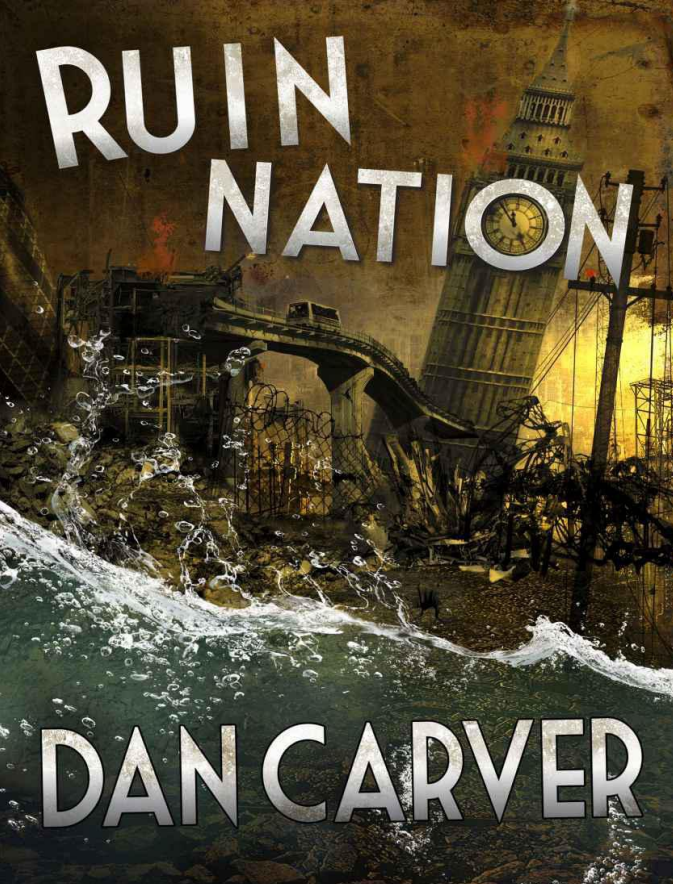




RUIN NATION

DAN CARVER

ruin nation

dan carver

Not So Noble Books (2013)

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Tags: fantasy, Literature Fiction,
Science Fiction Fantasy,
Paranormal Urban, Science Fiction

“Can Hugo Jupiter save his country from an even scarier future? If you like Terry Pratchett or Will Self you’ll love this.”

Ann Abrams

“Dystopia gets a facial in this brilliant story of hero Hugo Jupiter’s meteoric rise to power.” Chris Child (author of ‘Hackle’)

“A wildly funny adventure in the dark reaches of an all too possible future. Dan Carver is a great new talent.” Greg Racher

England is blockaded, her borders shut and the Channel Tunnel filled with raw sewage by the French. Isolated, the country is wild, wet (as usual) and dangerous. Nefarious politicians, who will stop at nothing, battle for control over the booze-soaked masses terrorized

by marauding leopards.

Enter Hugo Jupiter, former doctor and general disaster area, who gets caught up in the action during a search for his beloved missing donkey. Follow his rising star as he delves into amateur human taxidermy and a successful attempt to make a dead prime minister talk. Happy-go-lucky Jupiter is afraid of everyone (most of all himself) but despite many a scrape with more powerful foes, he fights on for no apparent cause and in his extraordinary journey through the corridors of power, we get an insider view of the demise of the establishment and the birth of a new world disorder.

Read this hi-octane account of a very British apocalypse to find out if England really could go it alone

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DAN CARVER

First published 2013

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Table of Contents

Before

Chapter One

AFTER, LET'S WALLOW IN FILTH

Chapter Two

THE MANY AND VARIED USES OF THE HUMAN
HEAD

Chapter Three

MAMMON, MINK AND MUTILATION

Chapter Four

ENTRY TO THE UPPER ECHELONS

(AN D WH Y YO U SHOULDN'T MA RRY YO UR
SISTER)

Chapter Five

CORROSIVE URINE AN D O THER FORM S OF
PASSIVE RESISTANCE

Chapter Six

THE PREDICTABLE DESCENT INTO CHAOS

Before

The Twentieth Century slunk off in disgrace, its knickers in a bag and a carpet burn on its chin.

The promised apocalypse stayed home. Jesus was a no-show and, most disappointingly, the Y2K bug failed to detonate Russia's nuclear arsenal.

The Twenty-first Century fared no better, arriving in an expensive dress then passing out in a pool of its own urine midway through the festivities. The misquoted Mayans stayed silent as 2012 came and went and the Aztec Antichrist stayed hidden in his South American

hidey hole. The sun kept shining through American carbon dioxide, the sea remained wet and blue around Japanese whaling ships and the Earth kept on spinning in a universe God didn't create. The great nations faltered, the not-so-great nations fell and the United Kingdom dismembered itself.

CJD, BSE, RQP, Foot and Mouth, Bird Flu, Swine Flu and Ostrich Pox – burning animal carcasses turned our skies black. What wasn't cremated went into feed-mix, rendering poultry inedible. Attempts to factory farm domestic pets resulted in a plague of distemper and saw an end to cats and dogs. Mink spread from the countryside to the cities, wiping out every small

animal species that couldn't out-breed them. Pigs got lucky, – reserved for organ transplants – horses didn't, whinnying their way out of the stable and into our staple protein and a nation of little girls wept into their microwave lasagnes. The public proved reluctant to eat donkeys, but it was clearly on the cards.

Our industries collapsed and pundits noted that the only thing we seemed to export was vomit to European beaches. Oh, and Islamist terrorists.

With our good name tarnished by numerous ill-conceived and illegal middle-Eastern conflicts, a ridiculous hyper-inflated currency and the politically correct assimilation of every

God-bothering lunatic going, the European Union dropped us like a hot brick. Inspired by Ireland's example, Scotland declared independence and blockaded itself in. The Welsh disappeared into the mountains, where they may or may not have become extinct.

The French, fearing waves of English asylum seekers, mined the shipping lanes and filled the Channel Tunnel with raw sewage. We were isolated. Quarantined, if you like. The Great Separation had begun.

We were starving. Paralysed by its own incompetence and, politicians being politicians, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, parliamentary

process descended into a caustic cocktail of feudalism, nepotism and behind the scenes beatings.

Criminals ran riot. Gypsy warlords pillaged the streets and everything metal was stolen and melted down for bullets. An attempt to impose martial law foundered when the black-market failed to deliver the crack cocaine necessary to keep the troops motivated.

Starving refugees sought shelter in the surviving supermarkets who, sensing the change in the consumer climate, took advantage of their international supply chains and restructured themselves as private armies. Civil war raged, fuelled by arms airdropped by Tesco and the Walmart group.

With all our coal, gas and nuclear resources stripped and shifted, the supermarkets upped-sticks and shipped out, leaving nothing but shell-shocked former-soldiers shivering in rubble.

An irregular militia composed of disgraced military commanders and God-knows-whoever marched upon the capital. They took it, and some kind of peace ensued.

The semi-official police force imposed curfews enforced by carnivorous animals. The release of leopards onto the streets had the knock-on effect of reducing the homeless population and boosting the re-legalised handgun economy.

Ostracised from the rest of the

world, we salvaged what we could and rebuilt from wreckage – Frankenstein buildings and mongrel motor vehicles powered by our own shit. Juvenile delinquents took to the air in home-made zeppelins filled with suspect gases. Defecating on foreign air traffic became the new extreme sport.

Finally and incontrovertibly, a gene was discovered that proved a cast iron link between political ambition and sexual perversion. But we all expected that anyway.

Welcome to my world. It's fucked.

Chapter One

After. Let's Wallow In Filth

Bullets bounce off the ‘*New Downing Street*’ sign. Mortar chunks spring from the brickwork and concrete atomises in small, grey puffs as rebounds and ricochets tear chunks out of ministerial buildings. Security Guard One waves his rifle in authoritarian protest, to be met by a wayward bullet glancing off pockmarked paving stone and finding lodgings in his leg. Security Guard Two surveys the scene from the safety of a

reinforced hut.

And whilst One lies prone on bloodstained tarmac, screaming for assistance, Two takes up a pistol and shoots him cleanly through the head thus making proceedings much easier for all involved. He returns to his magazine.

The airship spins on its axis, pointing its nose and four machineguns toward the main building. A cuddly donkey nailed to the door bears the legend: 'One Ass Too Many! Bring Back Our Mules,' and a palm print of human skin sizzles on the electrified doorknob. Welcome, my friends... to *Number Ten*.

Spraying bullets as it descends, the makeshift zeppelin lowers itself to the window, aiming for the sturdy figure

pacing, cigar in hand, behind the Plexiglas. But the Plexiglas is bullet-proof. The man turns, unhitches his trousers and exposes his backside to the attackers; his buttocks glowing like two pale moons in the half-light of the office.

Inside the cockpit, a masked figure loads spherical capsules into a paintball gun. He leans out of the side door and spells the word 'Twat' across the wall in thirty-seven smeary shots. Mission accomplished, the airship turns to make its retreat, the occupants congratulating each other on how 'anti-establishment' they are. The sturdy man – his arse re-holstered – unlatches the window. His features stay set as he slides up the sash and pokes out a rusty service revolver.

A few lazy pot shots and the airship explodes in a ball of flame.

“So glad we made these things legal again,” he laughs and turns with an affirming, masculine grunt.

This rambunctious bugger with a penchant for posterial exposure is a Mr Humboldt Bactrian – seventeen stone of personal hygiene issues crammed into a snug-fitting, charcoal grey suit and coated with a permanent film of enthusiastic moisture. He isn’t what you’d call handsome, being redder than a baboon’s backside – but, then, neither is his companion, the bag of knees and elbows they call Benedict Malmot. The bat-like Mr Malmot is tombstone grey with the venal stare of a geography

teacher waiting for a student to turn sixteen. He isn't what you'd call pleasant. Or trustworthy. In fact, some hesitate to call him human. And the joke is that these two run the country.

It seems everyone loses something they love and mourns its loss for the rest of their existence.

'Dubious Freddy Welcomes *you!*' flashes the sign in tart's-knicker pink, as its crepitating electrics transform every insect within a twenty-centimetre radius into a charcoal pellet. Crack! Ping! And our insect plummets down toward a waiting tin lid, brimful of little cremated bodies. The tin's stuck to the floor with some kind of cigarette ash and beer paste, much like Freddy, who's staring

over his large nose and even larger moustache, evaluating which customers he can short change without getting a pool cue in his already misshapen face. But avert your eyes from Freddy. He's not photogenic. Amputee dwarves seldom are. No, focus your attention on the twenty-six years of angst congealing opposite the sign, counting his blessings on one hand and listing his curses in cramped handwriting on an A4 sheet. His curses are many and varied. And I know. Because I'm him.

Curse One: The name: Hugo Jupiter. A conglomeration of the pompous and the ridiculous, and entirely wrong for somebody raised within the

care system. So sling me a metaphor someone...

“Jupiter: a large astronomical body; core of liquid hydrogen; spins so fast it distorts its own shape; notable for its giant, red spot.”

See where we're going with this? I'm tall and I'm volatile. The giant spot lurks beneath a plaster on my forehead. My wife says it's probably the boiling up of inner torment but, if that's the case, then she's the major contributing factor. Common sense tells me it's bad diet and Freddy's grimy pints. I've had plenty of those thrown down my throat recently. But I wasn't always so disgusting. No, I've worked at it.

Curse Two: My ridiculously hard

life – highlights including the death of my mother and my father's subsequent mental breakdown. Not to mention the requisitioning of my donkey yesterday morning by armed government stooges.

Now all this would be vaguely tolerable. Misfortunes are comparative and mine are mild. Look out the window and you'll see an old lady beating off a leopard. She doesn't complain, just gets on with being eaten. And *I* don't complain. I just state the circumstances and get on with drinking myself to death. But my final millstone doesn't have the decency to do that, despite my best efforts. No, he's a veritable wellspring of self-pity. Whatever it is, it's always everybody else's fault. Always. This is

Curse Three: the sinister rock caught in my orbit. His name is Elton. And may God help us all.

So, I'm sitting in my Tesco-issue army fatigues. Elton returns from the bar with two absinthes and a suspicious yellow spirit that smells of mink piss. I can't prove Freddy wrung it from an animal but I wouldn't put it past the miniature fiend to try. Elton pre-empt's me as usual:

"I know it stinks. But it was cheap. Like life in general."

You see, Elton is a Cockney, "born within the sound of the 'Old Bowel Bells'," or whatever it is they say, and he shares their genetic talent for segueing the most trivial of observations

into a recital of life's injustices. Whereas my miseries remain, on the whole, my own business, Elton's are never more than a trip and tumble away from his tannoy speaker mouth.

So we've had the platitudes and now for the Sob Story, polished beyond familiarity and into the realms of incest. Like a parrot repeating the same phrases decade after decade, that jaw works up and down. Can I shame him into silence? Is there anything from my own back catalogue that might put his meagre tribulations into perspective?

"You see that fly-killing thing there," I say, pointing. "Do you see how it works? It electrocutes. Like my mother. You remember her. She died

screaming from a thousand volts. My mother who burned to death in front of me.”

But the indigenous Londoner is a self-centred species and his woes will always outweigh the violent demise of a colleague’s mum. His eyes well up into concentric rings of various nasty purples, culminating in black, dilated pupils. His sinuses liquefy and his lips quiver and somewhere inside his crazed little mind the violins strike up. Excuse the accent; they’re not my strongpoint:

“I miss ‘er!!” he starts up like a car alarm. “You wouldn’t fackin’ understand! You ain’t lost no-wun!”

Well, as a matter of fact I had, many times over, and I’d just said so.

“Booaaaargh!” he grizzles on repulsively. “[Sniff!] I miss her *so much* it’s tearin’ me apart! You don’t understand! It’s like someone’s just punched frew my ribs and grabbed me fackin’ ‘art and...and...just ripped it aht! You *can’t* understand! No facker understands! It’s like...like being...”

“Yeh, yeh,” says I, “torn apart.”

Been there, done that, I’m thinking to myself. But the family I lost were real – not a product of my imagination. But this counts for nothing.

Elton bawls on. Had I given you the impression we were alone? We weren’t. We are now. Our companions have vanished, along with my will to live.

So, Elton’s missing things: dignity

and an understanding of acceptable behaviour chief amongst them. Meanwhile, I find that by moving my barstool, just so, it makes a creaking sound that my drunken acquaintance takes as an acknowledgement. By steadying myself with a hand on the table and rocking my hips, I can pick beer nuts out of my teeth with a matchstick and still sound like I'm being completely supportive.

“She’s gone. I know that.”

“Creak,” goes my stool.

“Can you believe it?”

“Creak, creak.”

“She’ll never find me. [Sniff!] ‘Ow can she? She can’t trace me through the phonebook. She won’t know me fackin’

name! Booooarghh! [Sniff.]
Booaaaargh!”

“Unless she saw you on that television show... wrist-deep in a dead swan,” I mutter under my breath, “and she doesn’t want to find you.” But the stool still goes ‘creak’ and then it goes ‘crack’. Then it goes ‘snap’ and I go ‘thud’. Elton doesn’t notice my downhill plummet - too busy having an identity crisis. He has two identities you see, each as annoying as the other, and they fight for dominance.

I know him as Elton. I fought alongside him as Elton. I scooped up his innards, and glued him back together, and the name I saw on his dog tags said ‘Elton’. But Elton doesn't trust me

because I used to be a doctor.

No, Elton is an artificial construct foisted upon him by sinister, unnamed psychiatrists. His real name is 'Richard Mitts', music hall entertainer extraordinaire. His place is onstage with a wooden dummy and his time is The Second World War. He doesn't explain how he dodged national service.

Memories of this former life come to him in sudden anachronistic flashes: pre-decimal coinage, seamed stockings – obviously – and a peculiar recurring dream about fish. All this he relates to me in infinite, expanding detail with hours devoted to involuntary teleportations, sinister operating theatres and more unnamed doctors – this time

demanding his kidneys. He hasn't informed the police, he says, for fear they think him mad. Which he is. Completely.

