

**bl r l nd**

**i ai n bri mswal l**

**Urban Rim  
Publications**

blrlnd © 2006 Iain Brimswall  
First published September 2006  
Revised for the internet May 2011

ISBN-10: 0-9554071-0-9  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9554071-0-9

Published by:  
Urban Rim Publications  
Hull, United Kingdom  
<http://www.urbanrim.eu>

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

You can't make up anything anymore. The world itself is a satire. All you're doing is recording it.

- Art Buchwald

This work being in the style of a dream, events in it seem real. Characters may not always accept that they are imaginary. Recognition of locales is optional.



# bl r l nd

The Welcome and Deport Officer raised his head to make eye contact. Ungraciously, he straightened his body on the high stool behind the stern desk, and breathed in loudly through the nose, a deep reverse sigh. The man standing before him, possibly the tallest Chinese the officer had ever seen, possibly the biggest Chinky ever, met the eyes impassively. A passport and an unsealed envelope lay on the desk top. The officer picked up the stiff red document and opened it.

“Name Wong?”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

The contents of the envelope were removed, a letter together with certificates, and perused. The official frown intensified.

“Reason for visit?”

“Cultural observation.”

“It says ‘exchange’.”

“That is correct.”

“Cultural exchange, then.”

The tall man gave a smile.

“Let it be so.”

More perusal, and a touching – almost reverent in its uncertainty – of the embossed motif in the centre of the letterhead. The official returned the items to the envelope and handed this and the passport back to the new arrival. An official greeting:

“Enjoy your stay in the Euphoric Kingdom, Mr Wong.”

“Thank you.”

In the arrivals hall the traveller ran his gaze along a line of name cards. None bore his own name. He directed the luggage trolley forward and waited at the end of the barrier. After a while, he took a seat in the waiting area, and keyed into his palmcator. The screen displayed a cheerful cartoon girl-child who informed him his request could not be dealt with at present but someone would get back to him if he please pressed 'waiting'. He collapsed the screen and closed the cover.

On repeating the attempt at contact a little later, and again failing, he left his seat and steered the trolley out of the building. A large canopy protected him from the rain teeming out of a leaden sky. Nearby, people were waiting at a callcar station. He joined the queue.

A shrill anxious female voice rang out from the terminal's entrance.

"Mr Wo-ong? Is there a Mr Wong here?"

Wong turned. A woman in a long pale-blue waterproof approached the callcar queuers. Bespectacled, not young, with teeth that slightly protruded, she held a clipcator out with both hands. He let her draw level before responding.

"My name is Wong."

The woman stopped, looked unsure, smiled nervously, checked the contents of her clipcator, glanced up at him, looked relieved.

"Janice Annison. Cultexfo. Pleased to meet you."

They shook hands.

"I'm terribly sorry for being late. Really, I am," she said. "I got caught up in a security check."

"Think of it as nothing," he replied. "I hear it happens all the time."

The woman repeated her nervous smile.

"I'll take you to your hotel. You must be exhausted after your long journey. I've brought my one-mo. Em..."

Together, they scanned the rain-lashed square beyond the canopy, though his was the advantage of height.

## bl r l nd

“I think over there.”

Wong discreetly motioned towards a mounted sign in the middle distance: ‘Private Transport Bay’.

“Oh, yes. Of course.” From within the waterproof, a thumbcator was produced and keyed, but nothing happened, except a flashed smile of embarrassment. “It always plays up when it’s raining. Wait here and I’ll bring it over.”

The woman pulled the hood of the waterproof over her head and, clutching the clipcator close to her chest in crossed arms like a lover’s letter, dashed off head down into the rain. Wong watched after her.

“Mr Wong?”

Wong turned. A young man wearing a bright green suit smiled and held out a hand.

“Lars Chance. Cultexfo. I recognised you from the assignment profile. Welcome to our country.”

They shook hands.

“Sorry for the delay.”

“Think of it as nothing. Security check?”

The young man gave a gasped laugh. “Yes, you’ve guessed it.”

“I hear it happens all the time.”

“It does, I’m afraid.”

“You cannot be too careful.”

“No, you can’t.”

It came out like an admission of risk. A fleeting young man’s frown, then:

“You must be tired after your haul, half way round the world. I’ll take you to the hotel to freshen up.”

A gesture to the luggage on the trolley.

“Is this everything?”

A one-mo glided to a halt at the kerb. Janice climbed out and threw a glance of query at the young man. Wong towered between them.

“Mr Lars Chance of Cultexfo, please meet Ms Janice Annison of Cultexfo. Ms Annison, meet Mr Lars Chance.”

“Oh —” started the woman.

## bl i n d

“But —” attempted the young man.

“I think wires may have crossed,” suggested Wong, smiling politely.

Wong selected out of courtesy to go with Janice. She pushed the vehicle’s rear seat to the extent of its adjustment and turned the forward seat to face the rear. With the extra space, Wong was able to fit into the narrow cabin, though his knees were almost to his chin. Janice’s small feet had to rest either side of his own enormous feet in the recessed footwell. The luggage completely filled the platform in the back – and still there was a traveller’s bag, which Janice placed across her lap. With destination keyed into the router, and on Janice’s clear call of ‘go’, the vehicle slid silently away. Guided by a subsurface track, the electrically motored two-seater slimcar joined other similar units moving swiftly in close sequential formation on a dedicated elevated flyway that reached into the heart of the city.

“This is a Chinese make. A RoveAgain, with the optional double H-cell capacity for all-day activity. It’s very smooth and reliable,” said Janice, who took pride in her ease of conversation. She sang the one-mo promotional jingle. “An eco-wise motor for one, with room for one more.”

“I recognise the model,” replied Wong. “It is made by my company.”

“Your company makes these?” Janice said with awe.

“Many other things, too.”

Wong looked through the clear plastic cover, over the city, then up at the sky. The purple of night was erasing the charcoal of the day.

“It’s all right. We’ll beat the curfew,” Janice told him in a reassuring tone.

“Curfew?”

“Well, that’s what we call it. We’re not allowed into Central Zone evenings without a drinking licence.”

She shifted the bag to her knees to relieve pressure. Wong continued to gaze out, at the streams of lights below, as he asked

## bl r l nd

a question.

“How does one obtain a drinking licence?”

“You have to be under eighteen when you apply. It’s normally done when you’re still at school, if you go to school. And it lasts for a year. If you don’t fill the aqua – that’s short for ‘alcohol consumption quota’ – if you don’t meet the quota then you lose your licence.”

He turned his head towards her. She was aware of being studied.

“I see,” he said. “Will I need a licence for drinking at the hotel?”

“Oh, no. It’s just the city centre.”

“I do not have to ‘fill the aqua?’”

The woman sensed her passenger might be concealing humour behind his serious eyes.

“No, no. You can drink as little as you wish, I’m sure.”

“Then perhaps you would consider to join me one evening while I drink little, Ms Annison.”

“Jan – please. Call me Jan. ‘Ms’ sounds so formal. I’d be delighted.”

The Smash Rotel is a middle finger raised to the Great Gas Crisis. That miserable period of fuel shortages and rationing gave way to a brash new confidence. A silver cylinder of massive proportions rises several storeys. It has been said that the design purposely and impudently mimics town gas holders of old. The storeys rotate, each a little faster than the one beneath, though all slowly, except for the ground storey, which is static. As a piece of architected engineering, it is impressive; as an example of engineered architecture, it is a marvel. Three years late in its construction and a respectable ten times over budget, the Smash is rightly proclaimed a credit to a most deserving city.

Janice’s one-mo pulled into the foyer. A red-jacketed, white-bloused, blue-skirted receptioner approached as Janice and Wong climbed awkwardly out.

“Good evening, sir, madam,” the receptioner smiled.

## bl r l nd

Janice returned the smile.

“This is Mr Wong. He has a window room reserved through the Cultural Exchange Forum. I’m his Cultexfo guider.”

An unsmiling man, dressed in slag-grey security uniform, joined them.

“If you’ll come this way, sir, we’ll get the search over with.”

“Search?” retorted Janice. “He’s a visitor, not a worker.”

“Still a foreigner, inee.”

The receptioner increased her smile to compensate for the rudeness of her colleague.

“It’s the law, I’m afraid. All our guests from outside EK have to undergo a full body search. It doesn’t take long – Bex here is very good.”

“Security, see,” added the uniform.

Janice stood her ground. “I’m from Cultexfo, a government approved organisation. Mr Wong is an invited visitor to this country. This is hardly the way to treat —”

“I wish to comply with the law,” Wong cut in. To the securiter: “Shall we?”

“But it’s embarrassing,” insisted Janice.

“I hear it happens all the time.” Wong followed the uniform.

The receptioner faced Janice and smiled anew. Or it may have been the same smile continued.

“Can I see your citizen’s licence, madam? And letters of authority, please?”

Janice leant over into the one-mo. She picked up her clipcator and handed it over.

“Yes, of course. Here we are.”

The smile continued. “It’s a price we must all be willing to pay for our unhindered freedom to go about our daily business.”

“I quite understand,” replied Janice, who did understand. “Happy to oblige. Really, I am.”

In his room, Wong partially undressed and examined the bed. A big bed, one from which the end of his feet would not protrude.

## bl r l nd

On this bed he could lie and watch the city beyond the window slowly pass. The bed was equipped with a personal relief system, a mechanical masturbator in the form of a lifelike hand at the end of a lifelike arm. The device disgusted him, and would probably be too small a fit. He sat on the bed, swung his legs up on it, and propped his aching body against the head cushion.

He called 'screen, on'. The wallscreen remained blank. He called 'telesperience, on'. Holographic images of cheap home furniture appeared in the room. Two characters were arguing in a soap dialect he had difficulty following, on the carpet near his bed. The drama was interrupted by a chime tone followed by the well-enunciating Voice of the Rotel.

*Mr Wong. You have a visitor. Mr Chance to see you. Waiting in the Oh My! bar. Thank you.*

He took a quick shower and went down to the Oh My! bar. It was crimson garish and garage loud and homoerotically busy. The self-serve alcohol and soft drugs dispensers, flanked by circles of urinals, were in the centre of the room, but he stayed at the entrance. A man lurched over and spoke to him.

"Hey, you're one big boy, true?" The man, dressed in striped trousers supported by broad braces, and a pink high-collared shirt, spread a palm over Wong's crotch.

"Is it right what they say about Chinamen?"

Wong turned away. A familiar green suit emerged from the crowd.

"Mr Wong."

They greeted. Lars Chance spoke above the throbbing beat.

"Look, I'm sorry about the mix-up this afternoon. I'm sure Jan was able to sort things out. She's a jewel, that one."

Wong confirmed that Ms Annison had been most able. His visitor held a hand to an ear.

"It's kind of noisy in here, true? Perhaps we could try another bar."

"I think the restaurant."

## bl r l nd

“Yes, how silly of me. You must be ravenous. They have a hale menu here.”

On the way, the cultural guider explained that the gay bar was not a legal requirement, not yet, but no half-decent stopover would be without one. He looked up at the impassive eyes.

“I don’t suppose —?”

And answered his own part question.

“No? Not to worry, eh?”

Chinese fare at the Smash is out of this world, Lars Chance told Wong, as one man who knows the world to another.

“I think for Chinese food I could stay in China,” Wong replied, and ordered the roast.

Wong learnt that Lars Chance was a recent addition to the Cultexfo team, and still feeling his way. Lars Chance asked if Wong liked bootball. There was a match Saturday, a replay which Chelski would win. The team would then go on to claim the next three games before losing big time to ManUSA.

“How far into the future are results cast?” Wong asked.

“A month, just a month,” Lars Chance replied. “Any longer and the fun is lost. It’s the uncertainty that gives the sport its edge.”

Wong enquired about the nation’s economy. He received data and statistics as answers, as his companion read from a palmator screen. The service provision index stood at a new high, every sector showing above total average. Bootball transfers were doing particularly well.

Wong enquired about the nation’s people, about social attitudes, about class relations. Everyone in EK is content, he was told. A land of unfettered opportunity and forward progress. Plenty of bootball.

Wong enquired about the nation’s migration policy and how it affected the labour market. He was informed that the EK bootball team was made up entirely of players from other

## bl r l nd

countries, something that the nation could be proud of.

Citing a biological clock not attuned to the time difference, Wong said he was tired and desired to go to his room.

“Of course,” Lars Chance replied, standing. “I’m – er – staying on a while. Some unfinished business in the Oh, My! Sure you won’t...?”

“Thank you. I think not.”

“I’ll pick you up at zero-nine in the morning, if that’s all right with you. There’s much that you must see. Sleep deep.”

Back in his room, Wong keyed his palmator. There was a momentary ‘please wait’ from the cartoon girl-child before the top half of Janice appeared on the compact screen. She was sitting up in bed.

“Ah, Ms Annison. I am so sorry to disturb you.”

The screen zoomed in, framing the face.

“Jan. Call me Jan. It’s all right. I like to retire early in the evening.”

“I wonder, could you please be at the Smash Rotel at eight-plus-half tomorrow morning?”

Janice unconsciously tidied her hair.

“Tomorrow? Well, that would be a little tricky. You’ve been assigned to our Mr Chance, you see. He was supposed to initiate tonight.”

“Mr Chance is very entertaining. I prefer you.”

This was kind of him, she replied, but she already had an assignee for tomorrow. Her role earlier in the day had been essentially one of rescue after some regrettable confusion at the office. She would love to act as his guider, but assignments were decided at a higher level. The face that filled the screen supported the words of apology.

The following morning, he was finishing a delivered breakfast when the Voice of the Rotel informed him Ms Annison was waiting in the Sweet Suite. He instructed the ethereal voice to

## bl r l nd

have her directed to his room and started to dress. Shortly after, the door ding-donged.

“Hello, again, Ms Annison. Please enter.”

The pale-blue waterproof rustled in.

“Jan. Thank you.”

“What can I do for you?”

Janice told Wong her previous assignee had had to return home at short notice.

“I see. Am I to be your new assignee?”

She said the boss felt bad about the confusion of the day before and had decided Mr Wong should have the guider of his choice, at least for this day.

“Is Mr Lars Chance notified?”

“Er, well he will have been, I’m sure.”

“I think Mr Chance is perhaps not yet aware of the modified circumstance.” Wong studied her for a moment. “We must therefore hurry,” he said. Janice sensed humour.

As he finished dressing, she made a show of looking around.

“It’s a nice room.”

“Yes.”

“Equipped with telesperience, I see.”

“That is so.”

“A Chinese system, isn’t it?”

“The factory belongs to my company.”

She peered curiously at the masturbator. On recognition of its function, she hurried across to look from the window. The room was currently facing south or maybe west and she thought she could see the House of the People. When they had climbed into her one-mo, adopting the cramped configuration as before but in slightly less discomfort without the luggage, it was to the House of the People she instructed the router to take them.

“We’re in luck. The House is sitting. They’re debating next week’s pensions fiasco, when the Pensions Avoidance Minister will resign.”

## bl r l nd

The one-mo was not of course allowed near the mother of houses of the people but was routed from the flyway at the ramp that leads down to the Statue of the Great Visionary. Leaving the vehicle to self-park, they walked the distance, the warm sunshine being a pleasant contrast to the persistent rain of the day before.

“I meant to say, yesterday – your knowledge of the language is very good,” said Janice.

“I could say the same of yours,” he replied.

“Have you been to EK before?”

“It is possible.”

They sat on backless benches in the viewing hall, a large chamber which echoed to its own emptiness. Beneath the legend ‘Saving Democracy’, a megascreen displayed a pre-recording of the day’s business. To one side, a column of smaller screens showed highlights of verbal exchanges and speeches to be made in the weeks ahead.

On the megascreen, the Primed Minister was talking. Delivered in short runs of words separated by unnatural gaps, his message was that retirement did not mean retirement from working. Retirement age had to be seen as just another birthday. To stop work and draw your pension was to burden other people. Every token drawn as pension was a token removed from the nation’s wealth.

*It’s stealing [unnatural gap] from the young. That is how [unnatural gap] I see it. And I’m sure [unnatural gap] you will, too. Stealing [unnatural gap] from the young [unnatural gap] and vulnerable.*

Wong leaned over and spoke quietly so as to cause the minimum of disturbance to Janice, clearly enthralled by the screen presence.

“How long has he been Primed Minister?”

“Always, I think,” Janice replied. “He says they’ll have to carry him out of Downer Street in a coffin.”

“How is a Primed Minister traditionally carried out of Downer Street?”

“It’s just a saying. He means he intends to stay in power to the end.”

## bl r l nd

They listened until Wong had another question.

“Why next week will the Pensions Avoidance Minister resign?”

“She’ll desire to spend more time with her family.”

“Yes?”

Janice raised a hand to the side of her mouth to reduce the possibility of her words travelling, and spoke in a lowered voice.

“She hasn’t been able to reach the silver employment target. We have a big retired population, many of them wishing to draw pension. That mustn’t be allowed to happen. It’s a drain on resources and not fair on the rest.”

“The retired should work until carried out in a coffin, like the Primed Minister.” It may have been a question – Janice could not be sure. It was followed by a proper question.

“To whom is the Primed Minister speaking?”

“To all of us.”

Wong scanned the hall. Seating for perhaps five hundred seated perhaps five.

“To the nation,” Janice added, to mend the misunderstanding. “Saving democracy.”

“To whom is he speaking in the House?”

From time to time the camereye would leave the face of the Primed Minister and float its lens over rows of motionless sitting figures.

“You mean the dummies?”

Janice explained that, many years ago, interactive remote links were introduced that enabled elected members to stay in their constituencies while taking part in the business of the House of the People. The equipment for each link was built into a lifelike representation of the individual member for ease of recognition. As members resigned from the House for whatever reason, or simply died off, they were not replaced, there being considered no practical point to the election of new members after privatisation of the government. The dummies were retained, however, as a mark of tradition.

“Saving dummocracy,” Wong proposed.

“They’re not all dummies, of course. That would be an insult

to the democratic system,” Janice added in haste. “The Primed Minister is real enough. The ministers on the front bench are all real. At least...”

They left the viewing hall of the House of the People and walked by the river. Drunken or drugged-up streetsleepers would approach for charity, gruffly asking rather than aggressively demanding, no doubt in deference to Wong’s physique. Janice handed out poverty tokens with cheerful generosity.

“You have to feel sorry for them. They’ve never known serious debt,” she said. “They live from handout to mouthful, like the poor of old. Now, where shall I show you next? After the House, it’s usually Buckers.”

The one-mo was collected and the vehicle took them to the seat of royalty. On the concourse of the famous museum, they skirted round prancing chortling colourful kings and queens from every age.

“Imagine, a place this size for just one family,” imagined Janice.

“Imagine,” reflected Wong.

“They live abroad now. For security reasons.”

It was Janice who lingered in the Conspiracy Room, designed to imitate a road underpass. At the base of a mock pillar bearing the number 13, an old-type gascar – the actual vehicle, according to the display card – lay twisted and freshly blood splashed.

“For years it was denied. They said it was an accident. Why hold the truth from us?”

“I hear it happens all the time,” offered Wong.

Wong was challenged at the check-out, and asked by a thumbs-in-belt securiter where he had obtained the credits to buy souvenirs.

“It’s none of your business, actually,” retorted Janice. “I’m with Cultexfo, a registered guider. Mr Wong is an invited visitor to this country.”

“They all say that,” sneered the securiter.

“Well, *I’m* saying it, this time,” she snapped back.

## bl r l nd

The securiter withdrew his thumbs and raised his palms.

“All ri’, all ri’. Keep yer knicks on. Only doin’ my job, arn’ I.”

The Buckers Experience was followed by a stop-off at the Wheel Monument. Janice, who took pride in the freshness of her each telling, repeated the story of how once a magnificent giant wheel had hung by the rusting support, and how one day the wheel broke free and rolled and rolled, far into the countryside, where it fell over and was instantly turned to stone.

“It’s still out there, somewhere – a big stone wheel lying on its side. People gather there, every year on Middleday, the day it stopped rolling.”

Under Wong’s impassive gaze, she added:

“That’s if you believe the story, of course.”

At Tower Thrill, they sat in the one-mo below the crenellated walls.

“It used to be open to tourists,” Janice informed. “But it’s now an interrogation centre.”

There was something excitingly spooky about the Undergrind, Janice thought, or at least those were her words as they climbed into the boat that would convey them, with other trippers, at an easy pace through some of the dimly lit tunnels which thread beneath the city streets.

“These weren’t always waterways. Once, they were dry, and had tracks for carry-coaches to shake and rattle along.”

“Were the carry-coaches on tracks of which you speak not more efficient?” Wong asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“And now you have slow boats.”

“The carry-coaches on tracks wore out and needed replacing. Nobody knew what to do. In the end, the tunnels just filled with water.” Janice turned positive. “Actually, I like the boat rides. I do. They’re...”

“Excitingly spooky.”

## bl r l nd

Janice had been about to say ‘romantic’, but nodded all the same.

On to the permanent exhibitions.

“We call it the PAP tour – Pride, Art, Purpose,” Janice told her companion. Wong inspected the plasticky, inaccurate, repetitively mobile displays at Make History Poverty. At the Tart he leant back or tilted to one side in order to appreciate in full the copies of paintings and exhibits whose originals could not be displayed for reasons of security. Unfortunately, Our National Purpose was closed for the day due to a systems failure.

It was getting late.

“I am hungry. May we eat?” Wong suggested.

“Yes, I’m hungry, too. We can go to the Pig High. Tallest status stalk in the land, with restaurant on top. All the celebrities dine there.”

“We are not celebrities,” Wong pointed out.

“Well, we can pretend for one day.”

“I hear celebrities do it all the time.”

In the restaurant, they were escorted to a window seat by an attentive head waiter.

“I told him I was with Cultexfo,” smiled Janice.

“I did not need to tell him the Pig High is Chinese built and Chinese owned,” smiled Wong. Janice was momentarily crestfallen.

“I am sorry, Ms Annison. I did not mean to disappoint you.”

“Jan. No, it’s all right,” Janice replied, not all right. “To be frank with you, Mr Wong, my organisation doesn’t wield much clout. Not many people have heard of it, and those that have take little notice.”

“I think it will not matter to you after today,” Wong said as they started their starters.

“How do you mean, exactly?”

“This morning, Ms Annison, you arrived at the Smash Rotel before Mr Lars Chance to claim his assignment as your own. I

## bl r l nd

think you may have – how do you say? – ‘blown it’ with your organisation.”

“You asked me to come. You set the time. You wanted me in place of him.”

He reacted smoothly to her tone of defiance.

“That is so. I chose well. You are an excellent guider.” At her smile, he continued. “Nevertheless, I was assigned to another.”

“It’ll be all right.”

Wong took out his palmator and keyed for texted messages. He held the screen for Janice to read.

*pls cntct l chance cultexfo*

*whr u?*

*urgnt u rply*

Janice sighed.

“I know. Mine, too.” She looked him full in the eyes, her head slightly back, the lenses of her spectacles reflecting light from above. “Yes, I will be in trouble. I may not even have a job.”

A dreadful thought struck her.

“Em – this meal, I —”

Wong, glass in one hand, held up the other hand to calm anxiety.

“This meal is paid for. Now, please enjoy.”

“But you’re the guest. I cannot allow you to pay.” She sought with agitation inside her shoulder bag. He spoke as she rummaged.

“You should perhaps ask yourself how it is I know this country’s tallest status stalk is Chinese owned.”

She looked up, her hand still in the bag.

“Because it belongs to your company?”

Wong laughed, a kind breath of affirmation.

“My company has many investments in this city.”

A smile of relief, and removal of hand from the bag.

“I’d say your company probably very nearly owns this city.”

Wong topped up his glass and hers.

“Ms Annison. Tonight, *you* are *my* guest. We will be celebrities. Please help me fill my aqua.”

## bl r l nd

Returned to the Smash, Wong lay on the big bed and massaged his legs. He called ‘telesperience, on’ and requested a summary of the news for the week ahead.

The earnest female newsreader, seated at the foot of the bed, confirmed the Minister for Avoiding Pensions, also chair of the Voluntary Euthanasia Inducement Network, would announce her sudden resignation from the Cabinet. She would continue to carry on her work in VEIN. There was to be an earthquake somewhere, killing many hundreds of thousands but importantly no-one from EK – call ‘red’ for earthquake sensation, ‘blue’ to bet on where. And Chelski were going to lose the match on Saturday.

(It is told that, in the old days, a reporter would stand foolishly and ineffectively outside an important building to wait for an announcement not yet made. Or wander erratically around a disaster area throwing guesses at the number of dead and injured and homeless. News was the child of capricious fate. Without full information, news had been untrustworthy. Without knowledge of what was to happen, plans could not be made. Life had been most haphazard.)

“Telesperience, off.”

He toyed with the masturbator but pushed it aside and took a shower.

Under the refreshing water, he thought about his guider for the day and partner for the evening. Would he see her again? She had taken a risk to please him, for which she was worthy of tribute.

“Ms Annison,” he hailed from inside the shower. “You are...” louder now, “...a woman of pluck.”

The Voice of the Motel responded.

*Due to high demand, we regret your request cannot be dealt with at this time.*

Lars Chance presented himself at the rotel at zero-eight and waited, in the Early Snifter Bar, while Wong readied himself. The young man from Cultexfo made no reference to the day before.

## bl r l nd

They set off in a paycar for a standard itinerary which was supposed to start with Buckers and the PAP tour. Wong said he was familiar with these locations and wished to see behind the tourist face of the city. No problem, replied the guider, and took his charge to watch Arsend play a training match, where the score was not pre-scheduled.

Over lunch, a llamaburger and glass of Greenland green at a street bar, Wong referred to the tract of city stretching out of sight that he could see when his room faced east. During daylight, it looked drab and featureless; at night, it appeared as grids of insipid amber. Lars Chance shook his head.

“The Essential Worker Zone. We don’t go there,” he said.

“Why is that?” Wong asked.

“No culture there.”

Wong replied to the effect that even essential workers have a culture. His guider swallowed a mouthful of dangling intestine before answering.

“True. But it’s managed for them. That’s how they want it. That’s how it is.”

On the way to the University of Bootball, they stopped off at the zoo, where virtual reality animals prowled around and sniffed at visitors, perhaps as the original beasts might have done before extinction. Uboot was Lars Chance’s alma mater and he was eager to pick out his picture in the gallery of graduates. The philosophy of the establishment was simple, he explained.

“We come from balls. We have an attraction to balls throughout life.”

“That is also the philosophy of Gay Dominance, Mr Chance.”

A laugh from Lars Chance. He wasn’t actually gay, he confided. He was doing the gay phase as a career move. To be seen as straight all the way through was to be regarded as prejudiced. Homophobia was a crime and a major obstacle to success. Better to be unsafe than sorry.

“Why do you not play bootball?” Wong was reading the names under pictures.

“Nice thought. Don’t have the blood line. Occasionally a

## bl r l nd

commoner does make it on to the pitch, but not this one.”

They left the campus to collect the paycar. A policer was hitting a man who was pinned to the walkway by another policer. The blows were hard and repeated. Wong stopped near the scene but Lars Chance pulled him by.

“Why are they doing that?”

“Saving law and order. They’re making our streets safe.”

Turning, and again being pulled on, Wong ventured that the streets were not safe if policers could attack in such a manner. There would be good reason, Lars Chance replied. Perhaps the man looked like he might commit a crime one day.

“I hear it happens all the time,” Wong said.

The rest of the afternoon was spent at MegaMonstaMall. The ultimate shopping experience always went down well with his assignees, Lars Chance told Wong, who disliked malls but did not convey so.

“I hope you don’t mind,” the guider said. “I have to do some shopping because I’ve received a low debt warning. If I don’t, then my salary will be converted straight into savings. It’s a slippery slope. Saving leads to more saving, and before you know where you are you’re up to your neck in unused credit. It’s not fair on the rest.”

“Let it be so,” replied Wong.

MegaMonstaMall, as every good consumer knows, is one of the country’s grand temples to binge buying. Once the customer has negotiated the entrance, with its revolving security cages, and its body scanners which render the enterer naked on screen for securiters to whistle at or jeer, and with its nets set to drop from the ceiling on detection of dishonest demeanour, then the pleasure is reached of lanes of bright white diffused light lined with T/Store after T/Store after T/Store. (T/Store is not only the nation’s biggest retailer, but also the nation’s only one.)

After perusing the rails of T/Store/Boutique, Lars Chance selected some clothes and took them to the settlement desk. There, the customer was asked which feel-good rating he would

## bl r l nd

like. Being so close to saving, he went for ‘extravagant’. A sewing head stitched top brand labels on to the garments while he presented his credit. There was too much to carry for one person and Wong took a bag.

Wong chose to dine alone in the restaurant at the Smash. Later, he called Janice, transferring the link from his palmator to the room’s system. Person-to-person holographic communication had yet to arrive in EK and he saw her only as a two-dimensional image. She was recently showered and wore a robe. A wrapped towel concealed her hair. Without spectacles, she looked unprotected.

Her self-initiated act of substitution the previous day had not been commented on by the assigner at the Cultexfo office, who presumably believed it a normal mix-up. Lars Chance, she told Wong, would not have complained because to tell on a fellow guider was something that fellow guiders didn’t do. She agreed to be at the Smash at seven-plus-half in the morning. Wong ended the call and stood at the window, staring for a long time out at the night, at the uniform rectangles of amber that was the Essential Worker Zone.

“No, I can’t. I can’t take you there.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t.”

Wong gently pointed out that her argument might eat its own tail. They were in her one-mo, the vehicle motionless in the rotel foyer, the cover over their heads misting up on the inside.

“I – I don’t have an address. Without an address, the router can’t find it.”

“This is a RoveAgain with all-day capacity. It is equipped with directional response.”

She had forgotten he worked for the company that manufactured the model. A loud slap on the cover made them both start. It was the rotel’s securiter.

“Move along, if you please. There’s others waiting.” Then, to a

## bl ri nd

second securiter but not so quietly it could not be heard from within the slimcar, “Bloody foreigners. They only come ’ere to ’ave a finger poked up their arse.”

Wong called out ‘east’. The one-mo slid from the foyer and climbed the ramp to the flyway. Janice showed anxiety.

“This *will* get me into trouble. We’re not supposed to enter EW. We’re not supposed to leave the Tourist Zone.”

“But you do not call ‘return’. Why is that, Ms Annison?”

“Jan. Because I —”

“Is it perhaps because you too would like to see the Essential Worker Zone?”

“No, it is not. We should not be doing this, Mr Wong. The office will know through the journey log. What can I tell them?”

“Tell them I asked to go home and the router took me to China.”

Janice smiled. Then she laughed. Then they both laughed.

The flyway ends at East Flyway End and a ramp brings the one-mo track to ground level, where it runs parallel with the paycar lane, the allbus and callcar lane, the freighter lane, the train lane, the emergency lane, and the security services lane – collectively the Eastern Bundle.

To regular prompts, Wong repeated ‘east’. On the approach to the appropriate junction, he called ‘Essential Worker Zone’. The vehicle steered from the transport artery and sped into an area of high tenement blocks of identical construction, travelling like a realisation of one of those kidcator games in which the player-hero zooms along deep canyons on his way to rescue the maiden or engage with the dragon, or vice versa.

Abruptly, the canyons stopped, as did the roadway and the subsurface router track. Wheels locked as power was cut, and the one-mo lurched to a halt. Wong was thrown forward and had to extend a hand to prevent falling on to Janice, a hand she caught painfully on the breast.

They were on open wasteland, and the one-mo lay at an angle in a slight indentation filled with water coated in a putrid growth.

## bl r l nd

Janice carefully opened the cover. To get out would be to step into the pool and would also risk the vehicle falling over on its side. She turned to her passenger.

“Goodness. I would have expected a barrier, or at least a warning sign. I can’t understand why the router didn’t see it coming.”

Four boys, not quite youths, appeared from across the wasteland. Janice and Wong watched as they approached the stranded one-mo. The boys were scruffy and wore aggressive grins. One, a little taller than the others, spoke.

“Y’ev gone off the track, true?”

“It looks that way,” Janice agreed.

“We can put yer back on. We can tern yer round.”

“Could you? That would be kind.”

“Twice normal. ’Eavy load, true?” The boy thumbed towards Wong.

Janice asked how much ‘normal’ might be.

“An’ make it tokens what we can spend,” the boy added, after announcing his rate.

“That’s a – a little expensive, don’t you think?” returned Janice. The other boys positioned themselves along the raised side of the one-mo, as close to it as the pool would allow. Their grins had transmuted to scowls.

“I think that would be more than a ‘little expensive’. Perhaps it is *very* expensive,” Wong suggested. He slowly raised himself from his seat, higher and higher. He eased himself out of the vehicle on its raised side and leapt over the water with an agility that surprised Janice and certainly the boys. The one-mo rocked but stayed upright. The gang stepped back.

“The load is reduced. Now we renegotiate, true?” he said to the spokesboy.

Wong did not wish for the boy to lose face in front of his friends, nor did the boy desire to escalate the situation. A deal was struck. The boy ordered his followers into the water and to heave the one-mo round and back on to the roadway, where it connected with the router track. Power was restored, and the

## bl r l nd

little machine shot forward until Janice yelled *'stop!'*. Wong paid the boy, and the boy saluted him. The gang left the pool for the wasteland and Wong climbed back into the one-mo.

“That was frightening,” Janice breathed.

“That was – how does your government put it – saving local enterprise,” replied Wong. She searched his face. He pointed to round holes centred in stubs of concrete beside the track.

“The sign you mentioned?”

She realised the nature of the trap set by the gang.

“The policers should do something about it.”

“I think the policers do not come to this place.” Then: “I apologise to you, Ms Annison, for bringing you here. It is not a good place.”

As the one-mo returned through the urban canyons, Wong consulted the city’s AA-ZZ on his palmator. The Essential Worker Zone was clearly delineated, a bold-bordered black pattern of streets. He scrolled the screen beyond the boundary and found an extensive area of bare references, of solitary roadways depicted in the weak grey of uncertainty, of a community without a name. Showing Janice the screen, he asked her what lay beyond the waste they had recently departed. She told him she did not know. It was the truth; and in part a consequence of her hardly ever venturing across the city’s limits, although this she kept to herself.

Wong turned the screen to himself and scrolled it in silent concentration. He keyed a route search. With the enthusiasm of success, he looked up and exclaimed.

“We shall go to the place without a name.”

A look of alarm filled his companion’s face.

“There’s no one-mo track.”

“Yes. We travel the Eastern Bundle as far as Industrial Zone Chemical. Then we branch at a road station.” He showed her the screen again. A red routeline blinked. She saw that a dashed one-mo track ran a short way into the grey. Keying for legend, she learned that the dashes meant it was a protected track, though

## bl r l nd

there was no explanation as to the type of protection, nor the reason for it.

“The assigner will have to be notified,” she frowned. “He won’t allow it.”

“The assigner does not have to know,” he smiled. “It will be another mix-up.”

She was confused. Hesitation before she spoke, but it needed saying:

“A few minutes ago, Mr Wong, you apologised for taking me to wherever it was, the backside of EW. That was frightening – I said so. Now you are asking me to take you to – well, I don’t know.”

A deepening furrow of the brow indicated a battle for resolution.

“No. I can’t do it. I have a duty of responsibility. You are a visitor to this country. Anything could happen.”

With effort, she looked him in the eyes. Impassive eyes stared back. The staring match seemed to continue for ages though it probably lasted moments. He spoke.

“I understand, Ms Annison. Please forgive me. I am allowing curiosity to precede caution.”

She let her body relax, and sighed. The router was prompting for a direction; it had been doing so for some time, and the one-mo had reduced to a crawl. Ahead loomed the Bundle. Behind, another one-mo was approaching, its headlamp flashing.

“We should be getting back. The assigner will be raising hell. It’s not all mix-ups. I’ll have to answer for this.”

Wong nodded. Janice called out ‘Smash Rotel’. They joined the main one-mo track.

After again dining alone, Wong left the rotel. This was not easy. At the rotel’s entrance, the securiter tried to prevent him.

“Sorry, sir. Can’t let you through. You’ll have to remain indoors.”

“Why is that?”

“There’s an alert on, see. All over town. Take my advice and

stay indoors.”

But Wong wanted to leave. And he did leave, by pushing by the securiter. A shout followed him.

“Management can’t be held responsible – you know that?” Louder: “You understandee?” There was more but Wong made no attempt to catch the words.

A callcar took him a circuitous route to his destination, an address in a street near Central Zone, to a building the facade of which was alight with flashing characters that spelled out ‘Lemons’. He settled the fare and for some moments studied the premises to which he had been directed, a sheet-metal construction in the style a factory from which mechanical clangour spilled into the street. A queue waited at the restricted entrance, and he made himself one of its number.

The intermittent shuffling of the queue delivered him to the interior where, every few seconds, an empty stool arrived at the head of the queue by means of a moving platform. Wong observed that the platform ran the length of the busy building, and back again. Its regular production-line progression positioned the occupant of each stool at a gaming machine for the duration of one play before sliding along to the next gaming machine. He craned his neck to see into the general throng, until aware that the action had attracted the eye of a posturing securiter.

On reaching the queue’s head, he entered his credit chip, sat astride a stool, donned headphones dangling above the stool, and rode the platform the short distance to the first machine. Under pulsating coloured lighting, he pressed the handpad. The three-paned display showed a rapid succession of images before stopping at a non-winning combination of symbols. A sultry female voice from within the headphones urged: *Don’t be discouraged. Play again, your luck is bound to change.* The platform shifted him to the next machine. He played. No winning symbols appeared. Wong knew none would. Winning combinations were not possible. His company manufactured the machines. *Don’t be discouraged. Play again, your luck is bound to*

## bl r l nd

*change*. After a number of losses, he dismounted the stool and removed the headphones. The noise without them was uncomfortable.

He returned to the entrance and tried to retrieve his credit chip from the socket but the minimum loss per session required by law had not been reached and the chip refused to release. Nor would the exit cage let him leave. The securiter was watching.

Wong went over to the roulette wheel and keyed a bet. He watched as the silver ball clattered round, occasionally bouncing from the separators, to slow and hesitate at the neck of the box bearing the number he had chosen, then to disappear abruptly down a hole of precise diameter uncovered by a swiftly opening and closing flap in the wheel's surface.

"What's your method?" a pale-skinned red-haired girl asked, reaching up to his ear in order to be heard above the din. "You must let me share your winning streak." She wore a dappled dress, low cut. Wong could not help but peer down her freckled cleavage.

"I didn't win. The ball entered a hole."

"There's a lucky ball, I'd say."

He looked about, as if searching for someone who would be in the crowd. The girl strove for his attention. He gave her it. Her gestures were seductive but her tone became rapid and matter-of-fact.

"I'm charged for five minutes, minimum and maximum, deducted from your chip. No fuss, no risk. Any preference. The management cannot be held responsible for corollary seizures or induced asthma attacks during or immediately after activity."

Reverting to flirtation, she added, "With me, it's a prize every time."

Wong made to leave. The woman hung on.

"Please. I'm short of my target. And the boss is watching."

"I cannot help you with your target, Miss —"

"Mersey. My name is Mersey. It's French for 'thank you'."

"I cannot help you, Miss Mersey."

"Look, you don't have to do anything, if you can't..."

He was stooping to hear her and to speak to her.

“Your time would be better applied elsewhere,” he advised her.

Mersey referred again to the management. The boss, she said, was nervous. There was an alert on, and he would be within his rights to restrain and detain an unco-operative punter.

It was a threat Wong knew he could not, as a foreigner, afford to ignore. Also, the establishment still had possession of his credit chip.

“Very well, Miss Mersey. I will go with you.”

“You can have a double session, if you want. The boss doesn’t mind that. Says it lets the girls get to know the punters.”

Wong allowed himself to be led through the crowd to a booth, one of a line, situated along a wall next to the infinity bingo. The booth was cramped, its space almost filled by a low bed. A curtain, when pulled across the opening, offered a degree of notional privacy and filtered some of the light but did little to reduce the noise. A smell of stale sweat and semen assaulted the nostrils. There was insufficient headroom in the booth; Wong supposed that headroom was not an important design consideration. Mersey slipped off her dress to reveal a shameless nakedness. She started a timer on the wall and gave an almost imperceptible nod to a camereye mounted in an upper corner.

“How do you want me?” she asked. “Front or back?”

“Miss Mersey. Please put on your clothes. I do not want sex with you.”

Her arms were round his neck.

“Sure you do, Daddy. Everyone wants sex with cute little Mersey.”

He grabbed her wrists and removed the embrace. She giggled.

“You want rough? The boss doesn’t mind rough, so long as you don’t mark the goods.”

A shape appeared as someone stumbled against the curtain. There was a muffled ‘sorry’ and the shape retreated.

“I don’t want rough, I don’t want front or back, I don’t want sex.”

## bl r l nd

He placed her gently down on the bed and himself beside her.

“Miss Mersey – I want to ask you a question.”

She avoided his eyes.

“What sort of question? We haven’t got long.”

“Do you know the Essential Worker Zone?”

The girl sounded unsure though she answered in the affirmative.

“Ye-es, I know it. What if I do?”

“Have you been there?”

She continued to sound unsure.

“I might have done.”

Then, after a repeat of the question, she became sure.

“Yes, I’ve been there. Lots of times. I live there. The boss sees to it.”

She raised her voice a little, probably for the benefit of a microphone.

“I’m an essential worker. And it’s official. He’s fully licensed, you know – the boss.”

Wong picked up the dress and motioned for Mersey to put it on. She took it and threw it over her head. This girl, he observed, could dress and undress faster than the eye might blink. In an unconscious movement, which she would repeat, she checked the timer. His next question.

“I am pleased for you. Is it possible you know the wasteland behind the Essential Worker Zone?”

“What’s to know? There’s nothing there.” She gave a snigger.

“Do you know was lies beyond the wasteland?”

“Troddenville, you mean?”

“Troddenville? Is that its name for the autorouter?”

“No. It’s what its people call it.”

Mersey was suddenly sad and vulnerable. And quiet: he could scarcely catch her words.

“I should know – I was born there. I lived there before I broke out and got a job and a proper life.”

He put his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Please tell me about Troddenville.”

## bl r l nd

She turned to him, searching his face.

“And why would you – anyone – want to know about the land of the forgotten?”

She pulled back, suspicious.

“You’re a foreigner, anyway. Why would a foreigner want to know?”

A shriek of pain came from the next booth, followed by the sound of impact on the party wall. Mersey ignored it. Wong clasped his hands together.

“Miss Mersey, can you take me to Troddenville? Will you take me to the place where you were born?”

The timer emitted a tinny staccato. The girl seemed relieved.

“Time’s up, I’m afraid. Goes quickly when you’re having fun.”

She stood and adjusted her dress.

“A double session, I think.” Wong remained seated on the bed.

“No, I can’t.”

“Why is that?”

She tugged back the curtain. A dishevelled man, the worst for drink, staggered back, turned, and disappeared into the crowd.

“Sodding peeper,” Mersey muttered. “Didn’t jackpot this time, did you!” she shouted after the man.

Facing Wong, she told him:

“Look, I have to go. We only get five minutes between pulls.”

They were out of the booth, Wong able to stand his full height. He tried one last time.

“I will pay for another session. We can talk about Troddenville.”

“No, I can’t. The boss doesn’t like double sessions. Says the punters get too close to the girls.”

She pulled away, and was soon asking a player at the roulette table how he did it. Wong sat down to one card blackjack until the minimum loss was reached, and he could leave.

In the cool quiet night air, he followed the walkway towards a callcarpoint. Across the street stood a restaurant, a quality

## bl r l nd

establishment by appearances. His eye caught the restaurant's name. Ramon's. Like one of the machines in the gambling factory, his mind gave a brief whirr. This time, there was a winning combination, and a light came on. His contact had said *Ramon's*, meet me at *Ramon's*, but had pronounced it to sound like *Lemons*. Wong laughed out loud and strode across the street.

The contact had started his meal and was into the second course.

"Where have you been?" the contact asked.

"Resisting the delights of the flesh and losing hand over fist at the gaming tables," Wong replied, and apologised for being late.

"That would be a most rare day indeed," the contact replied with an affable nod of the head.

[The conversation the two men held over dinner was conducted in Chinese. No translation is available.]

The meal over and business concluded, Wong set off for the callcarpoint to which he had been going before the mistake in venue names was realised. At the facility, the screen informed that service had been suspended due to the alert. He looked back. Soon, people in some numbers would be leaving the beerhouses and clubs and restaurants and casinos which lined the street. With no callcars to take them home, there would be fighting and killing. His dining companion was gone, slipping unseen into the night, as mysterious contacts are apt to do. Wong took out his palmcator and keyed the Smash to request the housecar be sent to collect him, the journey charged to his account. The receptioner told him with a lilt in her voice, a complement to the ceaseless smile, that the housecar would not be available for some hours. He left the callcarpoint and started in a direction which would take him to the rotel.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a battered grimy gascar had slowed to match his walking pace. The side glass was down and a head popped out.

"Looking for a lift, mate?"

## bl r l nd

Wong politely declined.

“It’s safe, mate. I’ve gone in for me callcar licence. Done all the tests. They ’aven’t got round to sending it yet, that’s all.”

Again, Wong said it was all right.

“Jus’ trying to earn a few tokens while transport’s off, see.”

Wong stopped under a street light and studied the head: it belonged to an unshaven fellow of anaemic countenance, with burdened eyes. A few yards in the forward distance, a gang of youths were urinated at the kerb and shouting aggressively to passers-by. One threw an alc-can his way. Wong guessed the gang’s evening was only just beginning.

After a check of the vehicle’s rear seat, he climbed in.

“Where to, mate?”

“The Smash Rotel. Do you of know it?”

“No problem.”

On the way, a direct route as Wong noted, they chatted.

“I’m Charlie,” Charlie said. “You’re from abroad, aren’t yer?”

“That is so.”

“Business trip, is it?”

“I’m in EK on a cultural visit.”

“Very nice.”

Charlie mentioned the House of the People and Buckers, and other tourist attractions.

“I can give you a spin, if you like,” Charlie offered.

“Are you licensed as a guider?” asked Wong.

“Like I said, the papers are in the process. Should be with me any day now,” came the reassurance.

Wong said he had already seen the usual tourist sights, and was impressed by what the city had to offer.

“Mr Charlie. There is, however, one place I would like to visit. Perhaps you could take me there, tomorrow.”

“Where’s that, then?”

“It is Troddenville. The land of the forgotten.”

Charlie’s admittance that he had not heard of the location prompted directions from the back seat: beyond the Essential Worker Zone, exit left the Eastern Bundle at Industrial Zone

Chemical – most uncomplicated.

“Er, I —” started Charlie. “There’s a snag, see. Out there’s not covered by the licence.”

