, but after three decades in the trade the director had seen what grief could do to a person. This explained the taser that he held in his hand as Boris said goodbye to the directors’ daughter.

The funeral director and the funeral directors’ daughter were worried as they entered the viewing room. There had been no tell-tale sounds coming from the room (they had been stood, ears pressed to door, to see if they could hear anything), and so had not entered. What they saw, once they opened the door, however, was nothing short of astonishing.

The funeral came and went. The funeral director did not speak to Boris of his astonishment upon seeing Mother Deluge, but registered with awe the reactions of the congregation as they filed past her, until he opened up the door to the limousine for him after the service.

“Boris,” he said. “What you did for your mother… the way that you made her look… could you do that for anyone?”

After a few moments thought, Boris said; “Yes,” and climbed into the car.

His employment with the funeral director began a week later.

After three years of working for Hardcastle Funeral Directors Boris was the most sought after post-death make up artist in London. His work quickly became legendary. It was as if, they said, he could almost bring the dead back to life. More than a few people, upon seeing the result of Boris’s skills, fainted at the sight of a loved one, lying in a coffin, looking
perfectly fine. Better than fine. Once Boris was done with his magic they looked better than they had done in their prime. He worked wonders with lotions, brushes and powders. Eyes no longer looked sunken. Lips no longer looked drawn. It was almost as if the dead person would suddenly sit up and ask what all the fuss was about. Although many people say that the dead only look ‘like they’re sleeping’, this is only said to make the mourners feel better. The dead look dead. After a few days even someone who has never seen a corpse knows exactly what they are faced with when they are confronted with one. In their final hours Boris made them look beautiful.

He looked at photo albums. Boris could not simply work from a single photo. He had to know who they were. He wanted pictures of them as children. Teens. Adults. He wanted them both posed and spontaneous. He wanted them dressed up for a night out and in the garden, sweaty and tired, digging up weeds. Home movies were fantastic for Boris – he wanted to see what the deceased looked like when they smiled; that glint in the eye that was extinguished after death. Mourners were never unhappy with the services that Boris provided.

As his fame spread throughout the business that is death Boris received many offers to poach him from Hardcastle. Offers of money and incentives came his way, but he ignored them all. His loyalty was absolute, and Hardcastle never questioned it. Although jealousy from other funeral directors grew like a fat child in MacDonald’s Boris was shielded from almost all of it. The only hints were at the conventions that he infrequently attended. At one particular convention (the biggest in London, when every funeral director in the land was invited to attend to peruse the latest in technology, coffins and services) Boris had been accosted by the very drunk director of Hardcastle’s closest competitor. Boris had been offered a vast sum of cash and, when he turned it down, was threatened with death himself if he did not leave the trade. Boris had immediately informed his employer, and received a letter of apology one week later.

Boris lived a good life, in his own way. The house that he had once shared with his mother was now his, and he had enough money to indulge in his DVD collection (which now took up most of the room that had once been his mothers). When not working Boris spent his time alone, reading his subscriptions to Embalmers Monthly, Vogue and Hello, as he had developed a strange fascination for the celebrity culture. No longer ashamed of his talent he took courses and developed his skills. Within weeks he had usually surpassed his teachers. More than once he had to turn down an offer from a fashion house to work with their models. He did not, he told them, work with the living.

The attic room became his test area. He had dozens of mannequin heads lined up, and experimented on each one for hours to make sure that he had every technique perfected.

However, there in only so much money that can be offered before it becomes tempting. Not so for Boris, who was more than happy to claim his wage at the end of the month, but for Hardcastle himself.

The only condition that Boris imposed on his employer was that he did not travel outside of the city. After the death of his mother he found it difficult to leave London, for fear of something happening in his absence. He was aware that it was an irrational fear, but one that he was unable to conquer. He had once attempted to take a holiday to Belgium, but had suffered a panic attack in the airport and had a rather embarrassing altercation with a group of security guards, and decided that holidays just weren’t for him.

“There’s a man named Stoker that requires your talents, Boris,” Hardcastle had told him one afternoon in his office. At that point it had simply been another job, until Hardcastle had told him where Stoker lived.

“Manchester!” said Boris. “But that’s…”

“Not in London,” finished Hardcastle. “Yes. But it’s only a couple of hours away, and the train is just like the tube, only with sunshine.”

“I can’t do it,” said Boris, but Hardcastle managed to convince him otherwise. It was a technique that Hardcastle had developed over the years, and involved a mixture of sympathy and gentle bullying. He generally got his own way, and although he loathed sending Boris on a mission to the dark depths of the north, the money had been too much to turn down.

Stoker was an artist of some distinction, and had been gifted with more than a few exhibitions in
well-to-do galleries across the country. He was not a darling of the art scene, but was popular enough to be found in the Sunday supplements of broadsheets every now and again. Boris had never heard of him, and Hardcastle was only aware of the man’s history after looking him up on Wikipedia. Neither man had much time for the art world. He gave Boris a printout of the article in a clear plastic wallet. Also included inside was an open ended rail ticket leaving from Euston station in a couple of hours and another printout of a map and directions from Manchester Piccadilly to Stoker’s house in Salford.

“You might need these as well,” said Hardcastle, and passed Boris a small childproof bottle of tablets. “For your nerves. I got them from a friend of mine.” Boris pocketed the tablets, and realised that his hands were shaking.

The two and a half hour journey was not as bad as Boris had expected. This was mostly due to the spaced out feeling that he’d had since popping the pills. He didn’t know what they were, but trusted Hardcastle implicitly. The carriage had a tendency to swim about in front of him and he had consumed seven and a half ploughman’s sandwiches in the travel time, along with various fizzy drinks and cups of tea. By the time he reached Manchester he was at a loss as to why he hadn’t left London in three years. The countryside had sped past with blurred beauty, and even the stations that he had passed through along the way had held a charm that Boris couldn’t identify. He had giggled maniacally for ten minutes after passing through Stockport, although he was at a loss as to explain exactly what had been funny about the name when the old lady next to him asked him if he was all right.

Feeling slightly groggy when he disembarked at Manchester Piccadilly, he wandered around for twenty minutes trying to find a black cab. In London it was easy. People there seemed to have a sixth sense about finding one of the hackney carriages. A native Londoner could arrive at any tube or train station in the capitol and instantly know where the nearest taxi rank was. Boris asked for directions from someone who looked like they knew where they were going, and was responded to with a curious glance and a slowly raised finger towards the ‘Taxi Rank This Way’ sign above Boris’s head.

The face of the taxi driver lit up when he heard Boris’s accent as he gave the address.

“First time in Manchester?” the driver asked.

“No,” said Boris, seriously. “I get up here every few weeks.” The driver’s face became less happy. Hardcastle had given him specific instructions as to how to respond to certain situations on his trip to the north. Chief amongst them had been to tell any and all taxi drivers that he knew the area like a blind newsagent can tell the feel of a ten pound note, particularly when the customer says it’s a twenty.

Boris had a particular idea of what ‘the north’ would look like. This was from years of watching Coronation Street with his mother, and he was not disappointed. Everything seemed somehow grey, as if the colour had been drained out of the buildings and people. Even the trees seemed to lack colour. It was a noisy and crowded as London but still, somehow, lacking.

The driver dropped him off, and he climbed out of the cab carrying his suitcase (packed with enough to last five days – Hardcastle had not been forthcoming about how long his visit would last) and make-up kit. It was made out of metal, and was one of the more extravagant purchases that Boris had made. Everything that could possibly be needed was inside, from nail polish remover to a freshly wrapped cucumber (for puffy eyes). It was weighty, and looked battered, with dints and scratches in its sides, but had suffered with Boris for a long time.

Nerves now took Boris. He was unused to approaching a client without the support of at least one of the Hardcastle entourage. He preferred to silently go about his business. He did not especially want to talk to people, particularly clients. When they asked him questions he felt as if his brain had turned into boiled spinach and sunk to the base of his skull. They wanted to know ‘how’ he did what he did, and he had no definable answer for them. They invariably left him disappointed. Famous or powerful clients (for there had been more than a few, wanting their loved one to look as spectacular in death as they had in life) had wanted to know what the ‘secret’ was, as if he had spent years training at a school in the Swiss Alps to develop his talent. A shrug and a “dunno” usually left them unfulfilled.

The terraced house looked thin, almost anorexic, and exactly the same as the houses that stretched out in either direction. It was as if they had been
squeezed in, pushed together to make room for an extra half-dozen houses on the street. It was half the width of the houses in London, but taller. Boris counted at least four floors.

The door opened almost before he had finished knocking. It was jerked back quickly, and took him by surprise. Boris almost leapt back into the street.

The man behind the door was tall and thin. His dark curly hair was greasy and knotted, and stretched to his shoulders. He wore a beard weeks past the need for trimming, and the bags under his eyes were dark.

“Boris Deluge?” he said, excitedly. He stepped out onto the step. Boris could see that he hadn’t washed in at least a week, and was wearing a dirty white t-shirt and dark shorts that reached his knees. He had paint splashes all over him, dried to his fingernails, skin and clothing. Boris nodded.

“Come in, come in,” he said. “I’m Colin Stoker. Thank you so much for coming. Boris smiled nervously, and took the hand that was offered, before almost being dragged into the house by Stoker. The door was slammed shut, and Boris found himself in darkness.

“Sorry about that,” said Stoker, and flicked on the light. “Come, come,” he said, and led Boris into the living room. “I didn’t know if you would attend. Your employer told me that you were reluctant to leave London. Having been there a few times I could hardly believe such a claim – most people there are fighting to get out. Cup of tea?”

The living room was thin, but long and heavy velvet curtains covered the window. Boris had been in a few living rooms over the course of the last few years, and this one struck him as belonging to an old person. The walls, sofa and carpet were all floral, while the units were dark wood. It certainly did not look like the living room of a thirty-something artist.

The thing that struck Boris the most, however, was the vast number of paintings that littered the room. There were dozens of them. A few hung on the walls, but most were propped up, sitting on the floor in rows. Some were the size of an A4 piece of paper, while others were life size portraits six feet high. Some were half finished, while others looked to be complete but had been defaced with the haphazard slashes of a paintbrush. The majority looked as if they could be hung up immediately in someone’s living room, or perhaps a gallery (Boris had the feeling that ‘artists’ did not want their productions stuck above a fireplace, but displayed so that any member of the paying public could view them).

“Pardon?” said Boris. “Oh, yes, a cup of tea would be lovely.”

Stoker almost ran from the room, leaving Boris in silence. He placed his bags in the middle of the floor and, with nothing else to do, examined the paintings. They were, to his untrained eye, rather good. All, however, had a common theme.

Regardless of what the subject matter was – there were paintings of buildings and flowers, Countryside’s and seascapes - in every one was the same woman. Sometimes she was the focus of the painting (every portrait that he could see was of her), but other times she was hidden, somewhere in the background. There was a painting of an old house, and there she was at the attic window. In another she was peeking out from behind a tree. Another, still, showed her reflected in a glass next to a bowl of fruit.

One hanging on the wall depicted her naked, lying on the sofa in this very living room.

She was beautiful. Boris had never had much success with women. He didn’t understand what they wanted and, more importantly he thought, he was fairly certain that he would not be able to give it to them, whatever it was. She had long dark hair, large green eyes and a wonderful smile. Stoker had captured her in almost obsessive detail. A vein on her temple. A mole on her shoulder. A small scar next to her left eye. The paintings were so lifelike that, from a distance, they could have been photographs. It was only as you moved closer that you could see the brushstrokes that had created the piece.

“Her name is Michelle,” said Stoker from the doorway. Boris turned to him, and could feel the redness rise from his neck to cover his face, ashamed for some reason, as if he had been caught doing something that he shouldn’t.

“She,” he began, but realised that he had no idea what he was about to say. When something did not spring readily to mind, he could only say; “she’s
“Yes,” Stoker said, staring at the portrait. “She was.”

Boris’s heart lurched. *Mouth open, foot inserted*, he thought. Evidently this was the person he had been summoned to make lifelike once more.

Stoker handed him a mug of tea, barely taking his eyes from the painting.

“I came back from shopping and she was dead in the kitchen. An embolism went pop in her head and down she dropped. She’d been stuffing the turkey when it happened. Still had her arm in it when I found her.”

“My mother went the same way,” said Boris, “but without the bird. Embolism in the kitchen.”

“Well, I don’t need to tell you what it feels like, then,” said Stoker. “Suffice to say, it wasn’t the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

“Christmas?” thought Boris. That was over six months ago. Part of him was relieved when he realised that Michelle would not be the corpse that he was to use his skills upon, and then he felt guilty because, in some strange logic known only to Boris, that meant that he was happy that someone else close to Stoker had died.

“When’s the funeral?” asked Boris. “Mr Hardcastle didn’t really have much information to give me before I came up.”

“Um,” Stoker said, and glanced at the floor. “I’ve heard that you work wonders, Boris. That there is no one else in the country that can make the dead look so alive. I only wanted the best, and although there were others that promoted themselves to me, when I asked those in the know who the best was yours was about the only name mentioned.”

“Thank you,” said Boris.

“How do you do it?” he asked, and Boris contained the groan. Every time… Why do they all have to ask the same question? This time, however, a response occurred to him.

“How do you paint?” he returned. Stoker thought about it for a moment and then nodded.

“Understood,” he said. “Come, let us go downstairs where I can tell you everything that you might want or need to know.”

“Downstairs?”

“Yes. Up here is not really me. We…” Stoker paused, and amended himself. “I’ve kept it like this since I inherited it from our Grandfather nine years ago. He, in turn, didn’t change anything after the death of my Grandmother fifteen years before that. This room has become something of a shrine to the year in which I was born. Nothing has been changed since then, not the record player, nor the wallpaper. Coming in here is like stepping back in time.”

Boris didn’t say anything, and hoped that this would convey an understanding that he didn’t really have. Stoker led him out of the living room and to the door to the cellar.

“I’m sorry to have to ask this, Mr Stoker, but may I enquire as to the identity of the deceased?”

“Certainly, I’m sorry – I completely forgot to tell you,” He opened the door and allowed Boris past. “It’s my sister, Michelle,” he said.

Before Boris had time to process what Stoker had said, he was ushered down the stairs. He had expected to find himself in an artist’s studio, but instead discovered that he was in another living room, one that was the length and width of the house. The floor was bare wood, and the walls plain white. There was no television down here, but there was a vast array of books available. A sofa and chair sat in the middle of the room. On the sofa was sitting the woman from the paintings.

“You said that she was dead,” said Boris.

“She is,” said Stoker. Michelle looked blankly at Boris.

After a brief interlude for a swift shot of brandy, which Boris was most grateful for, they sat on the sofa. Michelle sat in the chair.