I don't dig any deeper – that would imply interest or an emotional connection. I pick up my pen. I draw a cuckoo clock on my A4 pad, linking it with an arrow to the words 'Curse Three' and the letter 'M'. I sigh, run clawed fingers through my hair and start considering my exit strategy. And soon I'm clunking together the Meccano pieces of a devious plan: simple, elegant and featuring my trademark mixture of subterfuge and mind-destroying quantities of alcohol.

“Absinthe?!” I suggest, my eyes

flashing enthusiastically. “Yes, I think so! Absinthe’s what you need! If you can’t forget your troubles, obliterate the recollection of remembering them!”

Elton gives a recalcitrant grunt and I lurch toward the bar, empty glasses chinking in my hand. Freddy clumps up in those ridiculously high platform shoes of his, trying to steady the bottle with a metal claw and it slips and smashes whilst he’s cursing in the name of some foreign prophet or other.

I don’t ask how he lost his hand. I know he went on holiday with a full set of digits and came back three months later with a hook and a steel plate in his skull. And, at four foot high, well, he’s just the right height to go scuttling around

in low tunnels, planting bombs. It makes sense if you think about it. But I don't like to think of it, really. I've never liked bombs.

So Freddy's missing his hand, Elton's missing his marbles and I'm missing a mother, a father and... and something else. But the hurt's fresh and I'm wasted, so give me a minute... I have feelings. Doesn't mean I have to like or use them.

We drink a lot in England nowadays. Combine alcohol with emotion and you get the worst kind of boozy sentimentality. Couple that with the invention of the telephone and you have the potential to make a major embarrassment of yourself, worldwide,

and not remember until you have to pick up the pieces the next day. Believe me, I've reaped the whirlwind on that one. So, to my mind, it's best to keep things under wraps. (Or to confine your drinking to the tops of mountains, in countries where no one speaks your language.)

But the more you lose, the more you cling to what you have. I had a donkey. He was called Bongo, and I clung to him like mad. I remember my father telling me:

“Young man, you need a stable and a calming influence. And there's not much that's more stable and calming than a mule.”

Dad was right. That smelly, floppy-

eared bastard was a part of me. He was stubborn and lazy and all the things I would become. But whilst the bond between man and donkey is pretty much the strongest of all interspecies platonic love – I'm just one man and no match for a van full of council heavies. And now, as I look down into my clenched fist, I see a requisition form and a receipt. Not much to show for a twenty year friendship and the last link to my childhood. So to Hell with the council and to Hell with Elton. I've had enough. I signal Freddy.

“Absinthes,” I say, “three of the sods.” And then I think better of it. “In fact, you better double that...and add another two!”

So I shimmy back to the table with a kaleidoscopic display of shot glasses. Elton's face is a picture – something nasty and German Expressionist, by the looks of it.

“For you,” I say. “Because you’ve suffered so very much.” And I smile, like a lizard. “Down in one. *Every* one.”

“But... fuck,” he says, “there’s millions of ‘em!”

“Because you’ve suffered so *very*, *very* much,” I continue in my pungent croon.

He doesn't pause to think, just grabs the first glass and throws it down his tubby neck. The next two disappear in quick succession. There's three gone before he realises I haven't sugared them

and his eyes take on a frogspawn cast. But he still bangs back two more. His last shot has an ominous air to it but, misery leading to consumption, he throws that in after.

With eyes like jellyfish flesh, he staggers and sways. I picture his internals in my mind's eye: all that wormwood coursing through his bloodstream; six shots of unsweetened rotgut dancing the Macarena in an already queasy stomach. I stand back because I've seen this before and it's not pretty.

“Just going to the toiloooo...” he starts. But the absinthe's ready for a repeat performance, erupting into a mouth which, despite its Cockney

origins, hasn't the capacity to contain it. There he is, retching into a pint glass, then there he isn't – nowhere to be seen. But a blind man could tell his location from the Wagnerian roar of projectile vomiting. I write 'Result' on my sheet of paper with an arrow pointing to a smiling skull. You see, I'm not big on sympathy either.

Now I've got two absinthes left, I'm no great drinker and Freddy doesn't do refunds – so I neck one, dip my finger in the other and start cleaning my watch with it. It stops ticking. That's karma.

Well, there's a wailing wall in Jerusalem and I like to think there's one in every pub. It's called a urinal, and I know that as long as Elton's wailing at

it, I've got some peace and quiet. So I take advantage of the dim lighting and the isolation and sink back into the memories of my recently departed friend (the donkey, that is). I picture his heavy head lolling over the back of the horse truck and the heartrending look of betrayal in his eyes. And I feel afraid for him because, of the two domestic animal species left in this starving nation, he's one of them.

But God doesn't like his playthings having time to themselves. In fact, he can't like me at all because in comes Elton, wobbling all over the place and spouting sentences already – all inappropriate honesty and embarrassing personal detail.

“You make me hate Jesus,” I tell him, but it doesn’t register.

“‘Er lips,” he says unbelievably, “So soft! So warm!” He pauses. “So... sensuwall!

What trough of crap has he dredged this from? What the Hell’s he been reading? Considering Estuary English isn’t one of your great romantic accents, when he says ‘sensual’ as ‘sensuwall’, well, it’s just downright creepy. But the best (or worst) is yet to come. He scratches his shaven head and blurts:

“An’ she said I was like ‘er knight in shinin’ armour. An’ she was me pwincess.”

My head’s in my hands now. I can make a fool of myself easy enough. I

don't need this idiot to help me. But he's gone and done it anyway.

“Pwincess!” comes a raucous catcall – and I *mean* raucous, emanating from a six-foot-four man in a platinum blonde wig and platform high heels. “I’ll be your ‘pwincess’!”

Now you’ve got to understand something about Dubious Freddy’s. The only kinds of people prepared to drink in a bar owned by an alcoholic Islamist-militant hypocrite dwarf with a face like a rotten apple and a metal claw I’m sure I’ve seen crusted with toilet paper, well, they’re going to be earthy. I say earthy, perhaps I mean rough. Well, now I’m really thinking about it, perhaps I mean dregs. No, let’s settle on scum.

I like to think I'm a better class of scum. So it annoys me when the entire bar, including some half-dead octogenarian wearing a shit-brown, piss-stained suit is laughing at our expense.

“Well?” the big creature screeches, cupping his fake mammaries, “what do you say, Honey?”

I lean toward Elton. I've no choice but to brave his disgusting breath.

“Don't say a word,” I whisper. “Keep your mouth shut.” But Elton thinks he's some form of wit.

“Come back when you've... when you've had your balls cut off!” he shouts – or tries to, as the words come out in a drunken jumble.

Oh God, I think to myself, as our inbetweeny friend stalks up to the table, hairy toes poking out the end of his platforms. He inclines his gristly torso toward Elton, his face lacquered in bad makeup, his teeth tombstone grey and hisses:

“Come back when you’ve grown some, Honey!”

It’s not a particularly funny joke. Must be the delivery. Or fear of the deliverer. The bar erupts. Our new acquaintance is leaning back, grabbing his various bulges, asking Elton if there’s anything he like to see close-up, and I’m thinking, get me the Hell out of here. I’ve drunk with some pretty base company before, believe me, but I’m not

going to spend the rest of my evening listening to the cacklings of something that looks like a disturbed child's drawing of a woman.

Now, I know what you're thinking: two sad little homophobes scared of a man in a dress. Well, that's your *own* prejudices showing. The fact is that it's Big Tranny Dave's Quiz Night and we've both paid a pound for the privilege of taking part. You can win your own weight in beer.

But Elton's talked through all the questions and the booze is long since won. Now all that's left is Dave's theatre of cruelty. It's time for a strategic withdrawal. I have one last scrap of dignity and I'd like to retain it.

“Well,” I say, patting Elton on the back, “looks like you’ve found a friend.” I bid Dave a “Good evening, Madam.”

So that scrap of dignity I mentioned... forget about it. I go to make my move and the table and its tottering towers of empties move with me. I’ve got my bootlaces tangled like tendrils around the wrought iron table legs. One false move and I’ll be on the floor with an avalanche of glass on top of me.

I’m bending down to extricate myself when I detect the presence of bosoms in my peripheral vision. There was nothing even vaguely female in the bar when we came in so, ten to one, it’s Dave about to subject me to some ‘humorous’ interference.

Right then, you he-be-she-be swine, I think to myself, let's see how you like it! And I charge blindly upwards, yelling "Hello, sailor!" or something equally crass, and grab man-crotch. Or what I thought was man-crotch. And, as glass after glass shatters around us, I realise I've just floored my own wife.

Now, like I said, I don't make excuses. I state facts as I see them. You can't go wrong with the truth, I figure. Stupidly.

"I thought you were a transvestite." It's not the best hello. Her cheeks turn puce. She doesn't shout. She never shouts. She hisses, and her angry words hit cold air and come out cloaked in steam:

“I wore this *for you*. This dress! And now you tell me I *look like a man in it*?! I don’t know why I... I don’t know why I bother with you! I... I...”

She’s now speechless with rage – for which we should be thankful because, as her voice rises up the register, it’s a danger to the eardrums. And all I’m thinking is, I’ve never said anything about the dress; I don’t think I’ve ever even seen the damn dress. And who are you? And where have you hidden the woman I loved? But I’m a married man and our thoughts don’t count – as anyone, either side of the gender divide, will tell you.

“Elton,” I begin, “allow me to introduce Rachel Jupiter. Or Rachel

Bactrian-Jupiter when she likes to remind me she married beneath her. But, whatever convoluted combination of our names she's using today, she's my wife. Darling, this is Elton, from my old division. I patched up his intestines. Couldn't fix his brain, though, and now he works in television."

"We've met," she growls. "Many times. But you'd be too drunk to recall."

In fact, perhaps I do remember. I have a brief recollection of introducing someone as The Queen of The Damned and saluting. She turns to Elton.

"How long have you been here?"

Elton snaps to attention in a passable imitation of sobriety and, suddenly, I look like the drunk.

“Not long,” he says.

“So why’s he... why’s he *acting up*?” And she turns that gorgon gaze upon me. “Child,” she whispers under her breath.

“I don’t know,” he says, the traitorous bastard, pointing his bleary eyes in my direction, shaking his head. “Don’t ask me,” he goes on, “E’s been in a funny mood all day!”

Rachel harrumphs once or twice, indicating all chance of reconciliation is over and that it *really is* time for a divorce. And some old cove in the background’s bemoaning young people, saying that it’s a shame they can’t behave themselves these days. And suddenly I’m aware that the whole bar’s

looking at me. And they're all shaking their heads.

“I...” I start, but it's useless. Because there's nothing I can say. And nobody likes a whinger.

That's enough of me for now. Let's head back to 10 New Downing Street:

Faded wallpaper with a disturbingly symmetrical flower pattern – peer closely and it looks pleasingly like a vagina; dim, dusty bulbs in ornate brass up-lighters; an aspidistra plant on a marble plinth; a man being drowned in a turquoise washing-up bowl; a highly polished mahogany table and, reflected in its surface, the fine features of Humboldt Bactrian.

Bactrian is all you could ask for in a Prime Minister: his words are true and his heart is stout. His handshake is firm. He has a winning smile and a charming personality. He's also everything you can deplore in a human being, for his true words are often brutal words and that stout heart is as black as coal. His hands have killed. His dick has whored. His ego is colossal, as is his size. His affability and enthusiasm are chemically induced and he sweats accordingly. His plummy vowels drip poisoned honey. And the fact you can't dislike him makes him very, very dangerous. He holds the most powerful position in the country but, strangely, has no power at all. He's the mouthpiece for Malmot's Military

junta.

Malmot is rapier thin and bent two feet shorter than his allotted six foot four by years of conspiratorial whispering. His eyes are red-rimmed and repulsive. His hair recedes in a sharp arc like a shark's fin and its presence causes equal concern. His body, as mentioned, is bat-like and makes no sense head-side-up. His personal life is minimal, his hobbies are horrible and he lives by the Rule of The Three C's: conquest, control and cash-bought concubines. His speech is eloquent and educated but the tonality downright weird. His personality? Borderline autistic. His past is as murky as his sexuality and when he isn't paying women to manipulate him, he's

manipulating the Prime Minister's image. His foot is on a man's neck. The man's head rests in the aforementioned turquoise washing-up bowl. The man is dead. Malmot looks up.

"Three minutes fifty," he says.

"Good lungs, that one," says Bactrian with a rolled up bank note protruding from his nostril. "Elevenpences," he offers by way of explanation.

"And twelveses, too" reproaches Malmot. "Like a greedy child. Finish up!"

Bactrian unrolls King William's face, flattens the bank note on the table and replaces it inside his fine, red leather, monogrammed wallet. There's a picture of a woman in it. It could be his

wife. Only wives don't dress like that. And they certainly don't do what she's doing. With a horse.

Malmot holds a thin sheath of paper. His wrist flicks with a jarring click, the papers fly and Bactrian catches. He sighs, flicks over the cover sheet and locates the first line with his fingertip. He takes up a red felt tip pen, clears his throat with an almighty glottal growl and reads:

“Society is created by the actions of man...”

“Better put ‘*and* woman there’,” Malmot interrupts. It's clear where he's obtained the thought. He's reading a pornographic magazine. “Better still, put ‘its inhabitants’.”

“...And though we would all like to believe that society comprises of sane and sober taxpayers...”

“Harrumph.”

“...It must be remembered that there are still unpleasant elements out there, and their actions...”

“Make a note to pronounce ‘and their actions’ bombastically.”

“...Also contribute to what we can expect from our day-to-day existences. So... to cut a long story short...”

“Like the sudden informal tone.”

“...Let me tell you...”

“Ooh! Dramatic pause! I like it!”

“The unpleasant elements are taking over! And why are they taking over? Do you want the simple answer? Do you?”

... Drugs! ... Drugs! Drugs! Drugs!
Drugs! Drugs!”

“Bang your fist with each syllable.
They’ll lap it up.”

“*Cocaine, Heroin, Bang bang, Jack-up juice, the Ming Ming* – not to mention *Skunk Pussy* and a thousand other death sentences wrapped in tin foil and sold outside playgroups! We know the names! We’ve done our research! Insidious, invidious, creeping rots, eating away at the oak-beamed rafters of Good Ol’ Blighty; threatening to enslave our children and subjugate the decent people of England! These are the names that, if the *pushers* have their way...”

“Do quote marks with your fingers when you say ‘pushers’.”

“...Will be on your child’s list to Santa! I’m not exaggerating...”

“Hah!”

“...I’m not scaremongering to take your minds off the ridiculous rumours that we might be an inadequate political power!”

“[Sounds of choking]”

“...I’m simply warning you... something it is the duty of a *responsible government* to do!

“The degeneration of Britain’s inhabitants into a mindless pool of protoplasm is an imminent occurrence! Do you want to regress back to the primordial soup we struggled so hard to crawl out of, so many, *many* millions of years ago?! Do you want to?!”

“Do I get a bread roll?” Malmot enquires, but Bactrian continues unabashed.

“...And do you know what the sickest part of this misbegotten situation is? Shall I tell you? *It's taxpayers that'll pay for it!*”

“That's the soundbites. Drop the volume now; take them into your confidence.”

“Now I know you don't want tax hikes. *No one* does. I *certainly* don't!”

“Liar! Boo!”

“But what would you *rather* have: a *small* increase now, to pay for the police officers so vital to our war against drugs, or a series of massive increases to pay for the inevitable

epidemic?

“Law and order or atavistic descent? Dilettantism with dealers or decency? The choice is yours!”

“Cross out ‘dilettante,’ says Malmot thoughtfully. “It sounds like an artificial penis.”

“I thought it was.”

“That’s a ‘dildo’. Like in that picture in your wallet.”

“No, that’s a pony.”

“Other end. Now you’re to learn that speech by heart.”

“Like a good little hypocrite.”

“Indeed. [Laughs] ...Like a good little hypocrite.”

He turns and fixes Bactrian with

those evil red eyes.

“You see, you and me... Well, it’s a matter of breeding. We can handle our vices. But the vast majority... they can’t. And they need handsome examples like us to tell them to behave themselves.”

Bactrian catches his reflection in the paint-spattered window.

“Am *I* handsome?” he asks.

“When not in close proximity. But my point is this...” and Malmot snorts, “I just can’t bear to see the scum enjoying themselves.”

“Heh!”

