

SICK FUTURES

A collection of other-world fictions



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Nigel Fletcher

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EYE OF THE BEHOLDER.

One stifling afternoon at the tail end of a long summer, Laura Washington decided to take down all the mirrors in the house.

She began with the 18th century Spanish one in the hall that was heavy with gilt and left a tell-tale oval of darker coloured wallpaper behind, and completed her task with the modern hinged full-length mirror in her stepdaughter's bedroom with its New-Beauty logo stuck carefully in one corner.

She piled them up on the veranda, scarcely able to believe the house had contained so many mirrors. There were no less than fourteen when she counted. Some were so new her husband Pablo probably still had the receipts to them, others were old enough to have become mottled under the glass, like skin with liver spots. Laura stacked them all up in the back of the decrepit old Toyota and drove to the local tip.

Pablo didn't notice immediately, not until he'd sat down to dinner. A small Victorian mirror with an enamelled frame had formed the centrepiece of the family photos which faced him. Pablo chewed his steak meditatively, his head barely above the edge of the table in spite of the big pile of cushions on his chair, while with his bright eyes he observed the wall behind his wife.

'One of those portraits is missing,' he said finally.

'It's the mirror that's missing,' said Laura.

‘Of course,’ said Pablo, ‘The mirror. I’ve lived with that mirror, how long? And when it goes it’s like it never existed.’ He laughed happily at his own forgetfulness.

‘I’ve got rid of all the mirrors,’ said Laura looking down at her food.

Pablo nodded and swallowed hard as though the sirloin was too much trouble to chew.

‘Some of those mirrors were quite valuable,’ he said, ‘where’d you take them?’

‘To the tip.’

Pablo took in this fact and nodded. ‘I just want you to be happy,’ he said, ‘you know that.’ He held up a piece of meat on his fork, ‘This is really excellent steak.’

They were still eating when Barbara, his daughter, came home from the shop. Immediately she wanted to know what had happened to the mirror in the hall.

Laura was slow in replying, so Pablo said, ‘Laura doesn’t want any mirrors in the house for awhile.’ He said it in the overemphatic voice of a man who knows there is going to be trouble.

And sure enough Barbara, instantly electrified, yelled straight at her stepmother, ‘If you’ve been in my room, you bitch!’ and ran up the stairs without waiting for a reply.

Seconds later she was back, her face red and twisted with anger, a little snail-trail of saliva dribbling from one corner of her mouth. Phlegm flew across the room as she screamed at her stepmother, ‘How am I supposed to live a normal life with you in the house? You freak. You ridiculous freak.’ Then she stopped and took a deep, sobbing breath and a moment later had collapsed wailing onto the floor, beating the tiles with her huge fists.

Laura watched as her husband picked up his daughter. She knew better than to help when Barbara was in this sort of state. It was not easy for Pablo though. His daughter was so heavy and bulky and he was so small.

Grunting loudly, Pablo dragged the girl across the carpet with his arms under her armpits and heaved her into a chair.

‘Baby, baby,’ he soothed, and with a napkin from the table wiped the saliva away from his daughter’s chin and gently dabbed at the spot of blood which was seeping from an overworked vein in her forehead.

In bed that night Laura and Pablo lay side by side on their backs in the humid room, listening to Barbara’s snores coming through the wall.

‘She’s at that difficult age,’ said Pablo for the umpteenth time, ‘that doesn’t help either.’

‘I know,’ murmured Laura, ‘I was wrong to get rid of the mirrors. I’ll buy her a new one tomorrow, I promise.’

‘I wish I understood. You know I don’t ask for explanations. But sometimes I feel I could help if I only knew.’

‘I’d just got tired of looking at myself,’ said Laura, ‘that’s all.’ She could smell Pablo’s musky sweat, heavy in the airless room. She of course was barely perspiring, despite the heat. ‘It’s been so long...so many years. I wonder if I can take much more...’ Laura’s voice trailed off.

‘I can’t even begin to imagine it,’ said Pablo in the darkness, ‘but I know I could look at you for an eternity,’

‘Go to sleep,’ hushed Laura, ‘Go to sleep.’

Soon Pablo was breathing heavily, and as Laura listened it began to synchronise with his daughter's snoring.

Some nights his breathing was laboured, as if his throat was constricted, and he'd suddenly start fighting for breath before waking up choking and gasping, bolt upright, perhaps moments from death.

Not to wake up ever, what a thought!

Laura laid motionless as her pulse ticked along at an unwavering 70 beats per minute. For a while she could hear the blood swishing in her ears, a comforting sound that went away all too quickly. Her knee began to itch, but she didn't scratch it and in seconds the faint irritation had gone. She turned and put an arm across Pablo, pressing her head against his larger one. Though they'd been married nearly a year, it still felt strange to have that immense cranium against hers when his feet barely reached her knees. She lay, waiting for every sensation in her body to vanish, listening to the crickets through the open window, before she too drifted off into sleep.

Early next morning Laura drove into the city to find a shop where she could buy a new mirror for Barbara. It was not yet ten-o'clock but already the pavements were shimmering and glaring with the unrelenting heat. Just off the main street Laura came across a small store cum workshop which specialised in pine furniture, and there in the window like a blessed mirage stood a hinged, full length mirror almost identical to the one she'd thrown away, but better made with perfect dovetail joints and smoothly bevelled edges.

The young shop assistant went pale when she approached him and kept his one good eye fixed

somewhere to the side of her knees in an over-done display of subservience.

Laura spoke to him matter-of-factly. It turned out the mirror was expensive, but she had to have it.

Ignoring his nervous embarrassment, she helped him retrieve the mirror from the window display and take it out to the Toyota. He looked about seventeen and had a sheen of sweat on the top of his bald head.

Back home Laura realised the mirror didn't look quite the same in Barbara's room - something was missing - the New Beauty logo. But surely it didn't matter: Barbara could get another one herself if it was so important to her. Resolutely, Laura went down to make herself some lunch.

But straight afterwards she was back in Barbara's room. The trouble was she knew the New-Beauty sticker would matter. It was like a cause with young people, it *was* a cause, and the girl would be sure to find something hurtful and accusing to say about its absence, and there was no guarantee it wouldn't prompt one of her fits of anger.

Laura decided it would be safer not to go to the New-Beauty clinic her stepdaughter attended. Instead she looked in the phone book and found one in a suburb some three miles away.

The clinic turned out to be a low adobe building set in a little grove of olive trees. After parking the precious old Toyota in a meagre patch of shade Laura walked across parched, dusty earth to the reception area.

She looked around the room, momentarily at a loss as to where to go. There were half a dozen young people sat waiting on the pew-like benches lining the walls, and

their heads turned towards her briefly then away. Too quickly away. Someone took her arm.

‘Come this way please.’

Laura allowed herself to be pulled into an annexe room, void of furniture.

‘I know who you are,’ hissed the woman who had intercepted her, ‘and I think it’s disgraceful you just walking in here like this. Couldn’t you see you how you were disturbing the clients?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Laura. The woman had eyes that were permanently weeping and looked completely at odds with the anger in the rest of her face.

‘What do you want?’ she asked aggressively as the tears ran down her cheeks.

‘My stepdaughter...’ began Laura.

‘Is she registered here?’

‘No,’ admitted Laura resignedly. She should have known she was making a mistake.

‘Then I suggest you approach the clinic she is registered with...if it really is necessary.’

Laura looked past the woman with the weeping eyes. There was a single poster in the room, faded almost to monochrome by the sun glaring in through the window opposite. The poster showed a group of young people on top of a hill planting a flag. Each boy and girl represented a particular mutation - a word Laura only ever spoke in her mind - and those youngsters who could were smiling triumphantly. One of the girls reaching a muscular arm high up the flagpole could have been a mirror image of Barbara. Inevitably, the flag bore the New Beauty logo with the legend underneath, ‘In the Eye of the Beholder.’

‘I’m sorry if I upset anyone,’ said Laura. ‘It wasn’t my intention.’

The woman softened a little, and as her face relaxed the involuntary tears made her look instantly grief-struck. ‘We have to think of the majority, Mrs Washington,’ she said, ‘you have a daughter of your own...’

‘Stepdaughter,’ corrected Laura.

‘But I’m sure you love her as a daughter. It’s children like her who are the future. We need them strong and confident, at ease with themselves, you must agree.’

‘It was such a cruel war,’ said Laura, her eyes drawn back to the poster. ‘If they’d just used bombs it would have been so clean. The damage could have been repaired, all smoothed over in time, but those terrible germs in the blood...’

The woman brought her face close to Laura’s, her eyes so narrowed the tears were held in them to make two glassy, shimmering slits. Her mouth had an expression of pure disgust.

‘Go home, Mrs Washington. Go home now.’

Laura drove back through the suburbs. The midday sun lanced vertically down through the windscreen and drenched her bare arms with heat. After a time she could feel the skin begin to burn, the epidermis rupturing and dying. The pain lasted about three seconds, but then in came the machines, coursing through her veins, bypassing white cells and red cells, racing through the plasma like millions of ambulances in slow traffic.

She was a miracle. That was the word they’d used - a miracle of science. But when she’d first heard that phrase, so familiar and trite, Laura had experienced a

pang of lonely apprehension. Why? Surely it was good to be seventeen and be relieved of the fear of pain and decay. To have the whole world talking about you...envying you.

Laura looked down at her smooth complexioned arms that had hardly aged in over one hundred and fifty years.

She'd been thirty-five when the Bio-War began. There was an expression, which quickly became common currency in that time: The Lucky Dead. The machines inside her were kept busy through the war fighting diseases which drew on the deepest reaches of their programs, but always in the end she came through it, restored to showroom condition, like a Sindy doll fresh from the box - that was how she thought of herself, bitterly, in the days when dolls still had long blonde hair and regular features.

The world was so different then. Clean, modern, like the Toyota must have been once. They'd forgotten how to build vehicles like these. So much had been forgotten. All anybody knew now was how to patch things up. Cars, people - it was all the same.

Back home, before entering the house, Laura picked a couple of glossy leaves from the bay tree on the veranda and took them into the kitchen where she planned to make mutton stew; but when she had removed the meat from the fridge found she just couldn't bear to cut it. It lay on the butcher's board sinewy and sweet smelling, inert but somehow menacing.

She went into the living room, the coolest place in the house, and turned on the ancient TV, but it was as if she'd seen every programme on the two channels a million times. She picked up a magazine and put it down

again. She watered the plants and filed her fingernails. She nibbled on some taco chips and drank a glass of lime juice. She wondered if Barbara kept a diary.

It was in the first drawer she opened, optimistically hidden under some underwear. Avoiding her reflection in the new mirror, which to Laura's eyes no longer looked anything like the original one, she sat down on her stepdaughter's bed and opened the slim book with its New-Beauty sticker on the front surrounded by a collage of male pop-stars with features similar to Barbara's. The spread Laura opened to had a whole week's entries on it.

Monday 8th.

The boss in a foul mood, but what's new? Boring, boring, boring. Maria never rang like she said she would.

Start cereal diet tomorrow, worse luck.

Tuesday 9th.

A boy of my type came into the shop today. C L Martinez on his credit card. Christopher? Carlos? Would you believe I lost another tooth while he was signing but managed to swallow it thank god? His are all replaced already! Suit him! Bit shy I think. Definitely my type though. Look him up on the New Beauty register tomorrow.

Cereal diet - day one.

Wednesday 10th.

He is my type with a b prefix. What am I going to do? Hardly slept last night. Asked at the clinic for contact. Really nervous.

Already tired of bran flakes.

Thursday 11th

He's agreed! I got to see the photographs and his projection. Still don't know his first name. Another two

years of treatment - so he's a bit ahead of me. Close enough though. In the photographs he didn't have the teeth yet so had to imagine. Blue eyes though and a nice penis.

Friday 12th

He phoned the clinic today! He's called Clemente. Clem. Northern accent - bit of a wobble in his voice. I knew he was shy! Said of course he remembered me from the shop. Why didn't you say something I said. Said he didn't know. Aren't you going to ask me out? Where would I like to go? You decide I said. Lots of umming and ahhing over the phone. Lost my temper and wish I hadn't. Anyway going to the zoo Sunday. I'll make it up to him then.

Saturday 13th

Can't think of anything else. Tried on all my clothes. Twice! Decided on canvas jeans, matador top and the black pumps. Feel sick with nerves and will probably change my mind tomorrow. About the clothes, not him.

Sunday 14th.

Bit of an anti-climax but okay. Funny mixed feelings. He's my type but is he my type. They always warn you about that. How much can you get to know about somebody in two hours? I'm expecting too much. Perhaps if he'd kissed me.

Laura turned the page.

Monday 15th.

I HATE HER I HATE HER I HATE HER I HATE
HER

The words covered not just Monday but the whole week - two pages of angry black capitals. Laura let the diary rest, still opened, in her lap. Barbara hated her

yesterday; she hated her today and tomorrow and forever - that was what the diary was saying. Laura looked down at the savage writing then she looked up and saw herself reflected in the mirror opposite.

It was so long since she'd really studied herself she could have been looking at a stranger. Super-fine, glossy straw-coloured hair, grey eyes so absolutely clear and focused - they were unknown these days. When she opened her mouth there was a translucent gleam of polished enamel; her lips were moist; her neck arched in a way which was unique outside the Renaissance statues cached away under lock and key in the vaults of city museums.

Unlike Barbara, she wasn't a type. Nobody looked like Laura these days.

And Pablo, also unclassified, was one of her few remaining admirers. Poor little Pablo with the old fashioned handsome face that was almost the size of his body. In the photos on the wall, their separate portraits side by side with nothing to show the vast height difference between them they looked like a matching couple, the kind others might have been envious of years ago.

The door shook on its hinges.

'You bitch! You just can't keep out, can you?'

Barbara's appearance in the room was so sudden it was miraculous. Even Laura caught her breath. She seemed so big and red there in the doorway.

'Admiring yourself, are you? Freak.'

Instinctively Laura had closed the diary on her lap and concealed it as best she could with her hands.

'It makes me sick to have to look at you.'

‘Don’t Barbara, don’t’ Laura pleaded.

‘I can do what I like. I can say what I fucking like. It’s my room. You’ve no rights in here.’ Her lips moved awkwardly as if she was speaking with a mouthful of marbles. Her eyes bulged with the strain.

‘I was just returning your mirror,’ said Laura.

‘That’s not my mirror.’

Laura sighed, ‘You know I can’t get your old mirror back. I’m sorry, I really am. But this is just like your old one. Better. It was the most expensive one in the shop.’

‘I don’t care. I don’t want your mirror,’ insisted Barbara nastily.

Laura desperately wanted to leave, but how could she stand without revealing the diary hidden under her hands? If the gift of the mirror was annoying Barbara so much, heaven knew what her reaction would be if she saw her stepmother had been reading her most intimate thoughts. Laura felt a tickle of fear. Thrilling for a second.

‘Get out, will you?’ said Barbara, ‘I want to change.’

Laura stayed sitting.

‘Out, Bitch!’

Once again Laura experienced a small but repeated jump of her heart. Incredible. She clutched the diary hard as the teenager grew monstrous before her eyes. The clinic had told Pablo all about these rages - common in dF2 types owing to the effect of the cranium’s unusual shape on the frontal lobe of the brain.

