

A.K.C.T.

issue five

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It's not OK *Part One* Meet Peter and find out what he gets instead of breakfast. Meet Simon and find out why he had to trim his fingernail.

Trashing the future *Short Story* Julia rummages for a place she can call home in a disgusting mess of lager, sex and unfiltered cigarettes. Originally featured as a reading at the Expansions event.

Hardface *Part Five* No Number Zen calls in a friend. The caravan gets underway. Some trouble is not foreseen.

Autran writings *Short Stories* Unrelated pieces written in response to prompts on Barbelith Underground Creation forum.

The Bridge *Short Story* In the style of Edgar Allan Poe. Entered for the August Van Zorn prize.

It's not OK

Short stories

ownership

Peter had caught an early train, half an hour before his usual. He would be able to buy breakfast before going to the office. He stopped reading the newspaper he held in front of him and mused about breakfast as he rode the train to work. Bacon sandwich on white bread stained brown by the fat. Thick filling of a bacon and sausage sandwich with the spicy bite of English mustard. A floppy bacon and egg roll with just a little yolk dribbling to be caught on the outstretched tongue, or scraped hurriedly off the expensive tie. Cappuccino with the sweet chocolate powder melted against the inside of the lid to be licked off. The pitch black double espresso, with two sugars, only half filling the white polystyrene cup. Or something else; something not usually had for breakfast. Small microwaved omelette in a bap, bubbling butter as it was bitten into. Or something else again; not food at all.

The atmosphere in the train was quiet, but pleasantly so. Like the quiet between a couple in a pub on a Sunday after lunch reading different sections of the same Sunday paper. Peter found it comradely. Everybody in the same boat. Almost all the passengers lived out in the small towns and commuter villages and took the train in to the city where they worked. The last village station had now been passed and the passengers boarding there had filled the last spare seats. There was now twenty minute's journey until the train started to enter the city. Where Peter would have his breakfast treat, or perhaps some other treat.

When the train stopped in the city more people would get on. Young people that Peter found unpleasant. They carried personal stereos, wore cheap clothes, swore to each other and read magazines instead of books or newspapers. City people. Like many commuters, Peter thought that the trains should not stop in the city's outer suburbs. The people there spoil things. Many of them travelled without buying tickets too. Occasionally one would get caught by a spot check but not often. They knew all the dodges. The fact of the matter was that he, Peter, was subsidising them. He thought about this subsidy and his appetite declined. His appetite for food, that is.

Today, as occasionally happened, the train stopped between stations. The thought that his breakfast time was being reduced made Peter cross. More cross than he would have been had he been made late for work by a train delay. Taking his employer's time was one thing, but taking Peter's own time, like his breakfast, was quite another. Peter had to rush about getting ready and out of the house in a hurry for his own time. He would not stand for all this effort being wasted because of another's inefficiency.

Peter's paper sagged slightly as his attention turned from it to the window. Smooth tractor-friendly wide green fields, punctuated by a silo here and there, met his gaze. Peter liked to think that a quick look at a bit of country every day kept him sane. It was spring and something was growing in the field. Crops Peter thought, for a moment forgetting breakfast and anything else. Some kind of crops.

But after a minute had ticked by without the train moving Peter stopped thinking about crops. He started thinking about the poor service he was getting, sitting there not moving. If he treated his customers like the train company treated him he would have no customers. Actually was it the train company? Or was it the rail company? Or the signal company? Or the ticketing company? Peter did not know. Every year a different self-serving carve-up meant that it was impossible for anybody to know who exactly was responsible. This made it impossible to complain effectively. That did not matter to Peter: he had never been much of a complainer. When something annoyed him he just swallowed it and then took comfort in some indulgence or other. Like breakfast. Or something else not like breakfast.

There was a man sitting next to the window through which Peter had seen the crops growing. After the train had remained stationary for another minute, the man began to fidget. Then he began to mutter about the poor service. From his pocket he produced a plastic season ticket holder. The woman sitting next to him was a little taken aback as he flipped the wallet open in between her and the manual she was reading.

“Look at the price on that!”

The woman's face pulled into a completely neutral expression, which none the less entailed

the tensing of her facial muscles. She shook her head very slightly.

“Four and a half grand I'm paying. What do you think of that? Let's see yours.”

The woman raised and lowered her eyebrows in some kind of acknowledgement of the man's outrage, but ignored his request. Faces turned away from the man as he said to Peter and the people sitting near him “Let's all get our tickets out. Add it all up.”

Peter decided to be kind and just go on pretending to read his newspaper as though nothing was happening. The other passengers all took the same comradely attitude. Nobody made things worse by paying attention to the poor man as he rattled on. After all, everybody forgets themselves and creates a disturbance occasionally. The commuters were a silent support group; they let the man work out his problem without interference. Peter was pleased not to see any furtive smirks or slyly exchanged glances. Had any of the city people been on board by then it would have been a different story.

Peter had seen it happen. The city dwellers did everything to humiliate anybody whose armour so much as cracked. Sometimes they laughed openly. Sometimes they whispered jokes to each other and sniggered. Sometimes they told people to shut up. Sometimes they cheered people on as they made fools of themselves by talking in front of everybody. Once Peter had even heard one of them shouting an old man down with comments about how if he didn't like he could walk or get a car, and if he couldn't do those things then he should “pipe down and wear it” since he didn't have a choice. It was OK as analysis, but unfair, Peter felt, because old people never do understand the society in which they live.

The silence of the other passengers eventually got through to the man and he quietened and stopped embarrassing himself. Soon after that the train moved off and Peter started reading his paper properly.

A literary censorship story had completely engrossed him by the time the train stopped at the first city station. His reading was disturbed by a carelessly carried shoulder bag bumping into his raised left hand.

Turning a sour expression towards the source of the disturbance, Peter saw the oblivious back of a slim young woman. The back was clad in a long, bright red, skinny fitting sweater with a design, based on the logo of a confectionery brand that Peter had seen advertised, worked in black and white at the cuffs and collar. Above

the sweater was neck-length, dyed blonde hair. Turning his gaze downwards, Peter noted a light grey miniskirt, thin legs in black tights and finally a pair of plain black shoes. The woman did not notice that her bag had knocked Peter.

On the other side of the woman from Peter, and talking to her, was a young man who had also just boarded the train. He wore the sort of cheap fashion suit Peter despised, with a bright shirt and tie and a hat. The man saw what had happened, said a quick “sorry mate” to Peter and pulled the bag out of Peter's space.

Peter did not acknowledge the apology. He saw that the man had used it as an excuse to flirt with the woman by reaching around her. He returned to his paper, although now he just stared at it, unreading, his real attention on the couple. He strained to hear what they said to each other, and risked the occasional surreptitious glance at the woman's legs.

Peter wished he could hear the couple's conversation so he could be sure how truly stupid and worthless they were. The noise of the train interfered with his apprehension of their flirtatious murmuring so all he could hear clearly, apart from their laughter, was the occasional word or phrase. Peter was very familiar with most of what he heard.

The couple made extensive use of phrases Peter had heard on successful television comedy series. Copying British comedy writers and comics would have been bad enough, but Peter noticed that they also copied from imported American shows. American English deeply annoyed Peter. He found it sloppy and lazy but sadly prevalent.

When English people took on American language, they also took on American philosophy. To Peter this meant an unwillingness to criticise others, or to accept criticism from others, and an inability to criticise oneself. Oh yes, they were very articulate, very good at talking about their faults, very good at justifying them, or blaming the state for them. That was why the American disease was so widespread.

Nobody who came out of school thick wanted to think that they had failed, no, it must be the teachers, or the schools, or their parents (or parent). Nobody whose business went bust wanted to put it down to mistakes they had made, rather blame the market, or prevailing business culture, or the bank, or economic policy. Peter had thought about these people, and other classes of failure, before and did not waste more time on it now. He knew that they were neither abstract stereotypes, nor

inhabitants of some far-off land. Quite the opposite: they were all around him. In the carriage.

Failure for not being intelligent enough. Failure for not keeping up with new technology. Failure for not presenting the right image. Failure for not working hard enough. Failure for not learning to speak properly. Peter looked at each of his fellow commuters with mounting horror. So much rubbish. He knew that merely eating breakfast would not calm him down sufficiently for the office now. Indulgence does not satisfy.

The thought stayed with Peter as the train arrived at his station. It became like a layer around his perceptions; an immediate truth applying itself to the reality of his surroundings, interpreting them before Peter's own senses. Unusually, Peter did not push himself through the crowd of disembarking passengers, instead he patiently let himself be carried by the flow to the station's building beyond the ticket gates.

There were several exits from the station, each leading in a different direction. Peter, or his thought, headed for one leading downwards. It was not a popular route for people going to work; it led to a wasted area of concrete spaces and corridors sparsely populated by down-and-outs and other homeless people. Down there Peter would encounter no food kiosks, no coffee stands, and no sandwich bars; he would find no breakfast and no indulgence.

Dodging reeking puddles of urine, Peter descended. He stepped quietly. At the bottom of a flight of stairs he stopped to listen for a few seconds. He heard nothing apart from the urban hum audible everywhere in the city and was satisfied that nobody else had taken that set of stairs. He had therefore removed himself from that continuum of humanity called the rush hour.

Looking around, Peter saw that he was in an open-air circular concrete space just large enough to accommodate the five concrete corridors leading into it, population: one unconscious man with a cardboard sign propped against his legs. Not finding what he wanted, Peter decided to move on.

Before taking a step, Peter checked the floor. A patch of vomit he would have to walk around caught his eye. The liquid had drained or evaporated away leaving scattered chunks lying in an uneven disc of mush. Intact grains of rice were scattered evenly, and the texture of chewed meat showed through in places. A drunk's meal, Peter reckoned.

The food would have been carefully prepared, politely served, quickly chewed, swallowed into a deep pool of lager, carried a little distance, then ejected with digestion just barely begun. Ejected here at the bottom of the stairs. Peter wondered about that for a moment. Why be sick just here? The answer was obvious: they must have been about to get on the train and return home after a night of indulgence. Weaving across the concourse heading for the platform, they had felt the sudden clutch of urgent nausea. Not wanting to embarrass themselves they had looked around for a place. Somewhere to be private, discreet, somewhere to hide their body while it performed a most necessary function.

Peter could almost hear the echo of unsteady footsteps running down the concrete stairs. At the bottom they almost fell, and had to clutch the rail for support. They leant against the cold wall, gasped once, twice, then started puking. After a couple of retches they felt a little better and remembered to protect their clothes from the foul stream by bending forwards. But feeling better heightened the sensation of being sick. That and the warm smell of new vomit made them more nauseous. Then every retch was a question. Was it to be the last?

Finally their ordeal had ended. After some spitting and blowing of the nose they had returned, shivering, to find their train. Now, in place of that wretched retcher, here stood Peter in the grip of the thought that indulgence does not satisfy. The vomit proved it. It showed that indulgence was rejected by the body, the animal part of man. The body hungered to be sure, Peter could feel his own hunger was intense at that moment. But he was not going to attempt to feed it indulgence, no, he was hunting something better. Something which would really satisfy. Skirting the patch of sick he resumed his search.

Down a corridor and round a corner he found a "homeless and hungry" young woman sitting against the wall. Even though she wore several layers of ragged clothes, it was obvious to Peter that she was very thin. Her dirty hair was tied back from her face with a rubber band. As Peter walked past her she said "Spare some change, sir?"

Peter stopped and looked down at her. She smiled, it was a reflex response to a man's attention. After looking both ways, and seeing that nobody was nearby, Peter took his wallet out of an inside pocket. He took a note out and then replaced the wallet. Looking the woman in the face he said "How about earning this?"

“OK,” she replied after a moment's thought. “What do you want?”

“How about a nice blow job?” Peter suggested.

“OK,” the woman shrugged. “Where do you want it?”

“Right here.”

The woman looked left and right “Yeah?”

“Why not? You scared?”

“No. If you want it here-” the woman let a shrug finish her sentence. Putting her left hand down on the concrete floor, the woman leaned forwards and reached for the note in Peter's hand with her right.

With a quick shuffle of his feet, Peter positioned himself. He snapped his right foot forwards in a kick which connected with the woman's exposed neck an inch beneath where it joined her chin. Through the toe of his shoe, Peter just barely felt the woman's windpipe crumple inwards. His foot whipped back as quickly as it had extended.

“Are you alright?” Peter said as he stuffed the note into his trouser pocket. The woman writhed and choked in response. “Shall I call an ambulance?” Peter took out his mobile phone and showed it to the dying woman who clawed vaguely in his direction. “No? Are you sure?” The woman's futile struggling ended and she lay motionless on the floor. “OK then.” Peter walked off.

Only when he was well clear did Peter take a moment to congratulate himself. It had been a cleanly executed kick, and he had kept his head and done the clever mobile phone bit as planned. Peter thought that would have helped him if anybody had happened to walk past. In more general terms, it reduced his exposure. Barring somebody actually coming round the corner at the second he was delivering the kick, there was nothing to connect him to the woman's death.

With its evidential disconnection, came a mental disconnection and Peter forgot the murder he had just committed. The crime itself had already dislodged the earlier appetite-provoking thought from his mind which was therefore empty. Peter experienced a rare few minutes of calm as his legs walked towards his workplace. As the office where he worked loomed, Peter's hand automatically reached inside his jacket for his pass. The busy rotating doors could not be navigated successfully on autopilot and Peter's mind re-engaged partially with his surroundings as he approached them. He was aware enough to allow his boss, Phillipa, through first.