“Now, this fellow here,” he says, kicking the drowned man. “We’ll give him a blood test and, if he’s clean, well, we’ll have him roasted in garlic and

cayenne pepper. ...And now to our last piece of business...”

“The breweries?”

“Yes, and the compulsory purchase thereof.”

“You know my feelings on this.”

“Yes, Prime Minister, but fortunately you have no say in the matter. I do, however, and I’m placing alcohol production under State control.”

“And there’s a theory behind this, isn’t there?”

“Yees,” comes Malmot’s patronising sigh. “As you well know, England is a nation of drunks. And, if you keep people drunk in a ditch, well, they don’t bother you. And if people die of liver disease, well, you don’t have to

feed them. This leaves more food for the military. Feed the military and starve the proletariat and the proletariat enlists. The result is more soldiers and less useless eaters.”

“And all because of the booze.”

“The targeted distribution of alcohol. Butcher the weak and disenfranchised and arm the strong and dependent. It’s simple economics.”

“I like economics.”

“No. You like prostitutes.”

“You’re right. Let’s get some.”

“Let’s.”

You’ll have noticed many strange things about modern day England. You’ll be wondering what happened to

democratic political process. Why 'New' Downing Street? It might also strike you strange that a starving country is awash with alcohol. And what *are* people eating?

Well, like every other major civilisation, from the Mayans to the Romans, we became decadent; we got complacent and we fucked up. We stopped fighting for the Empire and fought for our right to party instead. I'm not saying that's right or wrong. I will say that measuring success by the amount of brain damage you can inflict upon yourself on a Friday and Saturday night is misguided.

For years we'd been moving all our people into service industries and

middle management positions, stigmatising manual labour and forcing ill-equipped teenagers into nonsensical celebrity-culture college courses. Craftsmanship dwindled as practical skills died out. Soon all our nation was fit for was pushing paper and punishing cheap alcopops. Anyone with a brain moved abroad.

A series of badly conceived military actions blighted our popularity on the continent and throughout the world in general. Further acts of political stupidity and arrogance sealed our fate. The French sealed the tunnel and the Russians cut off our oil. The Germans enforced a no fly zone but there was nothing to fuel our planes with

anyway. We had no means of importing food and our love of concrete office blocks left no ground for growing any.

We'd been self-infantilising for years. Now we were truly helpless.

Riots broke out across the North West. Gangs ripped up the paving slabs to plant vegetables. But our officials preferred bureaucracy to logic and arrested our would-be farmers for the contravention of planning laws. It soon became known that our ruling bodies ranked neat block paving over human life. Manchester declared nation status, followed by Liverpool. When the troops rolled in to force reunification, the terrorism started.

I'm told it's easy to make

explosives. I don't know. I buy mine in. I like to keep that emotional distance. But the knowledge had been circulating for years and anti-government factions formed to misuse it. *The Laburnum* – an extremely violent organisation named after the poisonous but incredibly boring tree – gained a large quantity of the malleable-explosive, C4. They shaped it into little round bombs. They painted the bombs orange and gift-wrapped them. They sent them to their local M.P. And he stuck them up his bottom..

Richard Gifford knew nothing about The Laburnum. Why should he? Nor how *they* knew about his little, shall we say, eccentricities. He had other things on his mind. He was a rising

political star. Why should he even consider that the small, orange fruit he had so lovingly inserted into his backside was a bomb? Why he'd stuck a tangerine up his chunter was his own business. How he intended to remove it, we can only speculate upon, as it never became an issue. He walked to work that day, whistling, tapping his umbrella, dishing out amiable kicks to the homeless. As he approached Number Ten, it was smiles from the window. Through the door...down the hall... left into the conference room, cries of: "Gifford! Gifford!" and deep voices heartily condoning his recent xenophobic outbursts and handling of a paving slab wrangle in Clapham station. There was

talk of opinion polls and colleagues' extramarital activities and laughs all round. They pumped his hand and clapped him on the back and some cheeky soul thought to slap him on the rump. It was the last mistake that cheeky soul would ever make.

“Kaboom!”

The initial blast kills all present, levelling the fifteen surrounding streets. Many say C4 isn't that powerful, that it must be all that political wind igniting that causes such a gigantic blast, but, for whatever reason, it rains bricks and blood for three days. The cleanup operation is huge, hampered by souvenir

hunters and onlookers. Morbid children play with soggy bits of politician. Dogs bring home chunks of junior minister in their mouths. And the dogs get eaten and so do the chunks of minister. Kebab shops reopen and morality, as is so often the case, goes into flux.

A phone call is made, admitting responsibility. The surviving government galvanize their ranks and draft a public statement calling for the stamping out of The Laburnum. But it takes one slip of the tongue from 'Laburnum' to 'Labia' on live television and a militia group of hard-line man-hating feminists take immediate disproportionate offence. *Oestrogen Pro-active* know it's a simple mistake

but, what the Hell, it gives them an excuse to throw off the veneer of civility and behave as badly as the men they despise. They resolve to destroy the remaining government. It isn't hard. They bomb a brothel. Twenty-two down, one to go. Our last minister, realising he'll soon be incubating a bullet, runs away with a partner of unascertainable gender and species.

The old order is banished. The slabs come up and England digs for victory. But whilst some plant, others simply steal.

We have no leadership, but a political void with two parties too terrified of reprisals to fill it. But Malmot isn't scared. Even when the

nation descends into bloody civil conflict. He has the police in his pocket. He soon gains military backing and, with Walmart on-side, he has food, ammunition and very large guns. The smaller supermarket militias can't compete. They crumble. When Walmart has what it wants, it pulls out to concentrate on East African initiatives, but it doesn't matter. Malmot has his opportunity. He marches on the capital and claims it. All dissenting voices disappear. When a brutal order returns to the streets, he assembles a police state and sells off shares in it. He's smart enough to lurk in the shadows with Bactrian as a mouthpiece. And he's smart enough to reconvene parliament.

But you'll never vote him out because all the ballot boxes go straight to the shredders. And no one knows that Malmot *is* The Laburnum.

Meanwhile, the remaining animals die. Restaurants offer a 'veterinary bucket'. Don't ask what's in it. Just eat it. It could be the last meat you see in this lifetime. Unless you go to back to Manchester and what they now call the 'cannibal territories.'

Global warming continues unabated. Our reservoirs dry up and we become dependent on desalinated seawater. But it's not safe to drink, so we brew it instead. And now we drink beer for breakfast dinner and tea, from the cradle to the grave. The cannier folk

have solar stills to collect water for their children, but the majority of schoolkids are drunks. And their teachers are drunks – although that's always been the case.

Old King William's still on the throne, imploring Africa and the other non-European states for aid, bless him. And my television's broke and I can't get the parts. Life goes on. It goes to Hell. And it's taking us all with it. God, I imagine, finds all this hilarious.

“You make *fun*?” says the homeless woman in a croak comprising a dozen accents. Is that Portuguese? I'm sure that last swearword was Czech. The low sun's in my tired eyes and the stunted

trees throw shadows across her wrinkled, riven features. She found me asleep in the gutter. I'm not sure which one of us smells worse.

“Fun with a capital ‘F’,” I say, as she stares through me. I pinch the silver foil into a sharp crease. She’s asking what I mean. Like a comedian, or something? I say no. I was an army surgeon. Now I make puppets. Nothing important. And I pass her my glittering handiwork.

“Well, you’re important to *me*,” she says. “This is the best tinfoil hat I’ve ever seen! I know my thoughts are safe now!”

And she puts it on her head, picks up the corners of her skirt and starts to

dance a slow, solo waltz in the middle of the road. I smile and wish her an unheeded goodbye.

I start on one of my interminable deliberations on the nature of Fun and why I'm not having any. How I live like a peasant in a crumbling hovel but I'm expected to behave like a gentleman and pay National Insurance for the privilege. How I contribute to a Health Service that doesn't exist and a pension it's impossible to collect. Why the council takes a third of my monthly pay and then refuses to empty my bins until I remove the crashed fighter jet in my front garden. Why? *I* didn't put it there. It's metal. Why hasn't anyone stolen it? Guess it's too big to move when all you've got is a

handcart pulled by toddlers.

If I was let off the leash I could amuse myself, do something interesting with my life. But there are no adventures anymore, no places left to explore in our satellite-mapped country. Everyone's tried everything and ruined it.

The sky's the last frontier. And, sure, I could rejoin an airship gang, build myself a scrapyard zeppelin and take up crapping on holiday jets for a hobby. But I don't fancy swanning around the heavens, strapped beneath a thousand cubic metres of hydrogen. Been there, done that and lost the woman I loved to overhead power lines.

All the good uncertainties have gone. There's just the bad uncertainties

now: the traffic smashes; attacks by religious extremists and the maniac on the train with the broken vodka bottle as sharp as the memory of the wife who's just left him.

Your main challenge is keeping your pointless job and fighting your own bad complexion. Or you can go out after curfew and see how far you get before the patrols mace you or a leopard chews off your face.

Mortality should make us feel alive. But it doesn't. So I guess we don't have fun anymore. We have it made for us.

And I just want an adventure.

* * *

Sparks shower against the surface of the workshop door. What isn't scorched is scratched and gouged by the various belts and buckles and 'interesting' clothing of the staff. There's a window – a small square of wire-reinforced glass – and it's sandwiched between the exterior frost and interior filth. And I'm there, pounding my fist on it, trying to get in. There's some kind of debris caught beneath the bottom edge of the door, acting like a wedge, and I can't get the damn thing open.

Inside, there's dirty magnolia walls supporting even dirtier metal racking. Cobwebs everywhere – they coat the dull grey shelves and the detritus upon

them. Each shelf's labelled and each label bears absolutely no relation to, well, anything whatsoever. Nothing reveals any obvious purpose, but nothing's ever thrown away. Because it might be important. But no one knows what's important anymore, because dozens of workers have come and gone over the years and the remainder have given up trying to work it out. It's like trying to decode The Secrets of the Ancients.

There's an area referred to as 'The Kitchen', but you can't prepare food in it. The work surfaces wear a crocodile pattern of cup marks and the detergent that should be used to clean it just oozes from its coloured bottles like Martian

semen. The corrugated metal roof drips condensation. Over live electric sockets.

The workshop floor's a greyish rectangle, textured like leprosy. Carcinogenic dust rests in conical piles itching for a lung to rustle up some tumours in. Catalysed fibreglass resin clots in unseen buckets, spewing out hot, choking fumes. Un-catalysed resin spills out from an overturned barrel, imploring something incendiary to set light to it and burn the building down. Which just might happen.

Sparks shoot skyward like rockets then futter into nothingness. By reversing their course I trace their source and I watch in horrified wonderment.

Now an angle grinder is a

dangerous power tool. It can cut through metal, so it's more than capable of severing an unwary finger. And it's pretty unnerving to see it grasped in the podgy digits of the company idiot: Ambler. The grinder screams, as barrel-shaped Ambler swipes and stabs at some dark heap of something or other, muttering something racist to himself. He has dark, curly hair, a wide, liver-lipped mouth, broad, almond-shaped canine teeth and a lolling tongue. He has a dog's mouth, when I think about it. He has an old dog's smell. He has dog-level intelligence, hence the racism.

He's laughing to himself. I'm doing my amateur psychology thing and theorising that the inside of his brain

must be like some cave painting: all full of stick figures and bright primary colours. Then confusion creeps over his face. I wonder if he's thinking about something beyond his capabilities, like toothpaste tubes, a happy mouse, or *not* shouting at a black person. Anyway, he's distracted and the grinder leaps from his hand and scuds across the bench, trailing flaming nuggets.

Now, Ambler is a mystery to me. I can't work out what he does and I can't work out how he does it. I don't know why he's allowed to do it here. I find it hard to believe he can breathe unassisted. Sometimes I see him sitting on the floor and I wonder when he's going to fall off it. I watch. And he does.

He loses balance, he flails around and somehow ends up on something higher up. He can't even obey gravity. And I'm told he's the company safety official.

So he's standing at my bench. And my bench is on fire. The flames, the flammable chemicals, the grinder and its razor-sharp cutting disk skittering around his ankles – all of this, or should I say *none* of this, matters to him. He doesn't do 'mattered' because he doesn't do abstract thought. He doesn't wear safety goggles, either. It hasn't occurred to him that a shard of metal skewering him in the eye might hurt. He just stands, watching the fire spread, watching me banging at the window and (almost) wondering what all the fuss is about.

There's a vinyl disc playing – *'Twenty White-Power Hammond Greats'*, squawking from a tinny speaker buried somewhere in the great morass of spilt paint and charring debris.

I'm shouldering the door, kicking at the protruding part of the obstruction with my steel toecaps. But it's the bottom of the door that gives in first. There's a splintering crack and I'm in. I haven't time to think and Ambler isn't going to do it for me, so I dash forward and grab a fire extinguisher. There's smoke, shouting, swearing, and I'm spraying like Neptune at a porno shoot. Water everywhere. The grinder shorts and I'm lucky not to get electrocuted. And finally, when the fire's out, I spray

Ambler. And I don't stop until the extinguisher's empty. And he just mewls over the wreckage of the whatever-it-is he was making.

Everything's quiet now, save for the drip, drip, dripping and the soft splash of our work boots. And he turns to me, sooty-faced and sopping, squelching forward like a proud parent cradling some unidentifiable baby in his arms.

"Spice rack," he says. Moron.

Now, what would life be without cruelty, irony and good things happening to bad people? I don't know. Ask God. You pray hard enough, maybe he'll take enough time off from wanking up

tsunamis to answer you. I doubt it, though, so here's my own little parable: The Story Of The Camel And The Erection.

Historically, people have taken their names from the things they do, sell, kill, kill for money or kill for money and then sell. With this in mind, it is entirely possible for a man whose ancestors traded hump-backed livestock in the Middle East to be called Bactrian. Or even Dromedary. And it's not impossible to imagine later generations of folk with these camel-based names forming a humorous internet group. And it's all such fun that they arrange to meet. And then they get drunk and they sleep with each other. Commit that to memory.

Now, Adrian Dromedary is a noxious specimen with a fat face and engorged cherub-cheeks crazed with a Rorschach pattern of burst blood vessels. Buckteeth? He's got 'em. And bulging piggy eyes jutting from the collage of zoological atrocities he calls his head. His overall expression? Like he's sucking on a rancid citrus fruit. Probably one of Richard Gifford's.

More of a bipedal hippo than a man, he lives for the satiating of his baser urges. I'm talking food and 'specialist' magazines and taking an unhealthy interest in what the mailman might bring in a discreetly wrapped bundle. So you can imagine his surprise

when Posty delivers an elegantly typed communication informing him that his entire life is a lie. His camel classification is wrong. His mother was a Dromedary all right, but Mr Dromedary, never existed. He's the bastard son of the late Lord Annadin Bactrian and half-brother to surfacing turd of politics, Humboldt.

So Dromedary's been growing increasingly tired of his life of solitude and self-abuse. And his current profession just isn't supplying those feelings of God-like omnipotence he's after. Okay, his little, printed ladyfriends give him some sense of control but not as much as, say, firing off a .45 calibre pistol in a crowded restaurant. Or

anywhere really, providing people die and he might feel like a man for once. So, we can say this letter is pretty well timed.

And so our bulbous friend takes himself off to the will reading, poised taut in some oak-panelled annexe of the Bactrian estate with a mercenary expression creeping over those already alarming features of his. The room's packed with dozens of bastard progeny, evidence of His Lordship's little extramarital sojourns and the sex games he liked to play with a turkey baster. But, by all accounts, it seems Dromedary was the first little bastard to shoot wombward from The Right Honourable's testicles, so the cash gets

carved up between him and the legitimate Humboldt – which is far more than any bastard has the right to expect. He walks away with enough money to buy Birmingham. Not only that, but his windfall gains him the friendship and sincere affection of his new half-brother. Well, you win some, you lose some.

Now, as I've said, Dromedary is an unpleasant, antisocial man with a bulk that can best be described as... well, terrifying. He's a beast of the field in a suit. But, like the leech, he has his uses. He's got brains. He's also got a head for figures – both numerical and feminine – his days spent on stocks and shares and his evenings on stockings and shaven ravers, intimate evenings making papier-

mâché with page twenty-two. These twin lusts have always driven him. Now he can consummate fiscal and physical conjugation in his own business. But what should this company do? And, more importantly, how can he get a lay out of it? Because big brains don't always mean big ideas and Dromedary hasn't had an idea in his life. Fortunately, his new brother is just packed with ideas – and they're all Grade A filth.