“But you do not have a licence. It has not yet arrived,” his passenger replied. “You can go wherever you please without a licence, I think.”

There was no arguing with that, Charlie said, and made no attempt to do so. They negotiated; an agreement was reached, reliability promised, and a deposit paid.

Lying on his big bed, the tired Wong needed to remind himself why he had made the arrangement with Charlie. He called out ‘data service’ and ‘personal transport regulations’. A smiling telesperience information girl, who might have been related to the Smash receptioner, appeared on a stool by the side of the bed. She asked was there a specific refinement of interest, to which he replied ‘as the regulations apply to foreigners’. The girl put on a pair of large framed spectacles, cleared her throat and read aloud, as if telling a bedtime story, from a bulky-looking dark-blue law book, her eyes lifting and smile refreshing at the end of each paragraph.

“Under the Greater Roads Integrated Network Directive, foreigners are restricted in the modes of personal transport they may use. For the purposes of smooth enforcement, the term ‘foreigner’ includes any individual possessing a family name that sounds foreign, or any individual having the appearance of a foreigner.

A foreigner is permitted to reserve a callcar, which is any passenger-carrying small-vehicle under the control of a licensed operator and suited for the purpose. But a foreigner cannot, by him- or herself, operate a track-guided slimcar, popularly know as a one-mo.

Nor may a foreigner take the controls of a paycar, which is any passenger-carrying small-vehicle hired to a licensed and approved individual for the duration of a charge period,

normally one calendar month. Paycars were introduced following the abolition of personal ownership of free-steering motorised road vehicles.”

She sang a promotional jingle.

“Pay-or-Stay-y-y! The leading paycar people. Don’t delay, key us today! Pay-or-Stay-y-y!”

And added restrictive caution.

“Pay-or-Stay services are available only to verified citizens of EK. Your licence is at risk if you do not fulfil your mileage commitment.”

Then resumed the reading.

“Modes of personal transport which rely for their power on the turning of pedals by the hands or feet, or on the pushing by hands or feet of a wheeled board, are permitted for use by any person on demonstration to the authorities of the required level of ability.

Foreigners are allowed to travel on most modes of public conveyance but may be required to give up their seats if requested to do so by anyone who is not foreign.”

When asked by the smiling girl if the information was satisfactory, Wong replied it was. When asked if further information was required, he answered there was none. When asked if he would like to enjoy the extra benefits of personal subscription, he called ‘telesperience, off’. The girl and her big blue law book faded. Partially clothed and lying on top of the covers, Wong fell asleep.

Up and fresh, out and waiting, Wong met with disappointment on the steps of the Smash. Charlie did not show. The plan was to be gone before Lars Chance arrived. In the event, Lars Chance did not show, either.

“Can’t wait there, sir,” the Smash securiter told him. “You’re in people’s way.”

## bl r l nd

Wong took a cushion in the guest waiting area.

“Can’t sit there, sir. These cushions are reserved for guests.”

“I am a guest.”

“Guests of guests. People who are visiting people who are staying at the rotel. You can’t visit yourself, can you.”

A man, sitting on an adjacent cushion, put down his newscator and spoke to the securiter. The accent was North American.

“The Lord have mercy. This guy’s with me. He’s the guest of a guest of a guest. Now scat.”

The owner of the accent turned to Wong as the securiter left without further comment.

“Limeballs. They still think they rule the world. There’s only one way to talk to them.”

“That is so,” returned Wong.

“Askew T. Peckwood.” A hand was offered, which Wong took. “At your service.”

In the minutes that followed, Wong discover that the corpulent sun-browened middle-aged Askew Peckwood hailed from Sanctity (population 1700), Alleluia; had a cute little wife and three great kids; attended church every Sunday; never used a gas engine; rooted for the Groingouggers; sweated for the Starstarers; was in EK for a conference.

Wong leant forward.

“So, you work for the most worthy space agency. Mr Peckwood, may I ask you —”

“Askew, call me Askew. We’re among friends, aren’t we?”

“Forgive me, are you the same Askew T. Peckwood who is mission adviser?”

The American laughed and slapped his thighs. “The very same. An adviser, one of a whole bunch. But modesty forbids me to say I run alongside the greats. You saying you’ve heard of me? You saying I’m world famous, already?”

“I have read the name,” Wong replied. “In connection with the conference. It begins tomorrow, I think.”

“Yup. I thought I’d come over a couple of days early to get used to the food, do a little sightseeing. Say, have you been to

Buckers?”

Yes, said Wong. He had. To return the adviser to the subject of the conference, he enunciated its title from memory.

“Intelligent Design Investigation and Observation Techniques Seminar.”

Another laugh from the American. “The IDIOTS conference. And, boy, there sure are some idiots over this side of the pond.”

“That is so.”

Peckwood shifted closer.

“They’re so behind the times it’s untrue. Stuck in the nineteenth century with all that evolutionary flapdoodle. They just don’t get it.”

“I believe not.”

“For sure, we all know the Lord created the universe – He tells us so in the Good Book. And we have the exact date, for Chrissakes. Even the hour. Right now, we’ve guys working on the precise minute. The Good Book testifies beyond all doubt. But these – these heathens, hold on to —”

He lifted his tone to sound silly.

“The Earth is billions on billions of years old, and we’re all descended from apes, yak, yak, yak.”

In his normal voice he asked: “Whatever will they try to dumb us with next?”

When Wong did not answer, because he thought the question rhetorical, Peckwood screwed his eyes in serious scrutiny.

“Say, you people believe in intelligent design. Don’t you?”

It was a pivotal moment.

“Intelligence, yes. Design, yes. We do not believe in flapdoodle.”

The scrutiny was sustained for a few moments before Peckwood relaxed. “Good. That’s what I thought.”

Wong asked about the mission that Peckwood advised on. The mission, he heard, was simple. Explore space, find the Lord, bring the Lord to Earth. Only then would doubt be removed for all future time. There were plans, Peckwood told him with a forefinger to the side of the nose, signifying the information

## bl r l nd

must go no further, to install the Lord in the Whitewashed House – if, of course, the good Lord were to be agreeable.

The conversation was interrupted by an expensively dressed man who Wong recognised as a fellow guest of the rotel. The man crossed the floor and threw his arms around the now standing Peckwood.

“Peckwood, my *dear fellow*. I hope I haven’t kept you waiting.” His was the accent of a Camford educated limeball, but perhaps not a heathen.

Peckwood answered by saying he had only just arrived. They both turned to Wong, still seated but rising to his feet when spoken to. Peckwood said:

“This is Mr – forgive me, I didn’t catch the name.”

“Wong.”

“Mr Wong, he’s – er —”

“An intelligent designer,” supplied Wong.

Peckwood and the other man laughed heartily, and continued to chuckle as they turned to leave the waiting area, each an arm over the other’s shoulder.

“The Lord stay with you,” Peckwood waved in farewell.

“Good luck with the mission, sir,” Wong waved back.

With no sign of, or message from, either Charlie or Lars Chance, Wong returned to his room. He looked out of the window, currently facing across the city to the river. A little beyond the river, a lake stretched into the far distance, a volume of water channelled on to the land in a first stage of surrender to the rising sea. His musing was cut short by the chime and Voice of the Rotel. *Management at your door. This is urgent. Please open immediately.*

He did as bid. The receptioner smiled and informed him the policer with her was a policer. She asked if it would be all right for them to come in, this as the policer pushed Wong aside and entered. With all in the room, the policer spoke of a routine enquiry which the smiling receptioner said she was sure could be cleared up in no time. Wong thought of Charlie – had the illicit

## bl r l nd

callcar operator lost his nerve and reported the previous evening's conversation? – but Charlie was not referred to.

“We have reason to believe a data service was recently called up from this room, sir. One sponsored by subscription,” the policer said. His eyes were checking the room, and rested momentarily on the masturbator. The receptioner presented the position.

“It's an offence for a foreign national to take out a personal subscription. We do mention it in our information pack, along with the other restrictions, but guests are often tired when they arrive after a long journey and may not always read the guide in full.” She paused to renew the smile. “Isn't that right, Mr Wong?”

“That is my experience,” Wong confirmed. The list of restrictions ran to several pages. He had read only a few of them.

The policer turned to take in the view from the window.

“It's a great city, this.”

“Yes, that is so,” agreed Wong.

“Makes you proud to police it,” the policer imparted, briefly lost in his own thoughts.

“I'm sure it does,” smiled the receptioner.

With a sudden return to the business in hand, the policer approached close to Wong, glaring up into an immobile face.

“Let's keep it a great city, shall we?”

The policer did not wait for a reply but made briskly for the door. The receptioner trotted after him and closed the door behind her. Allowing time for the policer to depart the rotel, Wong put on his coat and went down to the foyer. The securiter rocked on his heels, hands clasped behind back, as he gazed through the doors of the entrance and sucked his tongue.

“They'll log it you know. They always do. Makes the house look bad, bluecoats all over the place.”

Wong said nothing. He began the short distance to the road, where he could catch a holdtight.

(This simple and free mode of transport is suspended from an overhead cable that threads above and along principal streets.

## bl r l nd

Passengers – any number to the limit of ten, though it is a well known fact that the regulation is frequently flouted – jump on and ride by standing along a long footboard while gripping a waist-high handrail. Holdtights are exempt from foreign user restrictions.)

Anyway, by riding holdtights, Wong calculated he could reach the lake, where he would join a boat trip and find the peace to ponder.

As he crossed the concourse of the rotel, a callcar pulled in and stopped. The operator helped an elderly lady from a rear seat. Wong asked the operator if the car would now be available, and was told it would. He climbed in.

Watching from the foyer, the securiter blew at the flagrant breach of the rotel's rule by which guests were required to reserve callcars through reception.

"They never learn, do they," he moaned to the elderly lady, who had no idea what he was talking about.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janice Annison had stayed in bed because she believed there was nothing to get up for. There was no assignee for her to guide, no mix-up at a terminal to sort out. True, the assigner was habitually dismissive and forgetful, so typical of a lower management drug habit. On occasions, he even failed to recognise her, though had once confused her for his mother. That had been a strange experience for her, but touching. However, in her opinion he was not being merely forgetful following her unauthorised collection of Mr Wong from the Smash – he was deliberately passing her over.

It was late afternoon when she checked her palmator for messages, normally a task performed first thing, as part of breakfast, and repeated at regular intervals during the day. The first message was a general notice warning that rogue callcars were targeting tourists. Another concerned a misguided colleague who had been arrested for selling crack to a foreign

## bl r l nd

visitor for less than the maintained price. A third informed her that colleague Janice Annison was taking some time off for health reasons.

She closed the lid and rolled on to her side. Within minutes, the palmator chirped. Suddenly energised, she picked it up. On its screen, the cartoon girl-child announced the assigner was keying, and pulled back a cartoon curtain to reveal the natural face of her superior. He was high – unfocused and slack mouthed – and fawning in tone.

Lars had met with a nasty. As a mark of the highest regard for her, a valued guider of the most professional quality, this much indebted assigner was assigning her to Mr Wong, an honoured visitor to this country, and was also assigning Mr Wong to her, as from wonderful tomorrow. Could she possibly do the dot-dot-dot?

Then he was gone, back to his dopey bliss.

A tidy-up of the self before she keyed Mr Wong. The girl-child was sorry but the link was not responding. She keyed the rotel reception. There was a delay before the screen showed the dreadful securiter.

“Reception’s busy,” the man told her.

“I’d like to connect to one of your guests, please. Mr Wong,” she said.

“He’s not here.”

“Oh? Well, do you know when he’ll be back? It’s rather important.”

The securiter smiled, an unpleasant twist of the mouth.

“I wouldn’t know, madam. He didn’t inform the desk.”

Janice put on her best patience.

“Do you know where he’s gone, at all?”

“Went off in a callcar, this morning. By himself. Not a reservation, mind. Kerb hop. Risky, if you ask me.”

She thanked the securiter and keyed off.

Janice’s compartment, formerly a stationery cupboard in a government department building before conversion, comprised

## bl r l nd

a room that, once the single bed was folded into a wall recess, served for sitting and eating and viewing; and an ablutions cubicle containing a shower and toilet tube; and an entrance hall in which her one-mo was garaged. Janice entered her kitchenette – this done by lowering legs between bed and wall – and keyed the catercator for seaweed tea and toasted rubber-roll. The equipment’s warning filter was unreliable, often failing to display the current food scare, though rubber-roll when toasted is usually safe to eat.

As she nibbled at the snack, she considered what to do about her assignment. There was nothing she could do – nothing she should do. Wasn’t that so? She climbed back into bed. But her thoughts nagged. There could be no doubt where Mr Wong had gone – that was into the perilous grey beyond the Essential Worker Zone and the wasteland. Otherwise, why would he kerb hop a callcar? Why would he not inform the rotel reception where he was going, as he was supposed to? It wasn’t her worry. The assigner had said tomorrow. Tomorrow, it would be her worry. Not today.

Later, she tried again to make contact. No response, the girl-child trilled. No answer from his room, the rotel receptioner smiled. Through the *dub-dub* *dub-dub* of the wall-mounted heartbeat generator, adjusted to ‘full soothe’, Janice’s thoughts turned to low anxiety. How was Mr Wong to return from his adventure? What if he had reserved a callcar to carry him back to the rotel but it had not arrived? Holdtight routes did not run beyond the essential workers. Mr Wong would be waiting, alone, perhaps lost, in a hostile and dangerous environment.

So what? It had been Mr Wong’s decision, and nothing to do with Cultexfo. The agency could not be held responsible for Mr Wong’s determination to stray from the tourist map into an unauthorised area. He had acted entirely by himself.

But, deep down, and with anxiety rising, she knew it was Cultexfo’s responsibility. That would be how a court of awe would see it, when Mr Wong’s company sued the agency. That was always how the court saw it. An assignee abandoned during

## bl r l nd

an exchange visit; enticed by a pirate callcar; abducted and left to wander the grey; maybe never to be seen again. The agency could ill afford another lost visitor.

Janice reasoned against keying the assigner about her brimming anxiety. He would be incapable of sensible decision. There was only one course of action: the longest serving and most experienced member of the agency would have to handle the situation herself. The one-mo was waiting in the hallway. All she had to do was get in it and call 'east', as Mr Wong had done.

With no awareness of the actions, she was dressed and ready to leave. The one-mo's cover was up. In her mind, she saw his bulk crouched uncomfortably in the back seat; and his broad length emerge from it, to reach above anyone standing alongside. He was perfectly capable of looking after himself, wherever he was. Likely, he was enjoying himself somewhere in that inscrutable, controlled way of his. He would return to the Smash when it pleased him. There was no need to go looking for him.

She was sitting in the one-mo. Even a big man is no match for the many. He would have fought bravely but was now held prisoner. His company may have already received the ransom demand. 'Don't tell the policers', the note would warn, as if the policers would show interest in a kidnapped foreigner. Only one caring person knew where he was. Only one person coming to the rescue.

"East."

The Eastern Bundle was busy, the time being that of the daily evening return to Commuter Islands. Hers was amongst others on the one-mo track, all travelling in close formation at near maximum speed. At the overhead sign announcing closeness to the Chemical road station, she called 'exit' and the vehicle pulled from the main track to slow before entering a tunnel created by a metal mesh cover. It was gloomy inside the tunnel, much of the rusting mesh enveloped by creeper. She could see flashes of light from other one-mos in an adjacent tunnel, on a track running in the opposite direction. As far as she could tell, hers was the only

## bl r l nd

one-mo following the track from the Bundle and to the dead-end depicted on her router. Had there been a U-turn available, she would have taken it.

The ride through the tunnel brought the vehicle to a halt in a large walled yard strewn with piles of rubbish amid which dogs pawed and children crawled. The day was fading. At the far end of the yard, a fire had been lit around which a small group of figures prowled and crouched. One side of the enclosure was lined by a squat building, its concrete walls protected by steel cagework of the same type used around public structures. A floodlight hung from a mast above the building, presumably to provide illumination, when lit, for the bristle of security camereyes on the flat roof. Windows and doors were shuttered. There was no sign of Mr Wong. It was an eerie place that kept Janice in her one-mo. This was one silly plan, she told herself, and called 'home'.

The one-mo did not respond. She called again, then noticed the router screen was blank.

"Stay calm," she instructed herself. She would key OneMoKnight and a servicer would come. That was how it worked, wasn't it? That was what you paid for when you purchased an extended warranty: peace of mind at only twice the cost of the vehicle.

"Nice cator."

The voice, raised to penetrate the cover, came from her left. She turned her head. A youth stood, watching her, hands in trouser pockets under a heavy collar-up jacket. Fumbling, she keyed.

"No signal," the youth shouted. He used his head to indicate the yard. "It's the walls."

She had not appreciated just how high the walls were, perhaps because they were darkened, scorched from countless fires, and muted by the falling night. But, now, she could see they were substantial. The youth, his hands removed from pockets and cupped against the plastic to act as a sound funnel, told her she'd have to use the site antenna, only she couldn't because the place

## bl r l nd

was shut.

“Home,” she urged the recalcitrant one-mo, while banging the router screen with the side of her fist. “Home. Please. *Please!*”

The youth cupped again.

“The track’s switched off. Timer, see.”

He watched her as she continued to key and call to no effect. She sighed and slumped against the back rest. A one-mo reacts to a switched off router track in the same way as it does when one suddenly ends – the link between the power cells and the motor is automatically cut. It is a safety feature, one that now put her in danger. There is always a manual override but the hands-on mode requires a security passcode which Janice had never committed to memory. The code was stored in her homecator from which she could download to her palmcator. Which wasn’t working.

A courage came to her, and she welcomed it since panic was not bringing results. She lifted the one-mo’s cover a head’s height.

“Have you seen a tall Chinese man?” she asked the youth, whose hands were back in his pockets.

“Not lately, I ’aven’t. Not never.”

Janice sighed. The courage was delicate.

“Is there a hotel round here, do you know?”

“True, I know. There ain’t no ’otel.”

He kicked at an empty alc-can, hands still in pocket, and seemed to be losing interest in the conversation. The only light now came from the fire and the floodlight, now flickering into life. She realised the youth was all she had.

“I have to get back to – to the city,” she said.

He turned to face her.

“You can. Tomorrow.”

“But surely there’s some help I can get here.”

“Walk to the Bundle and ’itch a ride,” was the suggestion, uttered with little confidence. “A freighter’ll take yer – for a shag.”

A pause before advice. “Wouldn’t walk the tunnel. Full of

## bl r l nd

'itters at night. Go over the top. Watch the dogs and mind the pools. There's chemicals in the pools. Bad chemicals. Poison. The plant dumps them, see."

It occurred to Janice that, for all the stoutness of the yard's walls, the youth and the others must have gained access, maybe through a breach. All she needed to do was position herself on the other side of the wall, and the palmcator would work. But where was the breach? The idea of walking the perimeter to find it did not appeal.

She fully opened the cover and stood from the seat.

"How do I get out?" she asked the youth.

"Leg over the side, and then the other," he replied.

"No. I mean out of this – these walls."

He pointed towards a dark corner of the yard.

"Through the gates. Where the gates used to be."

The fear which the thin courage had been concealing left her completely. It evaporated as she climbed out of the one-mo and locked it. Is this what happens in the face of unknown and unknowable danger? Does fear vanish because it can serve no purpose?

"This direction?" she asked. "Did you say the gates are this way?"

"I'll show you," offered the youth, and he started to walk. She followed.

Behind them, children left their rubbish piles and approached the one-mo. The youth turned and shouted something to them that Janice did not understand. They backed away. Conscious of the relieving quality of conversation, she asked:

"What is this place – this building?"

The two had reached one end of the construction and she could see a sharply defined gap in the wall under the side spill of the now fully aglow floodlight.

"Dunno, really. They come every day and they go. That's it."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Devilmment workers."

Janice looked at him but could not properly see his face.

## bl r l nd

“Devilment?”

“That’s what they come for. Devilment.”

“Do you mean ‘development’? Development workers?”

“That an’ all.” He coughed phlegm from the back of his throat and spat. “It’s been ’ere years, this place.”

The gateless gateway opened on to a roadway which led away from the premises. A lone street lamp offered the only illumination beyond the pool of the floodlight. The silhouettes of buildings punctured by dim yellow rectangles of back-lit windows could be discerned in the distance. Three youths approached the compound, each holding a club. They stopped when they saw the two standing by the gate gap. One steadied a large dog pulling at the end of a short chain. They didn’t speak. Janice’s companion joined them. As she followed, he turned to her and held out a hand.

“Gimme your palmcator.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Mr Wong. You have a visitor. Mr Charlie to see you. Waiting in the smoking pod. Thank you.*

Wong finished dressing and went down to the foyer. The visitor emerged from the smoke pod and the extraction fan slowed to a stop. A panel lit up. ‘Vacant. Please insert credit chip. Enjoy your cigarette – it could be your last’. Charlie was apologetic.

“Sorry about yesterday. Me transaxle went. Forced to fit another. I let you down, didn’t I.”

“Why did you not key me?” Wong asked. His tone, like his face, implied no particular mood.

“Not safe, keying you at the rotel. Never know who’s tapping in.”

“That is so.”

The two men left the rotel steps under the gaze of the securiter, shaking his head and tut-tutting. They climbed into the battered

## bl r l nd

vehicle, which pulled away in a shower of sparks from its drive train. Charlie took the Eastern Bundle. Traffic was busy inwards but light outwards. Just before Chemical, a one-mo track branched away from the Bundle and disappeared into a kind of tunnel. A little further along, a paycar road also departed the Bundle, and this they took. There was no directional sign, only a pair of buckled uprights on which one may once have been mounted.

“I don’t know the place, mind,” Charlie declared.

“Perhaps it does not wish to be known,” Wong suggested.

The road was ill-maintained and bordered by overgrown banks littered with burnt-out vehicles and old chemical drums. Charlie shut the ventilator.

“Whiffy out there,” the operator complained.

“An altogether toxic atmosphere,” agreed his passenger.

A blind bend in the road led the callcar abruptly into a built-up area of drab two-storeyed homes and into a pot-holed square bordered by dilapidated shops, many displaying their wares on the walkway.

“Don’t see that, often,” Charlie observed. “I reckon they still take tokens, an’ all.”

He stopped the vehicle. They watched the scene: people wandering in and out of the shops; people strolling along the walkway; people stopping and talking to one another – untidy people, unshapely people, unhurried people. Wong mentally contrasted the scene with the gloss and paranoia of MegaMonstaMall.

“Where to? Anywhere in mind, or shall I just cruise around?” Charlie wanted to know.

“I think you do not know the place,” reminded Wong.

“I clued up, before I came,” Charlie replied, apparently unaware of the contradiction.

Wong pushed open the door and got out. He bent his head to speak in.

“Come for me, Mr Charlie. This exact place. Two after noon. I will pay you at that time for a full day.”

## bl r l nd

The operator seemed taken by surprise.

“But – I thought – you can’t wander about on your own. Not here. It’s not safe.”

Charlie’s protests were heard only by Charlie. The door slammed shut, and the tall Chinese strode with purpose across the square.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janice handed her palmcator to the youth because she could see no advantage in refusing. Either way, she expected to lose it. Would he and his friends now steal her credit codes and everything else that the device could supply? What would they do with her once they had what they wanted? Surely they would not leave her able to tell. The youth keyed, then moved away, into the open. Was he escaping the range of the security camereyes? Now he motioned for her to come over to him. There was no advantage in refusing.

“There you go. Signal strong,” he told her as he handed back the palmcator. He returned to his friends to talk. She began keying access to her homecator, then remembered the incident on the wasteland behind the Essential Worker Zone. This place, the yard, was a trap, just like the wasteland. Her one-mo was little use to the youths without a manual override code – that was what they were waiting for. They were letting her start the vehicle before grabbing it from her.

The youths were looking her way. She keyed OneMoKnight. A gallant-looking fellow dressed in a shining suit of armour, his helmet visor back and face all eager, listened to her request then was sorry to have to inform her the service did not apply to situations where the power to the router track was switched off. He suggested she try the router company, and obligingly put her through.

A young router woman checked the map and was sorry to have to inform that the track from Chemical to the regeneration

project was ex-network and therefore not the company's responsibility. Janice asked for the name of someone whose responsibility the track might be. This was not possible, the young woman replied, because of reasons of security. Janice appealed, explaining the emergency. The young woman sympathised, apologised, then emphasised she could not help.

The one-mo thread was going nowhere. She wanted just to get out of the place. There were normal roads. She keyed for a callcar but the dispatcher said all cars were out. In any case, their operators would not go east of the city at night. The next key was the 24/7 contact at Cultexfo. According to the cartoon girl-child, the service was unavailable after hours. The assigner was unavailable, too. A light flashed on her palmcator, warning of imminent keyfee expiry. Did she wish to transfer funds?

A kicking of stones indicated the youths were growing restless. Turning fully away from them, she keyed her credit station. Instead of a welcome, the screen announced the palmcator was being used from outside of an approved access zone and no transactions could be permitted. The account was suspended pending biometric proof of identity. This was in the interests of customer protection.

The policers – there was nothing for it but to key the policers. The lifelike automatic desk officer, uniformed and holding an imitation pencil, asked her in uninterruptible menu-speak about the emergency. She answered quietly, so the youths would not hear. Was she under attack? No. Had she been threatened? Not so far. Was she being held against her will? Well, not in the normal sense. Had she entered or been taken to the locality willingly? Yes, in a way...

“A polcar will be able to attend in...” A short delay for calculation. “...five hours twenty-seven point five minutes. Do you wish to continue with the emergency?” She cut the link.

Janice Annison had few friends. In truth, she had none. But she had agency colleagues. As she was about to key through the short list, the keyfee ran out.

“We gotta go,” the youth said, in her ear. “Time for our

## bl r l nd

rounds.” Janice felt alarm. Perhaps it was the result of his closeness; maybe it was because she did not want him to leave; probably it was both.

“Do you know anyone living locally with a paycar who would take me into the city?” It was a perfectly sensible question and she could not understand why it should produce a snort of derision.

“We’re not allowed, are we.”

“Not allowed into the city? Well, what about to the Bundle? Could someone take me as far as the road station?”

“We’re not allowed to *have paycars*. No one-mos, no paycars.”

“Oh, well – er – . Thank you for your help,” she thanked.

“What’re you gonna do now?”

“I – em —” Janice did not know what she was going to do now. Spend the night in the one-mo, surrounded by dogs and hitters? Find her way in the dark among pools of poisonous chemicals, to the Bundle and hitch with a freighter in exchange for a shag? Wander the ill-lit streets in the hope that one of them may lead to safety? She had to concede she did not know what she was going to do.

The youth had an idea. “You could unfold at my sister’s. It’s just down there.” He nodded into the dark. “I’ll take yer, if you want. It’s on our way.”

She thought hard and fast, hesitated and decided.

“Em – all right.” Was there any advantage in refusing?

They began to walk, Janice and her escort together, the three other youths and dog a little way behind.

“Track’ll be on tomorrow. You can go home.”

Grassy apologised for the mess.

“I was just about to clean up, do you know,” she said as she moved a pile of clothes from one cushion to another.

“Sit there. Comfortable, that one.”

A woman possibly in her late twenties, Grassy was dark-haired and well-built in a feminine way, though her large frame was less than flattered by a white-trimmed shiny-blue running suit. Later,

## bl r l nd

she explained her name was Italian for ‘thank you’. The mess she referred to was a domestic one of clothes airing on a frame before a central heater, clothes loosely folded ready for the presser, clothes awaiting putting away; of children’s toys, of scattered magcator disks, of foil trays from an uncleared meal in front of a screen that remained on without the sound.

When the clothes had been moved, many small piles becoming one precariously high pile, and items were scooped into corners, Grassy made mugs of plant tea in a separate kitchen room and brought them through to the cushion room.

“Peace. Till the kids know you’re here. They’re upstairs, playing on their kidcators, ’cept for the youngest, who should be asleep,” the hostess told her guest.

“How many children are there?” Janice asked, immediately concerned about being impolite.

“Only the five. There’s still time.” Grassy patted her midriff. “And you?”

“Sorry?”

“How many have you got?”

Janice felt a flush of embarrassment. Nobody have ever asked the question of her before.

“I haven’t got round to it yet.”

A smile, perhaps of pity, from Grassy, then:

“Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Janice was surprised at how large was the house. It had individual rooms, with proper walls and doors, instead of the tiny stand spaces partitioned by fabric dividers that were standard in the city. And stairs. Only homes of the wealthy boasted stairs and a second floor, and separate rooms for sleeping and for keying into kidcators. Grassy held a finger of shush to her mouth as they passed the doors. An ablutions room, containing a bath which could be sat in – surely a symbol of status. Janice asked Grassy if she was an important person.

“Me? Important? No, ordinary as they come,” Grassy responded, as they descended the stairs.

“You’re sure you don’t mind putting me up for the night, do

you?”

“No, not in the least. It’s not often Dank brings a stray woman in off on the street.”

A glance of uncertainty from Janice. Grassy grinned in compensation for the tease.

“I’m only joking.”

Janice asked what Dank had meant by ‘doing the rounds’. Dank and his friends looked after the neighbourhood, Grassy replied. They kept order. Someone had to.

A question that had to be asked:

“Will your partner mind my staying?”

“Partner? What’s one of them? You might have partners were you come from but you won’t find one here, I can tell you. No such thing.”

“Actually, we don’t have them, either.” Both women laughed. Janice believed she liked Grassy.

The children came down for supper and were introduced to ‘Auntie Jan’. For an hour it was noisy, and a pleasant challenge for the woman who could not recall the last occasion she had spoken to a child in home surroundings, and realised she never had. Finally, and after an ear-splitting command from their mother, the children went to bed. Thuds heard through the ceiling resulted in the occasional shout up the stairs.

The two chatted as Grassy pressed clothes with a hot iron on a board like you see in period dramas. Grassy said she was pleased to have another woman in the house to talk to. Dank, when he came to visit, was not great on conversation. The siblings had a sister, Mersey, who had done well for herself. She had gone to the city and found a well-paid job. Sent remittances to the family.

Janice was asked if she had a job. Yes, she replied. She was a guider to foreign exchange visitors. Her job was to show them displays of national heritage and places of cultural interest.

“What brings you this far?” asked Grassy.

“I’ve lost an assignee, as a matter of fact. I think he may have come here.”

Grassy was amused by the thought of a foreign tourist wanting

## bl r l nd

to visit the community. Nobody came to Troddenville, she said. Not through choice. Accompanying her words with a smile you would give an overoptimistic child, she said she would look out for a tall Chinese man.

Janice slept downstairs on the long cushion. It was the best sleep she had enjoyed for a long time, broken in the early morning by a tug of the arm from someone urging Auntie Jan to wake up. After breakfast, and the children pushed out to play, Janice thanked Grassy. She promised to send something in the way of appreciation when credit was restored, promised to stay in touch, promised to look after herself. Following Grassy's directions, Janice found the site of her previous evening's distress. The morning sunshine bleached the yard of its eeriness but accentuated the rubbish.

Through the gateless gateway, a few one-mos were parked in a tight row close to the building. Their presence signified power to the track was back on. Further into the yard, she saw her own one-mo and went over to it. She was pleased to find it undamaged, and marked only by the paws of a curious dog. Unlocking the vehicle, she pulled back the cover and climbed in.

"Home."

The screen informed her that a journey was not possible at this time since her credit station had suspended all transfers.

"Crisis credit."

The screen informed her that crisis credit could not be released at this time since the service provider was unable to verify authenticity.

"*Damn you!*" she yelled, surprising herself with the vocal expression of anger. The router responded with a 'bad command' message.

It was vexingly clear to Janice that the router company had decided the one-mo was stolen. Leaving the vehicle, she went over to the squat ugly building. A narrow gate in the protective mesh enabled access to a reinforced door. There was no means such as a bell push by which to raise attention. She knocked on

## bl r l nd

the door, hurting her knuckles while producing no sound. She pounded the door with her fist. She gave it a kick.

A small rectangular panel, inserted at head level, slid back. Janice saw a pair of suspicious eyes but could not associate gender until a voice, also suspicious, spoke. Female.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. My palmcator isn’t working and my one-mo has broken down. I wonder if I could key my office through your maincator.”

“Have you made an appointment?”

Janice replied she had not intended to need one. The eyes asked her why she had come in the first place.

“I’m looking for someone.”

“What’s the name?”

“I’m Janice Annison. I’m looking for a Mr Wong.”

“There’s no Mr Wong here. Sorry.”

Janice sensed the panel was about to close.

“Wait!”

The eyes waited.

“If I can let my office know where I am, they’ll send someone out.”

There was a pause before: “I’ll get the manager,” and the panel snapping shut. It reopened after a short delay to a new pair of eyes.

“Can I help you?” Another female, nasal.

“I would like to use your maincator, if I may, to key my office. It’s rather urgent.”

“Is it about the one-mo?”

Sense, at last.

“Yes, it is.”

“Is that your one-mo in the compound? The one left overnight?”

“Yes, that’s right. The router track was switched off and I —”

“Vehicles are not permitted to be left overnight. It breaches the terms of our responsibility. You had no right to leave it there.”

Two mud-smeared small boys had appeared and were silently watching. Janice became aware she was overly using her hands and put them down by her sides.

“Look, I had no choice. May I key my office. The name’s Janice Annison. I’m with Cultexfo.”

“Who?”

“Cultural Exchange Forum. It’s government recognised.”

The official reference had an effect. A thought, and a tone of assistance.

“Wait here. I’ll try them for you.”

The panel snapped shut again. Janice gave a loud sigh.

“You one of *them*?” one boy asked.

“Ave they locked you out?” the other boy enquired.

Janice smiled.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it.”

“No one’s allowed in there ’cept them,” the first boy informed.

“They’re devilment workers,” the second boy added.

“Development. The word’s ‘development,’” she corrected. “They’re development workers.”

“What’s that?” from the first boy. The phrase failed him. “What you said?”

“Yeh, what’s development?” the second boy completed, demonstrating his skill at new word recognition.

Janice knelt, to be at their level.

“Well, development means to make things – places – better.”

“Better than what?” Second boy.

“Better than – em – this.” She gestured to encompass the yard, the building, and beyond.

“Why?” First boy.

“Because there is better. That’s why.”

“When will it be better? When will it be develop-mented?” the second boy probed, demonstrating his skill at new word derivation.

Janice was saved from finding a reply, one she guessed was not to be found, by the reopening of the panel and reappearance of

## bl r l nd

eyes. She stood and turned. From behind the door, sympathy for Janice's plight competed with managerial firmness.

"I've tried this Cultexfo. Your assigner is on a trip, apparently. I've left a message. That's the best I can do."

"Thank you. I'm sorry to be a nuisance – could you try the router company for me? I need a crisis credit and there's some mix up. I'm sure if they hear it from you —"

Firmness edged forward.

"We're very busy."

"Please."

Sympathy now ahead.

"Well, if you make an appointment, someone can let you in and help you key the company. That's what we're here for, to assist with applications for crisis credit, and things like that."

"All right. I'll make an appointment."

The eyes disappeared for a few moments. On their return:

"We can fit you in – let's see – shall we say today, at noon plus two? Will that be convenient? Will you know what time it is?"

Janice replied she would know the time and agreed to be punctual.

Abruptly from within, firmness romped home.

"Oh, and could you remove your one-mo from the yard till the time of your appointment? The terms of our responsibility specifically prohibit casual usage. You do understand, don't you."

The eyes were thanked. Janice turned to the boys.

"Is there a – mall, or utility cluster nearby?"

"What's one of them?" enquired the first boy.

"What's a mowl?" asked the second boy.

Janice sought a synonym.

"Shops. Are there any shops?"

"Course there's shops. In the square," supplied the first boy.

"We'll take you there, if you want," offered the second boy.

She allowed herself to be led from the yard and along streets of houses, big houses the same as Grassy's, with rooms for

## bl r l nd

different functions. It could have been a saunter through Payfair, among the mansions of the rich, if not for the pitted littered roads and cracked walkways and crooked street-lights. There were patches of earth in front of the houses. Some were piled with rotting cushions and old beds but others were resplendent under flowers and shrubs. Cheeky children played in the streets. There were lots of dogs.

They reached a large potholed square surrounded by scruffy commercial facades and walkways along which fashionless people walked or browsed or stood and chatted.

Thanking the boys, and handing them each a poverty token from the pouch she kept on a belt round her waist, Janice reviewed her options. There might be a paycator at this open-air mall, one that accepted tokens; or, there would surely be a form of public transport available; or, she could walk to the Bundle, walk to the road station, walk to the city. The fear and doubt of the previous evening had given way to an excitement of sorts. Yes, excitement would not too be strong a description. The options gave her control over the situation. There should always be options. First, though, she had to complete her mission by finding the missing Mr Wong.

She stopped a grossly overweight woman dressed in stretched slacks and a thin top near to splitting.

“Excuse me. I don’t suppose you’ve see a tall Chinese man around?”

The woman had to think. “Chinese man? Tall, did you say?”

“Yes.”

“Here? In the square?”

Janice smiled in affirmation.

“Today?”

“Yesterday. He may have been here yesterday.”

The woman shook her head, slowly, working the memory hard.

“No-o-o. Not yesterday.”

“Can you be sure?”

## bl r l nd

“I wasn’t here yesterday,” the woman remembered.

Janice thanked the woman and was moving on. The woman called after her.

“Now, if you’d said today...”

Steps retraced.

“What about today?”

A hand plucked at threads from a bulging midriff.

“If you’d said ‘today’, I could’ve told you.”

“Told me what? Have you seen him today?”

“A Chinese bloke? Really big?”

“Yes. Very tall. Probably the tallest Chinese man you’ve ever seen.”

The hand stopped picking at threads and its arm pointed across the square.

“Oh, him! He’s in the Spit.”

The Copper Spittoon was a blistered beerhouse squeezed between shabby shops, and looked slightly sinister in Janice’s estimation. She thought it unlikely in the extreme that the premises would yield her lost assignee but set off towards the far walkway so as not to offend the watching woman.

After having crossed the square, she looked back. The woman was energetically throwing her hand to indicate the beerhouse, perhaps in the belief that Janice had missed it. Janice signalled back that she had located the object of direction. Since the woman continued to watch, and Janice wished to show gratitude for the help, she entered the beerhouse.

The buzzing interior reflected the exterior in its dilapidation and hint of menace. Ale was dispensed not from centrally positioned self-dispensers but through pumps with switches flicked by servers behind a counter, similar to a mobile bar you might see in the street. In the absence of smoke pods, customers illegally exhaled tobacco emissions directly into the communal air, while other illegally inhaled the pollution.

As her vision adjusted from the sunshine of the square, she noticed a back room full of people, standing, their attention drawn to something out of her line of sight.

## bl r l nd

“What can I get you, my flower?” The question came from a jolly rotund server at the pumps.

“Oh, er – nothing, thank you. I’m just looking for somebody.”

“Plenty of bodies here to choose from, flower.”

She could feel the stares from the plenty of bodies close by.

“A still wine, please,” she revised, hoping she had sufficient tokens in the pouch.

“There ain’t enough cuffing hours in the day,” he said, and followed it with, “There you are – that’s a whine. And I didn’t move a whisker.”

Laughter came from people standing at the counter. An old man told her not to take any notice of the rogue.

“Here’s your wine, flower,” the server said, handing a glass to the old man to pass on.

“You do accept tokens?” she enquired, wishing she hadn’t as soon as she had. It sounded naive and possibly condescending.

“We accept everything in here, flower. Offer me a blow job from a pair of false teeth and I’d take it.” More laughter.

Emptying the contents of the pouch into her hand, she presented them. He thanked her without checking and asked if there was anything else she would like, winking at the old man as he did so.

“Have you seen a Chinese man, at all? Very tall. I was told he might be here, in the Spit – the Copper Spittoon.”

“Have I seen a tall Chinese man?” the server exclaimed. “Have I?”

Low laughter from the left and right.

The server thumbed towards the back room. “He’s in there, flower.”

Confused, she started for the other room. There seemed no advantage in not doing so.

“Be careful, flower. They’ll have you signed up and shipped off in no time, that lot will.”

Clutching the glass of wine, she joined the assembly in the back room. A young woman snapped at her to wait her turn like

## bl r l nd

everyone else. Janice had not identified a queue formation and, even with this established, she could not make out the purpose of the multi-tailed queue. So she waited behind the snappish young woman, sipping the drink and occasionally moving a queue-step forward. By stretching her neck, she could see a table, and behind the table a sitting man who talked to people from the queue as he keyed into a flatcator. A Chinese man. Of large stature. Beside him sat a woman, not young, her hair in a tight bun, her face in a tight look of concentration. She appeared to be advising the Chinese man, occasionally directing his attention to the screen of the flatcator.

Janice reached her turn at the table. Behind her, the queue had continued to form, but it was less of one. Without looking up at her from the flatcator, the Chinese man asked:

“Name, please.”

“Annison. Two n’s. Janice. One n. Ms.”

The name was carefully keyed in.

“What kind of work is it you seek?”

Janice brought down the empty glass on to the table with a clonk.

“Actually, I seek for to guide a certain Mr Wong around places of historical importance and cultural interest kind of work.”

Wong looked up from the flatcator. For a half moment, surprise showed on his face, and maybe a briefer flicker of alarm.

“Miss Annison!”

“Jan – call me Jan.”

He assumed impassiveness.

“What are you doing here, Miss Annison?”

“What are *you* doing here, Mr Wong?”

Wong whispered to the woman something that produced a frown. The woman stood, made a loud clap with her hands, and called out to the remainder of the queue.

“Thank you. Today’s recruitment is complete. Thank you for coming.”

A collective groan went up behind Janice.

“There will be another opportunity, I promise you,” she added, and threw a sidelong glance at Janice. Murmuring filled the room as people turned and shuffled towards the exit. The woman came from behind the table and herded them out. When the last had gone, she closed the double doors. In the meantime, Janice leant forward, supporting herself on knuckles pressed against the table top.

“Well? I’m waiting to be ‘recruited’. What happens next?”

Wong held his hands in a calming gesture.

“It is uncomplicated, Miss Annison. It is merely good business.”

“I’m glad it’s uncomplicated. All the easier to explain.”

Wong stood and offered Janice the other woman’s chair.

“Please.”

“I’m fine as I am. I’ve been standing this long to see you – another five minutes won’t make a difference. That’s the same five minutes, by the way, you’re getting to tell me what’s going on.”

The bun woman faced Janice. They were of similar height and build and age. In a different universe, they might have been the same person. Speaking not to Janice but to Wong, the woman asked, urgently:

“Who is she?”

Wong sat again.

“Everything is all right. Miss Annison is a friend.”

Janice spoke directly to the woman.

“Miss Annison is a guider with the Cultural Exchange Forum, government recognised, and Mr Wong is my official assignee. He is under my care.”

“I think Mr Lars Chance is my guider. But not reliable,” countered Wong.

“Mr Chance has had an accident,” Janice informed him. “He is at present guiding no one.”

The bun woman, hands on the table, as Janice’s knuckles had been, hissed to Wong.

“I don’t like this.”

And repeated the sentiment.

“I don’t like it one crumb. What’s happening here?”

Wong was calm, or made himself appear so. He spoke quietly to the woman.

“Leave us alone, please. I will resolve the situation.”

“See that you do. We don’t want any trouble.”

The bun woman left and slammed a door behind her.

Once again, Wong offered Janice the vacated seat. This time, Janice accepted.

“Yes, Mr Wong. What *is* happening here? Perhaps you’d like to share your wisdom.”

Wong closed the flatcator and took a deep breath.

“Miss Annison, what does it look like to you?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

Wong patiently told Janice he was a recruiter of labour for the Chinese economy. China did not have enough people. Chinese industry exceeded that of all the other countries in the world put together times many, and continued to expand.

“But you can’t expect people from EK to go and work in China,” she retorted. “Not from EK. The idea’s simply dreadful.”

“Why is it dreadful, Miss Annison?”

“Because Eekays are – well, Eekays don’t do that sort of thing. They don’t go and work in – in China.”

“Miss Annison, yesterday I met an American. A space scientist. He said the limeballs still think they rule the world. Please persuade me this is not so.”

Janice had heard about Americans.

“Hah! The Americans are the ones who think they rule the world. But they do no such thing. They’re actually so wrapped up in themselves they show only their own country on classroom globes. Their arrogance matches the size of their waistbands. They think they’re everything when they’re only part.”

Wong folded his hands across his lap. She saw he was studying her in that way of his.

“Precisely, Miss Annison. I am glad we can agree. China does

## bl r l nd

not wish to rule the world. China wishes for business. We need workers for our industries. That is why I am here.”

Janice gave a vigorous shake of the head. “Not workers from EK, you don’t. Not our people.” She looked back into his impassive eyes. “You can’t treat this like some third rate country – to swan in, sweep our citizens off the street, and set them to work in your factories.”

“Your people come willingly. You have seen the queue for yourself.”

“They’re being enticed into cheap labour. It’s immoral.”

Janice made herself meet his eyes. His met back.

“They are being offered jobs and a future. Your country does not do that for its poor. Your country does not recognise them as people.”

She dropped her gaze.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“The name of this place, Troddenville, does not appear on the router. It is not mentioned in tourist information. Like all the Troddenvilles of your country, and there are many, it has no acknowledged existence.

In a renewed effort, her eyes lifted.

“I don’t know how you can say that, Mr Wong. Our country is a great nation.”

Wong was gentle.

“Dear Miss Annison. I think you do not know your country. You know only your capital city. You choose to live in splendid isolation and omit all other places, like the Americans with their globe.”

Eyes again lowered.

“That’s not true. I am a guider for Cultexfo and hold qualifications in landgraphy. I do know my country.”

Janice, though, did not know her country. Or any other, for that matter. Certainly, she had taken vacations in exotic places, but these had been virtual beachscapes stretched across telesperience holiday lounges rented by the day. That way, the weather and security can be controlled, and there is no journey

time. Her landgraphy courses had trained her to stay within the boundaries of what she was familiar with. Anyway, her travel experience, or lack of it, was not the issue. Eyes up again.

“What you’re doing here is strictly forbidden according to the terms of the exchange agreement. Recruiting cheap labour to work abroad is against the law. We need the labour for our own factories.”

“You do not have factories. Your country does not make anything. That is why these people have nothing to do but eat and drink themselves to an early death.”

She was out of her depth in such discussions, and told herself so. There were more important things to know.

“Who is that woman?”

“Do you believe you wish to possess that knowledge?” Wong asked in reply. It sounded faintly like a warning. Janice let it go – another thought had broken in, one that made her angry.

“You wanted me to bring you here. You knew what was here.”

Wong stood. He looked at his timepiece. Janice also stood.

“Miss Annison. I wanted for you not to come. I wanted for you to respect your own fear of leaving the city.”

“But we were on our way when —” Realisation hit her like a slap across the face: the wasteland incident had been meant to deter her, to prevent her from discovering his true purpose.