She smiled and said “Good morning Peter,” without breaking step as she pushed round not waiting to hear him return the greeting. Peter followed Phillipa in the next segment of the door. By the time he had passed through the door Peter's mind's detachment had completely vanished. He waited by the lifts, standing next to his boss, who ignored him. He made a quick glance to check she really wanted to ignore him.

Phillipa was standing upright and symmetrical: her feet were together; her case, its handle held by both her hands, hung down to just above her knees; her full-length coat was fastened by a single central vertical line of white buttons; her chin was tilted as she looked up, through the tall windows of the lobby, at a bright cold sky; her face was not at rest, but held in a half-smile she calculated radiated both positivity and professionalism. Peter did not see Phillipa as a fashionable attractive young (younger than Peter) woman, but as a senior colleague he was working on impressing in order to get promoted. It was easy for him to see that she did not want to talk.

Peter noticed another colleague, not a senior one, approaching the lift. Simon also worked for Phillipa, and at the same level as Peter. Simon noticed them waiting and came to stand by Phillipa and Peter. Phillipa looked in Simon's direction for less than a second, and he said “Good morning.” At that moment the lift arrived and the three of them, along with a number of other people shuffled inside.

Simon and Peter ended up next to each other, and to the lift buttons. As Simon reached for the door-close button Peter noticed that one of Simon's fingernails was trimmed much shorter than the others.

“What happened to your fingernail?” Peter asked, by way of starting the kind of general conversation with which they almost always started the day.

Making the effort to interact with Simon about something not related to work was the landing of Peter's thoughts. Taking time to maintain a good and productive relationship with one's colleagues showed good team-building instinct. Peter had shown that instinct to his manager, hoping to reinforce the impression that he would be a suitable candidate for the next team-leader position to become available.

Before talking to Simon, Peter had read and responded appropriately to the mood Phillipa had projected. “I'm not aloof, but I am a boss and as such know more people than I can practically say hello to. It's a problem I solve by

looking up so that I can plausibly and politely ignore you all. You are not bosses, and are therefore allowed, encouraged even, to spend your less valuable time having conversations, to the extent that this helps create a friendly atmosphere.”

Before that Peter had let Phillipa go through the rotating door before him, which gave her no advantage in reaching the lift and was thus purely a gesture stating his inferiority.

Before that he had been on the train.

Peter's mind had reconnected to Peter's reality.

television

“I caught it in my car door, so I had to trim it, you know. It was snagging on things.” Simon replied to Peter, thinking “That idiot always starts the day with some inane, banal question.” This habit of Peter's annoyed Simon. It was so transparent. As though he were really interested in Simon's fingernail. All Peter was interested in was trying to impress Phillipa so that she would sleep with him.

Some days Simon could force himself to chat with Peter, but not today. Today he looked at Peter and thought only “What a fool you are.” All Simon could think of by way of reply was to shout back a stream of banalities such as Peter had lipped at him over the past months. “Did you see that programme last night?” “Nice weekend?” “Here's a funny article” “Good holiday?” “Have you seen that film?” “How's Simon today?” “Doing anything special?” “Looking very smart there Simon.” “I was sitting next to this bloke on way in” “No coat today?” “Who cuts your hair? Do you want me and the boys to go round and see him? Ha ha.” “Bloody trains!” He stopped himself by looking away.

Coincidentally he found himself looking at a hazy reflection of Phillipa in the metal door of the lift. Phillipa was Simon's manager, but only in name as far as he was concerned. Why should she be his boss? The only qualification Phillipa had to justify her rise through the company's managerial ranks was a skirt which rose equally high. One qualification she should have had, in Simon's book, was some inclination to take care of her staff. Phillipa only took care of herself and anybody who could promote her. Like a foreign driver, she said “What is behind me is not important.”

Phillipa's reflection disappeared as the lift doors opened. She stepped out of the lift, followed by Simon and Peter. They navigated the familiar

maze of partitions single-file, heading for their desks. As he walked Simon watched Phillipa's heels and ankles.

He hated the kitten-point shoes and expensive tights for drawing his attention. Then he hated Phillipa for wearing alluring clothes; thus openly stating the solely decorative nature of her contribution to the office's work. As he reached his desk, Simon hated the people who failed to apprehend Phillipa's statement, which was everybody except himself. As he took his coat off, Simon hated Peter for saying something to him, which he didn't quite catch.

Simon pretended he hadn't heard anything and sat down at his desk.

“Are you alright Simon? You don't seem quite yourself.” Peter spoke through a mask of concern, not yet sitting down himself, for emphasis.

Simon had to restrain himself from cursing Peter for using his name. “I didn't sleep well last night. Don't know why,” he said. Unlike his answer about catching his fingernail, what Simon had said this time was true. Except for the part about not knowing why.

“Must have something on your mind.” Peter turned away from Simon and sat down, his show of empathy now finished.

Simon said “Mmm,” as he logged in. The thought of trying to explain to bland Peter what had been on his mind keeping him awake brought a bitter smile to Simon's lips. There would have been no point, of course; Peter lacked the depth to comprehend anything about Simon's motivations and inner life. Nevertheless, as his computer ran his start-up Simon mused about how he would have introduced the subject of his recent nocturnal meditation.

A story. Simon would have told a story, starting late last night after he and Mary had finished No, The beginning was before that. What he'd said in the car in the pub car park before driving her back to his place? Not quite; the real start was even before that. The previous evening, he'd met Mary outside a wine bar.....

It was Mary's birthday. She'd had a drink with some friends straight after work. At the agreed time, Simon arrived in his car to find Mary already outside. He'd been quite specific about collecting her outside, and not going into the bar to get her. This way Simon didn't see Mary's friends, they didn't see him, and, most importantly, there was no moment when Mary's time was shared between them. Sharing Mary was not part of Simon's goal.

The side window of Simon's car framed Mary-on-the-pavement from chest to knees. She wore sheer black tights, a short black skirt with matching fitted jacket, and a white cotton top. He did not recognise the suit, concluded that it must be new and made a mental note to compliment Mary on it later. As Mary stepped to the kerb, Simon heard the distinctive click of high-heeled shoes. Overall, the ensemble met with Simon's approval. Mary wearing attractive, feminine clothes was part of his goal.

The cab light in Simon's car went on as he opened the passenger door. Mary got in and sat down straight away, saying "Hi." The reply was Simon's lips pressing hers, quickly followed by Simon's tongue in her mouth. After a moment of being too startled to respond, Mary kissed back, tasting mint on Simon's saliva. Briefly, his hand fondled her right knee and thigh, then withdrew as the kiss ended. As Mary closed the door and put on her seat belt Simon surveyed the street. There were people about and because the light had been on, some of them would definitely have noticed what had just happened. It was part of Simon's goal that he be seen with Mary, and that she would be seen as his woman.

As he put the car in gear, Simon basked in the envy he supposed radiated from any man who'd just seen him snogging and feeling Mary. What about the people who had glimpsed the intimate moment and turned away? Simon enjoyed that too; the power he must have that they couldn't even look at him. And they still knew what he was doing. If he hadn't done what he'd done, and just let Mary get in his car and close the door, anyone there might have thought that she and Simon were just friends, or brother and sister. His kissing and handling of her had made clear to them exactly what relationship existed between Simon and Mary, and as a bonus had shocked Mary a little leaving a residue of disquiet on which he could build. It was an excellent way to start the evening, bearing in mind his goal.

"How are you?" Mary asked.

"Yeah OK," Simon replied. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. A bit tipsy." From his peripheral vision Simon noticed Mary turn her head towards him as she spoke. "You didn't give me much time with my work chums, so I had to drink quite quickly." She said, affecting a lisping, ingenuous delivery.

"You could always have drunk less," Simon replied without turning his head.

"Oh but my friends only buy wine in bottles", Mary continued with mock-innocence "and I have to drink my share."

Simon made a left turn and ignored Mary's accent and expression. She was making a joke. To acknowledge that with, say, a reply in the same vein, would have been to acknowledge her capacity for humour, for originality. Simon had made no acknowledgement, not even a smile, in order to show that whilst it might have amused her, Mary's routine was not good enough for him and therefore her humour and originality were much less than his own. Relating to Mary as his equal was not in Simon's goal.

Simon drove on in silence for a short while, noticing Mary abandon her attempt to make him laugh. Now he started the conversation: "Is that a new suit?"

"Yes. It's a present to myself." Mary sounded a little withdrawn.

"Good choice." Simon paused. "And happy birthday."

"Thanks," Mary said, emerging. "You could have come to my little party you know."

Simon grunted his distaste. "It's just your work friends."

"Not just my work friends, my other friends too. They'd like to meet you."

"Why?"

"Well they're interested in meeting my new man aren't they. The mystery man who's taking all my time. They met my other boyfriends."

"Other boyfriends?" Simon asked, archly.

"Ex-boyfriends. You know what I mean."

What it meant to Simon was that by staying away he had shown himself to be different to Mary's earlier boyfriends. They were the kind of men who would have gone to her stupid birthday party, and socialised with her stupid friends. Simon was a different kind of man. He was the kind which has a goal.

Finding out that he was different to Mary's earlier boyfriends pleased Simon. It meant he was taking her to new territory. It meant Mary had some virginity. Thus he would be some kind of first. Not the biblical first, but Simon didn't mind that. He knew Mary had plenty of barriers after her hymen. Not physical, but barriers none the less. She might have emotional barriers, mental barriers, even moral barriers. And any in between Simon and his goal would be assailed and broken.

"Penny for them," Mary prompted, interrupting Simon's musings.

“Oh nothing.” Simon completed a right turn. “There’s a card for you in the glove compartment,” he said, not taking his eyes off the road.

Mary opened the little door and took out a red envelope with her name written on it. “You could have given it to me earlier with the others, at my little party.” She said as she opened the envelope. “It was a bit odd having my little party without my boyfriend.” Mary glanced at the front of the card, then opened it and read out “Wishing you a happy birthday”. Turning to look at Simon she said “You could have wished me a happy birthday with my friends.”

What would it take to make her fucking let it go? “Did they wish you one like that?” Simon indicated the picture on the card.

“No, nobody mounted me on all-fours from behind, thank you.” The card bore a photograph of two rhinoceroses, entitled ‘You give me the horn’.

“Did they sing happy birthday?”

“Yes,” Mary confirmed it with an embarrassed laugh.

Simon hummed a few bars, out of tune.

“Stop it,” Mary laughed, swatting Simon’s arm lightly with card.

“Bread and butter, in the gutter,” he sang, smiling.

“No, they sang the proper one.”

“How does that go?”

“I’m not singing it,” Mary declined coyly, busying herself putting the card in her handbag.

Things were running to Simon’s plan once more: Mary was a little embarrassed, she had seen the dirty birthday card, and she had stopped complaining about him not going to her drinks do with her friends. As if Simon would be interested in her friends anyway. As if he wanted to waste time talking to them. As if he wanted to get to know them, or for them to get to know him. They were in Mary’s life. Simon had no interest in Mary’s life. She was now in his car, driving to a pub of his choice, following which they would go to his flat; she would be in his life, according to his goal, and not vice versa.

Mary checked her make-up in the passenger vanity mirror. Simon said nothing, content to smile and drive. Smile and drive the car. Smile and drive Mary to the pub. Smile and drive Mary beyond the pub. Sit in the driving seat, smile and drive, smile and drive towards his goal.

They arrived at the pub, Simon parked in the carpark, and they went straight in.

Simon and Mary stayed in the pub for about two hours. During that time Simon drank a pint of lager, then a half, then a mineral water. During the same time Mary had three large glasses of red wine. Simon paid for all of it, finding it easier to persuade Mary not to pay as the evening progressed and she became more intoxicated.

Conversation was balanced in favour of subjects about which Simon knew more than Mary. Pop music, concerts and musicians featured heavily, as did Simon’s work, office politics and even discussion of the market in which his company operated. Also present, but to a lesser extent was television. Mary and Simon were equally unqualified to talk about television programmes, but Simon’s analysis was presented more confidently and louder.

Halfway through her third glass of wine, Mary’s laugh was getting a little raucous and was attracting attention. She went to the lavatory and Simon noticed, with satisfaction, that the men in the pub watched her walk across the room. Simon decided that they would go once she had returned and finished her wine. A passed-out Mary was no use to him.

“Shall we go?” He asked, at the appropriate juncture.

“Go where?”

“Back to my place.”

“OK, but don’t take advantage of me.” Mary leaned forward in her seat, her folded arms resting on the table pushing her breasts upwards. “I might do anything in my state.” She looked up and caught Simon’s eye as he stood. Obviously Mary was intending her smile to look sexy and lascivious, but principally she looked drunk. So drunk, Simon thought, she really might do anything. That would be fine by him, so long as she wasn’t so drunk she wouldn’t remember what she’d done in the morning.

As they left the pub, Simon was pleased to notice men glancing in Mary’s direction again. Their ideal woman was leaving with him, he felt. Happy to wear immodest clothes, not hanging onto his arm or holding his hand, and enjoying a drink or two: ideal. Looking across the neon-lit tarmac to his car, he knew he would be ready for the next step. Simon held the pub door only until Mary reached it, then let her take it as he walked across the car park ahead of her.

As he reached the car, Simon unlocked all the doors, centrally, as he opened the driver-side door. Once sitting inside he closed the door, but did not do up his seatbelt. Mary was sitting in the passenger seat and drawing down her seatbelt before she noticed Simon was sitting motionless, making no attempt to start the car.