So he's at the *Old Soaks' Gentlemen's Club*, in Westminster, an austere establishment full of desiccated and depraved old geezers. Contrary to what you might think, women *are* allowed entrance but the house takes a

percentage of their earnings. And to facilitate transactions of this type, the foundations conceal a little know extension of the London Underground subway system that goes direct to *Soho* and *Dirtygirl Street*.

So there's many options available to members: you can sit back in a booth and eat rich food until you get gout; you can lie back in a leather armchair and drink brandy until you die; or you can participate in any number of orgies with the aforementioned ladies of the *Soho* district until you get gonorrhoea. The beauty of this last option is that sharing one's paid companion with the other members of the club means infection for one is infection for all, which fosters a

marvellous sense of community.

As a guest, Dromedary's barred from the inner sanctums of the club, especially the notorious 'Bodily' Function Room. So he sits with Bactrian in an oak construction carved by Freemasons to look like a onion. The politician claps him on the back, calls him 'Brother dear', ruffles his hair, even. Then he's pressing a glass the size of child's head into his mitt and it's gratefully accepted. And I can't think why, in Hell's name, Bactrian would want to talk to Dromedary, given as he's taken half his inheritance. Or, perhaps, that's *exactly* the reason? Or maybe he's just a lonely, isolated drunk with no close family and no one to mourn him

when he dies? And, after many, many refills, at least four bottles of God-knows-what and with the bodyguard on a toilet break, he leans in and beckons Dromedary close.

“You know what, Dromedary, old chap? It’s good to be here. To be here *with you*. To have *you*, my long lost brother, *here*, reclaiming your birthright, your heritage.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, you’re a bastard...”

“Eh?”

“I mean, in the illegitimate sense, that is. But now you’re here where you belong, with the type of people you belong with! (How much did you get

from the Old Man again?)”

“Er?”

“To be with one’s family! (Two or three? Not that it matters one bit to me.)”

“Ah.”

“Talkative, aren’t you? Anyway, and I’m telling you this as one Bactrian to another, that *that’s* the point, isn’t it? And I can see you already agree with me.”

“Er, I suppose...”

“Anyway, Dromedary, (and again, I’m telling you this as one Bactrian to another) let’s talk about issues. *Real* issues. *Important* issues. Are you married, Dromedary?”

“I was never fortunate enough to...”

“I thought not. I can tell by the way you walk. You’re tense. Like a coiled spring. That’s natural. Oh, don’t mind me! I’m a Bactrian. And you know us camels are well known for their fatty deposits – in this case, *in the head!* A hah!”

“Yes. Hah! [*Cough*] ...Ahem.”

“Well, I say a gentleman has certain needs... the instincts and impulses that make him a man. [*Belch*] Since we don’t have to hunt mammoths anymore, I find that my natural desire for physical exertion often goes unsatisfied. I say a man needs to exert himself at least five times a day! And I’ll say that again. And I’ll also say that at least one of those times should be with company. But that’s

the problem, see. It's so difficult to get yourself a night of torrid passion these days. You blink and the next thing you know, there's a picture of your todger in the tabloids. Usually superimposed onto a measuring stick. If you do find a nice place, where the girls are clean and discreet, then spending your wad costs one as well. I'm telling you, our climate's too miserable for kerb crawling. What *can* one do?"

"I know what I do. And I know how ashamed of myself I feel afterwards."

"...And sometimes you fall in love with them, these fallen angels, these daughters of the night. They're so brazen and so earthy and so real, and it breaks your heart when your hour's up and they

shove you out the bathroom window and throw your trousers out after. There was this one girl but... oh, that was another world, another time..."

"What are women like?"

"Well, they're soft and warm... and as soon as they're vertical they're causing trouble. Hah! But seriously, my dear chap, you mean you've never?"

"No. I'm fifty and I've never done it with anyone. Or anything. Women? Well, I never seem to meet any. I think they're intimidated by my, er, gruff exterior."

"*Well!* It comes to something when a sturdy fellow such as yourself can't get a woman!"

"They do tend to run away from

me.”

“And that’s my point, I suppose. I’m a decent, God-fearing, taxpaying man, (if it’s got an ‘ing’ on the end of it and it’s legal, I’m a man and I do it!) and I deserve a little comfort in my life. Don’t we all? Doesn’t everyone?! Someone who doesn’t demand an expensive love nest and, most importantly ...isn’t going to run to the newspapers to tell them about what I happen to think is *perfectly reasonable bedwear*. And why should underwear be gender-specific? You tell me. *Please!*”

“You’ve got the money now. You’ve got, well let’s just say, if you’re anything like me... urges. Do yourself a favour, man. Plough that money into

research and reap the rewards of your own sexual repression.

“Are you suggesting I make a robot? A robot woman?”

“Well, let’s face it, man – you’re fifty and you’ve never said boo to a barmaid. The only way *you’re* going to make female friends is with a plastic kit and an instruction manual. So *go on!* Give mankind something to be proud of! Give the feminists something to complain about! Why not? They’re bored now they’ve got equality!”

And, by appealing directly to his twisted libido, Dromedary’s path is set. He launches his funds into an animatronics emporium producing furry costumes and inane robot animals for

film and television and to encourage children to take part in various government initiatives. But kid-friendly crap's just the start and deep in the basement a more lascivious form of entertainment takes shape. But your average bollock-scratching couch potato isn't thinking about that as he sits, glued to his screen, laughing at the contrived blunderings of a stage school halfwit and a talking alien called Alfonse. He doesn't know I made Alfonse from an old car seat cover and a box of artificial hip joints I snaffled from a hospital skip. And he certainly doesn't know that Alfonse's big sister is a six-foot mechanical whore. It just wouldn't figure in your average mind.

So the months roll on. Dromedary sits back, counting the cash and, no doubt, rubbing his hands and licking his lips with glee. And me, Claire and Anja, we work underground in that bloody cellar, trying to make a fully articulated metal skeleton out of things we've found on scrapheaps and by begging for parts.

Before The Great Isolation we just ordered whatever we needed, but sanctions mean that you can't import mechanical components here in case they get weaponised. So we make do with what we've got and, eventually, we've got *something*. I won't say she's pretty and we haven't got any form of artificial skin – it's back to the garage for more seat leather for yours truly – and she's

ripped the ends off a few courgettes along the way, but we've got a tangible thing to show for our efforts and that means we might even get paid. Hell, we might even get a weekend off.

Now, I can't think of a delicate way of putting this other than to say that our creation needs road testing. I'm not doing it. That's flat. Claire and Anja find the whole concept pretty morally repellent and haven't got the necessary equipment anyway.

I tell Dromedary next time I see him. He goes into great detail about a woman he met who tested vibrators. He said she rated them on a number of criteria including "abrasion when wet" and "abrasion when dry". I ask what

criteria we should use here and he lists the possibles in such a way that I stick my fingers in my ears and go “La la lah!” And Claire and Anja do the same. And Claire goes “Urgh!” and Anja says she never wants to hear *those* words coming out of *that* mouth again. It’s too creepy. Well, I wouldn’t trust Ambler with a blunt pencil. So we’re a bit stuck.

But, luckily, our Glorious Leader intends to lead from the front. (And the back, once we’ve drilled a second orifice.) It doesn’t seem to matter that his mechanical sweetheart has the swarthy complexion of an old handbag. The old boy’s ready for the racetrack. After all, he’s gone fifty years without so much as starter flag. We retire as fast as

our little legs will carry us.

Now, every new product requires an operations manual and this is no exception. They're pretty basic instructions: you stick it in and work your way up through the gears. We list the various settings. We figure you can have quite a pleasant evening starting on 'Vaguely Disinterested Housewife', move things up a little to 'Accommodating Hussy' and work yourself to a resounding finish with a vigorous bout of 'Earthshake'. And then, as an envelope-pushing experiment, and certainly not something we'd put on the commercial product, we added yet another level, codenamed: 'Shy Librarian With The Truly Weird Kink'.

We never figured anybody would be stupid enough to use it. Well, we underestimated human curiosity. We see a button, we press it.

Now I can't rule out industrial sabotage. However I'm more inclined to believe that Dromedary thought he could run before he could walk. Or, perhaps it wasn't the machine at all. Maybe it was all those years of pent up frustration and he smashed his pelvis into seventeen pieces through sheer enthusiasm.

Still, they've managed to wire up the bits and he's now wearing a rather fetching genital cast. So I guess the moral of this story is that taking your work home with you is a very bad idea.

Okay, so what do you want to know next? Bactrian? Yes, let's have a little more on Bactrian. I think it's important you understand the old order to understand why I took such *dramatic* action against it.

What? No. I prefer to use 'dramatic'. 'Vicious' implies I wasn't justified.

So, Bactrian sits in the office of Doctor Olyphant, consultant head-shrinker at a very discreet clinic. They're here to discuss his impulse-control problems, his alcohol and substance abuse and his chronic sexual incontinence. Whilst all these things are just dandy behind closed doors, they've been causing chaos kerb-side recently

and Malmot's tired of the physical and metaphorical mopping up.

The therapy will start with a 'get to know yourself' session. But getting to know himself isn't the problem. It's a five-times-daily occurrence. It's stopping that's causing the difficulty. The P.M, however, is unrepentant and doesn't want strangers running around the inside of his head, moving the furniture around.

"No sense stirring up the sludge, eh, Olster?" he protests. He certainly doesn't need anyone telling him to empathise with a teapot.

"Remember," Olyphant persists, "be like the teapot. The tea is stewing. You must pour it all out. Pour it all out

for me, Prime Minister.”

“This isn't tea, Oly-pants” answers Bactrian, patting his big belly. “It's foie gras, caviar and wine so expensive the angels weep when they hear the cork pop. And vodka. Plenty of vodka!”

“Which is probably part of the problem,” Olyphant frowns before switching to a synthesized, sympathetic smile. You can't tell a politician anything he doesn't know. You can tell a doctor even less. “I assure you, Prime Minister, visualisation is a proven psychiatric technique. It...”

“Proven psychiatric technique?” Bactrian howls. “Proven psychiatric technique?! Mincing around the establishment with one hand on my hip,

waving the other like a spout! I'll tell you what comes out of my spout..."

"No need," the doctor interrupts.
"No need."

The Prime Minister is making lurid hand gestures indicating the movement of fluids.

"Your mistake, Old Olly-Olly Oxen-free, is thinking I need to be cured. But why cure something that's so much fun? Seems like a waste of a marvellous illness – the gift that keeps on giving, if you like."

"But..."

"I tell you what your problem is, Olcoholic: too much of this Sigmund Freudy, Squeegee-puss I-hate-women-I'm-scared-of-my-own-nipples

business.”

“Squeegee-puss?”

“You know the fellow... The chap with the hotsy-totsies for his mother.”

“You mean...” tries the doctor. But it’s no use.

“I don’t fancy my mother. Do you?”

“She’s very attractive for her age but...”

I don’t know about you but I don’t care for this topic. Let’s end the scene on a stunned silence and switch the action to our next medical establishment. You see, Malmot suspects that Bactrian’s problems are physiological as well as neurological. And so we find ourselves in Harley Street with a

different set of medical professionals, including a nurse who won't accept money to take her clothes off. As you can imagine, this has made the situation quite tense.

A spectacled man in a starched white smock sits stony-faced, dredging the depths of his mind for that all-important phrase. He's searching for euphemisms, a subtle alternative to 'dead within the week.' After a pre-consultation conference with the specialists involved with the Prime Minister's case, they came up with a popular phrase involving a creek, a paddle and a pejorative term for human excreta. Mr Bactrian is not particularly popular in *Harley Street*.

It's an impossible situation. Doctors are difficult people to interact with at the best of times and Bactrian does nothing to smooth out the personality differences. His use of the word 'quack' repeatedly and at volumes varying from under-the-breath to bull-elephant-roar being a prime example. The doctor is not 'a quack', just mildly incompetent, so he puts his usual subtle sarcasm back into its box and sneers his way through the following:

“Well, Mr Bactrian, let's start with your liver. Your liver is in a condition that we *professional* doctors would describe as – and I do not use the term lightly – fucked. Your colon's so clogged it looks like it's been pebble-

dashed and the CAT scans of your brain resemble nothing less than *Dresden* in the grip of incendiary bombing.”

“Uh huh,” Bactrian nods, betraying no emotion.

“But this is the killer,” the doctor says, suppressing the urge to smirk. “The cause of your nausea: gangrene, stemming from what I can only describe as a penile concretion.”

“A penile what?” says Bactrian.

“A penile *concretion*,” answers the doctor. “It’s a new term. I made it up today.”

“But what the hell is it?!” Bactrian snarls, his face a contorted kabuki mask of angered *perplexitude*.

“Come now,” the doctor chides.

“Surely you must have noticed that unsightly lump where your penis used to be? It *must* have aroused your curiosity when you discovered your manhood had disappeared and been replaced with a Stone Age club? You can’t have thought it was normal?”

“I’m the Prime Minister,” growls Bactrian, sweating brandy, “I leave discussions on the nature of normality to pseuds and students. Tell me what the problem is, tell me what you intend to do with it, and tell me now! I want to get tough on this issue!”

“Whip it out!” the doctor snaps. “Now look at it. Move it about a bit. No, *you* do it. I don’t want to touch it. The problem,” he continues, “stems from

your compulsive, and may I say, *idiosyncratic* use of cocaine. This, coupled with your laissez-faire attitude toward personal hygiene in that area, has led to a build up of smegma on your organ. The narcotic crystals have mixed with sweat to form a *cement*. This cement has set into a firm shell, restricting blood flow. Some areas of tissue are dead. Others are in the process of decaying. The solution, I'm afraid, is immediate amputation."

Bactrian considers his response.

"This is regrettable news. Go screw yourself, quack!"

"Please," the doctor berates, "A man in your condition should stay calm. Are you calm? Well, try to look as if you

are. That face unsettles me. Now... surgery really is the only option. ‘Bactrian’s syndrome’ is fatal if not treated immediately.”

“Bactrian’s syndrome!” the Prime Minister fumes. “Bactrian’s syndrome?!”

“Another term I made up today,” the doctor says curtly. “We have to call it something. And you’re the first recorded case.”

“Well, call it after yourself,” Bactrian snaps.

“*No*, I don’t think so,” the doctor asserts. “I’m not having my name associated with cock-rot.”

“You’re name’s Myanus. Surely, you’re on speaking terms with

embarrassment already.”

“That’s as maybe, Prime Minister, but the past is another country and the future is a new frontier. I’m thinking of my standing in the history books, and when people look up Myanus I don’t want them seeing your penis.”

“Well how the Hell do you think I feel?!” Bactrian fumes.

“Think of it this way,” the doctor confides. “When the Churchills, Chamberlains and Thatchers of this world disappear into the murk of political history, your name will be alive, playing across the lips of post-operative transsexuals the world over, as they tell their confused parents that it was ‘Bactrian’s syndrome’ and the

breasts are just a side-effect. You've been immortalised. God's smiling on you, son!"

Bactrian reels from the doctor's last utterance: a truly vicious blow to a man who's spent his life trying to *disassociate* his name from the third sex. When he finally speaks, the words arrive with a menace that requires no exclamation marks:

"I will not go down in history as the Prime Minister with no penis. I'll be a stiff before I'm stiffy-less. I'd rather be six foot under than six inches shorter."

"I think that's an overgenerous estimate," Myanus chips in cheerily, unable to resist this last opportunity to

put the boot in. “Well, you’re going to die then,” he adds. “I’ll bid you goodbye then, Prime Minister. Looks like we won’t be seeing each other again... Except, of course, when I have your knob in a specimen jar marked: Bactrian’s syndrome.” And he points to the afflicted area for emphasis.

“So be it then!” says Bactrian, with a resolve as rock solid as his member.

Bactrian is a proud man. He is not a pop star. There are no credibility points for androgyny in politics, only embarrassing tabloid rumours and unspoken admiration from certain sections of the backbench.

“P.M. Dies of Galloping Gonad Gangrene!” is a future headline haunting

him, for amputation, as they say, is not an option.