“Forgive me, Miss Annison. I have to go. A callcar is waiting.”

He made for the doors, leaving the flatcator on the table. When he pulled on a handle, the bun woman tumbled in. She spoke to him but looked at Janice. The hubbub from the beer room prevented Janice from hearing what was said. Wong nodded, and moved on. Janice dashed after him, feeling the bun woman’s eyes burning into her as she passed. Wong was out of the building as Janice pushed through the drinking smoking crowd. He strode across the square to a battered callcar and got in. Running awkwardly, she caught up before it pulled away.

“Wait!”

The operator lowered the side glass.

“I’ve already got a fare. You’ll ’ave to reserve.”

Wong's head appeared behind that of the operator.

"What is it, Miss Annison?"

"Could I ride with you to where I left my one-mo. It's not far."

The operator was not happy with the request.

"I can carry only one fare at a time. Regulations," he told her.

"Please. I don't want to walk on my own."

"Sorry – I could lose me licence."

Wong, head still forward, suggested Mr Charlie should check his licence. Charlie got the point.

Janice climbed in beside Wong.

"Where to?" asked Charlie without enthusiasm.

"It's where the devilment – development workers go. A low building, standing on its own, with a big yard behind. I think it's over in that direction." She pointed imprecisely.

Charlie followed the streets as if familiar with the area. On the way, Janice was silent; the situation needed to be thought through. She knew the procedure for dealing with infringements. These were commonplace among assignees, most of them perpetrated unwittingly, as might be expected from the masses of rules and legislation covering foreigners, although some infringements were undoubtedly deliberate, made as a protest. Whichever, they were for reporting immediately to Pettypol, who would issue a fixed penalty to the assignee, and pay commission to the informing guider.

Mr Wong's involvement in worker recruitment, however, was not merely an infringement, nor in any stretch of the imagination was it unwitting, or a piddling protest. As far as she knew, there was no commission paid for reporting a premeditated breaking of the law, though there might be a reward for having uncovered one. Then again, she could be accused of being an accessory. This thought disturbed her, and now that it had presented itself, she imagined any subsequent action of support would add to the case against her.

The callcar clanked through the gateless gateway. In the yard, the row of one-mos belonging to the development workers

## bl r l nd

stood as before. Janice's own one-mo was not to be seen.

"It's gone!" she cried. "Wait here. Please. Just a minute."

She leapt from the callcar and half-ran to the building. Picking up a stone, she used it to pound on the reinforced door. The panel slid back and a set of eyes looked out.

"How can I help you?"

Janice did not recognise the voice.

"I have an appointment at noon-plus-two today. Annison's the name."

Locks were released and the door opened to a metallic squeal. Janice found herself facing an uneasy girl in a security cubicle. She skipped the pleasantries.

"Could you please tell me where my one-mo is?"

"Why would I know?"

"I left it in your yard this morning. It's not there now."

"I'll have to have a word with the manager. Can you wait outside, please." The reinforced door closed, Janice on the outside, and the locks were reapplied. As instructed, she waited. Over at the paycar, Charlie was showing signs of nervous impatience. The manager's eyes appeared at the panel.

"Can I help you?"

"My one-mo. Where is it?"

"I'm sorry, we had to have it impounded. You do understand, don't you."

Janice felt angrier than in a long time. Perhaps in her entire life.

"Why?, why?, why?, *why?* You knew I had an appointment, that I'd be coming back. You knew why I had made the appointment – so I could obtain crisis credit and go home."

"It was taking up space. We have to provide for our own vehicles."

"But there's the whole yard. You could park a hundred one-mos out there – more."

The eyes looked past Janice into the yard, and back. "I'm sorry. I did warn you."

A shout came from behind Janice. It was Wong, through the

lowered rear side glass of the callcar.

“Miss Annison. We must go.”

Janice sighed in exasperation. She made to return to the callcar. The manager called after her through the slot.

“So you won’t be wanting the appointment, then?”

“No. I won’t. Thank you very much,” Janice answered, hoping she sounded sarcastic. The manager matched the tone.

“I do wish people would let us know when they were going to break an appointment. We could have given the time to someone else.” The panel snapped shut.

The callcar left the yard and retraced the route to the square from where it took the broken obstacle-strewn road for the Eastern Bundle, its occupants consensually silent. Ahead, the traffic of the artery could be seen. The road dipped to pass under the Bundle. In the short underpass, the callcar began to slow. As it emerged on the other side of the Bundle, Charlie brought the vehicle to a halt. He had little choice: two polcars blocked the way in an arrowhead formation. From the underpass, two more polcars appeared, and formed an arrowhead behind. Policers lined the grassed banks either side of the ramp up to the Bundle, kneeling, with long-guns aimed at the paycar. An amplified voice, source undetermined, called out.

*You are surrounded. Show yourself and stand away from the vehicle. Put your hands on your head. Do not attempt to escape.*

“Mr Charlie?” It was an expression of unnecessary enquiry.

“I had to, honest. They wouldn’t ’ave given me a licence if I didn’t co-operate.” Charlie sounded genuinely remorseful. They climbed out and stood away from the vehicle, as ordered. Janice was confused and alarmed.

“What’s this about?”

The policers were descending the banks slowly towards them, long-guns steady in their aim. Charlie, suddenly surly, answered.

“Our Chinaman here is not what he seems.”

“I know what he seems,” she replied.

“You know sugary Fanny Adams,” Charlie retorted.

## bl r l nd

A lone empty-handed policer advanced with an insolent lack of pace towards them. He addressed the callcar operator.

“Who’s she?”

“Er – another fare. Just another fare.”

The policer looked Janice up and down.

“Multiple fares are against the regulations. Why did you pick her up when you knew we’d be waiting?”

“Looks good, don’ it. Looks natural, like. Besides, she —”

Wong cut him short.

“The lady is an additional fare. She has no part in this.”

Long-guns now encircled them at short range. Unhurriedly, the policer came close up to Janice; she could smell the alcohol on his breath. Intimately, he spoke into her ear.

“Is that by any chance the truth, madam?”

Janice had never told a lie in her life. She believed she would not know how to. She would turn crimson, or stutter, or look down at her feet.

“Tell the officer,” Wong urged, with a force she had not before heard from him.

“Well?” The policer’s lips were touching her earlobe. “Do you know this man? Only, you’re sharing a seat with him, that’s all.”

She had never let loose so much as a white lie, a harmless lie, not intentionally. Not once, ever. She would be struck dumb for life, if she told a lie. That was what Sister Mattick had told her, as a child. Her tongue would detach and fall to the ground, and be eaten by worms. Her throat would close up, and she’d choke.

“I’m listening,” the policer cooed.

“I —”

“Yes?”

Janice spoke each word as a separate sentence. “I. Do. Not. Know. This. Man.”

The policer stepped back and once more looked her up and down, with an intensity that undressed her.

“You’re lucky. I happen to believe you,” he sneered. “You’re not the lying kind. You wouldn’t know how to. I can tell.” He gave her a dismissive nod of the head. “You can go.”

## bl r l nd

She hesitated.

“I strongly recommend you do what the officer says.” The forceful urging again from Wong.

“Quiet, you!” barked the policer. Then a shout directed at Janice, causing her to start.

“Go!”

She went. She passed between long-guns and scrambled up the bank to the Bundle. Looking back from a distance judged safe, she saw a compliant Mr Wong and a vigorously protesting Charlie being pushed into different polcars. The intimately intimidating policer glanced her way, and she turned towards the traffic.

This would be an opportune point in the story to tell of a metaphorical journey, a passage of profound change that came over Janice as she made the physical journey on foot along the Bundle to the city. But it did not happen that way. For sure, there is the setting for such a spiritual event: the whirling dust and constant roar; the vicious punches of air from passing freighters; the uncomfortable knowledge of yesterday’s slept-in clothes; a niggling hunger; and a prickling thirst under a contemptuous afternoon sun. Even more distressing: the piercing shame of having told a lie to save the self; and the biting guilt that ensues from abandonment of a soul supposedly under one’s professional protection.

Instead, Janice Annison’s journey beside the Bundle was more a thought-starved trudge. The polcars from the underpass ambush sped by in the security lane; she looked up at the screaming shapes but did not see their occupants.

After what seemed many hours though was probably hardly one, she was startled by the blast of a horn. A freighter slowed and she guessed the operator was about to offer her a ride. She remembered Dank’s remark. The freighter operator motioned for her to come over to the vehicle. She shouted that it didn’t matter, to which the operator in the low-slung cab cupped his ear to signify he had not heard. As she stepped across the one-

## bl r l nd

mo track to be nearer the freighter before repeating the reply, she saw out of the corner of an eye a one-mo approaching at speed. The awareness came too late: her reaction was to jump back to the safety of the rough shoulder, but the slimcar caught her and sent her reeling into an instant blinding darkness.

Consciousness returned in the schospital paybay. The admitter, a stooped elderly man with a runny nose, was reviving her to ascertain if she could afford to be revived. She hurt, generally, all over; specifically, sharp stabs of pain rose from her legs.

“...your credit station, madam. Only, it appears the account is shut down.”

She could not move her legs.

“A temporary security clamp. A misunderstanding, that’s all. I do have credit,” she replied, trying to sound matter of fact.

“It doesn’t say so on the cator,” the admitter insisted. “Nothing about a security clamp.”

Did she still have legs? How much of her was there left? She had to think quickly. If she failed to satisfy the admitter, then she would be deposited on the street.

“Key Cultexfo. I’m a registered guider,” she breathed through teeth clenched together to counter pain. “They’ll confirm my status.”

The admitter rubbed at his wet nostrils with the length of a forefinger and keyed.

“No one there. Try again later, eh?”

Children were making a noise outside the paybay, like it was break time. There were other admissions waiting to be cleared for credit. A male nurser poked his head between the bay’s curtains.

“Clip clop. We’ve got a heart crash out here. Won’t last the next minute. Needs clearance fast.”

“Yes, yes, all right. I’m going as fast as I can,” sniffled the admitter. To Janice:

“You’re lucky. I happen to believe you.” He pulled back a curtain and motioned for two children to come in and pick up

## bl r l nd

the stretcher. There was some advice for the patient.

“Next time you feel like throwing yourself in front of a one-mo on the Bundle, don’t do it when your credit’s in clamp. It slows our flow something rotten. There’s people dying, you know.”

She was carried away, freeze-numbered, operated on, and allocated a bed in which she could lie and view her hoisted plaster-encased legs.

This would be an opportune point in the story to tell of a metaphorical recovery, a profound knitting of thoughts, as indeed broken bones were knitting. And that is exactly how it happened. But not at once.

Schospitals are of course clamorous places. When politicians began, in their speeches and campaigns, to fuse the words ‘school’ and ‘hospital’ in order to save a syllable, it took only a moderate leap of the imagination – a short hop, really – to fuse the two institutions in actuality. It made perfect sense. Nurses are not in constant demand from patients, especially when the patients can be routinely sedated, and teachers have lots of holidays. Work sharing presented the obvious way forward for failing hospitals and schools, and – to avoid accusations of social bias – for successful ones, too. Pupils are at hand to provide free labour, from which they have the advantage of learning more about their living bodies than ever they could by dissecting small dead amphibians. The downside is the noise produced during the day. Janice did most of her thinking at night.

On the first evening following the operation, after her bedpan had been changed by a girl-child – a flesh-and-blood version of the palmcator girl-child, a pupil in detention for fainting in open surgery class – Janice was dozing when a hand smacked down on a bruised shoulder.

“Jan? It’s Lars.”

Janice was momentarily confused. “Lars?”

Her spectacles had not been recovered from the scene of the

## bl r l nd

accident and faces in the schospital appeared blurred until she screwed her own face into a squint.

“Lars Chance.” He sat at the end of her bed. “I heard you’d been brought in. You certainly look crumpled.”

Janice made the effort and smiled.

“You don’t look in the full round of health yourself. What happened?”

Although mobile, the colleague was heavily bandaged, and one arm was supported in a sling.

“I said the wrong thing in the wrong company, that’s all.”

He described how, at an away match, he had drifted into the opposing team’s gay bar and made a comment to the effect that one of their star players was so straight they could use him to line the pitch. Stars of the beautiful game do not like to be considered straight as it smacks of a lack of team spirit and commitment. Fans of the stars like the idea less since it ruins a personal fantasy.

Janice said she was sorry, and listened while he described in detail the match that preceded the incident in the gay bar. He helped himself to some invigoration chews and changed the subject.

“Bad luck you getting the push.”

The assigner usually left it to colleagues to announce a dismissal, and she thanked Lars for taking the trouble, given his condition. He expanded.

“Nobody blames you, not directly.” He counted the reasons for dismissal by extending fingers from his free fist. “Assuming the assignment of a fellow guider without permission; practising outside the appointed zone; failure to report illegal activity by a foreigner – to be fair, it could happen to any one of us. It was the Chinese guy. He brought you down with him. Never liked him, myself. Devious.”

“Actually, he tried to save me. He stopped me being arrested.”

Lars Chance laughed. “That’s something. You’d have been put away for ever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I heard your Mr Wong will be deported – exchanged for goods. He’ll be back home in no time. But who’ll serve his sentence here? Someone will have to. It’s the law.”

Janice had not thought of it like that. The protesting callcar operator, Charlie, came to mind. “I’ll expect they’ll find someone.”

“They always do,” agreed Lars Chance, moving Janice’s legs to improve his position on the bed. “What will you do – when you’re out of here?”

“I don’t know for sure,” she told him, truthfully. It would be some time later, after shuffling thoughts around in the relative quiet of the nights, before she did know for sure. For the present, she was content to return to her dozing while Lars Chance watched Match of Next Week on the ward’s big educator screen.

Janice was expelled from the schospital early, when it was realised her private medical care subscription would be unlikely to continue as she no longer had an employer. Care through the free national health service is granted to needy patients only after life has expired. Supported on crutches, she caught a holdtight home. The compartment smelt rank: the malfunctioning catercator had failed to detect expired food for disposal. With the door of her compartment chocked open, and the heartbeat generator on full soothe, she sought out some old spectacles and went through the messages on the homecator.

A formal notice of dismissal from Cultexfo; expulsion from the Guild of guiders; a fixed penalty from the credit station imposed for account suspension; a threat of eviction from the compartment for unauthorised non-occupancy; a substantial claim for traumatic disorientation from the owner of the one-mo that hit her; and a charge from the crushing company for the removal and subsequent recycling of her own one-mo.

There was also a message from Mr Wong, from China.

*Miss Annison, please accept my sincere apologies for what has happened. Have a happy life.*

## bl r l nd

Passers-by in Central Zone, a couple of days later, may have noticed the bespectacled figure in a long pale-blue waterproof conveying herself with the aid of poverty-issue crutches, an overly packed backpack over her shoulders, a look of another world about her – but it is most unlikely.

Residents of Creative Zone, the writers and screeners who swell out the area north of Central, they who are trained to notice the multitudinous minute details that define an individual's character, they who can fabricate the most engrossing stories from everyday commonplaces – these creative beings may have made a mental note of the figure, as it swing-stepped through their dreamy domain. If any so did, then a hint of Janice is bound to appear, somewhere, in a future work of fancy.

Her legs hurt, and the crutches were chafing at her underarms. She was unfamiliar with the area and, without a palmcator, there was no certainty of location. Her credit station had refused to restore her account because their biometric matcher rejected the cracks in her bones. Unable to transfer credit to her palmcator, the device having amazingly survived the accident, she had left it behind. In fact, she had thrown it away.

Wherever she was on the map she did not possess, that place was already beyond the point of no return. Her body would not endure a round journey. Besides, there was nowhere to return to: the eviction notice on the compartment, after careful and sympathetic consideration by the rent extraction agent, had been served. It was a decision she fully accepted. Non-occupancy of accommodation in Central Zone is a disgraceful thing – it isn't fair on the others. Her stay in schospital without consent for residential absence could, according to the agent, have meant big trouble for her under someone less understanding.

One disadvantage that the writers and screeners speak of in relation to their otherwise placid enclave is its proximity to the Northern Bundle. Convenient for travel links, but understandably displeasing to the sensitive aesthete. It is not just

## bl r l nd

the constant drone. The Northern Bundle, like all superways, was resolutely laid down through city and country when the earlier networks of transport became completely gridlocked. Nobody knew what to do with the old, so no one did much at all. As a consequence, straddling every Bundle are rusting ranks of redundant road and railware as far as the eye may wish to see. The Creative Zone is blighted by the legacy, though it has to be said that many are the writers and screeners who, in their search for elusive inspiration, will wander down and gaze on the endless lines of metal corpses with a sigh and perhaps a tear of nostalgia.

Janice reached the Northern Bundle and, having no better plan, followed the rough shoulder: a lone pedestrian beside a wide ribbon of teeming traffic lanes where pedestrians are not encouraged to venture; indeed are forbidden to venture for reasons of safety and of not being hit and schospitalised by a fast-moving one-mo.

Ahead of her, half on the shoulder, a stationary freighter blocked her path. She would have to go around it, treading very uneven ground, in order to continue. Picking her way from behind the giant vehicle, she came across the operator, urinating against its side. In an attempt to preserve propriety, she turned, but in so doing stumbled and fell headlong into some clumpy grass. Fastening his trousers, the operator came to her aid.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he helped her up and on to her crutches.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she replied, fighting nausea.

The operator adjusted the backpack on her shoulders.

“You don’t look too good. I’ve got a tea dispenser in the cab. Would you like some?”

“No thank you,” she said. Then, “Yes, I would, please.”

The cab, suspended under the massive body, was spacious – easily as big as her compartment – and comfortable. The operator helped her remove the backpack and ordered plant tea for two.

“There. You can have a shot of hooch in it, if you like.”

## bl r l nd

“Tea on its own should do the trick, thank you.”

The operator poured a generous measure of spirit into his own cup.

“Are you going to North?”

Janice did not know exactly where she was going. Or even vaguely.

“Yes. North.”

“Alone?”

A nod.

“On foot?”

“Sort of,” she smiled. “Is it far?”

Her host signalled his amusement at the question by exaggerating an act of calculation.

“Let’s see, now. I’d say half a day for half the way – that’s in this.” He gestured the freighter. “It’ll be nightfall when I reach North – given a clear lane.”

Janice sipped the tea. North seemed rather ambitious.

“Want a hitch?” His question caught her off guard.

“No.” The word came out as a response of alarm.

“It’d be quicker than on those.” He indicated the crutches, resting by the seat.

“I don’t...”

“And safer, I’d say.”

She put down the cup and bit her lip.

“Yes, all right.” An impulse. “Take me to North.”

The operator looked across at her. Janice threw her head back.

“You can shag me if you want. The only thing I have left is my intacta. I may as well lose that along with everything else.”

A laugh from her host. A long laugh.

“Dear me. I don’t want a shag. I don’t want anything, except your company.”

She was relieved. Shagging, the way couples did it on the screen, looked awkward; she was not sure it would be possible, with legs that did not bend at the knee, to heave up and down, up and down, above another body.

He was putting away the flask.

## bl r l nd

“Will you be accepting that hitch?”

“Yes,” she said with certainty. “I will.”

The vehicle pulled off the rough shoulder and gathered speed in the freighter lane. It was quieter in the cab than Janice would have expected, and the ride was as smooth as a one-mo.

“I’m Malc. It’s short for Malek,” the operator told her.

“I’m Jan. Short for Janice.”

They exchanged some personal history. Janice told Malc she had made the decision to give up a life of routine in favour of a little adventure, to see how people lived in other parts of the country, while there was still time. In turn, she learnt that Malc had been in the military, serving in a place that sounded like Half-gammy Stan. There, Malc had protected the poppy fields, against draught and insects. The crop, as Janice knew from government information screencasts, was essential to EK’s continued contentment. Stan had been a quiet posting, Malc told her, with not much to do after the day’s dusting and weed pulling. So he had left the military and returned to EK to become a freighter operator.

“I expect you see all the country,” she said.

“Go everywhere, but never see a thing,” he replied. Janice smiled at the irony.

A sign announced they were approaching a road station. Janice, who needed a toilet, asked Malc to pull in, euphemistically citing the plant tea. At the road station, she fell asleep in the toilet cubicle. When she returned to the freighter area, Malc had gone. It didn’t matter – she’d had the foresight to bring her backsack with her. She asked someone for directions to the nearest settlement, which was Commuter Fortress, which sounded interesting. Leaving the road station, she followed a one-mo track and, after a while, arrived at a broad ditch that extended as a wide curve in both directions until out of sight.

On the opposite bank, a high fence of stout wood prevented a view beyond. The one-mo track was joined near the ditch by a

paycar road; the two, combined, led to a stub-jetty. Directly across from the jetty, a raised drawbridge was held between two towers joined by an overarching security cabin. The windows of the cabin were darkened and Janice could see no watchers, but she could feel the scrutiny. Two unlit searchlights, each mounted either end of the cabin, became monstrous unblinking eyes.

A one-mo arrived from the Bundle and the drawbridge was lowered. Janice caught a glimpse of neat brick-effect homes. On her side of the ditch, set against a background of open country, stood a solitary mock-brick erection. A board on posts announced 'FreeRange Quality Show Home'. There was someone inside the construction, looking out at her. Janice felt suddenly exhausted. The walk from the road station had removed all sensation from her limbs, though through the numbness she expected really they hurt. She approached the show home.

A young man, not unlike her erstwhile colleague Lars Chance in appearance and wearing a similar bright green suit, greeted her with an enthusiastic smile. He helped her through the door.

"Good afternoon, madam. Welcome to FreeRange Quality Homes." He sang the company's promotional jingle: "FRQ is what we do-o."

The young man adjusted his string tie.

"My name's Arden. That's Arden Keen, by the way. May I show you round?"

"Could I trouble you for a drink of water, please?" asked Janice, sure she was near to collapse.

"Certainly, madam. I'll just go and get one for you. Take a seat, please. That one there." The young man left the room and Janice, backpack detached, fell back into a sumptuous bodychair, adjusted to 'laze'. The relief was delicious.

Janice cast her eyes around. The property looked spacious – about half the size of Grassy's. It was decorated and furnished in the style of home interiors depicted in screen dramas: she had a momentary mental picture of a newly killed body lying in the middle of the floor. On the wall where she would have mounted

her heartbeat generator, a panel displayed a long number which increased by one unit approximately every second. When the young man returned with a tumbler of water, she asked him what the number referred to.

“That’s the typical value of a home here at Commuter Fortress. Every unit is equipped with a price monitor. Buyers insist.”

She took a mouthful. The young man continued.

“The rate of increase slows down at night. We sell during the day, mostly.”

Janice asked him why the show home was located on the outside of the Fortress.

“We get a lot of weekend wannabuyers. It’s only fair on residents that we interview on this side.”

“Am I a wannabuyer?”

Arden smiled.

“I wouldn’t put you in that category, madam.”

He turned serious, as if remembering something important. “Everyone who comes through the door must be treated as a potential buyer, no matter what their appearance.”

It was a line taken from the FreeRange Quality Homes training event. He hoped he had the wording exact. To handle well a visit from one of the company’s sales inspectors was to advance your own career. To receive such a visit in the first place meant that job promotion was being considered. The inspectors were known for donning the most unlikely disguises, to trick the unsuspecting saleser. This inspector, lazing in the bodychair, was very good. Arden could think of only one detail that was not right.

“Excuse me for asking, madam. Where did you park your vehicle?” Was he being too clever? Or would it go in his favour? The training event has emphasised assessment by vehicle. ‘Know the model, know the punter.’

“I don’t have a vehicle. I was brought by a freighter, and I walked the rest.”

“I see.”

He kept a straight face. The test was going to be a toughie. “Would you like to look round now, madam?”

“No. I just want to rest a while, on this comfortable comfortable bodychair, if that’s all right.”

“No trouble.”

Wishing to prolong the period of rest, Janice asked about the interviewing of wannabuys that Arden had mentioned. He decided to answer her questions as if she knew absolutely nothing, an approach that would demonstrate he knew absolutely everything.

A buyer of a new home, he explained in a training event voice, was about to commit to a debt greater than that of some small countries. While debt was good, the loan on a new home would take many generations to repay. It was imperative that the potential buyer understood the concept of genealogical spreading. Gay partnerships were the trickiest cases since there would be no descendants to service the loan.

“What would you say to a gay?” asked Janice.

“I key Gay Dominance, every time. They do the inheritance downlining – the whole package. They’re bang on.”

She asked for some more water. While Arden was away, she tried to stand, but could not.

With a refilled tumbler in her hand, Janice enquired about security in a Fortress home.

“Security is our priority,” chirped Arden. “That’s what the buyer wants. That’s what we supply.”

“Security from what, exactly?”

“Security from the world. It’s a dangerous place out there. Anything can happen. People expect to be safe when they come home.”

“Protected by a moat and drawbridge. Like castles of old.” Janice suppressed a yawn.

“And the best security team. Nothing gets by them, I can tell you. They shot a guy only last week. Turns out he was a cold saleser – good luck charms or something. Well, he’s cold now.”

“It’s the womb mentality. People should learn to leave the

## bl r l nd

womb.” The words were thoughts given voice. Janice uttered them having recalled them from a source she could not recall, without knowing why. They seemed lost on the young man, who smiled out of politeness. It didn’t matter. She felt so very tired.

“Arden...?”

“Arden Keen.”

“Would you mind awfully if I stayed here, till the morning. I really don’t feel up to moving on. It’s my legs. Perhaps I could use the bedroom.”

Uncertainty gripped Arden. The training event had not included this scenario. Better play it cool.

“There isn’t a bedroom. The show home runs on telesperience. The style can be changed at a call. The bed isn’t real. Nothing is real, except for this bodychair and my desk. And a small catercator, in the kitchen. The rest disappears when I call ‘off’ and go home.”

“I can manage with a bodychair and catercator, I’m sure.” Janice smiled. Her eyelids weighed heavily.

He followed the reasoning. The company had recognised his potential and were about to offer him something big. Perhaps selling refurbished oil rigs as homes for the obscenely rich. But first, the company must test beyond the training event. He could see that.

Was he expected to let a wannabuy spend the night in a show home? How would that prove his responsibility to the company? Maybe he was being pushed to see how far he would go in order to secure a sale.

What if the batty middle-aged woman in the long pale-blue waterproof with her scruffy backpack, and taped-up spectacles and poverty-issue crutches – what if she were not merely a sales inspector overplaying the role but someone from higher management? FreeRange Quality folklore told of such stunts.

That thing she said, ‘people should learn to leave the womb’ – it was a code, true? The line had been whispered as a prompt. It meant, ‘talented young salesers with ambition should learn to think outside the frame, to take control of every situation, no

## bl r l nd

matter how bizarre'. It meant that higher management wanted him to pass this test with a plus – that's why the big performance. That's why the coded prompt.

Arden smiled, the winning beam he used when closing a sale.

"Are you sure, madam?"

Janice was sure. To demonstrate, she further reclined the bodychair and pulled her waterproof tightly round. Her eyes closed by themselves. One last question.

"Arden?"

"Arden Keen."

"Will I be all right here, Arden? What about the telesperience equipment? It must be valuable. What about the world?"

She could hear the young man smile.

"Safe as the castles you mentioned, madam. Between you and me, nothing ever happens around here. Don't even have to lock the door."

A bright new day would have suited Janice. Instead, the sky was overcast and threatening. But she did feel much better – the result of a sound night's sleep on the bodychair, a filling breakfast from the caterator, and a cheery send-off from Arden Keen. She hoped the young man would not get into trouble from his employers for his kindness.

The closing plan of the previous day – not a plan as such, just a sketchy intention – had been to visit the people of Community Fortress. She had wanted to learn more about the inhabitants, the residents of the Fortress homes. Were they really so intimidated by the world outside their own lives and routines that they needed to retreat behind a moat and high fence before they could sleep? That had been the intention but, overnight, the curiosity had drained away. Weren't they all just ordinary people who had been sold a fear of fear?

As she retraced the route over open land towards the road station, one-mos sped by, on their way to the Bundle and then most certainly to the city. Some riders looked her way but none stopped to her extended thumb. Janice, if a one-mo rider on the

## bl r l nd

way to work, would not have stopped either.

A fine drizzle started to fall. Over to her left, the paycar road traced a different route from the Fortress to the Bundle. The chance of a hitch in a paycar is greater than one in a one-mo. With care, she stepped across the rough heath until she reached the paycar road. Some operators looked her way, but none stopped to her extended thumb. The drizzle was proceeding to rain. Unlike the one-mo track, which ran almost straight, the paycar road skirted a group of trees. An informal footpath led into the trees, promising a short cut. The Bundle could not be far; a hitch seemed unlikely and now also unnecessary. Janice took the footpath.

The trees were more extensive when reached than they had looked from the road. Among them, the path split into two. A sense of direction was something Janice regularly regretted the lack of as a guider. She had once bought one of those adjustable compasses, for which the needle can be turned to accord with the believed direction of travel, but it had not helped. At the fork, a decision made: she could always return and take the other branch if the one chosen led her astray.

Under the sheltering canopy of trees, the going was fairly dry. The way ran slightly downhill and, at first, progress was not difficult. When the path met and crossed another, Janice accepted she might be going the wrong way. Rather than return to the original fork, she could take one of the arms of the crossing path, which would deliver her out of the trees to the Bundle. This was her reasoning.

The new path was slippery, and the downslope steep. To attempt to stop for rest would have been to risk a loss of footing. Her legs began to ache, and the chafing sores returned to her underarms.

Because of a life spent in the city, Janice had not entered many woods. That is to say, she had not entered any. In truth, she had never before entered the countryside – not on foot. There had always been National Park, where she had dined assignees, and where customers at their tables float leisurely through nature's

wild treasures. But National Park is holograms. This was real – and beginning to frighten her. People told bad stories of the countryside.

The trees would end shortly, she told herself. Could she not hear the Bundle? Sudden cracks of noise, and shouts. Had there been an accident on one of the lanes? According to the last screen news she had watched before vacating the compartment, the next North Bundle pile-up would not be for another few days.

A crutch slid out on a patch of mud, and she fell sideways into the undergrowth which concealed a deep gully which chuted her down and down into more growth which was wet and horrible and clingy. Briefly stunned, she lay awhile. The dizziness passed. Movement hurt. Groping about despite the pain, she located one crutch and then the other; and found her spectacles, too, although one lens had fallen out and the remaining one was shattered. The shouting was getting nearer, and the cracks of noise. Perhaps the sensible thing was to stay still and wait till someone found her, sensible because it was the only thing. She called out.

“Over here. I’m over here.”

A green waterboot appeared in front of her face. A voice called out above her, a man’s voice.

“Bag!”

Two green waterboots, then four. Two male voices.

“Dreadful state. Gammy leg.”

“Leave it for the dogs, what?”

Janice pulled herself up to a sitting position. The two voices, delivered in clipped syllables, emanated from figures dressed in thick jackets which in colour matched the waterboots, and wearing flattened hats. They held long-guns.

“Can you help me, please?”

One of the men turned sharply and discharged his long-gun upwards into a tree. A short screech, and something fell from the tree to the ground.

“Bag!”

## bl r l nd

The other poked Janice brusquely with the barrel of his long-gun as he acknowledged the bag.

“Well done, old chap. That’s nineteen, would you say?”

“A full score, actually.”

“Good show.”

They both squatted and looked closely at Janice.

“What about this one? Put it out of its misery, what?”

“I’d say so.”

Janice tried to stand.

“Help me. I’m hurt.”

“Let’s get it over with, shall we.” A long-gun was raised and Janice found herself looking directly into twinned bores. She shouted at the top of her voice.

*“Stop! Help me!”*

“It’s making the devil’s own squealing. They know what’s to come, if you’d ask me.”

Janice threw herself at the man holding the gun. From a low position, she could grab only his legs. He stumbled but remained upright.

“Good Lord! Some fight in this one, what? Got a mind to have it mounted, don’t you know.”

“Please, please! What are you doing?” Janice cried.

A woman appeared. She was dressed as the men, and balanced a long-gun along an extended arm.

“What goes on? One getting the better of you?” she smirked.

“Refuses to go down.” The accosted man had his long-gun aimed at Janice’s temple.

Janice clasped her hands together and appealed to the woman.

“Please help me. Don’t let them shoot me.”

The woman struck Janice hard across the neck with a side chop of a hand. Janice reeled under the blow and fought for air.

“The dogs prefer live meat. I’ll take it.”

Grabbing her by the hair, the woman pulled Janice through the foliage. Janice, bent double, tried to stagger after the woman, but was soon being dragged along.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why...?” she wailed. They

## bl r l nd

came to a clearing in which stood an open truck the size of a council refcol. Janice was momentarily in the air then in the back of the truck. Dead and writhing birds and small animals surrounded her. Blood oozed everywhere in the rain. She could not crawl, so she sobbed.

After uncounted hours in which more birds and animals were thrown in the truck, and consciousness was drifted in and out of, and a jolting journey was endured, the vehicle tipped its load on to a hard earth surface inside a large shed. Janice pulled herself up on her arms and, awkwardly, removed gore from her hair and face.

“Stop this! I’m human – can’t you see?”

Above her stood a man holding a long stick with metal prongs at its end, which he began to plunge into bodies on the pile. He was not one of the long-gun men. Bending, he pulled her to a kneeling position.

“Help me.” Janice felt weak, weaker than she could ever remember. Without a word, the man dragged her away from the pile before letting her drop on some straw. Then he spoke: a hiss of advice carried on a command.

“Stay there. Be quiet. Play dead.”

He returned to the pile and began separating the creatures by type. A few moments later, one of the long-gun men entered the shed. The two men spoke; the man with the prongs poked among the fur and feathers; the long-gun man raised a hand in approval and left. Her rescuer came over to her.

“Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Janice lost touch with time and reality. She remembered a cup being held to her mouth, her face being wiped, words of stern comfort – but the rest was merciful sleep. When she awoke properly, to sunshine seeping in through slits between boards, she found herself in a hut, in which she was not alone. Fowl clucked idly around her and shook the occasional wing. Her bed was a mat of straw. On trying to get up, she discovered that her legs had no feeling or movement in them whatsoever. Outside,

## bl r l nd

from a distance, came the intermittent pop of gunfire.

She lay listening awhile, then closed her eyes. The dozing was broken by the opening of a door: a rectangle of bright day, partially filled by the silhouette of a man.

“Feeling better, are we?”

It was the voice of the man who had rescued her from the pile of kill. With an effort, she sat up. He left the door ajar and she welcomed the fresh air as he crouched and handed her a bowl.

“Eat this. We have to get you on your feet and on your way.”

The bowl contained a substance that looked like the discharge from a malfunctioning catercator. But it was warm, and tasted better than hunger. She felt able to speak.

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Pellet. I’m the game disposer.”

“Mine’s Janice. Jan.”

She ate a little. The man held a bottle out for her.

“Where am I?” she asked. “Who are those people?”

“You’re at Splatter Hall. This is the country seat – the main residence – of the Upjohn-Winstanleys. A family of the highest social sitting. You have the chicken house.”

“Where they Winstanleys – those men and that woman?”

“They were indeed. Lord Ruouffplaigh and Lady Peculia Upjohn-Winstanley, and the Young Master, also Ruouffplaigh. His lordship is the 127th Earl of Splatter, and the young master will be the 128th. Their line goes back to the first.”

She finished the contents of the bowl.

“They very nearly killed me.”

Pellet stood.

“Oh, that! It’s not their fault. They couldn’t see you – not as a person. It’s their upbringing.”

“But I am a person.”

“Not to them, you’re not. They only recognise horses and dogs. And game disposers. Everything else exists purely for sport.”

Janice dabbed some liquid from the bottle on her cheeks and brow.

## bl r l nd

“Sport?”

“Yes, there to be killed. Hunted, trapped, snared, netted, shot, speared, hooked. It’s life.”

“I don’t follow.”

Pellet knelt and fluffed up the straw at her back. She leaned forward while he did so.

“You can’t have conservation if you don’t kill everything, can you, my dear. The world would be overrun.”

Janice eased herself against the rearranged straw.

“But if everything is killed, like it is here, where does new life come from?”

“We order from Amazon.”

She wished her legs hurt. Pain would be better than no feeling at all.

“Amazon? What’s that?”

He stood.

“Where’s that, you mean. It used to be a great forest. Cut down now, most of it. Some splendid golf courses in its stead, they tell me, though I’ve not been myself. Anyway, the wildlife has nowhere to go. So it’s shipped over here, to country estates like Splatter. It’s a kindness.”

“Brought over to be killed?”

“Or to perish from the cold. Saving conservation. Must keep numbers down.”

Pellet was at the door, once more a silhouette.

“How long will I have to stay here, in the chicken house?”

“It’s the safest place. They only come for the chickens when there’s nothing else left.”

On the third day, by Janice’s reckoning of time, in the hut – she wondered if all convalescence in the countryside took place among the chickens – Pellet brought a wheelchair. Speaking with an urgency she had not heard since the big shed, he showed her it through the open door.

“Let’s try you out in this.”

Arms round his neck, Janice was carried from the hut and

## bl r l nd

placed in the seat.

“It’s one they keep for guests who get shot by mistake,” the game disposer told her. “I think it’s time you went on your way. His Lordship has been asking where you are. There’s a blank of wall in the gutting parlour, and he has a mind to mount a head.”

He stood back.

“Best give it a trot.”

Janice called out ‘go’. Nothing happened. Then ‘forward’. Pellet could not understand what she was doing.

“Why are you talking to it? Dead things can’t hear.”

“One-mos do. Anything with voice-op does.”

“One-mos? Voice-op?”

She threw up a hand. “It doesn’t matter.”

At her side, he showed her the controls.

“Here. You wind it up with this...” A two-handed key protruded from a motor box attached to the frame under an arm grip. He wound until the key would turn no more.

“Then you push this little lever, so...” The wheelchair started off at running speed, bumping over the uneven cobbled surface of the courtyard, and threatening to topple.

“Steer it, with the handgrips!” he shouted after her. “Slow it down. Pull the lever back towards you.”

After ten minutes’ practice, Janice felt she had acquired reasonable control of the equipment. It allowed her mobility, but she had a question.

“Where am I supposed to take it?”

Pellet rubbed his chin.

“There’s the problem.”

But he had an idea. He had to go to Moor and introduce parrots into the wild in time for the summer shoot. He would hide her and the wheelchair in the truck, On arrival, she could slip away from his lordship’s land. The journey would take but two days.

“Two days!” she exclaimed. “How much land do they have?”

“They own most of the country,” Pellet told her, surprised she did not know. “They and the other high sitting families,

together.”

“Who gives them it?”

“They just take it, I suppose. I haven’t given it any thought. Nobody stops them.”

Janice practised again on the wheelchair, driving it round inside the chicken house until the noise of protesting fowl threatened to be heard over at the big house. She assembled her belongings for the journey. Pellet had not been able to find any spectacles to replace the ones broken in the wood and later lost in the carnage pile, but had recovered her backpack. It had shot holes in it; she vaguely recalled it flying through the air, as she lay in the open kill truck, and it landing beside her, and someone shouting ‘bag!’. He had found her waterproof, too, though it was reduced to tatters, and was stained indelibly. From the big house, Pellet brought an old hunting coat for her to wear – black, with red inner lining, or perhaps red with a black lining – and some riding boots since she had only one shoe. There was no sign of the crutches.

During the journey stages, Janice was confined to the canvas-covered back of the truck surrounded by cages of complaining parrots. At the end of the first day, she was helped out by Pellet and into a hunting lodge the size of Grassy’s home. Her host prepared and lit a fire in an open grate then wrung the neck of a parrot for supper.

They talked before settling down to sleep. Pellet, flask of spirit at hand, had tales to tell about the Upjohn-Winstanleys, about their weird ways and sexual antics, which Janice promised not to pass on to anyone. In order to respect the promise, the game disposer’s tales cannot be reproduced here.

Late into the second afternoon, the truck stopped and Pellet, pulling back the canvas, announced they had reached journey’s end, for which Janice was grateful. They had arrived at a high stone wall that stretched out of sight in both directions. In the wall was a small door of solid oak. Janice knew it was solid oak

## bl r l nd

because Pellet told her. He had a key with which he opened the door. It creaked back on rusty hinges. She steered the wheelchair through the gap. There was a moment when the hubs jammed, and she expressed doubt the chair would pass; Pellet gave it a powerful shove with the heel of his boot.

Through the door, the land was open and bleak and covered with short coarse grass. A wind howled. Hardly anywhere was it wheelchair friendly.

“You’re free now,” Pellet hailed.

“Where are we?” she asked, and wondered why she had not invited details of their destination earlier.

“I couldn’t tell you and be right,” replied the game disposer. He rubbed his chin before pointing almost directly away from the wall. “I’d have a try that way if I were you.”

“And what’s over there?”

“Grim-up-North.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a town.”

“What’s it like?”

“Haven’t been. Our kind of people don’t wander into them sort of places.”

He handed her the backpack, bid her goodbye and good luck. Cautiously, she steered to avoid thick clumps of vegetation and small pools of black water. When a little distance had been successfully covered, she looked back to wave. She could make out Pellet standing by the door in the high long wall. For a moment, she thought he was holding his long-gun and had it aimed at her, before dismissing the vision as a trick of myopia.

Two shots rang out. Something whizzed by her ear; another something entered the soft ground near a wheel with a soft ‘phutt’. More shots were fired as she pushed the lever for maximum speed and steered the wheelchair clumsily into a small hollow. Minutes went by with no further shots. She tried to creep the wheelchair from the hollow but the wheels would grip only after sharp pushes and pulls of the lever. Ejecting from the dip, she half expected to have the barrel of the long-gun thrust

## bl r l nd

in her face, but the door in the wall was closed and Pellet gone. The noise of frantic fluttering accompanied by angry squawking erupted from the other side of the wall, and a column of birds rose up into the sky. She could imagine their fine colours. Gun shots rang out, and birds began to tumble. In her head, she could hear a shout.

‘Bag!’

Stopping only to rewind the clockwork, a frequent requirement, Janice meandered across the moor till the sun began to dip. The wind was turning cool, a test for the protective quality of the hunting coat. For hours, she had seen nothing but spiky grass and mossy rocks.

A woman on her own, with uncorrected eyesight, her legs crippled; a woman lacking a sense of direction in a landscape that is not only inhospitable but apparently unending – that woman could be forgiven for feeling afraid. Janice desperately wanted a pee.

She stopped the wheelchair and crawled from it to the base of boulder. After glorious evacuation, she pulled herself up on the rock, which stood half her standing height (had she been able to stand), and carried out some physical exercise, by swinging her hips from side to side, in order to restore circulation to her numbed lower body. Presently, she rested and surveyed the blurred horizon. A memory came to her. Some years previous, she had taken a trip to Sisters Bronto country in a virtual vacation lounge just down the road from the Cultexfo office. That had been a pleasant afternoon. Unlike the current experience, the lounge had been equipped with catercator.

In the near distance, the land dropped away. It also changed hue. A dark shape could be discerned. By pressing fingers into the outer corners of both eyes, she was able to increase her optical range. There was a river down below. And a town. With renewed purpose, she heaved herself back into the wheelchair, wound the key, and set off as fast as the terrain would allow.

## bl r l nd

‘Grim-up-North welcomes care —’ read the sign. A lower corner of it was missing, possibly the result of a collision. A broken sign carrying a broken message seemed appropriate to her situation. She applied the brake but the pads were no match for the incredibly steep street that ran between stepped terraces of narrow stone-faced buildings downhill into the town, where lights appeared as darkness fell. Janice steered the wheelchair in a zig-zag fashion to reduce momentum. Her action was being watched from the walkway.

“Are you all right there?” a man asked. “Would you like some help?”

“No thank you,” Janice replied between exertions. “I can manage by myself.”

“Are you from South, by any chance?” he enquired. “You sound as if you might be.”

“Yes,” she said, as she neared a kerb and began the next turn.

The man changed accent.

“Eeh, lass. Ah can gi’ thee ’and if tha wants one. Thee only ’as to ask, tha knows.”

Janice tugged hard at the steering handgrips.

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Tha cums from South, miss. Wha’ can ah do?”

“What has – that to do – with it?” Janice was made increasingly breathless by the effort. “I can’t – catch – what you’re – saying.”

She was losing control of the chair. The man, who had descended the incline as she crossed from kerb to kerb, stepped out into the road and grabbed the handbar at the chair’s back to bring her gently to a halt against a granite carriage mount. He returned to his first accent.

“That’s better.”

Coming round to face her, he smiled. It was the first smile she had seen since Adrian Keen’s.

“People from South believe that’s the way we normally talk up here. They refuse to treat us as real if we don’t. The thing is, they don’t *want* to understand us.”

## bl r l nd

“I’m sure that’s not correct.”

The man held out a hand. “The name’s Phil.”

She took it. The man’s clasp made her wince. “I’m Jan.”

Without being asked, he retook the handbar and controlled the chair down the hill.

“Where are you making for?” Phil asked.

“I – er – haven’t made up my mind, yet. I suppose I’m looking for somewhere to stay.”

“There’s the Pit Head, or the Mineshaft. That’s just been done out in authentic coalface decor. Very nice inside.”

“Thank you. I’ll bear it in mind.”

They reached the bottom of the hill, a T-junction.

Phil asked, “Will you be all right from here? The Shaft’s just along the street there.” He pointed to the right. “I can come with you if you’d like. It’s no bother.”

“Thank you very much, but...”

He waited.

“You see...” Janice looked down into her lap. This was embarrassing.

“Don’t tell me – you’re short.”

She looked up.

“Short?”

“Short of brass?”

“Brass?”

Phil slid a hand inside his jacket and brought out a roll of poverty notes. Under the light of a street lamp, he peeled some from the roll and handed her the rest.

“Here. Take that. I know right enough what it’s like to be short. You can let me have it back on pay day.”

“But – I hardly know you,” she protested.

“You don’t need to know me to borrow from me, do you?”

“I mean, *you* hardly know *me*.”

“I do now – I’ve just lent you a decent night’s sleep in a snug bed. That’ll do for friendship, won’t it?”

She continued to protest. Phil placed the notes in her hand, curling his fingers around hers around the roll. He straightened.

## bl r l nd

“See you later.”

Janice watched him stride away. Softly, to herself:

“Yes. See you later.”

In the short distance to the Mineshaft, Janice was offered help three times. Outside the establishment, which was set in a long terrace of tall narrow frontages as lined the steep hill into the town, a jogger-by temporarily diverted to pull the wheelchair up the steps without a word being spoken. The deed removed any indecision she may have harboured about entering. Inside the lobby, a voice greeted her.

“Hello, there.”

A man appeared, not so young, not so old, dressed as a porter might be in one of the more expensive rotels, though the clothes were faded.

“Hello. I think I would like to reserve a room.”

“Reserve? Certainly, when for?”