“She’s unable to speak,” explained Stoker. “She no longer breathes; therefore there is no air to pass over the vocal cords.”
Boris nodded, and held up his glass to be refilled. He could not help but stare at her. He had seen hundreds of cadavers over the course of his career, and was in no doubt that another one was in front of him. Her face had no colour to it. People that were ill, Boris had observed, were frequently told that they were ‘deathly pale’. This, in Boris’s experience, was ridiculous. The ruddiness of people’s skin was caused by blood, and as long as that blood was pumping people looked alive, even when full of a cold. After death, and with the heart no longer pumping, blood simply settled at the lowest point in the body. Boris looked closely at this woman. He could see no veins at her temples, or on her neck. There were none on the backs of her hands.

“Can I take your pulse?” Boris asked her. She nodded and held out her left hand.

“You’re not scared?” asked Stoker.

“What? Of the dead?” Boris said, absently. “No. I’ve seen lots of dead bodies.”

“Not,” Stoker said, “ones that still walk around.”

With no sign of a pulse in her wrist Boris stood and attempted to find one in her neck. Michelle recoiled at first, and he apologised for scaring her. Her skin was cold and dry.

“Needs moisturising,” Boris said, absently. He turned to Stoker. “How… How did this happen? She’s dead. She’s really dead,” Boris almost collapsed onto the sofa.

“For want of a better term,” said Stoker, “she’s a zombie. The animated dead, if you will, although I am fond of neither term,” Michelle glared at her brother. Boris was sure that, had it been possible, her face would have turned red. “I couldn’t face life without her, Boris. Do you understand? Have you ever loved anything so much that you could not possibly let it go? That you would do anything to keep a hold of?”

“Not really,” Boris answered.

“When I found her in the kitchen, up to her elbow in that turkey, I simply could not find the will to alert the authorities. I could not admit defeat; that death had taken her from me. Since childhood she is all I have ever aspired to. She is everything to me – my heart. Without her as my muse I could not hope to ever paint anything again. She is the reason that I can pick up a brush. When I show my paintings I do not take pride in my work. I am not displaying my talent for the public, but revealing my love for Michelle to the world,” Stoker was leant forward, and gestured emphatically with every sentence.

Boris was not the kind of man that judged other people too quickly. He had come to realise, over the years, that once you accepted people for who they are it was possible to put up with any number of faults.

After listening to Stoker since he had first opened the door, Boris came to the conclusion that he was, in fact, a wanker. The man obviously loved the sound of his own voice, and enunciated every word with such precision that he could have given the Royal Family tips on public speaking.

“I have long been interested in the occult – that veiled realm between this world and the next. Over the years I have come to make acquaintances with people who have certain talents. There is a man in Spain who can commune with the dead. This is not some charlatan that exhibits their ‘talents’ for the paying masses, but someone who lives in seclusion, tormented by the spirits that haunt him. He rarely leaves his hut in the country, and actively discourages visitors.”

“How did you meet him?” Boris asked.

“Through his website,” Stoker replied. “I have spoken with women who can channel demons, and children who can heal terminal illnesses with a single touch. There are marvels in this world, Boris, which you can scarcely imagine. There are also practitioners of dark arts from Haiti – Bokor’s who are adept at the art of vodou.”

“Who does that do?” asked Boris.

“Sorcerers that practice voodoo. I know of a man who lives in Leeds that can raise the dead. When I found my sister I knew that I had to call him…”

“Right,” said Boris. “Got it. You called a voodoo witchdoctor that turned your dead sister into a zombie.”
“Well, yes, but there is more to it than that.”

“It’s okay. I get the idea.”

“But do you not want to know the rest?”

“That’s okay,” said Boris, raising his hands in defeat. “Let’s just skip that bit. Can I have another glass of brandy?”

Stoker looked annoyed that he would not get to finish the tale in the manner that he wanted. Boris guessed that he had probably been rehearsing it for days. He was gracious enough to pour another drink, though.

“There were side effects that I did not anticipate, however. Although she was returned to me she is still dead,” Stoker moved across to his sister and placed a hand gently onto her head. “There are issues with decomposition, and also problems with the pooling of blood. When she walks around for longer than a few minutes the blood collects in her legs. It becomes almost impossible for her to walk with any degree of grace and she has to use her arms for balance, or she topples over.”

“You mean the ‘zombie shuffle’, don’t you?”

“That’s one way of describing it, I suppose. Mostly though, she just looks dead. Her eyes are slowly sinking into her head; her skin is almost bleach white.”

Boris ran his thumb across Michelle’s lips. They were pale, cracked and dry. Her eyes, too, needed some moisture. She stared at him. Boris was not a man blessed with much in the way of imagination, or romanticism, but her green eyes caused a rarely felt lurching of his heart.

“I knew when I found her that I could not carry on without her. My painting was at an end. I have tried, before, to paint something without her in it, but they all turned out to be as lifeless and dead as my sister is now. She brings my paintings to life. Without her…” Stoker’s voice trailed off, dramatically.

Boris’s hands examined Michelle’s skin as Stoker spoke. He moved her wrists and elbows, flexed her fingers – checking the joints as he moved.

“What, exactly, do you want me to do, Mr Stoker?”

“I have tried, daily, to paint my sister. We sit for hours as I attempt to capture the essence that, in death, has left her. The magic that once exuded from her skin is now stale – the light that shone from her eyes…”

“Does he always talk like this?” Boris asked Michelle in a whisper. She smiled, which was about the moment that Boris fell in love with her, even though he was completely unaware of it at the time.

“You are the most celebrated post-mortem make-up artist in Europe, and possibly the world. People say that after you have worked your wonders the deceased looks more alive than before their death. I want you to work that magic on Michelle. Make her look alive for me. Without her I cannot paint, and if I cannot paint then I am as dead as her. Please, Boris Deluge, I implore you. Bring my sister back to life for me.”

Boris glanced at Michelle, and then back to Stoker.

“Okay,” he said.

Although Boris had an innate skill for making up the dead, there were other aspects of dealing with cadavers that he’d had to learn when he joined the funeral business. It was not suffice to simply stick someone first into a suit or dress, then into a box and finally into the ground. There were many other parts that lay behind the scenes, which the bereaving family would not really want to know about.

Michelle, Boris knew, would be decaying. Evidently a zombie decayed at a different rate to a normal cadaver, but it was happening regardless. Boris could see it in the tone of her skin, and feel it in her joints when he moved them. Given enough time they would cease to move. Once that happened it would eventually lead to bits of her turning black and dropping off.

“She needs embalming,” Boris told Stoker.

Although Boris kept the facts of the situation to himself, he managed to get Hardcastle to agree to send up the equipment that was required. The funeral directors questions stopped when Boris told him that Stoker would be adding another 50% onto the fee for Boris’s attendance.
The equipment was easy enough to get posted, but even Hardcastle drew the line at posting embalming fluid via the Royal Mail. If it was discovered he would probably be arrested under the terrorism act. It did not remain a problem for long, as within half an hour of speaking to Hardcastle, Boris received a call from Big Bob Burgess, a friend of Hardcastle’s that ran a funeral home in Manchester.

Formaldehyde would be too efficient in this case, Boris knew. Although they needed to halt the process of decay in Michelle (or slow it down as much as possible, at least), formaldehyde would make it virtually impossible for her to move. Boris decided upon Glutaraldehyde, which (if used in the correct amounts) shouldn’t restrict her movements too much, and should achieve the desired results.

Boris did not tell Stoker or Michelle that he knew all of this in theory only. He had spent many hours with Deirdre, the embalmer, and had been hoping to expand his skills, but had never been anything more than an observer.

It took 2 days to get everything together for the embalming process, and Boris spend the majority of that time practicing on Michelle.

The artist had wanted to be involved in the whole process, even if it meant watching Boris do nothing, but Boris had refused. He paused only to ensure that there was no risk that Michelle might attempt to tear out his throat or eat his brains.

Stoker brought down paintings that he thought ‘captured the true beauty’ of his sister. Boris spent a long time looking at them. Photo albums were piled high on the coffee table, that Boris flicked through for hours at a time.

Michelle sat next to him, his silent companion. A table was set up in the middle of the room, at which point Boris became ridiculously embarrassed.

“Um,” he said. “I need you to take your clothes off.”

Michelle stared at him. Sometimes there seemed to be a hidden intelligence in her eyes. At other times (usually when Stoker was droning on about something or other) she looked like nothing more than an empty shell.

Boris took a pack of disposable razors out from his bag. “I have to shave you,” he said.

Boris had shaved many, many cadavers over the last few years. He did not become embarrassed. He had shaved men, women and children with a detachment that came with the job. Normally it was just the face and hands – anything that might be on show in an open casket. Even the fine ‘fluff’ that covered the faces of people had to come off. It was the first trick of putting make-up on a corpse. If you do not shave the deceased then the make-up simply become clogged and no longer does its job.

Michelle, however, was not going into a coffin. This was a corpse that would constantly be moving around. Stoker wanted her to ‘pass for alive’, which meant that Boris would have to shave her entire body (within reason, of course).

He eventually got her naked and on the table. Boris first rubbed moisturiser all over her. He massaged it into the skin, and rotated the joints carefully. Once she was glistening he began to shave, after asking her to please close her eyes. It was a little disconcerting to have a corpse watching you work on it. He started on her face, concentrating intently. The slightest nick would never heal. Michelle remained perfectly still, and his nervous hands began to work automatically. It was almost like working on a normal cadaver.

He shaved her face and neck, her breasts, torso, arms and hands. He shaved her legs, feet and toes. By the time he had finished he had worked his way through 12 razors, but Michelle was virtually fuzz free.

There wasn’t a great deal that he could do with the eyes. Over the last six months they had sunken into her skull, and Boris did not want to risk pulling them back out again. It was only a few centimetres, and with the correctly applied make-up no one but the most observant would even notice. There was, however, something that he could do about the ‘deadness’ of the eyes.

Boris pulled an eyedropper from his bag of tricks and gently put three drops into each eye. Almost immediately the eyes became more vibrant. The colour suddenly seemed brighter and more alive.
“Good lord,” Stoker would say upon seeing these ‘new’ eyes. “How on earth did you manage that?”

Boris would hold up the pipette. “Extra Virgin Olive Oil, mixed with a little white wine vinegar. Makes the eyes shiny, although I’m not too sure if she will actually be able to, y’know – see.”

The regime that Boris put in place for Michelle’s continued good ‘health’ was extensive. Her skin needed to be kept supple, so baby oil had to be administered twice daily. The eye-drops needed to be done every hour, or her eyes would dry up like plums left in the sun. Boris also supplied a small spray that could be used to moisten the mouth when required. Her lips, also, needed almost constant balming.

“This is too much to remember, Boris,” said Stoker. “I thought that my sisters beauty regime was bad enough when she was alive, but it’s even worse now that she is undead!”

“If you want to keep her in good condition then this is what you have to do. If not she will continue to decompose until eventually she rots away.”

“Can you make her the way that she was before, Boris? Can your return my beloved sister to me?”

“No,” said Boris, honestly. She was dead. Nothing more than an empty shell. The essence of her had long since gone. Boris did not know what it was, (if anything) that remained behind, but it was a dead thing. “But I can make her *look* like your sister did.”

This seemed to satisfy Stoker.

It would have been much easier to take Michelle to a professional funeral home to be embalmed, but the risks vastly outweighed the benefits. Chief among those risks was explaining to the embalmer why the deceased was still walking around.

Boris borrowed Stoker’s laptop and found a Do It Yourself Embalming website with step by step instructions on how to embalm a cadaver. Boris read it a few times to remind himself of the process, and was fairly certain that everything was on there.

The pre-embalming procedure had already been completed with the shaving of the body and moisturising of the skin. Boris ran his hand up Michelle’s arm – it was lovely and smooth, although a little cold.

Normally the next step in the process would be the setting of the features (eye-caps to hide the sunken eyes, suture string tied through the lower and upper jaw to keep the mouth closed, that sort of thing), but in this case it was not required.

Michelle was lying down, naked once more. Boris looked down at her.

“I’m sorry if this hurts,” he said.

Boris bent over to examine the area around her right collar bone. He was trying to find the right common carotid artery and the right internal jugular vein (the easiest points from which to administer the embalming fluid). He made a small cut, opened the wound and brought the artery and vein above the surface. This small act took ten minutes.

“Artery in, jugular out… Artery in, jugular out…” Boris repeated. The chemicals would be pumped into the artery, and the bodily fluids would come out of the jugular. It was best not to get these two mixed up.

The main instrument in the process was the embalming machine. It had always looked, to Boris, like a gigantic food mixer. Into the clear body of the machine he poured anti-coagulants to clear out the many clots that must have developed in Michelle’s system over the last six months. He poured in preservatives, germicides, dyes, and perfume. Finally he poured in the Glutaraldehyde.

Michelle weighed just over eight stones. Judging from the photographs, paintings and what Stoker had told him, she had probably lost a couple of stones through dehydration since her death. If Boris had a starting weight of 10 stones, that would mean Michelle required approximately three gallons of embalming fluid to do the trick.

Boris wore goggles and a facemask. He was wore a chemical protection suit that would not have looked out of place in a film about an infectious disease sweeping the world. His hands were covered in thick plastic gloves that stretched up to his elbows, and his feet were housed inside Wellington boots.

He had no idea what this would do to Michelle. On
the one hand he could hardly make things worse. On the other he had no idea if this would be in any way painful for her. Could she feel pain? He had no idea.

Boris took the tube connected to the embalming machine and threaded it into Michelle’s carotid artery. He took another tube and threaded it into her jugular vein. Normally this would expel the waste material directly into the sewerage system, but that was out of the question here. Instead Boris had managed to find a 5 gallon plastic container. That should be more than enough.

This was the part that Boris had agonised over, but had come to the conclusion that there really was only one solution.

There was no way to know if Michelle would find this painful. There was no way to know her reaction to the carcinogenic chemicals running through her system. She might stoically lay there as if she was on a sun bed, or she may start thrashing around as if being attacked by an invisible crocodile.

With another apology Boris strapped her wrists and ankles to the sides of the table. She didn’t seem to mind.

Boris took a deep breath and switched the machine on. It was set to the ‘pulse’, which simulated the pumping of the heart. He watched as the embalming fluid flowed down the tube and into Michelle’s vein. Her body immediately tensed. She didn’t grit her teeth or ball her hands into fists, and there was the barest tremor of the eyes under their lids, but Boris could see it. He reached out and touched her hand.

Boris could remember the first time that he had witnessed the arterial fluid being administered. It had been bizarre and enthralling, and each time after it never ceased to amaze him. He watched as it ran through Michelle’s veins, causing them to swell as the preservative flooded her system. It was most noticeable on the backs of the hands. The fluid had a tint of blue to it, so that when people saw it in the veins they would think it was blood.