The scream burst from the girl like something animal, the expulsion of breath so violent it air-pistoled a loose tooth the full length of the room.

‘I SAID GET OUT!’ The scream had more than just anger in it. It was tragic. The most fundamental howl of frustration Laura had ever heard. It came from depths of anguish and disillusionment she could hardly even guess at, and would be denied nothing.

As Laura stood she let the diary fall deliberately to the floor. The sensation of fear was now exquisite. She was actually feeling the heart beat in her chest so strongly it was vibrating her body. Despite everything, she couldn’t help being drawn to her own face in the mirror, wondering how fear might have changed her, and was horrified to see herself gazing back as serenely as a Madonna.

The arm appeared in the mirror a second before she felt the blow. It hit her to the side of one eye, knocking her to the soft, pink carpeted floor. For a moment, Laura’s ears buzzed and her mind span. She knelt on all fours, shaking her head, and watched with puzzlement as a spot of bright crimson fell onto the pink wool beneath her. Then she realised she must have bitten her tongue.

An instant later the full weight of Barbara’s body thumped down on her back. Hands scrabbled to grasp swathes of her hair near the roots, and she could feel the moist heat of her stepdaughter’s thighs as they gripped tight around her waist. Laura’s spine was bending under the impossible weight, her arms straining to keep her body from collapsing forward, and all the time was that terrible screaming only inches from her ears. YOU BITCH! YOU NOSY BITCH! Hot breath scorched the back of Laura’s neck while her stepdaughter’s distinctive acetic smell filled her nostrils.

Plainly Barbara was trying to pull her hair out. Laura's head was wrenched back so far she was staring at the ceiling, and she could feel the skin of her scalp being stretched with each vicious tug. There had been a little pain at first, but she'd sensed reinforcements being quickly mobilised, hundreds of machines attached to each threatened follicle, simultaneously anaesthetising and repairing where necessary.

When Barbara realised the futility of her attack on Laura's hair she went for her eyes, reaching wet, fleshy fingers around to her stepmother's face, feverishly groping for the sockets and grunting with concentrated effort.

There was a stab of pain, more acute than anything Laura had experienced for years, as a forefinger suddenly found her right eye.

It was the shock more than anything which made Laura cry out and with sudden strength force her shoulders upwards, twisting her body at the same time in a desperate attempt to throw her tormentor off her back.

The action failed. Barbara had tightened the grip with her thighs and was searching again with renewed eagerness for Laura's eyes.

'Stop it!' said Laura and bucked again.

The wet fingers were all over her face. The weight on her back, which she had been sustaining for some minutes now, was terrific. It was at the moment Laura realised that her stepdaughter had completely mastered her, when she felt totally crushed and suffocated under the almost inhuman weight, imprisoned by the insistent, prying hands, that she suddenly, and without precedent, lost all detachment.

‘Get off, get off,’ she screamed, ‘get off me, you freak. You ugly fat freak.’

With the strength of total desperation, Laura heaved her shoulders up, throwing the girl violently off her.

She heard Barbara cry out, angry and surprised. Laura stood up wildly, weightless, just in time to see the immense bulk of her stepdaughter staggering back into the mirror which toppled and shattered with a long sustained crash.

Shards of glass were scrunching under Barbara’s back as Laura threw herself upon her, reaching for the girl’s throat.

‘What gives you the right to treat me like that?’ sobbed Laura. ‘What makes you so fucking wonderful? You think you suffer? What about me? Have you any idea what it’s like to be me?’

Laura could see her own arms stretching out before her, the hands deep in the great folds of skin around Barbara’s neck. She could see eyes rolled up to show eggshell white delicately laced with crimson veins, and through the terrible choking noises she could hear her husband’s voice shouting, ‘Laura! For God’s sake! For God’s sake, Laura!’ as his little hands heaved frantically at her shoulders.....

Laura listened as father and daughter made their way downstairs. Barbara could be heard sobbing with that strange gurgling noise she always made, while Pablo was saying over and over, ‘It’s alright, baby, it’s alright, baby.’

A door closed. Silence.

Laura sat in the broken glass and took a deep breath. She felt perfectly calm. If she measured her heart rate she was sure it would be back to its regulated, metronomic 70 beats a minute.

Perhaps Pablo would want her to leave now. Perhaps not. She would do whatever he wished. It mattered and it didn't matter. That was all you could really say about anything in the end. Laura looked down at the broken glass surrounding her. Such a waste. She picked up a piece of mirror shaped like a shark's tooth, caught the reflection of her clear grey eyes in it, and then, just for the hell of it, cut her wrists and watched them heal, cut her wrists and watched them heal....

A DEVOTION.

Judith and Leo sat on the balcony, consuming tea and honeyed grains of exploded rice, waiting for the helicopters to come. The wooden platform was perched over a sheer cliff above a forest of evergreens. It was two whole years now since Judith had first walked out onto the balcony, dizzy with vertigo, but like so many things she'd grown used to it. On mornings like this the mist-filled valley looked as if it would blanket anything falling into it.

“I hear them.”

Judith looked across at the old man, her employer. His eyes were watering with joy and there was milk in his beard. She could hear nothing, but nevertheless turned to look at the hill on the other side of valley. It rose like an island from the mist, dense with trees to its summit, where the outline of the pines was as sharp as a serrated knife edge against the clear blue sky. Now she heard a dull throb. Then seconds later the helicopters appeared, rising above the hill with one mind - over a hundred of them - their noses down, driving forward over the valley, casting their shadows on the white blanket of morning mist.

It was the shadows Leo scrutinised as he hung salivating over the rickety balcony fence. The noise was overwhelming and he yelled words into it which Judith couldn't understand. It wasn't his native language: the sounds were too fluid for that. He could be speaking in tongues for all Judith knew.

As the helicopters disappeared beyond the house, their din fading, he returned to his chair exhausted, lowering himself into it with difficulty. His eyes had a blind look as if he had just looked into the face of God. But they were only helicopters for pity's sake, man-made machines that could fall from the sky through mechanical failure or human error.

She'd asked in the village where the helicopters came from. Was there an army base nearby? Was the valley a recognised training area for pilots?

But nobody seemed to know the answers. The woman in the shop that sold wool wasn't sure if she'd even seen or heard the helicopters.

'You must have *heard* them,' said Judith, 'the racket is terrific. You listen out next Wednesday. Around eight thirty.'

The shopkeeper looked at her discomforted, and Judith realised she must have sounded a little hysterical. Why should it concern this woman whether she heard the helicopters or not? Perhaps the balls of wool which filled the shop muffled the sound, made it insignificant, just a distant rumble of thunder which would hardly be noticed, let alone recalled.

But when she spoke to Eileen, the waitress she sometimes chatted to over her cup of coffee, the response was no more satisfactory. Did Judith mean the police helicopter – the one that had tried to track a murderer into the woods last month and woken everybody with its noise and searchlight?

Judith smiled and shook her head. It didn't matter. They exchanged details of the horrific murder, and

talked in awed tones until Eileen had to serve another customer.

As Judith left the café, she gazed up past the striped awning that sheltered customers from the sun, up to the shoulder of the tree-crammed hill. Leo's house wasn't visible from here. She wasn't even sure of its exact location. They were well hidden away.

Her way home took her past the little whitewashed church at the edge of the village with its cracked bell that could be heard so clearly as she lay in bed on Sunday mornings. Running along the back of the tranquil graveyard was the start of the path back to the house. It was steep and stony, with a chalky whiteness that glared in the midday sun – a difficult climb, particularly with two heavy bags of groceries. But Judith never thought of complaining, not even to herself. It was her lot. Who else was going to look after the poor soul?

On her back, in the coolness of Leo's bedroom, lying on a white cotton sheet she'd only just taken from the line, Judith watched as her employer kissed her belly and her thighs. The long white beard caressed her as lightly as fronds of dry fern. There was no passion in the way his lips met her flesh; it was more like a valediction or an obeisance. Judith was forty-one or forty-two, (she was never sure which) but against Leo's parchment grey, map-lined skin her flesh looked as buoyant as an infant's. It was narcissism which bestowed a kind of pleasure in his attentions.

Sometimes he would study her face so hard he might have wanted to possess her, to become her. His unnaturally intense eyes would stare into hers until she felt herself disappear into his image of her and found

herself smiling beatifically. And once he had sketched her face in pencil. There had been no flattery in the portrait, but the skill of the drawing took her breath away. It made her wonder what he had been before the all-consuming vocation of old age took him over.

Leo rarely spoke to her. He spoke mainly to himself; random sentences which sometimes contained little nuggets of sense, but never added up to a full story or explanation of anything. Perhaps *he* was the infant, the autistic genius. Like an infant his peace of mind depended on ritual. Meals at the same hour, a sleep in the afternoon, a glass of wine and water at six, a mumbled prayer before bed. He governed Judith's days as surely as night and day. Not to serve his supper at seven would be a rupture in the natural order of things.

And most important of all were the helicopters every Wednesday, eight-thirty as regular as clockwork. He lived for the helicopters, she was convinced. It was as if they justified his existence. If they ever ceased to come, he would surely die.

But of course he was dying anyway.

He'd been frail ever since she'd known him, but the substance continued to drain from him relentlessly. He'd reached the point where the life force had given over to the death force, an energy pushing him ever downward, stripping him of dignity, dismantling his flesh to parchment, showing the skull beneath as if fate was looking out and grinning. It was only a matter of time.

Unless...

It was Judith's wild hope that as long as the helicopters came he wouldn't be able to die. As they flew over he would sometimes gyrate his arms in mad, wildly

energised mimicry, and though it would exhaust him, his eyes would be shining afterwards and no longer would fate be looking out of his face.

But Leo wasn't whirling his arms the day the helicopter fell. It had been a difficult morning. He'd managed only a few mouthfuls of his breakfast and Judith had had to help him from his chair when he heard the helicopters. She held him as he leaned over the balcony with the air and his body vibrating, his eyes fixed on the shadows projected onto the valley mist. Judith looked where he looked and was suddenly aware of a disturbance in the formation. She also detected an unevenness in the din surrounding them, something barely perceptible, but disturbing, like a child choking in a room full of adults. Immediately she looked up and saw that one of the craft was falling, its rotor-blades turning lazily, sleepwalking. Among all the noise from the rest of the fleet it seemed to drop as silently as a ghost, disappearing into the mist below them and leaving an impression that it had never existed.

Judith looked with horror at Leo as the remaining helicopters passed on regardless.

'Did you see that?' she shouted, holding him tightly, almost afraid he would dive over the balcony after it.

But Leo's face was expressionless. There was none of the usual joy the helicopters instilled in it, but neither was there alarm or concern. He made a small gesture with his arm to show he would like to return to his chair.

That afternoon Judith bought twenty-five balls of red wool from the shop in the village. She'd prepared a lie about what she was going to knit with the wool, but she needn't have bothered. The shopkeeper was wary of

Judith these days and didn't make the friendly enquiries she made of her other customers. She simply put the wool into a strong brown paper bag with string handles and wished Judith a good afternoon.

Judith turned left out of the shop and walked to the end of the village where the road ran very straight and the telegraph poles took on a new, more dominant presence. To her left were open fields, to her right the forest, and it felt as if the whole village was staring at her narrow back as she stepped out on the dry, stony road with her bag full of red wool.

She walked slowly but purposefully until she came to a track which led into the crowded trees of the forest. Soon Judith was in another world, soundless except for the crunch of old pine cones under her feet, gloomy and fetid smelling. The track took her about two hundred yards into the forest, and then the trees crowded in to form a barrier that looked barely penetrable. Judith took out the first ball of wool, tied one end to a strong looking sapling, and continued her journey.

She played out the wool slowly, careful not to stretch it. Not only was it her route back, it also served to distract her from the claustrophobia of the forest. When one ball ended she busied herself tying on the next one. Every so often she gazed back at her blood-red lifeline winding through the trees, and it gave her some illusion at least of being in control. Judith was heading in what she hoped was a route parallel to Leo's hill, but the forest was so disorientating she really couldn't be sure. It was a hopeless business she knew, as hopeless as playing the Lotto, but like the Lotto once you'd started you had to carry on.

Although she was moving forward, her surroundings remained consistent, and she became ever more thankful for the balls of wool which at least gave her some idea of progress as their numbers in the paper bag diminished. Even if she were heading in the right direction, what were the chances she would hit the exact spot the helicopter had fallen? It *was* hopeless, but she would carry on until the wool was all used up, then she would return to the village and call the authorities from the phone in the café. The authorities! It was such a reassuring word, even though she had no idea who she meant.

Judith was tying on the final ball of wool when she smelt smoke. It was impossible to tell which direction it came from because there was no discernible movement of air in the forest. Judith sniffed, instinctively raising her nose like a dog, her senses in overdrive. She sniffed, searching for the smell of fuel, but the scent was pure wood smoke; and then, alarmingly, within the wood smoke the distinctive smell of cooking meat.

She reached back for the wool lifeline, her eyes scanning the dense trees. Her foot broke a twig and it was as if the forest held its breath. The police never had found the murderer. ‘The forest has eaten him,’ the newspaper had said, reassuringly but ambiguously. Judith knew she would have to turn round eventually, but for some reason she felt sure the attack would come from the part of the forest she hadn’t yet penetrated, so she felt with her fingers for the wool and walked backwards, grazing her knuckles on rough bark, bumping her bottom into tree trunks, stumbling over

roots, and all the time the smell of cooking meat was growing stronger rather than fainter.

She turned and ran. She didn't have to hold the wool anymore. Her eyes were blurred with dread and exhaustion, but the red line held shakily and magnified by her tears. She ran with the smell of hot meat in her nostrils and the memory of a horrible crime she'd read about

The exit to the forest came more quickly than she expected, and mixed with relief was the realisation that she hadn't been very far at all – certainly not far enough to discover the crashed helicopter. The rough track back to the road looked like the height of civilisation, and as her fear subsided Judith began to feel she'd been stupid. As she walked past the café, Eileen caught sight of her through the window, and waved in a quizzical way. Judith waved back, but kept on walking. She felt fearful for herself. Fearful for Leo.

The next day he was sicker than he'd ever been, but still insisted on going out to the balcony early enough for the helicopters. For the first time, he watched them from his seat and three of them fell from the sky, following each other in quick succession, and Judith watched them as if in a dream. Accepting the impossible.

The morning after that, so many of the craft fell Judith couldn't even count them. She didn't even follow their passage down into the mist. They simply looked lazy, as if they couldn't be bothered to fly any more. Their slow turning props stirred the mist briefly before they vanished from view, down into the forest which Judith now regarded as a very different place to the one she entered just three days previously.

The following morning Leo didn't wake up. Judith went down to the village to arrange his burial in the little graveyard at the bottom of the hill. They would send up a cart and a coffin and some men the following day. She returned to the quiet house and washed the body herself then dressed it in a clean shirt and trousers. Finally she combed the wisps of long white hair that circled the bald crown, and carefully arranged the beard so that it formed waves across his chest. She even ran the comb through the fulsome eyebrows which partially curtained the deep set eye sockets. In death the face looked hugely wise and knowing, like a painting of God.