“Tonight. If you have one available.”

The man checked a register lying open on a polished side table, which served as the reception desk, and raised a thumb.

“You’re from South, aren’t you?” he asked.

“That’s right.”

Crossing the lobby, he bent down behind a coat-catch in one corner. Returning to her, he held a pair of clogs in one hand and a cloth cap in the other. Deftly, he removed his shoes and wiggled his feet into the clogs. Then, with cloth cap thrown across the head, he conducted a brief jig.

“Tha’s welcum any time o’er yon doorstep. Tha’ll a’ways fahnd a glad face ’ereabahts.”

Janice gave a wave of irritation. She was tired.

“Please let’s not go through all that. Just be yourself.”

The man said sorry and removed the clogs and cap. Southerners expected it, he told her. Not familiar with the denominations of the poverty notes, she held out the whole roll. He counted out the notes in her hand and informed her she had far more than would cover a room for one night – enough in fact for a

month's stay. In any case, he added, Janice was entitled to a disabled discount.

'Disabled'. Why did it sound like some sort of an insult? Why did she feel a twinge of annoyance on every occasion someone offered help, which in Grim-up-North turned out to be frequent? The silliness that overcame local people immediately they discovered she came from South was soon dealt with: she would start each conversation by declaring her family were from North, which may have been true for all she knew. But how to stop people wanting to assist all the time?

The Mineshaft, as Phil had told her, was indeed nice inside. Her room, the bed, the ecstasy of being able to wash body and hair with soap and hot water – the bathing restored confidence and would gradually get rid of the chicken hut smell. However would she repay Phil, however? She did not know how to contact him or even his family name; she regretted accepting the notes from him, though what would she have done without? There was also Grassy's kindness to repay. 'Debt is good', goes the government slogan, but consumer debt is one thing while indebtedness to strangers who help is quite something else. Janice Annison, Janice told herself, had to find herself a job.

After a few days of rest and washing, Janice wheeled along to the town's employment bureau, a gaunt building indistinguishable from adjacent properties apart from an engraved lintel that read 'Labour Exchange'. There was a queue which she positioned herself at the end of. Soon, she was at its head as individuals in the line stood aside and signalled her to pass forward.

A friendly clerker recorded her details, which were few. He was interested to learn that her family had come from North. 'Had she worked before?' he asked. Although the name Cultexfo was unknown to him, her experience with foreigners was exactly what he wanted to hear – he had the perfect vacancy for her.

From directions given by people asked in the street, she arrived at the address on the card which the clerker had handed

her. It was another narrow stone construction – in truth, every building in Grim-up-North is narrow and of stone, except for the Town Hall, which is fat and stoned – but she could not be sure of the title of the organisation because the script on the wall board was all curly and meaningless to her.

The outer door was wedged open with a cobblestone – a local practice. Through an inner door she found a room of women dressed in saris (Janice was acquainted with the type of dress from having once been taken by an assignee to *Saris*, that noted eatery just outside Central Zone which provides the very best in simulated ethnic fare). The women seemed pleased by her arrival and talked excitedly among themselves in another language. Janice was shown a desk which had on it an old-fashioned writecator, and was handed documents in the same curly script as appeared on the board outside. From the gestures of the women, she assumed the job was hers.

Although she was without a precise description of her duties, the work she found to do was evidently carried out to the satisfaction of the sari women. When the ancient callcator on her desk trilled, she would answer it. If the keyer spoke in the other language, the mouthspeaker was passed to one of the women in the room. Otherwise, she would make a careful note of the message and place it in a tray with all the previous careful notes.

She maintained stationery supplies; saw that tradespeople were paid, handing them poverty tokens taken from an unlocked casket kept under the desk; did dozens of things. Sometimes the women brought children to the office, and Janice would play with them. The children, who could switch language when they wanted, called her the lady with wheels, which she supposed she was.

“Do you live?” one child asked, a little boy.

“Do I live?”

“Yes, in a garage?” continued the question.

“I live,” she replied with a smile. “I live.”

## bl r l nd

Her wages were paid by weekly transfer direct to her hand via a small brown square envelope which contained a fold of poverty notes. With her first receipts of income she replaced the notes taken from Phil's roll removed to pay for the room at the Mineshaft, put a deposit on some new spectacles from the town's only eyetician, purchased some clothes at a street market, and replaced the hunting coat with a long pale-blue waterproof.

One sweltering day, a heavily built man, a poor breather and wearing a dark businesser suit that was a little tight, lurched in, looked around at the faces, and chose to speak to her.

"Can you help us, love?"

"I will if I can. What is it you would like?"

"I'm putting up for election. I wunder, could you 'ang a poster or two in t' window for us?"

"You don't have to use the accent. My family came from North."

"What accent's that, luv?"

Janice let it go. She accepted the posters, and unrolled them. 'JACK FURLOUGH is counting on you're vote'. Untidy text under a grainy picture of the man in his straining suit. Tactfully, she pointed out the grammatical error. The man grunted.

"Out o' kilter, is it? You'd best 'ave a look at t' rest."

"I imagine they'll be all the same."

"No, I mean t' rest of stuff. Leaflets and t' like."

So it came to pass that, by day, Janice worked in the office of the organisation she did not know the name of and, in the evenings, she applied grammar and style to Jack's election campaign.

As already said, elections on a national basis were no longer viewed as necessary following privatisation of the government. The Save Democracy programme saw to it that the country knew well in advance which party would hold power. And whichever party this may be, that the (same) Primed Minister was its leader. Everyone could see the efficiency in the system.

In North, though, things were done different. Jack said so.

## bl r l nd

Elections had to be held so as to fill the fat Town Hall with representatives from the town's various groups. Jack stood for himself.

Some candidates favoured the completely unrealistic pledge, assuring the impossible and guaranteeing the extremely unlikely. Others preferred a message of doom and gloom, declaring that things were getting worse with the passage of each day. Jack was one of the former. He explained to Janice that the electorate loved to hear that life was going to be fantabulous, even if it never was, and never could be. His election pledge was that, were he to be elected, Grim-up-North would become the nation's envy, a world class centre of excellence (this after Janice's correction of the spelling), and every home would have an inside toilet within his own lifetime.

Drawing accusations of playing dirty, one of the candidates received personal endorsement by a leading national politician who was not (of course) one of the dummies in the House of the People but was often mistaken for one. Out of curiosity, Janice went along to see the Primed Deputy Minister give a speech in a sausage factory.

"Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking I would just like to say a few words on behalf of my colleague who has done some much tireless work in the community and who looks forward to standing as your only realistic choice in the forthcoming election when we hope to get some decent people in the town hall here in Grim and drive the agenda for change which this part of the country badly needs if it is to maintain its position in the challenge that faces every one of us both now and in the future..."

Jack Furlough failed to win the popular support that would have secured him a seat in the Town Hall, but it was not through a lack of effort on Janice's part. Whatever the weather, she rode her clockwork wheelchair up and down steep streets and across uneven backstreets each evening during the weeks in the run-up to the election as she distributed leaflets which proclaimed to dear friends that Jack Furlough was their man. She was by his side on the declaration platform to learn, at a little after

## bl r l nd

midnight, of his minimal following. And to hear him announce his acceptance of defeat.

“Bugger politics. Bugger all politicians. It’s a right waste o’ time and always ’as been, if you ask me.”

The words resounded in her ears as she wound and wheeled from the Town Hall to the Shaft through the empty wet streets.

There is perhaps an irony to be found in the following. When, during the election campaign, Janice had weaved through even the town’s most forbidding neighbourhoods, she experienced no trouble. On coming face-to-face in a shadowy cut-through with a boisterous trio of bruisers canvassing for a candidate who vociferously opposed Jack Furlough and his pledges, one of the three broke away to assist Janice over a footbridge across the canal at the end of the passage (although that same individual also dropped packs of his own leaflets into Janice’s bag while doing so). Elsewhere, bored youths hanging around on street corners stood back to let her pass or offered her drinks from alcans. It may seem odd, therefore, that a busy shopping street in broad daylight was the setting for Janice, in a lunch break, to be abducted.

With no warning whatsoever, the wheelchair was grabbed from behind. At speed, it was pushed down a side alley, along a back street, and into an abandoned mill – all the while Janice shouting at and hitting the hooded perpetrator with a paper carrier containing sandwiches and a squirty of slimmer’s slime.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the mill’s mouldy interior, she made out two additional figures, also hooded. Hands fidgeted menacingly around the handles of wooden clubs.

“What do you want from me?” she asked, trying to sound firm. The abductor flicked back his hood. He was young and black. Janice had seen black people before, on the Undergrind. The youth grinned: perfect white teeth between broad lips that had recently embraced a cream cake.

“We don’t wahnt naatin’ wid you,” he said. “We jes’ wahnt de wheels.”

## bl r l nd

The others laughed inside their hoods.

“Whatever would you want with a wheelchair?”

“Well, daat’s a plexin’ questiahn.” He stood above her, knees almost touching hers.

Janice felt her patience slipping away.

“Look, do you have to speak in that – that ridiculous manner? What’s wrong with you people?”

“You ferrin’ to us blaacks, lady?”

“No. I’m referring to the whole confounded town. You all talk as if you’re stereotypes in a bad fiction. Have you any idea how wearying it is?”

The youth dropped his smile and stepped back. The other two lowered their clubs and removed their hoods. They, too, were young and black.

“Sorry,” the leader said in a quite normal accent. “We’re expected to talk like that.”

“Well, that’s all right then, if you’re sorry. At least we’re getting somewhere. Now, why do you want my wheels?”

He looked down at his feet.

“We don’t, really. We steal because we’re black, and that’s what blacks are supposed to do.”

A voice, also quite normal if a little defensive, cut in from the side.

“But we only steal things we don’t need and which can be of no possible use to us.”

Janice expressed her exasperation.

“Tch!” To the leader: “What’s your name?”

“Jeremy.”

“Hello, Jeremy, I’m Janice. Both our names begin with a ‘J’.”

He shook her extended hand and smiled.

“Tell me, Jeremy, what is this nonsense? Who says you’re supposed to steal?”

Jeremy lifted his hands to signify the world.

“Everyone. That’s what black youths spend their days doing. The mediers say so, the policers say so, the dummies say so.”

“And so you do it?”

## bl r l nd

“We just want to be good citizens. We want to fit in with society’s expectations of us. If not that, then chaos will ensue.”

Jeremy pushed Janice out into the sunshine. She delved inside the carrier and pulled out a mashed sandwich. Jeremy looked on.

“I’m sorry about your sandwiches. Shall I send for some fresh?”

“No. That’s how I bought them.”

He started to push her slowly along the street, in the direction of the shops. The other two followed at a distance, trailing their clubs behind them.

“Jeremy, you have to stop thinking like you do.”

“And think how?”

“You have to behave to your own standard, not how you believe society condemns you to behave.”

She offered him a sandwich, but he declined.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” he told her. “What you say makes sense. Are you a philosopher?”

“Of course it makes sense. We should each set the gait for our lives, instead of dancing to the tune of others. And, no, I’m not a philosopher, though I might give it a go one day.”

Janice chewed. The sandwiches were not up to much anyway. Mouselet; she wished she had gone for the ground slug.

“You know, Janice, you are so right. The traditionalist approach has obvious shortcomings. Postmodernism provides us with a better tool for personal analysis. Don’t you think?”

“If you say so. If it stops you stealing a wheelchair from under an innocent woman buying her lunch.”

“Yes. I’m truly sorry about that. It must have given you a fright.”

“It’s all right – I don’t do fright any more.”

They reached the shopping street, and Janice wound the wheelchair key.

“Goodbye, Jeremy. Remember what I said to you.”

“Goodbye, Janice. I will. Everything’s lucid to me now, thanks to you.”

From one of the others, now by her side:

## bl r l nd

“Is there anything you’d like us to steal for you before you go?”

To celebrate her birthday, Janice posted herself a card, addressed to the office where she worked minus the name of the organisation. The sari women clucked around her desk, each picking up and inspecting the card. One spoke to Janice in the language of the place, and motioned with fingers walking. *Would Janice like to come? Hand to chest. With me? With us? Hand to mouth. To eat? Hand to clock. At tea-time? Come for tea? Come home with us for a birthday tea?*

“Yes. I’d be delighted,” Janice replied.

When the day’s work was over, Janice went with the women. Theirs was an isolated home, perhaps four times the size of Grassy’s, on the edge of town where it overlooked moorland. She was met by other women in saris, and many excited children. One of the women from the office introduced Janice.

“This is Janice. She is our most valued receptioner.”

“Hello,” said Janice. She turned to the woman from the office.

“Can you tell them I am pleased to be invited.”

“You can tell them yourself, if you like. Everyone is understanding you.”

“Welcome to our humble home,” a home women said.

Janice, sensing bewilderment, looked up at the woman from the office. “But I thought...”

“People expect us to not know the language of the country that we are living in.”

“So you pretend to – not?”

“That is correct. We do not wish to add to the confusion that is already everywhere in the world.”

In her head, Janice sighed.

By her own recollection, it was one of the best birthday teas she had ever had. The last few birthdays – a fair few, it should be said – had been celebrated alone in her compartment, the special day quickly forgotten by herself and never remembered by

anyone else. At this treat, the food was excellent: ethnic, like at *Saris*, but with taste and flavour added. Afterwards, there were games with the children, home played music, and conversation with the women.

Janice learnt that the office she had worked in for the last few weeks existed in order to foster relations between the townspeople of Grim-up-North and Islamic Republic.

“Do you come from Islamic Republic?” Janice enquired.

“No, no – we are Hindus.”

“I see,” replied Janice, who did not see.

Gradually, though, the position became clearer. The office, once an ordinary dwelling, had been acquired by the Town Hall as a centre where townsfolk and residents of Islamic Republic could come together. But no one came together, from either group, so the premises were offered to the sari women.

“It makes no difference who is in there, you know,” her host told her. “We are all the same to the Town Hall.”

“And are relations fostered, now that you – we – are in there?” Janice asked, hoping the question was sensible.

“Oh, yes, indeed so. The people of Grim-up-North are staying on their side of the border, and the people of Islamic Republic are staying on the other side. It is very good relations.”

“But the border – it’s...” Janice’s landgraphy failed her. “...a long long way away. Isn’t it?”

“The border is across the moor.” Her host pointed out of the window. Janice felt astonished.

“Really? How big is it?”

“Are you meaning the moor?”

“No – Islamic Republic.”

“How big is Islamic Republic?” Her host turned and spoke in the tongue of the office to an elder. Back to Janice.

“It is exceedingly big. It is everywhere.”

On the morning after the birthday tea, Janice arrived at the office and thanked the sari women. None of them could understand her, but they seemed to grasp the meaning. She

## bl r l nd

wanted to learn more about Islamic Republic and was sorry they had resumed their sham language divide.

It was time to be honest with herself, Janice decided. Birthdays have that effect. She had grown tired of the town. Yes, the people were friendly and agreeable to be among, except when they were being daft, which was often. Yes, the place had offered her shelter when she had none, and a job. She had tracked down and repaid the kind Phil; had bought things that made her feel good; had learned much. But the time had come to move on. Janice wanted to go home.

Preparations were made. She handed in her letter of resignation to the sari women, who smiled without comprehension. She purchased a new pull-case and threw away the old bullet-holed backsack, which still had straw from the chicken hut caught in its zip. And, on her last weekend, she wheeled the undemanding distance across the moor in bright sunshine towards Islamic Republic.

It lay in the opposite direction from the town to that of the country seat of the Upjohn-Winstanleys. Janice had asked the mail deliverer if he knew that family. He said he did not. Had never heard the name. Had never heard of Splatter Hall. As far as he was concerned, the family and their land which took two days to cross in the back of a truck did not exist. But he knew Islamic Republic, and drew her a map on the back of someone's envelope for getting there.

A concrete wall, twice the height of a person, higher than the Splatter stone wall, crossed the moor. The entrance to Islamic Republic comprised an ornate wrought iron double gate and overhead. A script strange to Janice, but different from the one used at the office, filled numerous boards attached to the ironwork. One board, mounted on the overhead, she could read. It said: 'Welcome to Islam. Please wait for instruction.'

The gates were not completely closed and she could have entered had she chosen to do so. Ahead lay a stretch of open ground leading to a deserted street lined with low white

## bl r l nd

windowless buildings. The earth was bare and dusty, in contrast to the damp springy grass of the moor. It looked a different world.

A figure, body and head concealed under white robe and hood, advanced unhurriedly towards the gates from the street, producing a stir of dust around sandalled feet. Only when the figure had reached her and spoke could Janice be sure it was a woman. Brown eyes searched out between folds of cloth; Janice was vaguely reminded of the slot in the door of the development workers' building in Troddenville.

"We are at prayer," the woman said.

"I don't wish to intrude," replied Janice. "It's just that I'm going home tomorrow, to South – and I wanted to have a look at you – this place – before leaving. It may be my only chance."

"We are at prayer," the wrapped figure repeated. It could have been the end of the conversation had Janice not persisted. It crossed her mind that the woman would not be able to hear well under the heavy covering, so she raised her volume.

"Are you a guider?"

A pause before the reply.

"Yes. I am a guider."

"So am I. My name's Janice Annison. I'm with – used to be with – the Cultural Exchange Forum. You may have heard of us."

Another pause.

"No. I have not heard of you."

Janice eased her wheelchair through the gap between the gates. The woman did not move.

"I wondered if I could have a quick look round."

A pause, it seemed, would precede every response from the shrouded figure.

"We are at prayer."

"When will the prayer end?" Janice enquired.

"The prayer has no end."

Janice thought she could hear a kind of wail. It rose and fell and sounded to be coming from beyond the buildings of the

street. She realised it had been there all the time, and perhaps noticed it only because it had stopped.

“What was that?” she enquired, as something to say.

“A call to prayer.”

An opportunity.

“Then you must go, to pray. Maybe I could come with you.”

It worked. After the standard pause, the woman agreed.

“Very well. The mosque is this way.”

As the woman turned and walked, Janice gave the motor a wind. Stirring the dust, the wheelchair caught up to continue beside the woman, who crossed the open ground as if Janice was not present.

Ahead of them, a short way into the street, the mosque became evident. Its domed gilded roof glistened in the sunshine. The woman came behind the wheelchair and started to push.

They passed a building on the left, standing alone and slightly back from the street. Its frontage, like the entrance to Islamic Republic, carried boards bearing script.

“What is that place?” Janice the one-time guider asked her present-time guider.

“It is a home for retired suicide bombers.”

Janice was not sure how to reply, so did not. Her companion filled the silence.

“Suicide bombers,” the woman repeated. From inside the head covering came a noise of contempt, like a dry spit. “They seek the death of others so that they can enter Paradise where they believe awaits a pool of the purest water, and for each man many willing virgins.”

“They do?”

“Yes. They are fools.” Another dry spit. “They go to Paradise, they find a filthy pond and some disagreeable penguins.”

“Penguins?”

“Yes. It is a mistake in translation. The early writings say ‘penguins’.”

Janice was confused.

“But you said this was a home for *retired* suicide bombers.”

## bl r l nd

“Yes. They know well this world is the nearest a thinker of evil will get to Paradise. So they don’t explode. They leave the detonator at home, or they take the wrong backpack. But they are hailed by other fools as martyrs for trying.” Dry spit, louder.

The two women had reached the mosque. Her guider pushed Janice through an entrance. The interior was far bigger than Janice expected – it was enormous. She marvelled at the intricate decoration of the walls and ceiling. A carved divide separated two groups, each many in number, of bodies knelt upright on mats.

“Men and women cannot pray together,” her guider informed in a whisper that was barely audible through the cloth. “We pray for different things.”

A voice rang out from a central point that Janice could not see. All the bodies fell forward, as one, to bring their heads to the floor. The guider, herself on the floor, hissed at Janice.

“You, too.”

Janice hissed back.

“I can’t. My legs...”

“You can. You must.”

By an action of the arms that she had developed to leave the chair for the toilet, the bath, the bed, Janice added a kick, a thrust of the legs. She stood. She was able to stand! She wanted to yell out.

“Get down on the mat!” her companion hissed again, urgently.

Janice joined the woman, the entire company, on the floor.

“But I can stand,” she whispered.

“Of course you can.”

After a few minutes devotion, the guider rose and led Janice outside. Not in the chair, but behind it, pushing it, letting it support her, Janice entered the strong sunshine.

“It’s a miracle! Look at me! I can walk!” she exclaimed excitedly.

“It is not a miracle. You lacked faith, that is all. It is now mercifully restored.”

“I thought I was crippled for life.”

## bl r l nd

“Because that is what you wanted to think. You must pray for those who are truly crippled.”

With jerky movement, but getting steadier, Janice walked down the middle of the deserted dusty street holding on to the chair’s bar. Her guider followed. Janice imagined her smiling under the thick cloth.

Presently, the woman hastened to her side.

“You must go now. Soon, they will be coming out. It will not be a good time.”

Janice didn’t care. Her legs were getting stronger by the step. She wasn’t really listening.

“Hey, look at me.”

“Hurry. Please sit in the chair and I will push.”

“But why? I’m doing fine,” Janice retorted. “I’m whole again.”

“We are all whole in the eyes of the Holy One. Please.”

Janice allowed herself to be sat in the chair and pushed, at a brisk pace. But not without question.

“Why do we have to rush like this?”

“Your people do bad things to our people. Our people do bad things back. It is stupid. It is the way of the world. It is the way of men.” A dry spit.

The gates were ajar, just as before. The woman pushed the wheelchair through, stopping at the grass of the moor.

“You are safe now. You can walk from here. Use your legs.”

Janice rose from the chair. There was some pain, but there was also the glorious knowledge that her once shattered legs were healed. With one hand on the chair’s bar, she turned to the figure, who had retreated inside the gates.

“But I don’t know your name, or anything about you. I haven’t seen your face.”

“It doesn’t matter. We shall meet again, one day, in a better place. Then we shall talk into eternity. Janice Annison.”

The gates were closing.

“At least tell me where you’re from. You and the others. How did Islamic Republic get here?”

Pause.

## bl r l nd

“It was always here.”

Through the bars, between boards, Janice watched the anonymous guider stepping towards the street, hooded head held high, kicking up a cloud of dust, as a petulant child will do.

She walked a distance, relying on the wheelchair for support, and a further distance pulling it behind her. There were moments when she let it run freely by her side under its own power. This was the happiest day of her life. For the rest of the path back to town, she climbed in and rode so as not to tire her revitalised legs. Who could she thank? There must be someone.

The farewell to Grim-up-North was tinged with sadness, with appreciation, with a certain fondness, with other emotions. But there was no sense of having belonged. It was a primitive place, she felt – another existence altogether. Janice imagined she would never return.

To save money, she travelled immigrant class. This meant crawling into and sharing with several others a hidden compartment under a freighter body. This choice would have not been possible were she still dependant on a wheelchair. The chair she donated, with private ceremony, to a chariters' shop. Before she had left the shop, a young man bounded in and bought it for sitting in while playing a flute for poverty tokens in the main shopping street. Apparently, his previous wheelchair had been stolen by four youths wearing hoods.

The journey south along the Northern Bundle was uneventful. Mostly, the other passengers slept the countless hours. There was not a great deal else to do, since the chamber was in total darkness, had little ventilation, and offered space hardly enough to turn.

Under cover of darkness, the travellers were released into a field on the rim of Capital. Janice thanked the operator for his good timekeeping and a smooth ride. With the help of a walking stick, and dragging the pull-case with the other hand, she made for a road station, where she spent the night, drinking cup after

cup of frogbroth to avoid being asked to leave the refreshment area.

At daybreak, she obtained a paycar hitch into the city from a freelance wrist-restraint saleser. George told her that business was booming. Leaving his old employer, Hurtz Interrogation Tools, to go solo was the best thing he had ever done. At the park near the Statue of the Great Visionary, he stopped the paycar under a tree and showed her his best selling model. Arms behind her, she let him demonstrate how easy the restraints were to snap lock. It was stuffy in the paycar, he said, and he opened her waterproof, and unbuttoned the top of her shirt. A polcar pulled up next to them. George suddenly remembered a meeting he had to attend, and released her. Janice got out and thanked him for the hitch.

The first task on reaching Capital is to find somewhere to stay. Normally, there is space down by the river, though the comfort of a bench to oneself is a rare luxury. But the newly confident Janice wanted better. She went to see the understanding rent extraction agent who had handled her compartment. The hope was he may have a similar let available.

“You’re in luck,” he told her. “I can let you have your old place back.”

“You can? That’s wonderful,” Janice replied, clapping her hands together like a little girl.

“The present tenant is just about to leave.”

“When exactly, do you know?”

“As soon as I can get an eviction squad round. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“And I can move in – tomorrow?”

“You can move in today, for all I care,” he sighed. There was a condition: no more unauthorised non-occupancy. He did not want the dompol on his back, like last time. She promised to observe the regulations. And something else: she would have to pay rent for the weeks she had been away.

“Even though I wasn’t a tenant?” she queried.

## bl r l nd

“Look on it as a reservation charge,” the agent said. “Like I’ve been holding the place for you, see.” Another sigh. “Of, course, if you don’t want it..”

“No, no. I’m happy to pay the back rent.” She wanted her luck to hold.

It did. Her body matched the biometric record held by her credit station now that her bones had healed, and she was welcomed as a valued customer. A charge would be made for the test, the comparison, the recognition, and for preparing the charge. Janice thanked the customer services imposer.

She walked to her old address, and keyed the compad.

“Who is there, please?” asked a female voice, suspicious and metallic through the decrepit wiring.

“My name’s Janice. Janice Annison. I’m the new tenant. It’s all right, I used to live here before.”

“I don’t know you.”

A short crackle meant the connection was cut. Janice rekeyed and appealed directly to the lens of the security camereye.

“Look, perhaps we could talk about this.”

“I say nothing to no one. Goodbye.”

“*Don’t!*” she yelled. She composed herself before continuing.

“Just let me in and we can sort this out, I’m sure.” A pace back from the camereye. “I’m by myself – there’s no one with me. All right?”

The locks released and she entered the building. Up the stairs, the door to the familiar compartment was open. She deposited her pull-case and walking stick, and squeezed by the one-mo in the hallway. Stick-on lettering across the top of the one-mo’s front screen spelt the name ‘Nita’. Into the compartment.

Nita was a big woman, in the sense of being obese, and wore an orange housecoat over a nightdress. The bed was out of the wall; they sat on its edge to talk.

“I work night,” Nita said, to explain the situation. “I sleep during day.”

“In that case, I’m sorry to have disturbed you,” Janice replied

in apology.

“Does not matter. You say you tenant? What it mean?”

“Well, the agent said you’re having to leave. He’s letting me have the tenancy back. I thought I’d come round to measure up.”

The woman was agitated. An orange arm rose up; for a moment, Janice feared she was about to be struck.

“Why I having to leave? I pay bond, I pay rent, I make no noise.”

“I’m only telling you what the agent told me.” Janice sensed there was going to be a problem. “Why don’t you key the agent and sort it out? Now.”

Nita began to sob. Her face was cupped in chubby hands. Janice wanted the situation resolving. She glanced round the flat. Her heartbeat generator was gone; the catercator had been replaced by a family-sized model; a telesperience system was mounted where her old flatscreen had been. The woman’s palmcator – the object of Janice’s search – lay on the floor, under the bed. Picking it up, she handed it to Nita.

“Here. Key the agent. He’s very helpful.”

“No.” Nita, still sobbing, pushed it away.

“I have good job in EK, I work so hard. Why I have to leave compartment?”

Janice keyed the agent. He told her the squad was on its way. Removal would take a few minutes tops.

“But why are you evicting Ms...”

“Pakka,” Nita supplied, through her hands.

“...Ms Packer?”

The agent thought it a question that need not be asked, and said so. Janice was left to assume he also thought it a question that need not be answered. She went on.

“I don’t think it’s right that Ms Packer should be thrown out on to the street. Not on my behalf.”

“So?” On the palmcator screen, he affected distraction.

“Look – can’t we both use the compartment – at least for the time being?”

## bl r l nd

“If you like. Double rent, mind. There’d be two of you.”

“That’s fair.”

“And it’s a single. The dompol won’t be very pleased.”

She hadn’t thought about the legalities. But the agent had a solution.

“Then again, they don’t have to know, do they?”

“No?”

“All I have to do is key the one name on the form, don’t I.”

The agent was inspecting his fingernails.

“I suppose so.”

“It’ll cost, mind. My job’s on the line, here. You know what the dompol are like. They’ll beat you to a stain sooner than hear you out.”

An amount was agreed and, for a second time that day, Janice thanked the agent for his help.

Nita felt much better. Janice instructed her to roll back into bed and get some sleep while she herself had some more business to attend to. Leaving the pull-case propped against Nita’s one-mo, Janice walked to the heart of the city. She inhaled deeply and smiled with eyes closed. It was good to be back.

At the offices of Cultexfo, she asked to see the assigner. Lars Chance greeted her.

“Ah! A stranger in our midst. Do come in.”

“Hello, Lars. Where’s...”

“The assigner? You’re looking at him.”

Lars Chance updated Janice. His predecessor had OD’d and attempted to fly from the roof of the building. Seeing the figure fall by the window, Lars had been the first to put in for the newly vacant post. Janice, he told her as he tilted back his chair and placed hands behind head, would have been the obvious choice for assigner – had she kept her nose clean.

“Anyway, what have you been doing with yourself?” he enquired of her.

“I’ve been travelling. It’s good for a guider.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that,” Lars Chance grimaced.

## bl r l nd

“Where did you go?”

“I’ve been staying in Grim-up-North,” she told him, with a tone of achievement.

“North. That’s where the essential workers come from, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is.”

He asked her the purpose of her visit to the office. Looking for a job, she replied. If Cultexfo were short of guiders, she could make herself available. Lars Chance laughed out loud.

“I don’t think so, Jan. Much as you were appreciated – and I personally don’t hold it against you —” he threw a nod to one side as a gesture of the unspoken, “I have to be frank. Things have changed hereabouts.”

“In what way?”

“We’re more focused. We’re really at the core of the nation’s culture.”

“I didn’t think we had it wrong before,” Janice returned, honestly. “All I’m asking for is another chance.”

“Another chance? One Chance does for all.”

She had heard him pun his name this way before.

“All right, Jan. Tell you what. If you agree to resit the guider exam, and you pass, then you’re in the team colours. I can’t be fairer than that, true?”

In the examination pod, denied palmcator and notes, Janice failed the exam.

*Who was voted best dressed player in the last final between Whatfor and Asthmatic? Which referee was forced to ignore a game of deliberate fouls when he swallowed the whistle? Explain the chest-butting rule...*

Failed miserably.

The sneer from Lars Chance as he opened the door for her to leave spurred her to Plan B. At the Guild of Guiders, after listening to her full apology for the Wong affair followed by a promise that nothing like it would ever happen again, the tourmasters decided Janice could operate as a guider within the limits of the Tourist Zone during the hours of daylight and early evening provided her assignees were of female or appropriately

altered gender, and held EK citizenship. Janice would have leapt with joy had it not have put a possible strain on her legs. She wanted to dance, to hug passers-by in the street. Hey, she was in business!

Janitours proved a good idea. There were waiting lists of people wanting to see the sights and sites of Capital. The average delay for security clearance to visit Capital from other parts of the country is over a year, but with a pre-booked guider, the wait can be reduced to months. In the period until her own assignees began to arrive, Janice stood in for other independent guiders who were unable to do the tourist circuit for reasons of – for example – physical attack, nervous breakdown, disappearance.

The domestic arrangement with Nita worked reasonably well, once a few home rules had been established. In truth, compatibility was a gradual process.

After her success on that first day back in Capital, Janice returned to the flat, in a mood for celebration. Nita was getting ready for a night's work.

“What is it you do, exactly?” Janice called through the shower curtain to a soaped Nita.

“I work in schospital. I teacher-nurse. Teach your language. Give out pills. I work very hard.”

“I hope you don't give out the pills to the kids,” joked Janice.

“They, too. They have knives, hold to throat. Want pills.”

“Are there many kids to teach at night?” During her own time in schospital, she could not recall having seen or heard many pupils after midnight.

“New push. Education three times. Children must learn all hours. Primed Minister say so. Schospital very busy. I work very hard.”

“I'm sure you do, Nita.” Janice lifted the bed into the wall to make some room. Nita emerged from the shower cubicle, which would only just accept her bulk, and started to dry herself.

“You good woman, Janice. I know. We will be big friends.”

There were two questions Janice felt she needed to clear

## bl r l nd

before the woman, dressing in a blue uniform and knitted ribbed cardigan, departed for the schospital.

“I used to have a one-mo, like yours, Nita. When I lived here before. I may need to have one again. That is, I *will* need to have one again. But there is no space.”

“You use one-mo. Day. I don’t need one-mo day. Sleep.”

“Are you sure? I’ll go halves – that goes without saying.”

“One-mo no licence. You get licence, you use.”

Janice looked towards the hallway, and the shabby dented vehicle.

“It’s not licensed? But you do use it?”

“Of course. How else I get to schospital? Holdtight no good when rain, when wind blow.”

“No, they can be uncomfortable when the weather’s bad,” agreed Janice.

A thought came to her. “But how can you use a one-mo without a licence? The router won’t work without a licence.” And another thought, not expressed: foreigners were not allowed to use one-mos.

Nita was almost ready to leave, and was showing irritation at Janice’s quizzing.

“When first I come here, message from router company say sorry for no crisis credit previous request. Comcator error. Company say okay to use one-mo track now. So I buy one-mo, second-hand. Two careful owners. Heavy duty axle. Charge router to name.”

“But that’s *my* name!” exclaimed Janice.

“Thank you, Janice. We already big friends. Must go now.” The large woman went into the entrance and heaved herself into the one-mo which rocked and sagged under the load.

“Nita!” Janice caught her before the cover was lowered. “How would I switch on the telesperience?” It seemed a tactful way of asking to use the equipment.

“Telesperience, on’. Like that. You talk, it obey, same as one-mo. Not same as kids.” Down went the cover; Janice heard ‘Central Schospital. Emergency’.

The door opened and the one-mo pulled out of the compartment and on to the residents' ramp where it scuttled down to the street. Janice watched from above as it rapidly picked up speed, its lights flashing. Emergency routing was charged at twice standard tariff. She recovered the pull-case, dashed against a pillar by the departing one-mo, and returned inside.

"Telesperience, on." A voice asked her which service. "News."

A holographic male newsreader appeared in the room. He told Janice the policers would catch the notorious North Bundle rapist in two days' time, but not until after the meal break. In the meantime, an image was shown to warn vulnerable women not to approach. George, the wrist-restraint saleser strode in front of the newsreader. He brandished an example of his best selling model, and leered at her, like he had when unbuttoning her coat and shirt in the park near the Statue of the Great Visionary.

As the Janitours enterprise developed, the domestic arrangement grew easier. Each morning, Nita would arrive back at the compartment from the schospital; the two sharers would exchange chat for a few minutes; and Janice would leave in the one-mo. The reverse happened in the evening. Occasionally, Nita had a night off. These evenings at home threatened at first to be problematic: when Janice wanted the bed down to sleep, Nita had only the foot of the bed on which to sit in order to telesperience. If Nita rocked in uncontrolled mirth at something happening around her, as she was apt to do, the motion put Janice's feet and legs at risk of being crushed. Also, Nita invariably remained wide awake during the night. Her almost unbroken eating, a noisy process, disturbed Janice's rest. The difficulty was solved by Janice's agreeing to sleep in the one-mo during Nita's off-duty nights.

Janice arrived home after a particular day's guiding to find Nita jammed in the shower cubicle. Nita was of the opinion that the hot water had made her flesh swell. Staying calm, Janice told the

## bl r l nd

wedged woman to rub soap on every part of her body she could reach. The lubrication worked and, with Janice's tugging, Nita came tumbling out of the cubicle, throwing Janice to the floor. The incident made Nita fearful of standing in the shower. The following evening, Janice found her sitting naked on a stool half in and half out the cubicle.

"Janice. We very big friends. Wash back, please. Shoulders, too. Shampoo hair."

Washing Nita became Janice's first task on returning home in the evening.

Domestic harmony was not to last, however. The end began when Nita's sister arrived unannounced for a stay. Tina was the double of Nita. The week presented a logistical challenge as regards where to sleep, and – when all three were present – how to move about.

Tina took a liking to Janice. When it was Tina's turn to be washed, Nita having left for the schospital, the two women talked. Unlike her sister, Tina spoke fluently.

"Has Nita told you the good news?"

"What good news is that?"

"She's been offered a unit in Essential Worker Zone. Isn't it nice?"

Janice was confused. "But I thought..."

"Thought what, my dear?" And, in relation to the washing: "A little more round the front, here. That's it."

"I thought essential worker units were for EK citizens only."

"They are."

"Then – how has Nita been able to...?"

"Simple, silly. Because Nita is an EK citizen. A bit higher – yes, there. Lovely."

Janice remained confused. "All this time, I was under the impression Nita was – was not from EK."

"Goodness. We're as Eekaysian as you, dear. Just at the round there – ooh! Now the other one – yes! Nita talks and acts the way she does because we're from a multicultural background.

## bl r l nd

She was never properly integrated. Our parents didn't even tell us we lived in EK until we were teenagers. I used to be like her once."

"Were you?"

"But it's such an effort."

Tina eased herself forward on the stool.

"It wouldn't be too much trouble to do the legs and thighs, would it, dear? Nita says you're wonderful."

Awkwardly, Janice got down on her knees to wash the guest's legs. Tina continued.

"As I was saying, Nita has been offered a unit. There weren't any available when she first came to Capital. That's why they allowed her to have this place."

"I was wondering about that," Janice interjected. She had wanted to clear the point with Nita but had somehow never found the voice.

"The schospital pulled some strings, evidently. She was warned it would only be temporary," Tina went on. "Inside, as well, please. Right to the top, if you wouldn't mind."

Janice did to the top.

"Is she going to accept, do you know?"

"Dead right, she is. An essential worker unit comes vacant between hardly ever and never. She'd be a fool not to."

Tina motioned for Janice to start drying her with a towel. Janice was finding it difficult to contain her excitement. She hoped her tone sounded casual.

"When will she be moving, do you think?"

"Nita? She won't."

The towel was directed by pats of the hand to the desired part of the body.

"She won't?" asked Janice, confusion returning.

"No. She thought it would be better for you to take the unit. You'd have your own space, and everything. It's very nice, they say. Not as much room as you have here, obviously, but very cosy. And there's even a little window box, if you'll agree to the service charge. I felt you should know."

The following Sunday, Tina left for – well, to be truthful, Janice knew not where, nor indeed why she had made the visit in the first place, thought it was not for sightseeing. Nita retired to bed, to snore and fart. Janice had made sure she had no assignee to show around the city. She took the one-mo out on to the Northern Bundle and set the router for Commuter Fortress. Her intention was to call on Arden Keen in the show home, not as a passing lame woman asking for some water and in desperate need of rest, but as a potential customer of FreeRange Quality Homes. There was no possibility of her buying a place but a palmcator browse had found some properties offered to let. She owed it to Arden, to earn him the commission in return for his act of compassion.

Nita's one-mo creaked and made disconcerting mechanical noises though it routed accurately. The track skirted Creation Zone to join the Bundle and Janice recognised the spot she had reached on foot before accepting the hitch with Malc in the freighter. From the road station where she had fallen asleep in the toilet, she expected the one-mo to take the track she had followed on crutches, those many weeks ago. But the one-mo came to a halt shortly after leaving the road station, at a barrier, a substantial yellow and red striped pole across the track, with long metal spikes radiating along its length. She opened the one-mo's cover.

"I'm on my way to the show home," she told the securiter.

"What show home?" he asked.

"Over there, at Commuter Fortress."

The securiter gave a snort. "Commuter Fortress is gone."

"Gone? But it's on the router."

"Can't always trust the router. See for yourself if you don't believe me. Land's been built on."

By raising herself up, Janice could observe that the once open countryside had disappeared under homes, row upon row, packed together. The expanse continued out of sight.

"I can't believe it! I was here not so long ago, and there was

nothing on that land.”

“No mystery. Inflatahome.”

Janice gave a nod to signify that, with the mention of the name, there was indeed no mystery.

“So, where is the show home now?”

The securiter began to inspect the one-mo.

“There isn’t one. Sales are done over the palmcator.”

“And lets? There are some properties to let, I understand.”

He crouched down beside the vehicle, and tapped against the sides with a knuckle.

“Likewise palmcator. Is this your one-mo?”

“No. I share it.”

“Have you an operator’s licence?”

“Yes. I have it with me.”

One hand on the ground, he peered underneath the vehicle.

“The subframe’s on its way out – do you know?”

He stood and went to the back, returning on the other side.

“Is the vehicle licensed?”

“Yes. I have that with me, too.”

A boot kicked at the underskirt. “Hasn’t always been licensed, has it?”

“I’m not sure. Does it matter? It’s licensed now.” She wondered how he could tell, or maybe it was no more than a guess.

He backed away, reducing his interest. His head turned to look over the barrier, towards the residential proliferation.

“Not the same any more. Letting in the riff-raff, if you ask me. Knackered old one-mos everywhere. Renters moving in. Lowers the tone.”

He opened the barrier and the slimcar turned a U to join the opposite track. Before lowering the one-mo’s cover and calling ‘home’, Janice asked the securiter if he knew Arden Keen.

“And why would you be wanting to know about Mr Keen?” he queried.

“I wanted to thank him, that’s all. He was very kind to me once.”

## bl r l nd

“That’s all right, then. We all have Mr Keen to thank. Now on your way, if you don’t mind.”

A new week. The one-mo broke down, and Janice called out OneMoKnight who towed it and mended it and tested it and charged her. Janice raised the subject as she washed Nita.

“I had to have the one-mo repaired today. New suspension frame. Rather expensive, aren’t they.”

“Good job your turn not mine.”

It was the opportunity, Janice decided, to raise other matters, too.

“Your sister tells me you’ve been offered an essential worker unit.”

“My sister tells too much. Not her business.”

“And that you think it would be better if *I* moved into it.”

“Glad you agree.”

Janice used a finger to flick suds of soap from an eye. She had removed her spectacles because they tended to mist up during washing sessions.

“That’s just it, Nita. I don’t agree. I’m not going.”

“Suit yourself. May be only chance.”

Nita used to dry herself until seeing Janice run the towel over Tina. Now, Janice dried Nita.

“The thing is, Nita, why don’t you do the moving? It’s your offer, when all’s said and done.”

“I like here. Near to schospital. Also, last in, first out.”

Janice persisted.

“But this was always going to be temporary for you. You only got it because the schospital used influence.”

Nita gave a sharp laugh.

“You think that all? I tell you something. Agent prefer big women. Business is business, he say.” She swept back her wet hair with a hand. “Hurry, please. I have to go.”

Janice continued to persist.

“This is my compartment, Nita. I lived in it for lots of years. It’s home.”

“You left. Hit the road. Now you get new start. Thank your starry luck. You not even essential worker.”

Janice gave up.

To the east of Capital, along the Eastern Bundle, past the unmarked turn-off for Troddenville and a distance beyond the smog-shrouded sprawl of Industrial Zone Chemical, lies the popular township known as Commuter Islands. It is built on stilts of compressed domestic refuse pegged to the bed of the estuary. Each of the hundreds of chalettes there has a sealed base, like a hull, which allows a movement of lift as the estuary rises due to tide and increases of level in the globally warmed sea. Stilts of fresh refuse are periodically inserted under a floated home, to make it officially land based once again, and therefore subject to property taxes. Residents who believe they are being smart by registering their homes as water craft risk conflict with the law of the land as well as being swept out on the tide, which is against the law of the sea.

It was Janice’s first visit to Commuter Islands. She was in Nita’s one-mo, though not alone. An assignee sat with her, an old lady uninformed of the home-hunting element to the tour. Janice parked the one-mo at the bridge gate and threw back the cover.

“Whatever is that dreadful smell?” the assignee asked.

“It’s the estuary. You soon get used to it,” replied Janice, hoping she was right. “Look, I have to go over and tell security.”

“Off you go, my dear. I’ll wait here and take the air.”

Janice stepped across to the gate hut. A securiter sat behind a desk, his feet on the desk top, watching a portascreen. He made no attempt to smarten.

“You looking for someone?” he asked, without turning. Janice caught a glimpse of the portascreen: a number of naked bodies, of both sexes, were rolling over one another and squealing in what she imagined to be orgasmic delight.

“According to the palmator, you have a chalette to let, here on Commuter Islands. I would like to have a look at it, if that’s

convenient.”

The man looked at her.

“Do I look like a letting agent to you, missus?”

“Ms. No, you don’t. Perhaps you could direct me to the agent.”

“There isn’t one. We don’t need one.” He returned his gaze to the portascreen. A picture adorned one wall of the hut, next to the door. It was a large picture, professionally produced. A picture of Arden Keen, head and shoulders. Smiling, handsome, confident. *FreeRange Quality Homes – FRQ is what we do!*

“Do you know Arden?”

The securiter continued to ogle the squirming bodies. “Mr Keen? Everyone knows Mr Keen. What of it?”

“He’s a personal friend, that’s all.”

Feet from desk. “A friend, of you?”

Janice brushed the picture fondly with the back of fingers.

“Yes. I once stayed over at his place. At his invitation.”

She faced the securiter.

“Give him my regards if you see him. Just say ‘crutches’. He’ll know who you mean.”

The man was standing, brushing crumbs from his grey uniform.

“Crutches?”

“It’s a private joke.”

He was at her side of the desk, calling ‘off’ to the portascreen. Behind her, he opened the door.

“I know which unit it is. I have the key. Let me show you the inside.”

“Are you sure?”

“No trouble. That’s what I’m here for. We’ll take my one-mo.”

When Janice returned to Nita’s one-mo, the old lady was asleep. As gently as possible, Janice removed a piece of wind-blown sticky nappy liner from the old lady’s hair, climbed in, pulled down the cover, and ordered the vehicle away.

## bl ri nd

Within a month, Janice had her own chalette at Commuter Islands. Each morning, she would open the door from her bed and wave to the neighbour who would wave back from her own bed. She would go out on to the tiny deck, rake the night's flotsam from the surface to peer into the dark water, and imagine a fish or a crab looking back at her. After breakfast, she would scrape seagull droppings from her very own pre-used one-mo, and travel the Eastern Bundle in a near gapless line to Capital, where she would meet up with the day's assignee. Janice Annison believed herself the most content woman in the whole wide restricted world.

\* \* \* \* \*

FreeRange Quality Homes is that rare exception, a company endowed with a philosophy that recognises its moral and social responsibilities as well as placing a perfectly normal emphasis on the need to maximise profits at the expense of the customer. The company started on a modest scale when, according to its literature, a small group of skilled craftsmen built homes for discerning commuters, and a dedicated marketing team sold the finished product to buyers wishing for security, peace, exclusivity.