“Something wrong?” Mary asked, fastening her seatbelt anyway.

“Take your knickers off.”

“What?”

“Take your knickers off,” Simon repeated, meeting Mary's startled look.

Looking around through the car's windows Mary could see that nobody was about. Even so she was reluctant. “I've got tights on.” She lifted her skirt at the side so Simon could see.

“Take them off too,” Simon shrugged. The risqué act of showing him the top of her thigh “in public” excited Mary because she was drunk. But this was not about Mary doing something naughty to arouse herself. This was not even about her doing something naughty to arouse Simon. This was about his goal, and he would not be satisfied with a mere leg-show.

After another quick look around to check nobody was watching, Mary raised her body by arching her back and reached around under her skirt. The car interior was dark, like Mary's new suit. Simon caught a flash of contrast as Mary's buttocks were exposed briefly before her weight sank back to the chair. With the seatbelt causing some difficulty, Mary leaned back and lifted her legs in order to push her tights and knickers down to her knees. Then she leaned forwards, her head against the dashboard. and slid her underwear down to her ankles.

“Take your shoes off.” Simon answered before she asked.

By touch, as she could not see, Mary completed the operation, leaving the garments by her feet.

“Put your shoes back on.”

“You don't want me barefoot and pregnant then,” Mary quipped, fumbling with her high-heels.

Not the one, and most definitely not the other, Simon thought. “Bare-arsed will do,” he replied.

Mary sat up and was suddenly not sure where to put her hands. After looking her up and down, Simon announced: “I'll just have to check.”

First Simon pushed his left hand up Mary's skirt and across her bottom until the whole palm was squeezed between textile seat cover and bare skin, and the fingertips were brushing the inside of her left buttock. Then, leaning over, Simon pushed his right hand between Mary's parting thighs and wriggled his fingers in underneath until he could feel a tickle of hair and the pressed lips of her vagina.

Simon lost focus and paused. Putting one's arm around somebody's shoulders is a gesture of protection. What was Simon gesturing?

There was pressure on Simon's right wrist as Mary squeezed her thighs lightly. Then a tickle as she stroked the back of his hand. She moved slightly, twisting in his hands.

Simon regained focus, realizing that Mary was trying to start something herself. Quickly he withdrew his hands from her, put on his seatbelt and started the car. He did not touch her again until they were back at his flat.

After he had locked his front door, Simon turned to make his next move. The hallway of his flat had no windows and the lights were off, but it was not completely dark. The open door of the kitchen showed Mary in a late dusk of streetlamp, moon, and stars. She was walking away from Simon towards the bedroom, at the far end of the hall. He rushed up behind Mary, reaching her before she reached the doorway.

A small gasp of surprise escaped from Mary's throat as Simon wrapped both his arms around her. Pressing herself back against Simon, Mary felt his trousered hard-on against her buttocks and his hands squeezing her breasts and stroking her thighs. Ignoring the open mouth turning towards him, Simon nipped Mary's neck, eliciting another small gasp. As Mary grabbed behind her at his hips, Simon pushed his right hand up her skirt, and probed her vagina with the tip of the middle finger. Moist. Maybe this was going to be easier than he thought.

“Keen little bitch, aren't you? Did you like sitting there with no knickers on? Baring this to the world?” Simon hissed in her ear.

“I kept my legs crossed,” Mary whispered, grinding her arse against Simon.

“They're not crossed now are they?” Simon pressed his hand up hard for emphasis.

He had hoped to make Mary gasp again, but she just sighed with pleasure, saying “They were though, and pressed together tightly. It was very pleasurable.” Mary paused, enjoying

her current and recent sensations. "Let's do it here, against the wall."

Involuntarily, Simon's hand reduced the pressure on Mary's vagina. "What?" His other hand froze on her breast in mid-squeeze.

Excitement rushing her words, Mary explained: "Like we're in the pub and we can't wait to get home, so we had to fuck against the wall outside, like a bitch." Her hands took hold of Simon's, restarting their pressures.

What kind of inarticulate daydream was Mary having? Simon wondered, his hands working automatically. How ordinary, not to mention ungrammatical; he thought of plural and agreement. Feeling his erection pause for thought, Simon realised that this was no time to be proofreading. He simply had to get back on track to his goal, and quickly.

"I don't know how to do it. Against the wall I mean," Simon fumbled, hoping to coax Mary into bed instead. "I've never done it that way before."

Craning her neck to look at Simon, Mary said "Nor have I, darling." She took his right hand in hers, then separated the rest of her body from his. Mary stepped over to face the wall leading Simon behind her. Lifting her skirt by sliding his hand up across her bottom, she said "Come on. It is my birthday."

Thinking about the supportive tone of her "darling" and the encouraging hand-holding, Simon became angry. As if the problem was that he was unsure of himself! He wanted to tell Mary that she was the problem, boring him with this plain little charade which she found so exotic. Of course it was unthinkable for Simon to tell her any such thing.

Standing at arm's length with his hand on Mary's bum he tried to think of another way to back out of the situation. But as the torque of his erection dropped he realised there was no time left to think. He had to face facts. Somehow, in spite of all the care he had taken, he now found himself wandering in a stupid fantasy of Upright Sex in a Public Place, instead of moving towards his goal.

All he could hope for was to get through to the other side, and to do that Simon would have to stop thinking. He undid his belt.

Worrying is a form of thinking, so Simon put from his mind his worries about having sex in the new position. He gave no thought to the fact that he might be unable to manage it nor did he concern himself about how ridiculous he would look trying. He did not think about the clumsy gait his downed pants shackled him into

as he shuffled towards Mary's upped skirt. When she nearly toppled over and he had to pull back for a second to let her remove her shoes, Simon did not think it was funny, although he caught a glimpse of Mary's smile.

Trying to get his penis even close to the correct point and angle was very awkward, but Simon closed his eyes and did not think about it. Nor did he picture Mary's contorted form, leaning forwards with her head on her left forearm steady against the wall, as she reached her right hand back between her straight tiptoed legs, groping for that thing she would slip into her vagina.

Once Simon started thrusting, he didn't think about how ridiculous he must look in a half-squat with his trousers around his ankles. Shortly, he felt his thighs turning to jelly and realised that he would have to come shortly. He did not think about Mary's orgasm although he was aware of her ecstatic moaning and gasping. Fortunately for Mary, she was already elated from her solid-state manipulations in the car and the combination of her fantasy, the position's novelty, and Simon's urgency carried her to satisfaction, if not repletion.

Afterwards, and before, Simon had not thought about using a condom because he had persuaded Mary to go on the pill. In the initial stages of their relationship Simon and Mary had used condoms during sex. Subsequently, Simon had explained that the pill was a preferable alternative.

Not promiscuous, not using drugs intravenously, not gay, people like them were not at risk of catching STDs in Simon's view. So the condom had no benefit over the pill, whilst the pill had the benefit of allowing them to have sex more spontaneously. Mary had gone along with this view and now saw sexual spontaneity as the advantage of the pill, the price for which was its effect on her body and mind. Simon's real view, which he had not explained, was that sexual spontaneity was only an imagined value which he had used to sell Mary the pill. Simon's real view was that only his goal mattered.

Simon's goal was not to father children, therefore some contraceptive was necessary. Condoms would have been a burden to Simon, something he would have had to buy, carry and use himself. So using condoms would have made sex a sharing experience; something he did *with* Mary. That kind of sex did feature in Simon's real view, but only as something worthless; he wanted the other kind. He wanted the kind of sex where he did something *to*

Mary. As to the effects of the pill on Mary's body and mind, Simon's real view was the same: something he did to her. And doing things to Mary was part of Simon's goal.

So Simon did not have to concern himself with disposing of a laden sheath after he had come in Mary against the wall. Breathing heavily, his only concern was decoupling before his leg muscles gave way. That done, Simon put his left arm against the wall, supporting himself in readiness for the Little Death. His eyes remained closed.

A light kiss on his cheek gave Simon a start: he had forgotten Mary was there.

"Did you like my fantasy?" She said, quietly.

Barely alert, Simon groaned "It was too tame" without thinking.

"Tame?"

It had been thoughtless to use that word, Simon realised from Mary's tone. He wanted to become alert now and think of some response to get Mary moving towards his goal again. Opening his eyes, Simon saw Mary leaning, her back against the wall. Looking into his face, she reached out and stroked his upper arm.

"What would you rather do then?"

Being alert, Simon managed not to laugh at Mary's attempt at sexy purring. Also he stopped worrying about being off the path to his goal.

"Something in the bedroom," Simon said, without smiling.

"Bedroom's tame," Mary shrugged. She bent and picked up her shoes by hooking two fingers of her left hand through the straps. Turning, Mary raised her hand and flicked the shoes to dangle over her shoulder. They swung behind her as she sauntered down the hall to the bedroom.

Simon pulled up his trousers and followed her, noticing that Mary did not seem at all nervous.

The bedroom was small and furnished with double bed, bedside table, wardrobe, and plain chair. Clothes and other personal effects, mostly unidentifiable in the faint light, lay around generally.

Once in the room, Simon had to decide where to sit. He thought about sitting on the bed, as Mary had done, but chose the chair instead. Less sexy, but less comfortable and therefore more sexy.

"Well?" Mary broke the silence.

Simon looked straight at her, thinking she had become a little nervous. He would work on that. The more nervous Mary was the better, in

his view. More nervousness meant less self-assurance and less self-respect. To Simon, Mary having self-respect was like her having fat.

"Take all your clothes off," he instructed her.

"Am I your plaything then?" Mary stood up, breaking eye contact for a moment. As her eyes met his after that moment she received her reply: a blink. She looked down at her skirt, feeling for buttons to undo.

No answer had been necessary, and Simon was pleased. He had made Mary do what he wanted, simply by willing her. Not only that, but she was less comfortable, less self-assured. Continuing his silence, Simon watched as Mary's skin was exposed: thighs, arms, pudenda, stomach, shoulders, breasts.

Naked, Mary stood facing Simon, her feet slightly apart. Her right arm was at her side, her left crooked across her front, with the hand holding her right forearm. Simon was pleased to see both hands fidgeting a little.

"Now then," Simon leaned back in the chair, folding his arms. "Across my knee."

For a slow two seconds they stared into each others faces. "I d-" Mary stuttered, "I don't really want to. I've never wanted -"

"It's what I'd rather do," Simon repeated her phrase back to her.

Mary looked down and sniffed. Was it a shiver Simon saw? Was she thinking about refusing? Perhaps she was thinking about going home, looking down at her clothes and thinking that she would have to get dressed pathetically in front of him, then use his phone to call a cab, which would take ages to arrive. Would Mary simply stand there naked until he relented (not that he was going to)? Or go into the bathroom or another room? Or lie on the bed and try to persuade him to do something she would call "make love"?

Would Simon be persuaded though? Was it worse than that; was it possible he would rape her?

Simon's ruminations were cut short by Mary stepping over to his side. Not meeting his eyes, she was mumbling; Simon caught "How do I do it? I'm heavier than I look you know! Maybe it'd be easier on the bed."

With a slight pull and catch Simon had Mary across his lap. His left hand was resting on her shoulders, his right across her upturned buttocks.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" he said, rhetorically, stroking her right cheek.

“Have I been a naughty girl?” Mary’s provocative question annoyed Simon.

Was she so stupid as to think that all he wanted was to play the paedophile sadist? No, Simon realised, his annoyance subsiding, Mary was just thinking about herself.

Realising that pain was coming, Mary wanted fantasy schoolgirl pain rather than real ordinary pain. And it would have been easy for Simon to let the headmaster give it to her; to let her escape as he had in the corridor. Inflicting pain on Mary was a step towards Simon’s goal, but “inflicting” and “Mary” were more important than “pain” so the alter-ego device she wanted had to be placed well out of her reach.

“No Mary,” he used her name for emphasis. “You’re you.”

Simon raised his right hand. Mary twisted her body, trying to look round and see what was happening, but Simon pushed her down with his left hand and said “No.”

He brought his right hand down, softly. Mary twitched at the moment of contact, which pleased Simon. He stroked her for a second then suddenly gave her three quick hard slaps. Mary yelped in pain, which also pleased Simon.

Continuing to tease her with varied stroking and slapping, Simon went on pleasing himself, until he noticed something he didn’t like.

Hoping to discern a handprint after a particularly stinging delivery, Simon had paused. In the silence he had heard Mary’s breathing, and something else. Unsure of what he was hearing, Simon had spanked her bum and thighs hard half a dozen times, eliciting renewed cries of pain. Then he had paused, listened, and his suspicion had been confirmed: in the quiet Mary had emitted a low groan of pleasure.

This was a zero-sum game: as Mary took pleasure, so Simon lost it. His pleasure had been derived from her submissions; from her going across his knee, and then from her taking the spanking. Mary’s subsequent enjoyment now took back those submissions, leaving a void in Simon. A void that was quickly filled with fury.

Allowing his anger to take hold, Simon gave Mary as hard a spanking as he could. He *would* be her master.

He would not. As soon as Simon stopped to catch his breath Mary frustrated him with louder ecstatic moaning than before.

The physical effort had spent his anger, and Simon wondered what to do next. He actually could not hit Mary any harder, and his hand

was now smarting a little, so further abuse of this kind was impossible, as well as seemingly pointless.

Before Simon could think of anything, Mary rolled off his lap onto the floor. Kneeling there she looked into his eyes and reached out to feel his crotch. There Mary found hard evidence that, in spite of himself, Simon was well aroused by what he had just done to Mary.