She wondered if she would feel at all afraid sleeping in the house with Leo's body, but her only fear was for the future. The pattern of her whole existence for the past two years had been governed by his. Without his whims and rituals what was she? She began to shake in the hot night when she remembered that tomorrow was Wednesday. The day of the helicopters.

Waking late, she got up immediately and looked in on Leo with a sense of disbelief. His relaxed face looked so capable of animation it was hard to remember he wasn't merely sleeping. She ran a finger along the long, noble nose, half expecting him to stir. Then she kissed him once on the forehead before leaving the room.

The day felt charged with significance. In the kitchen she put together two bowls of cereal and a pot of tea with two cups. She knew exactly what she was doing. Just one last ritual. *In memoriam* would be the phrase for it. After taking the tray out to the balcony she sat at the little table, but didn't eat or drink; instead she placed her

watch face up by the tea-cups and waited. It was twenty past eight.

As the minute hand nudged against the half-hour, Judith strained her ears, remembering how Leo always heard them before she did. She stood and leaned against the unsteady fence of the balcony, scanning the ridge of the hill, staring into infinity. Nothing. Her watch was saying it was nearly twenty five to nine.

She'd known it. Of course the helicopters wouldn't come today. She looked again at her watch, then into the unechoing space of the empty valley. In three quarters of an hour the men would be arriving to take him down the hill. There was time for one last goodbye.

She went through the stone flagged parlour, down the cool corridor to his bedroom. His death had changed her perception of the house. The watercolours of local scenes on the corridor walls looked alien now, pictures of a foreign country. She noticed for the first time that the door to his bedroom had a deep, jagged crack in one of the panels and the brass knob was tarnished almost black. But none of these were her responsibilities any more.

She hadn't opened the door an inch before the draught poured out, so strong it was really a wind – an unwavering rush of cool air that could have come from a massive fan. She sought for logic; the possibility of a window blown open by a freak gale from the north. Then she leaned against the door, pushing against the pressure of air, till finally she had opened it and could step inside.

There was a slam as the door blew shut, and for a moment the sudden sound shook her more than what she was seeing. Great shadows swooped across the walls,

ceiling and floor with a startlingly vivid contrast between light and shade. Where the light came from she couldn't say. Certainly not from the little window, which couldn't be blamed for the intense wind either. It was closed and latched. She struggled to breathe against the wind, forcing her breath out against it, then pursing her lips to take in precious little parcels of air.

Leonardo was at the very centre of it all, the absolute axis, and not a breath of air disturbed him. His wispy, white hair was as intact as she had left it. His face seemed to have relaxed into an even deeper expression of serenity, while all around him whirled the black shadows of the helicopter blades, forceful but somehow hypnotic in their regularity, sweeping over the white sheet which covered him to his neck, over Judith's bare forearms, over the distempered walls, over the entire sparsely furnished room, hurtling and spiralling, but soundless; as peaceful as the wings of angels.

HERO AND VILLAIN.

Here inside Strangeways the Game is everything. Without it I would barely exist. I'd be little more than a phantom stalking these cold prison corridors and walkways, rattling my chains of guilt - furlongs of them - dragging the immense ball of my Crime behind me. But with the Game it is sometimes possible to forget...

Let's start with the construction of my hero. This is where so many gameplayers get it wrong. Fools always rush in, impatient to begin, whereas I spent months in meditation and study before putting together the character that was going to be my constant gaming companion over the rest of my foreseeable time. And though I say it myself, the hero I created is a work of genius.

My first step was to video-scan Shirley Temple from 'Baby Take a Bow' (1934). I then dressed her in flame-proof dungarees, equipped her with Batman's utility belt (circa 1964) and a Saudi army shoulder-mounted bazooka (2011). Next, I strapped a Hydrogen shield across her flat chest and, as the final touch, put a laser trident in her chubby little paw. Then we were ready to play, little ickle Shirley and I.

That was fourteen long years ago. Shirley has served me well in that time as I knew she would. She has the bouncy resilience the Game requires - nothing gets her down - not even the schizophrenic black hole on the ninety-third level could faze her cherubic chirpiness. She charmed it back to sanity, effectively inverting it with her dimples. But don't get the idea Shirley is averse to

making her weapons do the talking. Definitely not. Remember we are talking about an infant here! She was merciless in her spearing of the Cyclops whale in the Atlantis zone, and giggled excitedly all through the multiple strangulation of the Medusa shark. Yet when we finally cornered old Neptune in his seaweed festooned lair what did she do but bubble a lullaby at him and drown the old rascal in sleep. Shirley, her child's energy and native cunning armed and armoured, is the perfect protagonist for the versatile player, the lateral thinker.

Clearly, this is no ordinary video game. No, this is 'Chernobyl Regained', an amusement currently allowed only to those like myself serving a life sentence (and that means life these days) in a maximum security prison. The records show that since the Game's introduction nearly thirty years ago, nobody has ever succeeded in regaining Chernobyl. If I tell you that during the 2030's, when the Game could be played by anyone, there were dedicated clinics throughout the civilised world for those who had succumbed to addiction or insanity in attempting it, you'll get some idea of the frustrations the Game can generate.

One poor fellow spent five years at his computer, his brain charged with copious amounts of benzedrine, yet progressed no further than the Sulphur Lake on Level 1 and had amassed a score of 2! I could have told him his problem. He should never have selected John Wayne as his hero. Such gung-ho, let's-kick-ass attitudes only serve to make the Game's defences bristle and tighten up a notch. He would have done better with Ghandi. Anyway, in time his case was brought up in the UN

council and 'Chernobyl Regained' was deemed unfit for civil consumption. Later it was decided to give the Game to us 'lifers', though whether this act was intended as an extension of our punishment or as some kind of perverse occupational therapy has never been explained.

There are one or two ironic revelations in this story, and here is the first one: the author of the Game, you will be astonished to learn, is none other than yours truly. I designed 'Chernobyl Regained' in the second decade of the century, a full twelve years before my Crime. Just as my Crime has been called 'the ultimate act against humanity' (no bull), so my game was known as the 'ultimate challenge' - a much overused accolade in the retail world, but one that was entirely appropriate in my case.

Of course, neither the prison staff nor the authorities are aware that I am the author of 'Chernobyl'. I was shy as a youth, as computer geniuses usually are. Rather than market the game under my own name, I leased it to Spider Domain - that excellent and much mourned program library - and anyone plugged into their network could call it down, whilst I received a percentage from the company for every minute of playing time. In three years I had become an anonymous Ecu billionaire.

It is rumoured among the hard-core here in Strangeways that anyone completing the Game will receive a royal pardon. Strange how the old lags love that word 'Royal', they roll the r with such relish! Barry Hogg (serial killer) has been in here for twenty two years, with his hero (Charles Manson in Boadicean drag would you believe?) pitched against the leprous terrapins of the Moroccan Market zone for the last six, yet still he

dreams of his R-r-r-royal Pardon. I am tempted to tell him that he has barely begun the Game but it isn't wise to offend our Barry, as I discovered when I boasted too smugly of how Shirley had cured the scabby terrapins with a sprinkling of Baby Talc....I never realised just how much I enjoyed possessing a complete nose.

No, it is vital to avoid giving any indication that I am the mastermind behind 'Chernobyl Regained'. If they knew the truth I would be inundated with requests for clues, cheats, game methodology, weaponry, power-ups, shields and passwords. I would be bribed, threatened, cajoled, emotionally blackmailed, beaten, starved, drugged, and given every other imaginable incentive to release my secrets, of which, it has to be confessed, there are few. I would have to attempt to explain to those computer illiterate fellow inmates (illiterate full-stop in many cases) that the Game is self-generating. To compare 'Chernobyl Regained' with a traditional holographic scrolling arcade diversion is like comparing the Cistine Chapel with the caves of Lascaux. 'Chernobyl' is the most advanced computer game in the history of the known universe, which admittedly still doesn't amount to a great deal more than Galileo knew, but nevertheless....

I just don't think that the likes of Barry Hogg or his pal Maurice 'Razorman' Jones, would swallow the idea of the game working within broad parameters of self-invention. How could I convince Barry and Maurice that I didn't create the leprous turtles. Certainly the game knew about turtles, and had a rather cutesy graphic reference of them, but the decision to infect them with leprosy...that imaginative leap belonged to the program

alone. Its data base is huge. My main task in programming it was to edit out the elements in the real and fictive world which would bring the game to a rapid stalemate. There is, for example, no hydrogen bomb in 'Chernobyl Regained', no Superman, no Star Wars weaponry, no nanotechnology, no Merlin - this is a gameworld in which everybody has a chance, in which iron pectorals and megatons of TNT can be countered with an appropriate song or a fine speech. (One tip: The words of Martin Luther King can work wonders against the Pharaohs.)

Sometimes I suspect I made the Game too balanced. As its creator, surely I should have defeated it after twelve hours play every day of the week for fourteen years. True, Shirley and I have reached levels I'm sure no other gameplayer and his hero have attained before, yet the conclusion seems no nearer than when we began. Shirley is as chipper as ever, but for me the whole thing has begun to pall. On occasions recently I have experienced the dull throb of despondency which led to my Crime.

From my cell window at night I see two moons, one of which is the everlasting testimony to my offence. There is nowhere in the western world I can escape that haunting disc with its accusing sheen. Moon II is of course a fraud. Though it has an identical pallor to the original and appears to be of a similar size, it does not wax or wane. It is in fact an immense orbiting satellite in geostationary orbit, its giant's footprint stretching from San Francisco to St. Petersburg. And, believe it or not, this is just one of three similar satellites strategically stationed in space, imaginatively named Moons III and

IV respectively. But it is Moon II which I see from my cell, perpetually reminding me that since my Crime there are no more computers left on Earth, only receptive VDU'S and keyboards. All the computing, all the circuitry, all the real work, is done up there on those artificial moons. And here is Irony No. 2 - when I play 'Chernobyl Regained' it is transmitted from that very satellite, Moon II: that hideous lunar gimcrack, that monstrously expensive technological monster which only exists because of my Crime. Sometimes I glance up at it as I play, imagine the pulses winging their way through space with every twitch of the joystick, every depression of a key, and am in awe of it all, gobsmacked to eternity by my responsibility. If it wasn't for me Earth would still have only one moon!

But any remorse I keep to myself. In here I am something of a legend, and it would not do for a legend to act like a wimp. The enormity of my Crime lends me a degree of invulnerability. Apart from the nose-job from Barry, which was performed under some provocation, I have managed to keep my looks, such as they are, through fourteen years spent among some of the most murderous mutilators in Europe. Imagine it! These axemen, knife-wielders, paid-guns, lovers of little boys and girls innards, self-appointed guillotiners and family butchers are in awe of me - a man who blanches even at squashing the scuttling lice and spiders in his cell.

Yes, they are in awe of me, and with good reason, for I am also the man who caused planes to fall out of the sky, power-stations to melt down, the man who plunged operating theatres into darkness, poisoned the water-supplies, robbed the banks of every yen and dollar they

had, closed down factories overnight, the man who put the world on hold... and all from his own room. Compared with my Crime, their atrocities are mere pranks. Beside my perverted dreams of domination, their sadistic fantasies are like tickles and pinches. That is why they leave me alone, even though I am physically puny and have a weak, rabbit smile which at school earned me a kicking on more than one occasion.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that I began working on the Virus the day Ronald Tory spat in my milk and blew his nose on my tie. I was fourteen years old.

Back then the idea of creating a computer virus of global magnitude was precocious in the extreme. There were so many different competitive systems, and program designers still had a remembrance of the hackers of the twentieth century: the pests and pranksters who irresponsibly applied their undoubted expertise to office disruption. At the beginning of the 21st century, most systems carried some degree of viral protection. But I had the boldness (or was it ignorance?) of youth on my side. I embarked upon creating a virus so voracious, so promiscuously adaptable, that it would destroy programs in almost any language, however well guarded.

It took longer than I expected. My first virus won a small place in the computer history books. It is known as the Slaydybug on the Macintosh, the Inter-Ruptor on IBM, and Golly Gosh on Linux. But to my frustration it surfaced only in two cities - Adelaide and Singapore, and in both places was confined for some reason to systems used in meat packing or the labelling and filing of museum artefacts. 'Bones' are the only things I can think are shared by slaughterhouses and museums, so perhaps

there was something in my first virus which responded to femurs and vertebrae, skulls and spare-ribs.

That first failure was a great blow to my self-esteem, already at a pitiful low ebb. It was years after its small appearances in Adelaide and Singapore before I admitted to myself that my virus really had died, and was not simply dormant. In the meantime the world moved on. The global village, long talked of, was finally becoming a reality. Nearly every terminal in the world was connected to every other terminal, while systems and products became more and more standardized. This was when I realised I could quite easily become rich.

The universal language at the beginning of the twentieth century had been silent film; at the beginning of the twenty-first century it was the video game - and you may draw whatever conclusions from that you wish - but whereas silent film had had its Eisensteins and Cecil B de Mille, nobody had yet made the truly epic video game; the game that would sweep across history with full-blooded arrogance, that would combine intimacy with spectacle, that would immerse the player in such an overwhelming experience that he or she would emerge from the game all too well aware of the tawdry and insignificant nature of their own existence compared with the grandeur that was The Game.

That way lay absolute addiction. That way lay the wealth of Croesus.

I made my fortune, but like everybody else lost all my money when my second virus wiped the banks' computers clean. Overnight wealth came to be measured not by what you could own, but by what you did own. It's a fact that I suffered as much as anyone through the

antics of my second virus, and there is much I would rather forget. That is why, upon waking, even before washing or shitting, I am to be found seated at the screen, the joystick in my smelly hand as I manipulate little Shirley against whatever 'Chernobyl' is going to throw at her that day. It is deeply depressing, yet there is an irresistible oblivion to be found there.

Did you know that Shirley Temple had been a US Ambassador in her adult life? I didn't. Not until a couple of days ago. I didn't even know she had survived beyond the age of ten and found it, at first, unbelievable. My sparky, spunky Shirley involving herself in the tedium of politics, in endless ambassadorial dinners during which fine points of precedent and favour would be negotiated amid the small talk! Could this be the same Shirley Temple who sang the Narcotic Sloth out of the Banjum Tree with a ditty I helped her compose, before turning the dopey creature into soup with which she poisoned the Nile above fortified Cairo?

Yet the more I think about it, the more I can see those latent diplomatic talents. Sure she's flirtatious and a little scatty, but what endurance! Shirley always sticks with it. She's a winner and a charmer. I've decided she's everything I'm not.

They think I'm a psychopath. Judge Hedgerow used that very word when he sentenced me, and it has stuck. But it's a lie, or at least a hasty diagnosis, your honour. This place is full of psychos, and one thing a psycho never gets is depressed. He gets mad, he gets blood lust, he smashes up his cell, he takes a warder's eye out with stolen cutlery, he shouts, screams, curses and threatens, but never cries or moans. No conscience, you see.

Whereas I...

The calculations of how many deaths resulted from my second Virus are still going on. Initial reports only took into account the directly attributable fatalities: the lives lost through stalled dialysis machines, blinded air traffic control systems, exploding chemical factories and so on. By the end of the first year the number had passed the ten million mark, having been given a huge boost when the virus finally got to Tokyo.