But what sort of a company is it that wants only modest? Not FreeRange. When the government announced that South was to be covered by homes except for areas earmarked for sacrifice to the sea, FreeRange launched Inflatahome. The new line was an immediate runaway success. A home could be ordered through palmcator or even from a streetcator. The goods would be express delivered in a large bubble pack to the allocated plot. Inflation of the contents with an included pump to form a home took the average healthy buyer less than a day. Each weekend, whole communities were created. Sunday evenings became known for their 'bung-in' parties, when people would congregate in their hundreds to celebrate a job swiftly done.

The first Inflatahome newtowns rose on land the company

already owned, swathes of open land around exclusive locations like Commuter Fortress originally purchased in order to preserve the environment and prevent further development. Soon, though, the company was obliged to look elsewhere. High ranking government officials were invited on to the board and given generous share packages in exchange for smoothing the way for national parks and areas of natural beauty to be cleared and flattened for the Inflatatome expansion.

There was opposition; of course there was opposition – what sort of society is it that stands idly by to let its woodlands and wildlife be swept away in favour of carpet urbanisation? FreeRange, though, was true to the values of its founders. It was a caring company. It listened to the protesters. After all, today's protester is tomorrow's customer. And when the difficulty in finding additional sites for inflation came not from protesters or competitors but as a consequence of deliberate flooding, the company came up with an obvious solution. This was to adopt the principle used so successfully at Commuter Islands. Instead of lakes doing nothing – and, from a corporate point of view, lakes do do nothing – they could become lake newtowns, or new laketowns, homes aerated on columns of compressed domestic refuse. Commercial inspiration combined with environmental virtue.

It has to be said, the protesters were not easily assuaged. Green Bit held a campaign. A continuous ring of determined saving hands would link whenever a freighter arrived with fresh compresses to drop into the waters of a shimmering pointless lake. The early encounters resulted in protesters and waste sometimes being bound and stacked together in the water, and it all became rather messy.

FRQ-Inflatatome embarked on a charm defensive. The rebranded company sought an image, a clean, honest, friendly, reassuring all-EK face to represent its corporate ideals. A renown image consultant was brought in to scour the database for an individual who could be the very essence of what the company stood for. The consultant came up with a short-list of

## bl r l nd

one: Arden Keen. Not only was the young man blessed with the perfect physiognomy, he had always been dead weight as far as his regional sales manager was concerned. Willing, yes; personable, yes; but no aggression; no predation. In any case, since the burgeoning success of Inflatahome, the company had no use for a ground sales force.

Arden settled into his new role with ease. He did not let rapid national recognition go to his head. Behind the medier adglare and luxury company pentpad and stretched vipcar there lay humility and gratitude. His ability to identify a member of senior management through the guise of a pathetic lame biddy, to respond to the most stringent testing, to pass at the highest grade – for this he had himself to thank. To the amazingly versatile woman who had put him wickedly through the paces, who had seen the boundless promise in him, who had returned to the boardroom full of recommendation – to her he would be forever indebted.

He had enquired after the woman, but the company was secretive about its high-ups. It said there was no Jan. Nor did it like him asking questions of any kind. His job was to look pretty. This he accepted, though he sensed his path and hers would cross again.

He was soon to prove himself right. It came about like this. The plan submitted by the company was for a new laketown in Central Zone, to be erected on an extension into the very heart of Capital of the existing lake. The proposal was to install first the home-supporting stilts, then let the lake fill around. It was hard to see why anyone would dissent. Some did, however, including the Primed Deputy Minister, whose office would overlook the new water.

Ashantytownbuiltinshitandnowwaysitgoingto happenwhileI'vea nythingtodowithit, he snarled when shown the model. The company realised it had some considerable winning over to do.

Arden was despatched to Commuter Islands. Everyone,

including Green Bit, were happy about the method used there, several years earlier. Heralded as innovative, imaginative, impressive, and praised for high running costs, Commuter Islands had been opened by an actor standing in for no less a personage than a stooge for the King. If an image of Arden strolling around and extolling the concept were to be implanted in the common mind, then the same trust-me face could be imposed on impressions of the Central Zone project. As regards the office of the Primed Deputy Minister, a custom-designed fantasy screen was promised for placing over the offended window which would then present any view he wished.

It was while in Commuter Islands that Arden caught a glimpse of Janice. Waiting for the mediers to set up their equipment, he recognised her without difficulty even as she glided by without looking his way, in a one-mo. The impulse was to wave but he reasoned that the action might break her latest cover: he guessed she was playing the mystery tenant, checking that business was being carried out with the maximum of extortion and the minimum of internal embezzlement.

The securiter sidled up and asked for his autograph.

“For the boy. If it’s not too much trouble, Mr Keen.”

“I’m please to.”

The securiter remembered something.

“There was a woman – a lady asking after you.”

“They all do.”

The securiter gave a laugh in praise of the joke.

“This one said she was a personal friend. It was a small while back, but she said ‘crutches’ and that you’d know what it meant.”

Arden signalled his delight.

“I certainly do.” He thanked the man with a pat on the shoulder. The securiter had more.

“She lives here, in Commuter Islands. In a let, near the sewage outflow.” The man gave another laugh, perhaps at the unlikeliness of the association.

“That’s her, all right,” Arden smiled. Then, confidentially, into the securiter’s ear:

## bl r l nd

“Don’t let on. Just play it as it looks. Say nothing to anyone. Got it?” The words finished on a wink.

The man gave a conspiratorial if uncomprehending nod.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janice could not get the idea out of her head. All the way along the Eastern Bundle to Central Zone she saw, out of the corner of her eye, the retained image of a figure, standing in the open and looking her way as she passed the security hut at Commuter Islands, and half raising a hand. Was it him? It could have been. Had recognition registered at the time, she would have stopped the one-mo to say hello. The more she exercised the fading image, the more sure she became of it being Arden. Oh well, the opportunity would surely come round again. It was pleasing to see that he had made good. That was one nice young fellow who deserved to go places.

When she returned to Commuter Islands after the day’s sight showing, the securiter was hanging around on the pontoon near her chalette. He watched as the one-mo halted at her door. There was food shopping in the back of the one-mo – her catercator was not connected to a T/Store provision network and consequently required manual refills. To Janice’s surprise, the securiter stepped over and offered to help her with the bags. She accepted. When all were unloaded, he moved his head near hers to indicate privacy.

“You know, there’s a clean let just become available at Jetty End. It’s nice out there. Well away from the sewage pipes. Rent’s not much more, either. I can put in a word, if you like.”

She looked at him before replying.

“Thank you, but no thank you. I’m happy with my little home here. The neighbours are quiet, and it’s closer to the Bundle.”

“I just thought you should know. If you change your mind...”

He went his way and she inside. With the catercator filled, and a meal keyed in, she called out ‘on’. Hers was a simple flatscreen; there was not really enough space in the chalette for

## bl ri nd

telesperience; moreover, Janice always thought telesperience a little creepy in the home – the way reporters or performers shimmied around the room and could suddenly appear at your shoulder. The sex scenes, inevitable in just about every programme, would be particularly embarrassing when played out on your own floor or table.

The evening news was occupied with ME. The desert countries of ME were being disrespectful to EK, the Primed Minister was saying. They were planning to build tools of mass desiccation. Janice was not sure what the Primed Minister was talking about, was not sure exactly where ME was, or what ME stood for (middle east was mentioned but so was military engagement), though the situation sounded serious. Talks that were to take place the next week would end in failure, the Primed Minister informed. He would then think things through before coming to the conclusion that action was necessary to prevent the deployment of the tools of mass desiccation and to ensure the nation's security. In the meantime, there would be an increase in paycar rates, and the tax on one-mo routing services would also have to be dearer. These changes came into effect at midnight, backdated one month. Palmcator channels were open for donations to the Primed Minister's eventual retirement fund. As any good citizen, Janice keyed and pledged her day's earnings. That was the very least she could do in return for sleeping in her bed at night safe in the knowledge that someone from ME would not come and desiccate her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The FQH-Inflatahome pentpad is said to be the highest luxury suite in the land. That is technically incorrect. There are luxury suites up mountains, which are higher. Also, some redundant wind-turbine supermasts have been converted into stylish studios. Nonetheless, in terms of distance extending from the ground, the FQH-Inflatahome status stalk is enviably tall, and from the pentpad balanced at the stalk's skyward end there can,

on clear days, be obtained an uplifting aerial view of Capital. It is the kind of outlook favoured by those blessed with delusions of self importance, though unsettling to those with a fear of heights.

Arden respected his position by the application of moderation. For example, although the pentpad was equipped with telesperience-plus, he rarely indulged in transforming the cushion area into a filled Roman arena, or a roaring Formula First racetrack. Only once, or maybe twice, did he call Virtual Home Harem, a service which provides the holographic spectacle of slave girls programmed to pretend-fulfil every male desire.

His tastes were tempered, and indeed he was pleased to have them tempered, by a live-in girlfriend, a lovely creature whose beguiling sweet innocence the company thoroughly approved of and were delighted to have co-promote their clean youthful image. She meant a lot to Arden, who showered her with gifts supplied by the company. In return, she satisfied all his expectations of intimate partnership, which were not complicated.

As with many relationships, this had been the product of a chance encounter. Of a mistake, really. A medier opportunity had been organised at a restaurant frequented by the city's environmental trustees, one offering an excellent table over which matters could be discussed and under which inducements might pass. Arden was present to emphasise, via the mediers, the close harmony of minds that now existed between developer and trustee when it came to saving the planet.

The company vipcar was too long for the parking space outside the restaurant which, in that peculiar tradition of better eateries, is located in a somewhat seedy side street just outside Central Zone. The vipcar's rear operator opened the door for Arden, who was delivered on the opposite side of the street from his engagement venue. Before him was a gaming palace. Being a quarter of an hour early, and suffering that tweak of nerves which precedes every medier occasion, he decided to

## bl r l nd

have a peek inside the building. A delighted queue let him through.

The interior was crowded, gaudy, painfully noisy, and offered nothing he could not call up from the pentpad telesperience-plus.

“Looking for a sure win?”

He turned. The pretty face of a pale-skinned red-haired girl froze in astonishment.

“Coh! – you’re the Inflatahome guy, true?”

“That’s me.”

“This is heaven!” she purred.

He looked about him, and smiled.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“No, I mean meeting you.”

“I’m in the wrong place, actually. I should be across the street.”

The girl pulled closer.

“So am I – in the wrong place.”

Arden could not help but notice the girl was thinly dressed, hardly dressed. A glance at his timepiece.

“Sorry, I have to go.”

He made for the entrance. She followed.

“Take me with you.”

He stopped.

“What?”

“Please. I am in the wrong place, really I am. Get me out of here.”

The girl became distressed, and fell to her knees, clutching his. The surrounding crowd pulled back. “Please!”

He was not sure what to do but, being a constant object of medier attention, he knew whatever he did do had to make him and the company look good. There was always the chance this was a set-up. The company warned him incessantly about set-ups. Green Bit would stop at nothing.

“Well, you can leave with me, if that’s what you want. Don’t you have a wrap?”

## bl r l nd

“Wraps are available from the dispenser,” she said, temporarily dispassionate.

“No – the sort that goes round your shoulders,” he clarified. “It’s chill outside.”

“No wrap. It’s all right.”

They left the casino. One of the vipcar operators signalled to him to hurry up. He strode across the street, for a moment forgetting about the girl. She followed closely behind. A group of mediers were waiting for him as he entered the restaurant.

“Who’s the lady?” asked a reporter. “Are you together?”

The lady answered.

“Yes. We are together.” She took his arm. “Aren’t we, darling.”

It was not a time for Arden to deny her and risk causing a scene. He smiled at her fondly. The mediers sensed a minor scoop. After a session of posing – an activity which the girl carried out with not a trace of awkwardness – the pair were called over to join the table of an Inflatahome top executive.

“You didn’t tell me,” the executive smiled, talking to Arden but fixing his gaze on the girl’s cleavage. Arden expected a reprimand.

“No. It was meant as a surprise,” he replied.

“Oh, it’s a surprise, it’s a surprise.”

“You’re not angry?”

The executive laughed. “Angry?” He lowered his voice. “My dear boy, what you’re doing is absolutely brilliant. Brilliant.”

Sitting at an adjacent table were the environmental trustees. Arden’s superior leant over to the girl.

“Listen, my dear. Why don’t we go over to the next table, where I can introduce you to some important people.”

The mediers called Arden back for a further session. He performed alone.

With the evening’s business over, the company vipcar swished Arden back to the pentpad. The girl sat in front of him, her back to him, watching a late night soap on the invipcar telesperience.

## bl r l nd

Arden tapped her on a bare shoulder.

“Where can I drop you?”

She turned.

“At home, silly. Your home. Our home.”

He caught his breath.

“But – I can’t. You see, it’s not actually mine...”

She smiled at him. She was beautiful.

“Your boss said I could.”

“He did?”

She threw her arms round him.

“Your boss is a nice man.”

At the pentpad, the girl asked if she could take a shower. Arden heard the ‘wow’ as she entered the bathroom. Later, dressed in one of his bath robes, hair damp and loose, at the same time comical and alluring, she snuggled up to him on one of the squabs that circled the cushion area.

“I – em – don’t know what you want from me,” she told him.

“I expect you want – you know.”

Not being able to decide how to respond, he said nothing.

“I don’t know what kind of a girl you think I am, but I’m not. I’ve never done it before – not properly. You might think I’m not very good at it.”

She was up on her knees, one leg either side of his thighs, and playing with his shirt buttons.

“I’ll do my best. I promise.”

Taking hold of her hands, he gently removed them from his buttons.

“I don’t even know your name,” he told her, trying to be firm but knowing she would win the night.

“Mersey. It’s French for ‘thank you’.

It was a win-win-win-win situation. Arden had found the love of his life; the company had, in a stroke, progressed their popular image from clean young man to clean young couple; the boss had secured a corporate hostess to entertain horny

environmental trustees; Mersey was able to send Grassy bigger remittances.

Mersey's proclaimed desire to advance her education took her out of the pentpad often, but Arden did not mind. Regardless of how demanding her evening classes, she always had something left for him. Arden was happy every day. In front of the wall-filling mirror in the wow bathroom, he would stand naked, with a hand cupped over the privates, and say things like, 'Thank you, Crutches. Thank you so very much for everything.'

The part played by Arden, and of course Mersey, in the growth of FQH-Inflatahome will never be calculated with precision. Suffice to say that the company became *the company* as the competition either fell by the wayside or were absorbed. Environmental trustees increasingly came to see the sense in allowing high density homes to spread across water as well as land. There was even talk of a development in which homes could be erected not on stacks of compressed refuge but submerged one below the other into the waters of lakes, all the way to the bottom. Maybe that will come.

In a way, Arden became victim to his own success. When a company emerges as the only one in its field, or lake, then what is the point of image? But, FQH-Inflatahome, being an honourable corporation, considerate to its employees and an avowed rewarder of loyalty, did not dispose of him when his youthful usefulness expired. As things turned out, they were saved the bother.

During the evenings, when Mersey was out in pursuit of self-betterment, Arden would sometimes call a current affairs team into the pentpad. He had little personal interest in events outside the pentpad and beyond medier shoots but did not wish to let Mersey down. As her intellectual compass expanded, she would need a partner who showed a willingness to keep up.

The telesperience-plus reporters would patiently explain to him the rapidly deteriorating situation in ME. He sat and listened

as the Primed Minister stood at the centre of the room to announce the difficult decision-making that lay ahead, and what those decisions were going to be. When Mersey returned to the pentpad, Arden would show off his new breadth of informedness.

“Tools of mass desiccation really do exist, you know. The Primed Minister has seen the – it’s called a dossery.”

“Bully for him.” It was Mersey’s playful way. Arden was used to it.

“There’s forty-five of them altogether. It’s serious.”

“Sounds it.”

“And we’ll have to launch an inversion. It’s the only way.” He saw that distracted look in her eyes. To hold her interest he must add his own perspective. “That’s how I see it.”

“If you say so.”

“We have to go get them. We have to inverse ME if we’re to have any hope of protecting our nation’s future.”

Mersey yawned. “So long as *I* don’t have to go. Sand gets everywhere.”

Arden laughed: Mersey was at her best when flippant; it made the deeper mind even more mysterious.

“There’s no fear of such a happening. We’ll stay home and look after the things that matter.”

“I’m all for that. And this.” She was on him, kissing him, chewing the lobe of his ear and telling him what a clever Dennikins he was.

The Primed Minister’s predictions were correct. They always were. What sort of Primed Minister is it who is ever wrong? Under the articles of Saving Democracy, the electronic dummies in the House were reconnected to the nation’s pulse. The country’s unanimous vote against inversion persuaded the Primed Minister that he should go ahead. What sort of Primed Minister is it who follows the wishes of the people?

It all happened very quickly. ME was bombed; the Primed Minister declared a resounding victory. ME bombed back; the

## bl r l nd

Primed Minister cited the reactive nature of the enemy as justification for inversion. Parallel trenches were dug in the sand the length of ME and filled with armies who each glared at the other. Daily, at prime time screening, the opposing armies waited for the signal from the mediers, and attacked, breaking off every quarter of an hour to allow product promotion.

Arden, who had not been out of the pentpad for three weeks, there being no image-making for him to do, watched events as they telesperience-plussed around him. It was appalling but exciting. Mersey called it pathetic, the war, as he knelt behind a section of cushion discharging an imaginary long-gun. Then, one morning, he received the message, which he read with a mixture of shock, disbelief, uncertainty, outrage and panic.

“Due to the advances and gains being made by our glorious army of liberators in the search for tools of mass desiccation, all able-bodied males between the ages of too young and too old who are not engaged in professional positions or who are not registered as essential workers, or who are not related to a member of the government, must proceed to the nearest voluntary impressment centre and report for military duty.”

Arden realised he did not know where his nearest voluntary impressment centre was.

“I won’t go,” he announced defiantly to Mersey as she painted her toenails over breakfast.

“So, all right. You’re not going,” she replied. “Wait for them to send a vipcar round for you. That’s what you do best.”

“Do you think they will?” he asked, his brow puckered in deep concern.

“How the *fuck* would I know? I’ve never joined up, have I.”

The boss was sympathetic.

“We need to act fast,” the wise and distinguished top executive told him gravely. “It might soon be too late.”

Arden asked which act should be fast.

“Why, enlisting, of course. You must do your bit for your

## bl r l nd

country. There are young men out there, and old, who are at this very minute clawing their way to the sign-up desk. They're heroes already."

"But I don't want to go. It might be dangerous," objected Arden. The boss came over to him and put an arm around his shoulder.

"Look, son. I know exactly how you feel. I, too, had my doubts, during the Great Gas Crisis. Let me tell you, we were faced with much the same sacrifices, at that time."

"But that was just power cuts."

The boss smiled as veterans do, as he remembered past hardship. "I hope you will never know what it's like to be stuck between floors in an up-down, eighty storeys above ground, with only a cator-op for company – a mere slip of a girl, she was, and clinging terrified – for a whole afternoon. You don't forget a thing like that for a long time, I can tell you."

Arden knew his own mind. As he regularly told the wow bathroom mirror, 'Here before you stands a man who can handle himself.'

"I'm still not going."

Returning to his seat, the boss played another angle.

"Think of the company. Think of FreeRange Quality Inflatahome. How do you say it would look for our image if we did not take up arms and fight for our country?"

"You're not taking up arms. I am."

"There you are. It's settled."

Courage comes in many guises. Arden found a font of the stuff in his inner being, a supply he had not known existed. Waiting till Mersey had left for an afternoon of nude sketching, he packed a holdbag, and left the pentpad. That is, he ran away. Later the same day – actually, a few hours into the next – Mersey found the message he had left for her on the roomcator.

*My Darling Dearest M. My Flower of Vertue. Please forgive me. What I done is best for both of us. Trust me on this. I am gone but will be back one day. I promise. Please don't despare.*

## bl r l nd

There was more, but she called ‘delete’. She then keyed the boss, who appeared in a dimmed light so as not to disturb his wife sleeping next to him.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“It’s Arden. He’s gone. Pissed off out of it.”

The boss thought for a moment.

“I expected this. I’m sorry.”

“What about me? What about the pentpad?” Mersey looked about to cry.

“Now, don’t you worry about a thing, my lovely. You can stay in the pentpad for as long as you like.”

She let the tears roll down her cheek.

“Promise?” she asked, flanking the words with sobs.

“Promise,” he confirmed softly. A quick glance at the snoring shape beside him, then: “Look, I’ll come over tomorrow. I’ll be right there for you.”

“Promise that as well?”

“Promise that as well. Sleep well, my dear. Everything will work out – you have my word.”

Courage comes in many guises. Mersey decided not to despair. She decided to swallow a handful of A-pills and put on a brave face. In the bathroom, she stripped and danced and pouted and pressed up her breasts to the big big beautiful mirror, and shouted at the top of her voice:

*“Up yours, baby!”*

He did not know where he was, though he knew for where he was heading. The first effect of being on the run is a consciousness that everyone is staring at you: every passer-by in the street, or off it, knows what you are up to. The second effect is believing that the nation’s entire policers and securiters are on the lookout for you, and you alone.

A sitting dozing securiter will spring to his feet instantly alert as you back away from him, and knock over a street litter bin, sending it rolling towards a flight of stone steps down which it will boing and boing and boing. A sauntering policer will find a

## bl r l nd

sprinter's pace when you turn sharply from his direction only to collide with a woman whose dress you grab hold of and accidentally rip from her body as you fall clumsily to the ground, and she is standing and screaming louder than you have ever heard anyone scream, on the walkway in her skimpies. This kind of incident seems to draw more attention when enlarged portrayals of your face beam out from every promotion hoarding, and the distressed woman's incensed escorter picks you from the ground and shoves his fist into your face.

"Hold on, you're the Inflatahome bloke. Arden...?" The escorter sought completion of the name as he pulled back a second punch.

"Arden Keen. Yes, I am," Arden supplied through a daze. He wiped a streamlet of blood from his nose. The escorter relaxed.

"I'm sorry, mate. I thought you was a perv."

"It's all right. My fault. I should have looked where I was going."

The policer had reached them.

"Everything under control here?"

"Yes, officer," Arden and the escorter replied together.

"Aren't you the Inflatahome geezer?" the policer asked.

"Me?"

It is not recommended to give up one's name to a policer when on the run, but Arden saw the futility of denial under the circumstances. He accepted his fate and held out his wrists.

"That's correct."

"You couldn't give me your autograph, could you? It's for the boy."

The policer produced a pocketcator and stylus. Arden scrawled his signature with a speed that results from satisfying thousands of requests for thousands of boys he would never meet.

"Thank you, sir. I'd get that nose seen to, if I were you. It looks like you'll have a right shiner to go with it." Policer to escorter: "Don't you think he'll have a shiner?"

The escorter answered in the affirmative. From the shelter of a doorway, the woman complained of being cold and the escorter

led her away, holding the torn dress around her like an untidy sash. Arden was alone, nursing a painful nose, as the policer also went on his way, bringing out a scancator to check the time discs on parked one-mos.

A freighter gave him a hitch from a road station on the Eastern Bundle. As he settled himself in the cab, he told the operator:

“Before you ask, I’m not the Inflatahome man. I just happen to look like him, that’s all.”

“Who?”

It turned out the operator lived in the cab, had done so for five years, and had no knowledge of homes promotion.

“Nasty bruise you got there,” the operator said. “Fight with the missus?”

“I fell.”

“That right? Happened to me, once – but she used a catercator. Had diced dogsteaks coming out of me ears for days after.” The operator followed his joke with lengthy laughter.

The freighter dropped Arden at the turn-off for Commuter Islands. It was getting dark. He approached the gate where he surveyed the scene. There was no one in the security hut, and he could slip under the barrier undetected, except for the camereyes that would follow his movement from their masts. But Arden, perhaps as a result of intellectual polishing, had anticipated the surveillance and had hurriedly purchased, after the incident with the woman and her dress, a realistic rubberised face mask which he now took from the holdbag and pulled over his own face. This done, instead of using the central pontoon which led between rows of chalettes to the sewage outflow, he crept behind the chalettes, over handrails and across decks.

At a bend in the pontoon, Arden scurried round a corner and almost tripped over the kneeling securiter, who was recharging the cells of his one-mo through a length of cable running from a resident’s power box mounted on an exterior sidewall. The securiter looked up, startled.

“Oh, Mr Keen. Just a bit of routine maintenance...” he said,

## bl r l nd

standing, adjusting his belt, attempting to brazen out his embarrassment. “No one told me to expect you.”

Arden did not notice the surprise and embarrassment of the securiter because of his own surprise and embarrassment. He, too, attempted to brazen out the situation.

“No one does expect me. It’s – em – a special project. Hush-hush.”

They crouched behind the one-mo and spoke quietly.

“I understand, Mr Keen. It’ll go no further than me.”

Arden wanted to know which was the home of ‘Crutches’. The securiter pointed along the row and gave a number.

“I can take you, no trouble. My one-mo’s nearly full.”

“No. I want it to be a surprise. A special occasion.”

A one-mo was parked outside, and a light was on inside the chalette. After ensuring the pontoon was clear, Arden knocked on the door. There was no response. He knocked again, a little louder. Janice opened the door to the full short extent of a security chain, her head back-lit and face obscured.

“Hello?”

It occurred to Arden that he had not rehearsed this part: he had no idea what to say. The name she had given him, when she said goodbye at the Fortress show home, would not be her real one. He couldn’t call her Jan. The company did not have a Jan. She spoke again.

“It’s Arden, isn’t it? Arden Keen?”

“Yes. It is, er —”

The security chain was dropped and the door swung back.

“Won’t you come in,” she invited, each word carrying her complete bafflement at finding a major promotional personality at her door on an otherwise uneventful evening. It seemed the only thing to say.

He entered. Inside the tiny accommodation, and with the door closed, he laboriously removed the mask.

“Sorry about this. I should have taken it off before I knocked. I wasn’t thinking.”

## bl r l nd

Janice smiled, a smile of greater bafflement. When she saw the bruising around his eye, understanding came: obviously, he had worn the Arden Keen face mask to present an unblemished visage to his public.

Arden turned the mask and examined it. Why, he asked himself, had he not checked the character at the fancy face shop, even in his haste? No matter – there were more important issues.

“I came to see if you could help me,” he told her. She motioned for him to sit on a stool, and sat on one herself.

“*Me help you?*”

“Yes. They want to send me to ME.”

“I see,” replied Janice, playing for time until she did see. “Would you like some seaweed tea – I’ve just made it. It’s a local crop, hand-picked. I get it from the beachsleepers.”

They sipped the brew. Janice filled the silence.

“I thought it was the securiter. He’s become a bit of a pest recently. Always tapping on the door to see if there’s anything I want.”

Arden smiled, just like in the promotions.

“Maybe he admires you. I know I do.”

Janice felt the bafflement would overwhelm her. She had to get a grip.

“You said I could help you. In what way?”

He put down his cup and, leaning forward, spoke earnestly.

“You can stop them sending me away. You know the right people.”

“Er – would you like a slice of slick cake? It’s also local. Very nice. Oil is good for the skin – though I suppose you know what’s good for the skin already,” she tittered nervously.

He neither accepted not declined the cake. His earnestness increased.

“Here I am, begging for your help, and I don’t even know your real name.”

“It’s Janice. Janice Annison. Not the son of Annie, but her daughter. It should be Annisdaughter, like they do it in Icicleland.”

“Ms Annison —”

“Jan. Call me Jan. Everyone does.”

“Jan? I thought that was just a plume de nom.”

“Really, it’s Jan.”

An adjustment of his stool brought them closer together.

“Jan, I’ll do anything the company wants, I’ll chuck the contract, work for free, if I can just be allowed to stay in EK, and look after my Mersey. You have to help me.”

“Mersey?”

“My partner.”

“I knew a Mersey once. Well, not personally. I knew her sister, and her brother.” Janice poured more tea.

“I don’t think it would be my Mersey. She doesn’t have any family. They all died when the family yacht went down in a hurricane off the Bananas.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Mersey was the only survivor. She swam for two days and two nights, fighting off sharks and piranha, before being rescued by a crabber, when she had to fight off the crew.”

There was a tap at the door. Janice opened it, though not fully. The securiter, stretching his neck as he tried to see round her, asked if everything was all right. She said it was and thanked him. Returning to her stool, she looked her guest in the eyes.

“I’m puzzled, Arden. Why are you here?”

And she was puzzled. In the brief space of answering the door to the securiter, she had had a puzzling thought. Her guest, the normally calm countenance of the megacompany that is also her landlord, pleads with her to help him to not be sent away. It had to be a special promotion, one she didn’t understand. How was she supposed to respond? Play it wrong, and she might be thrown out of Commuter Islands. Play it right, and – well, what was right? It was, she concluded, better to let it roll out.

He replied.

“As I said, you’re someone who can get on the palmcator and make things happen.”

## bl i n d

“All right. I will, if that’s what you want. Who would you like me to key?”

“Whoever.”

She collected up the tea things and put them on the shelf which was the kitchen.

“I’ll do it. Tomorrow.” Tomorrow would give her a night to think things through.

“Thanks, er —”

“Jan.”

“Thanks, Jan.”

That was that, Janice imagined. Arden would be ready to leave. But he made no move.

“There is something else.”

“Oh?”

“Could I stay the night?”

“*Here?*” The word stuck in her throat as a potentially choking gasp.

“Yes. Nobody knows where I am.”

Part of the promotion. Stay with it, stay with it.

Came the flash of explanation! She had once asked to stay the night, in none other than a FreeRange Quality home. And Arden had agreed. Now, the situation was cunningly reversed. She had yet to flesh out the details but this was one subtle promotion. FreeRange was asking if *the company* could stay the night with *her*, a humble renter. The ME business was just a blind.

Possibilities began to build. Herself on the screen, in the homes of the nation as a telesperience image – wearing a shirt bearing the Janitours logo back and front. The company might even hand over the pump to a new Inflatathome.

“Of course you can. You can have the bed – I’ll sleep in the one-mo. I’ll be fine with a rug over me.”

Morning broke and Janice awoke and at first could not think why she was wrapped up in the one-mo. She rubbed the mist from the cover and peered out. What she saw did not make sense. Groping around, she found her spectacles and put them

on. Still no sense. In one direction, the pontoon was blocked by a line of policers, kneeling, long-guns pointed towards the door of her chalette. In the other direction, the same. There was no movement or sound. She was faintly reminded of another occasion.

Suddenly, nearby, there was movement. Two policers dragged a cuffed and partially dressed Arden out of her door, across the pontoon, and pushed him into a polcar which they then climbed into, one either side, sandwiching him. A man in a hide coat emerged from the chalette and closed the door. He started to follow the others but stopped and turned as he noticed Janice's rug-covered upper head above the one-mo's side panel. She ducked down and held her breath. A loud slap on the plastic cover made her heart feel it would surely leave her body through her mouth.

"You. Out. Now." She stayed still. "Now!"

The man stood back and scowled as the cover opened, and Janice climbed out, jerkily, as if enacting a freeze-frame screen sequence.

"You Janice Annison?"

"Yes. I'm Janice Annison." It came out as a croak. Janice's voice always came out as a croak first thing in the morning.

"You live here?"

"Yes. I live here. Is anything wrong, officer?"

"Deductive Detective to you. DD Drainer, to be precise."

The deductive detective turned and raised a hand of dismissal at the waiting polcar. It sped off. He likewise disbanded the rows of long-gun men. They melted away and normal traffic started to pass.

As he turned his head one way and another, Janice was momentarily taken back to the underpass near Troddenville, to a uniformed policer shouting at her to go. The Wong case had apparently furthered his career, if not her own at the time. He showed no recognition of her.

"Harbourisation is a serious offence. So serious you had better say pip-pip to the daylight for a while." The detective was

## bl r l nd

stabbing at the keys of a polcator.

“Harbourisation? I don’t know what you mean?”

“You soon will.”

The ride to the polstation was uncomfortable. It was designed to be. A cam fitted to the rear axle of the poltruck pounded away at the underneath of a hard seat in such a way as to jolt and bruise the passenger riding in the back. Tight wrist restraints welded to a rigid post bolted to the floor held the passenger in a toilet-sitting position, ensuring the pounding would have full effect. An internally mounted siren blasted the eardrums of the passenger. Although the distance from Commuter Islands could have been completed by one-mo in a little over an hour, the journey by poltruck took almost half a day – once around the streets of Capital, and once again. The average usual suspect carried in a poltruck is, by journey’s end, prepared to confess to anything.

But Janice was made of sterner stuff. She had suffered pain and abuse before. It was nothing, she insisted to herself. The poltruck crew had stripped her of the rug, and she travelled only in a long nightdress and soft slippers. At the polstation, she was led down steps and, after a turn, some more steps, some more, and down again. The cellar at the bottom of the steps was lined in stone and illuminated by a centrally hung cobweb-shrouded thimble lamp. Furnishing was limited to a table and a single stool. The deductive detective sat on the stool and faced the standing Janice across the table.

“Name?”

“You’ll have to speak up. My ears are ringing from that awful siren.”

“*Name?*”

“You know my name. You asked me to confirm it at my home.”

He spat on the floor, a squashed oyster of phlegm on a smooth damp flagstone.

“Tell me again.”

## bl r l nd

“You must have a problem with your memory. I recommend pickled whale turd. There’s a taste you’ll never forget. Take a lick every time you want to remember something. It works marvellously.”

The detective stood and removed his coat, which he threw on the table. He walked from behind the table and behind Janice, to come round the other side of her. His mouth was at her ear.

“Is this going to be difficult, would you say?”

“I’d say it is going to be as difficult as you want it to be. Have you a proper question to ask? Or will we play this silly game till your shift ends and you can slink along to the beerhouse and sozzle yourself with all the other thugs in hide coats?”

“Don’t be funny with me, Miss Annison.”

She smiled though did not look at him.

“There. You remembered my name. You knew it all along.”

The detective was studying her closely.

“I think we’ve met before somewhere.”

“Yes. This morning. Outside my home on the Islands.”

The facetiousness was ignored as he continued to scrutinise her features.

“No. Somewhere else...”

“In a previous life, perhaps. We’re all recycled,” she suggested lightly.

Drainer shook his head as recall failed him. He left her side and sat at the table again.

“There’s only the two of us in here. Whatever happens is my word against yours. I’m a pol and you’re a sus. Got that?”

“Yes. Cosy, isn’t it. I wonder, what will your word be? A middle-aged spinster mauled you? Held you by the throat against the wall? That’ll go down well in the beerhouse, I’m sure.”

The man thought, his elbow on the table and thumbnail to his mouth.

“Hmm. Shall we start again. I’m Deductive Detective Drainer and you, Janice Annison, are here on your own accord to help with enquiries into the harbourisation of one Arden Keen. How am I doing?”

## bl r l nd

Janice sat, too, on the floor. The cold from the damp stone would, she hoped, seep through the thin material of her nightdress and dull the stinging. DD Drainer had to peer over the coat in order to see her. She answered.

“That’s fine by me. Was this Keen fellow the man you took away from my home?”

The detective once again left the stool, to sit on the edge of the table, where he could look down on her.

“Do you know him? Arden Keen. He’s known by everyone.”

“If you say so. Is he in trouble?”

A loud creak came from the table. It was a self-assembly model, not well self-assembled. Her questioner pushed away from it and crouched in front of her.

“We weren’t there this morning to celebrate his birthday – I can tell you that.”

“What will happen to him?”

“Why should you care?”

“Saving civil rights. As a conscientious citizen, I should show an interest.”

He leant forward to rest his knuckles on the floor. DD Drainer was not a fit man, and too flabby for the unsupported crouch. On all fours, he looked as if aping a corpulent ape.

“As it happens, he’s on his way to ME. As we speak. To fight in the trenches for absent king and ungrateful country.”

Janice stared into his eyes.

“So why am I here, exactly?”

“He tried to dodge the press gang. Bad for him. He holed up at your place. Bad for you. You have some explaining to do before you get out of this pit.”

A coughing fit ensued. Drainer turned his head and yellow phlegm sprayed across the floor under the table, where vapour rose from it into the chill air.

“See what I mean? A few nights locked up down here could be the death of you. Think about it.”

“I’ve endured worse. Why bad for me? I’ve never seen this

## bl r l nd

Keen person before in my life, not in the flesh, before he turned up out of the black last night, almost bashed down my door, forced his way into my chalette, and muscled me out.”

Uncomfortable from the cold, the detective stood and rubbed his hands together. He leaned over the still sitting Janice.

“You mean you don’t know him personally?”

“We’ve already done this part. Pickled whale turd.”

Drainer paced the cell, avoid the skids of expectorate. A distant scream of agony was heard.

“So, he turned up at your chalette and —”

“Pickled whale turd.”

He pivoted on a heel. Towards her, bent over, arm out, forefinger high and erect.

“Ah! Tell me, therefore. Why didn’t you go straight to security? That’s what *I* would have done, in your predicament. That’s what someone *innocent* would have done. Gone to the site securiter.”

She threw back her head. “Because the securiter was in on it. He’d have snuffed me. Company loyalty, and all that.”

A moment of uncertainty crossed the detective’s face.

“But he was the one who tipped us off. Why would he —?”

“Work it out for yourself, ‘deductive detective’. That’s what you’re paid to do, true?”

Janice waited while he wandered over into a corner, his back to her, to work it out. He returned, and tried another approach.

“All right. Tell me this, smart lady. Why not call the policers?”

“My palmcator was inside the chalette.”

“But you had your one-mo. Why not simply call ‘emergency’ and go? That’s what —”

“— you would have done,” she completed. “My one-mo was dead. The H-cells were empty. I did a full circuit yesterday. Check the router log, if you don’t believe me.”

He stamped his feet to generate body heat, his breath condensing on the air.

“Don’t worry. I will.”

And repeatedly embraced himself. A rat scampered the width

## bl r l nd

of the far wall, its red eyes briefly caught in the weak inconsistent light of the thimble bulb.

“One last hook for you to wriggle off. Why did you not proceed to the nearest callcar station?”

“There isn’t one.”

“Why not walk to the Bundle and flag for help?”

Her retort made him stop his warming.

“Hoh! And risk getting shagged by a freighter operator? What sort of a woman do you take me for, detective? I find the suggestion offensive in the extreme. I’ve a mind to report you to Females Out Front. Yes, that’s what I’ll do. It’s disgraceful, what you’re implying.”

“Females Out Front? Are you an equality warrior?”

“That’s possibly where you think you know me from.”

The detective’s untidy brows met. Maybe a lot what going on behind them. His armed dropped by his side and suggested compromise.

“All right, all right. We’re friends here. We have regard for one another. No need to fall out.”

Janice accepted the compromise.

“I decided to wait for daybreak and be rescued by someone I knew I could trust – which is exactly what happened, true?”

Arms reached out and helped Janice to her feet. Hands brushed dust and crystals of old phlegm from her nightdress. Drainer reached for his coat, and held it at the ready.

“You know, it’s a great city, this.”

“It is,” agreed Janice, turning to accept the coat.

“Makes you proud to police it,” the detective imparted, briefly lost in his own thoughts.

“I’m sure it does,” she further agreed.

“I’ve done so in uniform, I do so beyond. A great city.”

With a sudden return to the present, the deductive detective threw his arms into the coat, stood close to Janice, and glared into bespectacled eyes which glared defiantly back.

“Let’s keep it a great city, shall we?”

## bl r l nd

Not often is a citizen who has helped the policers with their enquiries given a ride home after interrogation, and this was not one of those occasions. In truth, citizens who have helped the policers with their enquiries do not often need a ride home since the schospital is a more appropriate destination. Sometimes, it is the morgue.

Janice was nonetheless thankful: thankful that the nation's policing was in such capable hands; thankful of the return of the rug, charged at the normal deconfiscation rate; thankful she was able to hobble from the polstation and cling on to a holdtight to the end of the wire, from where she limped to the Bundle; and, there, thankful to be offered a hitch by a neighbour to Commuter Islands.

At home, she bathed the bruises and sores on her buttocks and the weals round her wrists, while listening to the beat of the heart generator.

The dreadful gnaw of moral guilt did not set in until later, at about the same time that Arden had knocked on her door the previous evening. She was standing because it was less painful than sitting or lying, though her legs were weak. The discarded mask of her visitor watched eyelessly from the bedside shelf. His latex likeness was accusing her of betrayal, as the man himself must surely be doing. And quite rightly, too. She had denied their friendship, turned a shoulder, protected herself above defending him. Just as she had with Mr Wong. What sort of a person had she become?

Reaching out, she snatched up the mask. A palmcator rested under it – Arden's. He must have hidden it from the policers. Janice keyed for messages: maybe he had left one for her. But there were only incoming texts. The first ones read:

*dn't thnk ur cming bck, u WANKER. I hp u gt SHOT!!!*

*oo fcking me nw? HAHHAHA!!!*

*fnf urslf a CAMEL 2 hmp – OK!!!*

The sender's name was 'pentpad'. She did not read the rest, believing them to be private.

## bl r l nd

When the gnawing at her soul grew too much, she put on her pale-blue waterproof, went out into teeming rain, climbed gingerly and ouchingly into the one-mo, and keyed an address code. The recharged vehicle started but moved fitfully as pools of water flooded across the router track. She glanced round and saw the chalette was floating on the incoming tide.

At the entrance, she waited for the barrier to lift. It did not move. She left the one-mo and in the rain ran – or would have run if not so sore – to the gate hut. The securiter was absorbed by the portascreen which was showing the weekly beheading relayed live from Sweatier Rabia. A commentator was asking the soon-to-be-headless, knelt at the block, how she was feeling.

“Excuse me,” Janice said, her entrance alone failing to catch attention.

A quietening hand was raised towards her.

“Can you let me out? It’s urgent.”

“Fag arsel – she’s fainted. Why do they *do* that? They’ll have to slosh water over her now. No bloody good when they can’t see it coming. A cold chop’s no chop – that’s what I always say.”

“Can you raise the barrier and let me through?” Janice persisted.

For the first time, the securiter turned to face her.

“Oh, it’s you.” His eyes were cold and accusing.

“Yes, it’s me. And I’m in a hurry, if you don’t mind.”

“Then you’ll have to wait. I’m busy.”

Janice sighed in exasperation.

“All you have to do is touch the button.”

His gaze was back to the portascreen. He called ‘volume, up’.

The commentator was animated.

*There’s been a last minute reprieve challenge! She’s coming round – she’s hoping, hoping. Just look at that smile! Is it going her way, is it, is it? Yes, yes? And no. The fair play adjudicator has turned down the challenge. For a moment there, she thought she was going to be able to hang on to that most pretty of heads. This really is exciting.*

Janice had to wait for the sword to fall and the camereye to zoom in on the spurting blood. As the severed head was picked

up from the red-stained dirt by the hair, the securiter reached out for the gate button.

“Another thing,” Janice added. “My chalette is floating high. It needs some stilt extensions under it.”

“Tough,” the securiter replied as he watched the head being tossed into the air.

“Did you hear me?” she shouted. He threw her a smirk.

“You nag me to let you out, now I can’t get rid of you. Pity we don’t chop here anymore. What you done last night deserves the chop, if you ask me.”

The spiritual workout centre is a meritous building constructed vertically and cleverly in the shape of a huge cross, one of many similar structures that sprung up after privatisation of the Church of EK. It is part of the Jehovah’s Gym chain, and popular. Janice inserted credits to enter the floodlit cross. Inside, some floors up, more credits afforded her the hire of a room. Modest in size, it was clean, white, well lit, and empty except for a tall cabinet built into one corner. A call from Janice of her name and membership number, followed by ‘session, start’, initiated the fully interactive telesperience. After a short delay, the door of the cabinet opened and a holographic figure emerged. The image was of a significantly younger Janice, reflecting the period since installation.

“Forgive me, for I have screwed up,” Janice confessed to her calm, smiling, confident younger self.

“That’s perfectly all right,” the image replied. “We’re all human.”

“I want to scream. I want to —”

“You can make as much noise as you wish. The walls are protected by MufflePlast, the only lasting solution to audio-pollution.”

Promotions were a way of offsetting the storage charge. Janice limped around the image, lambasting herself through the medium.

“You’re a mess, Janice Annison. But I’m sure you know that.

## bl r l nd

You let people down. You walk away from your friends, leave them to their fate, when they need you the most. You're an untruthful coward, a self-serving miserable moral failure. The gate securiter was right – you do deserve the chop. *Chop!*"

The image smiled and replied.

"Steady on, my dear. Aren't you being a little hard on yourself?"

"I'm not being hard enough."

Two chairs virtualised. The image sat and motioned Janice to the other. Janice knew better: there was no chair, not unless you believed there was. It was a test of faith. Janice continued to circle the image, who inclined her head in a gesture of reason.

"Consider for a moment. These friends of yours – the ones you say you have let down. Perhaps they were the architects of their own misfortune. Maybe, whatever happened to them would have happened in any case, without your association. Some friends are destined to fall on stony ground. As it says in II Kevin, Chapter 10, Verse 11: 'Walk not the way of the man who fails to see the chasm opened out before him'."

Memories from a rigorous adolescence flooded into Janice's mind. She could hear Sister Mattick; she repeated Sister Mattick.

"But turn the other way and live another day."

Image clapped.

"There, you see. Why don't you sit here with me and we can talk this along."

Janice reached down to try the vacant chair with a hand but found nothing of substance.

"No. I can't sit. My bum hurts."

"Oh, you poor thing. Everything happens to you, doesn't it."

The real Janice could not be sure where this was leading. Image developed the flow.

"As I see it, my dear – and I can see it because I'm equipped with FessLogic, the only viable alternative to spouting bullshit. As I see the situation, it's your friends who have let *you* down."

Janice stopped and stared at her image, and was reminded how attractive she had been in her youth, in a toothy, straight-haired

sort of way.

“How can you possibly judge? You don’t know the details.”

The smile of wisdom.

“But you’ve come here this evening, in appalling router conditions – I’m linked to MonitMet, by the way, the only dependable way of knowing the weather for ever. Updated regularly. Don’t be caught out – sit back and gloat on climatic disasters anywhere in the world by —”

“Just get on with it.”

“Is there a pattern?” Image asked.

“To the weather? You should know, if you’re so well connected.”

Image showed no offence. “To your feelings of having let a friend down.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, does something happen to you after you abandon a friend, for example?”

Janice thought. Image waited. Janice spoke.

“Yes. Something horrendous always happens. I get hit by a one-mo on the Bundle. Or hauled away by the policers for questioning.”

“After which type of friend is that? You can tell me in assured complete confidence. I am supported by secure memory software supplied by —”

“Yes, yes – I was there at your programming. To answer your question, it’s men friends, as a matter of fact. I’m all right with women friends. I don’t let them down.”