He stumbles into the cold night. Cue the wind and rain. Someone turn up the emotive music. This scene needs some pathos.

And as Bactrian sings the half-forgotten words of some appropriately angst-ridden guitar anthem, he thinks back to better days, before his organ required a quarantine certificate to travel abroad.

* * *

Tramps protest outside the huge, bottle-shaped *Boozeshop* off licence,

complaining that the separate cider-basement for the homeless is a form of apartheid. There's a Leopard Van looming and something tells me we're about to get carnivorous, so I turn my collar up and hurry back to the architectural salvage project we call our house.

It's not my home. It's a monument to my wife's disappointment and anger. And she stalks the rooms with a chianti flagon dangling from her cardigan sleeve, rewriting the happier moments of our shared history as examples of my cruelty and neglect. I don't know why I stay. I guess, when you can't see land, you don't know which way to swim.

Rachel's inside so outside's safe.

But soon I'm locked in an argument with my tosser neighbour, Reynolds.

Reynolds maintains that my rosebush is a tree, it overshadows his patio, and that I need to trim it. I say I don't care what it is but I'll happily trim it if he'll just shut up and go away. But he doesn't. So I tell him I don't understand why he wants it trimmed anyway, since it gives him ample cover to stand outside, look up at our bathroom window and jerk his limp dick off. I tell him I've seen him do it. And I have.

Maybe his wife's seen him at it, and this is all part of some double-bluff display for her benefit. She can't be too bright to have married the white-trash goober in the first place. I feel resentful.

Once again, dullards I don't give a damn for drag me into their pointless, self-created dramas. They make problems then parcel them up for distribution. So I offer to hit him with a half brick and he goes away. For the moment.

I'm sick of petty, suburban bullshit. I want change. I want adventure. I want it now.

* * *

Bactrian barrel-rolls through the door, pissed as Christmas, with flared, flake-encrusted nostrils and eyes wide as the Grand Canyon. He points his heaving bulk toward the nearest female and announces:

“I have an erection and I demand someone attend to it!” and gesticulates toward his alcohol-soaked mound to clarify. Bodyguards glare through the window. No one seems surprised.

The proprietor eyes him up and slowly down. She’s a small, elegant woman, hair greying at the temples, with strong Eastern European features. We’ll call her Therese. Therese has seen a lot in thirty years in the restaurant trade. What she sees of Bactrian doesn’t impress.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” she says acerbically, “But we don’t service perverts here.”

“But,” says Bactrian, “the sign says *Brothel*.”

“No, *it doesn't*,” she replies. “If you will kindly take your drunken self outside to read it, you will notice that it says *The Broth Hole*. We are a specialist soup restaurant.”

“So no girls, then?” he persists.

“As I said, Sir, we don't service perverts.”

“But I'm not a pervert,” he protests.

“Sir, your current demeanour suggests that you are.”

“But I'm not,” he says indignantly.

“That's as maybe, Sir,” she growls, “but we don't serve drunken arsewits either. Now, may I suggest you take your sorry organ out of here and find a place more suited to your needs. I believe the *Tommy Tank Palace* has a two for one

offer for the over-fifties.”

Bactrian is flustered, frantic. His time on Earth is ticking away.

“Please,” he implores, “I don’t have much time! I’m going to die!”

“I’ve heard that one before,” Therese sneers, “I’ve been through three wars and four husbands. Listen to me: the only fluid exchanged here is soup. Have you got that? Can your little mind contain the thought?”

“Pleeease! I’m going to die!” he whines. “Very soon! And I’m *so* lonely! And it’s such a simple request! A single issue! It’s such a small thing!”

“I’ll bet!” she answers.

“All I want is a little light relief before the reaper calls to collect me. Is

it such a big thing? I have funds; plenty of funds!” And he pulls out a substantial wad of God-fearing taxpayer’s money as supporting evidence.

Therese assesses the bundle. A businesswoman, born and bred, she studies the empty restaurant, sighs and snatches the cash.

“You’ll do me...sorry, it? It’s the smart move all round!” says Bactrian brightly.

Therese shakes her head with a condescending smile. She reaches behind the till for a well-thumbed mail order catalogue.

“Take this,” she says sternly. “The storeroom’s through there. Don’t leave a mess. Don’t make any noise. If either I

or my customers get even the slightest indication of what you are doing in there, I *will* call the police. You got that?”

Bactrian nods as graciously as a man about to entertain himself with a catalogue can and bolts through the door, leaving Therese with the impression she’s seen him somewhere before.

The storeroom’s a cosy, pine-planked rectangle, littered with tomato crates and debris from recent renovation. He finds space beneath a long shelf and builds himself a nest of cardboard boxes, enjoying the illicit thrill. Safely ensconced, he locates the firm-control underwear section and sets to work.

It's a difficult business and I'll spare you the exact details. Suffice to say, the concretion numbs sensation and it takes great effort. His elbow slams hard against the wall at regular intervals. The loose planking vibrates and the objects upon the shelf judder closer and closer toward the edge. There's a clock on the shelf, a monumentally distasteful ornamented lump of heavy mahogany, embellished with crudely carved flowers and varnished, apparently, with hardened treacle. Perched ignominiously upon its top stands the cast metal figure of Justice, trademark sword and scales in hand, fortunately blindfolded to Bactrian's flagrant self-gratification (Hardly the best advert for human

sensuality there's ever been). As he pounds himself closer to a satisfactory conclusion, Justice draws closer to the edge of the shelf. And, as he reaches his crescendo, she arrives at thin air, plummeting in swift rotations toward the Prime Minister's skull. She hits hard and heavy; lethally. And Bactrian is dead.

Time flies when you're having fun.

Chapter Two

The Many And Varied Uses Of The Human Head

The street's dark, save for the flicker of candles behind broken windowpanes and the dim glow of The Broth Hole's kerosene lamps. Shadowy buildings crumble in the background. A gas grenade arcs noiselessly through the cold night air and clatters against the cobbles, spewing thick, choking mist. Shadowy people crumple to the

pavement. Malmot's operatives, black-clad and wearing respirators, sweep the alleys for witnesses. Pistol silencers sneeze into the howling wind. It's half past curfew, the leopards are out and the evidence will soon be eaten.

Inside The Broth Hole: Therese sits, flanked by Bactrian's bodyguards. The Prime Minister, dead – and from the look on his pale face, loving it – lies slumped over a red and white chequered tablecloth.

The door crashes open and Malmot, gasmasked and wrapped from neck to ankle in a long, grey trench coat, enters followed by yet more sinister entities. Leather gloved fingers grip pistols and semiautomatics. Respirator valves hiss

and sigh. Another high, sneezing sound and Therese falls face down.

Operatives surround the Prime Minister's corpse. His pulse is checked but none found. They hood the head and drag his slumped form into an unmarked vehicle. Small packages are placed around the dining area, kerosene lamps unhooked and smashed. Flames lick across the wooden flooring. They make their exit.

A black limousine pulls up. Malmot gets in. The Broth Hole flashes white, its once-verticals bloating outward in an exhalation of shattered glass.

Jump Cut to Ceesal: David Ceesal. Pronounced “See-sawl”, if you're

reading this in transcript. His dull eyes flick open into silent blackness. His first ever action was to hoof the midwife in the face. Coordination would never be his strongpoint.

Now in his late thirties, he's pop-eyed, boss-eyed and thick; the kind of man who sits in darkened rooms, licking his own face. In the queue for human brains, he was conspicuous by his absence, lining up with the apes for prehensile toes instead. Rumour has it those decades of intermarriage left the Ceesals with an incomplete genetic code that could only be plugged with monkey DNA. I don't claim to know but it seems feasible. That's hearsay, however. I never met the guy personally.

Viewed in profile – one eye at a time and with his tongue sheathed in his skull – he could almost be handsome. He has the sturdy physique of a rugby player; the operations to cure his scoliosis have left him straight-backed with a regal posture and the scar from the removal of his eleventh finger is virtually unnoticeable. He holds some political position but I can't recall exactly what it is. I do know his deformities extend to his bladder, which is reputed to have a capacity of approximately fifteen litres. I also know he has a habit of waking up in cupboards.

I'm not sure why he sleeps in cupboards. There'll be a deep-seated

psychological reason for it, probably involving wombs, but it's not necessary for me to speculate.

So he's in a cupboard now. He doesn't know it, though. It's too dark to see and he's too stupid to get out. He thinks it's a coffin. He's waiting for an angel, someone to tell him he's dead and pack him off to the afterlife. The door opens, light streams in and an apparition appears: some hazy, undulating entity too thin to be human. Technically speaking, it isn't. It's Malmot.

“Well, well, well,” he goes. “And who's this then?”

“It's Ceesal. David Ceesal,” answers our idiot in a sub-bass rumble. He has a nametag to remind him. “I'm

not being annoying, am I? Are you an angel? Am I... Am I dead?"

"Well, your body is most definitely alive. Your brain, however... well, let's just say it's open to debate."

"I'm not being annoying, am I?" Ceasal whimpers again. "And what happened last night? What's wrong with my eyes?"

"Firstly, you are always annoying so don't bother asking again. Secondly, you're wearing the shadow Home Secretary's glasses. You stole them. I believe you said it would be a 'good laugh'. I don't claim to understand your concept of enjoyment but many of our more feeble-minded ministers seemed to agree with you." And he lets off a

starched smile and sniffs haughtily. He might even click his heels like a prison camp commandant. Who can be sure? Whatever, there's something about Ceasal's posture he finds disturbing.

"And..." starts Ceasal.

"And what?" Malmot answers.

"Well," says Ceasal, "well, I'm sure it's nothing serious, it's just that... I think I have my backside wedged in a mop bucket."

Malmot thinks for a second, with those great, grey wheel arch eyebrows knotting.

"Again," he says, "I don't understand your concept of enjoyment, but one might assume, from the positioning of your trousers around your

ankles, that you fell asleep whilst trying to relieve yourself. You became, for want of a better expression, *wedged*.”

“Can’t think why I’d want to do that,” mumbles Ceesal. “Bit of a silly ass thing to do, eh?”

“The question,” answers Malmot, “is not why you would want to do it, but why you would want to do it in a broom cupboard?” Ceesal releases his buttocks from the bucket with a rubberised purr.

“I don’t know. I have a problem with thinking.”

“I can imagine,” says Malmot. “Fortunately, you’re going somewhere you won’t need to think.”

“Now, I know this one,” says Ceesal. “It’s either California or middle

management.”

“No,” says Malmot, “and it’s not university either. Tell me, Ceesal, have you ever thought of becoming Prime Minister?”

And so we confine Bactrian to history. When Ceesal asks, “Why me? I mean, I’m hardly The Brain of Britain”, Malmot replies, “My dear chap, you’re not even The Brain of your own skull. For that, we must look to the parasites in you hair. You are, however, a man of noble lineage and proud carriage, big enough to protect your party from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” By which he means, fat enough to keep him (Malmot) shielded from

snipers.

“Well, that’s just marvellous!”
Ceasal chuffs.

“Yes,” says Malmot, “marvellous like a hideous wasting disease.”

And so another idiot ascends to Prime Minister. Simple as that. He’s eminently qualified. ‘Supple Ceasal’, they call him, ‘pliable as play dough’. His lack of opinions mean he can be pushed any which way – so long as there’s the promise of beer and rugby at the end of it. A perfect puppet. A perfect Prime Minister for a scheming, backseat Machiavelli.

Now, Malmot’s position may be unassailable but the illusion of democracy is vital to the smooth running

of his dictatorship. Our drunken nation doesn't notice Bactrian's absence yet, but they will. Eventually. And there's enough newspapers outside of State control to pose some tricky questions. So best to pre-empt them with a press release explaining Bactrian's sudden contraction of a debilitating respiratory illness and his retirement from politics. Ceasal will be sworn in before a select audience of loyal and extremely inebriated party members and his picture – taken in profile, with his tongue put away – circulated amongst the press. The former Prime Minister's disappearance may provoke some international discussion. Who cares? A few carefully circulated lies –

kidnapping by aliens, eaten by his own leopards etc – will keep the conspiracy theorists busy.

So it's back to governing now for Malmot and preparations for the next fake general election. And if Bactrian's body needs to turn up sometime, well, it's safe in refrigerated storage.

The *Stemset* building sits squat on the cliffside. The Devil's own breezeblock; it sucks the life and colour out of its surroundings; a karmic black hole, leaching in the positive and spitting out the negative in fantastic new forms of mangled depravity. There are trees, bushes and general vegetation, but like nothing you've seen *this* side of a

nightmare. What should be green is grey, stunted, twisted. And dripping with fat: human tallow renders on the electric fence. We still have science, you see, and its bloody by-products spill from skips, as blackened chimneys flare off the souls of incinerated test specimens.

It wasn't always so. The *Stemset* building – or *Ethicare Well-Being Trust Centre* as it was then known – started its life as a psychiatric hospital. Never one to let stupidity hinder policy, the then Home Secretary decided that the best thing to do with the cripplingly shy, the hyper sensitive and the over anxious members of society, would be to lock them up with shit-slinging window-lickers, psychopathic killers and corpse-

mutilating, necrophiliac rapists. The idea being, of course, that this would put them in an environment where they would feel safe and their issues could be resolved quickly and efficiently. Part-private funding and a substantial one-off payment for each patient was *nothing to do with it*. And it *certainly wasn't* a plot to camouflage health service inefficiency by locking the evidence out of site.

Ethicare was also noted for its curious security, the high fence with the wide gap on the cliff's edge labelled, "Jump here to be free of torment". And with no doorlocks to stop them, many did and probably were. Unofficial communications between ministers made veiled references to "the successful

implementation of a cruel-to-be-kind stratagem". But throwing aside rumours of conspiracy, malpractice or simply extreme gallows humour, no one could deny that the suicides were televised and that bets were taken on which patients would jump next. I'm told a doctor won fifty pounds on my father's death.

When asked about the matter in the commons, the Home Secretary replied: "Sometimes, I stand up too fast and it makes my brain all hurty," and was quickly consigned to the facility he'd created.

But time marches on regardless. Large sums of money change hands and the last of the patients make the great leap, buttering the cliff with body parts.

Ethicare Well-Being Trust Centre becomes *Stemset Life Technologies*, part of a rapidly expanding research corporation. They add electricity to the razorwire fences, sling in some halogen lighting and a couple of watchtowers and fix up a charming sign reading: "If you've seen this, you're already dead. By appointment to His Majesty, King William."

Business thrives. Anthrax sales are down due to the popularity of home brewing, but government subsidies and a nice little sideline in cryogenics ensure a healthy return for the unethical investor. And here come our investors...

The guard on the main gate is surly and the stench of non-viable embryos in

the incinerator further proof, if any were needed, that Stemset may be one of the many entrances to the underworld.

“Call me C,” says a disguised Ceasal warmly as they approach the huge, reinforced doors.

“Believe me, that's the letter that springs to mind,” Malmot answers bluntly. “You're to behave yourself today. Understand?”

It's unlikely Ceasal does. He's drunk. One more drink and he'll be quadrupedal. Malmot's mood is sour, bordering on explosive. His new mouthpiece is an inarticulate inebriate; a liability unfit for public display; a one-way ticket to ridicule.

“Why are we here?” he asks. “Am I

being annoying?” he adds.

“We are here,” Malmot replies, “to operate on your deformities. I’m thinking, we probably can’t make you any smarter but we might be able to find some kind of electrical implant that shocks you whenever you behave like an arse. You don’t mind us putting things inside your skull do you?”

“Not at all! Plenty of room in there!” Ceesal laughs.

“Just as well,” says Malmot, “because the alternative is a little more...” he turns away “... a little more *fatal*.”

The charming receptionist with the dead seagull eyes and too much makeup introduces them to – or rather points at –

Doctor Holubec, a swarthy Eastern European with a handshake of respectful pressure. But his courteous smile hangs beneath a blank, blue gaze. It's a look that speaks of war crimes and a first family lost to a mass grave. Whatever he loved is long gone. He prefers scientific experiments to people now. They only die within set parameters.

The foyer has a barbaric efficiency to it; a Cold War atomic bunker vibe that no amount of smiling photographs can quash. I'm not big on family portraits and torn and tearstained images of long-dead children are seldom 'jaunty', no matter what a grieving parent might tell you.