Veins began to thicken all over her body. Boris opened the tube from her jugular, and a splatter of blood clots the size of pebbles slid down the side of the container. With each pulse more blood and bodily fluids came out. Even behind the mask the stench was unbearable. Boris wanted to run from the room, but instead tightened his grip on Michelle’s hand. She stared at him.

Boris released his grip and began to massage the extremities. He had to make sure that the fluid was evenly distributed, and wasn’t collecting in any one place.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Michelle just looked at him.

The flesh was starting to firm up as the Glutaraldehyde did its job. It wasn’t as severe or startling as Formaldehyde, but Boris could still feel its effects under his hands.

With each pulse the container filled up.

Two gallons had gone into Michelle, but over three had come out. It was read and black and green. It stank, like returning home after a couple of days to find that the fridge had broken and the 3lbs of mince in there had gone off. Occasionally the jugular tube would become blocked, and Boris would have to momentarily pause the machine to work free whatever it was blocking the tube. Most of the time it was a blood clot, but there were other, solid and unidentifiable bits that Boris needed to excise from the tube.

Michelle was slowly filling up with the embalming fluid. Her fingers became less skeletal. Her stomach expanded and her legs firmed up. She remained tense throughout the whole experience.

Formaldehyde would have frozen her in that position, but the Glutaraldehyde would allow movement. If it worked the way that Boris planned then she would need no more than regular massage to get moving. If she remained in one position for too long then she might need some coaxing to get the joints active, but nothing too strenuous.

The container for Michelle’s bodily fluids reached the brim, and began to spill over. There was nothing that Boris could do about it, so he ignored it (making sure to step over it when needed). By the time the embalming fluid began to pump out of the jugular (the easiest indication that the process was complete) there was, perhaps, five pints of waste that had come out of Michelle that was now on the floor.
Boris stroked her hair and said; “There you go – all done now.”

He tied off the arterial and jugular vessels, and then sutured and sealed the incision that he had made on her shoulder.

The whole process had gone shockingly well. Boris tried to read something in Michelle’s eyes, but they just held the illusion of life. She looked better, of course. Fuller. Her skin had started to take on detail. There was a vein running down her forehead. A thick one ran down her right arm, and the backs of both hands were alive with blue lines.

Boris put a dressing gown on her and called Stoker from upstairs. He bounded into the room like a child on Christmas morning. Boris thought that the artist was going to burst into tears when he saw his sister.

Stoker ran to her with his arms outstretched, and skidded through the pool of her bodily fluids on the floor. By the time he had struggled to his feet, his hands slipping and sliding in the waste matter, he was virtually covered in the stuff. It was in his hair and on his hands. It had splashed across his face and stained his t-shirt and trousers.

Boris helped him up, and the artist returned upstairs with the attitude of a child on Christmas morning that had discovered the XBox he had asked for was actually a dead gerbil.

Boris was sure, however, that he could see something new in Michelle’s eyes. A glint. He could swear he saw a hint of a smile play upon her lips when Stoker had been sliding and swearing in the blood.

He took the night off, went to the pub, and got drunk. It was the first time that Boris had consumed more than a polite amount of alcohol. He quite enjoyed it at the time, but felt, the next day, that it might have been a mistake.

Over the course of the ninety minute drinking session at the Dog and Partridge Boris convinced himself of many things. Firstly, that he was not in love with Michelle. Secondly; that there was something there. There was a spark in her eyes. He had seen her smile. He could sense that she was more than just a dead shell. Thirdly, that Stoker was a selfish, self absorbed arsehole. He didn’t want his sister back – he wanted his success back. Stoker had not finished a painting since her death. Those that he had attempted had ended up defaced or destroyed. Michelle deserved better than that. Fourthly; Boris realised that he was no good at pool, and to never accept a ‘friendly’ challenge from a dwarf in a strange pub.

Boris woke up the next morning with his wallet £100 lighter and his head considerably heavier.

One of the reasons for his drinking had been the next phase in the embalming process. The arterial fluid he had pumped in would sort out the skin, muscles and the organs themselves. Unfortunately what was in the organs would continue to decompose. Gases, fluids and bacteria would speed up decomposition, and the smell they produced wasn’t exactly ocean fresh.

Michelle showed no reaction as he used the trocar, although Boris had never felt worse. The trocar was a long metal tube with blades at one end, and was about the most fearsome instrument in an embalmer’s repository. Boris used it to pierce Michelle’s abdomen, just above her belly button. From there he directed it upwards, and punctured each of her internal organs. The trocar sucked out the cavity fluids and replaced them with embalming fluid.

To Boris it was more invasive than administering the arterial fluid. On occasion he had to really shove the trocar to get into the organs. They had become hard over the months, and the stench that was released from them was horrendous.

Michelle barely moved during the procedure, and Boris did not bother to strap her down. It was, he thought, because Michelle trusted him. She knew that he just wanted to help her. He refused to accept that it was because she was a dead thing.

Stoker, however, was rapidly running out of patience. He wanted to get on with his painting, but couldn’t until Michelle was back to ‘normal’. Seeing her transform from the skeletal zombie she had been upon Boris’s arrival to the fuller, post-embalmed,
Michelle had been shocking, but it still wasn’t enough. She looked better, but she did not look alive.

Normally the process would be completed within 24 hours of death. From the arterial fluid to the organ draining to the dressing of the corpse with makeup and hairstyling. Boris had to explain to Stoker that he was only a professional at the last part – the rest of it had been a new experience for him.

“Just get on with it!” Stoker had instructed. “Wouldn’t surprise me if you were dragging this out to get more money out of me.”

Boris thought it prudent not to mention that he would have done this for free.

Another few hours, however, and he would be finished.

Boris bathed Michelle in a mild disinfectant, massaged baby oil all over her body and washed her hair.

Stoker demanded that he be allowed to pick Michelle’s clothing. The only condition that Boris placed upon his choice was that it had to be either trousers or a full length skirt and a top or blouse that was not too low cut and had sleeves down to the wrist. Although Stoker had attempted to bully Boris into allowing something more revealing for his sister to wear Boris had stood fast. One had to respect the dead.

Boris chose matching underwear from Michelle’s middle drawer, and dressed her in the black skirt and white blouse that Stoker had picked out.

Although Michelle did not actively participate in getting dressed Boris still found it easier than dressing a cadaver. He could, at least, stand her up and position her as he wanted, although he resisted the urge to place her in an ‘I’m a little teapot’ pose.

He started with false fingernails, carefully gluing them into position, filing and painting them.

Boris had studied hands. Back in London he had an extensive collection of albums, full of pictures of them. They were ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots. On the left was the untouched, dead hand. On the right was the same hand after Boris had worked his magic on it. He had never shown these albums to anyone that wasn’t ‘in the trade’ (and even a few of those thought that it was either creepy or outright weird), but he was proud of them. The hands were the hardest part to get right.

There had been a documentary about movies that Boris had once watched, and there was a quote in it that had remained with Boris since he’d seen it; ‘The best special effects are the ones the audience doesn’t notice’. This was the principle that Boris attempted to uphold with his own work. He did not want someone viewing the body to notice that there was anything different about Uncle Malcolm or Aunt Gertrude. His job was not to show off his skills but to hide the imperfections that death created, and give the mourners some solace in the death of their loved one.

He dusted the knuckles with a light pink, and a slightly darker shade around the cuticles. There was a slight cut on Michelle’s left index finger that he managed to disguise. Turning the hands over, Boris took a fine red pencil and marked out the creases carefully.

Hardcastle had gently mocked Boris over the years about his obsession with hands. No other post-death make-up artist went to such lengths. Boris had pointed out that, perhaps, that was the very reason he was in such demand.

Once the hands were done Boris started on Michelle’s face. He had gathered the best photos of her that he could find, and a couple of Stoker’s paintings for reference.

Boris sat in front of her, at eye level, to apply the make up. After ten minutes he brought out the cleanser wipes and rubbed out his work. Fifteen minutes after that he had to do the same again. Within an hour of starting to paint Michelle’s face he had made no less than six attempts at it.

“What am I doing wrong?” he asked his model.

He knew her face better than any cadaver that he had ever worked on. This should, really, be so much easier than normal. He barely had to look at the reference pictures, and he didn’t need to take into account the lack of muscle when applying the make-up. Unless you were careful the flesh of a corpse’s face would gradually start to move back as gravity took effect, giving what looked to be a slight facelift
to the deceased. It wasn’t particularly noticeable (and worked in favour of some corpses), but on those with loose skin or lots of wrinkles it could make the respected dead look like they had died whilst caught in a wind tunnel. Michelle didn’t have that problem. Boris wasn’t quite sure that he understood much (if any) of the zombification process, but the muscles evidently still worked. Michelle could walk, pick things up and smile (although Boris had only seen evidence of this once, and Stoker had insisted it was wind), so Boris didn’t have to worry about adjusting his make-up to give the illusion of a living face.

So what was it? Why was it not working? Boris wandered around the room, trying to figure it out. It certainly wasn’t that Michelle was a bad subject. She was beautiful, in an undead kind of way. She was patient, never complained about how long it was taking, and didn’t give helpful suggestions.

Boris stared at her, trying to figure it out. She was still sitting in the same position that he had placed her in over an hour ago. Still staring at the same spot on the wall in front of her.

“Oh,” said Boris, as he realised what the problem was. He stood her up, walked her to the table, and helped her lie down on it.

“There,” he said once she was staring at the ceiling. “That’s better,” and he began to work.

He shaped her eyebrows and painted her lips. He coloured her cheeks, and added slight imperfections on the skin. He did not hide the scar on next to her eye that she had picked up in childhood or the mole on her temple. He carefully outlined her eyes and shaded her lips.

Boris attempted to keep Michelle looking as natural as possible, which did not mean a minimal application of make-up. Close inspection would show that there was a thick layer on her skin, but from even a foot away it looked as if she had only been given a light brushing. Her dead-white skin now had a healthy glow. Her blue lips now looked full and inviting. Her dead eyes shined with life.

“Perfect,” he said, and stopped.

He stood her up, and posed her in the middle of the room. He tried to make her look as natural as possible, which took at least fifteen minutes.
Boots, or raided her belongings for her own. The problem is that you couldn’t do it. Sure, you might have been able to put it on, and it might even have looked acceptable, but she still looked like a corpse with a bit of slap on, didn’t she?”

“You can teach me how to do it,” said the artist.

“No,” said Boris. “I can keep her looking like this, beautiful, forever. If I leave her here the make-up will become smudged. Within a day she will look like a prostitute that’s been dead for a month.”

“If I can paint her she will remain beautiful, forever.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Stoker, but she’s coming with me, and there’s nothing that you can do about it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because she’s dead. Who are you going to call? The Police? Even if you managed to convince them that you had reanimated the dead, you’d have to explain why you killed her in the first place.”

“What?” asked Stoker.

“When someone dies and I am called in, Mr Stoker, I pride myself on doing the best work that I possibly can. I go over every square centimetre of the corpse’s body. I check for imperfections and flaws that can be brought out. I treat them with more care and respect than, frequently, they had during their lives. I certainly treated Michelle with more respect in death than you did in life.”

“You’re lying,” said Stoker.

“No, I’m not. I don’t think that you physically abused her. If there had been any bruises on her skin when she died they would still be there today. But your relationship with her… it wasn’t exactly normal, was it?”

“Get out,” said Stoker. “Get out before…”

“I think you lusted after her. Well, that much is obvious, really. But, more importantly, I think she was going to leave you. I think that she’d had enough and was going to try and create her own life, away from you.”

“Lies,” said the artist, shaking his head.

“And I also found the needle mark on her arm.”

“I loved my sister!” Stoker shouted. His hands had balled into fists, and he was stalking around the room. Boris kept his voice calm, and did not move.

“At first I thought you might have poisoned her, but I’d have seen some evidence of that. I’ve dealt with murder victims before. People that are poisoned tend to have convulsions that I have to disguise. I had one client who snapped his own back after his wife decided to feed him rat poison. I figure that you either drugged her, or got her drunk, and then injected an air bubble into a vein. As soon as it hit her heart she was dead. I’ll bet that you even had your voodoo friend ready and waiting when it happened.”

“She died in the kitchen. She had an embolism.”

“No. You used it as a way for me to feel sorry for you. I rang Mr Hardcastle and he told me that you had been enquiring as to how I ended up in the trade, including how my mother died.”

Stoker screamed, and leapt at Boris.

Boris had been fully prepared for this. It had been a part of his plan. Stoker would become emotional as Boris revealed his knowledge, and easy to overpower.

Unfortunately Boris had managed to live his life without ever having a physical fight. Boris did not understand that he needed a little more than theory to see him through it. He had decided he would step out of the way as Stoker came at him. Stoker would fall to the floor as his momentum took him down and Boris would quickly emerge victorious. There was nothing else that Boris could do to him. The police could never be involved, and Stoker would never pay for his crime, but Boris wanted to ensure that he, at least, paid some sort of a price.

Boris hadn’t taken into account that the artist would leap over the sofa to get to him, however, and ended up on his back with Stoker on top of him.

Stoker rained his fists down on Boris’s face. Boris felt his nose break and his lip split, and the fight had only taken five seconds so far.
He had begun to realise that this had been a bad idea when Stoker vanished. One moment the artist was on top of him, screaming and showing every intention of committing another murder, and then he was gone.

When the room had ceased to spin Boris raised himself up on his elbows. Everything was silent. Boris struggled to his feet, and peered over the sofa.

Until he saw her, Boris had not even registered that Michelle must have moved.

She was on top of Stoker, and was making a concerted effort to chew her way through his neck. The floor beneath him was covered in blood, as was the majority of Michelle’s clothing, and her face. Stoker’s eyes were open and he was looking at Boris, but there was nothing there. Michelle tore something away, possibly a thick vein or tendon, and Stoker’s head bobbed.

Boris stared. He stood there for minutes that felt like hours, watching as his beloved finished eating through the neck. She snapped the spinal column, and freed the head from the body.

She held it up in front of her, turned to Boris and smiled. Her teeth were stained red, and blood covered the lower half of her face. Her eyes though, were untouched by the violence. The blue eye-shadow he had put on was still perfect. The eyebrows still immaculate. The green eyes themselves still sparkled.

Boris was not scared, and moved to kneel next to Michelle, over the body of her brother. She did not say anything, but looked into Boris’s eyes and continued to smile.

He put his arms around her, and held her close.
Eleven years ago, controversial Middlesex-born Doctor Who novelist Lawrence Miles introduced us to one of the most complex and mind-bending creations to appear in the BBC’s ongoing series of original Who novels: Faction Paradox. Described by their creator as a “ritualistic time-travelling guerrilla organization”, the group’s Earth base is the bizarre “Eleven-Day Empire”, bought from the British government when they first adopted the Gregorian calendar and lost the period between the third and thirteenth of September 1752. The universe of Faction Paradox revolves around a time-spanning “War in Heaven”, fought between the Great Houses and the Enemy, and while Faction Paradox do not play a central role in this battle, they work to carve their own little empire with time paradoxes and temporal impossibilities.