All knowing. “Ah! Now we’re getting to the heart of the matter, wouldn’t you say?”

Image called for refreshments. A virtual trolley appeared from the cabinet, with tea and gluecake on a stretched-bladder platter. It wheeled noiselessly and smoothly by itself to fit between the two chairs.

“Won’t you join me?” Image indicated the trolley.

“They’re not real.”

“That’s a subjective point of view. They’re real to me.”

## bl r l nd

“You’re not real.”

“Then why are you talking to me?”

It was a riposte used all the time in self-confrontation sessions. Janice dismissed the question by an impatient flick of the hand.

“You said the heart of the matter. *What* is the heart of the matter?” she asked her image. Image dunked a slice of cake.

“Your relationships. Women: fine. Men: injurious. Get the picture, mm? Poverty token dropped yet?”

Janice would have liked to have tipped the trolley and its tray, just to prove how non-existent it all was. But she did not want to leave a mess. She snapped at the self-image.

“Are you by any chance suggesting I might be lesbian?”

“And what’s wrong with being lesbian, may I ask?”

“What’s wrong with...” Janice could not finish, so she stopped. Image wagged a finger.

“Careers depend on same sex relationships nowadays. It’s the only way to climb the greasy pole. Proves you’re not a phobe. Says you’re not saddled with hang-ups. Means you’re safe to have around.”

“And how would you know?”

“You told me, last time you were here. Don’t you remember? You should try pickled whale dung. There’s a taste you’ll never forget. Actually, I can recommend T/Store’s own brand, now available in —”

“Shaddup!” shouted Janice, surprising herself, and glad of the MufflePlast wall insulation. Image was unperturbed by the retort.

“A little touchy, are we? Perhaps we’ve discovered a raw nerve, don’t you think.”

Janice grunted, and once more dismissed her image by a motion of the hand. It did not stop Image.

“I’m only the virtual you, but you’re the real you. If I know what you are, then you *certainly* know what you are.”

Image stood. Gently, she put an arm round Janice’s shoulder. Janice put a hand on the arm. Image whispered softly.

“I can put you in touch with a group who can help. LOCATE. The name’s a what-d’you-call-it for ‘ladies of a certain age

together'. They're very good. Empathic and – ahum – reciprocal.”

Janice pulled away, sharply. She was so angry.

“I. Am. Not. A. Dyke.” She rushed across the room to the door as quickly as her aches and bruises would allow. Her knee brushed against something; behind her was the sound of crockery hitting the floor. Fuelled by furious resolve, she resisted the temptation to turn and look.

“Session, end!”

Within a week, Janice was out of Commuter Islands. Her one-mo packed to capacity, she left the bobbing chalette and ignored the two-fingered goodbye from the securiter, to let the router take her to Capital, and once more to her old compartment. It was available to let. Nita, who had been eating intensively to relieve the stress of being obese, had decided to move to accommodation where there was a communal shower facility.

The rent extraction agent was, as ever, most helpful. He asked for only the part of the double rent he had lost out on. Janice slept and ate in her one-mo until a ceiling-high heap of musty crusts and rank rinds could be cleared. Nita, unable to fit into the shower, and with no one to wash her, had not bothered to bathe at all; the reek of body odour took a while longer to dissipate. But, as Janice hung her heartbeat generator on the wall, she celebrated the return to home sweet home. She vowed never again to give it up.

As a result of the move, Janice had become the possessor of a telesperience system. Possibly unwilling to extract it from the rotting food remains, and it having a slight fault, Nita had not taken the equipment. The agent said it could stay, provided Janice was willing to pay him a fee for transfer of ownership. Which, because she did not wish to see him disappointed, she was.

She laid back on the bed and called ‘telesperience, on’. Items appeared around her on the fifth shout. Scanning was intermittent, and characters tended to holograph from the waist

## bl i n d

up only. This, though, hardly mattered when the bed was down. Ghostly figures floated over her legs and around her on the mattress. On the shout of ‘news’, the regular late evening announcers – one male, one female – sat facing each other at either side of her. It was like family visits she had seen at the schospital.

An anti-fire engine passed in the street below. Its urgent bulk shook the building and caused a temporarily break in telesperience integrity. When the images reformed, Janice felt her heart miss a dub, such was the shock of the representation levitating, and flickering slightly at the edges, barely one arm’s length from her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bifurcation is not to be overused as a narrative device in fiction. It can confuse the author. However, in some stories, it is an unavoidable course. As here.

The polcar that swept Arden away at DD Drainer’s signal from outside the chalette at Commuter Islands where he had spent a night of peaceful sleep in the assumed knowledge that the woman who called herself Jan was, on the following day, to key some high-ups she must surely know at the Ministry for Overseas Aggression on her palmcator and make everything all right – the same polcar swept Arden through unfamiliar countryside, to arrive at some sort of camp surrounded by a high fence of razor wire. At the gates to the camp, Arden was ordered to get out the polcar. He climbed from the vehicle and viewed his new surroundings. From the outside, the place could have been mistaken for a FreeRange Quality Homes commuter community were it not for a large board which read: ‘Secret Military Base’.

The two policers who had accompanied him were quickly back in the polcar and departed. But Arden was not alone at the windswept entrance. Four shootmen, dressed in uniforms of

## bl r l nd

conspicuous camouflage, and a burly sergeant – the rank displayed on a label stitched across the left chest – had been awaiting his arrival. Four long-guns were trained on him, and four forefingers fidgeted.

“Atten-tion!” the sergeant bellowed, in Arden’s ear.

“What?” Arden asked.

“It means stand rigid and straight,” informed the sergeant less loudly, stroking one tail of a moustache.

“Why?” inquired Arden.

“Because I tell you to!” The sergeant was back to bellowing.

Arden winced. “You don’t have to shout. I have twenty-twenty hearing.”

Under the sergeant’s glare, and aware of the four restless fingers, Arden drew himself rigid and straight. The sergeant inspected him.

“You look like you’ve been in the wars, my son.”

“Oh, this.” Arden smiled and raised a hand to caress the bruise on his face. “I —”

“Hands down!” Then quieter: “So you’ll know all about rough and tumble. A royal bonus, that is.”

The sergeant turned to face his men. “You’ll get plenty of rough and tumble where you’re going, my lad.” The men laughed at the joke until another bellow.

“Quick march!”

Arden was escorted across a gusty expanse of hard surface to an extended hut shaped like an upturned U, long-guns trained on him the full distance.

“Halt!” the sergeant yelled. Arden halted.

“About turn!”

“Which way?”

The sergeant pulled a face of incredulous menace.

“Into the hut, I would say.”

Arden reached for the handle of the door. More from the sergeant:

“Before you leave us, my son...”

## bl r l nd

“Yes?”

A pocketcator and stylus were pushed into Arden’s hands. The sergeant’s menace was replaced by a smile of polite enquiry.

“If you don’t mind. It’s for the boy.”

Entering the hut by himself, Arden found a further four shootmen and another burly sergeant waiting for him, a match for the squad outside, except long-guns were by sides, and the shootmen stared ahead, at nothing.

“Civilian attire, remove!” barked the new sergeant.

“Sorry?” queried Arden.

“Take off your clothes. Then proceed to the shower at the double.” The sergeant pointed his baton towards a large brass dripping nozzle hanging from a rafter above a square sink grid sunk into the floor at the middle of the hut. Arden complied.

Without being ordered, the shootmen arranged themselves to stand one at each side of the curtainless grid as Arden showered. The sergeant played the tip of his baton over Arden’s chest, prodding here and there, as the men looked on.

“Enjoy the clean while you can, my boy.” As an aside to the shootmen: “There’ll be no clean where you’re going – that’s for sure.” The shootmen laughed.

A slight youth emerged from behind a partition drawn across the end of the hut. On outstretched arms of a uniform that was far too big for him, he carried folded camouflage topped by a pair of boots. The sergeant ordered Arden from the shower and threw him a coarse towel.

“Dry, off. Combat kit, on.”

While a dried off Arden was donning the shootman uniform, a further command was issued.

“Registrate.”

“Say again?” Arden requested.

“Not you – him.” A stab of the baton into the midriff of the youth.

The four shootmen moved away from the shower to stand rigidly in a row and stare ahead at nothing. Their sergeant walked

## bl r l nd

slowly in a circle, treading here and there as if testing the floor.

“Name, rank and serial number,” the youth asked, in a voice not completely broken by manhood.

“I don’t have a rank or serial number,” Arden replied.

Through sleeves which reached to the end of his fingers, the youth keyed a palmator. Arden was shown the screen and instructed to memorise his rank and serial number.

“Name, rank and serial number,” repeated the youth.

“But you already...” With a sigh, Arden supplied the information.

“Thank you, Mr Keen,” the youth smiled. “I recognised you as soon as I saw you, even with the...”

He held out a sleeve. “It’s a pleasure to —”

“Dismiss!” the sergeant barked, into the youth’s ear.

Arden was marched to a similar hut, where he was left to introduce himself to his unit. A dozen men he met, though few of their names stuck on his first hearing them, or ever. They all knew his; they had been expecting him since his enthusiastic enlistment was broadcast on the news.

A name that did stick was that of Russ. It was Russ who, in the afternoon, led Arden to the training hut, where a telesperience battle scenario was being enacted. Shootmen of one side clambered out of a trench and on to the sand of a desert, where they wandered about for a few moments under a simulated sun until being mowed down by a volley of quick-gun fire from the other side’s trench. Then, shootmen of the other side climbed out to be quick-gunned from the first trench. Bodies were cleared away, and a next round was played. Arden found himself enjoying the game until Russ told him that, in the ME desert, there was no telesperience.

“How is it done there?” asked Arden.

“They use real shootmen.”

“They do?”

“With real quick-guns.”

Arden was astounded. “Isn’t that a bit risky?”

## bl r l nd

Russ went on.

“That’s where we come in. You and me, and the lads from the unit.”

Arden stared into his eyes. “How do you mean, exactly?”

Russ stared back. “We’re the ones who go over the top.”

“Over the top?”

“Leave the trench.”

“Why?”

Russ turned his attention to the virtual action. Another telesperience unit went over the top. Quick-guns rattled. When every shootman was reduced to a limp body in the sand, he answered Arden’s question.

“Because that’s what shootmen do. It’s expected of us.”

Arden was not comfortable with the knowledge. Russ knew Arden was not comfortable. It was the moment to press the point.

“Are you prepared to die, Arden?”

Arden was not prepared to die. In fact, he was horrified by the thought.

“That’s us, in two days’ time.” Russ motioned to the collecting up of virtual bodies by virtual military schospital pupils. “No mistake. The FIBs are already printed.”

“Fibs? What are fibs?”

“‘Fallen in battle’ notices. They’re done when you registrate. Easier that way – reduces the risk of error.”

Arden was crouching, an arm around his knees. The other arm covered his mouth. He looked like he was about to vomit. He felt like he was about to vomit. Russ crouched down next to him.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Arden searched the searching face.

“Well, someone famous, like – like yourself, for instance – a screen sleb can get out of it. You never see slebs going over the top, on the news, do you.”

“I suppose not.” Arden supposed. He brightened and turned to Russ.

## bl r l nd

“I can get out of this. I know someone who can get me out.”  
He rose to his feet.

“You know, I bet at this very moment she is arranging my return to Capital.” (It was at this very moment that Janice was sitting in her nightdress on the damp cold cellar floor under the tuberculous hawk of DD Drainer.)

Russ handed Arden a long-gun.

“Here. Best look interested, for the camereye. Pop a few at the enemy.”

Arden had never handled arms before. He picked up the long-gun and swung it round, high, awkwardly. It discharged, causing Russ to duck down sharply.

“Care there! These things are loaded with live rounds.”

“Sorry.”

On the way back to the accommodation hut, Russ returned to his theme.

“You say you know someone who is working to get you out of here.”

“Yes. She looks after me. Knows the right people.”

Russ stopped. Arden stopped. Russ spoke.

“Do you know our regiment’s motto?”

“No. What is it?”

“Omnibus ticket.”

Arden shook his head. Russ supplied the translation.

“It means ‘touch all’.”

Arden nodded his head, his mouth uncomprehendingly slack.

“It means, whatever one of us does for himself, he does it for the whole unit.”

The same evening (as Janice consulted with the telesperience image of her younger self) Russ announced to the men that Arden was going to prevent the unit being sent to ME. All eyes were on Arden. No eyes were on the hut’s screen. Actually, there was a screen blackout. Screens are traditionally blacked out the night before a unit’s despatch to the front. Arden told the men

## bl r l nd

what Russ had told him to say to them: nobody from this hut was going to stiff it in the sand. No one. Omnibus ticket, he announced to attentive ears, meant just what it said.

It was with some grumbling, therefore, that early the very next morning the unit were prodded out of their beds with long-gun barrels and marched through pouring rain to a waiting Aircules which transported them, over several monotonous hours, to a blinding-hot sand-blown strip in a far away desert. From there, they were marched directly to a faeces-smelling fly-swarmed trench. Arden remarked to Russ that it did not look good, but Russ was not downhearted. Russ told the others that the unit had to be seen to be put through it so as not to discourage other units. All they had to do was stay cool.

A corporal dressed in camouflage uniform – heavy green and dark brown, as worn by everyone in the trench – crawled towards them, clenching a clipcator in his teeth. On reaching the huddled men, he stood to read from the clipcator. A quick-gun volley whined overhead. He crouched down to continue.

“You’re on in five. Over the top. One of you is allowed a final key.” He produced a palmcator from a deep leg-pocket. “Who’s keen?”

“I am,” replied Arden.

The corporal handed him the palmcator. Arden keyed the pentpad. The cartoon girl-child asked him to wait for the connection. Mersey’s face appeared on the screen. He could tell from the background she was in the bedroom and must be kneeling on their giant waterbed.

“Hi, darling. It’s me. I bet you thought I’d done a runner to stay out of uniform. Not me. I just wanted to join up without you worrying. Well, it’s done now, and here I am.”

“Whaya want?”

“We’re just about to go over the top. This is real war – that’s how I got the shiner.” It was a note of lightness before he turned serious. “Listen – I want you to know that if something really bad happens to me, then —” He paused to gather the right words. Mersey cut in.

## bl r l nd

“You won’t be coming back. Right?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s what I’m trying to say.” He knew he could rely on Mersey to have her finger on the mood.

“Darling, why are you so up and down? I can hardly hold focus.”

Mersey was indeed up and down, her head occasionally lost below the screen.

“I’m doing my exercises. Like you said.”

“That’s good, sweetheart. Keep it up.”

Arden heard a moan through the palmcator.

“Is there someone there with you? I thought I heard a noise.”

The screen briefly displayed white noise. Mersey returned.

“Your boss. He drops by now and again, to see if I’m all right.”

“That’s good, too. Put him on, darling.”

The face of the boss replaced Mersey’s.

“Hello, sir. Are you in good health?” It was a sensible sensitive query because the boss had his head against a pillow.

A smile from the boss.

“I’m fine, Arden. Just taking a little rest, that’s all. You have to at my age. Not like you young bucks, eh? – always on the go.”

Arden was pleased at the boss’s intimacy.

“I’m sure you’re every part as fit as I am, sir.” As he said the words, the boss closed his eyes and gasped. Arden wondered whether he had been tactful. The boss spoke, not clearly:

“I’ll hand you back to Mersey. She’s doing her exercises, so don’t keep her.”

“No, sir.”

“And Arden.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You’re doing a fine job out there. We’re all proud of you.”

Arden’s thanks to his boss were lost in the transfer of the palmcator. With the jouncing Mersey back, Arden wanted to tell her how much she meant to him and how he was doing this for her and soon they would be together again and lots of other things, but the cartoon girl-child told him his time was out. The

## bl r l nd

corporal took back the palmcator and slipped it into his pocket. To the unit:

“At the ready, if you please. Clean run, now. No survivors. All white cloths to be left with me.” He checked his timepiece.

“Wait for it... Now! Good luck, men.”

He helped the men out of the trench with, here and there, a playful smack of the clipcator to the buttocks. With most gone, the corporal suddenly remembered something. He glanced at his clipcator.

“Is there a Private – er – Keen here?” he asked.

“That’s me.” Arden readied himself to give an autograph.

“You fall in and stay behind.”

The corporal signalled for a hesitant Russ to climb up out of the trench.

“Off you go. You don’t want to miss the fun, true?” A pat with the clipcator.

Arden gave the corporal a quizzical look. “What about me?”

A finger of wait from the corporal as quick-guns ripped the air, then a few finishing single shots. There was a brief silence before they heard schospital children whooping and shouting ‘bag’.

“Private Keen, special duties,” the corporal read. “You are ordered to return to your unit immediately, forthwith.”

Arden made to peer over the crumbly lip of the trench but thought better of it.

“*That* was my unit – the men you sent over the top just now.”

Speaking the words as he keyed, the corporal said and entered: “Position maintained. Unable to contact unit.”

“Private Keen, follow me.”

At the blinding-hot sand-blown strip, Arden was handed over to the waiting Aircules crew who returned him to EK. In driving rain that may have been the same that fell when the Aircules first set off, he was greeted by a man wearing a heavy raincoat and brimmed hat who did not give a name, and invited to climb into a big old grey gascar.

“I’m to tootle you along to HQ. Stroke of luck, wouldn’t you

say?”

“HQ? Where’s that?”

The nameless man looked over to Arden.

“Classified, old man. Not allowed to divulge info like that. What if Johnny Foreigner should get hold of it? Next you know, it’s cocoa and goodnight. Never do.”

Arden brushed rain-damp sand from his boots and loosened the laces.

“Why do they want me there, if it’s classified?”

“You’re quite the war hero, don’t you know. A hero in the fight against tools of mass desiccation.”

“What is a tool of mass desiccation, anyway? I’m such a hero I don’t even know what it is I’m fighting for. Or who it is I’m fighting against.”

The nameless man sucked noisily through his teeth.

“Doesn’t do to tumble the ruse. What a chap doesn’t know, he can’t pass on. Doesn’t do to feel for the enemy. Takes the edge off. Blast the blighters before they get a pot at you – that’s my advice.”

Exhaustion was gaining on Arden. He closed his eyes.

“But if I’m the hero, shouldn’t I know what to hero-ise about? People might ask.”

He sensed the man glance over him and reopened his eyes. The man turned his own eyes back to the road.

“Well, I dare say there’s no harm in spilling a few beans. After all, you’ll be filling the nation’s ears soon enough. Live dangerously, I say.”

“Me, too,” yawned Arden.

“Darned fact is, Johnny Foreigner isn’t the sort you’d want in charge of all that water. Has to be sent packing. Let a decent side have the bat – don’t you agree?”

Arden looked through the side glass and into the torrent.

“Haven’t we got enough water of our own?”

“There you have it. That’s ours. No glory in filching what’s one’s own. No gongs there, old chap. Got to have the other bloke’s, too.”

## bl r l nd

Head back, eyes again closed. Words missed.

“...future is water...every last drop...TMDs as good an excuse as any...when this show’s over, we’re off next door...what d’you say?” Words not heard at all.

Awakened by his companion, but not at once fully awake, Arden found himself at Hidden House, on the banks of the river in Capital. Hidden House is an eye-catching building, and invariably busy, the ground floor being occupied by a shopping mall, the floor above it a restaurant, and the floor above that a super-casino. Arden had slebbed at all three.

“Why are we here?” he asked.

The nameless man put a finger to his lips.

“This is military HQ. Top secret.”

“With all that going on?”

They parked. The man answered.

“Had to make it pay. Shareholders insisted.”

“Shareholders?”

“When the military was privatised. Not my idea of tea with salad sandwiches, but there it is.”

Leaving the gascar, they entered the building and stood together in a packed up-down. The other passengers alighted at the restaurant or casino. When the sexy Voice of the Elevator announced *Floor number withheld: Military Intelligence Secret Strategy*, and the doors opened, the man said his goodbye.

“Over to you, old chap. Give the blighters a run for all they’re worth, right?” This with a slap of encouragement to Arden’s upper arm. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention my name, not to anyone.”

Two shootmen were positioned either side of the door to the up-down. Without a word, they escorted Arden along a corridor, one in front of him and the other behind, to a non-wow bathroom. Left to himself, he removed the combat wear and soaked in a tub of hot water, pleased to rid himself of every particle of sand. A clean set of clothes had been laid out for him:

a camouflage uniform in pale colours suitable for desert fighting.

Refreshed, he emerged from the bathroom to find the two shootmen waiting. Again without a word being spoken, they marched him further along the corridor to a door marked Ops Room, flanked by a second pair of shootmen. All four exchanged abrupt nods and the escorting pair retraced their steps. One of the Ops Room shootmen opened the door and jerked a head signalling Arden to enter.

The capacious room was for the most part taken up by a huge sandpit sunk into the floor, like a grain-filled indoor swimming pool. Arden counted seven generals – rank displayed on labels stitched across left chests. The generals sat apart at various points in the sand, each holding a bulbous glass of spirit or smoking a cigar, or doing both. Occasionally, one would poke a long stick at a figurine of a standing shootmen, knocking over the model to a mimicked ‘poough!’ of an artillery hit, or the ‘whoff!’ of a grenade. A child crawled around the miniature dunes, resetting figurines upright, giggling as he did so, every bit as happy as a sandboy.

It turned out that Arden was not supposed to have been directed to the Ops Room, and was told by an embarrassed male clerker, who bustled in and led him out, to forget everything he had seen there. The clerker led him down the corridor which turned at its end into another, which in turn turned into a third, the walls of which were panelled in dark wood between spot-lit alcoves containing plaqued plaster busts of past military heroes, these turned around in order to hide identities. The clerker stopped at an unmarked door, and knocked.

On hearing no response, the clerker opened the door. Arden was motioned into a high-ceilinged office of someone in high office. A massive desk occupied the centre of the room, and shelves of files filled the walls. The door closed behind him as the clerker departed. From the opposite side of the desk a sitting woman sat up – a big woman built like a day-and-nightclub bouncer, dressed in a thickly padded jacket that matched the deep brown of the furniture.

## bl r l nd

“Ah! Arden, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir – ma’am. Arden Keen. Private.”

“Well, Private Keen. You won’t be private for much longer. You’re about to become public. Very public.”

The woman smiled at her own humour.

“Ma’am.” It seemed the best reply.

The woman turned stern. “But it’s top secret – you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

The woman relaxed again. “Good. Good.”

Arden was invited to sit down on a visitor stool. His host rummaged about the desk to find a filecator. She keyed and read.

“Hmm. They tell me you’re the right man for the job. Do they tell me correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Arden reasoned that there was no advantage in contradicting a compliment.

Eyes to eyes.

“Now you won’t know who I am —”

“Excuse me, but aren’t you the lady who played the head of Military Intelligence Secret Strategy – M.I.S.S., ma’am?” As he spoke the words, Arden realised it was probably not his place to interrupt, and wished he hadn’t.

The woman responded sharply. “Who told you that?”

“It’s just that I – I’ve seen you so many times on the screen, ma’am. I watched every episode of all the series. And there’s the promotions, ma’am. I particularly liked you in the T/Store promotion, where you’re pushing a trolley full of shopping and patting your behind and humming that —”

“Yes, I rather liked that one myself, as a matter of fact.”

She put down the filecator.

“Now, can we get on with the business?”

Arden saw the opportunity to humble himself. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“Doesn’t matter. Playing the lead role in M.I.S.S., I’m used to recognition. I expect you get a deal of that yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am. I do.”

## bl r l nd

“Good. Now here’s what your country wants you to do.”

Arden learnt he, or rather his visage, had been chosen to spearhead an intensive recruiting campaign. In return for doing what he did best – being himself – his tour of duty would be postponed. The former lead actress of the hit screen series M.I.S.S. and current head of the real secret service of the same name, but minus the stops, completed the briefing by inviting any questions.

“What about my Mersey?” Arden asked. “When do I get to see her again?”

“Who?”

“The girl I left behind, ma’am. The heartbroken woman I went to war to protect.”

The woman peered across the desk. She could be sour in face as well as tone.

“May I remind you, Private Keen, that this is a top secret project. No one must know.”

So sour, a chill ran down Arden’s spine. There was more.

“You’re a shootman, shootman. You’re in the military, where men are men. There’s no room for females. They don’t understand what the military is about. All they do is cluck about and get under feet.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s that out of the way. You’ll commence your duties as of this moment, without further ado. And remember – you’re working for MISS, so not a word to anyone. Do I make myself plain?”

“No, miss. I mean, yes, ma’am.”

A military pentpad is not necessarily the equivalent of a company pentpad. In fact, it rarely is. Perhaps it never is. But it can be impressive, nonetheless. Arden’s quarters, located at a top corner of Hidden House, was pentpad spacious, if a little utilitarian in decor and fittings, many of which were reworked from parts of battletanks.

One of the inconveniences he had to get used to, since he had

no choice, was the presence of two armed shootmen at every door in the pentpad. Each visit to the toilet involved a double exchange of salutes. Similarly at the walk-in wardrobe. Another inconvenience was the requirement of access codes for everything: the catercator, the shower, the shaver – even the time from the clock on the wall was an official secret. Yet a third, perhaps the most frustrating, was the total ban on receiving screen and telesperience broadcasts. As Arden quickly discovered, there is only a limited entertainment value to be had from watching old diskettes of in-camp training exercises.

Arden's military recruitment face began to appear (once the bruising had subsided) across the nation, often in coincidental proximity to his home-selling face. This caused a problem for FQH-Inflatahome.

On his widely announced departure for ME, the company had decided to run promotions that depicted their man as everything to be admired. He was seen parting from a tearful loved one (an unnamed Mersey – although the couple did not appear together in the same frame) to go and fight, fight, fight for what he knew was right, right, right. The valour, the bravery, the determination – according to the implicit message – reflected the company in its own battle against Green Bit.

When, however, the recruitment started, the company was obliged to conduct a rethink. The problem lie in the content of the military message. In blokeish activity slots, such as – and especially – bootball, Arden would be urging the fit young males of the nation to enlist. Fit young males, as the company was acutely aware, constituted the main purchasers and erectors of Inflatahomes. Arden's entreaty to them to replace their fallen mates in the desert threatened to reduce the customer base. The company needed to counter the macho call. The company needed to encourage the nation's fit young males to stay behind, buy, and pump. The company needed a message with a pull stronger than Arden's.

## bl r l nd

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Janice found the latest Inflatahome promotion offensive. The company had replaced Arden with that saucy little overacting madam who had played the supposed girlfriend. In Janice's opinion, the company should have let Arden's real partner, the delightfully described Mersey, take the part. Anyway, the floozy regularly perched herself at the end of the bed, here in the compartment, dressed only in scanties, seductively suggesting there were better things a man should be doing than having his equipment blown away in the desert.

For the past few evenings, the displeasing promotion had followed the news, in the break before the latest from the Big Sister den. Janice expected the Inflatahome siren to be seated at her feet, cross-legged and self-caressing, on restoration of telesperience after the brief interruption caused by an anti-fire engine rumbling by in the street outside. Instead, Arden appeared at her side. Sand heaped itself up unsteadily against one wall of the compartment. A blinking sun shone from above. To Janice, who was seeing Arden deliver his appeal for the first time, it came as a surprise. A shock.

"I want to say hello to all you men. To all you men who care passionately, like I do, about freedom. To all you men, every fit man among you, who puts a price on this nation we all respect and love so dearly. I have to tell you, our way of life is under threat, from a danger we ignore at our peril. Tools of mass desiccation are at this precise moment plugged in, and ready to be used against us. It is a dark moment for our people. I am asking you to join me, Arden Keen, on behalf of a civilisation that can be traced back to before it began, in overthrowing this evil. I look forward to seeing you here where the real action is. A man's action. Thank you."

During the speech, a notice was flashed on the information pane announcing that, in the interests of national security, the voice was that of an actor, though Janice could tell it was not. Arden disappeared and a continuation girl hovered above

Janice's feet to add cheerfully that recruitment would be accepted over the cator, at all public utility clusters, and at most leading spiritual workout centres. A male announcer came from behind to tap the girl on the shoulder. He, too, had an addition.

"Remember. If you enlist a friend – it's all right, he need not know – your own name will be entered in a draw and you could win your very own personal made-to-measure bodybag in a stylish pastel, with matching draw tie and disposal label."

"Telesperience, off," Janice called, and repeated the command until the virtuals left the room. She pulled her knees to her chin and folded her arms round them. What kind of hell must Arden be going through? she asked herself. Had she been male and young, she would have picked up the palmcator and enlisted there and then.

Life goes on. Janitours went on. Between itinerary stops, Janice – who took pride in her quality of chat – exchanged conversation with her assignees. An increasingly favoured topic among them was the war. Perhaps to compensate for a lack of insight, Janice began to tell her clients that her boy was in the military, that he was serving in ME, that his name was Arden, that he was Arden Keen.

"Are you reilly Arden Kein's mum?" one lady from the Muddlelands asked, in diphthongal amazement. Janice smiled proudly by way of an answer.

Of course, Janice did not believe it. She was not losing her mind. It was nothing more than a talking piece. And good for business.

"Does he key you?" another lady asked.

"When he can," Janice replied. "His work is very hush-hush," she whispered.

Fairly soon, Janice would let slip snippets of daily life at the front.

"You mustn't tell anyone," she would insist to whichever assignee sat opposite her under the one-mo cover. "If it ever got out, I'd be taken away and thrown into a damp cellar with rats

and tuberculosis and nothing but a nightdress to protect me. That's what they do to you, you know."

"Never!" might be the horrified reply. "I can't believe it!"

The punishment for letting slip longer snippets, such as precise details of military movements, which Janice did let slip, was worse.

"They fling you in a truck of dead birds and animals, and then throw more on top of you. And leave you there for hours in the rain before they stick prongs into you," she told a wide-eyed impressionable young tax guesser from Looting.

"Go on!"

It was fun. It got things out of her system. And, as these flights of fancy are apt to be, it was pushed too far. She had reached the part of an ever expanding story where her son had single-handedly found a TMD.

"He was out walking, on the beach."

"The beach?" queried the robust woman opposite. Janice was reminded faintly of Nita. Or was it Tina? "In ME?"

"Yes. They have beaches there as well, you know. A lot of it's beach, actually. The tide goes out a long way, that's all."

The day's assignee wore unusual clothes for a tourist on a warm day – a heavily padded jacket in drab brown. Janice was reminded faintly of a series that used to be on the screen, about a secret service called – oh, what was it?

"What about the beach?" The question was almost a snap.

"Well, as I was saying. He was walking along it – the beach, one day."

"And?"

"And he saw something lying in the sand."

"And?"

"And he picked it up."

"What was it?"

Janice wished she had not started on the thread, certainly not with this assignee.

"Them. One of them."

“What sort of ‘them?’” The assignee had repositioned herself. She seemed suddenly bigger, more menacing.

“I – I’m, sorry, I can’t tell you. If they find out, they’ll...”

“They’ll what?”

“They’ll break my legs and push me out in a wheelchair on to a barren moor a long way from nowhere.”

The padded woman gazed through the one-mo’s cover, across the city. Janice was faintly reminded of Mr Wong. She wondered how he was. Still gazing, with head tilted high, the assignee mused aloud.

“Hmm. Sounds like so much nonsense, if you ask me. You probably make these yarns up as you go along.”

“I don’t. Not really. They’re true. Some of them.”

There was a lengthy silence. Janice began to fiddle with the router when her passenger turned to her and spoke. It sounded sympathetic, in contrast to her previous sourness.

“We all do, from time to time.”

For a moment, Janice was not sure what the woman meant. Many moments later, she was still confused.

“We do?” she asked, timidly.

“We all make stuff up, lose ourselves in fatuous fantasy. That’s what we do, when it helps.”

“Yes. I suppose we do,” agreed Janice, still uncertain. They were nearing Buckers. “We’re nearly there. It’s very big. A family used to live here, once. Just imagine the dusting and polishing they had to do.”

To Janice’s surprise, the assignee called out to the router.

“Revise destination. Hidden House. Go.”

Also to Janice’s surprise, the router screen displayed affirmative, and the one-mo switched track to turn towards the river.

“You’d like to go to Hidden House?” she asked her assignee, sensing the question was unnecessary.

“Anything wrong in that?” came the reply.

“No. Not at all. It’s just that – well – Hidden House is not normally on the tour plan.”

“It is today.”

There is a section in the Guider Guild’s Guide to Good Guiding that deals with the situation where an assignee might attempt to take over the tour: Janice wished she could remember it. A weakness that would emerge at the destination was that she knew hardly anything about Hidden House, apart from its being strictly off limits to tourists, for security reasons.

They travelled without speaking. The one-mo slowed as it joined the queue to enter the vehicle park. She tried to recover a proper guider-tourist relationship.

“This is Hidden House. It’s always busy like it is today. Sometimes busier – there’s a lot to see.”

The assignee grunted in reply, or maybe just grunted. As the one-mo crept under the entrance scanner, Janice called ‘park’. Surprising her once again, her passenger revised the command.

“MISS, place seven.”

Misplaced heaven meant nothing to Janice, but it evidently did to the router. The one-mo cruised the length of the parking lane and down a ramp at the base of the building. A shutter opened automatically to allow access to a small underground one-mo bay, and closed again, casting the environment into gloom. The vehicle’s interior light came on, making the passenger’s unmoving expressionless face appear waxy and somehow unreal. For a moment, Janice thought her assignee might be dead. When, after an uncomfortable delay, the padded woman leaned forward to place a hand firmly on Janice’s knee, the action made Janice start. When the woman spoke, the near growl made Janice stop.

“Now listen to me, Janice Annison. You are to pull yourself together. I am not some fickle weekend shoulderbagger from the backwoods, for you to amaze with your absurd imagination. Nor am I your spiritual workout telesperience persona, programmed to pick up your mood and tell you whatever it is you believe you want to hear.”

Janice tried to swallow but her throat had turned ME dry. The woman continued.

“Oh, yes. We know all about you. Where you’ve been, who you’ve talked to, what you’ve been telling people, what you’ve been telling yourself.”

A pause.

“I’m going to give you some advice, which you will take, if you know what’s good for you. That advice is this. Stick with the crap that’s already out there – yes it’s daft, but it’s real. You don’t have to make up your own. You’re not some latter-day Alice in Wonderland, you know. You’re Janice in – well, wherever.”

Janice blinked and let her moistureless mouth hang slack. There did not seem anything easier to do.

“And you must stop all this rubbish about TMDs – there aren’t any. Never were. Besides, it’s history. We’ve drawn a line under it. Moved on. There’s the next war to plan for, and the one after that.”

“No TMDs?” Janice asked. Perhaps it was not so much a query of confirmation as simply something to say. “Never?”

“Wars need excuses. Anyone will tell you. Excuses for wars aren’t pulled out of thin air. They have to be devised, and cultivated, and made to sound as ridiculous as possible. Sometimes it goes wrong. People aren’t supposed to swallow the hook, but it happens. Like last time. The military don’t like it any more than the folk back home. It’s undignified when you’ve got to tramp around pretending to look for something that doesn’t exist. Makes you look a prick.”

Janice noticed that the woman was sweating. Maybe it was the padding. She felt bolder.

“So – why are we at war, if there’s no tools of mass desiccation?”

The assignee sat back with such force the one-mo shook.

“That is not your concern. Your fight is with this fictional world you inhabit.”

The passenger raised the cover and climbed out. She rested her arms briefly on the cabin rim.

“You’ve been warned.”

Janice was about to think of something else to say when the

woman called 'home' and slammed down the cover. The one-mo began to move as the entrance shutter lifted. Janice closed her eyes and let the machine take her up on to the flyway and across the city in unbroken retreat to her compartment.

The padded woman's warning had an effect on her. She stopped entertaining assignees with her stories of the ME war. Instead, she went no further than supplying them with overdramatised facts about the sites of interest listed in her itinerary – as tourist guiders do. Deep down, Janice was hurt at what the padded woman had said, not about the tools of mass desiccation that never existed, but about her making up things as she went along, and suggesting she was part of a fictional world.

Philosophy had never been Janice's strong card. Indeed, she had trouble saying the word. But she did try to rationalise the world around her. In a worthy effort to contextualise her own existence, she formulated such questions as: how can we tell whether we are nothing more than a feature of someone else's dream?; is there any way to disprove that life does not exist until it has happened?; and what should be the true test of our sexuality?

These are fascinating issues deserving much exploration and discussion. It would not be out of place to devote the remainder of this book attempting to answer them. Unfortunately, formulation of the questions was as far as Janice got. As already mentioned, philosophy was never her strong card.

She did not altogether give up her interest in the ME war; at least, not as it was described by Arden. Although she failed to achieve any philosophical progress, her ability to interpret the message of the broadcasts improved. It was, for example, with some satisfaction regarding her powers of perception that she noticed in Arden's nightly delivery a gradual shift from recruiting for the war to justifying it. No longer the macho dare thrower, he subtly transformed into the acceptable face of international aggression. His was to impress upon the nation, through those boyish good looks, a fixed grin, and constant repetition of

## bl r l nd

phrases, that illegal inversion of another country is a noble and honourable act carried out for the very best of purposes. Even if it is the wrong country.

\* \* \* \* \*

Arden, of course, relayed what was ordered of him. With no official access to the news, he totally believed the words pouring from his own sensuous lips into the macrophone. But he was not entirely devoid of news from the outside. The shootmen who protected every door in the pentpad were occasionally tempted to break the dullness of their long spells of duty by mouthing the latest gossip to Arden – mouthing so as not to be picked up by the various listening devices known to be concealed around the pentpad.

By this means, Arden learnt that Mersey had been given a seat on the FQH-Inflatahome board. He was pleased for her, attributing her rapid rise up the corporate ladder to her evening studies. Her success, he surmised, was a result of her clasping hold of an advantage whenever one arose in front of her. In these suppositions he was correct, though her clever positioning of secret camereyes around the bedroom, and her consummate skills in the practice of blackmail, may also be said to have played their part.

\* \* \* \* \*

One evening, Janice lay on her bed, sitting up and listening to the holographic family around her. Because the telesperience system was an old model and not equipped with BawlBack (reputed by the manufacturers to be the most satisfying interactive personal verbal release system available), Janice's emotional gestures had no effect on her virtual guests. When Mersey floated across the bed, to announce that FRQ-Inflatahome had made a large donation of credits to the government as well as having been awarded the prestigious

Saving the Sphere sphere, a newspiece which she finished by thrusting a finger in the air and snarling ‘Get that, Green Bit!’, the response by Janice – to swipe at the image with a cushion – was not fully satisfying. And when Arden appeared, looking uncharacteristically grave and world weary, Janice’s concerned enquiry about his health went unanswered.

Arden, as always, said he had something important to say. Against a backdrop of sand dunes, which, because of impaired telesperience resolution, slopped against the walls of the compartment like waves of semolina pudding, he entered into a preamble about how tough was the struggle in ME, how he and the men of his unit had persevered through hardship and deprivation.

“Every drop of ME water is won by the blood a comrade, and I am glad to have won that water.”

He breathed deeply before lifting his voice.

“This war, however, is not about water. I would urge you not to listen to the malevolent lies put about by misinformed detractors of our esteemed Grand Visionary, our impeccable government, and our righteous cause. This war is about globular terrorism. We – each man, each child, each woman, each bi – every one of us must seek out and destroy the evil that is Terry.”

It was a galvanising speech, in that it galvanised Janice. Any lingering trace of non-galvanisation was removed during a later telesperienced repeat. She was galvanised into doing something. In truth, it was not just Arden’s serious presentation of a serious message of a serious threat; Janice had become tired of one-moing gentlewomen from the greenery around the same old sights of Capital. She was also aware the Guider Guild were conducting trials with a robot guider, and planned to introduce a fleet of pre-programmed tour-mos within the next few weeks. The writing was on the sand-stained wall.

She toyed with the idea of running trips from Capital to other parts, possibly weekend trips to North, until market research suggested few would risk leaving the safety and comfort of

Capital. Then, when the government announced a work-till-you-drop initiative in response to the latest failure to fulfil the silver employment target, and offered generous grants to employers of the elderly and infirm in dangerous or physically demanding occupations, Janice had that entrepreneurial flash of inspiration that occurs only rarely, or sometimes never at all.

Within days, Grannytours Abroad, a wholly owned subsidiary of Janitours, was operational. Favourable rates were negotiated with the military's commercial division for one-way trips on Aircules provided touring passengers did not mind sitting on the knees of shootmen. On the home front, non-occupancy of the compartment was sorted out with the rent extraction agent. Janice agreed to pay a premium on the rent for the period she expected to be absent in exchange for the agent giving the compartment a blow-through from time to time. Lastly, but not leastly, a shortlist of assignees was prepared from the many names forwarded by the Department of Pensions Avoidance.

Grannytour number 79 (it is not good promotional practice for a tour company to start its numbering at 1, especially for trips to war zones; the number 79 was chosen because it reflected the average age of assignees) left EK in pleasant sunshine and arrived in ME during a gritty sandstorm of the sort that removes unprotected skin in moments. Janice helped her small group of assignees to erect their tents.

The next day, they set off between the trenches. All was quiet: Janice had carefully chosen the timing to coincide with a Whirled Cup replay. They were a cheerful group, exchanging rambling anecdotes and recipes.

"How long have you been doing these treks," a man of average Grannytours age asked Janice. She had heard others refer to him as Randy, although the name did not appear on the manifest.

"I've done them in all sorts of terrains," she replied, not answering the question while seeming to.

"I've done a few out here myself, as it happens."

## bl r l nd

“Really?”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but if you get into a mess, lose your way, let me know. I was your age once.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Janice was not sure whether to be pleased at her relative youth being referred to or upset by the thought of being considered inexperienced. In the end, youth won.

They made camp at nightfall and Janice instructed a fire to be built, though wood was hard to find. As they chatted under the stars, and watched distant explosions, Janice closed her eyes and imagined herself to be happy. She was happy.

A woman sidled up to her.

“Hello. I don’t believe I’ve had the opportunity to introduce myself properly. My name’s Evessa.”

“Hello. Call me Jan.”

They shook wrists.

“I’m so fortunate to be here,” Evessa declared.

“That’s funny. I was just thinking the very same thing,” Janice confided.

“My grandson has told me so much about the place. About the people, the customs, the things they do to one another.”

“Yes?” Janice became instinctively cautious.

“He’s Arden Keen. You may have heard of him. He’s often on the screen, is our Arden.”

“Is he?” Janice grew more cautious.

“Yes. He works for the military. I’m not supposed to tell you that, but I don’t see any of ‘the other side’ around here. Do you?”

Evessa looked around, and Janice copied.

“No. I don’t.”

“He’s a public relationser. A soft choice of career, if you ask me, but there you are. You can’t tell these youngsters anything. Lives and works in Capital – though you must keep that to yourself.”

“Capital? I thought he was out here, in ME.”

In the light from the fire, Evessa looked puckish.

## bl r l nd

“Oh, you shouldn’t believe everything they tell you on the screen, my dear. That’s for simplewits.” Evessa looked at her. “You’re not a simplewit, are you?”

“No. No, I’m not,” answered Janice, who abruptly decided the group should unite in a campfire sing-song.

The next morning, the tour party set off across the dunes. Under an incinerating sun, Janice began to fall behind. Randy returned for her.

“Come on. You won’t get your badge by dawdling at the back, you know.”

Janice saw the truth in what Randy said, and hurried forward, plunging once or twice knee deep into the sand.

“Walk on the windward side of the dune,” Randy advised. “The sand’s more compacted.”

Janice nodded in thanks. He added:

“And step *on to* it, like you’re climbing a stair.”

It was someone’s birthday. Around the campfire that evening, glasses of spirits were handed out, and a celebratory cake produced. When lit, the candles on it outshone the light from the fire until the birthday recipient blew them all out in one powerful puff.

Janice shuffled next to Evessa.

“Arden. Is his mother – er...?”

“Still around? Yes, she is. Shoves shit-sticks under floating chalettes for a living. He got her the job when he worked for FreeRange. He’s a good boy, that one. Why d’you ask?”

“Just wondered,” Janice replied, it being the most casual answer she could think of. “Do you see him often?”

“Do I see Arden? Never. The military keep him to themselves, in the interests of security. But he’s allowed to key a palmcator once a month. They listen in, of course.”

The red of the flames caught the puckishness in Evessa.

“We have our little codes, when we talk. They don’t suspect a thing. I get to know all sorts that way. I’d hate to think what

## bl r l nd

they'd do to me if they found out.”

“I see,” said Janice. “And what about his mother?”

“Does she key me? Yes, whenever she wants something, she does. She's not *my* daughter, thank goodness – I'm from the paternal side. Was once called Keen myself.”

“No. I mean, does Arden key his mother?”

The puck eyed the guider.

“I would say he might do. When they let him. Why do you want to know?”

Time for the evening sing-song.

Randy woke Janice with a gentle shake of the shoulder.

“I think we should be setting off, before the sun gets too high – don't you?”

Janice had still to adjust to the time difference. The group, already breakfasted and packed, stood around or sat on their backsacks while Janice hurriedly folded her tent.

“Let's go,” she called, in the style of an eager explorer.

Some hours into the day's journey, they came across a lone hooded figure in a black dishdasha sitting in the sand. (A dishdasha is a long robe with long sleeves worn by desert men, long or short.) The hood tilted up on their approach. Randy was the first to speak.

“Salaam 'alaikum.”

“How's yourself?” the figure replied.

“You speak our language?” Randy asked.

“Sure do,” answered the man of the desert. (Such a character has to, in a story.)

Janice caught up. Hot and thirsty, she reached for her flask.

“Would you like a drink?” she asked the man, out of politeness.

“Not before sundown,” he told her. “Thanks all the same.”

Janice drank. Randy steadied her.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

“Yes, thanks. It's a hot sun today.”

“It's the only one we have,” said the man in the hood, possibly

smiling.

“Did you use the lotion I gave you?” asked Randy.

“You mean the stuff in the bottle? I did, thanks.”

Randy, humorously, to the desert man:

“We shouldn’t bring them out in this heat when they’re so young. Their skins are not as thick as ours.”

Desert man, sincerely, to Randy:

“True enough. Skin is only beauty deep.”

Janice needed to regain her position as leader. She stepped between the two.

“Are you waiting for someone?” she enquired of the sitting man.

“Every one of us waits. The triumph is in the arrival.”

“Time waits not for the man but man for the time.” She was surprised by her spontaneous response, though pleased with it.

Under the hood, the man may have smiled, maybe again.

“You read the Good Book,” he half asked.

“I used to. When I was young.”

Randy broke in.

“But you *are* young, my dear.”

Janice pretended to ignore the words.

“Do you know the way to —” She stopped. This, she told herself, was not a question a competent guider should be asking.

“To where?” the man in the dishdasha prompted.

“To where?” Randy echoed.

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Janice, dismissively.