But the figures are constantly being revised upwards. Disease from Chicago's ruptured sewers seems to claim an increasing number of lives every year. There are the ongoing fatalities from the meltdown at Sizewell. But mostly there are tens of thousands of individual cases - each one traceable, sometimes by the most quirky routes, back to my virus. In one estimate they even included the case of a Neapolitan man who had thrown his redundant PC at his wife during a fight and killed her. Presumably he would have refrained if it had been operational!

I wish they would stop. What is the difference between eighty million deaths and eighty one million? They are now attributing 90% of the rising death toll from AIDS to the break in the health education programme and the chronic condom shortage caused by my computer virus. I'm even to blame, it seems, for the civil war in Russia - if the Czar hadn't been killed when the Kremlin's moving-corridors failed, he would doubtless have gone on to produce an heir and the dispute over the Russian throne wouldn't exist. That he was eighty three and his wife sixty five seems to have been overlooked.

My virus has produced an irresponsible age. It is the scapegoat for so many things. I am the only person in the

world who cannot lighten my load of guilt by reference to it. The virus is my guilt, my overwhelming burden of sin, and every day they increase the load with their statistics. Infant mortality up 800%. Serious industrial accidents doubled in the past month. Fatal car collisions still over twenty times their pre-virus average.

No wonder I drink wearily, but thankfully, from the Lethe-like pixels of my computer screen. To play the Game is to enter a kind of sleep, free from the fetid smelling multitude of the dead. Shirley and I rampage through clean exterminations. Our victims die with a groan just 1.75 seconds long and then grow pale and transparent before dissolving absolutely.

But it is terrifying to realise I might getting bored with the Game. Not that the Game is becoming predictable - far from it - that appearance of Mussolini disguised as Shirley's mother really caught us off guard yesterday, it's just that it's beginning to lose its reality. But that's my fault, not the Game's.



The worst has happened, much sooner than I imagined. Everything I've told you so far has been history, but now we are entering unknown territory, a land without charts or landmarks. It begins with a dream.

I woke this morning, shouting and sweating. It was the first dream I'd had since I entered this god-forsaken hole. In the dream I was with Shirley. She had her hand in mine, it felt hot and damp like a real flesh and blood little girl's hand. We were walking down a street, a very ordinary street which had many of the features of the

town I grew up in. I asked Shirley if we were in the Game, and she looked up with her cheeky-sweet face, as broad as a moon, gave me a massive smile, but said nothing. Then I wondered if Shirley had escaped through the screen, and together we'd escaped from Strangeways. At that thought, the mere possibility of it, my heart lifted skyward, and I had begun to picture a life with Shirley in some little Land of Oz cottage with larger than life painted pansies round the door, when, from a side-road to our left, lurched a steel studded woodlouse the size of a lorry. I woke up howling as it came scuttling towards us.

I don't want to sound stupid, but it is true: that dream was the most real experience I'd had for ages. I sat on my cot stunned, still sweating with fear, but alive. My right hand held a remembrance of Shirley's hot little palm which had stiffened at the appearance of the woodlouse. I looked over at the computer in the corner of my room, it's screen saying "CHERNOBYL REGAINED. ON HOLD.", and found I had absolutely no desire to return to it. Shirley had been so alive in my dream, I couldn't bear to reduce her again to that video-sample. This is a crisis, I thought. This is my final disillusionment with the Game, and without it I am nothing. I am just a repository of guilt.

I have scarcely moved all day. The future stretches before me like an endless blank wall. On my side of the wall is desert, limitless blank, blinding sand, and on the other is lush pasture surrounded by green woods with tinkling streams and inviting pathways which lead to a valley in which nestles a small, welcoming village. The problem is the wall is too high to climb, and I doubt

whether it has a beginning or an end. Nevertheless time demands that I walk forward.

As the reality of the dream fades away, I begin to feel a profound sense of loss. I imagine it is how some people feel after a glorious bout of love-making. (I can only imagine as I am, of course, a virgin.) I suspect that in the end the intensest pleasures only add to the sadness of life, a transcendental experience serves finally to emphasise the tawdriness of the mundane. What a pessimist I am, what a depressing little shit, but I am entitled to be. Nobody in the history of civilization has had such an inalienable right to be so downright miserable.

Without the Game, I am left only with my Crime. No relief. All those deaths, all that chaos, pushing down like some dense moral ether, stinking and pressurised, crushing the breath out of me. I am sorry, I am sorry, oh God, I'm so sorry. It was only a fragment of machine code barely three lines long!

The sky through my barred window has turned pink and the twin moons have appeared like phantoms slowly gaining opacity as the sky grows darker. How I long to sleep, but my weariness is only mental, not physical. When I was sentenced, there was an international outcry - Life Imprisonment, is that it! Newspapers around the world offered imaginative alternative punishments (with some particularly nasty and protracted suggestions coming from Japanese journals) and the hate mail grew so mountainous the prison had to open an extra incinerator; though I have preserved a bundle of the most extreme letters for times when I suspect my own sanity. (Bud Mankovitch of Los Angeles who has a thing about

sewing machines is a particularly good antidote.)

What those twisted morons don't realise is that incarceration is the worst torture anybody could have devised for me, because unlike them I am sane. You don't have to be a madman to want to stop the world. It's just that living with the consequences has, to say the least, turned out to be something of a trial. But I still maintain it was a Big Idea, and time may even prove that I had the Right Idea. Who knows, generations to come may raise statues to me as the man who heroically attempted to de-toxify the world of poisonous, de-humanising hardware and software. Fond hope. I only have to look to the night sky, to Moon II, and I can see that technology is one narcotic we just can't do without. It was a junkie's desperate ingenuity that devised Moon II. I take my hat off to its creators.

It is approaching dawn, and still I don't sleep. The moons grow translucent like discs of tracing paper against the lightening sky. Even through my metre square window with its brutally naked bars it all looks as delicate as a Japanese watercolour. I stare and stare at the twin moons as they fade, wondering if there is a precise moment when they will disappear, or if there will be a limbo period in which it is impossible to say whether they are visible or not. Without the Game I suppose these are the kind of entertainments I will have to turn to. As it happens, I finally fall asleep before discovering the answer, and dream again of Shirley.

I rejoin her in the street of my childhood. A few metres away the giant woodlouse is threshing about in hideous death-throes while Shirley waves her laser trident victoriously in the air, acknowledging my presence with

mock disapproval. The actor-child says so much with her face, in this case: "what a silly-billy you were to disappear like that, but welcome back anyway." I feel an immense gratitude towards her, as I follow her past the now dead woodlouse and up towards the end of the street which is apparently turning into the interior of a submarine. Soon we are surrounded by elaborate brass pipe-work and valves, Victorian looking pressure gauges and a great deal of heavy rivet-work. I look back and the submarine seems to stretch away into the mists of infinity. Shirley meanwhile has stopped by a periscope. I watch as she stands on tiptoe in her little buckled shoes and cotton socks, and manipulates the instrument with the practised familiarity of an old sea-dog. Excitedly she beckons me over.

I find myself staring at the Spanish Armada in full sail. It is a glorious, captivating sight, and I can almost hear the snap of sailcloth and creak of timber, smell the sea and the tar, feel the salt spray in my face whipped up by a stiff north-westerly. As I watch, romantically absorbed, I notice that something is heading away from our submarine towards the fleet. It leaves a line of foam in its wake as it powers purposefully away towards the nearest ship. Whump! A perfect hit! The ship disintegrates in a spectacular explosion of flying timber. I turn away from the periscope to see Shirley seated at a complicated hi-tech console I hadn't noticed before. Now I become aware of the echoey poop poop poop of sonar, and can see a vividly luminous radar sweep picking up the armada. Shirley has that familiar look of concentration she adopts when involved in a tricky task. It's the look you can see on a lot of kids, tongue out, eyes

narrowed, but with Shirley it's somehow more so. She is typing rapidly on what looks like a full computer keyboard integrated into the console. Figures and words are appearing along the bottom of the radar screen. 545.90m/22_ Flow;1.8965km/hr Please supply correction Correction installed On standby 300kg Sea Requiem Fire? Yes Torpedo fired 13.06.

Shirley leans forward - her body rigid with anticipation as a small dot starts moving up the radar screen and, after an age, meets up with one of the larger ones from the armada, whereupon both dots promptly disappear from the screen. Shirley turns to look at me, and her face says, "This is Fun!", and she doesn't seem to hear the sound of knocking on the outside of the sub, as boomily persistent as a death knell. Doom doom doom it goes, and my heart starts to wallop against my chest. I've always considered drowning in a submarine one of the very nastiest ways to go. Let me out of here, let me out of here, my brain is screaming as the knocking grows louder. I try to speak, to warn Shirley, but I'm incapable of words. I wake, as mercifully one always does, when terror reaches the verges of the unbearable.

The knocking turns out to be Maurice 'Razorman' Jones hammering on my steel cell door. Never have I been so glad to see Maurice. In fact it's the only time I've been glad to see Maurice, though that quickly changes when I hear what he has to say. He informs me in a dramatic stage whisper that there is going to be a "jolly" at six-o'clock precisely. He means a riot, and passes me a prison issue desert spoon whose handle has been sharpened to the approximation of a stiletto. There is pure pleasure displayed in his thin weasely face as he

hands over the precious gift. Quite mad, you see. Cannot comprehend that not everyone shares his passion for a well formed blade. I try to paste a grin on my own face, and tell Maurice that I look forward to it. "Six-o'clock," he reminds me as he leaves. "Six-o'clock," I repeat, "It's a date."

Like hell it is. I can't abide violence. I decide I will hide under my bed until it is over. But what to do in the meantime? I'm beginning to feel giddily hungry, having missed several meals through erratic sleeping. Bacon aromas linger in the air from breakfast, and my mouth fills with saliva. I check my watch. There is still another three hours to go before I'll be let out for the midday meal. Automatically, I look over to the computer screen, even though I still don't feel like returning to the Game now that I have the far more tangible Shirley of my dreams. To my surprise, the machine is no longer on hold, but is displaying a familiar game scenario. Now when did I play that one?

The realisation hits me like a physical blow. The screen is showing the submarine down to the last detail, and there is Shirley still seated at the console with a much reduced Armada displayed on her radar. Even as I watch, no doubt boggle-eyed as a cartoon character, she fires yet another missile and the screen overlays a window in its top right corner representing the view from the periscope. The torpedo furrows its familiar path through the water and the ship blows up - a perfect duplicate to the one I witnessed in my dream.

Mesmerised I gaze from my cot as Shirley methodically destroys all the remaining ships in the fleet before standing and walking away without a glance in

my direction. As she disappears, a little stiff-legged, into the distance, a fanfare sounds from the computer and the scene fades to replaced by the legend:

"CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE COMPLETED LEVEL 12,014. HOLD OR CONTINUE?" Then as the fanfare ends a voice which is a perfect copy of Sir Richard Dimbleby's says smoothly and authoritatively, "Congratulations. You have just completed level twelve thousand and fourteen. You now have the choice of holding or continuing the game." It has always irritated me in the past that I didn't make the voice simultaneous with the script on the screen, but now I barely register the error as I cross to the chair in front of the computer.

I sit down, take a deep breath, and push the joystick up for Continue.

"LEVEL 12,015. TIME: THE PRESENT.
LOCATION: STRANGWAYS PRISON, ENGLAND.
OBJECTIVE: TO LOCATE THUNDERBIRD 3,
ENTER AND LAUNCH"

I am still trying to regain my breath, as the words fade from the screen to be replaced by a picture of Shirley standing expectantly in front of Strangeways' grim gates - the gates I never got to see all those years ago when I was rushed through the baying mob in an armoured Black Maria. From the outside they look like all prison gates - as if they are designed as much to keep the innocent out as to keep the felons in - and I move Shirley back a few paces so that we can get a better look at the whole picture. Now I can see my block, though not my window as it is below the level of the wall, but most remarkably, I can see the nose cone of a rocket protruding somewhere over near D wing. I still can't

believe this is happening. Could it just be a monstrous coincidence that the computer has chosen this moment to pick Strangeways out of its vast scenario bank? I feel paralysed, and almost sense Shirley's impatience that I am not moving her forward, allowing her to seek a way of entering the prison. Pointedly, she begins the little tap dance she is wont to do if I leave her standing for more than two minutes.

"Alright, have it your way," I mutter, and move the joystick forward and right, taking her to the edge of the prison wall. Now I select the Utility Belt option and click on "Batarang with Climbing Cord". I press for Throw, and Shirley flings the Batarang skyward, but not far enough. It clatters back down the wall. I press again. Still no good: she just isn't strong enough. We carry on circuiting the wall. There will be some way of getting into the prison, the Game will have made sure of that, and sure enough as we are turning a corner on the East Wall who should we bump into but old Mole from the Wind in the Willows, complete with waistcoat and spectacles. Shirley whispers sweet somethings in his ear and in no time at all Mole is obligingly digging us a passageway under the wall. I do not doubt the animal's efficiency, but this is a big task even for a Mole nearly a metre taller than Shirley; and there is something deeply soporific about watching soil fly out of a hole in the ground, hour after hour after hour after...

I didn't dream immediately, and can't remember the beginning of it, but somewhere in my dream I find myself embroiled in a prison riot, vivid as technicolour with tomato ketchup coloured blood everywhere. To my right is Maurice, a sharpened spoon in either hand,

ripping here, slashing there. To my left is Shirley, zapping away with her bazooka at virtually anything that moves, whilst I appear to have a chair in my hands with which I am trying to force Mr. Jones, one of the more amiable screws as it happens, back over the railings of the walkway. I accept that this is out of character for me, but it is of course a dream, and as I realise it's a dream, I wake up to find myself with a chair in my hands trying to force Mr. Jones over the railings of the walkway. For a second, I wonder whether it might be one of those cases where you 'wake up' into another dream. But no, this is reality sure enough. Shirley has gone, but Maurice is still very much here, though now I can't maintain a dreamy detachment to what he is performing with his improvised knives. It is truly disgusting, and I can taste sour vomit rising in my mouth as I run back through the rioters towards the open door of my cell.

I slam the door shut behind me and it locks automatically. The shouts and screams, of course I can't shut out, but it is with horror that I realise the noise of the riot isn't just confined to outside. It's continuing right here in my cell, bellowing out of the computer, and I turn with a sickening certainty of what I am about to see on the screen. Sure enough, there is Shirley in the thick of it, her bazooka blasting a pathway to the entrance to D wing. Warily, with a resignation I can't explain, I sit down and watch.

It goes without saying that Shirley reaches the rocket, that she understands the complex controls at a glance, that she lifts off faultlessly. What does surprise me is the way the prison rocks with a great blast of heat and light and noise at the precise moment of her launch.

Something to do with the riot perhaps? I am still clinging to the notion of coincidence like a drowning man clutching at seaweed.

Suddenly all is calm. The riot appears to have stopped outside, and I am left with Shirley pictured on screen in the incubator-like seclusion of her cabin, gazing out at the star-speckled blackness. As if by telepathy, I know precisely where we are heading. I know there can be no other destination. Never has been. And already I am anticipating the end of the game with dull acceptance.