Faction Paradox appeared – or are alluded to, at least – in nine of the Eighth Doctor Adventures, debuting in Alien Bodies in 1997, before being spun-off in 2002 by US publishing house Mad Norwegian Press into their own stand-alone series. The Faction Paradox range began with the multi-authored faux-encyclopaedia, The Book of the War, and one of the contributing writers was Daniel O’Mahony. Daniel is a familiar name to Doctor Who fans, as author of the acclaimed Virgin New Adventure Falls the Shadow in 1994, and 1996’s Missing Adventure The Man in the Velvet Mask; and was a contributor to Telos Publishing’s acclaimed Doctor Who novella series with The Cabinet of Light in 2003. January 2008 saw Daniel’s return to Faction Paradox with Newtons Sleep, the first release from New Zealand-based publishers Random Static. But going back to The Book of the War, how did Daniel become involved with Faction Paradox in the first place?

“I got involved in a very uncomplicated way. Lawrence Miles circulated an email to writers he thought might like to contribute to The Book of the War, and I was fortunate enough to be on the list.

“This would have been in the autumn of 2001. I’d met Lawrence for the first time about a year before – Lawrence and I had both written for Virgin’s Doctor Who novel ranges in the mid-1990s, but once the BBC took back the licence for themselves, I’d dropped out and hadn’t really been following what they were doing. One of the few BBC books that I had read was Lawrence’s Alien Bodies, which was also the Faction’s first appearance. Fortunately, I’d caught up with his other books before the offer to do The Book of the War came along, or I suspect I might not have got involved.”

What was it like working on this multi-authored book? Daniel explains: “The great thing about The Book was that it was very flexible. We were allowed to write about whatever we liked. That’s one of the strengths of Faction Paradox in general – you’re not limited by a certain set of characters or ideas or themes. I suspect Lawrence was chafing at some of the restraints on the Doctor Who novels – not just the format, but the BBC guidelines and the response of some of the more conservative readers to his more recent books. I might be projecting my own thoughts onto him, but I suspect The Book of the War was his first attempt to break away from that and do something looser.

“Lawrence and I tend to think in similar ways. I used to joke that I’d submit a proposal to Virgin or the BBC and the following week Lawrence would get commissioned to write it! I felt I was on the right wavelength for The Book of the War, and I ended up writing far more for it then ended up in the final book. I was almost the biggest contributor but Simon Bucher-Jones overtook me in the final edit, which was a shame because Lawrence was offering a personally-tailored prize to whoever wrote the most. Apparently if that had been me, he would have sent a troupe of cheerleaders round to deliver my copy. I can’t remember what Simon won. I don’t think it was cheerleaders.”

Born in Croydon in 1973, the half-Irish, half-British Daniel has wanted to write for as long as he can remember: “I’ve always written. I was always creative as a child and I can remember very vividly falling in love with the idea of writing a book – of being an author – when I was still quite young. I’m not sure
I can describe it any better without ending up sounding religious, deranged or clichéd – or all three at the same time. Children have a lot of fantasies obviously, and I’m sure I imagined doing plenty of other things with my life. But with hindsight I can see there was always a kind of passion for writing and for books there. Funnily enough, I don’t think I was a great reader until I was older!

“I began to focus on writing when I was about fifteen or sixteen. I decided – as I’m sure a lot of fifteen and sixteen year olds do – that I was going to sit down and write a novel. The rest of the world had just converted completely to word processors, but I had an electric typewriter that smelled of ozone and worn-out ribbons, and I spent ages banging out rubbish on it. I didn’t finish anything and nothing I did was remotely publishable. I went through vast amounts of carbon paper, because I couldn’t afford photocopying. I probably spent more time trying to line up the sheets properly than on work!

“The big break for me was Doctor Who, which was cancelled at around the same time I was doing all this. Since it was no longer on TV, Virgin got the rights to publish original fiction based on the series. Fortunately for me, the editor, Peter Darvill-Evans, decided that they were going to have an open submissions policy. Now obviously there was bound to be an element of finding new writers who’d work for next-to-nothing, almost for the love of it – but at the same time he was genuinely hoping to find new talent. I think he wanted to mould the next generation of exciting young British science fiction writers – the Iain Bankses and Christopher Priests of the 21st century – and it’s a shame for him that it didn’t quite pan out that way.

Anyway, I spent a few years pitching ideas to Virgin. I’d written Doctor Who stories for my own amusement, as I imagine most kids who watched it did, and I’d always fancied the idea of novelising one of the television stories. I’d even sent scripts to the Doctor Who production team, it was all very embarrassing. Virgin turned this from something I did for fun into a decent learning curve. It took about three years before I got anywhere with them and the process of pitching and facing rejections then redrafting or coming up with fresh ideas helped focus my mind on the craft and the discipline of writing. It’s easy for a teenager to send a script to a TV series because the chances of it getting through are non-existent, so there’s no pressure to make it any good. But Virgin was an attainable goal – seeing people like Paul Cornell move from writing fan fiction to writing professionally for the books – was an incredible goal to improve. It was really only once I’d written the two Doctor Who novels for Virgin that I started to see that I could do a lot more with my writing than I’d imagined when I started out messing around with the typewriter and the carbon paper.”

Following The Book of the War in 2002, Mad Norwegian Press published five Faction Paradox novels. Were there any plans for Daniel to write his own Faction novel? “We talked about it. Lawrence was interested in getting me to write one. I gather, though I had no direct contact with him so I can’t say for sure, that [Mad Norwegian Press publisher] Lars Pearson was less enthusiastic. My Telos Doctor Who novella The Cabinet of Light came along at just the right time, and got a very positive response, so that might have assuaged some of his doubts. I was feeling quite frustrated by the limitations of writing series fiction, specifically Doctor Who, but Faction Paradox was tempting because it offered much more creative freedom. I’d initially thought that I’d have to develop something based on ideas I’d come up with for The Book of the War, but Lawrence encouraged me to think of something completely new instead.

“It helped that I was talking to Telos Publishing about writing an original novel for them by this stage. That took a lot of the psychological pressure off of me. In the end that turned out to be Force Majeure, which eventually came out in 2007, but was an idea that I’d originally pitched to Virgin’s original science fiction novel range. At one point it was going to be my Faction Paradox proposal for Mad Norwegian, but the first idea that I actually formally pitched to Lawrence was the ancestor of Newtons Sleep.”

The Mad Norwegian Press run of Faction Paradox novels was destined to be short-lived, however, and the series was dropped in 2006 with the publication of Kelly Hale’s Erasing Sherlock. It was just prior to this that Daniel began pitching his story:

“This was the start of 2005, when the Mad Norwegian range still seemed quite healthy. Mags L. Halliday’s lovely Warring States was due out imminently, and I think I knew that Erasing Sherlock
was going to be the next book after that. Lawrence had then pencilled in two other writers who had ideas or pitches with him, and we thought that my book would be the next after them. My first idea was something very intricate, interweaving two apparently separate but mirrored storylines, but Lawrence wasn’t keen on the strand set in the present day – which admittedly I hadn’t developed particularly far – and suggested an historical period instead. That became England in the second half of the 17th century, which I’ve always found to be a fascinating time, and which seemed to encapsulate a lot of the themes I wanted to explore. Then gradually the other storyline withered away and left me with the seed of *Newtons Sleep*.

“If I’d stuck with my initial idea I think I would have run into trouble. I tend to over-write but it was becoming clear that Mad Norwegian Press was looking for slimmer novels. After the first two books, which are fairly hefty, they suddenly get very skinny and I understand at least a couple were trimmed fairly ruthlessly from the manuscripts. I wouldn’t have enjoyed doing that. Also, I’m not sure that Mad Norwegian would have let me get away with some of the things that Random Static did – there’s a fair amount of explicit sex and language in the finished book that I don’t think is a big deal, but Mad Norwegian might have disagreed!

“I’m still not sure exactly what happened to the range. I hadn’t really got the proposal right and it stopped being quite so current. I heard rumours that Mad Norwegian were planning to relaunch the novels as a more conventional series with recurring characters, and I’m not sure I would have been interested in writing for that. As it was, they just seemed to stop. I was still keen enough on *Newtons Sleep* to suggest trying to find another publisher, and Lawrence was happy for me to do that, but that petered out as well. So I stopped thinking about it.”

In 2007, Random Static announced that they had acquired the Faction Paradox range, relaunching the series with *Newtons Sleep*. So how does *Newtons Sleep* fit into the Faction Paradox series, and given the complexities of this universe, what should readers unfamiliar with the series expect? Daniel explains: “*Newtons Sleep* is about the 17th century. It begins in the 1640s with the execution of King Charles I in the aftermath of the English Civil War. It takes in the years of Oliver Cromwell’s rule, the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, the plague and the Great Fire of London, the Scientific Revolution, the Popish Plot, the struggle over the succession to the throne, and goes right up to the Glorious Revolution in 1689 when England was effectively invaded by the Dutch. But it’s a time travel story so you don’t necessarily see all those things in that order!

“There was a lot going on in that period, so the book covers a lot of ground. Isaac Newton is in it, but he’s not the focus of the story. He’s a kind of two-faced historical figure, looking forward to the modern scientific age, while at the same time being immersed in alchemy and esoteric learning. William Blake pictured him as this Titan-like, amoral scientist obsessed with measurement and mechanics – I think that view infected me a bit, he was too big to fit properly in the novel. But he is in there, kept at a distance!

“The main historical ‘guest star’ is Aphra Behn, who was a real person, a Restoration playwright and the first woman to write professionally in English. She was also a spy, archly-royalist, archly-conservative – this is a period when everyone’s political, and their politics inform every aspect of their lives. We know next to nothing about the details of her life, so I made something up for her! The second principal character is Nathaniel Silver, who’s fictional. He’s a soldier-turned-philosopher-turned-scientist. He fought for parliament and almost died during the Civil War. In the aftermath he’s out to experiment with new types of knowledge and politics and social organisation. He’s an idealist in a period when the world wasn’t particularly kind to idealists. He’s also the focus of the events that are happening on a cosmic level, which is where Faction Paradox come in.

“You don’t need to know a thing about Faction Paradox or to have read anything else about them to appreciate *Newtons Sleep*. If you’ve encountered them before, you’ll probably spot things that new readers won’t, but there’s nothing in the book that isn’t explained in context. Faction Paradox in general is about a vast war between cosmic powers being conducted throughout the whole of time and space. Faction Paradox itself is a time-travelling voodoo terrorist cult, who are involved in the war but are getting squeezed between the two major antagonistic powers. They’re looking for advantages anywhere they can. In *Newtons Sleep* one front of the war is beginning to erupt on Earth in the 17th
century, so the Faction recruit a totally ordinary woman from 1665 into their ‘family’ to act as their agent in this period. She’s the third major character, Little Sister Greenaway.

“So the story is seen entirely from the point of view of ‘local’ people and filtered through their perceptions. The reader learns what’s going on along with them, though we’ve got certain advantages. No one from the 1660s is going to have much of a grasp of what we call ‘time travel’, for instance. I was very much influenced by Gene Wolfe and his skill at concealing his ‘real’ story in plain sight, while completely wrongfooting both his characters and inattentive readers. In the end I’m a bit – actually, a lot – more explicit than he ever is. I can’t compete with him but he gave me something to aim for, and there are a few nods to his work along the way.

“I’m confident that Newtons Sleep works completely as a standalone novel, that anyone could pick this up and give it a whirl and come away satisfied. Is it a good jumping-on point for Faction Paradox? I hope so. The question implies that readers will get to the end and think, ‘That was good. Maybe I should try some more.’ That’d be a result, though they’ll find that all the previous books also stand alone to the same extent – there are recurring themes and ideas but no set cast or location. So they all stand on their own merit. This is Random Static’s first book, so I’m sure they’re hoping as much as I am that Newtons Sleep will have readers thinking: ‘Yes. Now give me some more!’

So how did Daniel come to write the first Faction Paradox novel from Random Static? “Well, once Mad Norwegian were out of the picture, Lawrence got the offer from Random Static. I heard about that while they were still negotiating and got in contact with Random Static’s publisher Kelly Buchanan – at that stage just to exchange ideas and offer encouragement. I wasn’t pitching anything. I’d reached the conclusion that Newtons Sleep wasn’t going to happen, and even if I did get an opportunity to write for Faction Paradox I’d
probably want to start again with a fresh idea.

“A few months later Kelly got back in touch. She’d been sounding out various writers about the relaunch and Lawrence had told her that I’d been interested. I still thought I’d rather come up with a new proposal, but I sent her various different outlines for Newton’s Sleep just as a courtesy, and in the process I rediscovered my enthusiasm for the whole idea. It wasn’t like dusting off an old synopsis – the outline still needed a completely new draft, which helped me get back into it.

“The big change from earlier versions was that this time Faction Paradox were in it! I’d not included them in the Mad Norwegian Press proposals – which wasn’t unusual, as Lawrence’s universe has a lot more to it than just them, and a lot of the earlier books had homed-in on other elements completely. But Kelly was quite insistent that they should appear, and I’m really grateful to her for insisting on it. Once they were there they added a whole new dynamic to the plot and fixed a lot of the problems I’d been having back in 2005. Organising a story isn’t really my strong point, but the finished version of Newton’s Sleep is probably the most plot-intensive novel I’ve ever written and I think it’s all the stronger for that.

“I didn’t really imagine it would be the first book from Random Static. I wrote it a lot faster than either Kelly or I expected, so it ended up as the debut by default, more or less. It’s a good thing that I was persuaded to include Faction Paradox as new readers might be completely confused otherwise – as opposed to just partly confused!”

When it came to actually writing the novel, Daniel admits that it was a bit of a convoluted process: “The idea was there from the start but the shape went through a lot of weird mutations. When Lawrence first suggested an historical story I had – for reasons that now escape me – been thinking about Isaac Newton, and he took the opportunity to barge his way to the forefront of my thoughts. It was one of those completely inspirational moments that I can’t explain, but as I looked at it more rationally, I realised I was less interested in his life as I was in his ideas, and the times he lived through. This was an incredibly turbulent time politically, but also socially, philosophically, scientifically, economically, in terms of religion, and there was a general sense that Europe was opening up to the existence of a much wider world than it had previously imagined.

“I decided I didn’t want to put Newton at the centre of the story, partly because he has a quite well-documented life and I didn’t want to pull that apart for the sake of fiction, but also because I didn’t want him to dominate or distort the story. It feels very Doctor Who-ish to build an historical storyline around someone whose face you might find on banknotes. I wanted to keep the real movers and shakers of the period at arm’s length, and while Newton does appear I knew from an early stage that he wouldn’t be the focus of the story.