Holding Simon’s erection Mary felt that he was one of two lovers sharing the discovery of a new (to them) sexual pleasure. She smiled at Simon.

“It hurt at first, but then it got nice and warm,” Mary explained, wanting to talk about it. “We can fuck and go on doing it,” she continued, also wanting to continue, “if we do doggy-style.”

Mary released Simon’s penis and withdrew her hand, stroking it down his thigh. Not crawling, but without fully standing up, she climbed onto the bed, resting her weight on her knees and elbows.

“Is it all red?” Mary was asking Simon about her arse, which was pointed squarely at him. “Come on. Make it all red and warm.”

Sexual togetherness was an anathema to Simon, mentally. But physically, Simon had a hard-on and a fit naked woman saying “take me, take me” in front of him. It was not in the plan. It was not getting him towards his goal. But there was no other course of action open to Simon than to get his trousers off, get on the bed, and spank-fuck Mary. His body gave him a physical imperative and he did as he was told.

As the two of them had sex, Simon felt no emotion. This session of intercourse, like every other, was a specific multi-element engineering process that he had to manage. This time the elements were maintaining a proper rhythm of thrusting, maintaining a proper rhythm of slapping, and staying hard without ejaculating. The process had to continue to run until Simon had worked out what to do next.

By contrast, Mary was feeling, and expressing, overwhelming elation. In her relationship with Simon she had been struggling to have some kind of equal sex with him. But tonight the realisation had come upon her that Simon did not want that. He wanted man-woman sex. After some resistance, Mary had found that a part of her also wanted that and could enjoy it. Giving free rein to that part meant Simon was more aroused and consequently so was she.

So long as Mary continued expressing her elation, Simon did not care about what was going on in her head. He only cared what he would do next. Looking down Mary's moving body, he wondered about pulling her hair, then about pinching her nipples. Either would be a new pain, but judging by Mary's wetness and loudness she would probably just become more excited by its infliction. Simon wanted to take Mary beyond excitement. He wanted to shock her.

Continuing his traversal, Simon's gaze came to Mary's bouncing buttocks.

Carefully, Simon placed the tip of his right index finger on the opening of Mary's anus. Immediately, she froze. A grin leapt to Simon's lips and he started to push his finger inside her.

Involuntarily, Mary's whole body jerked forward, she bumped her head on the wall and landed face down, flat on the bed. Ignoring the fact that Mary was rubbing her head with her hand, Simon again tried to press his finger into her.

"Ow! Stop that!" Mary flipped herself over.

"Stop?" Simon made it quizzical and wiped the smile almost off his face. He was not actually sure he wanted to violate Mary's arse. But Simon was sure that he had reached a point beyond which Mary did not want to go, so he was determined to push her farther.

Holding his finger up, Simon said "That's all it is. Your turds are bigger than that aren't they?"

"Turds," Mary replied "go the other way. And they don't have fingernails."

For answer Simon blinked and inclined his head. There was a pair of nail scissors in his bathroom.

Later, Simon lay awake dwelling on the night's developments. In the quiet of his bedroom he could easily hear Mary's deep, regular, breathing. The winner sleeps easily, Simon thought, bitterly. There was no question that Mary was the winner, not that she had even known there was a competition, and no question that he was the loser.

The goal for Simon had been to force Mary beyond her limit. Once pushed outside her boundaries, she would no longer be herself; she would belong to him and he would have won.

But all Simon had succeeded in doing had been to show Mary her limits, then she had won by breaking those limits herself.

The last limit of the night, but one, had been broken when Mary had accepted Simon's trimmed finger. After he had withdrawn Mary had said a quiet "Come on," to invite the inevitable next step. Checkmate.

There had followed a few comical minutes of trying different coupling positions. A few seconds after they had found one that worked it was all over; Simon had come as soon as Mary's anus popped over the rim of his glans. It was technically a penetration, but it could hardly have been called a bugging.

After disengaging, Mary had told Simon that she had felt him coming. He had feigned a post-coital doze to avoid a conversation about feelings. After visiting the bathroom, Mary had come back to bed to sleep. Defeat nagged at Simon, keeping him awake.

Wondering if it would have made a difference, Simon imagined sodomising Mary properly: gradually shafting deeper and deeper. His penis stiffened a little and Simon thought about having a wank to get himself to sleep. It had never before occurred to him to fantasise about anal, but Simon found himself enjoying it greatly. Penetration between rounded buttocks had immediately become a more exciting act than penetration of the vagina.

Why? Because Simon had realised that the arse could not have an orgasm. So when he came in the arse, his orgasm was the only one. That was how Simon liked his orgasm, and his life. He did not want to share, nor did he want to compete. In the vagina he had to do both.

Not only could the vagina's orgasm coincide with his, and thus diminish it, but also the vagina's orgasm could be better than his. "The cunt has nothing I want." Simon cast himself as a modern Sadist libertine with just a thought. Immediately, he realised this was self-deception. Really, he was afraid of the cunt.

Finding that he was not the extremist-beyond-sex he had imagined, but rather a frightened little boy, scared to compete and too greedy to share, made Simon's penis limp. He slipped into a depression and slept badly that night. Compounded with his failure against Mary, this put him in a bad mood the following day.

Trashing the future

Short story

Bedtime

Julia lit a candle and dropped the Club Venice matchbook. It landed on dirty, pitted lino. Michael watched her from the doorway as she clicked across the room to the grubby mattress she called home. She dropped to a lounge, propping herself on one thin elbow and reaching for her skirt with the other hand.

Staring Michael in the eye, she lifted her skirt, baring her cunt like a dog baring its teeth. The lager limpness of Michael's cock vanished, dispelled by the spread fit thighs of this scrap of white punk trash. He rushed between them, fighting his tight jeans down over his stiff knob. Almost immediately, Michael felt the scratched plastic of Julia's high-heeled boots against his buttocks as she clasped him inside her. They fucked and fucked.

Finally, with his heart beating like a stoat's and with sweat soaked through his printed jacket and steaming off his back, Michael's tight, beer drowned balls managed to force a spurt of snot out of the end of his belaboured penis. He farted and went to sleep.

Julia was hungry for more pleasure. She masturbated, squeezing her love gristle between her taut thighs giving herself orgasm after orgasm until her anus was soaked with the fuck juice dribbling out of her cunt. Then she too slid into stupor.

Julia came to as she squatted over the seatless lavatory she called home. The chill of the cold, tacky porcelain against her arse forced a groan from her frayed lungs. As the groan passed her vocal chords it became a hacking, retching cough which quickly took hold of her whole torso. She coughed and coughed.

Julia felt the torpid mucus in her throat begin to stir. With a final rack she managed to eject what she hoped was a significant portion of the warm pudding creature living inside her neck. Only then did Julia open her eyes.

It was early morning. Dirt and dust, set in a glue formed by the dried shit of a dozen diseased pigeons, soiled the clear rays of dawn's light passing through the toilet's small window. This tarnished light cast a pale shadow of Julia's form on the cracked floorboards. She was hunched over, looking down between her knees.

The ejected mucus sat off-centre in a smear of spittle like the yolk of an egg just beginning to fry. The vision was framed by her feet, one bare, one clad in a black sock thickened by months of dried sweat. Apart from the sock, Julia wore only a long-sleeved shirt advertising

a punk band whose lead singer she had sucked-off once. The shirt was baggy, had yellow armpits and a small blood stain on the part of the hem nearest Julia's crotch. And the band had long since split up because of artistic differences over how the lead singer got himself sucked-off all the time.

After quickly checking that the shirt was clear of her buttocks, Julia relieved herself of some dry faeces and drained her bladder through caked and tangled pubic hair. There was no paper so she shuffled through to the kitchen, found some slices of white bread and wiped herself back in the loo. The bread tore so Julia rinsed her hands after flushing the wet shit sandwich away.

Breakfast time

Julia perched on the least broken chair in the kitchen. She dived her hand into the smelly pile of packets, tins and cups (Styrofoam, plastic and broken) which hid the top of the kitchen table. Pushing through the stale or rotting fragments past her wrist, Julia's hand eventually came to rest on the familiar tiny metal box she called home.

She withdrew, brushing the crap off her arm. In the box were two tightly wadded coin bags. Julia pulled them out and uncrumpled them. Each held a single illegal tablet. One was speed, the other a contraceptive. Julia popped both at once and washed them down with a mixture of stale lager and cigarette ash from a can on the table. Start your day the healthy way.

It didn't matter that it was the last of the pills because Julia's dealer was coming round later that day. He was a policeman who nicked drugs from the evidence room, then dealt them to Julia, who dealt him blow jobs in return.

The shower was a cold trickle and Julia shared it with a small brightly coloured slug. Even so, that and the speed were bringing Julia to her senses. Something was missing, she realised. The bastard was coming round. She would chew his stiffer and swallow the discharge. He would spring her turbo-charged wake-ups and a temporary hysterectomy. He'd fuck-off back to a riot to kick heads or something. Simple?

Somewhere there was a scab, but Julia couldn't pick it somehow. Was it clothes? Julia wore just the shirt she'd found herself wearing on the bog. Now it was a little damp from shower drips, but that turned plod on, she knew from experience. She would think about it over a fag.

At the edge of the table was a carton of duty-free Syrian unfiltered. She put one on her lower lip and looked for a light.

Julia was sure she had a light somewhere. She had lit herself a twisty cheeba recently she recalled. A match sprung up from the shimmering miasma that was her memory of last night. A match from a book. It must be in her bedroom, she thought.

Chuckling out time

The words "Club Venice" were obscured by wax which had run from the candle she had set by the door last night, but she spotted the corner of the matchbook thanks to her speed-enhanced edge perception.

Julia lit-up the rough Middle Eastern blend and sucked a cloud of abrasion into her lungs. Then she noticed the snag.

An insignificant piece of prick named Michael lay sprawled like a used condom on her mattress. It wished her a good morning and reported that it had a headache. Should she give a fuck? It was talking, therefore it could move, which meant it could now piss off out of her life.

By the door the little piece of wank complained it needed to take a leak. Julia dismissed the request easily and obscenely. She slammed him outside.

Michael knocked on the door and pleaded. He was bursting with toxic urine so much it hurt him to stand up straight. An indifferent silence greeted his pathetic implorings.

A solution occurred to him which would also satisfy the peeve he felt against the bitch that had used him for a finger. He unzipped his jeans and pissed and pissed his annoyance against the door of the squat Julia called home.

The fool didn't notice the policeman behind him until it was too late.

"Oi!" shouted the filth.

Michael turned, saw the cop in his beat armour and panicked.

"Put that away and I'll tell you what you're doing wrong!" commanded the uniform.

It was an easy trick; whilst both of Michael's hands were engaged the cop cuffed him heavily around the side of his aching head. Michael span and almost fell down the steps to the street.

"I hope that's clear now," shouted the pig. "Say 'yes sir'!"

"Yes sir." Michael turned to go. "Thank you."

The law kicked him in the lower back with careful viciousness. For a month Michael would be crapping his poor clone-meat diet with more blood and pain than usual. "You're welcome citizen."

When Michael had gone the cop knocked on the door.

Time's up

The cop stood and dominated the kitchen. Julia sat on her chair.

"You're going to be moved on from here in a week. I heard about it at the station," the policeman sneered.

Julia looked around at the place she called home briefly. "Can't you do anything for me?" She smiled suggestively.

"For you?" Plod replied, incredulously. "Who are you?"

"There's millions of bits of have-not rubbish blowing through Europe right now. Another piece with a live tongue and a drug habit'll drop at my knees soon. I don't have to do anything for you."

"If there's millions of us, how come we're the have-nots?"

"Don't start on the fucking politics," the pig scowled. "Here, start on this." He unclipped the piece of armour across his groin and tugged his uniform underpants down. With his other hand he pulled out a bottle of pills and his sweaty penis.

The cop rattled the pill bottle in his fist, which he lowered next to where his cock hung. Julia knelt by the table. She fixed her gaze on the bottle and her mouth around the end of the cop's cock.

As it began to harden, she stretched one arm out under the table. She twisted her head and looked up at the plod's face from the corner of one eye. His eyes were closed.

He didn't see Julia's hand come back from under the table holding a wide-bladed chopping knife. In one movement she pulled her head back and thrust the knife forwards into the pig's groin.

The edge of the blade had sliced into his penis like an undercooked sausage, sending a jet of blood sideways, spraying the kitchen wall. The point had been buried in the policeman's crutch and blood ran freely over Julia's hand which still held the handle.

The cop screamed and looked down in disbelief. "What the fuck?"

"I'm voting, shit-head," Julia replied, twisting the shoplifted Sabatier and releasing even more deep red blood. The knife slipped from her hand as the policeman toppled over backwards.

Julia ran her bloody hand through her short hair, making it stand up in red spikes. In a moment of calm she stared at the dead cop, his erection now replaced by the knife handle. The pill bottle fell from his loose fingers.

Julia wouldn't be needing speed anymore. She'd found a new rush to chase. She got dressed and packed her knife ready to cut a path to a place beyond the horizon of permitted pleasure, and beyond control, a place where humanity prospered and the last priest had long since been hanged by the guts of the last police officer. Finally, a place she could call home.