It's mistrust at first sight for

Malmot and Holubec; combative eye contact and a conversational tone that veers from professional to the downright hostile and back. Meanwhile, the idiot Ceesal emits methane and Holubec makes a mental note to inject him with something unpleasant before the day's out.

Malmot looks up. Something strikes him strange: a model railway track – suspended roughly a foot and a half below ceiling level and disappearing into the ventilation shafts either side of the foyer. Ceesal just stares, his eyes wide with childish wonderment as a miniature Wild West steam train peeps in above his head, towing six little wagons full of human fingers. He turns,

open mouthed, to Holubec.

“Waste not want not, yes?” says the doctor. The receptionist, called Michelle, shrugs.

“Oh, yeh!” comes an inexplicably excited voice from the depths of the ventilation system. Holubec shudders.

“You will be signing the visitor’s book,” he says, producing a massive, dust-encrusted, leather-bound tome full of blank pages.

“I think not,” says Malmot, shaking his head. “Hush hush, you know,” he adds, tapping his nose.

“*I said*, you will be signing the visitor’s book!” Holubec repeats.

“And *I said*...” starts Malmot.

“You are illiterate?” Holubec

interrupts.

“Why, er, no. No, I’m not.”

“Then why do you not sign your name? If you wish, you may put down an ‘X’ and I will write in the time and date for you.”

“I am not illiterate.”

“What about your idiot friend? Can he write his language?”

“I’ve seen him draw a pig in a top hat.”

“Then you will sign and he will draw his animal with its headgear. I have crayons. Then you may proceed into the facility. Not before.”

Malmot reluctantly snatches a pen and gouges something angular into the pristine white page.

“I don’t think you know who you’re dealing with.”

“You are right,” Holubec answers. “But you do not offer me money so I will not engage the emotion of caring. I will show you round, answer your stupid questions, but that is all. Offer me financial assistance, however, and I will be your finest friend. I will call you Sir. I will give you tea and I will not point out the extent of your ignorance.”

Malmot’s non-uniform persona is perfect for secretive excursions but hinders as much as it helps. And in situations where violence isn’t appropriate, well, it’s back to good, old-fashioned diplomacy.

“I’m a firm believer in scientific

progress, Doctor Holubec. And I have no ethical objections to buying your friendship. Two hundred million is a nice number, don't you think?"

"Ach! Hyperinflation is making my wallet too heavy to carry, yes? The Scottish have a stable economy. Ten thousand of their dollars will suffice. I am not a greedy man."

"You're a sharp operator, Doctor."

"We have the agreement?"

"Indeed. We have the agreement."

"Then welcome, *Sir*, to Stemset. And how may I be your assistant?"

"Can I count on your discretion?" Holubec nods with a wry laugh.

"If it were not for the simple virtue

of lying by omission, I would not be where I am today!” And he gestures toward a set of heavily-barred steel doors. When the infrared fingerprint scanner fails to work, he unlocks them with a rusty old key. “We shall enter through there. But the fool must stay here, for all our safety. He is drunk and his tongue is like a wobbling eel. I do not wish to see it.”

“I was hoping you could take a look at him, Doctor. You see my problem is ... is him.”

“We can observe him via surveillance camera. I have them everywhere because I am, how you say, a paranoid bastard. Plus, he appears to be the kind of man who opens dustbins

in search of food. We have very unusual things in our dustbins here, Sir, and were our retarded acquaintance to satiate his appetite, he would undoubtedly explode.”

He seats Ceasal beside the increasingly worried looking receptionist. “Do not worry, he will be perfectly safe here. Michelle is a cold and unpleasant woman. Her heart is dead from a man who left her many years ago. She will make sure your shavenape does not make any trouble. And now, Sir, if you would be so kind as to follow me, I shall show you around whilst you detail me the full extent of your problem. Possibly you will offer me more money at the juncture of which

we may endeavour to do something about it.”

“Indeed,” says Malmot, picking out the meaning from the doctor’s rattling syllables.

Stemset’s labyrinthine corridors beckon. Onward they go, through infinite soulless, olive drab hallways – all mental institution clichés present and correct. They barge through reinforced door after reinforced door, Holubec pointing out numerous fascinating atrocities; things that shouldn’t exist but do; partially-human arrangements of flesh, screaming silently inside tubes full of oxygenated liquid.

Meanwhile, in reception, Ceesal skips and sporadically collapses,

performing a dance he believes will win Michelle's affections. He asks if he is annoying her. She replies that he is.

In some horrible, tiled room, Holubec points into an incubator.

"This," he says, moustache twitching emphatically, arms in an animated flourish, "is the most rather amazing breakthrough in bio-mechanical surveillance technology. I say, the most rather amazing, but I mean the most rather fantastic! This is Science in action – beyond the cutting edge; beyond the bleeding edge; the Stanley-knifed cheek of discovery: The Sliced Face, yes?!"

"Where is its head?" asks Malmot.

"There," says the doctor. "We have replaced the jaw and mouth with a

socket that goes straight to the stomach. It is accepting an intravenous-style drip tube for the drastic reduction of feeding/refuelling times.”

“And the wires?”

“We steer the creature with electrical impulses to the brain. The connector in the spine is for data transfer.”

“It looks like ... Well, no offence intended, Doctor, but now I look, it bears a passing resemblance to your good self.”

“It shares a small percentage of my DNA, I will admit.”

“And you’ve had it tattooed?”

“Let us be realistic,” Holubec says, pointing with a pencil. “Many

institutions employ complex anti-surveillance technologies. Given a long enough operational time span, it is likely that the creature will be discovered. And if it is to be seen and examined, then we would be foolish not to utilise the advertising space.”

“Is it alive?”

“It, er, *was*.”

Further into the intestines of the building, they encounter a stack of insulated metal containers.

“What’s in there?” Malmot asks, whilst adjusting his flies.

“Possibly your penis,” Holubec replies, “But the boxes contain arms.”

“Guns?”

“*Arms*,” Holubec corrects. “Like

legs with hands on the end. We are removing them from soldiers in preparation for limb regeneration experiments. It is very hard to get genuine amputees these days, since the landmine treaties.”

“You experiment on conventionally-born people?” asks an incredulous Malmot.

“Of course!” Holubec answers. “We cannot let the freaks take all the credit. We are an equal opportunities experimental facility. We can even experiment on your companion. We were always testing the cognitive capabilities of apes. We could teach him sign language. Then he would be able to communicate.”

“Which brings me, rather, to my point,” starts Malmot, but the doctor interrupts.

“You will be wondering what happens to the arms in our efficient waste-not-want-not operation,” he says. “In times gone by, we are sewing them onto the dogs at tobacco research laboratories. The dog had no opposable thumbs, you will remember. It could not be holding its cigarette in a dignified manner. But now the dog is extinct. So we are taking the arms and are grinding them up into a highly nutritious, high-protein milkshake which we are feeding directly back to the soldiers. They are needing a lot of protein. You would be needing it too, if you were trying to grow

back an arm.”

“I’ve always believed in recycling,” says Malmot. “And your success rate?”

“Hmm,” Holubec says, “Limited for the moment. Partial regeneration in two percent of test subjects.”

“How partial?”

“Very Partial. Quite minimal. Almost non-existent. But we are working on a new incentive scheme and are expecting to be seeing more positive figures soon.”

“Incentives?”

“Yes. We understand the military mentality, you see. We are documenting its tendency toward criminality. Rather than to suppress it, we are choosing to

be accepting and exploit it; to work with what we have been given. Freedom from prosecution for one illegal act. A form of getting-out-of-jail-free card for one pre-planned, pre-agreed crime for the first soldier showing indisputable signs of regeneration.”

“And who did you arrange this with?” he asks.

“We have an agreement with *The Policing Company*. We assist with their prisoner sterilisation projects and they, shall we say, do us small favours in return.”

Malmot nods. He smiles – outwardly. The inward view's a little less rosy as our arch-conspirator considers he's been cut out of the

conniving by his own coppers. Or one copper in particular. But we'll go into that later.

“So, these crimes?” he enquires. “What sort of things do the fiends go for?” Holubec guides him through a pair of dirty-olive doors into a packed ward. He points at a sleeping soldier.

“Well,” he starts, “cutting off the limbs is never particularly popular. Especially *without* permission. So you will be unsurprised to discover that the majority of their criminal intentions are aimed towards me, myself. Private Chippen, there – you see: fat, snoring man. He is simplistic mammal. Barely sentient. Chippen is wanting to beat me round the head, to my death, with my

own legs. Other fellow there, with the moustache and the beady eyes – frankly, he is very sick. He requests intercourse with my mother whilst I am forced to watch.

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Hah no! My mother was cremated many years ago and now resembles the contents of an ashtray. He will experience no sexual pleasure, just gritty chafing.”

At the far end of the ward, shrouded in shadow, sits a lone soldier, motionless in a dirty towel dressing gown.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He is dead,” Holubec answers.

“Dead?”

“Yes. But we do not bury him because losing part of the team is bad for morale.”

“Isn’t it bad for morale staring at a dead body morning, noon and night?” says Malmot, displaying some form of empathy for once.

“Oh, they do not know he is dead,” says Holubec. “We have had him embalmed and a urine-dispensing pump fitted. The others avoid him because he stinks of the wee, yes?”

“A urine pump? Your own invention, of course?”

“No. Strange to declare, it is, how you say, off-the-peg model. That is the joy of the Internet.”

“Yes,” replies Malmot simply,

recalling his own adventures in cyberspace. Then something catches his eye. “Blue urine?”

“It is the agency temps,” Holubec blusters, “they have the sick sense of humour and the morals of jackals. I try to stop them but they ...”

“I don’t care,” says Malmot. “As long as the deeds you do for me deliver the results I require, you can sleep safe, knowing that your weird antics remain your own business. My soul concern is that you help me with my idiot.” Holubec nods frantically.

“Then I will be taking you to a place where we may observe him and you can detail to me his, how you say, deficiencies.”

Now Malmot nods.

“Then let it be so.”

They turn a corner. The miniature train passes overhead, laden with television remote controls.

The temperature drops as they delve ever deeper into Stemset's endless burrows, through another million miles of grey, featureless concrete and cold, clattering footsteps.

Steep stone stairs take them upwards. The fire escape takes them outside. A parapet winds around the fourth story exterior of the building. Another door takes them inside. A man viewing monitors sucks in his stomach and fastens his fly. He appears to be eating a large meal. The room is arid,

filled with the smell of obsolete electrical equipment. Two banks of thoroughly antiquated monitors reveal the comings and goings of the facility staff in skewed, zebra-stripping images. Crackling electrics and feedback provide the soundtrack.

Holubec urges the man aside, where upon he (the man) sits down on a pile of remote controls, undoes his trouser button, unleashes his gut and quickly resumes eating. Holubec regards him with disgust. Malmot wonders what the meal might be. The little train toots in through the air conditioning duct. The man stands and tips a serviette full of short, greasy bones into its tiny wagons. He licks his fingers and waves it

goodbye. His trousers fall down. He turns to Holubec, who stares like the gorgon and sends him scuttling out of the room, muttering apologies.

“Louder!” Holubec barks at the disappearing figure.

“I said I’m sorry, Sir!” the man pleads through the closing door.

“Debased ape,” mutters the doctor. Malmot smiles approvingly. Holubec resumes his air of professional grandeur.

“So, to reception,” he says, adjusting the equipment, “and the unfathomable mysteries of your idiot friend. Look! There he is. I think Michelle may be about to be hitting him with the hole punch.”

“I never said he was a friend.”

“Your relative?”

“In Christ’s name, no!”

“So then what? A bald yeti you discovered with hilarious consequences?”

“He’s the face of my latest marketing campaign,” says Malmot, clearly lying.

“But he is a halfwit?” says the sceptical doctor.

“Exactly!” Malmot answers, thinking on his feet. “A blank canvas. For others to, er, *project* themselves upon.”

“If he is a canvas, then someone has scrawled across him. Picasso, perhaps? A bit of that Kandinsky guy? I am seeing a problem with his eye. His tongue we

have mentioned earlier. Do you mean him to be like this? Is he the ‘before’ part of an advert?”

“Regrettably not. He’s both the ‘during’ and ‘after’. I was hoping you could tidy him up a little; make him more presentable; less abhorrent to polite society. You’ll notice if you freeze-frame – Yes, that’s it. Now zoom in a little – that he can appear quite handsome. It’s just the moving and talking that ruins the deception.”

“Then do not let him.”

“I’m afraid he must. He has to appear in public. Or, at least ‘appear’ to appear in public, if you understand?”

“No. Am I needing to?”

“Not desperately.”

“Good. Then I will give you my medical opinion: I can be stabilising the eyes with an injection to the optic muscles. It will stop them wandering independently. He will only be able to stare straight ahead and he will not be able to focus properly, but that is more than he can do now, yes? His tongue is simple. Tell him that if he sticks it out, you will sting it with a wasp.”

“How fiendishly simple! But do you have any wasps that I could, perhaps, *borrow*?”

“More than you could possibly imagine and for reasons you would not want to.”

“Wonderful.”

“Now look into the monitor.

Observe him closely. I am thinking of his other problems. For instance, the torrent of stupidity he calls speech. Are you wishing him to speak in public?"

"I *had* hoped. I thought you might have some form of psychotropic wonder-drug that might make him smarter, more adept at communication? ... If such a thing exists?"

"It does and I do but the administering process is ridiculously complicated and smells appalling. Have you not thought of punching him in the throat and playing his words from a tape player? No one will notice. We are a nation of drunks, remember."

"Truly, Doctor, I'm rather glad I came to see you."

“And I am glad you are glad, mysterious Sir. Not least, for my wallet. On a coarser topic, however, I am trusting our financial agreement still holds firm?”

“Indeed it does, my good man. Half now, the remainder upon return of my suitably modified moron. I have a packing case outside. You may deliver him in that. And, if all our meetings are to conclude this successfully, well, I predict many future collaborations.”

“Perhaps, then you will be revealing your identity?”

“I fear not, Doctor. For, whilst I detest lying, I share an equal if not greater revulsion to telling the truth.

“I understand, Sir. Discretion is the

better part, as they are saying, yes? But one thing, if I may ask you? You are choosing a cretin to front your campaign. Would it not be better to be selecting a man who can go for long periods of time without soiling himself? There are many actors and models out there. They can look handsome without invasive surgical interventions. Some are even capable of thinking for themselves.”

“Which is the last thing I want. Show me an actor and I’ll show you a vacuum searching for a cause, someone with half an opinion and the desire to broadcast it to all and sundry. Couple that lack of understanding with the near religious zeal of the recent convert and you’ll find yourself with the type who

delivers speeches about starving orphans at the opening of supermarkets; who berates schoolchildren on sportsday because they've never trodden on a landmine and they don't appreciate their legs; who spreads white-liberal-guilt like typhus. Turn your back for ten seconds and there they are, telling the world God sent them to cure AIDS, the bleeding-heart scum. Give me someone happy in their own skin and dumb enough to trust I'm right and behave accordingly."

"You are critical of our thespian friends, yes?"

"I move in political circles, Doctor. That should tell you all you need to know. But I digress. Please. Take my

card. You'll notice there's no name. Have the idiot delivered to this address. You'll find it's a bawdy house but ..."

"A 'bawdy house'?"

"A brothel. A place where kidnapped women rent their internal friction for the stimulation of lonely gentlemen. I prefer to do my dealings in whorehouses. Visitors with something to lose keep quiet. Those without, well, it's a professional hazard, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Why, being shot and mutilated in an alleyway, of course. My idiot knows the place. In fact, they treat him as some kind of mascot there. And you might find it somewhat educational yourself. On a purely physiological level, of course.

You being a married man and all. ... Well, now, must be going.”

“You are leaving? I shall see you out. Stemset is a big facility, yes?”

“No need. I have the plans to the building and an airship equipped with thermal imaging equipment tracking my location. I might take the scenic route, though. You don’t mind?”

“A-hah! There is nothing here you could try to steal which would not be tearing your throat out first. Speaking of which, be wary around the West wing, enclosure 247:B. That is where we are keeping the Gulls.”

“Gulls? *Carrion* Gulls? Still breeding them, are you? Christ!”

“I may be sounding defensive, but please do tell another way to clean up incriminating battlefield mess?”