“But I did want to have at least one real person as a lead character and once I’d thought of Aphra Behn everything seemed to fit. She was born just before the outbreak of the Civil Wars and died just months after the Glorious Revolution, so her life overlapped the period I was interested in almost exactly. There was so much about her life and work that I realised would illuminate the story I had in mind. On top of that, you could write the verified details of her life on the back of a postcard: her life is a blank, so I could invent stuff freely while also making that lack of detail a character trait and a factor in the story. She was a spy, and I loved that she seemed to have been an appallingly bad spy. From what little we know, and from what we can surmise from her writing, she comes across as wonderfully contradictory and complex. I loved writing for her, and I hope I did her justice.

“The main problem with the outline was getting the structure right. There was going to be a lot of time travel involved, but I wanted a non-linear structure anyway. I knew I was going to be covering a lot of history but didn’t want it to be an uncomplicated chronicle of the times. I don’t think it’s too confusing in the finished version – it could have been a lot worse – but I didn’t really nail it until it quite late in the day. That was another inspirational moment, when suddenly I knew exactly how it was going to work.

“The actual writing was fairly quick. I’d spent two and a half years thinking about it and rehearsing it in my head, so a lot of it just flowed very quickly. I managed to surprise Kelly by delivering a quarter of first draft after the first two weeks. Starting is always the hardest part for me. Every time I begin a big project like this I always go in with the
expectation that I’m not up to the task, so it’s a relief to get anything done at all, and even towards the end I’m still convinced I’m never going to make it. It actually took about four months altogether, though I took a month off in the middle to write the script for Return to the Web Planet for Big Finish’s Doctor Who audio range, which was on the cards at the same time.

“I stuck fairly close to the outline in the first draft. The third section saw the biggest changes, but that was the vaguest part of the synopsis anyway, and I started out with a sense that I was going to have to decide how it worked on the day. One of the characters really came into her own there. I’d invented her to carry a couple of scenes in the first half of the book, but after that I wasn’t sure that there was a place for her in the rest of the story. So I was planning to kill her off in the third quarter, only to find that she took on a life of her own and invented her own subplot that I hadn’t expected. It’s scary when characters do that to me, but she talked herself into staying alive for the remainder of the story!

“One chapter got heavily rewritten later, after some very prolonged discussions with Kelly, but it was always a bit of a problem. I think we had a good working relationship. Once we knew that it was going to be the first book it became very important to me that it was as good a book as I could make it – not that I was planning to skimp otherwise, but I knew it was a responsibility and I didn’t want to let Random Static down. I hope I haven’t.

“There was a worrying moment when it looked like the finale of the third series of Doctor Who was going to pre-empt the plot of ! Fortunately that didn’t quite happen, but it was touch-and-go for a week! I don’t really think of Faction Paradox as being a Doctor Who spinoff any more – if it ever really was – but I did feel obliged to put in a couple of surreptitious nods to the end of the 2007 series. I don’t think they hurt Newtons Sleep at all. I’m not sure anyone’s even noticed!

Despite Random Static being based on the other side of the world, Daniel didn’t find it posed any problems during the creation of Newtons Sleep: “The obvious thing to say here is that email has made international communication a lot easier. Kelly and I discussed the book in great detail before and during the writing, and I don’t think that would have been possible even ten years earlier. When I worked for Virgin in the mid-1990s everything was done by post or by phone, which would have been hugely impractical when talking to Random Static. Without email the plotting in particular couldn’t have gone nearly as well. It’s much harder to bounce ideas freely back and forth by airmail.

“Having said that, most of my communication with Telos on The Cabinet of Light and Force Majeure was also done by email, and they’re only based in Surrey! I’m sure there are times when [Telos publisher] David Howe would have preferred me just to pick up the phone and talk problems over with him! With Random Static that really wasn’t an option, but it all went smoothly. I didn’t get to talk to Kelly in person until we did a webcam linkup for the book launch, which was held in New Zealand. Obviously that’s another big difference – if they’d been based in the UK I would have been able to turn up to sign books, sitting in the corner and looking nervous. As it was I ended up projected ten feet high on a big screen, probably terrifying potential readers in the process!”

With the Faction Paradox series now relaunched with Newtons Sleep, Daniel has a variety of writing ideas to work on: “I don’t know if I’d do another Faction Paradox, but it would depend on having the right story, something that I’d feel totally comfortable writing in that context. I suspect it would have to be completely removed from anything in Newtons Sleep, which is the only healthy way of doing things. I don’t want to end up repeating myself. Having said that, I think Newtons Sleep could easily have been twice as long if I’d included everything I wanted. A lot got left out. Even once the plot was locked in I still kept coming up with odd factoids that I thought I could use, and as you read the book you’ll notice places where it almost looks like the story is going to veer off in a completely different direction with a whole new set of characters. Actually, sometimes it does exactly that, but most of the time I’m teasing. Those directions were roads not taken, and the blink-and-you-miss-them characters are off having adventures in the bits of plot I couldn’t squeeze in.

“I would have liked to have set more of Newtons Sleep in America, which is a kind of great blank terrifying wilderness off-stage. I can imagine Faction Paradox might be the ideal series for a big Pynchonesque system novel that’s the secret history
of America. Whether I’d be the right author for that is another matter! There’s a lot about Hollywood and native Americans in *The Book of the War*. We’re supposed to assume collective responsibility for that, but I understand it was a couple of US-based elements of our gestalt who wrote those bits, so an American book might be better coming from them.

“That’s just one example. There’s a lot of space and a lot of flexibility to Faction Paradox and coming up with ideas isn’t really an issue. If I thought I had something worthwhile I’d certainly pitch it, though of course the final decision would be up to Random Static and Lawrence Miles – and they might hate it!

“Generally though, I’m just plugging away with my own ideas. I spent most of the past decade working on a sort-of-mainstream-historical-magic-realist novel that I finally finished recently and I’m trying to place with a publisher. That sort of undefinable fiction is the seam I’m trying to mine at the moment. I don’t think I have it in me to write full-blown science fiction, though I’m quite pleased with *Newtons Sleep* which is my stab at a proper SF novel – certainly moreso than my *Doctor Who* books, which kept wibbling off into the most irrational margins of the genre. I’m glad I’ve managed to be able to get one out of my system. I can look at it with something like pride and say, ‘Right, I’ve done that. What next?’"

Finally, with five-and-a-half novels, four audio dramas and one novella already published, does Daniel have any advice for readers trying to break into writing? "I’m a full-time writer in the sense that I can’t hold down a proper job. Writing is the only thing I can do. I’ve been rubbish at everything else. Uncharitable readers might say that I’ve been rubbish at the writing as well...

“Actually, the most rewarding jobs I’ve had – in spiritual rather than financial terms! – have been in bookshops. I’ve also taught writing to degree students, which I enjoyed and is something I’d like to go back to if I had the opportunity. I’m not sure that the instinct for writing is necessarily something that can be taught, but the craft of it can, and so can all the boring technical stuff about what punctuation mark goes where. To be honest I’m not sure about the last one myself – I was misinformed at school and had to re-learn it all from looking at how the proper books did it.

“Even though I’ve taught it, I do feel it would appear incredibly arrogant if I started dishing out advice! Partly that’s because I was very, very lucky to get the breaks I did. I was there at the right moment when Virgin’s *Doctor Who* books came along and it was lucky that they were willing to offer the creative freedom that they did. Five or six years later BBC Books took over the rights, and were much more conservative in their approach – not just in terms of content but also about the shape and tone that they imagined a *Doctor Who* story should take. I was never commissioned for a BBC Book despite trying and despite having the experience, so I don’t think there’s any way I would have got past them as a novice. If I’d been even a couple of years younger my first break wouldn’t have happened.

“Nowadays of course it’s even harder to get into *Doctor Who* and there’s even less room for writers to be creative and do their own thing. I always looked on *Doctor Who* as a short-cut, but that’s gone now. If you want to write now you have to go the hard way – sorry! Peter Darvill-Evans used to say that if all you wanted to do is write *Doctor Who* then you’re probably not a writer. I think that still holds true, but I don’t think it was a bad place to start.

“Even so I’ve still only just begun writing original fiction of my own, and getting to where I wanted to be. I was afforded a tremendous amount of freedom with *Newtons Sleep* and with my *Doctor Who* novella *The Cabinet of Light* – while *Force Majeure* is quite unambiguously a standalone original novel and I’m glad I got that far. But they are still only first steps. I hope I might have a chance to go further, but until then I would feel a phoney if I insisted on impressing my advice on anyone. All I can say with any certainty is that if you have stories that you’re burning to tell – if the idea of putting all the themes and images and characters and emotions in your head down on paper then letting them loose in the world is something that actually viscerally excites you – well, then you have something and you should work on it. If you just want to be a writer for the money and the glory then don’t bother. Go and rob a bank instead! It’d be easier, it’s more glamorous and you’d get more than 7.5% of the proceeds!"

Many thanks to Daniel O’Mahony. For more information Faction Paradox and to download an exclusive online-only prelude to *Newtons Sleep*, visit http://www.randomstatic.net/
THE DOPPLE GANG PART 3: DOPPLE GANG INITIATION

Colin Sinclair

Had been since The Lady pulled him straight into the multi-coloured melee that was... well, whatever the hell they called that arrival place. Arrivals, most likely. The Lady took the lead, threading through the swirling rainbow chaos; a hustle and press and clamour of thousands of people who seemed to know exactly where they going. Many of them had clearly decided that Jake was in the way.

No one paid them much attention. Lady and her gorilla must be the average day here, thought Jake. Half-way through the scurry was when The Lady had started with the pointing and the speaking in tongues. A jumble of sounds that seemed a lot like real information; all of it thinly sliced and slathered with meaningless gibberish and jargon.

“You got your Animalists,” she announced, “and your Animex. Animats. Aviants, Imps and Nativists, see?” A sweep of the hand, and by the time Jake had turned to whatever she was indicating it had faded away in the storm of shapes and colours streaming through the vast room. Everything was too fast and too bright to get a clear look. Jake gave up trying to fix on anything, let it all flow over him.

“SigCadre,” the word was a sneer. “Want to front scarifying; traditonal. Not working, as usual. The Silent Crowd. Techfemmes and Facet. Unhappy Medeans; ever-so. Glass Baronets, Plushes—”

“Wait,” said Jake. “You said Plush?”

The Lady stepped in towards Jake and grabbed his hand, using it to swing his whole body round and raising Jake’s arm to aim in the direction of a very tall figure in the middle distance.

A tall grey-skinned slab, bare-chested and muscular, with an aggressive set to his broad face and pale hair chopped ragged and brutally short above a high, flat forehead. The man moved with effortless ballet dancer poise through the seething mass of fellow travellers. Anyone who saw him got out of his way, quickly.

“Plus-Humans,” said The Lady, “expanding the boundaries of physical and psychological development. That one is... Carver, sure. Generally steer well clear.”

Jake tried to see without looking, risking quick sidelong glances at Carver as the man sailed past amid the throng.

“He’s very rude,” said Jake, as he watched Carver beeline through a sombre crowd of religious looking types, scattering them in the confusion of his wake, moving on without a word. Carver seemed to slow down, a small change in his speed, a slight turn of the head.

“He also has exceptional hearing,” said The Lady, and dragged Jake away.

Arrivals was Big. Probably the largest room that Jake had ever seen. Way more volume than that Vehicle Assembly place they had down at NASA on the Florida coast, and Jake only ever saw that one on TV. Arrivals made Grand Central look like a doll’s house.

The next room was mind-numbingly huge. Epic.

Jake froze there in the entrance way and did the Tourist Thing. Just standing. Staring. Letting it soak in gradually.

The walls to his left and right were gently curved, suggesting a circle of immense diameter. The inward slope above Jake’s head rose up forever and vanished in a pale nimbus of light.

There were pillars dotted across the smooth white floor, pillars wide enough to hide a whole apartment block, stretching up and away, beyond sight.

The rhythms here were slower, calmer. None of the tumultuous energy of Arrivals. This was more his speed, but sheer scale was still a problem. He was getting dizzy from looking up, and his eyes had started to haze a little from all the glare and gleam.
White was the predominant colour. Was white even a colour? Jake was never sure but, whatever it was, there was a lot of it right here. Smooth and seamless acres of marble flooring; pristine curtain walls that glowed like new frost or scudding clouds. Jake started to wonder if snow blindness was a major health issue in this place.

“Promises to keep,” said The Lady.

Jake wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean, but a gentle nudge from Grills got the point across and they began skirting the perimeter.

Jake could see wide archways, evenly spaced and stretching away to become cavernous tunnels – one of the shorter tunnels led to a bank of silently sweeping glass elevators that housed circular plains of what looked like grass and wild flowers. Here and there were curiously shaded alcoves; enough space to park a whole city block and still have room to burn.

The air was crisp and fresh, now and again the scent of something floral or earthy would waft gently across Jake, but mostly the place just smelt of new and bright and clean.

There were people here, too, almost lost amidst the majestic dimensions. They moved silently, almost reverently, snaking lines that criss-crossed the floor, threading between the pillars: A dappled trail of industrious ants, marching over a mirror-flat tablecloth.

There were no sounds but soft footsteps, the whispers of fabric and polite murmurs of pleasant passing conversation. All shapes and sizes and colours of people and animals. Jake couldn’t help think of them as animals, even though a great many of them were walking mostly upright and wearing clothes. Probably have to work on that, thought Jake. Change up my attitude. Find the right words.

Amongst what he took to be standard issue humanity, Jake noticed stooped, dog-faced men; catlike graceful women; a few more gorillas doing that head-down all-fours walking. There may have been things with feathers, but it was kind of hard to tell at this range.

Jake wondered if they had any lemurs here. He could do without their freakish child-like appearance and crazy tree-leap movements, that was for sure. Plus, they had wicked hands just right for holding weapons, and that couldn’t be a good idea. It was so clearly a Wrong Thing.

There were transparent panels scattered along the walls, offering views of the same abundant forest that Jake had spotted from Arrivals. There were lakes and waterfalls. No sign of habitation. No tell-tale trails of cook-fire smoke or choking smogs. A whole different Eden.

“So what?” said The Lady, pause whilst Jake stuck his nose to the nearest pane of pseudo-glass and stared out across a sparkling ribbon of clear blue water.

Jake turned back, looking confused. “I did?”


“Sorry,” said Jake. “It’s just so...” He drifted off again.

“Yes,” said The Lady.

“Big.” The word sounded inadequate even as he said it.

“Yes,” said The Lady. “We find it gives people a useful sense of perspective.”

“Psychology,” said Jake. “That’s why you’re walking me to wherever we are going. Why we don’t hop in some super-speed Maglev train or - I don’t know - a matter-squirter gadget.”