Hardface

Part Five

chapter ten

Disturbed, the duty officer of the Ethical Brotherhood of Warriors jumped up from his full lotus. In mid-air, he aligned his feet with the toe of his left shoe against the heel of his right. At the same time his hands clapped together in front of his solar plexus with the fingers of his left hand pointing precisely downwards, the fingers of his right pointing in exactly the opposite direction, and both thumbs bent and tucked tidily at the sides. Only after landing, with his feet retaining their relative positions, and straightening his knees did he open his eyes.

The brass strip set into the floor of the duty room flashed as it caught the flickering light cast from the fireplace in the corner. Master Tsing had landed with his feet exactly in line, and exactly in the middle of the brass strip, which was about twice as wide as his shoes.

The first priority of the duty officer when disturbed was: to verify the disturbance. Having visually checked his placement he turned his senses inwards. There was no doubt.

The second priority of the duty officer when disturbed was: to place a relief duty officer. Assuming a more normal standing stance, Master Tsing turned to look at his acolyte. Yuen was still in his full lotus, seated across the brass strip a little way behind where Master Tsing had been sitting. His eyes were open and he looked at his master.

"Having trouble getting out of your full lotus, Yuen?" It was said as an order to rise, not as a question. Understanding this, Yuen stood up quickly.

Continuing his forceful delivery, as was appropriate for a master addressing his student, Tsing said: "Did you sense a disturbance?"

"I think so," Yuen answered.

"Good Yuen." Tsing's tone was still strident, but also expectant. Should Yuen say something? Or perhaps do something? He was too slow.

"We are on duty. What is our duty?" Tsing asked a formal question, impatiently.

"To be alert for disturbances on the ley line." Although he had given the correct reply, Yuen still felt that he was in trouble.

"Why is it important?" Tsing continued sharply. After taking a deep breath, Yuen proclaimed:

"There are twelve true ley lines. Ley power courses along them at ineffable speed. This power can be used well or ill. There are men without virtue, seeking to use the ley power for evil. If all ley lines fall into the hands of those without virtue the whole world will be turned to evil! The ley lines must be guarded. There are twelve virtuous orders, each sworn to protect one ley line. Constant vigilance is their duty, and instant response to any -"

"Then why stand here?" Tsing raised his voice to interrupt, just as Yuen was hitting his stride in recitation. "Call the next duty officer!"

"Yes sir!" Yuen shouted, dashing from the room.

The third and final priority of the duty officer when disturbed was: to investigate the disturbance. Once the new duty officer and his acolyte were seated on the brass strip in the duty room, Tsing and Yuen hurried from the headquarters of the Ethical Brotherhood of Warriors.

The headquarters building consisted of a dormitory, training cells, duty room and the chief's quarters. It had been built compact and low in the midst of forested hills for concealment.

At the end of a tunnel from the headquarters was a hidden exit, now used by Master Tsing

and Yuen. Once outside they could not help but take a moment to appreciate the sweeping moonlit vista of the remote woods. The view revealed no normal roads or railway lines, for none served the area. Master and acolyte walked down a slope heading for a road that was not normal: the brotherhood's assigned ley line.

Apart from knowing where the ley line was, both men could also feel its location as they approached. Once in the path of the ley line Yuen assumed the position for travel. Master Tsing checked his student.

Yuen hovered one metre above the ferns of the wood. His left leg was stretched out behind his body, his right leg bent so that the foot nearly touched his left knee. Yuen's left arm was bent and his left fist was held under his left shoulder. His right arm was outstretched with the middle and index fingers of the hand pointing forwards, the other two fingers bent so that their tips were pressed into the palm, and the thumb was tucked in tidily, its tip against the second joint of the third finger. This was all correct, and Master Tsing grunted his approval.

From his earlier verification, Master Tsing knew where the disturbance was. He told his student how far along the ley line to go, then assumed the same position.

Together, they then caught the ley power and travelled invisibly and at ineffable speed to an old church outside a town known as 75,52.

As the large stained glass window shattered Witch Carter cringed and held up her arms in front of her face. She was vaguely aware of Mr. Sunrise, who had been standing next to her for no reason, stepping between her and the breaking window.

Unexpectedly, shards of coloured glass did not rain down upon the two of them. Witch Carter opened her eyes into the cold breeze now blowing in from outside. Looking up past Mr. Sunrise, she saw that the myriad pieces of the shattered window hung spinning in the air. In their midst was a young man who had just flown into the church.

Flying in small wobbling circles, the young man was gesturing frantically to control the power keeping the glass in the air. Presumably this was the same power he had used to smash the four metre diameter window just moments before flying through it.

Abruptly, a second man, older than the first, flew into the church through the gap where the window had been. With a gesture he sent all the

pieces of floating glass flying off, back towards the gap. The pieces reassembled, and with a loud *kcarr* the window deploded into its original shape. It was as though it had never been broken.

Looking up, No-Number Zen contemplated the second flying man, then contemplated what the man had just done. The awareness of the shapes of all the glass shards, the simultaneous calculation of their necessary trajectories, and the sheer telekinetic power to reassemble the window all stacked up to something quite impressive. "Show-off," Zen muttered, at the same time aware that as a Warrior of the Ethical Brotherhood the man's heart had to be in the right place.

What of his companions? Zen knew their thoughts. A storm of mundane glass slivers was no threat to Mr Sunrise, yet for some reason No-Number did not understand, Sunrise's hackles were up; there was a hint of something protective there. Witch Carter was reaching for her novo-tarot deck, sifting defensive options. Zen spoke up, hoping to prevent a confrontation.

"There's no need for flash stuff, mate. Come down and say hello." He hoped a slightly stern line would calm Carter and Sunrise. To appease Master Tsing he added: "Nice trick with the window though."

"Had you been evil, the glass splinters would have shredded your bodies where they stand." Master Tsing's confident voice echoed around the old church as he landed gracefully. Yuen landed modestly behind him.

"Buddha sees wickedness spreading across the world and asks 'Why do good men debate whose power is greatest?'" No-Number quoted.

Master Tsing blinked. Looking at Zen he recognised something.

"I apologise for my vanity. Homage to the Buddha," he said, bowing his head.

"Yeah well, sorry about stepping on your ley line. It was the quickest way and we haven't got time to muck about."

Master Tsing raised his head, smiling. "It's not the first time it's been used as a fire alarm. What's the urgency?"

"Central Temple's in the shit. World Compassion doesn't have the muscle to get it out."

"We can become allies. But our enemies will become allies to your enemies." Master Tsing intoned the obligatory warning. By custom, any

intervention by the Virtuous orders would be balanced by the Malefic orders.

“Your enemies are evil, aren't they?” Zen replied, shrugging.

Carter and Sunrise had not followed everything, but they understood that they had a powerful new ally.

The next morning they all sat down for breakfast in the inn's ground floor room. There was no problem meeting the Buddhist caravan guards' need for vegetarian food. The only difference between most of the items on the breakfast menu was in the texture and flavour of Pro-meat™ served. Observant, Master Tsing and Yuen dined modestly on what was available, also creating no problem. There was no problem meeting No-Number Zen's needs, since he did not eat. Likewise for Mr Sunrise, who derived all his energy from the Sun. Witch Carter was happy with the “buttered toast and jam style breakfast plate” which contained no actual butter, bread, or jam. The post-karmic Innocence could have been a problem, had he not agreed to pay the extra for his plate of real bacon and real eggs. He and his meals were beyond sin and vegetarianism.

As they were tucking in, the merchant Harris joined them. When all was eaten and paid for, she led them to her caravan.

There were six large trucks and four smaller vehicles, two of which were armoured. All the vehicles had originated during the wars before Collapse although general wear and tear, coupled with the modifications down the years needed for alternative then multiple fuels, better terrain handling, and improved cargo capacity had left very little of the original material unreplaced.

The new caravan guards were given clothes like Harris and her crew. These had once been worn by army soldiers. They had a camouflage pattern of stone grey and green, now faded to the colour of the ruined city through which the caravan travelled.

Harris's caravan had rolled out from the Capital and into 75,52 during the night. This was the morning after, and the trucks were already being reloaded for the return journey.

chapter eleven

Routines were quickly established, and up until the third day the caravan ran like a machine.

To Harris the caravan was a machine for adding worth. One thing that her cargoes had in

common was that they would all be worth more located at the end of the caravan's journey than they had been when located at the start. The increase in worth had to be reckoned against the cost of the journey. The cost of the journey would be at least the cost of fuel, vehicle maintenance, hiring guards, feeding guards, etc. The cost of the journey would be no more than the loss of all cargoes and vehicles, and the lives of Harris and her crew. On the first two days, her cargo increased in worth.

To Desire's Futility, the captain of the Buddhist guards, the caravan was an enlightening machine. He insisted that his men and the other caravan guards shared all duties. Inevitably, the monks were seen as curiosities by the other guards, who therefore talked to them and questioned them. When the monks brought these questions to him, Desire's Futility refused to answer. This forced the young Buddhists to find their own answers, which, as some of them realised, was his intention. It was also his intention that the monks form friendships with the caravan guards. They would learn that these friendships were transient, as were the trust and camaraderie that accompanied them. By the end of the second day only one monk had deduced Desire's Futility's intention, and had asked him why he taught such a harsh lesson. “Any bloody fool can teach the transience of things with no value,” had been the reply.

To Shah, Harris's captain, the caravan was a quantity machine. Two armoured small vehicles: one holding firearms and ammunition; the other holding valuable, compact cargo. Two unarmoured small vehicles, both full of guards: one point; the other his command car. Four flatbed trucks with a container each: one uniform clothing; one real fruit, sealed in plastic; one solid protein, white; one frozen real meat. Two pick-up trucks holding supplies for the caravan itself, as well as assorted small quantities: shoes, electricals, make-up, wire coils, brackets, stationery, digitals, and other things Shah had not noticed during loading. How many guards on each truck? How many on point? How many in his command car? How many on-duty? How many off-duty? How many shifts, and how long? How many stops? How far between stops? How late are we? How early are we? At the end of the second day, Shah knew the answers to all these questions.

To Witch Carter, the caravan was a predictable machine. On the first day she had read her novo-tarot and, at first, the caravan had made haste when the way showed safe; later, shelter had been sought in readiness for a change in the weather; when they had finally stopped for the

day a pack of wild dogs attacked, but the guards were ready to see them off. In the morning of the second day Witch Carter read that a bridge had collapsed, and so a detour was made. Two safe readings had followed, but later she had read a landmine. The caravan stopped and the landmine was searched for and found. The bandits that had buried it thought better of attacking, as Carter had predicted. On the third day she saw nothing.

Nothing does not mean safety to Witch Carter. Nothing means nothing: neither safety nor danger, neither good weather nor bad, not a calamity, not a windfall, not an intelligent and compassionate woman, not a tall dark stranger, not an unexpected encounter with friends. Nothing means ignorance, an absence of prediction. For Carter then, a failure.

She suspected the reason for her failure and did not relish having to explain. Even though she had made correct, helpful divinations for the previous two days, Carter knew that what she had to say to Harris and Shah would be met with cynicism first.

It was in the nature of her problem that she was not alone. A few kilometres away, a hand was drawn from a rabbit-skin bag.

The rabbit had been killed by the owner of the hand using a bow and blunt arrow, in the traditional manner. The skin, intact thanks to the blunt arrow, had been expertly flayed and cured in return for the meat of the rabbit; traditionally considered an equitable exchange. A traditional knife with an ornately carved handle had been used to cut an oblong piece twice as long as it was wide from the hide. The piece had been turned into a bag by being folded over, fur inside, and stitched with a traditional needle, rather than a sewing machine. To allow the bag to be closed a traditional drawstring and toggle arrangement had been made, in preference to a zip.

What did the hand draw from such a traditional bag? Something that had been in the bag for years, intermittently. The contents of the bag had originally been a slim branch on an ash tree. With the tree's permission, the branch had been cut off on the night of the first full moon after the bag had been finished. Without being allowed to touch the ground, the branch had been taken, blessed, and cut into discs. Before being placed in the bag all the discs except one had been branded using the heated point of a traditional knife with an ornately carved handle. The branded discs each bore a different rune, but this was not what the hand drew from the bag.

Instead, the hand drew out the wooden disc that had not been branded and that had been put in the bag blank. The owner of the hand, a seer in the Viking tradition, did not need to turn the disc over to know that the blank rune had been drawn. He replaced the disc, rattled the bag, then drew again.

Again the blank rune came out and again was replaced. As he shook the bag the seer, whose name was Liffori muttered "The rattling sounds like Fate laughing at me." Predictably, his third draw was again the blank rune.

Knowing he had a difficult explanation ahead of him, Liffori took his time dismantling the sacred space he had made for his divination. Instead of merely disrupting the symbols he had chalked on the walls and floor, he rubbed them with the palm of his hand until they were actually erased. Before Collapse the walls and floor had formed the lobby of a cheap hotel. The building had long since been reduced to rubble and had fallen around its centre so that the walls and floor now formed the cavity of a grassy concrete crater. Liffori extinguished his traditional oil lamp and waited for it to cool so that he could pack it; this was also an excuse to wait a little longer and ponder.

He was sure of his divination, although he expected Aedin would cast doubt. Could he afford to explain that some things are unknowable? No. It was a bad time, with Aedin gathering more support with every passing day. Liffori and Yuggus needed to be definite. Well, thought Liffori, the blank rune has several definite interpretations. Choosing one, he clambered over the concrete and back to where the longships and the rest of the Viking Marauders waited.

They were not really longships, just as Liffori, Aedin and Yuggus were not really Vikings. It was all part of a style. Joining the Viking Marauders meant conforming to that style.