Whether it was the Game's idea to inscribe 'Chernobyl' on the inner rim of the satellite dish, or whether it was always there, I suppose I shall never know. At one point it seemed as if we were going to fly straight into the satellite, but at the last moment Shirley fired her warheads and we watched together as they went streaming towards that great white disc, diminishing to pinpoints as they were swallowed in its vastness. I decided to watch the explosion from my window, but just as I turned from the computer, the cell filled with a glare as white as flaring magnesium, and by the time I reached the window there was only the single moon remaining, casting a light as soft as nostalgia over the dark prison buildings.

I stared and stared at the sky, convinced I could just discern a moving speck where Moon II used to be, but then I blinked and it was gone. I couldn't move for many minutes, and when I did it was to cross over to the dead computer. Even before I embraced the lukewarm monitor, I was wailing like a baby. With trembling arms I hugged the blank screen to my bony chest and began to sob helplessly and eternally, "Shirley, Shirley,

Shirley...."

ANCESTRAL HOME

The planet below looked so phenomenally similar to the one they'd left only moments ago it was bewildering. Bathu stared out from the porthole as the other students jostled around him for a view. Yes, there was the same vivid blue of the oceans whorled with white clouds like diagrams of atmospheric movement; and there were the continents which - though shaped differently - had such familiar hues of vegetation, desert, mountain and ice they could hardly be described as alien-looking. Though not immersed in the Thought-Pool, Bathu could sense a general air of disorientation among his fellow students. It was like searching for the features of a friend in the face of a stranger.

But one thing was sure: the planet was beautiful - a luminous gem in so much dead universe, just like the one they had so recently left. Even the alien moon had given him a sense of *deja vu* with its pockmarked surface and ethereal presence. It was known that poets on the planet composed verses to it, just as their counterparts on Bathu's planet did to their moon.

'Soon we will be descending,' communicated their Mentor. She did this trip too regularly to have bothered joining them at the portholes. Her soft thought-voice glided effortlessly to live side-by-side with Bathu's own thoughts. 'Before we do, ladies and gentlemen, please note the greater proportion of sea to landmass on this planet compared to our own. It is only recently that our ancestors have been able to cross these waters, and only in your lifetime that they have travelled beyond their

atmosphere. At the time of The Leaving we were very primitive creatures, though able to communicate by basic empathy. This skill has been all but lost by our ancestors.'

'So how *do* they communicate?' thought Bathu.

'Mainly through sound,' replied the Mentor, 'their vocal cords and breathing techniques are far more developed than ours. They also use pictures and symbols. Very recently they have managed a kind of rudimentary universal communication through electromagnetic radiation, but this still relies upon external sounds and imagery - any emotion has to be inferred.'

Their ship began to descend, shuddering as it hit the atmosphere. Moments later they were in blinding cloud, then seconds after that looking down on a parched grassy landscape rising towards them, details rapidly revealing themselves. This was more exciting. The trees had a definite alien look to them. There was evidence of civilisation in the straight dusty roads and the odd-looking makeshift dwellings scattered meagrely across the plain. They were so close now Bathu could even see the sun glinting on some kind of vehicle moving along one of the roads, clouds of dust trailing behind it.

'We know that fossil fuels are widely used...' began the Mentor

She seemed tired to Bathu, bored even, and she was lowering his own spirits. He suggested to her that they enter the Thought-Pool. This was supposed to be a landmark in their education - such trips were expensive and had only been approved in the last fifty years or so. Bathu's generation was a privileged one, he knew that,

and didn't want the treat spoiling by an apathetic Mentor. But she didn't think much of Bathu's suggestion. The students were to stay subjective for the time being. But she promised an opportunity for group experience when they transported an ancestor up into the ship for examination. Bathu cheered up. That was the moment they were all waiting for.

'If I look to the left, I will see a source of food for the inhabitants,' decided Bathu. This was the Mentor imposing herself so strongly on his mind that her thoughts were now his. He suddenly felt older, more universe-weary, and even before he turned his head was receiving a picture of gross long-horned four-legged creatures stampeding across the plain, pursued by the circular shadow of their craft.

They watched that shadow for hours. It kept them company across shimmering fields of grain and vast tracts of grassland populated only by large herds of the nervous beasts. They followed strange parallel tracks that gleamed their way across the landscape, observed rough wooden poles with cable slung between them faithfully following the dusty roads, and these they learnt were some of the awkward ways in which their ancestors still communicated. But apart from these features, and the odd dwelling, it was a lonely, empty land. On the few occasions they encountered signs of human presence the craft veered away, accelerating powerfully. They were not to be observed. That was why this sparsely populated area had been chosen.

Gradually, imperceptibly, the shadow of their craft was growing longer. It was nearing sundown. The sky began to burn red, the land to darken.

‘Soon we will begin the search for an ancestor,’ communicated their Mentor, and now her thoughts had a timbre of anticipation about them. Below them the shadow of the craft had disappeared to be replaced by a spotlight, moving rapidly and eerily over coarse dry grass. Bathu strained his eyes looking into the distance where dim lights could be seen on the horizon. He guessed it was one of the dwellings.

Looking down again he saw that they had begun to follow a road. The grain of its surface was clearly delineated, as were the rocks that bordered it. In places where the dust had been blown away, he could see how the road was bisected by a painted yellow line. There was something deeply primitive about that line. Bathu couldn’t begin to guess what it might symbolise.

‘LOOK!’ The mentor suddenly loomed hugely in his head. Ahead of them were two red pinpricks of light, rapidly growing larger. Bathu had no time to speculate on their meaning, because in seconds they had caught up with them and he could see clearly they belonged to the tail of a vehicle. Their craft hovered above, matching the vehicle’s pace perfectly as it picked up speed and began to swerve panic-stricken from side to side across the road, its headlights raking wildly into the desolate land either side of the road.

They tracked it patiently until the vehicle began to lose power, freewheeling helplessly, carried only by its previous momentum. They hovered above, everybody eagerly crowding the portholes, as with infinite reluctance the vehicle rolled to a standstill, the headlights dying to a barely discernible glimmer.

For a brief moment all was becalmed out there on the

darkened plain. Then the transference process began. A magnesium white brilliance enveloped the vehicle giving it a freakish transparency, and the ancestor could be seen crouching in one of the front seats, its arteries glowing beneath the skin. Even the small brain was discernible beyond the halo of the cranium, and the bones of the hands, gripped tight around a wheel, radiated like neon. Then all at once the figure was sitting in the car no longer, and the most profound, heart-felt howl Bathu had ever heard filled the space behind him.

The ancestor was hovering in the very centre of the craft. No longer transparent, but still bathed in the shimmering metallic light of the transference machine, which now began to pulse.

The Mentor's two assistants hurried forward, one taking the head of the ancestor, the other its feet. Gently they turned the stroboscopically dazed figure into a horizontal position and manoeuvred it to the table.

Before restoring gravity, they stripped the clothing from its body - a protracted process because there were several garments, many of them fastened in absurdly complex ways, including countless small discs of plastic inserted through holes in the fabric, which the assistants manipulated with difficulty. But worse was to come. As the clothes came off, a rank smell filled the cabin area - so bad that Tuyu, one of the other students, began to retch noisily.

But it was not only the smell that was offensive. The ancestor's skin was the hue they all associated with death (though the Mentor assured them this was a perfectly healthy individual) and to Bathu's eye it was spattered with the most garish blemishes. Random spots and

wrinkles, reddened areas, some visible blue veins and patches of hair in the most unlikely places, particularly around the genitals. None of the pictures or simulations they had seen had quite prepared them for the living, breathing reality of their progenitor. It was hard to believe - Bathu wasn't sure he *wanted* to believe - that they were the same species.

Once undressed, gravity was restored to the comatose figure, and it was lowered onto the gleaming, sterile surface of the table.

'Gather round,' persuaded the Mentor, and the class moved forward hesitantly. 'Come on.' A little impatiently she reassured them it only took a short acquaintance with an ancestor to become inured to the physical aspect. She ran a probe through the abdomen. 'See, liver, pancreas, stomach, intestines, spleen, kidney - underneath the skin they're virtually the same as us. Same organs, same position - only the relative size of them differs. And in case you're wondering....' She moved the probe down into the pelvis, 'yes, the male students could mate with this female if they were so inclined.'

The Mentor stood back and invited to the students to make a tactile investigation of the creature.

The very thought of it revolted Bathu, and he was sure that was why The Mentor grasped his wrist and pushed his hand down towards the thigh of the ancestor. Bathu averted his eyes as his fingers made contact. He'd imagined a cold, clammy sensation. Instead he felt pulsing warmth. The skin felt much thinner than his own, barely covering the flesh, but it was surprisingly pleasant to the touch. Unexpectedly smooth and sensitive. It gave way under his fingers, then sprang

back, as his hand moved on.

Sensing Bathu's waning aversion, the other students moved forward to stroke and prod. One of them, Yuni, was so bold as to lift the ancestor's limp hand in her own, caressing the back of it. Such a contrast: Yuni's gleamingly smooth long fingers encasing those bony, blue veined stubby digits, which with just a little more hair would have been so like an ape's. What a long way we've come, thought Bathu, tracing his finger over the fragile eyelids then along the bridge of the protuberant nose and wondering if he dared enter the disgustingly moist interior of the nostrils. Strange to think that if the Fosterfathers hadn't discovered this planet all that time ago and organised The Leaving, he would be just like this creature on the table. Scarcely evolved at all.

The Mentor was pleased with her class, with their bravery. She communicated pure approval, an acceptance beyond words. Bathu warmed to her. Then, as if giving them a gift for their courage, she initiated the establishment of a Thought-Pool by gently introducing the Mantra. One by one they all joined in. At first there were many different versions of the Mantra, all jumbled and colliding in Bathu's head, one of them, of course, his own. But gradually, inevitably they began to merge, to inaugurate a pattern that all those present favoured. It felt as natural as gravity, as irresistible as water flowing to the sea.

In time the Mantra became so subtle it ceased to exist. Identity was now One.

Overflowing, indivisible companionship embraced them. The dominant thought was of their single history, stretching back centuries before the ancestor now

present. In the Thought-Pool, the ancestor was looked on as beautiful. In Bathu's eyes, in *all* their eyes, she became one of them; a long missed link between their history on this planet and the new world. Their hearts melted with compassion for this representative of their previous selves. Only outwardly was she different. Beneath the skin they'd seen the familiar organs, and surely if they could penetrate her soul they'd discover a template of their own hopes and desires, a bond running much deeper than blood and forged in the mists of millennia.

Inexorably, the group was drawn towards the pale naked figure. With slim fingers and the lightest of touches they traced patterns on the fragile skin, invisible diagrams of their shared affection, and were so absorbed that it was some time before any member of the Thought-Pool saw that the ancestor's eyes had opened.

They were turned back in her head, showing pure white shot with a tracery of delicate veins; her lips were pulled away from her teeth in a perfect O of terror whilst the arteries in her arms bulged as she fought pathetically against the restraints.

The many integrated minds took time to adjust to this sudden event, and it was several seconds before Bathu began to gain any degree of self-awareness. The discipline of emerging slowly from the Thought-Pool had been instilled in him from childhood. To surface too quickly could have dire consequences. But he was afraid. An alien sensation was penetrating it. Something with dark, unfathomable depths, that threatened to pull them all down into its grisly whirlpool. He tried to connect personally with the Mentor, but just received an

impression of alarm that went to feed his own.

In the end his training took over, and as quietly as he could, he re-introduced the mantra to try and stabilise the situation.

Hopeless. It was now a hard ugly syllable pounding in his head, endlessly repeating itself; wrenching the group apart rather than uniting them. He couldn't keep his eyes off the stricken face of the ancestor which he realised was a perfect counterpart to the corrupted mantra. Somehow they were communing with her, acquiring her consciousness.

Desperately, Bathu tried to release himself from the unrelenting mental grip made so powerful through fear. He was prepared to risk an immediate surfacing, but it was impossible. The mantra was as loud as a sledgehammer in his mind and seemed to echo in the loneliest place imaginable. He was being cast out, irretrievably, into an awful void. His connections to the others were snapping one by one, like brittle cable, and he felt himself begin to drift away. Horrified he looked at his friends, whose faces mirrored his desperation, their mouths gaping, their neck cords straining as they sought to re-activate fossilised vocal chords, desperate for some relief through self-expression. But they'd lost the art of screaming centuries ago.

The Kinetic

Samuel looked dog-tired but hopeful as he got off the train, just like you'd expect a good old country boy to look on his first visit to the Big City. I expect I wore the same expression when I arrived twelve years ago, astonished to the soles of my shit-kicking boots by the size of my ambition.

Samuel put his bag down to shake hands and I dropped the card I'd been holding with his name scrawled on it. He'd got this dazed look in his eyes and a slightly loopy smile. The other passengers, commuters mainly, were pushing past us, kicking Samuel's holdall, uptight dickheads to a man.

'Jim,' he said, 'it is Jim isn't it?'

'Yeah,' I took him gently by the shoulder, 'let's get out of this crush shall we?'

I suppose I'd call Samuel a friend in the sense that you'd probably call anyone you shared a first-grade classroom with a friend. But we'd never actually run in the same gang and I hadn't heard or seen from him since, not until just last week when I got the phone call.

'Is that Jim Mitchell?' The line had been crackly and his voice had nervous wow and flutter in it.

'Speaking.'

'Jim, I don't expect you remember me....'

But I did remember him. I remember everybody effortlessly. It's one of the reasons for my success, one of the most important reasons if I was honest with myself.

It appeared I was the only person in the city he knew.

He said he'd been following my progress; everybody did from the old school apparently. I ought to go back and make a talk or something.

'Yeah, I should,' I said, wondering where all this was leading. 'And what have you been up to all these years?'

There was a pause. 'Well, recently I've been ill.' The way he said it I knew we'd got to the real reason for the call.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, 'nothing *too* serious I hope.'

He stuttered something out. He sounded so desperate it made me go chilly. At first I thought what he'd said was, 'I'm connected.'

'Sorry, Samuel, this is a terrible line. I didn't quite catch you.'

He tried again through the static and ghost voices while I pressed the receiver hard against my ear.

'I'm kinetic,' he said, and the words were followed by a lonely sob that sounded a million miles away from my lush warm apartment in the centre of the city.

'Samuel, listen, Samuel. Are you there Samuel?' I had a sudden fear he was about to hang up. The line linking us was as frail as a spider thread.

'Yes.'

'Listen, I want to help you any way I can.'

I still wasn't sure if I'd heard him right. I thought kinetic was something to do with particle physics. But his single sob was the only persuasion I'd needed right then.

We left the station and walked the two blocks to where my car was parked. Now the threat of invasion was over

there were guys in smart blue overalls at every corner nailing back the street signs. Samuel kept looking up at them and nearly falling foul of the pavement. As if he'd never seen somebody up a ladder before! Never mind the circumstances, I was pleased to have Samuel walking these streets with me. It took me back to my first time when I stepped out through the station's massive Doric portals and looked up at the buildings, the green, luxuriant terraces, the howling gargoyles, the super-fast chrome lift shafts, the glass and steel, stone and brick, all mixed and matched...and above all the towering ranks of giant red cedars marching down the centre of the broad boulevard...and felt my heart go CHRIST!

But Samuel's eyes seemed to be reserved for the men up the ladders.

'Are you all right?' I asked him, 'Everything okay.'