The Lady seemed to be pondering that for a while. Or maybe she was wondering what the hell he was raving about. Jake found it hard to read people. Even normal workaday people; The Lady was something else entirely.

“I’m right though,” Jake said. “You want to shock and awe me straight out of the gate.”

The Lady turned to Grills. “Smarter than he looks,” she said.

Grills waved her hands around and pointed at Jake.
“Well, no,” said The Lady. “I guess it’s not that hard, but still. Impressive thought processes. From such a backward juncture too.”

Jake was trying to separate the compliment from the insult in all of that when The Lady said “Score one for my new recruit. Can we move? Fair distance still to travel,” The Lady began walking ahead, then stopped and smiled. “If only we had a mattersquirter, eh?”

In the absence of a cutting retort, Jake simply followed along.

The journey ended, eventually, at a curiously small door set back into the corner of one of the shaded alcoves. Jake looked around for a small cake with an EAT ME label.

What Jake found instead was a plastic sign with sharp black lettering:

**PROCESS & PROFILE**

There was an image on the sign. A cartoonesque human shaped figure, surrounded by a threatening circle of stylised arms. Skinny arms with multiple joints and stretched fingers. Kind of robotic looking. Each of the robo-hands carried needles, knives, other unidentified jaggedy objects. All of them were pointing resolutely inward.

“I may be having second thoughts.”

“Nothing to this,” said The Lady. “Strictly SOP. Tests, samples, stylish uniform: some press and polish. Get you badged and squared away.” She patted Jake on the back and half-guided, half-pushed him towards a door that opened into cold darkness.

“Relatively painless,” said The Lady, pushing Jake’s head down slightly so he would avoid cracking his skull on the doorframe.

“Relative to what?” said Jake, but the door had already hushed to a close behind him. The darkness faded and Jake stumble-stepped through into a sudden wall of white light, so bright that he could barely see the floor. He raised a hand to shield his face and caught vague glimpses of shapes and spaces.

“Remove clothing,” said a voice from nowhere.

And so it began.

Jake was staring into a mirror that covered a whole wall.

Time had passed, but he wasn’t really sure how much. All he got were vague flashes, images and sensations. It was like waking up after serious dental work.

He reached up a hand and touched the freshly shaved smoothness of his head. His skull was a funny shape without the hair to cover up the irregularities. Not a look he would have gone for willingly. Presumably it was part of the whole Border Patrol uniform deal.

Jake was dressed in a white, jumpsuit-style outfit. There were gloves tucked into his belt. Kind of like the outfit worn by The Lady, but she made it look real good, whereas on Jake it seemed a bit pants. If he crossed his arms he was an escaped lunatic in asylum-issue, fasten-at-the-back long johns. Maybe that was the truth of his situation: he could be strapped to a bed in Crazyville somewhere, not trying to join a super-science task force after all.

Jake’s thoughts were slippery and skittish, and catching hold of anything seemed like too much effort.

By turning is head to the right, he could see the ultra-fine barcode tattoo that was etched in the skin above his left ear. He didn’t even remember that part of the Processing. There was some screaming and falling down at one point. Maybe there was a connection.

Try and focus, Jake told himself. You walked in the door. And a voice.

The voice. Low and gruff and delivered from a mouth with too many teeth.

That voice told him to get naked.
“Hey, how about dinner and a movie first,” Jake had said.

The voice wasn’t the laughing kind.

“Look up,” said the voice.

Jake remembered staring into the refugee-from-nightmare spider mutant thing that had been hanging from the low ceiling above his head. Too many dangling metal limbs, a scattering of bright red lights, an upside down forest of spikes and knives and needles-

Jake was jagged in the neck before he could make a move. He was pretty sure that was when everything started to get a little surreal.

After that, it was random.

There was poking and scraping and scanning. No probing. Jake was sure he would remember probing. Definite taking of blood. Some questions about his lifestyle choices. Weapons. Combat. Skillset.

At one point he was gleefully telling a tale about using a paintball gun to shoot some bully in the face during a spring-break camping trip. Chas Macready. That was it. Jake laughed like a drain and Chaz squealed for a medic like they were in a real war. Great days.

Jake’s mind seemed less flighty and fuzzy now, he went back to staring into the mirror, wondering about how much of what he remembered was what really happened, and how much was maybe just fragments of old memory bubbling up through the cracks in his fragile psyche. There was something in there about Grills being an elegant and exceptional female gorilla, but that was probably a dream. Words were still getting jumbled around in his head, trying to find their place. Bioweave. Reactive-adaptive. Surface cleansing. Tagged. Rasp.

Jake shook his head. Why did he sign up for this crazy circus? Oh, yeah, it was the wasted life and the empty future.

“You took your time,” said The Lady, suddenly standing in a doorway to Jake’s left.

“It is my job,” The Lady smiled. “And your job, now.”

“So. I passed?” He couldn’t really believe it. When Jake was asked about combat experience all he could offer was taking a beating at recess and besting some guy with low-velocity paint. Could he be any more of a dork?

“Reactive adaptive,” said The Lady.

“What does that even mean?” It didn’t sound great.

“Means you put up with a lot of shit and keep going forward,” said The Lady. She stuck out her hand and smiled. “Happy to have you on the team, recruit.”

Jake shook her hand. “What’s next?”

“Follow me. You won’t want to miss Induction and Orientation.”

“Sounds painful,” said Jake warily.

“You have no idea,” said The Lady.

A theatre in the round, packed rows of seats on multiple tiers crowding a low disc shaped platform. A glowing cube hovered and spun in the air above centre stage. The Lady gestured Jake towards a couple of empty chairs near the very back of the room, in the Gods, and he set off up the steps. Jake hadnt gone far before he realised The Lady wasn’t following him. He turned back, weaving in between streaming lines of people and, yeah, things. There she was. Jake set off down the slope again.

Jake watched as The Lady stood to attention and saluted a wire-thin man in a dark burgundy suit. His style tended to the Byronic, Jake thought. One of those old romantic poet types anyway. Pale skin, body all angles, floppy shoulder length hair that swished about flamboyantly as he moved. The man returned a half-salute, half nod and Jake was close enough to hear him when he spoke. The voice was clear, cultured, sounded slightly patronising.

“Lady Clementine Appleby,” the man said. “How kind of you to join us.”
“That’s your name?” Jake misjudged his last two steps down the stairs and blundered right into the middle of the conversation. “I can see why you were keeping that one under wraps.”

“I do not believe we have been formally introduced,” the man said. His eyes were dark and cold. His smile, if you could call it that, was faintly unpleasant.

Jake offered a hand. “Rieser, Jacob. Call me Jake. Pleased to meet you, huge fan, loving your work, mister..?”

Jake was left hanging there, and when the man responded, he turned those bottomless dark eyes away from Jake and aimed his answer directly at The Lady.

“Oh, I know exactly who you are, Mister Rieser” Not even a pretence of a smile now. He made a clicking sound with his teeth. “Another new boy, Lady Clementine. Is this entirely wise?”

The Lady was polite. Relaxed. Like this was everyday stuff. But even Jake could see the tension there. “Field Operations are my responsibility, Lord Fawkes. I’ll do what I deem necessary.”

“I expect nothing less.” Lord Fawkes’ mouth twitched slightly. A nod of the head. “I would not wish to step on any toes. I merely wanted to convey the very reasonable concerns of the Solemn Overwatch Council. Tread carefully.”

Jake wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, but the whole situation screamed office politics, or some kind of chain of command deal.

Lord Fawkes turned and offered Jake a barely perceptible smile. “Good luck, Mister Rieser,” he said, and strolled off towards the stage area.

“Err, yeah, thanks.” Jake turned to The Lady. “Friend of yours, I guess?”

“Not exactly,” said The Lady as she shook her head. “Meet the new boss.”

They moved back up towards the seats and settled down as the light in the theatre turned to dusk.

“So,” said Jake, doing his best stage whisper voice.

“Do I call you Lady Clementine, or what?”

“Hush now,” said The Lady. “Show’s starting.”

Lord Fawkes took the podium to a storm of applause, spent some time waving and playing to the gallery, working the crowd, and eventually he stepped behind an old fashioned looking lectern and raised his hands for silence.

The cube above the stage stopped spinning and began displaying a rapid sequence of images that gradually slowed to a series of static frames that changed every few seconds.

Fawkes was high energy, constantly moving around the performance area, his voice amplified by some unseen mechanism that made it sound like he was right in your face the whole time. He began with welcomes, routine house-keeping business, a few statistics that Jake didn’t understand, and a long treatise on the history of Border Patrol. That particular lecture ended with a picture of what looked to be a snow angel. It was meant to be some kind of map, apparently, but Jake didn’t quite follow the explanation. It had been a long day, his head was getting heavy.

Fawkes was still talking, and Jake was beginning to wonder if this Induction thing would ever end, when a picture flashed up on the display cube and froze in place.

“This then,” said Fawkes, “is the Great Work. The task for which you have all volunteered.” He was clutching the edges of the lectern, talking in a low, serious voice. This was solemn business.

“The Collective live only to destroy. It is their reason and rhyme. They intend to bring down everything that the Border Patrol has defended for countless decades. They would shatter the alliances of the Solemn Overwatch. Fracture the delicate balance points of our existence. Unravel the Ribbon Empires and cast down the Winterlight Beacon.”

If there was more, Jake didn’t hear a word of it. White-knuckle grip on the arms of his chair. A hollow ache squirming deep inside his chest, a churning of jagged pain that made it hard to breathe. Or think.
There it was. On the screen. A young face; a hard, mean face. A couple of diagonal scars on the left cheek. Cold eyes. Sneer of a mouth. Hair cut short and neat. Jake recognised the face immediately. Aside from a few unpleasant cosmetic differences. It was obvious.

“Guess I should have mentioned this,” said The Lady.

Jake was adrift.

The face was Jacob Rieser. Enemy One.

To be continued in Pantechnicon Nine, December 2008.
Eric Peter-Kaiser and Brian Patrick O’Toole are fast becoming a force to be reckoned with in the independent horror market. Readers may already know Brian from his work as a producer on films like Dog Soldiers, Boo and Pantechnicon favourite Sleep Stalker (See Issue 5’s Horror Gems article) but Eric Peter-Kaiser is a relatively new name to the horror genre. With that said, the young actor/producer hasn’t wasted a moment in establishing himself. Eric founded Black Gate Entertainment in 2007 and teamed with Brian soon thereafter; the duo have begun making their mark as the co-producers of the upcoming and decidedly ‘old-school’ trilogy of Evilution, Basement Jack and The Necropolis.

Brian already has an impressive track record as producer and screenwriter for several refreshingly simple horror films, and I’ve no doubts that this trilogy of collaborations with the fast-rising actor will have a lot to offer gore-hounds globally. I was very pleased to take the opportunity to ask the two men a few questions about their works, aspirations, meeting George A. Romero - and how to make a really fun horror film.

The role of the producer is often a little ambiguous, especially to non-industry types like myself. I think it would be useful to start off by discussing what your tasks have actually been as producers?

ERIC: Ha, these roles are often confusing to us as well. I think the important part to know is that anyone with a producer credit was a big part of production and had a hand in getting the film made. It is difficult to really place a definition on each type of producer credit.

BRIAN: An executive producer is credited for raising the money. The producer is the manager of the project: finding the material, hiring the crew, casting, and running the show. The co-producer is just that; assists in all the roles of the producer but is also in charge of the creative end of the project. An associate producer is a credit awarded to someone who brings something important to the project, like special equipment or cast. Producer credits are more structured in the studio system. In the Indie world, everyone tends to wear a lot of different hats.

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One of the things people do seem to think they know about producers is that they’re all skirt chasing, cigar chomping, penny pinching hacks whose ultimate aim is to hinder the artist. How would you say that stereotype holds up in the real world?

BRIAN: The producer is the toughest job on a film because we’re the ones that have to say “no”. Nobody likes to be told they can’t have something. I think the stereotype you describe is left over from old Hollywood, before the studio system was dismantled and the lawyers invaded the dream factory. As a producer, I can only speak for myself: I don’t smoke, I come from a banking background so I have a deep sense of responsibility when dealing with other people’s money, and the only skirt chasing I do is on-set hunting down wardrobe people.

ERIC: Wow, I never knew producers were that well liked! I actually believe that good producers want to help artists make their visions come to reality rather than hinder them. About the rest of the question… uh… chasing skirts is a universal thing isn’t it? The thing to know about producers is that they are the ones in the movie-making process that carry the most risk. Directors, writers, actors etc. all get their paychecks no matter what, but it is the producers who often have to take a cut or put up their own money to ensure the project’s completion. I think you’ll find the producers that make indie projects are very knowledgeable in many facets of the filmmaking process because they have to wear so many hats.

You’ve both had very different professional lives: Brian a prolific horror producer and Fangoria journalist, and Eric a professional hockey player, model and actor. How did the two of you form this business relationship?

ERIC: We actually met somewhat randomly but realised that what each other had might work out. It actually works out perfect. We seem to compliment each other really well. We check our egos at the door and try and make the best movies possible. We are both artistic, business minded and trust each other’s capabilities.

BRIAN: Business partners are like any other partner. You may spend your whole life searching for the right one and when you find him or her you just know it. Eric and I simply clicked, which is a small miracle in itself as I’m a few weeks… years… decades older than...
Eric, but that has actually worked in our favour. Eric is the responsible one. He has a great head for business. He’s good with people and absorbs information. Eric sees the diamonds when I only see the rock. Me? I’m the one off the crazy train. My mind is always racing with ideas which can make me scattered brained at times. But I have eighteen plus years of film making experience in my bag of tricks. It is our differences combined that have given us a strong base to make this company succeed.

*The two of you have worked with some screen icons:* Kurt Russell (Escape from New York), Ken Foree (Dawn of the Dead), Reggie Bannister (Phantasm), Lynn Lowry (Shivers), Dee Wallace Stone (The Howling), Keith David (The Thing), Richard Roundtree (Shaft) and some behind-camera staples of the horror genre too; Christopher Figg (Hellraiser), Fred Olen Ray (ultimate schlockmeister) and Gregory Nicotero and Howard Berger of KNB EFX (Evil Dead 2). How does it feel to work alongside and perhaps even boss around people you’ve been fans of? Do you feel more of a responsibility to them, or even a bit of a “We’re not worthy!” embarrassment?

**ERIC:** As an actor I have definitely caught myself in a scene watching someone like Kurt Russell work and then forget that I was actually part of the scene too! That can be a little embarrassing I guess but it comes out of respect. The important thing is to not do it again, haha. As a producer I love working with great people like composer Alan Howarth because they bring so much to the table that we as producers wouldn’t have thought of.

I think it’s important to let the people that we hire, such as composers, editors, sound designers etc, do their job because that is what they are good at. I think at the end of the day, once we get passed that “we’re not worthy” aspect we realised that we’re all there to make a kick ass movie.