“Yes, but when there aren’t any dead soldiers, the Carrion Gulls migrate inland and eat children.”

“It is an economic equation, yes? We need Carrion Gulls on constant standby to make conflict zones look innocent for television cameras. We cannot cull them. They cannot breed naturally and cloning is prohibitively expensive. Too many birds have avian flu to harvest DNA. But children are cheap to replace. Give common women alcohol and their legs divide like the Red Sea to Moses. It is swings and roundabouts, yes?”

“Yes. Empty ones.”

The black limousine speeds through blacker night. The rear-view mirror reveals Ceesal, writhing contentedly around the backseat like a hippo in a warm morphine fug. We could pay attention but we don't need to. Malmot is asleep. This is his dream:

“I've never understood why ‘cunt’ is a swearword,” announces Ceesal in an eloquent voice.

“And why is that?” says Malmot, distracted, disinterested, sweating narcotics, trying to drive inconspicuously but seeing everything like a cubist painting. Only rounder.

“Because,” Ceesal continues, “fifty

percent of the population have them, and the majority of the other fifty spend most of their time trying to get in them. Why would a chap want to do that if they were so bad? And lesbians?! Lesbians've got 'em, they know the drawbacks, and they still chase after 'em. So, I think, they must be rather good. I think 'cunt' should be a compliment."

"Much as I admire your newfound capacity for lateral thought," says Malmot, "try calling King William a cunt... See if you get a knighthood."

"I like thinking!" Ceesal laughs. "Can't recall ever doing it before!"

"And what was it Holubec did to you again?" Malmot asks, noting that

King Tutankhamen's mummy is sitting in the passenger seat, taking notes.

“Well,” Ceesal starts. “He scanned my head and found that my brain was adhering to the inside of my skull. The massive pressure on vital areas was what was making me such a confounded imbecile, you see.”

“He's right,” says Tutankhamen before transforming into Malmot's mother and then a leopard. “I never loved you,” says the leopard. The numbers on the speedometer morph into letters. Malmot changes into fifth and accelerates to PMC miles an hour. The leopard changes its spots.

“They went in through a tiny hole,” Ceesal continues, “did some jiggyery

pokery and, lo and behold, it turns out I'm actually something of a clever clogs. However, they do concede that I have very little sense of shame or embarrassment. ...Will you excuse me, I'm just going to wave my penis out of the window. Ah! That's better!"

The leopard turns to Malmot.

"It's Bactrian all over again," it says. "Turn off at the next exit for Purgatory."

"Not *actual* Hell?" Malmot asks. "That's a relief!"

"Oh, you're going to Hell," the leopard replies, "but first you have to do the induction course."

"So I'm the prime minister?" chips in Ceesal, leaning in between the front

seats.

“Technically speaking,” says the leopard, “you should spell Prime Minister with capitals. It’s arcane usage but I feel the lower case implies disrespect.”

“Shut up, Leopard!” Malmot snaps. “And put that pipe out!”

“I’m the Prime Minister,” says Ceasal smugly. “And you say I’ve got an interview tomorrow? On live television? That’ll be fun. I’ll make it fun!”

“Not *live*, thank God,” Malmot answers. “You see, we must retain control of your public image. We may need to, how shall we say, *massage* the footage somewhat – ensure you come out

in the best light.”

“You consider me something of a liability, don’t you?” Ceasal laughs. “Worried I’m going to upset the applecart, are you? Too much of a live wire, eh?! Oh dear! Hah! It’s a wonder you don’t arrange a little accident for me?! I would – in your shoes. A-hah!”

He’s ahead of me, thinks Malmot, checking for a pistol in the glove compartment.

“Don’t,” whispers the leopard. “The car’s armoured. It’ll ricochet. Drive him down to the docks and collapse a building on his head.”

“I’ve got to stop him going to that interview,” Malmot whispers back.

“Like I said,” the leopard repeats,

“it’s the docks and a rickety warehouse or nothing. Because you *won’t* stop him. He’s smart now. He’ll escape. He’ll probably drug you and run off to the interview without you.” And it leans over and paws the speedometer, now calibrated in hieroglyphics. “And slow down.”

Malmot awakes. He pushes aside the meal that Ceesal doped and considers that everything he has dreamed, bar Tutankhamen and the talking animal, has actually happened. His eyes settle upon a folded note:

Dear Malmot,
Gone to the studio. Didn’t think

you'd mind. Have taken Big Tony, Mustapha and that slutty admin girl with the big backside and the self-esteem issues. I'm expecting to get lucky.

Regards,

PRIME MINISTER CEESAL!!!

P.S. What is it, exactly, that you do?

Charming, thinks Malmot.

Especially the signature in the shape of ejaculating genitals. He holsters his pistol, slips a silencer into his inside pocket, slides a sheathed stiletto knife into his sock suspender and pockets a packet a poison for good measure.

“P.S. What is it, exactly, that you

do?" he repeats bitterly. "I do what needs to be done."

"Wow! That Hitler could really work a crowd!"

Opinions and attitudes can shift over time. Take Vlad III Tepes for example. That's 'The Impaler' to you and I. He killed an estimated eighty thousand people - including women and children - skewering twenty thousand of them through the anus with sharpened wooden poles, standing them upright and leaving them to die in man-made forests of rotting corpses. But that's all water under the bridge since Bram Stoker recast him as a sexy bereaved husband who can turn into a bat. Yes, goth girls

get very wet for Vlad “Dracula”, and now something equally weird's happening with old Adolf.

Now I'm brutal but I was never racist and I was never cruel. There are six million very emotive reasons why Hitler's rule should not be eulogised but it's happening anyway, as right-wing revisionists and hormonal teens wrap him in the doomed romance of a Twentieth Century Macbeth. They forget the death camps and fixate on the pageantry - which brings us to our current set of circumstances: a lone man sitting in a projection room watching Riefenstahl's “Triumph Of The Will”. His name is Pip Lindberg. He presents a television chatshow. And Nazis get him

hard.

They say he has a big heart. I'm sure he does. Probably in a jar, next to his collection of Third Reich crockery and a lampshade covered in human skin. I think back to that old nursery rhyme: "Slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails. That's what little boys are made of." My mind turns to the constituent components of your average minor celebrity and I picture a poisonous doughnut: a viscous jam of ego and narcotics boiled inside a half-baked cake of ruthless ambition and Munchausenian self-delusion. Sprinkled with sugar, of course. And if you gorge yourself on the empty calories of celebrity? Well, you end up with a potbelly and a sticky face. Lindberg has

both of these.

He wears gaudily patterned sweaters. He believes they make him more approachable. They don't. He smiles wide and often, but never with the eyes. Whatever his intended facial expression, from faux shock to joyous rapture, those black orbs stay dead as a shark's.

Tune in around midday, just after the televised executions, you can watch him in action. Smack yourself in the skull until you're down to fifty I.Q. points and you might even enjoy it. There's ex soap stars plugging spin-off series; sanitised, sub-tabloid gossip from no-listers who've found the limelight by flaunting their personality

disorders on docu-soaps; a woman who's overcome tragedy by biting out her own malignant melanoma; and to finish, a gay man butchering a classic song in a tortured cat yodel. It's a world away from the world of serious journalism he craves.

“Don't let it bother you,” he tells his reflection before each show. “What was it Marie Antoinette said? Let them watch crap?”

But tonight will be different. Tonight he has a *real* interview. With Ceesal.

Ceesal. He owed his initial popularity to the accidental invention of a rugby tackle called the *Buttocks Of*

Steel and his continued success to the ability to fit an entire ashtray in his mouth whilst simultaneously lighting gaseous rectal emissions. He had that weird pathological thing of going to sleep in confined spaces, usually cupboards. He had wonky eyes and a tongue that lolled out of his mouth like a wilted sea cucumber. He was terminally stupid.

The New Ceesal stands straight-backed and handsome in the television studio's Green Room. Bodyguards Big Tony and Mustapha pretend not to look as he clasps a kneeling woman to his groin. Is it Slutty Admin Girl? Well, her face is hidden but the technique seems familiar.

So, whilst our heroine works her way up the employment ladder in the time-honoured tradition, Ceasal smiles his sickening rictus grin and grunts like a repulsive, coiffured hog. It's a less than beautiful moment in the world's history but these things happen.

Inside an evil-looking car, and Malmot drives like a man possessed. His incognito status holds no sway with the station's managers. They repeatedly reject his calls. His Asian chauffeur, relegated to the passenger seat, winces as pedestrians crumple beneath the limo's reinforced wheels.

"Shut up!" Malmot screams to his silent passenger, glaring with absent intensity. The chauffeur knows better

than to say anything. Malmot, squinting through a rain-lashed, blood-spattered windshield continues:

“Hell! Well, the way I look at it, the more people I run over, the more people get to eat meat tonight.” He laughs. “Still, no good to you, eh?! Not Halal!”

The chauffeur says nothing. He covers his eyes. He weeps silently.

Back in the Green Room, and Lindberg introduces himself to his guest.

“I know you,” Ceesal purrs. “Where do I know you from?”

“Eton, Prime Minister.”

“Well, I'll be a... You're right! It's Pip ‘lindyhop’ Lindberg! I used to board with this bugger!” he tells Big Tony.

And they celebrate with the one import that always find its way into the country: cocaine.

“Has anyone got a miniature alpine chalet?” Ceasal howls. “I’m about to turn my head into a snowglobe!”

Malmot storms through the main entrance, trench coat flapping like leathery wings. Reception may not know his name, but they know his face. They know his intent. They also know that the last person to stand in his way wound up in a gibbet, displayed at the Paedophile’s Gallery at London Bridge.

Now, the basis of politics, as you’ll know, is to take The Truth down a dark alley and beat it to a bloody pulp that thanks you for the privilege. So what

Lindberg expects to get from Ceasal is beyond anyone's guess. Some journalistic credibility, maybe? A little extra status? Perhaps some cast-off women (nothing new there). But whatever it is, it's going to be interesting. The new Prime Minister is behaving in an increasingly hostile, increasingly unorthodox manner.

"Ten hours is enough for anyone," Ceasal declares archly, testing Lindberg's reaction. "We should decimalise Time. A hundred second minute would give us forty extra seconds, which means our current system loses us forty seconds a minute. That's a lot of seconds and they all have to go somewhere. Don't you think?"

“Indeed I do,” Lindberg answers. Enough cocaine and anything makes sense.

“So, where are they then?” Ceasal presses.

“Where are what?”

“All the lost seconds.”

“I’m not sure that I know,” says Lindberg.

“But you do agree that they’re missing?”

“Of course!”

Then you’re an idiot, thinks Ceasal.

Malmot enters, trailed by a gaggle of black-clad blonde women bearing clipboards. He has no idea who they are or where they came from. It’s harder still to work out what they do. Are they

some form of locally occurring fauna? He waves his *Daily Telegraph* at them, discovering with growing glee that they can be herded like sheep.

Scrawny white men with childish hair and the mental age of teenagers mince to and fro, waving their hands, addressing everyone as ‘Guys!’ and screaming ‘Jesus!’ at the slightest hint of dissent. They seem to think their presence is important. Clearly, it isn't.

Malmot stands silent, surveying the scene. The transition from Green Room schmoozing to interview proper is a blur he can scarcely comprehend. Who knows how these things happen? They defy conventional logic. He retreats into a fantasy world of possible evasive

measures: a fire alarm? A drugs raid? Perhaps a good old fashioned incendiary grenade tossed into the director's room? But the Media have a nasty habit of sniffing around when one of their own explodes into bright orange flame – it makes for such great television. By the time he sets about the relatively simple sabotage of the fuse box, the stage lights are on, the cameras rolling, the theme tune roaring, and Lindberg stands working Ceesal's hand like a lifeboat bilge pump. They take their appointed places in black leather and aluminium chairs. Ceesal smiles like a Cheshire cat. Thank God the broadcast isn't live.

The crowd settle in for an hour of easy, informal chat. No hard-nosed

interrogative journalism here. Not with a daytime TV lightweight like Lindberg at the helm. No, expect, instead, to see the 'human' face of government; a potted biography, cosy stories about family and friends (a fiancé?) and a few subtle references to his modest upbringing and the dignity of the common workingman and woman. No real opportunity for divulging classified material. No real opportunity to go off on a crazed tangent. No opportunity to spout filth for its own sake.

“Three times in one hour. All on my own!” declares Ceesal in response to a deliberately misheard question about his arrival.

“Excuse me?” asks Lindberg.

Ceesal's lip curls up into a ghastly grin.

"You heard!" he leers, accompanied by a small gasp from the audience. Lindberg's beatific, chemical veneer cracks into anguish.

"But I joke, of course," Ceesal chuckles. The audience laugh nervously. "Probably a bit inappropriate. Didn't know the cameras were rolling," he lies. The audience chuckle indulgently.

"We'll cut that bit out," says Lindberg.

Damn right, thinks Malmot.

"Oh you won't, you know!" cries Ceesal. "Because we're going out live!"

"What?" Lindberg gasps.

"Well," starts the Prime Minister,

taking off his jacket and rolling up his shirtsleeves, “these things can be so formal, can’t they? They can be so forced, you know. And, *personally*, I’m sick of all the pretence in politics; the packaging; the spin. I don’t want my image airbrushed, my speeches edited, my past, present and future sanitised.”

This meets with a roar of approval from the crowd.

“But? What?!” Lindberg stammers.

“Oh, it’s not so hard to arrange a little thing like a live broadcast,” Ceesal laughs. “Not when you’re the *Top Man!*”

Lindberg’s eyes bulge like elephant balls. Malmot cannot experience fear in its conventional sense but his intuition tells him to obtain distance. He sweeps

up Slutty Admin Girl and charges toward the nearest exit. Something is said into some device in his gloved hand. The long, black limo oozes up, its right-side window down and Mohammed, the driver, looking concerned.

“You should be watching this,” he says, pointing to one of the vehicle’s television screens.

Slutty Admin Girl stares open-mouthed at the small, flickering image of Ceasal.

“He just hinted at something very rude,” she gasps.

And she's right to gasp. I have a transcript of the interview. Here. Read for yourself.

LINDBERG: [Shocked] ... I trust that was a metaphor?

CEESAL: *Metaphor?* [Feigning ignorance] Like those Spanish chappies who fight bulls! [Laughs] You've lost me there, I'm afraid. We were talking about ...

L: [Interrupts] The human side of politics.

C: Oh yes ... *that!* Now, let's get one thing straight shall we, Pip, old boy: no matter what noble intentions you enter this game with, you will be hampered at every opportunity by those who have gone before you, become disillusioned, and now work solely for the benefit of their own best interests.

Consequently, a human side – certainly when it comes to things like conscience or compassion – is a weakness, you know. So I repeat: if you want to get ahead, be a cu...

Half the audience hiss. The other half cheer furiously.

CEESAL (CONTINUED): I feel I must address my detractors here, in the audience: this is the *real* me, take it or leave it, you know. I *do* tell coarse jokes. I *do* use offensive language. *Frequently*, in fact. It doesn't affect my ability to dictate policy. And, on that score, who wants to hear more interesting things about the 'C Word'?

L: Hah, Hah! Oh, ho, ho, ho!
[Forced] Very good! It's good to know
our new premier has a sense of humour.
Really, that's good. Funny. [Awkward
pause] Ahem.

C: Oh, I'm renowned for it.
Humour, that is, you know. People are
always telling me I'm funny. I know an
absolute scorcher about a traffic cone, if
you'd like to hear it? Actually, it's more
of a funny story. All true of course. It's
about a society hostess who supplements
her income by performing onstage.
'Capacity', she calls herself.

L: A-hah, hah! The Prime Minister
jokes, of course.

C: Nope, all true! Happened to
Thackory Rampton, Minister for

Transport!

L: Err, yes. Moving on...

C: Exactly! Well known for his moves is Thackory. Moving violations! That's why he got Transport Minister!

L: [Mutters to unseen person, stage right] You still want to continue? Christ! Diplomatic immunity? I bloody hope so!

C: [Standing, performing hand gestures] 'Peep peep!' he says. 'Just going to park it in your garage, miss!' That's what he says, the filthy barstool! Time for your thousand-mile service? Let's look under your bonnet, shall we? I'll just start with this here hooter, young lady!