'Do you think we could stop for a glass of water some place. I couldn't find the restaurant car on the train.'

'You went for eight hundred miles without a drink?'

He tapped his bag. 'I had my flask at first, but that air conditioning it gets you right here.' He touched his throat.

We walked back a few yards to a cafe we'd just passed. It was clean and crowded with a smell of doughnuts and coffee.

'Just a glass of water please,' said a sheepish Samuel to the pretty waitress.

'Make it a jug of water,' I said, 'and a coffee for me.'

'Yes, sirs,' she said smartly and flipped her backside as she pirouetted away. There was that feeling of life beginning over again that always pervaded the city when danger was averted. Everyone was acting more sexily,

people getting pushy again.

Samuel had all the presence of a sheep abandoned to the wolf pack, sitting there with his overcoat up round his ears and his blatantly new homburg looking as if he'd double-sided it onto his pate. When the drinks came he clutched at the glass like a chronic alcoholic and his hand was trembling so much he could hardly pour the water.

I watched him. He seemed to be about to bring the glass to his lips when he changed his mind and slammed it down on the bright Formica, covering the top of the glass with his fleshy palm.

'Shit!' he said, with such low-voiced venom it startled me.

'What?'

'We'd better go. Now.' He hefted himself to his feet, raising his hand from the glass. As he did so the water shot up in a bright column. For a second it remained suspended like a superb piece of undulating glass sculpture reflecting the fluorescent and plastic colours of the cafe. Then with the sound of a single strike on a triangle it exploded into an atomised mist. Like everybody else in the cafe I ducked when the column detonated but the only after-effect was a delicate prickling of delicious coolness on my face that felt as if it would go on forever.

I had to chase Samuel half a mile down the street. He'd run way past the car. I caught him by one flapping sleeve at an intersection of unnamed streets.

I don't mind seeing grown men cry. It's something that's just never bothered me. I put my arm round the back of Samuel's neck and pulled his wet red face into

my shoulder and there we stood in the middle of the pavement with the crowd flowing round us - the only stationary item in the whole damn street. And you want to know what the beauty of the city is? The beauty of it is that nobody threw us a glance.

Back at the apartment I showed Samuel his bedroom. I could tell he was dead beat. He hadn't said a word in the car, but I wasn't about to start interrogating him. That would wait. I watched him for a while as he rummaged about pathetically in his holdall, hanging up clothes in the wardrobe, laying a pair of neatly pressed flannelette pyjamas on the bed.

'Anything I can get you?' I asked when he was finished.

'No, I'm fine.'

'What about that drink?' I said, 'I thought you were thirsty?'

'It's okay, I'll fill my flask from the bathroom.'

'If you're sure.'

'Yes I am. Thanks.'

I closed the door on him softly.

Pouring myself a tumbler of vodka, I went to the window to think. My apartment is on the hundred and fifty-first floor. I look down on skyscrapers, and sometimes clouds. From up here, even with the window open, the sound of the city is just a low perpetual hum punctuated by the faintest bleatings of horns or sirens. From here I can see beyond the glitter and greenery of the city centre with its plazas and fountains to the spacious suburbs, the local shopping malls and the

huddled workers' estates all laid out as graphically as a social diagram. On a clear day like today I can even see beyond the city to the empty grasslands where just a week ago I could observe the enemy encampments, glimpse the sun flashing on warheads which I could have sworn were pointed directly at me. To look down from a mountain is to feel humble but to look down from a tower is to feel like a king.

The vodka cleared my head. From my viewpoint, about three miles distant, the distinctive domes, sports stadium and green pastures of the university were clearly visible. I picked up the phone and called the Science Faculty.

I asked to speak to Dr Franks, but Dr Franks was in a seminar right now and would I like him to call me back? I said yes, and half an hour later the phone rang.

I knew Franks from when he'd done some NPD and testing work for the company. He'd cost us a small fortune and naturally he sounded pleased to hear from me. How could he help?

'You could tell me what kinetic means,' I said.

'Well in my field it refers to the speed of a chemical reaction, but it has other meanings in other sciences. There's the kinetic theory of gases, for example...'

'But can a *person* be kinetic?'

He sounded a little anxious at this line of questioning. 'You acquire kinetic energy every time you take a step.'

'That's not quite what I meant. I mean is there an illness, some kind of condition you can catch called kinetic.'

'Ah,' said Franks. There was a silence lasting some seconds, but I waited. 'Where have you heard of this,

Jim?’

‘So there is such a condition.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said unhappily.

‘But you’re not going to tell me anything about it.

Right?’

‘I’m just not authorised. Officially it doesn’t exist.’

There was a pause. ‘It’s not you who’s kinetic is it, Jim?’

‘No, it’s just something I heard about.’

Franks sighed. I could tell it was painful for him.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘if you’re in contact with a kinetic I’ll say just this. Keep well away.’

‘Its infectious?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Look I’ve already said too much. But just keep your distance. That’s all. Keep your distance.’

He rang off.

The rest of the afternoon was spent phoning doctors, alternative healers, prescription drugstores, medical magazine editors - anybody I could think of who might be able to enlighten me. In truth I wasn’t expecting information; I was listening for anything in the voice which might betray the denial. But zilch. Either they were all much cooler actors than Dr Franks or they really knew nothing.

Towards evening I sat down at the screen and linked with the Art Futures Exchange. It took a minute or two because it has to go via your bank before it gives access. For a while I watched the prices jiggle around. Turners still buoyant, Burne-Joneses doing badly, Magrittes showing early signs of recovery, but not enough to sell. So I started buying. As the dusk came down and the edgy luminosity of the screen intensified by contrast, I

acquired an Ernst, two Chirocos and a Klee. I was so engrossed I wasn't even aware that at some stage Samuel had come into the room and stood behind me. Not until he spoke.

'Maybe I should get started.' His voice sounded as gloomy as the room - now lit only by the borrowed light from the computer.

I turned in my chair, a little reluctant to leave the world of art, having to adjust to reality. 'What do you mean...get started? Get started on what?'

'I have to find The Baptist. That's why I'm here. He's the only one can help me.'

'Hold on Samuel,' I said, 'You're going too fast.' His big sad face was a multi-coloured craze from the Klimt on the screen. Inevitably he was still in his pyjamas, and inevitably they were too big for him and made him look clownish.

You have to talk to me, Samuel. You've got to let me in on it. I can't help you otherwise.'

I stood up and turned on the light. Down at street level maybe there were people looking up, seeing it go on a hundred and fifty floors up. One more light in the forest of lights.

Samuel stood in the middle of the room, blinking.

'Before we do anything, why don't you get dressed. I'll get us some food. We'll eat and talk okay?'

He smiled reluctantly.

This is what he told me over the salami salad. The first time...no, the second time the thing had happened with the glass of water he'd been in a roadside diner on his way back from the Wheat fair. As he was leaving the

diner, a man who'd witnessed the exploding water approached him in the car park. The odd thing about him was he wore a suit in a part of the country where as a rule suits were only donned for chapel-going or fancy restaurants. His face was pale and tight-skinned. A town face, Samuel called it. Under the dust his black shoes were shiny. 'You're Kinetic, sir...' the stranger had said without preamble and looked Samuel hard in the eyes. But it wasn't aggressive, it was like he was searching to check that Samuel had heard. The word was a new one to Samuel. Now as nervous as hell, he asked the man to repeat it, and the man obliged, enunciating more clearly this time. 'You're Kinetic,' he repeated, 'and that means you're cursed unless you can find The Baptist.'

Despite his shock, Samuel asked him to repeat that name too, but instead the stranger reached into his inside pocket and took out a wallet. He could have been in an expensive department store about to settle his account rather than the rock-strewn car park of a desert road diner. He opened the wallet with one hand and, deft as a conjurer, slid out a business card between his forefingers. So slick was the action, it seemed incongruous that the card he produced should be dog eared and grubby.

At this point in his story, Samuel stopped chewing on his salami and produced the item. It was crudely printed like an amateurish woodcut. There were four vertical wavy lines in blue ink which I took to represent the column of water I'd seen Samuel produce in the cafe. To the left, in the same blue ink, it said YOU ARE NOT ALONE and on the right I CAN SAVE YOU. I turned the card over. On the back in faded pencil was written

‘The Baptist now dwells in Jonah.’

I turned the card over and over. It was so old it had become soft and spongy, covered in a patina of grime.

After we finished supper I turned out all the lights in the flat and guided Samuel to the east facing window, directing his gaze past the snake of neon that was Route 1, past the broadly spaced tower blocks of the munitions workers, past the glimmering slums of the unemployed all the way to the barely lit area I knew to be Jonah. As if to acknowledge our observation there was a sudden flare from the heart of the district, short lived as a shooting star.

I looked at Samuel looking. His eyes had the bright sheen of hope, yet I couldn’t help feeling he was looking into a void.

Jonah. To the ordinary citizens like myself, who of course never venture anywhere near the place, the mere name has mythical qualities - as fictionalised as Mars - only ever seen from a distance and the depository of so many imaginings and delusions. For myself, I inevitably conjured up the Bosch triptych whenever I heard the name, or sometimes Breughel’s peasants or Durer’s London. Jonah was a work of someone’s overheated imagination, not somewhere you could visit.

I woke early after a bad night in which I’d slipped in and out of revolving nightmares featuring Samuel and cryptic business cards and terrible ghettos. Desperate for coffee, I threw on my robe and walked from the bedroom into something every bit as unreal as my dreams. The whole apartment was in fog. It pressed right up against my eyeballs, an intense opaque off-white

blankness, a soft wall of nothing. I brought up my hand. At six inches distance it became invisible. I looked around me. The bedroom door had disappeared, even though I was sure I was standing right in the frame. My robe was already soaked through. My face and hair were dripping with moisture. It was hard to breathe. Somewhere to the right, muffled by the fog, came Samuel's voice querulously calling my name.

I walked towards the voice, stumbling into furniture I never knew I had, before reaching out and finding Samuel's arm, damp and naked. I brought my face within an inch of his. To see the pores of his skin was as much a relief as touching ground after deep water.

'What happened?'

'I was taking a bath.'

'Good God.'

'It's never happened before. Jim, I'm scared.' He started to cling.

Two hours later, we joined the mania that was Route 1, took Exit 7 like it said on the A-Z, skirted the tank factory, then kept the sun in our eyes as the road headed into an area of sewage works, refuse processing plants and car dumps interspersed with burnt looking scrub land. Here the tarmac gave way to slabbed concrete jointed with black mastic and broken at its edges by urchin-like plant-life. We were hemmed in on either side by fences of rusty chicken wire hung from dissolving concrete posts. The air was heavy with chemicals and the world's rankest smell - human excreta.

Eventually we arrived at a crossroad with a solitary pillbox by it. Jonah was visible now - a sprawl of squat buildings low on the skyline with lazy plumes of smoke

drifting into the morning blue. The air smelt fresher here and a hawk hovered attentively over the wasteland area between the crossroads and outskirts of the ghetto.

I half expected a guard to emerge from the pillbox as we crossed the junction, but it had clearly been abandoned years ago. We drove on towards Jonah unimpeded.

‘You want business?’

‘You come this way. Fresh chicken.’

‘Genuine enemy hand. Not stained, real yellow.’

‘Ask your friend. He want?’

‘Only the finest Colombian for a gentleman.’

‘No, for free. No charge. You try.’

‘Wanna know why they call my daughter the liquorice girl?’

‘What you want here anyway?’

‘100% alkyhol. No foolin’ .Blow yer blimmin’ head oft, ha! ha! ha!’

‘Where you going? Hey, come back here.’

‘My famous brother will come like a knife in the night.’

‘Picked fresh this morning before dew-fall.’

‘You don’t want to go down there. Come with me.’

‘What you want here anyway.’

‘Baptist? There’s no Baptist round here. You’re in the land of lost souls, brother.’

As we pressed on through the crowded lanes, I tried to keep a map in my mind of where we’d left the car. The outskirts of the district had been surprisingly quiet and affluent. The cars were gaudy and flash, but top of the range flash. The shuttered houses were set back behind

tidy forecourts, hemmed in by security fencing expensive enough not to look anything like security fencing. It was outside one of these houses that I'd parked the car, but we'd come into a very different neighbourhood. Jonah was built on the edge of a horizontal plain but the further we walked into it the more it felt like a descent. The streets grew narrower until they were tight alleyways darkened by lines of washing criss crossing over our heads and balconies which almost met. Mingled with the stench of cracked drains were sudden sharp smells of cooking - cumin, coriander, onions and charcoal, and in every other crumbling doorway we passed there was a deal or a threat offered with nothing in the intonation to distinguish between the two.

Only Samuel's innocence kept us immune. He walked through it all wide-eyed and smiling, nodding at the offers and the menaces, disarming even the most reprobate with a grin of bottomless incomprehension.

Eventually we burst out of the claustrophobic alleys into a broad piazza. The sky arced over us massively, and I felt like a drowning man who suddenly breaks the surface. Though the piazza was full of people and market stalls, the noise sounded like faraway hubbub after the close calls we'd just experienced. It was approaching midday and the heat was trapped in the square where the crowd moved slowly, viscously. The only exceptions were the performers - mad tumblers, firebrand jugglers and monkey men - jitterbugs in a hive of sleepy bees.

Where on earth was The Baptist in all this? Nobody I'd asked so far had shown any sign of knowing. I'd begun to doubt that Jonah referred to this place at all, but

Samuel's faith seemed unshaken. He still had that shine in his eyes as he scanned the crowd, taller than virtually anyone else in the square.

But to me the whole thing was turning into a puzzle where the compiler has given out the wrong clues, like stalemate at the end of a poor game. But that was before the incident with the watermelon.

I didn't see it from the beginning. According to Samuel he'd been walking behind me and passing a fruit stall when the vendor thrust the melon into his hand, insisting he test it for ripeness. My first consciousness of Samuel's predicament was his desperate cry, 'NO!' I turned in time to see him throwing the football sized fruit into the air. But too late. The green skin was visibly stretching, the melon expanding as it flew upwards over the heads of the surprised shoppers and market stall holders. It had to be coincidence, but the melon exploded with what appeared to be a scripted climax at the very apex of its flight. There was a dull bang, the sound of two heavy books slammed together, then the air was full of pink flesh. Some of the crowd were applauding, others looked dazed as they wiped the sugary pulp from their faces. A card conjurer who a moment ago had held the attention of a small audience stared at Samuel with grudging respect.

'You pay for that,' said the stallholder, but without much conviction.

People began to move towards Samuel, most of them with an expectant look in their eye as if the trick with the melon was merely the appetiser to some main course of major wizardry. I dropped two coins into the stallholder's hands and took Samuel by the arm.

‘More, more’ the crowd began to chant. We quickened our pace and our followers matched us step for step. I steered Samuel towards the alley we had just left. The crowd behind us was growing bigger, snowballing with curiosity. Children, braver than the adults, danced in front of us, gazing at Samuel with awe-struck eyes. One of them had an orange which he held out imploringly.