You adopted a made-up Viking name. You dressed in accordance with the group's particular take on Viking clothing and accessories. Every vehicle was designated a "coracle" if small, or a "longship" if large. A designated longship would have been painted suitably: at the front a draconic prow, down the sides a series of bold designs, such as might have appeared on Viking shields, and at the rear a beaked head. Having a certain look gave this particular band of marauders a sense of identity and, more than that, it was part of their theme.

The theme was an important part of the Vikings' success. All Vikings knew that they

could rely absolutely on the loyalty and bravery of their fellows, not because of some subliminal pragmatic tit-for-tat analysis, but because loyalty and bravery were part of the theme. Useful in combat, that. And after combat, with foes defeated, when it came to the seizing of bounty the Vikings were no mere career pillagers. No, they took all they could lay their hands on, in line with their theme, which meant they were a most successful group of bandits. The success was shared amongst them by a simple method in line with their simple leadership structure.

The Vikings had a Prinz. The Prinz owned all booty after a raid, and divided it between himself and the war band leaders, who in turn divided their share amongst their war bands. For the Prinz to continue as Prinz he had to make fair decisions about dividing the spoils, but he also had to get plenty of good raiding. So it was that Prinz Yuggus had come to rely on his seer Liffori, and thus was eagerly awaiting his return and the results of his latest divination.

With the longships parked behind them, Yuggus and the six war band leaders sat in a semicircle on collapsible stools facing towards Liffori as he came over the lip of the crater. Although all were basically dressed in uniform fatigues each man also wore some real fur, with the more successful wearing more fur.

"Show us your rune then," a man with fur collar, hat and boots called out. "I need to know what we're about; I might want to take a bath later."

Some of the war band leaders smirked at Aedin's joke. Saying nothing, Liffori met Yuggus' unsmiling eyes briefly before returning his attention to his footing as he walked down the slope to where the seats were.

Liffori held up the blank piece of wood between finger and thumb.

"Don't keep us in suspense," Aedin said, his tone jeering. "Turn it round so we can see the forecast."

"It is turned round," Liffori retorted. Unfortunately for him, as he twisted his wrist to show the other side, the blank rune slipped from his fingers.

Jumping to his feet and throwing his hands in the air, Aedin screamed "Aiee!" in mock terror. "Great magics! The rune flies from his hand!"

Two of the other war band leaders were laughing, another smirked, another bowed his head, the last looked to Yuggus.

"Quiet now." Yuggus stood and scanned his gaze across the seated men's faces, silencing them.

There was an uneasy stillness as Yuggus' gaze reached Aedin. For Aedin to remain standing would be for him to insult Yuggus openly. He was not ready to do that. Not yet. Aedin sat.

Aedin's taunting of Liffori was a sly attack that set Yuggus wondering. Did he need to distance himself from the seer? He had looked pretty stupid dropping the rune then. He continued to do so, as he bent over meticulously brushing the dirt from the piece of wood. Time for Yuggus to put a stop to that.

"Tell us the meaning of the divination," he commanded.

"But I have to--"

"Do it later," Yuggus cut in, "after you've told us."

Looking up, Liffori caught a slight look of reproof from Yuggus. "It means there's another seer."

"Another seer?" Yuggus sounded a little frustrated, which made Aedin smile inside. "Is somebody looking for us?"

Liffori shrugged. "Maybe. Their path crosses ours somehow."

A thought occurred to Odarra, a war band leader who supported Yuggus' leadership wholeheartedly. "Could it be travellers using divination to preview their way?"

At that Yuggus turned away from Liffori to face the war band leaders. Two seconds passed with no sound.

"Odarra, what you say rings true." On hearing Yuggus' words Odarra filled with pride.

"Make ready to attack," Yuggus added, decisively.

"But we know nothing about who we're attacking," protested Olgyns, a neutral.

"We know nothing?" roared Yuggus. "Do we not know that we must fight? I do. And I know that my axe is in my hand, that my shield is afore my heart, and that my brothers are by my side!"

As a man the war band leaders stood and cheered, even Aedin.

"Post guards, send scouts, and assemble for wappenshaw!"

The war band leaders turned to go to their longships where their men waited for them. Yuggus watched them go for a moment; he had shown them who was the boss. He turned back

to face Liffori. Taking the man by the shoulders he said quietly "I never doubted you."

chapter twelve

All the Vikings gathered for what they called "wappenshaw" in a gap between Jrstella and Hrothmir.

Jrstella was Yuggus' favourite longship. When he had claimed the vehicle from a defeated caravan, it had still looked like an articulated double-decked car transporter, which had been its original purpose. Extensive modifications had since been made to align the vehicle with Yuggus' vision of his flagship's appearance and combat capability.

Thanks to large tyres and a significant upgrade to the suspension the vehicle could travel at speed over most terrain, though in comfort only on something like a road. Half the lower deck was engines, requiring a well co-ordinated crew, but giving Jrstella good acceleration and handling. Both decks were surrounded by battlements that had been built up out of pieces of wood, metal, plastic, ceramic and other materials of opportunity, given a harmonious appearance with an excellent paint job. Yuggus had retained the cab's armour plates, which had been fitted by the previous owner, although he'd had a runic dragon design applied by metal-acrylic stencil.

To some of the top deck battlements were fitted bright streamers, whilst to others were fixed the rotting, severed heads of significant enemies. The streamers would flutter behind Jrstella as the Vikings raced into battle. From a distance this drew the attention of their intended victims, letting them know that they were about to fight with men of great bravery and flair. As the Vikings drew closer their intended victims would see the heads and know that they were also about to fight with bloodthirsty barbarians who had slain many before.

But the focus of the wappenshaw was not Jrstella, but Hrothmir. Or Hrothmir the Dragon to give the full name.

Hrothmir was a dusty old ice-cream van with a few conversions. Three people could sit across the bench seat in the front of Hrothmir. To get in the three would have had to climb onto the roof of the cab and then drop in through a small trapdoor one at a time. Once inside, they would be able to see out only through the five hooded slits in the layered metal that Hrothmir had instead of a windscreen. Once inside, one of the people could drive the van. Alternatively, the

seat could be lifted and a hatch behind it opened, with Yuggus's key, so that the back of the van could be accessed.

The back had been the van's ice-cream serving area originally. There was still a hatch where the old serving hatch had been. This was the only trace of the van's original purpose that remained to be seen, although the chimes could still be heard. Yuggus was sure that the Vikings had a sense of humour and had left the bells operational. That sense of humour was not in evidence elsewhere on Hrothmir. There were no windows, or illustrations of ice-cream or even anything ice-cream adjacent, like lollipops. There was only armour. So much so that Hrothmir seemed to be a van-shaped steel box, moderated only by the protruding lower thirds of her six wheels, the trapdoor on top of the cab, the slits through which the driver looked, and the serving hatch.

Hrothmir's serving hatch was the focus of the wappenshaw. All Hrothmir's armour was there to protect what would be shown at the wappenshaw. The point of the Vikings' wappenshaw was to hand out weapons; firearms to be precise.

For the wappenshaw Yuggus stood outside Hrothmir a few paces from the serving hatch. One of his men worked inside, handing guns and ammunition to several others who in turn passed the weapons on to the Viking war band leaders and their helpers as they came up in response to Yuggus' nominations.

"Gondrir: eight pistols, five sub-machine guns, five rifles, one light machine gun"

"Bjorn: ten pistols, seven sub-machine guns, five rifles, one light machine gun."

"Kalgneg: ten pistols, ten sub-machine guns, eight rifles, two light machine guns, box of grenades." The grenades would be an assortment: gas, concussion, fragmentation, reliable, dud, dangerous.

"Olgyns: twelve pistols, ten rifles, one light machine gun, Soul Harvester." The Vikings had given names to their best weapons. Soul Harvester was a heavy machine gun; a piece of undoubted power in battle, although often low on ammunition.

"Odarra: twelve pistols, twelve sub-machine guns, ten rifles, Star Bolt." A portable rocket-launcher.

"Aedin: twelve pistols, twelve sub-machine guns, twelve rifles, three light machine guns, two boxes of grenades."

During the division of weapons the Vikings had stood in large groups behind their respective

war band leaders. Furtive discussions had taken place over the division, which showed their war band's relative status, and over whom the leader had chosen to help carry their allotted weapons back, which showed the helpers' status.

As Aedin and his helpers had taken his weapons silence had fallen. Some Vikings tried to deduce by exclusion what weapons remained for Yuggus' own war band. Most wondered what weapons would be issued to them by their own leader. All waited for Yuggus to speak.

As they waited the Prinz climbed aboard Jrstella, to the upper deck, where he stood alone facing the whole troop. For a moment Yuggus gathered his thoughts. According to the Vikings' made-up tradition the end of the wappenshaw was always a pep talk from the Prinz. Of course it had to be in the Vikings' own idiom: extempore, inspiring them to fight well, promising material rewards, short, and with an offhand mention of death somewhere.

It was pretty much formula for Yuggus:

"Today is a good day. Why?" Before anybody could answer Yuggus continued.

"Today is a day we shall do battle." The Vikings cheered.

"Today is a day with a worthy adversary. An adversary with a seer." This drew a murmur.

"Today is a day some of us may die." Back to cheering.

"Today is a day we will freshen Jrustella's crown." More cheering as Yuggus gestured to the rotting heads.

"Today is a day we shall drive our enemies' vehicles from the battlefield, *loaded* with treasure." Even more cheering

"Today is a day for bravery!" Tumult ensued as Yuggus raised both his hands to show that he had finished.

The Buddhist caravan guards had their own ideas about bravery. They were explained by their captain, Desire's Futility, at the last possible moment. This was after Witch Carter had given a non-prediction to Harris and Shah, after lookouts had then been posted, and after the lookouts had sighted and identified the Vikings. With the faint sounds of the raiders' vehicles in their ears the captain asked his assembled men a question about bravery:

"Some say that the Vikings are brave. But can a man who fights only for material gain be said to be brave?"

One of the men took the bait. "We fight because we get paid," he stated. "That's material gain."

"No," said Desire's Futility. "We get paid because we fight."

A different guard now asked: "Why do we fight then?"

"For no reason. Now, engage the enemy, not your minds."

Clearly the Buddhist caravan guards also had their own ideas about what constituted a pep talk.

autran writings

Short stories

Bald

"I'm going to flirt with my customer," Maria told Stella, smiling and tilting her hips.

Stella looked across the restaurant, her hands continuing to wrap a clean knife and fork in a napkin. She scanned Maria's area and laughed. "So long as it's not the bald one."

"What's wrong with bald?"

Stella put down the cutlery package and picked up the makings of another set. "Nothing I guess," she said as she started to wrap. "It's just that whenever I see a bald head I get the urge to hammer a nail into it."

After a pause Maria asked "Why?"

"I don't know. To break up the monotony maybe?" Stella grimaced at her second package, unwrapped it and started again. "You know, it's just skin, skin, skin."

"This one's not monotonous. He's got a tiny tatoo behind his ear." Maria stood, doing nothing.

"Still, it's smooth and boring like a billiard ball." Stella picked up two clean plates.

"Smooth doesn't have to be boring," Maria insisted as her order arrived at the kitchen hatch. "Smooth can be sexy."

"Is that soup bowl sexy?" Stella asked, pointing at an item in Maria's order with her free hand. "Needs a nail," she said tapping Maria on the top of her head. "Right on the crown."

Maria tutted and turned to go to the staff toilet to check her hair had not been messed up by Stella's tap. Suddenly she thought of something. After quickly checking that nobody was looking she picked up the bowl of gazpacho from her order and took it with her to the lavatory.

The stylist of the restaurant where Maria worked had chosen soup bowls with a full and bulbous line. After Stella had said the word "sexy" it had struck Maria that there was a resemblance between the bowl and her bald customer's head.

Once in the toilet Maria placed the bowl carefully in front of the mirror and got a lipstick out of her trouser pocket. After giving her lips a fresh thick coating she picked up the soup bowl in both hands, puckered up and planted a kiss on the roundest part. She inspected it for a moment and then, satisfied with the big red smacker, put it back down and patted her hair.

"What about hygiene?" Stella gasped ironically when Maria told her what she had done. "You're really flirting for a shag aren't you? I thought you just wanted a big tip."

"Well," Maria replied, twisting from side to side in time with her sing-song delivery "I wouldn't mind either, but I'd rather not just get a ti-ip."

"Do you think it worked?" Stella asked putting a plate of steak tartare on her tray.

"I can't tell," Maria replied, looking over.

"Go and find out," Stella urged her, adding a plate with a terrine of winter vegetable. "Ask him if his soup's OK."

"How are your starters?" asked Maria, smiling.

"Fine," said the bald man's friend.

"And yours, sir?" she continued, showing a little cleavage.

The bald man dipped a finger in his soup and held it up. "Actually I prefer mine hairless," he said coldly.

Brief Encounter

Lord Hirosaki knelt on the floor of his receiving room watching his eldest son's back

as the young man stormed out of the clan residence. With a flick of his wrist Lord Hirosaki rang the tiny bell he kept concealed in the sleeve of his kimono.

Paper screens slid open to his left and Lord Hirosaki's closest retainer and closest servant entered.

"My writing desk," he said, his eyes still looking in the direction that his son had taken. His servant bowed quickly and left.

After a gesture from Lord Hirosaki his retainer crossed the room and knelt to his right. The two men sat in silence until the servant returned accompanied by two boys carrying a writing desk between them. The boys put the desk in front of the clan lord and left. The servant knelt opposite and busied himself readying the brushes and ink.