**BRIAN:** Of all the famous people I have worked with in the world of horror, I think Reggie Bannister was the most intimidating to me. I mean, come on, *Phantasm* changed my life. On the set of *Cemetery Gates* I didn’t speak to him the first couple of days because I knew I’d say something stupid. It wasn’t until we were literally trapped together on a location that I had the nerve to say something to Reggie, and we have been great friends ever since. I really want to work with him again but he’s been so busy lately.

Jimmy Duval (Donnie Darko, Independence Day) and Guillermo Diaz (Weeds, Half Baked) were amazing together in *Evilution*. In fact, I am writing a buddy comedy with them in mind.

Nathan Bexton (*Evilution, Basement Jack, Necropolitan*) has been the only person so far that actually understands what I’m talking about most of the time. What a rare find! And what a deep and dedicated director he is. He has made our manager character into a horror icon.

In the “can’t freakin’ believe we got these people” category, I have to mention KNB EFX’s Greg Nicotero and Howard Berger who lent us their valuable time and humour on *Cemetery Gates*. They were so much fun, and under such adverse conditions too. Greg shot his first scene and then went to the hospital for stomach ailments. He came back just a few days later to shoot the beheading scene.

A bit of trivia: Greg’s severed head was the same one used in the original *Day of the Dead*. Howard left from *Cemetery Gates* to go work on a little film called *The Chronicles of Narnia*, for which he won the Academy Award for Best Make-Up. Now I can say I killed an Oscar winner.

Behind the scenes, I am grateful to Steve Adcock, the Director of Photography on HBO’s *Deadwood*, who gave *Cemetery Gates* a visual quality that I never thought we could achieve on our budget. Boy, he knew how to hide the rain that plagued us everyday.

Our current DP on *Evilution, Basement Jack* and the upcoming *Necropolitan*, Mathew Rudenberg, is the next Dean Cundey [staple cinematographer for John Carpenter and Steven Spielberg], mark my words. He is a wizard behind the camera. You can give him a vague idea of how the film should look at he runs with it. For example, on *Evilution*, all I said was, “Mathew, I wanted this film to be a Technicolor nightmare”, and he delivered a blood red masterpiece. On *Basement Jack*, I told him, “It’s important that we have a fever dream quality.” I didn’t even really know what I meant but I’ll be damned he delivered. My greatest fear is that when this trilogy comes to home video and the public sees Mathew’s work, the studios will sweep him away from us. And I do wish that for Mathew; he and his team deserve great success.
I have been very fortunate to work with the master of horror art direction, Mark Richardson. Horror fans will know his work from such films as Rob Zombie’s *Halloween*, *Feast*, 2001 Maniacs, The Devil’s Rejects, and The Prestige*. Mark just knows how to bring the evil out of any place.

Christopher Figg too was always a gentleman to me during the Dog Soldiers experience and I hope to work with him again.

The director of *Basement Jack* and the up-coming *Necropolitan* Michael Shelton is a great asset to us. He understands the fundamentals of horror. He has a visual mind and knows how to put that on film. Michael has been a visual effects artist for many years and has created digital magic on such films as *Passion of the Christ* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. He is currently putting his stamp on *Mirrors*, *Terminator 4* and the remakes of *Friday the 13th* and *My Bloody Valentine 3D*.

**ERIC:** I feel truly blessed with some of the people that I have had the chance to work with and look up to early in my career. *Miracle* was my first ever movie and it was great to see how fun the process can be after hearing so many on-set horror stories. For me it has been people like Kurt Russell, Noah Emmerich, Patricia Clarkson and James Duval that have inspired me as to how I should carry myself while working in this crazy business.

As producers you’ve both given a lot of work to first-time directors. Presumably this has gained you a lot of friends for life – but what inspires you to invest so much in someone who could be considered a novice?

**BRIAN:** Complete control. No, seriously, I think my fondness for giving people their break comes from my days as a literary agent. It is just so difficult to watch talented people get passed on time after time because the studios want a name with a built-in fan base. So, in the back of my mind, I kept a list of people I had met and worked with and promised myself to give them a chance if I ever got the opportunity. I can’t say that they have all been grateful but I’m still glad to have given them the chance.

Having mentioned some of the legendary people you’ve worked with and noting your support of first time directors – I wondered what you find most gratifying: Having worked with an icon, or watching directors like Neil Marshall (Dog Soldiers, Doomsday, The Descent) rise in prominence following your support?

**BRIAN:** Here’s my most interesting story about rubbing elbows with a legend. While at the San Diego Comic-Con promoting Graveyard Filmworks and *Cemetery Gates*, I had the opportunity to meet and have dinner with Guillermo Del Toro, who can I just say is probably one of the most visionary guys in Hollywood who actually loves the horror genre. We exchanged numbers and then, nothing. One day, we get a call from Guillermo who is looking to secure financing for George Romero’s next Living Dead film, which, at the time, was called “Dead Reckoning”. Now, the original “Dawn of the Dead” is my favourite film of all time, so you can imagine the brain overload I was having when I learned we were going to meet with George. At dinner, he was very gracious as I babbled on about my first experience with “Night of the Living Dead” when I was five and how I wrote my college thesis on the subtext of “Dawn of the Dead”.

When he handed me his personal business card, I squealed like a schoolgirl inside my head. Then, he gave us copies of “Dead Reckoning” to read. And I pulled a DVD of “Dawn of the Dead” out of my pants pocket for him to sign. I’m such a fan boy. I devoured the script that night. It was amazing; a tight 9/11 allegory that was so much more thoughtful and insightful than what it would eventually become as “Land of the Dead”. At the following story meeting, I sat across from George Romero and was giving him notes on the script. In my head, I’m screaming, “who the hell do I think I am giving notes to the master of the zombie film?” But there was one point I did feel very strongly about, the lead zombie character. I truly felt, and still do, that the dead would not follow one leader. Zombies, to me, have a hive mentality. They work as a pack with singular motivation. I know that as the Dead series progressed George was trying to show that the dead were learning. I love that. I just didn’t think they would follow. Just as much as I believe that zombies can’t run. Their ankles would break. George was very kind listening to my babble and seemed to consider my points. Sadly, the proposed partnership didn’t happen and George eventually got the picture set up at Universal. But, damn, what a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
Eric, how has your acting experience influenced the way you approach producing? Especially when you’re expected to pull double duty, as you do in Basement Jack and Evilution.

ERIC: It definitely isn’t easy, I can tell you that much. I like our directors to know that when I’m on set, I’m their actor, and not to think of me as a producer. I do try to separate the jobs as much as I can but sometimes it is difficult I must admit. I think understanding how everything that goes into making a movie from a producer’s point of view has made me a better actor actually. I think as an actor it is important to know that every one on set has an impact on the movie. The hardest part about being an actor is often the “hurry up and wait” aspect. Sometimes you can find yourself wondering why the hell you were told to be ready and now you’re waiting around for an hour. The fact is that there are so many things that need to be absolutely perfect before a shot is ready and this means there are just as many possibilities for a delay. As an actor it is important to know that we are not the most important people on the set. It is the work of grips, gaffers, PA’s, etc. that make it possible for us to look good on screen.

Brian, you’ve been credited by David E. Allen (CEO of Kismet Entertainment) for coming up with a rather significant subplot in the film Dog Soldiers. Did you find that screenwriting was a natural progression on your duties as a producer?

BRIAN: I actually came to Hollywood from Chicago to make my fame and fortune as a screenwriter first. My journey to that point has been quite the adventure. Working at a literary agency, I read hundreds of screenplays. This taught me the art of knowing what makes a screenplay “Hollywood Friendly” and allowed me to pass that information on to new writers. During my Hollywood experience, I have learned one scary truth: a writer will never sell an original screenplay. I know this is a harsh blanket statement but I’ve read over 3,000 screenplays from new writers and none of them were ever sold. That’s because producers will always have better ideas than any a screenwriter could invent. Luckily, producers don’t have time to write their masterpieces so they are forced to hire writers to write the scripts for them. So, am I saying that it is a complete waste of time to write a spec screenplay? Not at all. Just don’t expect to sell it. Think of it as a calling card. So, go ahead, write a vampire script. This way, when you meet a producer who is looking to turn his vampire idea into a movie you have a writing sample for him to go on. In my career, I have written and sold over twenty screenplays based on producer ideas and my spec scripts. None of them were ever made into films - but the cheques cleared.

Having worked on commercial and critical successes like Dog Soldiers and Miracle, and cult favourites like Cemetery Gates, what would you both say have been your most gratifying features to date?

ERIC: That is really difficult to say because each project is always completely new and completely different from the previous one. I have been extremely fortunate with the projects I’ve worked on because they have all been very gratifying. Miracle probably stands out in my mind the most. We were all hockey players on that movie and to get the opportunity to portray some of our childhood idols as well as the greatest sports story in history was simply amazing. I travelled around North America for the release of the film and it was unreal to meet people that had such strong feelings about the movie because of the effect that the real event had on them. It was also really cool when the men’s swimming team and women’s gymnastics team for USA in the 2004 Summer Olympics said they watched the film for inspiration. That meant a lot to me and showed me early in my career how important movies are for people.

BRIAN: Are you asking me who of my children I love the best? You’ll get no Sophie’s Choice out of me, Solomon. Each film has its pluses and minuses and I learn something new from each of them. Obviously, Dog Soldiers has received the most attention but I really enjoy reading reviews and receiving emails from people who’ve discovered Cemetery Gates and actually get it. I’m surprised that Precious [the mutated Tasmanian Devil that terrorises the cemetery] has such a global fan base. I also get a kick out of seeing the different DVD cover
boxes that have been created for the film around the world. *Evilution* was an interesting shoot because it was my transition from film to Hi-Def video: Quite a learning experience. In the beginning, I wasn’t a fan of HD but now I am completely sold.

*When considering a film like Cemetery Gates, how important do you think the fun factor is? People have a lot to say about intelligent horror and rightly so, but when you’re looking for thrills and chills - can you really beat a mutated Tasmanian Devil? Is there any shame in providing “dumb fun”?

BRIAN: The journey of *Cemetery Gates* is an interesting one. I originally received a script called “The Cemetery Gates” from an ironworker in Rhode Island and his neighbour while I was with the Leslie Kallen Literary Agency. It was an epic story from two first-time writers. After several months of trying I couldn’t get any interest from the studios. Everyone passed. But I always liked the idea of a Tasmanian Devil as a new killing machine and I promised the writers that if they trusted me I would get *Cemetery Gates* made. Well, after 12 years and just as many re-writes by me, I finally got Graveyard Filmworks to make it. How it took a comedic turn really was out of necessity. When I first talked to the creature designers, I gave them a drawing of what I thought the Tasmanian Devil would look like mutated or de-evolved. The drawing style was sort of anime-ish, over the top. The problem is that they didn’t base the suit on the real animal, instead they based it on the drawing. I was really worried that the finished Precious suit wouldn’t play scary enough in a straight horror film so I thought it was best to embrace what did work and run with it by tweaking the script with a comedic underbelly. Do you hide the monster suit as much as you can, like in “Jeepers Creepers” or “Ginger Snaps”, or do you put it out there, let people get used to seeing it and let the story move forward. It was decided to put Precious out there. And it worked. We did some camera tests on the Precious suit at a horse ranch. At one point, we heard the horses whining. They started circling in their pens. We couldn’t figure out why. Then, we saw Precious moving around in the grass in their eye line. I figured if the suit frightened the horses it could work with an audience.

As for “dumb fun”, there is never anything wrong with that. I wanted *Cemetery Gates* to be the movie that a bunch of friends could sit around, drink, watch and have a really good time with. It’s a film for fans to discover and keep as their own “Dude, you gotta see this movie.”

When Eric and I were promoting Island Gateway Films’ horror slate at this year’s Fangoria Weekend of Horrors in Los Angeles, a young man came up to me and said that because of seeing *Cemetery Gates* he got into creature building and showed me this very impressive animatronics wolf’s head. It’s a moment like that which makes everything worthwhile.

*One of your main tasks for Cemetery Gates was to re-work the ambitious story into an affordable shooting script. How conscious do you have to be of budgetary concerns throughout production?*

BRIAN: Very, very conscious. Money is always the ultimate restrictor. I have always worked in low budget filmmaking so I am always very conscious about stretching a dollar. Besides, it’s not my money so I have to be respectful of that. My general rule for working (writing/producing) in low budget is: One Location/One Monster. With Sleep Stalker, the entire film was shot at a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles. With *Dog Soldiers*, we filmed on the Duke of Luxembourg’s estate and built the farmhouse on the land. *Cemetery Gates* was filmed at a ranch in Sylmar, California. The cave we utilised was in Griffith Park. So, we filmed half the movie at the ranch and half at the cave. That cave was the original bat cave from the ‘60s “Batman” TV show and was actually drilled into the side of the mountain for the Errol Flynn film “The Adventures of Robin Hood”. *Evilution* was filmed entirely at an abandoned, and very haunted, hospital. We returned there for *Basement Jack* and will finish off the trilogy there with “The Necropolitan”.

My other rule is this: no matter the budget, my cast and crew must eat well. No skimping on the meals. These people work hard for far less than they are worth and so the least I can do is give them a decent meal.

*Brian, you’ve mentioned Dawn of the Dead and Evil Dead as two of your favourite films. What do you think of today’s horror films in comparison to the films of yesteryear? As a Fangoria writer you must be quite opinionated on today’s horror.*

BRIAN: As a lifelong horror fan, what sickens me most of all about the state of today’s horror
films is that I now have to preface the classics with “the original” – the original “Dawn of the Dead”, the original “Friday the 13th”, the original “Halloween”, the original “Hills Have Eyes”, the original “Texas Chain Saw Massacre”, the original “Prom Night” - and even the original “My Bloody Valentine”. UGH! What these remake jockeys are forgetting is that the “originals” are creatures of their time. You cannot recreate that. You cannot recapture that. You can only up the budget and get bigger names and cut out anything that resembles suspense because you think your target audience won’t sit still for it. It makes me see red when I talk to someone who says they liked “The Omen” or “The Fog” remakes. Why? Because my follow-up question is always, “Did you see the original?” and most of the time they say “no”. I just read today that Billy Bob Thornton may be playing Freddy Krueger in the remake of “A Nightmare on Elm Street”. Why is that even being remade? I know, I know: Because the studios own the rights and they would rather remake something that has a fan base and not jeopardise their shareholders’ money with an original premise. I guess I just remember when horror films scared people. Not sicken them. Not insulted their intelligence. Not replace the artistry of make-up effects with pixel pushing. The only way we’re going to get back to basics is for the studios to take a chance and start producing some original material. Classic horror films are made because an audience discovers them and embraces them. Horror films have never been about who’s in them, it’s always been what they’re about and until we return to that simple rule, $50 million remakes of films that originally cost $500,000 will collapse the genre and send horror back to the independents where, frankly, it belongs.