It was the tightness of the alleyways which saved us. The crowd literally stumbled over itself in its corporate excitement. Instinctively we turned into the narrowest passages, walking at full tilt rather than running: a couple of silent comedians trying to sneak away from the scene of the crime. We didn’t look back. Soon the hubbub was fading. We took a quick left and a right, diving into an opening between two crumbling walls that was barely shoulder width, then I grabbed Samuel by the shoulder and pulled him back into a deep doorway, into shadows and silence. Without even the sound of our own footsteps, we were suddenly aware of just how quiet it had become. And dark. The houses, separated at ground level by little more than the width of a handcart, had leaned into each other till there was barely a foot between their eaves. We pressed ourselves back against the door, listening to the blessed peace for a long time.

The landlord was the type who didn’t interrogate, but gave the impression he thought you were as suspicious as hell.

‘I got one room left. Double-bed. Bathroom.’ He admitted grudgingly.

‘Sounds fine,’ I said.

‘Cash in advance.’

I pulled out my wallet and the quantity of notes in it did nothing to assuage him.

‘We may be staying a few days,’ I said conversationally, ‘we’re looking for somebody.’

I handed over an extravagant number of bills. ‘Last time we heard he was calling himself The Baptist.’

The landlord began counting the money as if he hadn’t heard a thing.

‘My friend here is sick and we believe...’

‘Anything contagious?’

‘No, no. It’s just a constitutional malady.’

The landlord cocked an eyebrow. ‘I haven’t heard of that one, but as long as he isn’t infecting the other guests....’

‘He finished counting the money. ‘This’ll keep you a week. You’ll have to share a bed - any problem with that,’ he said in an insinuating tone.

The room was high ceilinged with mouldings in the corners, everything clean but faded. It had been a spur of the moment decision to stay here. When we came across it there had been something tempting about the crumbling rococo facade. Its faded colonial grandeur summoned images of a more languid, self-possessed time. I’d expected a sweep fan in the lobby.

Samuel was pacing the room. ‘It’s no good, Jim. We’re never going to find him. I’ve brought you on a wild goose chase.’

I got him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye, ‘For chrissake, Samuel, we haven’t even started.’ I steered him to the bed and sat him down. ‘You’ve got to stop going guilty on me, Samuel. It’s driving me crazy. I want to help you okay? I *love* helping you.’ My voice

was beginning to rise.

‘Who’d a known it was going to be this hard,’ whined Samuel.

‘Who says it’s going to be so hard? As you sow you reap, right?’

He looked blank.

‘Look, this might seem like a big old rotten metropolis to you, but believe me it’s a village. It’s Gossipville. Look at the attention you got in that market. You’re already famous. If The Baptist is here, believe me it’ll be no time at all before he’s heard about you.’ I seemed to have acquired the accent of my upbringing during this little speech - Samuel’s accent.

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right,’ he said, but none too convinced.

‘I’m right,’ I said, sitting down on the bed beside him. I thumped him on the back, ‘Say, why don’t I run out and get a bottle of something and we’ll just sit here and get a little drunk and talk over old times.’ Saying it made me want it badly. I’d been looking to the future for too long.

‘I’m sorry, Jim. I’ve taken the pledge. Sorry.’

‘You have?’

‘I joined the Church of the Exalted Innocents two years back now. We don’t touch alcohol. Sorry.’

‘So what does this church of yours believe in? Besides abstinence.’ Anything to stop him apologising.

‘In the death of those who worship the beast,’ said Samuel, surprised that I should need to ask. ‘These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast. These shall make war with the Lamb and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is the Lord of lords,

and King of kings; and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.'

'And you are one of the chosen?'

'I believe so, yes.'

'Chosen to do what?'

'That has yet to be revealed,' he said shyly.

I was sitting so close to Samuel that our shoulders were almost touching. I could feel his trembling through the bedsprings as he spoke those words that were so awesome to him. It wasn't a surprise to discover Samuel had got religion. There are little people and there are big people, and the littler you are the bigger the lie you fall for. But that was okay. C'est la vie, say the old folks. If Samuel got some comfort from his Church of Exalted Dupes, who was I to argue?

But Samuel took my reticence for interest. Before we went to bed he removed the Gideons Bible from his drawer and pointed out some juicy passages. Long after he had fallen asleep, I found I was still reading.

'...the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man; and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and the fountains of waters; and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters say, 'Thou art righteous, O Lord.'

The angel of the waters! Samuel snored blissfully beside me, with a face in repose full of lunar splendour. Outside, in the distance, a dog was barking unceasingly. I went to sleep to the sound of horses' hooves passing below our window.

I'd paid for a week at the hotel, but after a couple of days I wasn't sure if we had the luxury of so much time.

Samuel's condition was growing much worse, his symptoms accelerating almost exponentially. By the middle of our second day scarcely an hour would go by without a kinetic reaction. I realised now that he actively sought water at crucial times and would periodically be drawn to the bathroom as inevitably as an alcoholic seeks out the drinks' cabinet. I would hear the sound of a running tap, shortly followed by a soft explosion. Samuel would emerge like a gawky angel from a white cloud, looking helplessly self-accusing and wet-eyed. It got to the point where even with all the windows open there was a constant dampness in the air and the impression of looking through misted glass. It was clearly impossible for him to go out. I brought bread and cheese up to the room and told the chambermaid my friend was too sick to be disturbed.

By the third day, the sheets had become too damp to sleep in and the carpet oozed moisture miserably with every step. I woke in the night to a dank tearing sound and an ancient smell. A sheet of faded rose-patterned wallpaper had come unglued, and hung down in a great ugly swathe.

Then something happened to alarm me more than any of this. I returned in the evening after another fruitless day wandering streets and squares and alleyways asking after The Baptist. I'd grown sick of the name, my constant repetition of it like a beggar's supplication. There had to be alternative strategies, but we had entered a world where so much was strange to me. I couldn't even advertise in the local paper. There was no local paper.

The mist in the room had got much worse. It took me a

while to locate Samuel hunched on a wooden chair near the open window. He was asleep. The kinetic reactions seemed to take it out of him. On his lap was the Gideon's Bible, open at Revelations, its pages as limp as old lettuce. I didn't want him to wake, but as I turned away he suddenly looked up blearily.

He rubbed his eyes. 'Any luck?' There was a cheery hopelessness in his voice. I'd finally convinced him that his perpetual apologies irritated me, and he'd adopted this 'we're both in it together' attitude instead.

'Still early days,' I said, just as I'd said yesterday and the day before.

'Something's bound to turn up though.'

I nodded, thinking that on balance I preferred the pessimistic version of Samuel. He stood up and rather awkwardly put a hand onto my shoulder, looking me straight in the eyes for once. 'Whatever happens, Jim, you did your best. You're a wonderful guy.'

I was so touched I could feel my eyes beginning to prickle. And then, oddly, the same sensation began all over my skin. Samuel shook me gently. 'I don't know what I'd a done if it wasn't for you.' The prickling sensations were becoming more acute, in my eyes, my cheeks, my chest, my belly, my scrotum. 'We'll find him, Jim.' My skin was stretching, pushed by a force from inside my body. For a moment I was more bemused than scared. There was the strangely voluptuous feeling of subtly expanding tissue. My skin was beginning to resist as if it was a balloon on the verge of inflation. A second later I realised what was happening and threw myself backwards out of Samuel's friendly grip. What percentage of the human body was

water? 80% ? 90% ? As I toppled backwards I was thinking of the melon, the pink pulp everywhere.

Next day I returned to the market square. It seemed an age since we were last there, though in truth barely a week had passed. I started my litany. 'I'm looking for The Baptist, sir. Can you help me? I'm looking for The Baptist, madam. Can you help me?' I held out The Baptist's card with its water symbol - almost illegible now from grime and bleaching sunlight. I too felt dirty and faded, as insubstantial as a ghost. It had been a mistake to come here. This crowd was intent upon shopping and entertainment and couldn't be bothered with cryptic questions and cards unless they constituted a bit of wizardry. 'I'm looking for The Baptist, sir. Can you help me?' The man I'd spoken to looked straight past me over my shoulder. Perhaps I really was a ghost, transparent in the hard sunlight. His eyes were riveted on something in the sky behind me, as were those of the people around him. I turned just as the sound of the jets hit us. They came in so low I could see the hawk eyes of the cyber-pilots in their mesh-screened cockpits, the rivets on the snub noses of the Chaos missiles as at least thirty Scarab jets came scorching towards the market square. Dust and stall-awnings flew as we flung ourselves to the ground and the noise slammed in like the end of the world.

Then they were gone. Their falsetto scream turned bass profundo by the Doppler effect. The crowd got back to its feet - a few patriots howling and gesturing to the enemy who were now just a diminishing smudge heading for the city's heart - for the skyscrapers and

wide boulevards....for my home.

It was later, much later, that I found myself searching for my car in the affluent district I'd left it in. All day since the Scarabs' flyby I was tortured by visions of loss in a war even more vicious than the one just finished. I saw the window of my apartment selected for the precise entry-point of the Chaos warhead, my possessions blasted to eternity. I was returning to my car with the nervous anticipation of an astronaut coming back home. I expected it to be changed beyond recognition, wrecked, perched on bricks, the windows smashed in, but as I turned a familiar corner there it squatted on the quiet, tree-lined street, waiting as patiently as a faithful hound, with only a film of dust covering its waxed paintwork to mark the passing of a week in Jonah. I unlocked the door and got in, immediately entering a cocoon of quietness and soft leather and modern dials set in old walnut. I held the steering wheel and found comfort there. It would be so easy just to turn the key, to pull away quietly and head for the highway, back to....

Back to what? I got out of the car, clunked the door shut and locked it carefully. The expensive vehicle was not out of place in this road of restored mansions, it went with the long lawns and drives, the discreetly shuttered windows, the plashing fountains heard in the near distance. I walked further down the road. Who knew what kind of money had bought these places and rebuilt them, what motives lurked behind the security fences and burglar alarms and reinforced glass? The sound of falling water grew louder, perhaps one of the most soothing sound in the world, tapping into something primeval in us. We all emerged from water, we float in

water before birth.

Behind spike-topped iron railings the water gardens covered half an acre of ground in front of the house. At the centre was a broad stepped waterfall descending to a stone-lined pool in which six fountains threw up thin jets that flowered at the top into a spray of sparklers. Marble statues of a classical bent lined the waterfall - soft limbed, blind eyed nymphs and hard muscled heroes - each supplying an ever flowing libation of water from urns and shells. It was all in bad taste but still compelling. The white noise of so much flowing water drowned out everything in a rowdy serenity. I was certain I'd found The Baptist.

The gate was locked but there was a button to press and an intercom.

I rang twice and waited a long time, my ear pressed against the speaker of the intercom, until finally a scratchy voice said, 'Who is it?'

'My name's Jim Mitchell,' I said, 'I have something belonging to The Baptist.'

'Belonging to who?'

'The Baptist,' I repeated.

The intercom hissed static for a while, then I heard distant voices. Shortly afterwards the intercom went dead and I was left with the cool sound of the water, and I was about to ring again when the iron gate swung smoothly open.

I was met at the front door by a tanned, silver haired character looking cool and charming in a double-stitched off-white linen suit. As his blue eyes engaged mine, he smiled and showed a line of teeth that could have been designed using a spirit level, 'You have something

belonging to me?’

I handed over the tatty card with it’s water symbol. He glanced at it briefly then held the door open for me. ‘Do come in.’

I followed him in a dream through a broad hallway, across a floor of blue mosaic, over a stone slab bridging an artificial stream, through a Corinthian columned portico into a highly impressive room. Three of the walls were of back lit sheet-glass with skeins of various coloured water sliding down them to make an effect like abstract stained windows, but constantly fluid, constantly changing. Through the whispering noise of the water came the barely audible sound of piped organ music, and at the head of the room was a simple marble table, altar sized, with a glass flagon of clear liquid at its exact centre.

‘Come,’ said The Baptist, and led me to the altar.

He handed me the flagon then made a slow passing motion across my face with the palm of my hand. ‘The water of life,’ he intoned, and repeated the passing motion watching the contents of the flagon all the time. And again.

Finally, he turned away. ‘You’re not Kinetic,’ he said, and there was a touch of irritation in the soft voice.

‘I never said I was. It’s a friend who needs help.’

‘Ah, a friend,’ he said, solicitous once more. ‘At what stage of the condition is your friend?’

I described how Samuel had exploded the melon, his effect on the plumbing....on me. The Baptist took all this in gravely, nodding at appropriate points. It felt like an unreal conversation. Everything about Samuel had seemed so isolated. His condition had seemed freakish,

supernatural, but here was this smooth, immaculately suited character taking a professional interest in it all.

He asked if I had ever noticed solid objects moving in close proximity to Samuel. Books, vases or small tables for example. When I shook my head the man who called himself The Baptist made a great show of relief.

His eyes watered slightly and grew softer as he said, 'It means he hasn't yet reached the true kinetic stage of the condition. There may yet be time. We'll have the poor soul brought here immediately.'

Little more than half an hour after I'd given The Baptist the name of our hotel, Samuel entered the chapel. I watched his shy progress towards us as the water-walls began to form new, more anarchic patterns, his face lit up with hope and a psychedelic light show.

The Baptist suddenly raised a hand, 'Wait there, my son,' he said. Obediently Samuel froze into position and the water-walls resumed their more regular flow as The Baptist took the flagon and held it aloft, walking slowly one step at a time towards my immobile countryman. He was about six feet away when the liquid in the flagon exploded.

The Baptist raised his eyes to the ceiling which was painted with storm clouds pierced by a single shaft of bright yellow sunlight. 'Accept our offering,' he cried, arms reaching out in supplication, allowing the flagon to break on the blue ceramic floor. In the background the organ music swelled louder. He appeared to be manipulating something in the capacious pocket of his linen jacket. Samuel, wide eyed with wonder, unexpectedly threw his own arms upward in an awkward

imitation and said ‘.....our offering,’ a muttered echo.

The Baptist gave him a kindly smile. ‘Where there is faith there is hope,’ he said. ‘On your knees and pray, my son.’ Samuel blundered onto his knees while The Baptist went down more carefully, avoiding broken glass. The two knelt facing each other across a space of some six feet and The Baptist waved me down to join them in their position of humility.

Slowly, the organ music grew louder still and the transparent colours in the water-walls seemed to intensify, with a new predominance of aquamarine.

‘Great Lord of dark storms and blue skies, of war and peace, of land and sea, architect of joy and sorrow, look with pity upon your servant, Samuel....’ The man in the linen suit had to shout to make himself heard above the music, which was itself drowned out at the end of his address by a great peal of thunder which made the walls vibrate.

‘We hear you!’ cried The Baptist with a look of genuine ecstasy on his face. ‘May I bring salvation to your servant, Samuel.’

There was an electrifying flash of intense white light that blinded me temporarily, then a crack that deafened. Suddenly my face was being flooded with water.

It was pouring out of the ceiling in fine but densely packed droplets. Either smoke or dry ice now hung high in the air, obscuring the painting of storm clouds and any sprinklers. I describe it coolly now, but at the time I had been so disorientated by noise and light that I was almost ready to suspend my disbelief. It really did seem as if there were rain clouds in the chapel. Most remarkable of all was the vision of Samuel in the rain. He was

untouched by it, surrounded by an aura of clear dry air while at its perimeter the falling droplets detonated as if hitting invisible concrete. He looked saint-like, a miracle.