The retainer spoke. "Young master Itaro seemed angry, my lord. I take it you did not approve his intended marriage?"

"My son does not know the girl's background," replied Lord Hirosaki. "It makes her quite unsuitable."

"Will you tell the young master her background, my lord?"

"Unfortunately that is impossible. I could only tell him that he must have the approval of his aunt in Tambu."

"Surely she will allow him to marry whoever he wishes?"

"I suppose so, but she will insist on him bringing the girl to her."

During the conversation the servant had finished his preparation and sat back.

"What a situation for a father," Lord Hirosaki exclaimed. "I must turn to poetry for solace." He picked up a brush and contemplated for a moment. Inspiration struck and he dipped the brush in black paint and wrote:

Wet with her man's tears
She lies on the Tambu road
A brief encounter

Reading the poem, the retainer bowed his head to hide his face from his master.

"My haiku is so poor I have to pay for an audience," the clan head sighed reaching into his sleeve. He withdrew his hand and placed a small pile of gold coins in the centre of the poem. Then he folded and tied the paper around the gold to form a compact, heavy packet.

"Please send it to my usual reviewer." Lord Hirosaki passed the packet to his servant, who bowed and left the room.

"You seem troubled," Lord Hirosaki said to his retainer, whose head was still bowed. "You are displeased with me?"

"No no, my lord," the retainer hastily denied any such impertinence. "It's only that I am shocked at the harshness of it all."

"The girl's background makes such harshness necessary. We will speak more of it later."

Three days later, at dusk, the paper with the haiku was being digested in the stomach of a clanless ninja. The ninja, Yoshi by name, ignored the pain of indigestion in his stomach in the same way that he ignored the pain of fatigue in his limbs as he ascended, vertically, the outside corner of a wayside inn on the Tambu road. He had a set of tiger-claw hooks laced to each hand. Upon reaching the roof, which was over the second storey, he pivoted his body so that his legs pointed towards the peak of the roof.

Once he was settled, Yoshi unlaced the tiger-claws from his left hand and hung them from his belt. Using just his left thumb he opened a tiny gap in the inn's shutters so that he could look down on the corridor within. Then he waited, confident that nobody would spot him, a black shape against the dark wood of the roof at night.

After a while a woman emerged from one of the rooms on the upper storey. Yoshi waited for her to walk past then flipped the shutter open with his thumb and dropped through the gap. He landed behind her with his right hand raised. Yoshi was poised to deliver the death strike with his tiger claw when something happened.

Startled, the woman had turned to face him, but she had no face. Above the neck her whole head was as featureless as a paper lantern. Yoshi was sure he had seen at least a nose and hair as he was watching through the shutter and for a moment could not comprehend what had happened.

In that moment the woman drew a dagger from the folds of her modest night attire and struck. Yoshi's reflexes saved him: his left arm, almost on its own, lifted to block the knife's slash. At the same time his right foot stepped forwards and his right hand lashed at his attacker, but he struck only air as the woman shuffled backwards.

In the next moment Yoshi became aware of two things. Firstly, that the thousand-power chain he had had wrapped around his left arm had protected him from the dagger blow but had been dislodged from its fastenings. Secondly, that the faceless woman in front of him was turning to run away; he could not allow her to escape. In response to these observations he lowered his left arm, catching the weight on the end of the chain in the palm of his left hand and counted two heartbeats as he caught a few coils of the chain on the fingers. With his eyes fixed on the featureless head of the woman, who had now turned to flee, he deftly rotated his left thumb to form a noose in the thousand-power chain.

Just as she was two paces from a corner in the corridor, and safety, he hurled the noose. For a moment his heightened combat senses allowed Yoshi a vision of a helix of metal links in mid-air with its axis pointed straight at the woman's head. Then the noose hit and tightened around her neck as he had intended.

Yoshi sank his weight and passed his right hand in front of himself so that it caught on the chain. Braced against his weight, the chain transferred the running momentum of the woman's slim body to her beautiful slender neck, breaking it. Yoshi had a brief glimpse of her feet flicking upwards, carried by the impetus, before her whole body landed limply on the floor.

Making rapid hand passes as he moved forwards Yoshi maintained the tension in the chain as he wrapped it around his left forearm and at the same time approached the woman's body. Soon somebody would come to see about the noise of their brief struggle.

For a moment he looked at the blank head of the woman. Satisfied that it was not a trick, but some kind of supernatural manifestation, he dropped his right knee and delivered a mighty whirling slash with the tiger-claws on his right hand. Next moment he straightened his knee and jumped to the ceiling, then somersaulted out of a shutter.

"You see she was a monster, a mujina with no face of her own," explained Lord Hirosaki to his retainer late one night as they sat by the fire. "She could have taken any woman's face and would have had absolute control over my son, and hence the clan quite soon."

"Don't say quite soon my lord," said the retainer. "I'm sure you will live for many years yet."

“Perhaps the flames think they live for many years.” Lord Hirosaki smiled enigmatically as he threw a piece of paper on the fire. The message on the paper was visible only for a moment before it was consumed.

Nothing is told by
A face the tiger has stroked
Secrets can die too

Chandler style

Most dames, they hate rain. Figure it's cold, gets their hair wet, ruins their fancy shoes, so forth. But some dames love it and they're the ones you got to watch.

Tonight I'm watching Clara. I'm not talking about the way any man with a drop of red blood would watch Clara. Or maybe I am; maybe I don't know why I'm watching her tonight. I told her I wouldn't and I told myself my job was done and I'd been paid so I could go home. But I didn't. Maybe it was the way she paid; maybe I figure I owe her.

I'm watching Clara as she walks through the puddles stupidly, like a rain-loving dame. Between her and me there's two lanes of traffic, a sidewalk, the window of Ashman Jackie's bar, an ashtray, and a shot of neat bourbon. In that order. That and the worst storm in the history of Chicago ought to be enough to stop me from doing anything dumb like trying to help her.

She stops outside the Italian grocer and gets a gun out of her purse. She stares at it, letting it get wet in the pouring rain.

Next to the Italian grocers is a smart restaurant with a French name and a Packard parked out front. Next to the French name is Enrique's barber and there's Enrique helping a clean shaven man on with his coat. Clara knows the man and I do to since I met her.

His name's Caxton; he's a coward and he cheated on her. It's smart to be a coward, I got a lot of friends who're only alive 'cos they're cowards including myself. But a man who cheats on a rain-loving dame is asking for trouble.

Caxton leaves Enrique's and turns left, away from Clara, not seeing her. She raises the pistol and I pray she's just going to shoot him but she doesn't. I can see Clara's mouth moving and guess she's calling his name. She should have shot him in the back when she had the chance. Now it's going to be toe-to-toe, and you never win fighting toe-to-toe with a coward.

He's smart like I said and reaches inside his jacket without breaking step. Clara's mouth moves again but I still don't hear what she says on account of the downpour. The only thing I can hear over the rain is the two gunshots.

First was Clara's as Caxton turned and dived in front of the Packard. Then his, a heartbeat later. She missed, he hit, the end? Not quite.

She's hit in the stomach and drops to her knees. Now I need all the Bourbon to make sure I can't hear her. She falls forwards, keeping herself off the floor with her left hand. Somehow she raises her right hand and the gun and her head to look for Caxton. She can't see him because he's crouching out of sight by the Packard's bonnet. He knows he hit her, he knows she's not dead, he knows she'll die soon and all he has to do to kill her is stay put.

Clara's gun hand drops as she starts to crawl towards Caxton. She's on all fours and it reminds me of the night we made it so she could pay me for finding him. It's wasted now because she isn't going to get Caxton. Even with the storm rain washing her a bucket-a-minute I can see blood on her skirt, her legs and her shoes. It's the same skirt I lifted up to her waist that night and they're the same shoes that she left on the whole time she was paying me. She was a rain-loving dame all-right.

I need another Bourbon and turn to catch the Ashman's eye. When I turn back Clara's lying flat on the sidewalk. Her fancy shoes are ruined, her hair's wet and she's cold.

Charm

The first time I asked her where I came from, my mum said “We used a magic charm,” and then “I'll explain when you're older.” Straight away I wanted to be older so she would explain about me and the magic charm.

But she didn't explain when I was older. She would say something like:

“The man puts his penis in the woman's vagina and ejaculates his semen. Semen contains sperm and they fertilise an egg from the woman's ovary.”

Even if I asked her about the magic she'd say something else so she didn't have to admit it.

“Look at the tomatoes in the garden. The whole plant, with the stalks and the leaves and the fruit all came from a tiny seed, and a big boy like you grew from a tiny thing only this big,” she would say, showing me the tip of her little finger. “Isn't that magical?”

I would always say “No” to myself because I knew that it wasn't. It's like when the magician makes you look at his left hand so you don't see him doing the real magic with his right. That's what my mum was doing with all that stuff about the penis and seeds. I might have forgotten about what she'd told me the first time eventually, but I never did because of the Quiz Master on TV.

The Quiz Master always said it, and my mum and all the people on the TV said it with him. “I'm sorry,” he'd say, then he'd wait so everybody could say it at the same time as him. “I must accept your first answer.” Mum would say it as she sat on the sofa watching with Dad. So I knew I had been made by a magic charm because that was Mum's first answer. Sometimes on TV they want to change their answer but it's not allowed.

Mum wouldn't tell me about the magic charm again. I tried lots of different ways to ask her but her guards were always up and she never mentioned it. One day it looked like her guards might be down. I still had to be careful though. If I'd done it wrong I might never have really known.

I remember asking “Are you crying?”

Mum sniffed and looked up at me from the sofa. “Yes.”

Then I asked her “Why?”

“Because your dad turned out to be a selfish boy who wouldn't grow up.” She was angry as well as crying. “You won't grow up like that will you?”

“No Mum. I promise.” I really did promise because that's the way you can hear about magic things.

She muttered “You're a good boy. I shouldn't be angry at you.”

I asked her another question, just to keep her talking. It felt like the right moment could be coming.

“Why did you marry him?”

“We were young and we loved each other. He sort of pushed me into it.”

“Is that like pushing you into the sea when it was cold?”

“No it's not that kind of pushing. He persuaded me. He was quite charming then. I suppose he still can be.”

“So you got married because of Daddy's charm?”

“I suppose so.”

“I'm here because you got married and that was because of Daddy's charm and I'm a good boy so the charm must be good too, mustn't it?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Then she hugged me and stopped crying and I think her guards went back up again, but she'd admitted that I had been made by a charm, so then I knew for sure.

It's only me that was made from a magic charm. Everybody else is made from the penis and seeds.

Dialogue exercise

M: Hallo two oh eight four oh eight.

J: Oh hi. Is Audia there?

M: No. There's no Audia here.

J: Sorry I must have the wrong number. Hang on though, you did say two oh eight four oh eight?

M: Yes. But it's not the right number for Audia.

J: Hey is that Michael?

M: Um yeah. How did you know?

J: This is Jane. We met at Jack's barbecue, remember? How're you?

M: I've been better.

J: So is Audia there?

M: Well, no.

J: Oh yeah you said. Is she on holiday?

M: Um, no.

J: Okay.....

M: Okay then. Bye.

J: Don't hang up I want to talk to Audia.

M: She's not here.

J: Well Jesus, don't just say bye and hang up. Tell me where she is and give me her number.

M: I haven't got her number and I don't know where she is. She left.

J: She left? You mean you guys split up?

M: We didn't split up, she dumped me.

J: What? Why?

M: A difference of opinion about my appearance.

J: What are you saying; she dumped you over a pair of shoes?

M: Shoes?

J: Yeah those red shoes. You were wearing them at the barbecue.

M: Was I?

J: You definitely were. They made quite an impression, on me anyway. Very funky, very hip. You're quite the peacock.

M: If you say so.

J: I do say so, and I said so at the time. Remember? As well as bemoaning the lack of a decent man in my life.

M: I don't really remember you.

J: Tsch! Vivacious, intelligent, charming, yet strangely single, got a bit drunk, danced, didn't get off with anyone - or did I? Oh I did, didn't I. Sort of. Anyway, ring any bells yet?

M: Other than alarm bells?

J: What a thing to say, that's not very nice is it? Well I forgive you, you're still in shock from being dumped over a pair of shoes.

M: I wasn't dumped over the shoes.

J: Don't be so sure, I've known Audia a long time. Longer than you. She's dumped boys for less than inflexibility over footwear. If she wanted you to change your appearance and you didn't -

M: Audia didn't want me to change.

J: I'm not surprised, that's all I'm saying.

M: Audia wanted me not to change.

J: Sorry?

M: She didn't want me to change my appearance. She wanted me not to change. Well not in the way that I did change, anyway.

J: What? I didn't get that. You're not making sense; it must be the emotional trauma. Why don't we meet up so you can tell me face to face and I might actually have a chance to understand you?

M: There's nothing to understand. I had an antenna fitted to my head, Audia didn't like it so she left.

J: Right, right. Sorry, did you say an antler?

M: Antenna!

J: Right, right, right. For your phone, yeah?

M: No.

J: Is it extendable? How do they get the metal to stick on?

M: It's not made of metal, it's plastichitin.

J: It's what?

M: Plastic chitin.

J: Plastic what?

M: Chitin. I got it done at Insectify.

J: Uh huh. Does it make you look like an insect?

M: No, it's for hybridisation. I'm going to get another one when I can afford it. Really the antennae are just the start. I'm going to be a human and an insect. What do you think about that?