On the other hand, it is show business. Movies must make a profit, mainly so you can make more. As a producer, I might have to consider a scenario like this: Do I invest $10 million in an original project or Friday the 13th Part 12? And there lies the dilemma. Friday the 13th Part 12 would be the safe answer.

If I could remake just one film I would love to remake The Car.

Why The Car in the particular?

BRIAN: The Car is just one of those “so strange it’s good” films that fits my warped sensibilities perfectly. I have this great take on a remake, which focuses on the world’s current environmental and fossil fuel woes, Biblical prophecy, hybrid cars and the evil of self-aware GPS systems. So, Universal Studios, give me a call. Let’s do lunch.

Eric, do you share Brian’s enthusiasm for horror and fantasy?

ERIC: Yes I do for sure. Horror and thriller movies are definitely some of the best to work on. I mean who doesn’t like taking a date to a good scary flick, right?

Dog Soldiers has had a very different response stateside to what it had in the UK. How do you feel a European audience differs to a US one?

BRIAN: Dog Soldiers had a completely different journey in the US. The biggest stumbling block was that we had our first screening of the film for perspective distributors just days after the attacks on the World Trade Center. We were told that no one wanted to see a film with soldiers or werewolves. This was one of the reasons it ended up as a Sci-Fi Channel Original Movie and didn’t receive a theatrical run in the US. I know that the UK press herald Dog Soldiers as the re-birth of British horror: That was very flattering. I know Neil Marshall was trying to get the film made for years so I am eternally grateful that producer Christopher Figg found us and we had the opportunity to launch Neil’s directorial career.

Sleep Stalker was released in the UK at a time when the “video nasty” scare was still on the go and British censorship was incredibly strict. Did you struggle to sell the film overseas?

BRIAN: Remember that episode of “The Young Ones” about video nasties? That was brilliant! How funny is it that the land that gave us Shakespeare frowns upon a little stage blood? How does anyone in their right mind think they have the right to censor anyone’s creative expression? I am an avowed opponent to any form of censorship. I’m not here to parent the world. I am here to tell an entertaining story and if that story just happens to have 17 people meeting gruesome deaths in ninety minutes so be it. What I have to say to all the do-gooders in the world is this: Don’t tell me what I can or cannot watch. Mind your own children. We are all individuals, so stop trying to force us to be
the same. I have yet to see a child’s head explode from them hearing a swear word, seeing a naked person, or watching a mutated Tasmanian Devil gut a camper. You don’t want to see it? Turn it off. It is that simple. If you know a person that cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality, you have bigger problems. We have a Senator Lieberman here in the US who will occasionally go on a crusade against violence in video games. I don’t want an elected official wasting time counting red pixels in a video game. We have bigger problems that need their attention. Anyway. As far as Sleep Stalker, there isn’t really much blood or nudity in that film so we didn’t have any censorship problems.

Can you tell us a bit about your trilogy of Evilution, Basement Jack and The Necropolitan? What can we expect from these pictures, and do they share a narrative link? With Brian writing, Eric starring and you both producing, it sounds as though you've got some serious creative control to enjoy?

BRIAN: When Eric and I created Black Gate Entertainment [the horror division of Island Gateway films], we knew that we wanted to do three films specifically: a zombie flick, a slasher movie and a creature feature. We also thought it would be unique to have a small thread that linked the three movies so the idea of a mysterious apartment manager that played puppet master in the films was born. All the films will stand alone as separate stories so you won’t have to see one to get the others but for those who do see all three films there will hopefully be a satisfying link to the three tales.

As far as creative control, we have been extremely fortunate to make the films the way we want. No ‘creativity by committee’. We are able to allow the creative people to carry out their vision without a bunch of suits on set giving notes. We are horror fans making movies for horror fans. We are very lucky in that respect.

Do you ever feel as though you’re treated with less respect when putting together a horror film as opposed to a drama like Neo Ned or a comedy like Tripping Forward?

BRIAN: Horror gets no respect. Hollywood frowns down on it. A horror film has never won an Academy Award, unless you count “Silence of the Lambs” as horror. Yet, horror is the most popular film genre. I hold it as the greatest genre of film because it is an interactive experience. Horror makes us feel a plethora of emotions in one sitting; we laugh, cry, scream, cheer, duck, squirm and think. Yes, think. Good horror can make us wonder and get excited by something without being beaten over the head with the message like other films genre can do. A good horror film will hold up a mirror to society. The good ones show us our dark sides, or allow us to confront our dark sides at a safe distance. Horror fans in my experience are intelligent people who understand the subtext of fear. When we were out promoting Dog Soldiers, and later Cemetery Gates I got a chance to meet a lot of gore-hounds like myself and found them warm and gracious. It surprised me how they picked up on the littlest things in our films. Horror fans are the best and I never ever want to disappoint them.

ERIC: It depends on who you talk to. Some people look down on all indie movies in general. Yes I do think there are some who don’t really respect the horror genre but who cares really? Filmmaking is filmmaking and I think Evilution and Basement Jack are pretty cool movies. I believe that the horror genre has the most supportive audience and those are the people that we are making the film for anyway. The genre is an extremely successful genre so by nature you will find lots of people who’ll try to cash in on it and this is how it gets a bad reputation. We hope to rise above and show people that we truly care about the product we’re putting into the market place.

Of your horror films only Brian’s Dog Soldiers and Boo are BBFC approved, in-print and available in the UK (Eric’s hockey drama Miracle is also available). Do you have any plans for your films to be released more widely in the future?

BRIAN: Once you hand off your film to a distributor it’s sort of out of your control. You just want to make sure that the distributor you choose can get you into the video stores and on the retail shelves. Currently, we are seeking International distribution on Evilution and Basement Jack. As for my older films, I don’t own the rights to any of them so I don’t know if they’ll ever get wider distribution in the future. I know that Dog Soldiers has been released by three different distributors since 2002 in the US. The latest release doesn’t include the commentary. I really liked the UK packaging of Dog Soldiers - I admired its nod to “The Omen” poster art. I am pleasantly surprised that
Cemetery Gates is getting so many International DVD releases. It’s nice to know that the world loves Precious.

With two new features in the can and a third in production, the future is looking pretty bright for you and Island Gateway Films. What’s next?

BRIAN: Right now, Eric and I are preparing our film for 2009 called “A Necessary Evil”, which is a modern re-telling of the Elizabeth Bathory story. I’m writing a tale of demon possession now as well as a couple of comedies. When I’m not doing that I can always be found playing videogames online.

Any final words for the wonderful fans of horror, sci-fi and fantasy?

BRIAN: When a studio puts out a PG rated remake of “Prom Night” you have to start to worry a little for the future of horror films. But there is hope, hope beyond independent filmmakers like Eric and myself. And that hope lies in videogames. Lately, I have played some genuinely scary survival horror games. I know one game called Manhunt 2 stirred up some controversy in the UK because it depicted and rewarded the violent deaths of asylum inmates. Games like Condemned and its sequel, the Resident Evil and Silent Hill series, Obscure, Siren, Doom, Haunting Ground, Rule of Rose, F.E.A.R., and Prey are the next evolution in horror entertainment. They each have intelligent stories, real suspense, buckets of gore and best of all are immersive and interactive. You are the hero fighting the monster. That’s been every horror film fans dream and now the nightmares have come real.

Though disreputable, the films that Brian calls “Big, Dumb Fun” are often among the most entertaining the genre has to offer. If you’re serious about your horror - but don’t like your horror too serious - look no further. The duo could very well be a true beacon of hope in a relatively dull horror scene of straight-to-DVD sequels, endless remakes and overkill CGI.

The two men offer the enthusiasm and integrity needed for the genre’s survival, and unlike so many others they actually possess the creative control to make things happen. This trilogy of terror is their baby, and early reviews suggest that they’re exactly the right kind of hip, same-sex parents it needs to grow up big, bloody and strong.

Evilution and Basement Jack are due for a DVD release due in 2009. Sleep Stalker, Cemetery Gates, Death Valley, Boo, Miracle and Dog Soldiers can be purchased ‘new & used’ via amazon.co.uk in region 2 and region 0 (all regions) DVD formats.
The furnace had consumed Jaime’s body with ease. The petulant teen, a mere boy, disobeying his father. I had protected him. I had given him life. His death did not cause me much sorrow, just the time I had to spend cleaning the blood from the linoleum flooring. The furnace had ravaged his body, burning away his fouled clothes that he had tried to hide from me, refusing to wear my plastic wrapping - an easy to burn alternative to standard clothing. The smoke of his corpse had risen out of my chimney, perhaps contributing to the global warming that would one day end all germs, frying them beyond recognition.

The furnace room was my safe haven, always kept to temperatures that others could not stand. Sweat would pour off me, and this furnace had taken Jaime’s mother too. My wife, Jaime’s mother, had wanted to me to go to a hospital when she saw what improvements I had made upon the house. I had to. I had brought her down here so that Jaime would not know what I had done - that kind of thing could put a lot of pressure on a boy.

“David, why are you doing this? This place is a prison!” She did not see.

“I do this to protect us. The world outside will kill us. Germs are rioting, they are out there, waiting for us, to feast on us.”

“David, please!”

“A hospital? A breeding ground for filth and disease! I would never enter such a place again. MSR, Pseudomonas, who knows what other disease I could so easily catch just by walking near one of those places?”

“No, I will stay in my fortress; I will defend myself against the horrors of my tiny enemies.”

She reached out her hand and touched my bare shoulder, what filth was on her unwashed hands, I will never know, but that night I scolded the skin off my shoulder with an iron just to make sure.
“David, I’m leaving you. You need help. I’m taking Jaime, and we’re leaving. Goodbye.”

She would break quarantine. I couldn’t let that happen. I hit her: there was a hammer nearby, and I hit her. I hit her again. The blood, it made me retch: blood, in my safe zone. Blood. I hit her again. I dragged her body into the flames of the furnace, all the while trying to avoid touching her rotten, blood-hosting body.

When Jaime asked about her, I told him she’d left us; didn’t love us.

I washed, I washed a thousand times, and I washed until I felt boiled. I dined on food that I could be sure would never have seen a germ - only water and air-sealed foods. Life was good. It made me retch to think of those dolt scum eating yoghurt and drinking milk, both made by bacteria: it would be like giving yourself to the enemy.

That night I slept, spreading new plastic sheets on the bed - they always stuck to my back when I sweat, but I could dispose of them easily in the morning. Like I said, you can get used to anything if you have to.

I missed the sun, one of the few allies I had in this war, but I could not go outside. For some reason it had become an ally to the germs, terrors of my life. Outside anything could kill you. I would not die.

I sat on my prepared bed and lit a cigarette - one habit I had never quit, and never would. I blew smoke around the room, little tendrils of death, killing any germs living within me. I smiled as the cigarette came to an end. I put it in the burnable bag and dropped it down to the basement where it would be burned.

Jaime was a baby again. I was sitting outside with his mother, and we were happy. She wore a big sun hat. She was radiant in the sun. Oh God how I loved the sun. Jaime coughed, we looked at him, my gorgeous wife looked at our newborn son, and we stroked his chin. He coughed again, more violently this time. I knew what happened. He kept on coughing, we took him to a hospital, and the doctors were good there.

“He probably just picked up a minor bug, just being outside for the first time. It’s nothing major. We’ll take a look at him, and you can take him home in the morning Mr. Salinger.” The doctor looked at us with that wise aura of confidence and training.

Jaime didn’t get better.

He got a lot worse.

“The infection is hard to fight against for a child as young as this. We’re giving him some medicine that should clear him up.” The doctor had lost his aura of wisdom to me now.

Eight more days Jaime screamed and slept and coughed. Occasionally it looked as though he would never get better.

On the ninth day, he cleared up. He turned back into my baby boy again, and I loved him. All this just from being outside.

I woke up. The bright glare of the high power light bulbs washed over me. I was drenched in sweat. The lights gave me a shine to my skin. Tears burned my eyes and I didn’t know why. Perhaps I’d been dreaming: I would never know. I never remember my dreams.

The shower burned. I was surprised that my skin could still feel after all the scrubbing I’d done over the last few months. Before I made the house airtight, I’d had to scrub every morning for hours just to get a peace of mind, but now I knew that I would be ok with just an hour of brushing my skin with a coarse sponge.

The intercom buzzed: someone was at the door. I approached slowly. People did not come here often, and the house was at least five miles away from nowhere.

“Sir, it’s the school board. We’re here to check why Jaime hasn’t been registered at the local school after his move from London.”

I was frantic. I had not thought of people looking for Jaime and my wife after I’d left London to pursue a clean life. What could I say?

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“He’s being homeschooled currently,” I said through the intercom, hoping my voice would come out strong, but I felt weak.
“Sir, we’d like to see the syllabus that you’ve got him on currently. May we come in?”

“No!” The fear struck me. I could not allow the germs they carried into my home - it would take months to clean.

“Sir, we need to see how his education is progressing.”

“You may not enter, go away!”

With that they left, hopefully for good.

I felt ill after their visit - fear of my life being destroyed - so I begun to clean the living room floor, covering it over and over again in bleach. There was only one way into the house. It was an emergency door in case of fire. It could not be opened from the outside. It was a risk, but I couldn’t let myself burn in a fire; that would be crazy.

I sat on the floor, a cigarette in my lips, smoke curling up to the ceiling. The police had arrived, demanding that they inspect the house. I’d told them to get a warrant, they’d told me they had one, still I refused to allow their unclean bodies into my abode.

The third ‘thunk’ came as they tried to batter their way into my house, the door beginning to crumple under the constant blows. I made my way to the bottom of the cellar, all the while the ‘thunk’ of the battering ram mixing with my fragile heartbeat. A cry of triumph, a call from the police for me to show myself, the sounds of their dirty feet on my linoleum, the stench of the outside air, the exultation of the germs as they finally raid my castle.

The furnace room was solace to me. Quickly would the viruses find me, and bacteria would swarm upon me. I looked at the canisters of oxygen in the corner. Fire. Fire would end them all. I would be free. Fire. I quickly rolled the oxygen canisters around the furnace from the bright lit corner of my basement, I threw the first into the flames. Soon the canister would explode. Soon.

Jaime was a baby again, a healthy pink, rolling around the bedroom floor. My wife lifted him in her arms. I looked on with pride - pride and fear.

Fear that Jaime would get a virus again, get hurt, so I started to make sure the house was clean. I hoovered all the time, I washed every plate myself just to make sure they were clean. Some nights I would wake up wanting to scrub the floors, but that was ok, I just wanted to make sure my son wouldn’t get ill again.

I smoked my last cigarette as the canister exploded; fire was the only way to kill them. The only way to get them all.