“Are we lost?” Randy asked, with concern that may have been in fun.

“No, we’re not lost. I just wondered if there was a shortcut, that’s all,” Janice said, hoping her irritation was concealed.

“A shortcut is what remains after the ridding of all obstacles,” the man on the sand said.

“The shortest cut begins at journey’s end,” Janice answered. She and perhaps the hooded man smiled together. It was Randy’s turn to hope to conceal irritation. An arm of the dishdasha was raised to point.

## bl r l nd

“Follow the sands. There you will find your fate.”

“My fate is in your sands,” Janice replied.

The group said goodbye to the man, and he to them. Janice was determined to stay at the head. Randy trod beside her.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

“He was quoting from their Good Book. I was quoting from ours. You should read it some time.”

“Which one? Theirs or ours?”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re almost the same.”

Randy shook his head.

“I thought theirs was different. It’s what we have wars about, isn’t it?”

Another setting suddenly appeared in Janice’s mind, like a mental telesperience. The padded woman was breathing into her face, in the confined space of her one-mo. ‘Wars need reasons.’

Janice tried to delete the remembered scene by closing her eyes, but the padded woman was still there. ‘People aren’t supposed to swallow the hook, but it happens.’

“No. They’re the same.”

“So you said.”

Janice was not listening. She could hear only the spat words of the shrouded woman who had led her to the mosque in Islamic Republic.

‘It is stupid. It is the way of the world. It is the way of men.’

And there was Mr Wong, and Grassy, and Arden, then Sister Mattick and the stored image at the spiritual workout centre – all going round and round and talking together and making nonsense out of no sense and...

“She’s fainted,” Randy called out to the others. “It’s the heat. She can’t take it.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Evessa.

“We shouldn’t have brought her,” said a crusty nonagenarian in glittering gold shorts.

“She’s our guider,” Randy retorted.

“Well, she’s not guiding us from that position, is she,” the nonagenarian retorted back.

## bl r l nd

Randy was inclined to agree. He leant over Janice and attempted mouth to mouth resuscitation. The nonagenarian tapped her feet with the end of his cane.

“Anyway, where is she supposed to be taking us? Bet you don’t know that.”

Feeling the chest for a pulse, Randy replied he was not sure. The cane swiped an ankle.

“Admit it – you haven’t the faintest. Neither has she.”

“It’s a tour. We’re here to see the sights, like it says in the promotion.” He fed a trickle of water into Janice’s quivering mouth.

“Sand, sand, sand, you mean. So far, that’s all we’ve seen. Sand.”

Janice came partly round.

“Stop complaining, will you?” Randy told the nonagenarian. “At least the weather’s fine.”

Evessa had a suggestion.

“Listen – why don’t we take her to the chap in black back there? He seems to have all the answers. We could leave her with him. She could catch up later, when she’s recovered.”

“As I keep saying – she’s the guider. We need her,” Randy countered, helping Janice to sit up.

“Like a hole in the head,” the nonagenarian muttered.

Janice looked up at the faces inspecting her.

“I – I’m terribly sorry. I must have flaked. Perhaps it was the stuff from the bottle. Too potent for me, I’m afraid.”

Randy turned anxious.

“You did rub it on your skin. Didn’t you?”

“On my skin? Why would I do that?”

He cocked his head in question. She sighed.

“I thought it was to drink. How silly of me.”

Supported by Randy, Janice rose to her feet.

“We think you should stay with the Arab type,” Evessa said. “Just till you’re feeling brighter.”

Randy was quick to correct.

“*We?* That was *your* suggestion.” This to Evessa. To Janice:

## bl r l nd

“We’ll have a short rest, if you like.”

Before Janice could reply, the nonagenarian was in.

“No. Take her back. She’ll only buckle again.”

Others in the group, impatient to proceed, shared the opinion. Randy found himself in a minority of one, which is to avoided in a proxy leadership situation. The weak leaning on the strong, Janice and he retraced their steps to the dishdasha man.

“We’re back,” Randy said.

“Were you ever gone?” came the reply from under the hood.

Randy helped Janice to sit on the sand, next to the man.

“She needs to rest awhile. Could she stay with you till she gets her wind back?”

Hooded consideration.

“If she finds the company compatible with her true nature, then she will remain.”

It was not a clear answer, but Randy took it as an affirmative. He brushed his hand against Janice’s cheek, said a not entirely confident ‘see you soon’, and left.

They sat in silence for some time. Janice felt queasy from the knowledge that she was not supposed to have consumed the anti-sunburn lotion, and truly was queasy from having done so.

“What’s your name?” she eventually asked the hooded figure. The reply was a vowel-starved string punctured by glottal stops. It cannot be accurately transliterated here, nor was Janice able to catch it.

“What does it mean?”

The man pondered the question.

“It means, ‘the one who is sent to lead you to he whom you sincerely seek’.”

“Really?” Janice believed she would never master the meanings of foreign names.

“No. But it’ll do.”

Another silence ensued. Janice was feeling a little better.

“Who is it that you think I ‘sincerely seek’?” she asked.

“You know. I know. That is enough.”

## bl r l nd

“Who?” she persisted. The hooded figure did not oblige. Nothing more was said for the remainder of the afternoon. Only when the sun dropped to the duned horizon did the man once more acknowledge her presence.

“Come. We go now.”

He stood, and brushed sand from his dishdasha. Janice waited for him to help her to her feet, but instead he began to walk away. She raised herself, slid her arms through the loops of her weighty backsack, and stumbled after him.

“Where are we going?” she asked, struggling to match his pace.

“Since I go where I must, and you have no other desire but to follow, then there is no virtue to your enquiry.”

Janice thought as she tread the sand like stairs.

“Why are you in a mood? Earlier, when the others were around and you and I exchanged quotations from our Good Books, you sounded friendly and – and personable. Now you’ve turned grumpy.”

They walked without talking. It gets dark very quickly in the desert. The man seemed to be using the stars to navigate: every so often, he would stop briefly and the hood would incline to the sky. It also grows very cold in the desert when the night has come. After some time that may have been hours, the lagging Janice called after him.

“I want to stop. I’m cold and hungry and thirsty and I want to go to the loo. Let’s make camp. I have a tent.”

Janice did not expect any agreement. She imagined the man would continue across the moonlit desert, leaving her behind, unless she could somehow find the stamina to keep up. He stopped and turned.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said.

In hardly any time at all, the backsack was opened and the tent erected and the two were sitting round a tiny stove sipping hot drinks.

“This is the life, isn’t it,” the man said, signifying pleasure. He pulled back his hood. Janice tried not to make it obvious that she

## bl r l nd

was examining him. He may have been dark-skinned – the poor light made all things appear dark – and his hair was probably black. He was not young, but not old like the members of the tour party. Perhaps he was of similar age to herself. He had a moustache. There looked to be a scar running down one cheek.

“You can call me Jan,” she told him.

“Then I will call you Jan,” he replied. “You should call me Abu Sif.”

“Is that part of your name?”

“No. It’s because I have, to you, been abu-sive. I apologise.”

She smiled, and saw him smile. His apology continued.

“It is wrong of me to adopt behaviour that one would assume to be normal in a black-hooded individual one encounters sitting alone in the desert sands.”

“We should each set the gait for our lives, instead of dancing to the tune of others. More to drink? I have something a little stronger in the bag, if you like. It’s really for emergencies, but no one will know.” She searched inside the back sack.

“Not for me. We don’t imbibe. But feel free, if you wish. Anti-sunburn lotion is your tippie, yes?”

She stopped rummaging, and looked at him. Without meaning to, she laughed out loud; he, too.

Janice slept inside the tent while Abu Sif wrapped himself tightly in his dishdasha and curled up on the sand at its entrance. The following day they set off while the air was still cool. Occasionally, Abu Sif would stop and lower himself to the ground for wordless prayer. They took turns to bear the back sack. Janice was moderately happy.

“Are you going to tell me now, where we’re heading?” she asked.

“Not until you ask,” he replied, from under his hood.

“But I’ve just done that.”

“No. Your question was am I going to tell you.”

“All right, then. I’ll ask. Where are we heading? And don’t give me the guff about you having to go where you must, and I

## bl r l nd

having no other desire but to follow.”

The hood was turned towards her.

“Isn’t that the truth?”

She turned towards the hood.

“No, actually. I’m fully recovered and *I must* find my group. They’ll be wondering where I’ve got to. If I don’t, they’ll be demanding refunds.”

He stopped, and put down the backpack. The hood went back. He looked her in the eyes.

“They don’t want you, Jan. You delay them. They’ll survive perfectly well without you.”

“Oh?” Janice was hurt. The man noticed.

“They don’t care where they end up. For most, life is a journey without destination – as the Good Book teaches us. But not for you. You know precisely where you are going.”

She was confused.

“I do? Well, I’m just following you.”

“And I was sent to be your guider.”

“Guide the guider? Where have I been through this before?”

He ignored her, possible because he did not know what she meant.

“Why do you think I sat in the middle of the desert all day yesterday? And the day before – you were late, by the way. Why – if not waiting for you?”

Janice slowly picked up the backpack and heaved it on to her back. The sun was getting hot.

“Who are you, Abu Sif? How could you possibly know I was coming? If I’m such a lousy guider, how could you be certain I would pass your way?”

The man adopted concern.

“Lousy? You have lice? We have a method to delouse. You have to take off your clothes and turn them inside out to the sun at its peak. The fierce rays cook the lice till they are no more.”

“No, no. I don’t have lice. I meant, if I’m such a *poor* guider.”

He held out his arms in query.

“How can you be a poor guider? You came straight to me.

Your skill of direction is immaculate. As we say around here: you are like a scudded missile.”

With a sigh, Janice made to start off, at an angle to the course they had been taking.

“Thanks for your company, Abu Sif, but I’ve a job to do. I’ve a troop out there who may be in the greatest danger. They could be under attack from man-eating camels, or down to their last lick of dew. I’m not covered by insurance for this sort of thing.”

She started off. He followed, then overtook her, then stood in front of her.

“You came here to look for Terry.”

They stood facing one another. Janice thought she heard distant thunder.

“Terry? The evil that is? Why are you saying this to me? I – I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She pushed him aside with a sweep of an arm and restarted her walk. He repeated his previous manoeuvre.

“Will you stop for a moment, and listen to me? I was sent to bring you to Terry.”

Janice stopped for a moment and listened. She stopped for longer than a moment.

“Me to Terry? Are you —?” A gasp of unwelcome realisation. “That makes you a terryist. You’re a globular terryist!” She sank to the ground, the backsack toppling, and she with it.

He stood above her, hands outstretched for her to take hold of.

“No, Jan. I am not a globular terryist. I am a guider, like yourself. In this instance, you seek the way, I show the way.”

He pulled her up.

“Come. This is not a good place to bicker.”

“Where are we, anyway?”

An arm pointed. She looked. After cleaning and adjusting her spectacles, she could see white tips, the snow-capped peaks of mountains, shimmering through the hot air.

“It’s not far as the vulture flies,” her companion said. “We will make it before nightfall. That’s the best time.”

## bl r l nd

Abu Sif was right. Walking as the vulture flies, they did indeed reach the mountains by nightfall. And it was the best time – though, because Janice was without knowledge of the mountains by day, she had no way of confirming.

She wanted to rest but he coaxed her to climb. When he went behind a boulder to relieve himself, she hurriedly erected the tent in a small level gap between rocks, and started the tiny stove. On his return, she told him the day was over. He sat down beside her and acquiesced.

“Is it always this cold in the mountains?” she asked. “It’s colder than the desert at night.”

“This is not cold. You should try it in the winter time. That is cold.”

They sat on stones and sipped. There was little light. Janice felt twinges of excitement, and waves of curiosity.

“What’s Terry like?”

“Acquaintance will be yours very soon.”

“Where does he live, exactly? I cannot imagine anyone living here, among these bare mountains.”

“You get used to it.”

There were other questions, but Abu Sif was evasive, in a teasing way. Her drink finished, Janice said she wanted to turn in. A brief hesitation, then the words broke free:

“Abu Sif, you must sleep in the tent tonight. Next to me.”

“I cannot do that, Jan. We do not allow such things.”

“There are just the two of us. Nobody will know. You’ll be turned to ice if you stay in the open.”

He held a finger to his lips. Janice thought he was being bashful and wanted her to stop the invitation.

“I don’t snore. At least, I don’t think I do.”

“Shh!”

It was hardly more than a breath. Even in the low light, she could tell he had tensed. She whispered to him.

“What is it?”

He whispered back.

“There is someone.”

## bl r l nd

“Where?” Janice also tensed.

“Everywhere. They’re all around.”

Both listened. Somewhere, a loosened stone rattled as it fell. Janice imagined she heard a shuffling sound. Then another. Very quietly, Abu Sif told her they were closing in. The silence was palpable. It seemed like time had stopped. In unison, powerful hand-lantern lights flared, an arc temporarily blinding the two crouching campers, and figures emerged noisily from the rock surroundings.

“Surprise!” shouted Evessa.

“Gotcha!” shouted Randy. “Caught you two at it, eh?”

The rest of Grannytour number 79 gathered round.

“We beat you to the mountains, easy-peasy,” laughed an effervescent Evessa.

“Just as well, by the looks,” grinned a randy Randy.

“Let’s party!” cried Evessa.

They shared rations and joked and laughed around the stove, though it was too cold to continue the merrymaking for long. Besides, the group had something they wanted to say to Janice.

“The thing is, we’ve been talking, and we’ve – er – come to a sort of consensus,” Randy started.

“We want to go on without you as our guider,” Evessa expanded.

“We want to go on without you, full stop,” the nonagenarian in glittering gold shorts condensed.

“But you can’t,” Janice protested. “The group visa stipulates a qualified guider. That’s me.”

Randy spoke kindly. “A visa for where, exactly?”

“I don’t know. Wherever we are, I suppose.” Too late, Janice recognised the trap. Randy closed it, gently.

“There you are. You’re lost, true? And if you’re lost, we’re all lost. It’s every man for himself.”

“And every woman,” added Evessa.

“And every woman,” backed Randy.

Abu Sif joined in. “Who amongst us is lost if life’s final

## bl r l nd

destination is common to all?”

People started to talk at once. Janice stood, and shouted.

“That’s enough!” She waited for silence before turning to Randy. “If you want to wander off on your own, then go. I can’t stop you. Any of you. If you want to remain safe, then stay with me. It’s your choice. That’s all I have to say.”

“We’ve already made our choice,” Evessa replied, in the flat tone of unnegotiable decision.

“*You* can come with *us*,” Randy offered brightly. “I’ll lead. I’ll soon pick up the trail.”

“No she can’t,” the nonagenarian growled.

A group member from the back spoke out.

“Ask her where she thinks she’s going.”

“Where are you going, anyway?” asked Randy.

Janice evaded his gaze. “I – I can’t say.” She looked at Abu Sif. Other eyes followed. He pulled the hood over his head. The mountainside was quiet.

“We have our destiny,” Abu Sif finally told them from inside the hood. “We may fool ourselves that we have choice, yet unfailingly we follow the path which has been laid down for us.”

The nonagenarian snorted, an unpleasant sound. “A load of tosh, if you ask me. He’s as bad as her. Good riddance to the both of them – that’s what I say.”

“Where will *you* go?” Janice retaliated, half to Randy, half to the nonagenarian.

Randy answered. “We’ve decided to return to the trenches. There’s more to see. It’s the action we’re after rather than scenery.”

“Sand, sand, sand,” muttered the nonagenarian. “I’ve had sand up to my jacksie. Back to the front, that’s where we’re off. Can’t beat a good scrap. *Rat-tat-tat.*”

“Sorry,” Randy concluded. Janice thought he said it with meaning. That was nice of him.

Janice was having a nightmare that returned her to the horrors of Splatter Hall. There were long-guns going off in the near

distance, and shouts of ‘bag!’. She awoke with a yelp. The shouts instantly stopped, but the long-guns continued as reality. Instead of dead and dying animals around her, a black-clothed shape was squeezed up against her, in the narrow tent. She tugged her arm out from under the shape. Abu Sif stirred, and woke.

“Oh!” is all Janice could think of saying.

“It’s all right,” Abu Sif told her from her feet. Janice saw he was lying the opposite way. He crawled out of the tent from one end, and she the other. It was day, but the air was as sharp as the night. Long-gun fire from beyond a ridge broke the natural peace.

“Who’s shooting?” she asked.

“Don’t worry – it’s harmless,” she was told.

“How can you tell?”

“It’s only dangerous when it’s aimed at you.”

She rubbed her eyes and wondered why the headache. He started the stove and prepared breakfast.

“You were in the tent – with me!” she exclaimed. Sleeping next to a man was a situation she had never before had to deal with.

“I apologise. It was not meant to be that way.”

“So why was it?” She was confused, not angry. And curious. Another thought came to her.

“Where are the others?”

“You don’t remember?”

Janice tried. “No. No, I don’t, now you come to mention it. What happened?”

Abu Sif laughed.

“Jan, you had a merry time last night.”

“What do you mean? All I can remember is being given the push as the group’s guider.”

They sat together and sipped.

“This is strong,” commented Janice, screwing up her face.

“Consider it as medicine. It will counter the effects of spirit.”

“Spirit? I don’t drink spirit.”

He laughed again.

## bl r l nd

“I think last night much spirit passed your lips. With the woman Evessa.”

“Are you sure?” She hoped he wasn’t but sensed he was.

The events of the night were related by Abu Sif, as follows. While the group continued their discussion, he decided to retire. Janice had insisted he slept in her tent while she would share with Evessa, this perhaps because Evessa had wanted the two women to talk about someone called ’Ard On. He heard the clink of spirit bottles before falling asleep. Later, Janice had crept in beside him. He could smell the spirit. Not wishing to offend her for the courtesy shown by the use of the tent, he had stayed inside but reversed his alignment. The others had packed up and left at daybreak.

“I don’t remember any of it,” she told him, mystified.

“Maybe it is for the better,” he replied with a thoughtful nod. “Not all that is known is elucidation.”

They climbed higher into the mountains, getting nearer to the intermittent cracks from long-guns. Towards the end of the morning, they came across an old trailer caravan chocked by the side of the track. The caravan was converted and had a counter for selling snacks. Abu Sif ordered snow soup and brought the bowls over to Janice, sitting on a rock. She thanked him as they broke bread. Another customer of the snack trailer, wearing a rough mountain coat criss-crossed by ammunition belts, hailed Abu Sif, who returned the greeting.

“We are expected,” he told Janice. “Terry is waiting for us.”

“Where does he live?” she munched.

“I cannot tell you that. No one can tell you that.”

“But I’ll know, soon enough. True?” she sipped.

“Not exactly. Jan, you will have to wear a blindfold. I apologise.”

“That’s not very polite.”

“But you’re a woman.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” She threw him a glance that he tried to avoid.

## bl i n d

“Women do not know the meaning of that on which they gaze but are in haste to tell others what they believe has been seen.”

She held out a hand to him, and smiled. “Yes, our Good Book has more or less the same teaching. Chav the Elder. He says it more than once, actually. He says most things more than once.”

Abu Sif accepted her hand, and smiled back. “Our Good Books are indeed good books.”

Janice could feel her head clearing.

“Then again, in response to Chav, there is Margaret who tells us that a man sees only what is in his mind to see.”

“The mind is the heart of the soul. Without a soul, we do not exist.”

“Except in the imagination of another.”

“Without the other, we cannot be a self.”

“So, can we skip the blindfold, do you reckon?”

He let go of her hand. “I’m sorry, truly. It is the tradition of our people.”

When they had finished the soup, Abu Sif told Janice to put on the backpack.

“It’s *your* turn to carry the load,” she complained.

“I cannot allow my countrymen to see me struggle with a backpack when I have a woman with me,” he whispered.

A short distance from the snack trailer, he took the backpack from her. This was a relief for her as the path had become not only less even but upwardly steeper. Maybe hours went by before Abu Sif, in the lead, stopped.

“We are close now. Here, you will have to take the backpack. Same reason as before. You must also put on the blindfold.”

“Oh, do I really have to?” she moaned.

“It is to prevent you memorising the route,” he explained, reaching round her head. “And it helps cover your face.”

“Well, at least let me take off my spectacles,” she grumbled.

The last part of the journey was difficult for Janice, under the load on her back, feeling her way step by step along what she knew was a slim ledge between a rising sheer rock face on one

## bl r l nd

side and a drop to oblivion on the other. In places, a piece of the ledge had broken completely away, and the traveller was required to take a small leap. These were tricky moments for Janice.

“Stop. We have arrived.”

Abu Sif removed the blindfold. Once she had put on her spectacles, Janice saw a portal in the side of the mountain, framed by tall fluted pillars and an ornate lintel carved from the living rock. People were entering, and others were leaving, these carrying goods of all description. Opposite the perilous ledge, a metalled road wide enough for vehicles to pass dropped gradually away into mist that cloaked the mountain’s lower levels. Janice was led through the entrance. The massive interior was brightly illuminated by continuous lighting. Lining each side of the cavern were shops, including a T/Store. In the centre of a neatly marked floor, vehicles were parked. The interior of the mountain was as busy as a shopping mall; this was not surprising, since the interior was indeed a shopping mall.

“Is this where we find Terry?” asked Janice, who had imagined something different.

“Shh!” Abu Sif shushed. “Get behind me and pretend to be invisible. See how the other women do it.”

She followed him, closely, past the shops and further into the cave. The sense of vastness diminished and the lighting was reduced to individual lamps mounted on bare rock walls. Also, there were less people. Gradually, the cave shrank to hardly more than a gloomy passage, with no people.

“Are we nearly there?” she asked, the question bouncing from the hewn rock.

“Shh!” The repeat was repeated as a muted echo.

He stopped, so abruptly she bumped into him.

“You have once more to put on the blindfold.”

“Why? I have no idea where I am, anyway.”

“It is to prevent you memorising the route.”

“You surprise me.”

He deflected the sarcasm and tied the blindfold round her head. From inside his dishdasha, he took a short length of rope

## bl r l nd

which of course Janice could not see. Taking her wrists, he bound her.

“What are you doing?” she struggled.

“I have to bind your hands in front. You are a woman. I have to lead you into the presence of the most supreme Terry as a humble servant.”

“Isn’t this taking tradition a bit too far? I feel I’m being treated as a chattel.”

He grunted. “Yes, cattle – that is the word I was searching for. The most supreme Terry will receive you as my cattle.”

The blindfold and rope were in place, but not without protest.

“What’s come over you, Abu Sif? You’re a reasonable sort of fellow all day, then you suddenly go off like this. We shared a tent, remember?”

She heard a voice: loud, quick, glottal, challenging. Abu Sif replied. There followed an argument. She yelped at a prod into her breast with probably the barrel of a long-gun, and again when probably the same probable barrel was inserted brusquely between her legs and jiggled.

“It’s normal procedure,” Abu Sif whispered into her ear. “To see if you are truly a woman.”

The rope pulled and she followed. There did not seem a practical alternative. Whenever the backpack caught against the rough rock of the narrow tunnel, slowing her, the rope was tugged with a painful impatience. Whenever she protested, Abu Sif hissed at her to be quiet for her own good. All the time, the other man, in front of them, maintained a constant griping, or what sounded very like griping.

They arrived in the presence. Janice could sense it. A slackening of the rope; the sudden cessation of the griping; the rustle of her companion being searched for weapons; the aroma of coffee in the air. A command was issued. The rope was removed, and the blindfold. Janice put on her spectacles. Between two watchful guards, who cradled long-guns, sat a third man with a long beard. Separating him from his visitors was a table on which

stood a deskator. All were in an office about twice the size of Grassy's cushion room. One wall was lined with overfilled shelves; two walls were plain rock except for head-and shoulder posters of the man sitting at the desk; the remaining wall contained a window which looked out on to mountains. Heating was supplied from a stove in a corner by the window; on the stove stood a simmering pot. Janice could taste the coffee within.

"Welcome," the man behind the table said. He made a gesture with his hand and Abu Sif helped her remove the backpack, placing it on the floor. Another gesture produced a stool for her to sit on, brought by the same man she assumed had prodded her so rudely with his long-gun.

"I must apologise most sincerely for the inconvenience born of security – it is a sign of the times, I fear."

"I understand. It's the same everywhere," she smiled.

"Would you like a glass of coffee?" the man behind the table asked. He had a soft voice, and a kind smile. His movements were unhurried.

"I'd love one," Janice replied, truthfully. She loved real coffee.

The man again gestured, this time to one of the long-gun cradlers; moments later, Janice had her glass of coffee. Her host already had a glass, which he raised to her.

"I am —" (he gave a long difficult name) " – better known, I think, as Terry Tory. Disputed and fought over."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Tory. My name's Janice Annison."

"No – al-Tori is a descriptive, you see. It means, 'cannot be changed'. Teri is my assumed name. This is the one I use – this is the one which the world knows me by."

Janice was confused.

"I'm sorry. Pleased to meet you, Mr Terry."

"Just Teri will be all right."

"Pleased to meet you, Terry."

He acknowledged the revised greeting.

"Perhaps yours, too, is an assumed name?"

"No. It's my real name. My friends call me Jan."

## bl r l nd

“Then I will call you Jan, if that is not being presumptuous of me.”

“Oh, no. Please do call me Jan, Mr —” She corrected herself. “Terry.”

They drank their coffees. There were documents laid out on the table containing a runny script. Janice was reminded slightly of the signboards in Islamic Republic.

“You have surely come a long way, Jan. On what matter is it you wish to see me?” Terry asked. His elbows were now on the table, and his hands clasped, forefingers extending to the ceiling like a pointer. His was a simple question, yet so difficult to answer. She assumed it was he who had wanted to see her.

“Er – I just thought it would be nice to meet you, Terry. I have heard a lot about you.”

That disarming smile.

“I’m sure you have, my dear. And it is a pleasure to be visited by a lady of your doubtless charm and intellect. Life in the mountains can be lonely.”

She smiled back.

“I expect you have lots of people to see you. Everyone says they would like to find you. Everyone is looking for you – aren’t they?”

The disarming smile became a gentle rolling laugh. A gesture of the hand to the same guarder as before had the effect of replenishing the coffee in the glasses.

“You have been listening to your Mr Arden Keen. He will have you believe your leaders would like to track me down and finish me off.”

“Yes?” Janice tried to subdue the discomfort of Arden’s name used in scorn.

“‘The evil that is Terry’, he says. ‘Seek and destroy the evil behind globular terryism.’ My door is open to all. My palmator ever switched on. Yet no one keys. No one comes in person. No one – save a courageous delightful lady from across the sands.”

“No?”

“I will tell you why that is. Your leader and his kind *don’t want*

to find me, and to destroy me. As a matter of fact, I am perfectly safe in this respect.”

“Yes?”

“They grow anxious about my health. They send me vitamin pills and an exercise machine. They offer me medical checks. And free care of the teeth – which is not possible in your country.”

“No?”

“They need me to be well and evil. They need a bogeyman, to frighten you all with.”

“Yes?”

“It is – how do you say? – a protection racket. If you don’t let them play at being leaders then they will say to you ‘how can we prevent the coming of the bogeyman?’”

Janice was aware of her metronomic yeses and noes. Her guest had referred to her as intellectual. Well, she could do intellectual.

“Globular terryism does happen, though, doesn’t it. There is evil, done in your name.”

One of the guarders bristled and gripped his long-gun. Terry calmed the guarder with a hand.

“Regrettably, there is *reaction*, my dear. Evil to him who evil does. Your Good Book prescribes reaction, is that not so? Eye and tooth for eye and tooth?”

“It also prescribes not launching the first missile,” Janice countered.

“So why does your leader ignore the teachings of your Good Book? Does he not read it? Does he not comprehend its lessons? What is the matter with him?”

Terry gave a slow shrug. Janice met his eyes, and was about to reply, but he had not finished his turn.

“Sometimes, our people get – what is the expression? – pissed off with your military aggression, and with your shootmen everywhere in our lands. Sometimes our people feel the urge to throw the shit back over the wall. Your leader needs an excuse for his violent ways – so he blames me.”

The smile was less disarming. Her host was studying her.

People were always studying her.

“It’s all about the water,” she said, remembering the telesperenced discussions that had taken place across her bed between important people whose names she had forgotten, or never learned.

“Ah, yes. The water.”

From behind her, Abu Sif moved forward and, bowing, said something to Terry. Terry gave a motion of dismissal, and Abu Sif and the other man left the room. From the passageway, the sound of receding griping could be heard. Terry had not taken his gaze from Janice.

“For the present, the water will stay where it is. Your people will come for it only when fresh water everywhere else is completely gone. The value of the water beneath our lands will then be most great. That is good business, Jan. Excellent business. How do you say? – the market will be in a corner. Regrettably, our people will enjoy no benefit from the good business because the land will be in ruins, due to your leader and his calamitous trespassing. Our people will not have homes. They will have no freedom. Their only work will be to dig for water, for your people.”

“That’s nonsense,” protested Janice. She was wondering if there would be a women’s toilet in this male domain.

“I think your leader is most clever. He has your people by the short and curlies. He wants our people by the short and curlies, too. I cannot allow that. I am Teri al-Tori.”

The gentle smile had completely disappeared. Janice began to feel uncomfortable.

“I am Teri al-Tori,” Terry repeated. “And I cannot help it if there is reaction from our people. It is to be expected. Moreover, it is what your leader wishes – it makes the bogeyman real. Otherwise, your leader would not provoke as he does.”

“You have it wrong,” Janice interrupted. “It’s not like that at all.”

“Unfortunately, your people believe every word of your Arden Keen. He is nothing more than a mouth puppet of your Great

Visionary, yet you swallow without first chewing the lies he tells you.”

“It’s just not true,” shuffled Janice.

The gentle smile returned. “So, Jan. I ask again. Why do you seek a meeting with me?”

“You set yourself up as the father of terrysts everywhere. Don’t you realise your responsibility?” The question was answer avoidance. Also, it was impolite. She expected a denial of the charge, but received instead the question twistedly turned.

“And you set yourself up as the dream mother of Arden Keen, do you not?”

“What —?”

“You talk of him to others as if he is your very own son. Is that too not a responsibility?”

Janice stared at Terry, her mouth temporarily stuck in the open position. He continued.

“I hear you inform trusting visitors to Capital in this manner, as you ride the skyway in your one-mo. I am told also you sit under a tent of canvas on the mountainside at night and let the spirit of the bottle recite your fantasy. You tell the mother of the husband of the true mother of Arden Keen what is lodged in your imagination.”

“How can you possibly know that?” she protested, with astonishment and not a little anger.

“Virtuous Jan. You may choose to believe that I am a kind of hermit prisoner confined to a remote cave and therefore out of touch with the rest of the world. However, I assure you it is not so. If I am to be the responsible father of terrysts everywhere, then it follows I must be everywhere at once.”

Janice decided it was Terry who was being impolite.

“Have you been spying on me?” she demanded. “Have you got people in your pay?”

Terry laughed, a full laugh. A gesture for more coffee.

“Not for me, thanks,” Janice smiled to the guarder, covering her glass with a hand. The guarder put the coffee pot back on the stove and returned to his position. Terry replied.

“It is not necessary to spy on you, Jan. You wish for all to know your dream. Though, yes, it is perfectly the truth that there are people who consider it their proud duty to tell me what is going on. They are encouraged to do so by your leader. It is necessary for me to know all things if I am to be the exceptional evil your leader wishes to describe.”

Janice found she was holding her crotch. She removed her hand, hoping the action was not noticed.

“Are you saying that my – our leader deliberately passes you information?”

“That would be telling, Jan,” smiled Terry, tapping the side of his rather large nose. “Let us instead discuss what it is you seek so bravely.”

She thought, quickly.

“Have you a ladies’ toilet I could use? I think it’s all the coffee.”

There was no toilet specifically for females. At a gesture from Terry, the guarder who had served coffee led her silently through a side door and along a corridor to a small heavily-perfumed cubicle which had a round hole in the centre of the floor. The guarder stood beside her in the cramped space until she had relieved herself, then led her back to the reception room. Teri was on a palmcator, his arm slowly lifting and lowering as he made a point. The point completed, he put down the palmcator and turned to Janice.

“Regretfully, most worthy Jan, I have to attend to some urgent terryism. It is all go. Perhaps one day we will have an opportunity to finish our conversation, maybe in the next life. However, I think you have already found the enlightenment which you seek.”

Terry gave an almost soundless clap of the hands. The coffee-serving toilet-standing guarder pressed a button in a small casing mounted on the wall.

“Have I?”

“Yes. I am certain of it. Now, Jan, if you will excuse me...”

## bl r l nd

Terry rose from his seat and left the room by the door that led to the toilet.

Through the room's other door, she heard the approaching sound of griping. From the entrance passageway, Abu Sif appeared with the man he had earlier left with. Abu Sif lifted the backsack.

"Put this on. We must go now."

He produced the blindfold and the length of rope.

"This, too. Quickly."

"What for?" she protested.

"You are a woman. It is the tradition."

"What if I don't want to?" she resisted.

"We have to get away from here," Abu Sif instructed in an urgent whisper.

"But I can do without the rope and blindfold, thank you," Janice persisted, though both were in place.

"It's security. Now hurry."

They bustled a distance then came to a sudden halt, and Janice felt the barrel of a long-gun thrust brusquely between her legs. When the blindfold and rope were removed, the man with the long-gun smiled, saluted them both, and retreated. Abu Sif sniffed contemptuously.

"Come. Get behind me. Pretend you are invisible."

He led her back to the shopping mall, busy as before. She hesitated and pulled back.

"I'd like to look at the shops, if you don't mind. I want to buy a memento," she said.

"No time," he replied. "We really must leave." He tugged at her sleeve, but she refused to move.

"Why? What's the hurry?"

"No time for discussion of the matter, I assure you."

She pushed him away. Her voice increased in volume.

"All this is just for dramatic effect, isn't it. You think that, because we shared a tent, you have the right to push me around. Well, I'm totally fed up with it, Abu Sif – and you'd better believe it."

## bl r l nd

People were looking. He implored her.

“Please. People are looking. At least, cover your face.”

She readjusted the backpack with a defiant heave.

“There is nothing wrong with my face. It is the one I was born with and I’m entirely happy with, thank you.”

Abu Sif raised his arms out wide in an attempt to conceal her from the shoppers. She pushed him aside with such force that he half stumbled. Alarmed, he increased the distance between them when she raised a fist.

“I’ve truly had it up to here with you, Abu Sif. And the others. It’s not me living in some sort of fictional world, but you lot. You’re pathetic – all of you.”

Janice stormed out of the cave mall. On the roadway, an allbus was about to move off, to take shoppers down the mountain. She waved wildly and the operator waited for her to climb aboard. All the seats were taken but a young woman gave hers up for Janice, and helped remove the backpack. Janice thanked the young woman by gesture and stared out the window as the allbus slowly descended through the mist. At the bottom of the mountain, where the allbus ended its journey, there was no desert as on the other side of the range but field upon knobbly green field of opium poppies. The allbus gone and its alighted passengers dispersed in every direction, Janice set off at a steady pace along the only road. There did not seem to be a better alternative. After a while, she heard a freighter approaching from behind. With little expectation, she raised a thumb for a hitch. It stopped, a surprisingly modern machine, and she climbed into the cab.

“You can have your shag now, if you want. Let’s get it over and done with,” she told the operator, imagining he would not understand. Her anger with Abu Sif, and with men in general, had yet to subside.

“Not for me, lady, I’ve just eaten. But thanks for the offer.”

Janice was embarrassed, and looked it.

“I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to...”

“No sweat.”

## bl r l nd

She glanced across at the operator, whose face was clean-shaven and white under the bronze of tan.

“You’re not from these parts,” she said, knowing it was an obvious observation but wishing to compensate for her initial coarseness with pleasant conversation.

“Neither are you, I’d say,” he grinned. “Where’re you heading for?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. EK, I suppose.”

“Snap.”

“You, too?”

“Me, too. D’you wanna come?”

She put her mind to work. One: she had not found Arden, though she had met and spoken with the most wanted man in the world. Two: there was little chance of catching up with Grannytour number 79. Three: there was little incentive to catch up with that ungrateful group. Altogether, she did not see any reason for remaining in ME.

“How long will it take – to get to EK?” she asked.

“A few hours.”

“Hours? I imagined days. It’s a long way, isn’t it?”

The operator shook his head. “No. We wing it from the strip up the road. I’m carrying the juice of poppies. This load’ll be on the streets of Capital tomorrow. It’s processed en route.”

“Really? That’s impressive.”

Gene, for that was the operator’s name, explained that the body of the freighter contained a fully automated line for turning the crop into powder and packaging it ready for distribution. Later, Janice could hear the hum of the equipment as she rested in the freighter’s back-cab bed. On touchdown at Capital, security guarders pulled out stowaways from under the freighter, beat them up, and dragged them away, as was standard procedure. Being a priority import, the consignment was cleared quickly of formalities, and the freighter was soon on the Bundle. At Janice’s indication, Gene halted the freighter to let her out. She thanked him for the hitch.

“I’ll take you up on that shag, sometime,” he joked as she

heaved the backpack on to her shoulders.

“Please do,” she replied, perhaps not so jokingly.

It was late in the night. Janice walked through the chill rain-flicked streets to her compartment. She reached the building, ascended the stairs, and unlocked the door. The annoyance of finding her one-mo filled with rubbish was replaced by the amazement of discovering group sex taking place in the room beyond the hallway. For a moment, she was vaguely reminded of the screen romp drooled over by the securiter in the hut at the gate of Community Islands. Except this was going on in her own home.

“*Out!*” she yelled as loud as her voice would go to the heaving heap of flesh on the floor. “Right this minute!”

So startled were the participants that they stopped what they were doing, dressed and began to leave. They did so quietly, apart from one girl, who snarled at Janice.

“The agent said you wouldn’t be coming back. Ever.”

“Well, he was wrong, wasn’t he.”

The girl, who looked fashionably underaged, was the last to dress.

“He won’t like this – I can tell you for nothing.”

“I don’t care what he likes. This is my home.”

“I’m going to complain anyway,” the girl said, with spite.

“I couldn’t care less what you’re going to do, sweetie.”

“I’m going to tell him that —”

Janice felt her temper snap.

“I’m wet, I’m cold, I’m tired, I’m hungry, I haven’t had a hot soapy shower since I was last here. Inside one week I’ve been deserted, betrayed, deceived, humiliated, and thoroughly utterly completely disillusioned. Do you really believe I give a *fuck* about what you’re going to tell the agent? *Go!*”

Janice had never issued an obscenity in her life. Now she would loose all her teeth, and her hair would fall out. That is what Sister Mattick had told her, as a child. She wasn’t bothered.

One of the men took the hand of the spiteful girl and dragged

her away. Janice closed the door and pulled the bed from the wall. She threw herself on it, and slept for many many hours.

The catercator was clogged and the telesperience had failed completely, but the heartbeat generator still worked. Janice prepared her strategy to its peaceful rhythm.

In the foyer of the TwiceBC telesperience studio, a seasoned female reporter held out a hand in welcome and to confirm she was not a virtual image.

“Miss Annison?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Would you like a caffeine?”

“Please.”

They moved across to a table and stools. At a call from the reporter, a hatch opened in the table and two filled cups appeared.

“You say you have something of tremendous importance for us, Miss Annison.”

“Jan. You can call me Jan. Yes, I have just returned from ME.”

“From ME? Goodness, that’s exciting,” said the woman, smiling and sipping. “Whatever were you doing there? Not fighting, I hope.”

“No. Fortunately, I avoided that.”

“It’s terrible out there. Did you see our piece last evening about the pensioner tour party?”

Janice spilt her drink, and hurriedly dabbed at the dribble.

“No. What happened?”

“It was horrendous. There they were, abandoned by their guider and set upon by a gang of crazed armed bandits in the desert, for no apparent reason other than robbery.”

Janice repeated herself. “What happened?”

“A total massacre, by all accounts.”

Janice was appalled but tried to conceal it. “A massacre? All of them?”

## bl r l nd

“Yes. Every bandit down. No casualties among the pensioners apart from a broken deafcator.”

Janice felt she should have felt relief. “That’s good.”

“Great story, yes. Unscheduled, too.”

They sipped together.

“Now, what’s your story. Not about ME as well, is it?”

“Well, yes, it is. Will that cause a problem?”

A shadow of doubt flitted across the reporter’s experienced features.

“Nowadays, ME is usually a switch call. Nobody cares any more. It takes a bijou story like the one last night to catch a rating.”

Janice rebounded with confidence. “Mine’s good, too.”

“Okay. Let’s hear it, shall we? If it’s as good as you say, I’ll pass it up to the producer.”

“How about?: I. Met. Terry.”

The woman gave a buckled smile of puzzlement. “Terry?”

“*The* Terry. Terry al-Tory. Father of terryists everywhere.”

There was a look in the reporter’s eyes – perhaps astonishment.

“You’re saying you *met* him? Terry?”

“I certainly did. We had coffee together, real coffee, and a chat, just like you and me are doing right here, now.”

“And he let you go?”

“Yes. He was very charming as a matter of fact. Very courteous.”

A straight-lipped smile from the reporter. “Let me see if I have this correct. You went to ME where you saw – had coffee with – Terry al-Tory.”

“Yes.”

“And he was charming.”

“That’s right. Most charming.”

“And, after coffee, you said goodbye to him, and came away. Is that what happened?”

“More or less. He had some terryism to attend to – the key came in while I was there. I was in the loo, actually.”

## bl r l nd

“I see.”

The reporter sipped at the caffeine while she composed her next question.

“So what did you and Terry talk about? The weather? The coffee?”

Janice had the impression she was not being taken completely seriously.

“We talked about the causes of terryism. I was shown the other side of the wall.”

“Which wall is that?”

“It isn’t a wall as such. It’s a metaphor. I mean, the other side of terryism.”

The woman watched Janice finish off the caffeine then called ‘clear’. They both leaned back as the hatch in the table lifted and the cups disappeared.

“There is no other side to terryism. There’s only the one side,” she said, tautly.

Janice could see the meeting slipping away from her.

“Anyway, I met Terry, and I thought you’d be interested.”

The woman recovered her smile; it was the sort of smile that precedes an action that is going to disappoint the receiving party.

“Look, Jan. Before I came down, I ran a check. I don’t wish to sound rude but, a while ago, we were warned not to have anything to do with you.”

“Oh, yes? Who by?”

The smile tightened. “We were told that a tour guider was touting it about that she was the ‘mother’ of Arden Keen. Ring any bells?”

Janice wished the floor beneath her would open up like the top of the table, and sweep her away.

“Was it a military woman in a padded suit, by any chance?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe. I was asked not to mention MISS.”

“I didn’t mean I *am* Arden’s mother. It was —”

The reporter cut her short by standing and preparing to leave.

“A metaphor, I know. Point is this. First you’re claiming a

close bond with Arden Keen, the nation's voice against globular terrorism. Then you're drinking coffee and chatting with the very charming Terry himself. Doesn't stack up, does it?"

Janice also stood. She reached out to the woman in an effort to stop her from walking away.

"I'm telling you the truth when I say I've been to see Terry. You have to believe me."

"Sorry, Jan. If you'll take my advice, you need help in the head section. Leave the make-believe to us – we do it better. Now, I must dash – we've next week's news to cook. Enjoy your adventures."

As a lone stander in the reception area, Janice soon attracted the eye of the securiter. She departed the studio and went home. The rent extraction agent was at the compartment, sitting on the edge of her bed. He had come to rail about the eviction the night of her return of youngsters having a bit of harmless fun. Janice was not in the mood.

Sharply, she threatened to go public with how he was a kind, considerate, sympathetic, always available friend who would readily give up his own bed and sleep in the one-mo rather than leave someone with nowhere to stay. The agent, taken aback by the outburst, was quick to heed the message. If he were any of the things she described, then no domestic property owner in Capital would engage him. His tack was to turn the visit into a jokey welcome back. He offered her a shag. Janice told him she was not in the mood.

That evening, she lay on the bed, heartbeat generator to maximum. The padded woman had meant exactly what she had said.

'You've been warned.'

And so, it seemed, had TwiceBC.

An idea began to form. It alarmed her. It emboldened her. It excited her. It convinced her.

Tipping the backpack and shaking it, she found the card Terry had passed to her over his table, and keyed her palmcator. The

## bl r l nd

cartoon girl-child appeared and said something foreign with glottal stops. Then the darkened shape of Terry filled the screen, sitting up from a bed. Too late, Janice remembered the time difference. She apologised for waking him in the middle of the night. Blearily, he said it came with the job, and asked how he could help her. Was he able, she enquired, to let her know the target for the next terryist attack in Capital?

“Why, Jan, do you wish to learn that from me? Your mediers will tell you when it is going to happen.”

“Just out of interest,” she replied, trying to sound casual.

“The Big Round Tent by the River,” he told her, stifling a yawn. “We may blow it up.”

“But that hasn’t been used for years,” she exclaimed. “It never was any good, even when used.”

“So its attack will cause great mystery. That is our – what do you call it? – traitmark.”

She thanked him, once more apologising for the disruption of his sleep.

Applying a nail file, she sparked life into the faulty telesperience, though image integrity was poorer than before. Disembodied heads bobbed about the room. Arden appeared, paler than she had ever seen him: probably the result of a defective coloriser. The tip of a sand dune waxed and waned behind him.

“The threat of globular terryism increases by the day,” Arden’s head warned. “The peace and prosperity we have brought here to ME is in danger of being lost.”

It was a repeat from the last season; Janice could see why TwiceBC considered ME to be a switch call.

“Switch.”

The Vomit Channel was imaging Liver Pool, the live organ forfeit show, but partial virtualisation prevented Janice from seeing the contestants on the cutting tables.

“Back.”

Tonight, Arden had more to say. His pallid face became more grave than before.

## bl r l nd

“A country in ME is making its own energy. That country has been declared a rascal nation. Self-provision in ME is terryism writ large. We ignore it at our peril. We will not ignore it. We will inverse.”

Another talking head appeared, to promote shares in the exciting new inversion plan. Janice called ‘off’, and repeated the instruction louder until the heads faded.

Another day, another telesperience studio. Here, the conversation was held on the steps outside.

“It’s in the interests of security,” the securiter explained. “What d’yer want?”

“Did you know Arden Keen is not really in ME? He’s here, in Capital,” started Janice.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s true.”

The securiter was letting his attention drift.

“Can’t see no sand in Capital. Can you?”

“It’s added in, to make it look like he’s in ME.”

“Like I’m added in to make this look like a sensible conversation. I though you said you had a scoop for us.”

Janice prepared herself.

“Well, it so happens I do have a scoop for you. Try this. There’s going to be a terryist attack on the Big Round Tent by the River. It’s going to be blown up, possibly any day now.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. It’s fact. You can put it on the news.”

The securiter picked his nose.