But this was not the cure. We sat in bathrobes in the conservatory while The Baptist explained there was a process of initiation and learning that Samuel had to undergo before the great ceremony that would finally release him from the kinetic bond.

‘You mean you’re going to top that?’ I nodded in the direction of the chapel and The Baptist’s smile went a little sour at the edges.

‘I promise you will scarcely believe your eyes,’ he said, then turned back to Samuel. ‘First you must rest. Rest is most important. I will show you to your room.’

When he returned he came bearing a flask and two glasses. ‘We must come to an agreement about a contribution,’ he said, pouring carefully. ‘Normally it would be Samuel’s responsibility, but I feel that in this case *you* were the supplicant.’ He handed me a glass. ‘To Samuel’s salvation.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ I said, ‘but this contribution, it’s voluntary I assume.’

‘You assume wrongly,’ he smiled, ‘I am a man of the spiritual *and* the corporeal as you may have gathered’ He raised the glowing glass of Burgundy.

‘What size of contribution were you considering.’

The figure he named seemed designed to make me admire his nerve, and I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

‘Miracles don’t come cheap,’ he said calmly, ‘and I am afraid the figure is not open to negotiation. I know

you by reputation, Mr Mitchell. And by wealth. It has always been my belief that the supplicant should pay according to his means, and yours are considerable. The Kinetic condition is no respecter of wealth or poverty, but it doesn't mean we can't be.'

'Very pious,' I said. 'But how do I know you'll actually perform this....miracle?'

'I make no guarantee that I will. I don't always succeed.'

'So what's your success rate?'

He made a great show of looking offended. 'Samuel's cure would stand a greater chance of being effected if you had a little faith.'

'I daresay Samuel's going to need a great deal of faith, but for my part if I'm going to give you what you want I need something rather more material than that.'

Percentages.'

The Baptist put the tips of his fingers together as if in delicate prayer and closed his eyes. His lips moved. But he wasn't praying, he was calculating.

'Eighty-two percent,' he said finally, opening his eyes.

'That's your success rate?'

'To the nearest whole number, yes.'

'Alright,' I said, 'I'll pay you eighty-two percent of your asking price.'

'Haggling over your friend's life,' said The Baptist, 'I certainly didn't calculate *you* correctly, Mr Mitchell.'

'Eighty-two percent,' I said, 'You still get a small fortune.'

He went back into calculation mode, and when he opened his eyes his mouth was also open and smiling. 'Very well, if it will give you satisfaction, I agree.'

He reached for the wine bottle, still wearing his film-star smile and passed his palm over the neck twice like a stagy magician, When he poured from the bottle into my empty glass the liquid was as clear as water. I tasted it. It *was* water.

‘You see,’ said The Baptist, ‘I *can* perform miracles.’

I lay on the stripped hotel bed alone listening to the planes overhead, waves of them, followed by the sound of distant bombing. It wasn’t so much the noise which kept me awake but my imagination working overtime picturing the slaughter and destruction. If it weren’t for Samuel I would have been at the centre of it, and I almost wished I was. I felt like a Captain who had deserted his ship. There was no doubt that my factories would have been one of the primary targets. In the distant thud, thud of the explosives my wealth was being destroyed, along with lives and homes. Even when the flights ceased shortly before dawn I couldn’t sleep. I went down to my car and in the deceptive radiance of morning drove out of Jonah, past the still unoccupied pillbox, then parked and watched the rolling curtains of smoke to the west. Watched the ship going down.

It was with a sensation of unreality that I sat down at The Baptist’s computer and asked for access to the Art Futures Exchange. I was sure the bank wouldn’t recognise my account or pronounce it empty, but everything went smoothly. The market was down but I had no difficulty selling my portfolio, most of it going to a single dealer in Europa. I made enough to keep a single Lichenstein – *Girl with Ball*, which I figured would always have a market. Then I started the

mechanics of transferring the bulk of my account into The Baptist's. By the end of the morning, I no longer numbered among the rich. I was a man of limited means, and I felt different, kind of purified. I went to find The Baptist to tell him what I had done.

He was in the chapel where Samuel stood with arms outstretched before him in an attitude of great concentration. The lights behind the water-walls were dimmed but it seemed to me that the bowl of water that should have been in Samuel's cupped hands was actually floating an inch or two above them. My arrival seemed to break the moment because the water in the bowl suddenly exploded, sending the container spinning to the floor.

'We'll have to work on your concentration,' The Baptist told Samuel, 'Some simple meditation techniques might help.'

He walked over to me, his footsteps echoing faintly in the empty space.

'I've settled the account,' I told him.

'That's fine,' he said. His eyes were shining as if with spiritual enlightenment at the thought of all that money. 'What will you do now?' he asked, embracing me with one of his warmest smiles.

'I'm going to wait around to see you do what I've paid you to do.'

He was unfazed by this remark. 'Why don't you move in here? I have plenty of rooms and it will be much more comfortable than the hotel, I'm sure.'

And so I did. I felt it was the least I deserved.

I had to give it to him, there was nothing miserly about The Baptist when it came to hospitality. Life was

comfortable, unrealistically so, and with everything conducted to the sound of background water, took on an appropriate fluidity. Moments simply melted into moments, time was a bubble on a stream. Whether eating, sleeping or reading, there was always the random music of a fountain or waterfall in the background, washing the air of tension and filling it with invigorating negative ions.

For days on end, I saw neither Samuel nor The Baptist, only a chronically shy servant whose whole conversation was to ask if I needed anything and to say thank you when I thanked him. There had been so many busy, industrious, virtuous, moneymaking years, and now there was nothing. Just sheer indolence played out in this temple to Apathy in which my life flowed like water down a marble stepped waterfall - constantly moving, never changing.

It was many days, weeks, before I saw Samuel again. I was in the cloistered gardens, water gardens of course, that formed the tranquil, slow-pulsing square heart of the house, a small leather bound volume of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayan perched open on my knee but unread. I'd grown too idle even for that. Then all at once the state of monotonous continuity was broken by a sudden agitation in the pools surrounding me. The water began to form excited little peaks as if being shaken by an invisible stick. Worse, there was the same sensation of expanding flesh I'd experienced in the hotel with Samuel. I turned quickly and there he was, standing between two columns in the cloistered area some distance away - the strangest apparition, like a dream by Dali, wearing a suit contrived of thin plastic pipes through which water constantly

moved as if he were a complex walking laboratory. Even his face was masked by the pipes, and oddest of all, a jet of water shot at high velocity from his side like a terrible cut artery. As I stood up, The Baptist appeared at the opposite side of the cloisters and put up a warning hand. 'Don't go any nearer. He's barely stabilised.'

It was horrible and impressive at the same time, and certainly instilled a new sense of respect for The Baptist. It was like monstrous old-fashioned science. Then Samuel spoke. 'Hello, Jim.'

His voice didn't come from where he was standing, but through the speakers which were usually used to pipe light classical music into the area. Samuel sounded as if he was all around me, not located anywhere specific, and behind his voice was a constant gurgling noise.

'He's connected remotely to the system,' explained The Baptist. 'He insisted he wanted to speak to you. If you speak loudly he shouldn't have too much trouble hearing. Keep your distance and there should be no danger.'

'Hello, Samuel,' I tried, almost shouting.

'Hello, Jim.'

'How are you feeling?'

Samuel's giggle seemed to merge with the background gurgling effects. 'Not so good, Jim. But everything should be different tomorrow.'

I turned instinctively to where The Baptist had been standing, but there was empty space.

'We're going to try for my cure tomorrow,' the speakers said, 'It's looking promising.'

'That's good, Samuel. That's great.' I backed away, trying to make it look casual, and thankfully felt my

flesh slacken, reform around my skeleton.

‘I want you to be there, Jim. If you will.’

‘Of course.’

Samuel was like a water-driven robot or some piece of avant garde sculpture. I could see now that a tube extended from the suit of plastic pipes through which water was being constantly pumped. Presumably he was creating tiny explosions throughout the metres, kilometres maybe, of water coursing around him - discharging enough of his destructive energy to make him safe.

‘Whatever happens tomorrow, Jim, I want you to know how much I appreciate all you’ve done for me. You’ve been a real good Samaritan. You didn’t pass by on the other side. You had compassion on me.’

‘It was nothing,’ I said.

‘Beg your pardon, Jim, I’m having trouble hearing.’

‘Glad to be of help,’ I shouted, my voice echoing round the courtyard.

Samuel raised his water wrapped arm stiffly. Was he saluting me or blessing me?

‘I won’t detain you any longer,’ he said, ‘till tomorrow. Tomorrow it’s all going to be different. I’ll shake your hand, Jim, tomorrow.’

I raised my own arm. ‘Till tomorrow, Sam.’

We drove Samuel in a closed trailer with a tank of water and a pump installed to feed his suit. The water poured in a stream out under the tailgate of the trailer. We towed him with my car, The Baptist and I sitting side by side in the front. The Baptist, usually full of himself, was disturbingly quiet, only giving directions as I drove.

I'd thought about him quite a bit during my enforced solitude but still hadn't decided whether he was a sham or a true shaman, whether he was all theatrics or a genuine believer in ritual. It was certainly difficult for me to reconcile all the tricks and mumbo jumbo with simple truths. I wasn't like Samuel: he found it easy. He was like a three year old in the magic tent at the fairground. Believing it all. But I was suspicious of anything designed to dazzle. Maybe I'd gotten too sophisticated by half. Maybe not. The proof was going to be in the cure.

'Take this left turn,' said The Baptist.

The road led downwards, and there was sand in its verges together with a new ozone tang in the air. I drove carefully, unused to towing anything so heavy downhill. Ahead of us the sky was turning rosy with shards of ragged purple clouds, then as we came over the brow of a hill we were suddenly looking straight at the ocean: a calm, reflective expanse of blue and pink with little dabblings of white at its margins, coming and going. The Baptist sighed deeply.

'Soon there'll be a turning onto the beach. Take us as close as you can to the tide, then drive back to the dunes. You'll see everything from there.'

'Is it going to be dangerous?' I said.

The Baptist pointed. 'Here. Turn in between those two posts. The track is pretty rutted.'

We bounced along, and in my mirror I could see the trailer yawing crazily.

'Yes, it's going to be dangerous,' said The Baptist, 'I've never known a kinetic so highly charged as Samuel. I wouldn't like to predict anything'

We came to the edge of the beach. Stones were embedded in the softer sand to give vehicles a grip, but still the car floundered dangerously for a few metres before we reached the firmer sand.

‘Do you know,’ I said, ‘I wish there was some way you could convince me I’ve invested in the genuine article, and not a fake. You seem to be hedging your bets even now you’ve taken the money.’

‘I’m genuine,’ said The Baptist, and he turned to me. ‘Would you question the authenticity of a painting simply because it had a high price tag on it? Rather the reverse, I suspect.’

‘I wasn’t simply talking about the money,’ I said.

‘My style is too vulgar for you perhaps?’

Was that what bothered me. A question of taste. Maybe it was. That and the perfect teeth. Suddenly I didn’t feel like continuing the conversation. It seemed The Baptist knew me better than I’d imagined.

‘Stop here,’ he said.

With the engine off we could hear the wash of the sea.

‘Listen,’ said The Baptist. ‘It’s like the pulse of the earth. Like the slowest blood.’ For once he wasn’t smiling. He really was listening.

Then he spoke. ‘I was poor myself once, Mr Mitchell. As you once were, as Samuel is now. I was also Kinetic.’ He looked out of the window towards the tide-line as if reluctant to be telling me this. ‘Then I discovered a cure. It wasn’t the kind of cure the scientists would ever have found. Their solution was to claim there was no cure, and then to deny the disease existed. This cure was more akin to a miracle. What do you do when you own a miracle, Mitchell? What would

you do? Make money from it? Glorify it? Glorify yourself?’ He looked at me resentfully. ‘I’ve done all that, and worse. But one fact remains beyond dispute. I *am* a healer.’ And with that he opened the door and made his way to the back of the trailer.

I watched from the dunes as Samuel walked naked into the sea. The Baptist was already knee deep in ocean, standing well clear but within calling distance of Samuel. I could hear his voice across the constant seethe and suck of the tide coming in across shingle, but the words were lost before they reached me. It was primeval. Naked, Samuel no longer looked gawky. He looked like Everyman. A poor forked creature, erect, and moving his body in an exaggerated way against the weight and force of the ocean. I looked for signs of disturbance in the water, but could see nothing abnormal. The Baptist was keeping up constant instructions, motioning with his hands for Samuel to go in deeper. Then, like someone guiding a vehicle, he held his palms up : Stop! My eyes strained to see in the fading light. The sun was now just a pink flush at the horizon, bleeding into the dark sea. Samuel, up to his waist in water, was an indistinct figure, marked mainly by little splashes of white where the tide broke against him.

A seagull cried harshly, circling slowly some way beyond The Baptist. Distracted by it briefly, I looked back to see there was now a broad column of sea-water where Samuel had been standing. At its base the ocean rushed to fill the void, the circular waves clearly delineated in the low crimson light, rippling inward. The column grew like a living thing in an accelerated film,

burgeoning skyward, shockingly dynamic in the otherwise tranquil scene, its surface like smooth, transmuting plastic, as reflective as Perspex. It grew rapidly, soon reaching as high as a church tower, tottering under its own weight. For a moment I was sure the whole liquid edifice was going to collapse, but then suddenly it was feeding into itself at its crest, billowing out like the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. As I watched, the base lifted from the sea, to reveal, incredibly, Samuel standing there, arms straining to the heavens. The huge bulk of liquid above seemed to suck up what remained of the column to become a whale-sized blimp of teetering liquid, reminding me of an outsized bubble blown with a child's toy that struggles for long seconds to remain complete, shifting and reordering its shapeless shape. The difference here was that the bubble was solid water through and through, and the size of a blimp. I was sure Samuel was going to lose it. He was going to drop his concentration for one moment, lose his faith - whatever - and be crushed under the crashing weight of tonnes of water. Then he gave a shout. Even at a distance I heard it clearly above the sea's wash - a sound quite unlike him. Almost a war-cry, with a note of special pleading. Immediately, as if on command, the mass of water began to explode. This was not the kind of instantaneous event I'd witnessed before, but a slow eruption that began at the edges of the water-blimp. Vapour billowed out, forming complex, chaotic patterns like blown smoke, lit crimson on its underside by the low sun. The cloud grew and grew, rising all the time on thermals from the dark, brooding ocean. It could have contained pink winged angels or four bloody

horsemen, saviours or destroyers. It was both beautiful and threatening.

By the time it stopped expanding, it seemed to fill half the sky - banked like cumulus but supernaturally low. Samuel, arms still extended, was looking straight up into it, head back like someone praising the Lord, expectant of a sign. The Baptist, who had maintained his station throughout, was shouting something inaudible to his elated acolyte, then the three of us stood silently, a triangle of awed observers as Samuel's cloud, the discharge of his sickness, drifted up towards the ether.

Samuel and I were singing as we drove west the next day. Was the boy high? He was reborn! It was like all the water he'd raised yesterday was a weight he'd been carrying for years. But I don't know if he was any happier than I was. We were raising dust, literally, a great cloud of it trailing the car. The radio was blaring, the windows open and we were yodelling along to songs I hadn't heard since my youth. It felt like we were singing to our different gods.