J: I don't know, it sounds pretty cool I guess.

M: Audia didn't think so.

J: Her loss, I'd say. So what does it look like?

M: It's implanted in my left temple with a grommet through the bone, it's 12 and a half centimetres long and it's pale green.

J: It goes into your brain? Can you, like, feel through it?

M: There's a sensor thread like a nerve but it takes a while for my neuromass to get used to it. I'm supposed to stroke it every day to train myself.

J: Hmm, maybe I could help you with that. I'd be really interested to see it, and you. What are you doing Saturday, apart from stroking yourself?

M: I'm working in the morning.

J: OK, I'll come to yours at eight. We'll go out for a drink, yeah?

M: Er, alright.

J: See you Saturday then. Ciao.

The Bridge

Short story

The Bridge

From his hiding place Desmond Crabtree watched the housekeeper walk down the path away from the cottage. Not until her lantern had dwindled to a dot, floating along the road, did he emerge into the open.

Before him stood the cottage, dark now, a single-storey building isolated from the village. Within was his quarry, to whom light was an irrelevance.

Desmond approached the back door quietly. With care, he turned the handle and pushed. The door was not locked and opened easily. He peered through the doorway into a dark room.

In a few moments his eyes became used to the pale light and he saw that the room was a small kitchen. The few simple utensils were arranged tidily.

Even with the pleading of his mother's last words ringing in his ears, and even after the hardening of his soul in a years-long hunt, Desmond still felt himself held back from entering where he should not by the trepidation of the law-abiding citizen.

At what do I flinch? He asked himself. Trespass? A minor infringement compared to the crime he intended this night. From inside his overcoat Desmond drew a flintlock pistol. The moon glinted on the barrel and lock. To come this far and be balked by a thought of the wrongness of trespass seemed foolish in the extreme. Holding the gun in front of him he entered the house.

Another door led from the kitchen to the rest of the dwelling. Quickly but quietly, Desmond crossed the kitchen and opened the door just enough to look through. The study beyond was dark and anybody without Desmond's knowledge of his intended victim would have taken the room to be empty. But Desmond knew that the man he intended to shoot might well be found sitting in the dark. His careful scan of the twilight room was not wasted.

There, sitting in an armchair, Desmond saw John Peacock. A patch of starlight given through the window showed him to be tall, clad in the dress of a poor gentleman, and with the wrinkles of middle age beginning at the corners of his closed eyes. Satisfied that there was no way for John to escape, Desmond pushed the door open and entered the man's study.

"Who's there?" John said, starting. "Is that you Mary?" His eyes remained closed.

Desmond watched John's head twist left, then right, as he strained to gain some audible clue as to the intruder's identity.

"Who's there?" John said, louder and more urgently. "Y-you should leave now, whoever you are. My housekeeper will be by directly."

"A lie," Desmond pronounced. "I watched her walk down to the road."

At the sound of the intruder's voice John Peacock's fear abated a little. There was a stranger in his house, true, but there was now the viability of a dialogue and thus hope for survival. The man must be made to converse further. What had he said? Something about John's housekeeper.....

"Tell me, does she walk well, my housekeeper?" the seated man asked. "I have never seen her, on account of my affliction."

"I am not here, sir, to give you a description of a young woman's walk," Desmond said. "In fact I am not here to give you anything. I am here to take."

"You mean to rob me? I beg of you, do not. I am almost penniless. I have a terrible affliction. Mercy, please, have mercy on a cripple."

A mean smile twisted Desmond's face as he enjoyed the other man's discomfort.

"I am not here to rob you, cripple. I mean to take something far more precious."

The moment passed and he felt ashamed. What he was about should not be done cruelly. With firmness, yes, with justice, yes, but with cruelty? No, his mother would not have wanted that.

"I will have no mercy," Desmond said, without emotion. "Your blindness will not ameliorate your punishment one whit, resulting as it does from the act for which I am here."

"Alienation of vision, not blindness exactly."

"I beg pardon?"

"My condition is not properly blindness, which results from a physical damage or lack, but alienation of vision. It is a thing of the mind."

"Another lie. Your blindness results from a blow to the head."

"That's not so and you confuse me, sir."

"How, sir?"

"Why, just now you stated that my blindness, as you termed the condition, resulted from an incident in my past, did you not?"

"Yes I did, where is the confusion in that?"

"The confusion is between blindness caused by a blow to the head, and alienation of vision caused by an incident."

"It was during the incident that you received the blow."

"Ah, I see it's a simple misunderstanding on my part."

"And it is because of this incident, to wit the death of Mr Jack Crabtree, that I am here. I am going to execute you for his murder."

"But I did not murder him, at least I believe I did not."

"You believe you did not? What does this mean?"

"Not only did I suffer alienation of vision but also traumatic amnesia. I cannot remember the event of Crabtree's death. The events before I

can summon to mind in an instant. The events afterwards, although deprived of any visual sensation, are also clear. I may say that I have always had excellent recall; as a child I won prizes. But of the event that I most need to recall, I can summon nothing. That book is closed. Like my eyes.”

Desmond Crabtree found his determination wavering for a second time. Should a man who did not remember his crime be punished? he asked himself. A man with no recollection of a misdeed would never confess the sin. Would such a man be damned?

“In the interests of justice, Mr Peacock, I will open that book,” Desmond said. “I will tell you what happened, and how you came to murder Mr Crabtree, who was my father, and then I will shoot you dead.”

“I have often thought that if I heard a true account I should regain my memory. For does not the bible say 'The truth shall set you free'?”

“If I committed a crime. But how can you have the true account?”

“Let us hope it is the case. Justice would be better served if you could repent your crime.”

“I have it from a witness.”

“A witness? But Jack Crabtree died and I lost my memory.”

“There was a third person present, sir. Mrs Crabtree. My mother, sir.”

“Mrs. Crabtree? Anna? I am remembering something! I remember meeting her. In the lobby of an hotel. We went up to a room. I - I can remember no more. Pray continue - no wait. Why were we in a hotel and going up to a room?”

“You had tricked my mother into visiting you in your hotel room. Do you remember that, sir?”

“No. No, I do not. My remembrance is unclear, but it seems to have been more her idea than mine.”

John heard the gun's lock clicking. “Do you call my mother an adulteress?”

“Adulteress? Well young Mr Crabtree, what a leap you have made. I never mentioned anything of an intimate nature between your mother and I. Why do you say adulteress?”

“Enough of this charade. These are the facts: you lured my mother to your hotel room -”

“No.”

“- you ravished her. -”

“No.”

“My father came upon you there and sprang to his wife's aid -”

“Beyond ascending the hotel stairs none of this -”

“Be still, sir. He sprang to his wife's aid. There was a struggle. He managed to strike you with a candlestick before your brute strength overcame him. Then you strangled him.”

There Desmond was forced to pause and catch his breath. In the starlit room he tried to aim at John's head. The telling of his story, which he had never told before, had swelled his emotion so much that his hand shook and the barrel of his gun wobbled making it impossible for him to draw a bead.

“May I speak?” John Peacock asked.

It might be for the best, Desmond thought. He knew that he could not shoot accurately until his nerves had steadied.

“Aye,” he said.

“I do not doubt your story, save for a detail. Are you sure it was not your mother who struck me? That seems to be in my recollection.”

“No it was not. It was her shame for the rest of her life: that she had been unable to move to save her husband. It was not her fault that she, of the weaker sex, after the ferocity of your assault, could not find in herself the strength to raise her hand. And her shame paralysed her even from bearing witness in the trial. Her shame, that you wrought, sir, forced her to watch in silence as her beloved husband's murderer escaped for lack of evidence.”

“That I remember. But nothing else of what you have said.”

“You seek to shame my mother further? You cannot. Her shame died when she did, or rather, by justice, a little before.”

“Before?”

“Before my mother died, the grip of shame loosened and she was able to tell the whole true story to me, only me, her eldest son.”

“And did your mother tell you to hunt down a poor crippled man, sir?”

“Yes she did, sir, yes she did. My mother made me promise to hunt you down and to bring you to justice according to her precise instructions.”

“But this vengeance; surely you can see it is unchristian?”

“Unchristian? Such was the poetry of her last words I wonder if she had not passed on and an angel spoke through her mouth.”

“Pray, tell me the poetry before I die. I might recollect more: thus far I have only the stairs and the candlestick.”

“Maybe the symmetry will shock you into repentance. With her last words my mother bade me find you and shoot you with a bullet cast in lead mixed with a lock of her hair and fragments of her teeth.”

“Her hair and her teeth? I am remembering something more!”

“So, poetic justice. Tell me what you remember.”

“Her teeth I saw when she smiled at me. We were in the hotel room. She smiled and then unpinned her hat and placed it on the bedside table. Then she shook her hair free. Anna had beautiful, soft yellow hair. Soft? Did I touch it? Yes, I remember now. Stroking her hair and seeing her smile, I felt as though I was drifting, trailing my hand in a warm river whilst the sun bounced, dazzling, across the soft-flowing waters.”

“Was it then that you ravished her, your brute desires stirred by her beauty?”

“She offered me her beauty. There was no ravishment.”

“You lie. And you will die a liar.”

John had remembered more than he had said. Shortly after he had stroked Anna’s hair, the door had been flung open, interrupting their proceedings. A short man had entered the room in a state of agitation. That man was Jack Crabtree, Anna’s husband. Although she was not fully dressed, Anna had confronted him. John had sat on the bed and watched as the couple had argued vociferously. The display of raw emotion had amused him, he remembered, especially when the man and his wife became so angry that they started to hit each other.

But he could remember no more until a little later, when Anna had struck him with something he now knew had been a candlestick. That seemed to be the end of the incident.

There was his condition, like a river he had to cross. For so many years since the incident John had known nothing save that he was far from the river. Now he had suddenly reached the bank, seen across the watery barrier to the far side, but had no bridge by which to reach freedom. Could he be meant to die now? He could not accept that; there had to be a way forwards.

Thinking quickly, John enumerated two points of leverage in his otherwise hopeless situation.

Jack Crabtree, he recalled, had been a man of slight stature. From the shallowness of the voice he heard, John surmised that his son was similar and therefore easy to overpower for a large man such as himself. Secondly, there was the matter of the bullet.

“Very well, but I will die standing up, if you don’t mind,” John said, rising from his chair without waiting for an answer. “That is, if I do die, which I doubt.”

“You doubt this bullet will cause your death?”

“If it hits me squarely, I suppose I will die.” John turned to face the direction from which the other man’s voice came. “But I could easily just be maimed if the missile strikes me obliquely. And you have only the one bullet with the requisite ingredients for your justice.”

“You are attempting to trick me, as you tricked my mother,” Desmond said, creeping forwards.

Detecting the near approach of his would-be executioner, John swept his arm broadly and ducked, hoping. He struck something. Reflexively, he seized what turned out to be a thin arm.

Desmond cried in anguish as his gun arm was pulled to one side. Desperately, he struck out with his other hand. John barely felt the weak fist strike his shoulder as he stepped forward to wrap his other arm around Desmond’s scrawny torso. Now in complete control, he bore the other man to the ground beneath him.

Keeping hold of the gun hand at the wrist, John fumbled towards the winded Desmond’s face with his free hand. He took the smaller man’s chin in a firm grip and brought himself close.

“I mean to regain my sight and that means I must know what really happened. Now tell me the truth.”

“But I have told you the truth. I heard it from my mother’s own lips.”

“Her lips! Another piece of the puzzle, another memory. Yes, her red, red lips, and her tongue licking them.”

“This cannot be a true memory,” Desmond gasped. “You describe the painted lips of a whore.”

“Not painted then, but stained. With wine perhaps.”

“Even though you hold me in this grip I will not hear such slander. My mother never touched liquor.”

“Not liquor ... not liquor ... then what?”

With a shudder John Peacock opened his eyes as he remembered the truth. Sensations blocked

for many years flooded him. He blinked them into focus. He saw the face of a young man, distorted by his vice-like grip, eyes wide open in shock.

“Can you see?” asked Desmond.

“Yes.”

“Then you have remembered.”

“I remember your parents arguing then fighting. She struck him in the neck with her hatpin. Blood spurted out, covering everything, including her face -”

“No.”

“- the sight of your father’s body, jerking in mortal spasm, excited her -”

“No.”

“- when he lay dead and there was nothing more to see she turned to me in a fever -”

“No.”

“- she licked the blood from her lips and threw herself upon me -”

“No.”

“- I could not bear the sight of such demonic pleasure on that angelic face, but I could not deny her fervour. I closed my eyes during the passionate love-making that ensued.”

Desmond had realised the futility of his denials and made no further protest.

“When we were spent, and Anna returned to herself, she must have realised her position and sought to escape. She struck me with something heavy. I still had my eyes closed and did not see the object. I was knocked senseless. When I awoke I was in a hospital bed with a guard. The trial and the rest of the truth you know.”

Desmond lay quietly. He did not, could not, accept John Peacock’s version of events over his mother’s. To accept that version would have been to accept that the hunt to which he had dedicated his life had been no more than a cruel woman’s fancy. It could not be true. He could not have wasted his life.

“My life ...” Desmond mumbled, out loud.

“Your life is over. Your mother brought you thus far and it seems fitting she should take you onwards,” John said, releasing Desmond’s face and taking the gun from his hand.

“Doubtless you will go to heaven, as an innocent,” he continued, putting the end of the barrel to Desmond’s perspiring forehead.

“And from that great height you can pour burning coals on the head of your wicked mother who will be in Hell, screaming.”