“I suppose you got this from Terry himself, did you?”

Janice hesitated.

“Yes, I mean no. Yes. There’s only me knows about it.”

He flicked the snot from his finger.

“And me. You just told me.”

“To prove I’ve really been speaking to Terry.”

The man turned to re-enter the studio building.

“Tell you what. Let’s just keep this a secret between ourselves,

## bl r l nd

eh? Now, why don't you toddle along and stretch out on the Bundle?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Of course Arden Keen was in Capital. He had not been out of the city since his installation in Hidden House. He had not been out of Hidden House since installation. To be precise, he had not been out of the pentpad. His total confinement and isolation was wearing him down. Imagine his thrill, therefore, when one of the guarders at the front door announced, with a saucy wink, that Arden had a 'lady' visitor. The guarder pulled erect as the visitor swept in.

"Remain standing, Private Keen. This won't take long," ordered Ma'am from MISS.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What do you know about the Annison woman?"

"Who?"

"You will remember her," instructed Ma'am, and showed him a deskcator print-out.

"Yes, I do," remembered Arden.

"Well?"

"Not very. To be honest, I don't think I'm getting enough fresh air."

"I mean, what can you to tell me about her?"

Arden thought.

"She's higher management at FreeRange Quality Inflatahome, my old employer."

"What?"

"She used to be one of my bosses, like you are now."

Ma'am gave a loud 'pah'.

"Nonsense. Wherever did you get that ridiculous idea?"

He was not sure, and it showed. Ma'am continued.

"She calls herself a guider. Janitours, Grannytours. The woman doesn't know *where* she is, half the time."

"No, ma'am."

## bl r l nd

“Has she ever mentioned Terry to you?”

“Terry? You mean —?”

“The evil that is.”

“No, ma’am. Never.”

Ma’am mmed. She made a circuit of the cushion area with her hands clasped behind her back.

“I don’t like it, Private Keen.”

“We clean up daily, ma’am.”

“No. I’m referring to your association with this mad woman.”

“In what way, ma’am? If I may ask.”

He received no reply, but used the silence to frame a request.

“Ma’am?”

“What is it, Private Keen?”

“When do I get out of here? Forgive me for saying so, but it’s as bad as being locked up in a prison cell.”

She stood in front of him, inhaling, looking up into his face, her padded suit appearing all the more padded.

“Where you ever locked up in a prison cell?”

“Never, ma’am.”

They were almost touching.

“A shootman doesn’t feel imprisoned when he has an entire desert at his disposal. In place of the add-in, perhaps you would prefer the real thing. It could be arranged.”

“No, ma’am. It’s fine as things are, thank you.”

The visitor backed away, and deflated. Her tone softened.

“Private Keen. I understand how this life has its – shall we say? – obediences. I, the department, your nation – we appreciate the good work you do. And there is still more to be done. Can we depend on you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s the sort of thing I want to hear.”

Ma’am gave what might have been a coy smile.

“I’ve made arrangements for some entertainment to be sent along. It can’t be jolly to sit in here by yourself every night and watch the same old training stuff, over and again.”

“No, ma’am. It isn’t jolly.”

## bl r l nd

The same evening, a parcel was brought to the pentpad. In the parcel were diskettes of a screen series made around the time when Arden was an impressionable youth. He settled down to enjoy 'The Best of the Ma'am from M.I.S.S.'.

\* \* \* \* \*

There could be no mistake: she was under surveillance. The signs were all around. For example, the wind-dropped and hand-thrown litter in the street was being swept up several times each day, carried out by a discarded matter technician who paid scrupulous attention to the walkway directly opposite the compartment block. Then there was the one-mo in military livery that was never far behind wherever she went. And the servicer, wearing camouflage overalls, who came to clean the lens of the miniature camereye in the compartment that she thought had been installed by the rent extraction agent in order to keep an eye on the youngsters having their bits of fun. Janice expected another encounter with the padded woman, and found herself half hoping for it to happen, but the padded woman stayed away. Eventually, the street cleaning stopped, and the military one-mo no longer followed. Maybe she had been mistaken about the surveillance.

The trading title of Grannytours was quietly discarded, and that of Janitours resurrected. As before, assignees from various parts of EK who had permits to visit Capital were taken to officially approved tourist sights. An addition to the Janitours itinerary was the Big Round Tent by the River.

"Soon to be blown up by a terryist attack," Janice would tell her passengers. "I know, because Terry told me personally."

The inclusion proved to be popular, and one which gave Janitours a competitive advantage over the newly introduced one-mo autoguiders. More terryist-confirmed targets were inserted in the list as assignee reservations grew in number. Assignee reservations grew in number as more terryist-

confirmed targets were inserted in the list. Because accuracy of description has always been a principal principle of guiding, Janice regularly keyed Terry's helpline for an update.

An only cloud in the otherwise splendidly blue sky was Arden, or rather the words that accompanied Arden's bobbing head. His was a nightly message increasing bloated with reasons for further ME inversion, the main one being that self-produced energy is a right that belongs only to those who know how to use it properly. Acts of actual globular terryism were hardly mentioned, or were part of the weather forecast.

Also (another cloud), assignees began to complain that all the supposed terryist targets were demonstrably and boringly undamaged. Janice prompted Terry for a precise date regarding the blowing up of the Big Round Tent by the River. He apologised for the delay, blaming contractual nit-picking and not being able to get the staff. An executive meeting of Janitours was held. Following a full show of both hands, Janice decided to speed things along.

The instructions for making a bomb are readily available through even the most junior kidcator. Obtaining ingredients for an explosive mixture presented no difficulty, due to Nita's legacy of a catercator connected to the T/Store network of home delivery tubes. In a little over a month of working in the evenings, the bomb was ready. The completed device was significantly bigger than Janice had imagined it would be, perhaps because of an early confusion over quantities, and it only just fitted into the back of the one-mo. She wrapped it in an old waterproof and concealed the shiny bulbous top under an anti-sun hat. Painstakingly, she painted a face with spectacles on the upper casing. Standing back to admire her artistry, she told the bomb figure:

"If we get stopped by security, let me do the talking."

Frivolity and courage were in shorter supply the following morning. Starting for the Big Round Tent by the River, Janice's

throat was so dry her words were not recognised by the one-mo's autorouter. She switched to manual. Before the flyway, she stopped off at a street cluster for some mouth gum. The dispenser at first refused to discharge and she took off a shoe with which to tap the side. With the gum squirted accurately into her mouth, she turned for the one-mo, to see it gliding away. A swift search and search again for the thumbcator revealed it had been left in the receding vehicle.

Janice had long been able to control panic even though panic would have been normal and appropriate at this moment. She reasoned the one-mo had been stolen. By a person unknown. With the bomb. A large bomb, attached by a coil of cable to a push-button activator. Although the instructions had emphatically advised removal of the activator during transit, Janice's plan depended on a quick positioning of the bomb somewhere around the base of the target, a rapid unwinding of the cable to a safe distance from which to press the button, and the fastest getaway a standard one-mo can manage. She did not want the operation to be slowed by confusion over where the wires went. The activator was currently lying at the bomb's feet, (or at the spot its feet might have been had the bomb been a being), where the sensitive push-button might easily be stepped on if not seen. And still she did not panic. Instead, her innards caved in.

She sank to sit on the edge of the walkway, her feet in the gutter.

"What exactly do you think you're doing, Janice Annison, may I ask?" she asked herself aloud, brusquely. "Have you completely lost leave of your senses? This was a lame-brain idea right from the start. You should be thoroughly thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

"Are you all right, there?" a voice enquired. Janice turned to find a streetsleeper, an old woman wrapped in a threadbare blanket, standing uncertainly behind her. Janice furtively removed the gum from her mouth and put it in a pocket, as she had when a child.

“Yes, I’m absolutely fine – if you can call losing a one-mo carrying a bomb in the back powerful enough to blow up the Big Round Tent by the River and ready to go off at the merest touch ‘fine’.”

The old woman took a cautious step nearer.

“We all have our bad days. You mustn’t let it get you down.”

Janice, still sitting, put her head in her hands. The old woman extended a bony claw and laid it on her shoulder. Janice trembled. She turned again to the streetsleeper, looking into the worn face.

“I haven’t any poverty tokens on me, I’m afraid. They’re all in the one-mo with the bomb.”

“That’s all right. What need of poverty tokens in a city that’s about to go bang?”

It was meant as humour. Janice smiled, and stood.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t know what to do. I can’t very well call the policers and tell them I’ve lost a bomb, can I. They’ll think I’m a terryist and put me in an orange dress and send me to Want-to-know-more Bay.”

“You’re a terryist, like Arden Keen warns us about?” the old woman asked, too rhetorically for Janice’s liking.

“No, no. I’m not a terryist – I’m a tourist guider, actually...” It sounded a poor explanation for being in possession of a lost bomb.

“He’s a good boy, that Arden,” the streetsleeper mused.

The change of thread was welcome. “He is. Have you met him ever?” As soon as she asked the question, Janice regretted her tone of condescension.

“Oh, I have that. I’m his natural mother, you know.”

Janice studied the old woman. Leathery skin, few teeth, rheumy eyes, serious words.

“Yes?”

“Born of my body, though you wouldn’t believe it to look at me now.”

In Janice’s opinion, it was time to leave. She had more pressing problems.

## bl r l nd

“Really?”

“Give him my regards if you see him. Just say ‘stilts’. He’ll know who you mean.”

In truth, Janice felt a little dizzy, but she was resolved not to faint. This was neither the place nor occasion.

“I’ll – I’ll have to be going. I have to find my one-mo.”

“I wouldn’t give it a thought. Like as not, it’s scampered off home all by its own.”

The old woman gave Janice a knowing wink.

“I’d say you had it switched manual and left the power on. There’s nothing so wicked as time-out. It got the sulks and’s gone back to its cubbyhole.”

It struck Janice that the old woman was talking sense. She thanked the streetsleeper with a shake of the claw, and set off at a brisk step for the compartment. A little later, it struck Janice that the old woman might have been talking only half sense: the one-mo would not return to its default address but surely continue with the keyed command. The impatient machine had taken itself to the Big Round Tent by the River. She changed direction.

Her journey took her past a streetscreen. Reports were coming in of a massive unscheduled blast in Capital. Janice felt her blood turn cold, then hot, or maybe it was the other way round. She stopped briefly and listened to the breaking news.

*...a normally quiet part of the city...as always, terryists are held to blame...in an unprepared statement, the Primed Minister said this outrage vindicates the inversion of all rascal nations bent on self-sufficiency in energy...the planned inversion of Further ME will be brought forward in time...*

Starting again, she increased her pace, almost to a run. A couple of streets away from the site of the Big Round Tent by the River, she slowed, sensing that it would be prudent to appear a casual looker-on rather than owner of the means of delivery. From terryist blasts shown on the news, she imagined there would be dust and debris everywhere, and crowds. But, as she turned a

## bl r l nd

corner, she found a peaceful sun-kissed embankment and an intact Big Round Tent by the River, with not a stray one-mo in sight.

Evacuating her mind, refusing to think, she retraced her steps for a distance before cutting across Central Zone on the shortest route for the compartment. She wove unseeing between lines of halted traffic and did not glance up at the stationary sausage of one-mos on the flyway. She pushed unhearing through the static mass of murmuring anxious pedestrians, and failed to respond to a movement-sensitive hailer ordering her to get back. In her mindless state, she would have turned the corner to find a sleepy street and undisturbed compartment building. But, with senses abruptly restored, she noticed there was no compartment building, no street, no corner.

‘This brave woman, this unwaveringly loyal individual, will be remembered and honoured in our nation’s history for all time. Unconcerned for her own safety, Janice Annison alerted us to the terryist threat that is engulfing our city. She drew the terryists’ fire, so that we would know their presence, and she paid the price. We will be ever grateful to her. A commendatory plaque shall be mounted at the site of the attack, jointly funded by Cultexfo, the Guider Guild, and a military department that cannot be named for security reasons.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Three very different men from three very different backgrounds were, for very different reasons, united in letting Janice occupy their thoughts.

\*

In Capital, Arden Keen felt exhausted by overwork, and undoubtedly was. The planned inversion of Further ME demanded round-the-clock justification. Had he been allowed

access to news beyond the scripts that he was required to deliver against a desert background, he might have understood the reason for this intense justification: when first the plan was announced, the whole nation had been out on the streets in protest against the unprovoked military and cultural aggression against another country. How wrong can the people be?

There was, after the blast, also the load placed on him of fronting public grief for the People's Victim. Perhaps it was exhaustion on exhaustion that caused him to be visited by a rather odd notion, a sense of being taken for a ride. As he solemnly announced, in his evening telesperience slot, a day of silence in respect of Janice Annison, he privately decided she was not really dead. It was the first time he had questioned in his mind the validity of a script, and it made him uncomfortable. He tried to banish the ridiculous thought of an official pronouncement being based on a lie, but it refused to go away.

Arden turned to reflection (a course not to be recommended when body, brain and soul are exhausted. It can lead to misgivings, a state not to be recommended when one is the leading mouthpiece for government adventure). He had felt indebted to the subject of his doubt, for her having helped him on to the ladder of success, and for offering him shelter when he sought it. Then Ma'am had pah'd his belief. Ma'am had referred to his association with this 'mad' woman. It was a code. It stood for Military Approved Decoy. Jan was working for the military, had been all along. He could see how his fate had been arranged: fast-tracked to national recognition as the face of Inflatathome, made to enlist, and handed over to MISS. Ma'am had said Jan was a tour guider who didn't know where she was half the time – exactly the right cover for a secret operative.

No, Jan could not be dead. The military would not waste a top mover. Her announced martyrdom was a sham to distract attention from the rest of what was going on, whatever that might be. She would be somewhere out there, hatching the next plot, ensnaring another unsuspecting honest, hardworking saleser.

Being but a young man, Arden allowed the reflection to ferment. He became angry – with Janice, with Ma’am, with himself, with the whole mean military machine which confined him to his womanless, funless, sunless isolation.

Arden had an idea. He would overpower a guarder, one having the same build and height as himself, which was any of them, and put on the guarder’s uniform. The right time would be just before a change of watch. He could leave the pentpad with the others, and slip into the night. The only difficulty with the plan was that the guarders stood guard in twos.

Carefully choosing his moment – an evening, when all were weary – he told one of the shower guarders that there was no soap in the dispenser – could the guarder please bring him some? Soap was kept in the cupboard wing situated in the utility wing, somewhere behind the kitchen wing. Three sets of guarders would be involved in the procurement and passage of a fresh canister of soap. Arden calculated there would be time to hit the remaining shower guarder on the head, drag him into the shower bay, don his uniform, and position himself by the side of the bay before the return of the first guarder.

A number of scenarios are possible. Arden may not have possessed the mettle to hit the guarder over the head, or indeed the metal. Or, he may have got as far as stunning and dragging the guarder, and stripping the man, only for the soap-errand guarder to return and find the two rolling around on the floor of the bay, naked on naked under a cold torrent, which would have been a reportable misuse of water. Or, the uniform may have been removed from the guarder, and climbed into, and the guarder’s position taken up – all to no avail should the returning guarder notice a difference of face. Any of these events would have altered the story.

Yet the implementation was flawless. As the second guarder appeared with the canister of soap, the Voice of the Pentpad instructed a recycle of security. The guarder placed the canister down by the curtain, shouted ‘soap’, picked up his long-gun, and

## bl r l nd

started for the pentpad's entrance. Arden, in guarder guise, followed close behind.

The detail of relieved guarders grouped and marched in formation along the corridor to the up-down, passing on the way a detail of incoming guarders. Arden, deliberately at the tail of the departing detail, stopped and tried the handle of a cleaner's cabinet. He crouched in the cluttered dark until he heard the descent of the up-down, at which he left the cabinet and tiptoed as gingerly as it is possible in heavy military boots to the door leading to the emergency stairwell. The door was locked for reasons of security. There was a window at the end of the corridor. He forced it open and climbed out on to a breezy ledge, telling himself not to look down to the distant ground. Very slowly, for Arden was not an adventurous outdoor type, nor did he possess a head for heights, he worked his way along the ledge. He was grateful for the night because it would prevent anyone below from seeing him, and a lack of light is no disadvantage when the eyes are tight shut.

After what seemed like a complete circumledging of the building, he reached the next window along. The glass did not move to his press – why should it? So he kicked against it. The glass did not move to his kick, though he very nearly tumbled from the ledge. The butt of a long-gun might have smashed through; he wished he had not left the guarder's weapon behind in the cleaner's cabinet. Removing the broad heavy-buckled belt from his waist, he wound it round a fist and punched through the glass. After fashioning a hole large enough to enter by, he found himself in his own military pentpad bedroom.

To a determined man, such an understandable mistake is nothing. Back out on the ledge, Arden worked in the other direction, past the first window and to a further window. Wishing he had not left the belt in his bedroom, he pressed against the glass. The hinged frame opened internally – why shouldn't it? Slowly, he lowered himself into the darkness within.

He called 'light, on'. Under a soft glow was a normal spacious sumptuous cushion area as might be found in any luxury

## bl r l nd

pentpad. He felt like jumping and shouting ‘freedom!’, but caution prevailed. Mounted on a wall was a spirits dispenser; spirits were not permitted in the military pentpad; he went over for a mouthshot. Standing before the dispenser, he reached out but his hand fell forward to the wall. Alarmed, he spun around, and frantically prodded about. Everything in the pentpad was telesperenced – everything except the approaching personage of Ma’am.

“Hello, Arden. Things are rarely what they seem, true?”

Arden did not know how to respond, so said nothing.

“I hope you enjoyed your little outing. The evening air can be most refreshing this time of the year.”

He remained silent.

“You must try it again some time.”

Ma’am moved closer.

“But you do realise it’s not real out there. No more real than the room in which we stand.”

There was hardly any gap between them.

“Nothing is real any more, not for you, Arden.”

He swallowed.

“But I saw the ground, ma’am. Out on the ledge, I could see down below.”

Ma’am smirked.

“You saw nothing, shootman. You had your eyes shut all the time. You’ve always had your eyes shut. You know that?”

“No, ma’am. I mean, yes ma’am.”

She turned away and walked towards the window.

“It’s all an illusion.”

To prove her point, she passed through the exterior wall and, illuminated by a light that seemed to follow her, did a twirl, like a coquettish model showing off a life jacket.

“As you see, I do not fall to the ground. The freedom you were looking for is simply not there.”

Arden could not believe his senses. This was telesperience-plus with more.

“No, ma’am.”

## bl r l nd

Ma'am returned, and patted his cheek, cheekily. He could breathe her breath. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Now, Private Keen. I suggest you return to your station, and stay there until further orders. Don't you know there's a war on?"

Silently, he glanced down into her eyes. For an instance, he thought she was going to kiss. She stepped back, and bellowed.

*"That's an order!"*

Startled, he stood to attention. Her voice reduced to a bark.

"Proceed. Left-right, left-right, left-right..."

To her beat, he marched through an open real door, along a corridor which joined that of the military pentpad through the stairwell door, also opened, and to the pentpad he thought he had so cleverly escaped from. There, Ma'am marched him to the shower bay. The guarder whose uniform he wore was gone.

"Halt!"

He halted.

"Strip!"

He stripped.

"Soap!"

He soaped.

"Shower!"

He showered.

A few days later, Arden attempted that favourite escape ploy of the desperate detainee – concealment in a laundry basket. Being now wise to the perils of escape, he lifted the lid and climbed out before the contents were tipped by an automated conveyor into a huge vat of hot water. He hid among piles of unwashed clothes from where he could check that no one was about. No one was. A door led from the laundry room into the street; in the street, a passing one-mo stopped. Its bespectacled toothy middle-aged woman occupant raised the cover and urgently beckoned for him to get in. Together they sped up a ramp and along the flyway, across the sun-sheened roofs of the city below, to a waiting joyous Mersey. Then he awoke.

Alterers arrived at the military pentpad to brick up the windows. At the entrance to the pentpad, the barred inner gate was replaced by a security cage equipped with genomeric scanner, and the guarders were doubled. The pentpad's telesperience system was reprogrammed so that the desert which virtualised in the cushion area for live screenings from ME became a permanent surround. In the interests of greater authenticity, room temperature was increased to the highest setting, and a minimal water ration introduced. Ancillary domestic facilities, such as the bedroom, the shower, the kitchen, the toilet, were placed off limits. Arden was issued with a tiny stove, a poop-scoop, and a desert sleeping bag bearing the bright MISS logo.

'We must remember for what is it we fight. Liberty. We have become accustomed to our liberty. We have a right to our liberty. We will defend our liberty come what may, and do so with courage, pride and dignity. No one, no thing, shall come between us and that thing called liberty which is ours by historical entitlement. Even if it means the end of liberty for others.'

\*

Full sessions of the Terryist Association were, until the one called as a result of the Capital blast, rare. More accurately, they were unknown. Some, perhaps most, of the association's membership were not actually aware of being members of the TA. A few, perhaps some, had never heard of the TA. For these newly informed followers, the arduous journey across the desert to the mountain to which Terry summoned them was therefore a novel experience. On their limping and staggering into the venue, they would meet and talk with better informed supporters of the cause who had arrived much earlier, having travelled across the pleasant plains and up the mountain by allbus.

Terry's rousing address to the full session was well received, it

ending with a standing ovation from a seatless crowd who had listened in captivated rapture. As is the mountain custom, live rounds were fired into the air from long-guns, resulting in a number of casualties among those on the upper level. A feast followed by lots of male dancing continued into the night.

[The TA, being a secret organisation, does not publish transcripts of full sessions. However, we may safely assume that the membership safely assumed that, even as Terry spoke, an army of inversion was preparing to swarm across the desert. Accordingly, it is certain that those present heard their leader recommend lashback on a grand scale, for inversion of the homesand is a serious provocation. It cannot be treated as if one is merely scraping a squelch of camel dung from the heel of a slipper. We may safely assume that a motion proposing all-out lashback was unanimously carried.]

Terry was hurt by the Capital blast. Not physically, because of course he was far away when it happened, but pridefully. The clash of civilisations which would inevitably ensue as a result of the outrage was certainly distressing, but the knowledge that there was someone out there who thought they could do a better job of bombing than the terryists – that hurt.

When he learnt of the blast, he had his assister scrutinise the list of approved targets for possible error or omission. Nothing. He himself checked the latest terryist vilification initiatives, looking for clues that the EK military might have been responsible. None. He had his learned clerickers pour over the Good Book in a search for coded prophecies. Not a sign. There was only one conclusion that could be drawn: another organisation was making a grab for the franchise. The hurt had to be privately nursed since it would do him no good to have his followers think he was losing his grip.

After having rousingly addressed the TA and dancing into the night, Terry took time out to catch up with world news. From a cushion in his cave behind the office, he watched Arden Keen

and listened to him praise the outstanding courage of the victim. A picture was shown of the new national heroine, a portrait enlarged and enhanced from a one-month licence application.

Janice Annison? Jan?

Like a stalactite of mountain ice falling from a high rocky overhang, the truth suddenly hit, metaphorically pinning Terry to the cushion, paralysing him in a state of intense meditation.

Those weeks ago, he had received Jan as a guest, and had liked her, finding her perceptive and intelligent – as women go. It was with pride that he had been able to offer her counsel based on centuries of accumulated wisdom. Had his faith allowed gambling, he would have bet on her returning to the country from which she had come, and committing herself to the spread there of the true word. This is what he supposed she was doing when she keyed him for target confirmation. Instead, the devious Jan had set up against him. She had deliberately selected a target of her own, one not on the TA list, in order to mock him.

Leaving aside the presumptiveness of a woman making a point, an act specifically prohibited by the Good Book, Terry found the aspirations of Janicism (or, as it translates into the ME tongue, Jaundice) somewhat obscure. He had no difficulty in understanding why someone would wish to blow themselves up – that is a worthy traitmark – though short-sighted is the leader who undertakes the task personally. Also, bombings have a purpose, which is to draw attention to abuse and injustice. What were the abuses and injustices that Jaundice hoped to draw attention to? What exactly had Jan's grouse been? How many ideologies does the world need?

The Good Book teaches that prideful hurt is often the dishdasha that conceals an ugly truth. Terry, inert on the cushion, forced himself mentally to remove the dishdasha of prideful hurt. The nakedness he unclothed was that of raw envy. Jan's bomb had been far more successful, both in explosive power and political consequence, than anything the terryists had

achieved. Envy is a sin. It is something for which you would not envy another. Jan had humiliated him by causing such envy. Was she not at this same moment taunting him as she sat by the side of the stagnant pond of Paradise with the penguins? Terry made a hand gesture for coffee, then remembered he was alone.

\*

A third man touched by the Capital Blast did not exercise his feelings to begin with. He, like Terry, was not touched in any physical sense, for this man had been more distant from the actual event even than Terry. In landgraphic terms, as far as it was possible to be. Anyway, he showed no pleasure at the news as it briefly dominated the multi-sperience that occupied the various alcoves of his extensive exclusive executive office, though some undisplayed pleasure must have been felt, as always it was at a terryist outrage in a twitchy city.

Such pleasure, it should be said, has nothing to do with sympathy for the terryist cause. Nor is it an example of that bizarre enjoyment of seeing things destroyed. It is about business – and the certain knowledge that prices of property in the vicinity of an attack site will suffer a temporary tumble. For the quick-acting buyer, the purchase of real estate according to its position on the bomb map makes for good investment.

Then he discovered the blast had demolished a residential neighbourhood owned by the company and which consistently yielded full rents. This was annoying, though he did not show it.

Shortly afterwards, he learnt that Ms Annison had been the terryists' objective.

"Ms Annison, why would they choose you?" Wong asked, speaking aloud in the language of the woman he held the highest respect for. "What did you do to vex them so greatly?"

The matter bothered him, though he did not show it. Not until after lunch. That was when he keyed Terry. Terry was not available, so he left a message. It was carefully worded because the Terryist Association is a valued customer of the company.

Wong politely enquired if Terry had been acquainted in any capacity with Ms Annison.

Later, a reply was received from TA's public relations department.

*The world is quick to condemn the noble purpose of Terry but the open mind is free to consider the possibility that Capital Blast was the work of Jaundice, an unregistered revolutionary group masterminded by an ideologically confused individual whose misguided interference may have aspired to undermine common reaction to unjust and evil inversion but instead stimulates it.*

Wong told himself there had obviously been a misunderstanding. He had heard it happened all the time.

For a whole day, the value of property in Capital plummeted. On behalf of the company, Wong instructed buy, buy, buy. The same day, with inversion of Further ME imminent, the EK military placed a huge order for offensive weapons and equipment with the company. The Terryist Association also placed a huge order, for defensive weapons and equipment, with the company. (Any difference between offensive and defensive military ware resides only in the mind of the customer. The company simplifies logistics by applying at the point of despatch the appropriate labels to goods that are otherwise identical.)

By the end of the day, Wong felt elated, and he showed it. He stood legs apart at the wide window of his long office, and threw his fists in the air, and shouted at the top of his normally impassive voice.

[An adequate translation for the present purpose is: *Capital is mine!*]

Being a man of dignity and humility, he returned to his wide long desk. There was something else to be done. He keyed into his corpicator.

The two megastorey buildings that the company were to construct on the site of the Capital Blast would, at his direction, since he owned the company, be called Janice Annison Towers.

## bl r l nd

\* \* \* \* \*

It is a place not known to many, and to maintain its tranquil anonymity, it is given no name. The precise location is not divulged, nor the rough location, but it is doubtlessly near Capital. To be sure, any place that is any place at all is near to Capital; any place that is considered no place at all is placed a long way from Capital. That is how things are.

The exterior of the place – let us refer to it as Place – is designed to attract no attention, although it sometimes does so for that very reason. Yet the true ambience of Place is to be found within its interior. In many ways the ambience defies description – so that’s that. What can be said is there is a lot of bare stone in the interior, and the stone can make Place seem hard and cold to the uninitiated outsider. Place reminds Janice of the time when she was young – when it was together her home, the college of her education, a centre of social preparation, and the foundry of her spiritual development.

Here it is, at Place, that we catch up with Janice. She is chastened by her experiences, and a little diffident. Only to certain people will she talk and only after sundown. And she never answers the door, not to anyone. If we make no noise or movement to disturb, we can hear her in conversation with Sister Mattick, who is now a very old lady, almost as old as the Primed Minister and, like that august politician, Sister Mattick intends to leave office only by coffin.

Janice tends to repeat herself – not in the sense of sentence after same sentence but in the meaning that every evening’s exchange returns to her consuming sense of guilt.

“All I wanted was to go into the world and perform good deeds,” she says, as indeed she was heard to say on the previous evening, and on the one before that. “If everyone did good, what need would there be of a word for evil? It could be let free and used for something else.”

## bl r l nd

She is of course quoting from the Good Book, though not always reciting the content exactly as it appears in that mighty tome. No one but an obsessive gets every line right. But she is more or less accurate, and the deviations are so trivial that they need not distract us. And if we are content to accept, rather, that some of her references are examples of loose paraphrasing, and that a great deal of the Good Book's meaning is mightily improved when loosely paraphrased (though the obsessives will blanch at the suggestion), then we have no problem and can move on.

"That is so," Sister Mattick replies, as she needles away at her embroidery. Sister Mattick is working on the Voyeux Tapestry, a magnificent depiction in a multitude of coloured cotton threads of the Inversion, a record of history for future generations to gaze on and marvel at.

Not all the interior of Place is hard and cold. There are some pleasant corners, if one knows where. Sister Mattick moves gently back and forth in a rocking chair. Janice, sitting on her hands, moves gently back and forth on a wooden stool. An open fire crackles as it provides warmth and some light. Other light is provided by an old-fashioned cat-fat lamp hanging from the ceiling. Janice wonders that the sister can see to follow the trace lines sketched on the cloth, but should wonder more because in fact there are no sketched lines. It is Janice who speaks.

"I wanted only to do good in my own little circle. Instead, I blew a hole in Capital and started a war in the whole of ME."

"It was an accident, child," soothes Sister Mattick.

"It was an act of gross carelessness," counters Janice. "If only I hadn't stopped for gum."

Gum is described as a temptation in the Good Book. Some denominations ban it completely. Other denominations, which have been bought by gum companies, suggest the word 'temptation' is used out of context. They propose that the correct translation from the incomprehensible and mostly non-existent original texts should be 'enjoyment'. There is much semantic debate on the matter, though not within the

denominations owned by the gum companies. Nor in Place.

“How goes the flagellation?” the sister asks. In her own youthful day, the chewing of gum was a sin punishable by means she does not care to recall, so does not. It is probable that she regards the flagellation as a punishment more fitting to the purchase of gum than to an act of gross carelessness on a world scale.

“It’s making my back hurt,” moans Janice, and is immediately sorry for moaning.

“There is no pain like the pain delivered by the hand that promised no pain.”

“To feel the pain of punishment is to feel the embrace of those you have wronged.”

“Which, in your case, is yourself, yourself and yourself.” Sister Mattick looks up as she says this.

“And all the others.”

The others – Janice prefers to package the objects of her guilt into one easily enunciated, all-inclusive word. The penance for her act of gross carelessness, handed out as a condition of refuge at Place, is one self-inflicted lash of the whip for each resident of Capital mortally inconvenienced by her stupidity. At twenty lashes per night, taken before bed, an entire season will pass before the whip may be put away. The whip will surely be brought out again for further penance, when the numbers of inversion casualties among the military are released. Janice takes solace from the knowledge that no one will bother to count the numbers of dead among the people of ME.

“You shouldn’t have stopped for the gum,” the sister belately agrees, placing emphasis, as she always does, on the gum.

Janice stares into the flames; the sister threads her needle. After a silence that is lengthy Janice has a question.

“Sister Mattick?”

“Yes, my child. What is it?”

“Do you believe...?”

“I do believe, my child. You know very well I do.”

## bl r l nd

“What I mean is, do you believe that everything which happens is decided in advance?”

“You mean, is everything ordained?”

Janice nods, not quite sure. The sister continues.

“Well, yes and no. It depends to what you’re referring.”

Janice rests her elbows on her knees and her head in cupped hands, as she used to do in front of this very hearth long ago when life was innocent.

“Well, they’re making such a big thing of my – my passing. To listen to them, I’m the most famous heroine in the land. People make reservations to visit the site of the blast. One-mos queue till they block the skyway. Everywhere, Janice mementoes are sold. Did you know, long blue waterproofs are all the fashion?”

“Death can be a rewarding experience. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Yes, but something continues to puzzle me.”

Sister Mattick glances up from her needlework.

“Would that be the same puzzlement as troubled you last evening?”

Janice smiles in slight embarrassment.

“How did they come to choose me for heroine-ism? Why am I the supposed target of the terryists? Why did I have to die?”

“It was your bomb, if I recall. Was it not?”

The smile and embarrassment are repeated.

“Yes, but *they* don’t know that. Nobody knows, apart from you and Sister Posterior.”

Sister Mattick resumes her embroidery.

“Oh, I think they know, all right.”

“That’s what I mean, sister. It must have been ordained.”

Janice crouch-walks from her stool to put another log on the fire. It spits and steams and crackles and cracks. Back on her stool, she waits for the reply.

“Like I say, child, it was an accident. For them, it was a lucky accident. They stole your accident to start a war. They bless you for it.”

“Don’t!” Janice buries her face in her hands.

Sister Mattick puts aside her work. She leans forward to touch

## bl r l nd

Janice on the shoulder.

“There, there, child. You mustn’t blame yourself for the conniving of others. Your only sin was to stop for the *gum*.”

We return the next evening, when much the same conversation is heard – though, to save paper, we can jump to the part where Janice is puzzled.

“They must have been watching me, even when they were pretending not to,” she is saying to Sister Mattick.

“But you knew they were watching you. There was every evidence – didn’t you say as much?”

“That was before. Then they lost interest – or so I thought.”

“I dare say that is what they wanted you to think.”

“And I fell for it.”

This evening, Sister Mattick is accompanied by the young Sister Hood, brought to help with the tapestry because Sister Mattick is having difficulty with the depictions of tools of mass desiccation.

“Why do they say the terryists were after you?” pipes up Sister Hood, who should not, because she has a penance of silence to serve. “Where they really after you – the terryists?”

Sister Mattick chides Sister Hood. Janice replies nonetheless.

“No. I get on well with Terry.”

“So you say.” It is pitched as an implicit warning, from Sister Mattick, to not continue - not with the impressionable, gossipy (when not serving a penance of silence) Sister Hood present. But Janice either misses the tone or ignores it.

“I do. He is polite, and easy to talk to. He’s not at all like they describe him, as if *they’ve* ever met him.”

“It is true that you crossed the desert and went up a mountain to find him?” Sister Hood asks, with more than a dash of awe. Sister Mattick lifts her head, but is silent.

“Yes. I did.”

“What did you do, when you were there?” Sister Hood is youthfully curious.

“I learnt many things.”

“What sort of things?”

“I learnt that people in other lands have a point of view. That they too have rights.”

Sister Hood has stopped with her needle. She resumes at a nudge from Sister Mattick.

“It’s really about the water, isn’t it?” Sister Hood asks.

It is a question too far. Sister Mattick puts down her own needle and scolds.

“Will you shush! For now and for all time.”

“I’m sorry, Sister Mattick.”

“You have a penance to serve out, child. You know what happens if you break a penance.”

“Yes, Sister Mattick. I will constipate, and fill up to my ears.”

Both pick up their needles and thrust them into the cloth. For a while, only the soft hissing of the cat-fat lamp can be heard. Janice is on the edge of her stool, fidgeting with her fingers. She speaks.

“It was about the water, at first. Now it’s about self-made energy. But I still think it’s about water. Terry said it will be very valuable one day.”

“Who does the water belong to, really?” asks Sister Hood, and glances sideways at Sister Mattick.

“It belongs to the people of ME,” Janice replies.

The comment receives a glare from Sister Mattick, who decides a quote from the Good Book is timely. Her favourite source is Margaret.

“Take from the other that which he cannot defend.”

She goes on to add her own opinion. “It belongs to the world, not just ME. The tribes of the wilderness have no rightful claim to a treasure that’s been given for all to enjoy.”

“But what if it’s under their land?” Sister Hood chips in.

“Then they must move aside,” answers Sister Mattick. “As long as they don’t move here. We’ve enough of them.”

Sister Hood again:

“Why can’t we use our own water? Our country is flooding. We have too much water. Why can’t we use that instead of

## bl r l nd

taking someone else's?"

"Because it's different – that's why." Sister Mattick has come to the end of her endless patience. She pushes the tapestry aside, and raises her hands.

"Away. I've had more of this idle chatter than I have a care to listen to. Go to your cells, the both of yous, and leave me in peace."

In the cold stone passageway, Janice reaches the door to her cell. Sister Hood walks on.

"Goodnight, Transient-Sister Janice. Sleep well and profit from your dreams."

Janice hesitates, and calls after her.

"Sister Hood...?"

The younger woman stops and turns.

"What is it, Trans-Sister?"

"Em – my arms ache, from the flagellation."

Sister Hood approaches her, waiting for more.

"And I wondered..."

"Yes?"

"Could you do – do the whip for me? Give me my lashes? I'd be most grateful."

The next time we see Janice, she is in the garden of Place, strolling alone in the afternoon. It reminds her of the time she was as young as Sister Hood, stepping out in the very garden. She remembers that every day seemed warmer then, and the sky always blue – this day is overcast and has a cool breeze. She fancies she can hear long-guns far off in the distance, though it may be thunder.

Those distant days were so full of promise. Everything was going to get better and better and better. Had not the Great Visionary said so? Everyone was going to be happy and prosperous and cared about and looked after. It was going to be a glorious life of new.

That is why she left Place. She had had the confidence to go

## bl r l nd

out into the world because she wanted to be part of that wonderful plan. Instead, she had brought the world a war. Where had it all gone wrong?

Her miserable thoughts are truncated by a movement on the roadway that skirts Place and which the garden overlooks. She peeks over the wall and sees below a bulky ugly military gascar crawl by. It briefly disappears from her view but returns, travelling slowly in the opposite direction. A sideglass is lowered, and she catches a view of a face she recognises before instinct tells her to duck below the wall.

Janice mentions the incident to Sister Mattick, as both rock gently near the crackling fire.

“Pay no heed, child,” the sister advises. “You’ll come to no harm.”

“But they know where I am. They’ll come for me and take me away. I just know they will.”

“Mark my words, they’ll be doing no such thing.” Sister Mattick is again assisted by Sister Hood, who is under threat of having her penitence doubled if she breaks into speech one more time.

“I saw the padded woman. I’d know her anywhere,” Janice half cries.

A rare chuckle is emitted by Sister Mattick. “It doesn’t matter who you saw. They don’t want you coming back to life, healthy and all aglow, not after they’ve named a day after you, and a twin tower and everything. I’m perfectly sure of that.”

Sister Hood wants to say something, but catches the words in her cheeks. Janice sighs.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“That you have no need of. Nobody welcomes a thinker.”

“I’ve been thinking I should go to the mediers and tell them the truth. That it was me responsible for the bomb.”

A gasp from Sister Mattick. The old lady is prone to fits of gasping. She calls them fur balls. She recovers, and speaks.

“You’ll do no such thing. They’re content with their own version of events. Let them be.”

Janice turns to face the embroiderers needling away in the dim light.

“But I’m living a lie. I am a living lie. I don’t exist. How can I continue like this?”

“Child, you have never properly existed. Yours is one long fanciful story, from cover to cover.”

The reply upsets Janice. She turns back to the fire. She feels confused.

Sister Hood makes a sound not unlike one of Sister Mattick’s gasps, but smothered. Janice stares into the flames.

“If I don’t tell the truth, then it means the whole world is living a lie.”

“To be sure, the world is no stranger to living a lie.”

“That is not a very nice thing to say,” Janice mutters, not sufficiently muted that Sister Mattick does not hear.

“The world relishes its lies.” The sister quotes from the Good Book. “If there were no lies, what need would there be of a word for truth? It would be a waste of a beautiful word.”

The furrows on Janice’s brow are accentuated in the flickering pale yellow.

“I hear the situation in ME worsens by the day. The people there are turning on one another. It’s all my fault. How can I live with myself?”

“You mustn’t believe every word that Arden Keen puts about. He has a better touch for embroidering the facts than I myself would be proud of with this same needle and thread.”

Sister Hood can hold her silence no longer. “Arden Keen – he’s so dishy. I could penance for him any day.”

“That’s enough, child. Remember what you’re about,” rebukes Sister Mattick.

“Arden’s spoken for,” Janice says.

“Do you know him?” asks Sister Hood, with more than a trace of excitement.

“I’ve met him, yes. Once, and then again.”

## bl r l nd

“Have you really? What’s he like – in the body, I mean?”

Sister Mattick raises her voice. “Stop it. Each and both.”

There is only a crackle of logs and the hiss of cat fat to be heard. After a while, Sister Mattick speaks again. A touch of sarcasm may be detected.

“Terry, Arden Keen – is there any big name you haven’t met and talked with, I’m wondering.”

Janice, her head sunk in her hands, elbows resting on knees, does not reply. Sister Mattick goes on.

“Why, I wouldn’t be surprised at all to hear you’ve been meeting our new saviour.”

“New saviour?” squeaks Sister Hood. She did not mean to speak, hence the squeak.

Sister Mattick puts down her needle and leans forward, which causes the rocking-chair to roll and nearly tip her out. She hangs on, and grows confidential, looking around her before she says in a whisper:

“Our home has been saved from the closure that threatens it. It’s been bought, every last cruel cobble of it.”

“No!” mouths Sister Hood. Janice turns, and lets her eyes echo the sentiment.

“By a non-believer, would you believe. Isn’t that an irony in itself?” continues Sister Mattick.

“Who is it?” breathes Sister Hood.

“Who’s the new saviour? Is that what you’re asking?” Sister Mattick is mischievously maximising the situation.

“Yes,” exhales Sister Hood. Sister Mattick rolls the rocking chair back.

“Well, that’d be telling. Wouldn’t it now?”

“Please,” pleads Sister Hood. “Don’t be mean – tell us.”

“It’s for me to know and you to ponder.”

“What is it you know, Sister Mattick?” Sister Hood is beseeching.

Sister Mattick turns teasing mysterious.

“For what I’m told, his timely munificence may be comed all the way from China. Can you imagine.”

## bl r l nd

Janice stretches her arms, which causes obvious pain. She is not facing the sisters when she speaks.

“It’s Mr Wong, isn’t it.”

Rolling forward, too quickly, Sister Mattick this time is tipped from the rocking chair; nimbly, Sister Hood reaches out and saves her from falling to the hard stone floor. She eases the elder back into the chair.

“How can you possibly know that name?” demands Sister Mattick, clearly piqued.

“I happen to know Mr Wong. You were right, Sister Mattick. I have met and talked to our new saviour.”

“Have you, honest?” glees Sister Hood. “You’ve really met our new saviour?”

“Yes,” Janice answers, rather flatly.

“Like you’ve met Terry? And Arden Keen?”

“Yes. On more than one occasion. Perhaps one too many.”

Sister Mattick glowers as if offered gum.

“She who knows all has nothing to learn,” she quotes, somewhat loudly. The Good Book of course insists on the ‘he’ form, but never mind. “She who has met all will never again a stranger greet.”

“What’s he like?” Sister Hood has abandoned her needle and squats beside Janice. “Our new saviour. Is he big and strong and – you know?”

Janice snorts. “He’s big, all right. He’s as tall as they come. And broad. You wouldn’t want to mess with him.”

“I think I would,” Sister Hood giggles, as excitable young girls are prone to do.

Unnoticed, Sister Mattick has risen from the rocking chair and is pulling a bell rope. She remains standing. Moments later, two securiter novices rush into the room. They are given an order to escort Janice and Sister Hood each to their own cells, where they must remain till further notice.

In a way, it is an unfortunate order. Sister Mattick has perhaps not thought through the consequences. The same night as its

issue, she is overcome by a prolonged attack of gasping which, for several days, is to confine her to bed and prevent her from talking. During her absence from the supper table – that venerated item of repastive furniture over which all administrative discussion takes place and decisions made – a directive arrives from the saviour stating that traditions and customs are to be retained, that no changes must be made, that everything in Place is to stay exactly as it is. The aim is undoubtedly to put at ease the minds of the souls who reside there, but the rigorous interpretation of the directive by those who attend the supper table, those who would normally be guided by Sister Mattick before the installation of a new regulation, seals forever Janice and Sister Hood in their respective cells.

Janice is able to speak with the securiter novices through the bars of her cell door. She asks that they ask the sitters at the supper table to ask the new saviour for reconsideration with a view to her release.

“Tell him it’s Ms Annison,” she begs. “He’ll know who you mean.”

But to no avail. The truth is this: the sitters at the supper table – with or without the advice of Sister Mattick – are of the belief that Janice inhabits an unreal world of her own. They are unanimous in their opinion that the cell is best for Janice. Her request is not sent on.

Days pass. Maybe weeks. Sister Mattick, now partially recovered, hobbles down the passageway to Janice’s cell, and they talk through the bars.

“How are you, my child?” enquires the sister.

“My back hurts, and my arms ache terribly. Otherwise I’m fine. How are you?”

“Better now, thank you. I think it’s the tapestry. I may have an allergy to the weave.”

“Try dampening it with a sponge before you work on it.”

“Thank you for that. I will.”

## bl r l nd

Their conversation is challenged by the repeated scraping of metal on stone in the passageway where the sister stands, or rather is supported.

“Sister Mattick. What is going on out there?” asks Janice.

“We’re bricking up the door to your cell. I’m sorry about the dust.”

Janice clutches the bars; her knuckles ivory.

“Bricking up the door? What do you mean?”

“You have made your fate, child. This is where you will remain from now and for all your days. I hope you have everything you need.”

Janice’s face turns white.

“How will I eat?”

“Don’t you worry your head about that. We’ll be fitting in a little hatch and I’ll see to it that you’re fed once a day. Of course, I will, child. What sort of person do you take me for?”

“Thank you, I’m sure.”

“But there’ll be no gum, mind. I want you to know why you are here. You shouldn’t have stopped for the *gum*.”

The sister, her good work done, is turning away. Janice is urgent. She tries logic.

“If the new saviour said no changes are to be made, then why are you acting contrary to his will? Why are you bricking up the door?”

The gasping starts. Sister Mattick hunches. A novice comforts.

“Draught prevention, child. The programme goes on.”

Janice waits for a break in the gasp spasm.

“That’s nonsense, Sister Mattick. You’re just doing it to keep me here.”

“Then take it up with the saviour, when he comes.”

“He’s not allowed to enter EK. The saviour will never come.”

Gasping again. The novice urges the sister away. She holds for a moment.

“You know, child.” Gasp. “It’s a lamentable truth.” Gasp. “But they never do.”

It is the last time Janice will see Sister Mattick. Or anyone.