Boos and catcalls. But an ardent

minority clap, cheering louder and louder.

L: Again... if we could talk about you, Minister...

C: Yes, back to me.

L: What do you, Prime Minister, do to relax? [Cringes, instantly realising his mistake.]

C: I go to the gentlemen's club, of course. You know that, Pip, old boy. You've been a member as long as I have. All us Old Etonians... all together... doing what Old Etonians do. Oh, we never really got on that well before, of course. You did seem to regard me as something of an idiot, didn't you? But, believe me, I was taking

it all in. You're a bit of a livewire on the sly, aren't you? Aren't you, Pip, old boy? Remember last month? Francesca, eh?

L: The name doesn't ring a bell.

C: Of course it does! Franny the Fanny, you called her. Didn't think it was too subtle, myself. A bit sexist. But, then again, she's your pick up – you can call her what you want.

L: I don't recall.

C: Oh yes you do! You call her frequently. No wonder you're divorced! Eh? Eh, old boy?! Missus got sick of you bringing the pox home, eh?

L: Anyway, moving on... what do you...

C: And we sing the old school

songs, don't we? Don't we, man? Don't we, old boy?

L: No.

C: Yes we do!

L: I don't recall.

C: Of course you recall. And I seem to remember you've got a rather pleasing baritone, unless I'm very much mistaken. So how about a few verses of something saucy, eh?

L: No.

C: Oh, come now! No need to be embarrassed. This is your swansong, after all. You may as well enjoy it.

L: Swansong? Eh? But I'm not going anywhere.

C: Oh dear! Have I let something slip? ... Oh well, cat's rather out of the

bag now, isn't it? May as well come clean, you know. Confession's good for the soul, and all that.

You see, I have it on very good authority that this is your last broadcast. [Adopts forced smile.]

L: Really? I mean, *really*?

C: [Sympathetic] Well, you're not getting any younger, are you? And think about it: how many other political interviews have they given you? One might suspect an attempt to raise the show's profile – in readiness for your replacement. I mean, from soap stars to the Prime Minister, it's a bit of a departure, isn't it? In fact, 'departure' is the operative word here, I'd say. A hah! ... Sorry. I just found that last remark

quite amusing.

L: [Ashen-faced] But ... but they'd tell me?

C: Why? And give you extra time to consult your lawyers? Oh come now, Pip-Pop. Let's face it, you're getting a bit long in the tooth for telly, aren't you? This is a young man's game, you know. A young man wearing a sharp suit and talking with a fashionable regional accent.

L: [Flustered] But ... I ... Damn! But, I mean ... Ah, Christ! ... I can't believe it!

C: So you may as well go out on a song, I say. Something *appropriate*.

L: Yes, you're ... You're right! Something *appropriate*!

It's not hard to push Lindberg over the edge. You've a man with a voluminous, but ultimately, fragile ego working in a cutthroat industry full of young, smart, backstabbing jackals. Throw in Ceasal's goading, drug-induced paranoia and you've all the constituent components of a highly amusing mental breakdown.

Well, Mental is as Mental does, and Malmot watches stupefied as Lindberg treats the viewing public to the curious spectacle of a fat man with a tie wrapped around his head, marching on the spot to his own internal rhythm and singing:

“Stick it up slow
She won’t notice
Slip it up whilst she’s still drunk
She don’t know you’ve laid her
You won’t have to pay her
So give her some old Eton spunk!”

In between other, even more disgusting verses, he screams: “I’ll show you what an old man can do!” and, following a few hip thrusts and some rather lewd hand gestures, he concludes:

“And I’d like to dedicate that song to the all the good people of film and television. I’m sure the irony will be completely lost on you, you vultures! You hyenas!”

He bows, calls the audience

‘Bastards!’ and exits, stage right, into the awaiting arms of a burly stagehand cradling a cosh. He reappears later in the Green Room, straightjacketed and strapped to an upright trolley, much to Ceasal’s delight.

“Well, my dear chap,” Ceasal chuckles, positively jubilant. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You know I’m not finished yet,” Lindberg mumbles through some sort of reinforced muzzle.

“I think, perhaps, you might be.”

“Well, I don’t care,” comes the unconvincing response.

“Good on you! That’s the spirit!”

“Don’t patronise me. This is all your fault.”

“Okay. You know, you’re just being weird now.”

“Look, don’t. ... Just don’t. I’ve spoken to my producer and she says they had no intention of firing me.”

“Well, they would say that, wouldn’t they? To you. In your delicate condition.”

“You lied to me.”

“Perhaps you deserved it?”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what it says on the tin, as they say. But, if I were to add anything, you know, it might be that you could try being a little nicer to those less fortunate than yourself.”

“And what, exactly, do you mean by that?”

“Well, back in the old days... school, you know, and at the gentlemen’s club... You *were* rather *mean* to me.”

And, with those cryptic words, Ceasal smiles and gestures the orderly. Lindberg exits backwards on squeaking wheels, issuing threats.

“Now that’s exactly the kind of behaviour I was talking about,” says Ceasal.

Big Tony steps out of the shadows.

“Mr Malmot’s outside,” he says.

“Let him wait,” says Ceasal.

“There’s something I have to attend to first.”

Malmot is installed in his London office of red walls, red leather, read

pornography and unread reports. The verdigris glass of the table lamp casts unflattering shadows onto his hawk-like face as he ponders the previous night's events and Lindberg's mysterious death from carbon monoxide poisoning. Ceesal grins disturbingly.

“The Truth is a person's honest interpretation of the events that have happened around them,” says the Prime Minister.

“That's relative Truth. Interpretation is different from reality,” Malmot replies.

“And I'd agree with that,” says Ceesal. “... To a degree.”

“So what are we saying here?” the desiccated weasel creaks, tapping his

fountain pen. “That a hosepipe *magically* attached itself to the ambulance exhaust and passed itself through the window?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” says Ceesal with a smirk. “Perhaps. Or, just maybe, someone tampered with the oxygen cylinders. You know, I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“That would require forward planning. Premeditated murder, you could say.”

“Well, it pays to think ahead.”

“I can’t condone this sort of behaviour. It’s ostentatious!” Malmot chides.

“Oh, come now!” Ceesal laughs. “In the two and a half weeks I’ve known

you, you've shot two women and had a man starved to death in front of full-length mirror. ... And you criticise me for one little gassing, one brief flexing of my murder muscles?"

"You *don't do it in public!* There's a time and a place for everything, Ceasal. And that place is certainly not beneath the nose of the Media. Human life may be cheap, but its opinions aren't so easily bought."

"Which should show you where you're going wrong."

"I don't follow."

"You're running scared from the press. You should be riding it like a cheap bitch. The minute we have to question the Media's loyalty is the

minute it stops serving our objectives. So why not snuggle into bed with it, whisper sweet nothings into its ear and then slap the little pricktease when it doesn't put out. It'll soon come round to the right way of thinking. After all, your only other option is to destroy it completely. And what good would that do?"

Malmot briefly considers an England devoid of television and the rediscovery of the simpler things in life like card games, folktales and unhurried sexual intercourse. Not to mention the ease of ruling an ill-informed populace with no recourse to the press. Suddenly killing the Media seems like a marvellous idea.

They say men divide women into virgins and whores, but it's actually more of a sliding scale. We balance a new partner's sexual appetite against the risk of unwittingly raising another man's bastard. I never had that problem with Rachel, though. We never had kids. In fact, we barely had a relationship.

She never figured in my conversation much either – something she took personally. But careless talk costs marriages as well as lives. With chlamydia crippling fertility and our diseased maternity wards killing as many as they bring into the world, if it weren't for the council estate slags we'd be an extinct nation. Let the wrong

person know that you've got a healthy wife of breeding age and he'll be round with a bunch of flowers for your missus and a machete for you. He'll be carrying her off on his shoulder whilst you're trying to scoop your innards back in. So I know it sounds chauvinistic, but I wouldn't let her out of the house unless she was heavily armed. She seemed to think this was weird.

You'll know about the mink. They were released from fur farms in the late nineteen nineties and, after a couple of decades spent breeding in the shadows, broke cover and unleashed animal genocide – systematically devouring every small prey species, every medium-sized prey species, and then

teaming up to take on everything else – us included. That's the great joke: we *can* wear their fur – they don't mind – so long as we're inside their stomachs at the time.

With the weight of numbers and evolution on their side, they're diversifying to fill the ecological niches left by the other animals, including herbivorous roles.

So this is how we find ourselves in our current situation: mink swarming all over our vegetable patch and Rachel trapped in the shed, leaning out of the window with a small calibre air rifle. It's her own fault. If she hadn't been outside, burning all my possessions, I wouldn't have had to lock her in there.

Trouble is, the mink have me cornered up a tree and I'm now no longer in a position to let her out.

Well, I'd have taken my pistol and blown the swine into bite-sized chunks. But then my critical faculties only go so far before deferring to the more damaged aspects of my personality. I walk the fine line between very clever and very stupid and it's a constant source of infuriation for all concerned. Rachel, however, can keep her temper with anything but my good self and knows that the pistol is louder and draws attention. Given what we've got growing in the garden, well, attention's something we don't need. Our supposedly Non-Genetically Modified seeds have turned out to be GM after all.

Worse still, Novelty GM: an erotic tableau of genitalia-shaped vegetables erupting from our once wholesome little allotment. You can't turn your head for peapod pornography.

Bad science smells and the mink won't touch our filthy crop. But they're happy to conduct their business amongst it, preventing us from removing the offending evidence.

Now this is serious stuff. I've seen an eighty-year-old grandmother put in the stocks for an accidental arse cantaloupe. If the cops find our crops, we'll be looking at a minimum six month stretch.

But why's vag veg such a threat to society? Surely it's all just innocent fun?

Well, no, I'm afraid, it's not. The government's knee-jerk response to endemic alcoholism and the wholesale commodification of the female body is draconian obscenity law. So, whilst it's impossible not to drink booze and prostitution remains our sole profitable industry, it's illegal to be seen intoxicated or to have your photo taken with your tits out. All this, despite complete and total public indifference.

So, I was unlucky. Black-market products are a law unto themselves and you expect a few curious foreign phrases on the packaging. Thank God we didn't plant the 'Sodomy Beans'. Or the 'Spurting Cock Zucchini's'.

Malmot's always been odd. Or, perhaps, I should use the past tense there. After all, he's been dead these past twenty years. In fact, it remains one of my proudest achievements that, even in my dotage, my prostate remains healthy enough to urinate on his grave – liberally and without the slightest discomfort – at least twice yearly. But my internal plumbing is beside the point. You'll be wondering the reason for the sudden narrative-shift. Well, the simple fact, and one I feel I should clarify, is that I'm dictating this memoir from my deathbed. I have a young, female journalist recording my every semi-senile utterance. If my words seem to wander

into the one-sided, it's because I'm responding to her continual interruptions (all cynical attempts to build up her own part in History by the way. She isn't doing this for love of The Leader).

Now I'm not new to dictating. Fact is, I've made something of a career of it. And, like most folk in the trade, I run the constant risk of overthrow. So whilst you may be reading this in your school, in its hundredth, leather-bound reprint, saluting my picture – and I sincerely hope that you are – it's more likely you're a NATO General plucking the pages from my dead fingers as your troops hoist my corpse up the nearest lamppost. I'm a pragmatist, you see. At best, I've hopped across the border with

my elite guard, my faithful doctor, a sympathetic writer and died fighting with a gun in my hand. More realistically, I've left this world as I came into it: with my head between some woman's thighs. That way, if they do display my body in public, at least I'll be grinning with my tongue stuck out. But I digress.

Malmot's always been odd. It's all that wailing and gnashing of teeth he does. The outside world, well, you get that icy facade. I used to think he had no emotions. Then I saw him hunched up in a hotel room, whinnying and smacking himself in the head with his fist. That's when I realised there was something deeply wrong going on in there.

But you'll never get anything out of him. He may let slip something that hints to something else. Occasionally. When he's drunk. But you'll only half-hear it. Through a wall. And the words get drowned out by the sobbing.

I know things about him, however. Things that, perhaps, it would be insensitive to tell you. But I never hesitated to bad-mouth the swine when he was alive so I figure it would be the wrong kind of hypocrisy to start speaking well of him now.

That smacking himself on the head, I've seen autistics do that before. Don't know why. I don't know anything about autism. I can tell you about the gnashing of teeth, though, and how it's not really

gnashing. It's more of a kind of chattering. Like a monkey. And that's the thing... He grew up wanting to be a monkey. It was the only way to get affection.

Nanny didn't like men, she told him. But she found monkeys morbidly amusing.

"I've always found simians preferable to the human male," she said, doubtless whilst dragging him around by the earlobe. "They don't lie. They don't make false promises. They're not dirty and disgusting. So just you follow your Nanny's advice and mind you don't grow up into one! Dirty, *dirty*, *disgusting* things! With just one thing on their dirty, *dirty*, *disgusting* minds!"

More astute parents might've noticed that their child's primary carer was psychosexually deranged, advertised mainly in phone booths and spent whole hours diddling herself with a broom handle. They were unaware of the educational excursions to strip clubs and brothels. They didn't see him playing lookout as she entertained sailors in back alleys, and they certainly didn't see her pole dancing with a garter stuffed with banknotes and a peacock feather sticking out of her backside.

"These are the wages of sin," she would tell the young Malmot, rubbing the notes beneath his nose. "And this," she said, taking his hand and sliding it inside her hastily replaced underwear,

“is the factory that Satan’s workers toil in.”

“Satan pays well,” says the seven-year-old Malmot. “Did you find it hard to get a job with him?”

“The nuns at the convent wrote me a good reference,” she answers.

So you can talk of Reactive Attachment Disorder and what it did to the poor little mite, but, if anyone should be suffering emotional deprivation caused by separation from their parents, it’s me. After all, my mother was electrocuted and my father went mad and spent his last days in a lunatic asylum. I’d have killed to have two living parents and a perverted nanny. I would have known what to do with her.

Malmot's window is open. The room reeks. Ceesal has brought a succession of increasingly weird people through the door in recent hours and if their ideas didn't stink then their aftershave did: a communications expert who just shouted; a female public relations expert who wouldn't listen; a black race relations expert who was adopted and had never met another black person in his life and, finally, an effeminate man who wanted to see the national flag 'rebranded' in pink to make it more 'inclusive'. Thank God they were gone now.

Ceesal has changed. He won't take orders. He refuses to sign things without

taking them away first. He's slimmer now, dresses better and his speech is peppered with anachronistic slang. He calls people 'guys' and constantly invades their personal space.

"This is *not* the business of governing," Malmot growls to Ceesal.

"You're right," the horrid grimace replies. "It's the Future!"

"It's dragging up mistakes from the past."

"No, old man!" Ceesal snaps. "You're the past. You know, the word on the street is that this party's out of touch. Well, I'm gonna change that! I'm gonna make us hip! I'm gonna make us happening!"

No, thinks Malmot, you're just a

preening sociopath who wants to be loved. And it's that desperation that'll make people hate you.

Ceesal speaks of opening up the process of government, making things transparent. Malmot reminds him of his plan to butt-fuck television. He asks how transparent he intends *that* to be. Ceesal says, oh that was last week and that they need to be more 'Media convergent' from now on. Malmot asks why the change of heart and where the Hell he dragged up such a gaggle of corporate-speech dunderheads to support him on the idea? Didn't The Great Separation kill them off? Ceesal tells him that economic collapse isn't the obstacle it used to be, at least, not for the *forward-*

thinking. He continues with more incoherent babble about ‘attitudes’, ‘choice’ and ‘proactivity’.

Malmot reaches into his desk drawer and produces a pistol. He shoots Ceasal through the head. Ceasal burbles, before passing with an anguished croak.

“And that’s the most sensible thing you’ve said in ages,” says Malmot, kicking the corpse down the stairs. With Ceasal out of the picture, the whole post-Lindberg Show situation looks far rosier. But things get even better when he picks up the papers.

Now it takes three days for your average journalist to sober up enough to write an article – so the news is always three days out of date. And it’s now

exactly three days since Ceasal's broadcast and, coincidentally, three days since shoddy maintenance work crippled one of our last power stations and plunged seventy five percent of the population into darkness.

And what's today's headline? Clue: It isn't Ceasal. That's because no one outside of London and the New Home Counties had a working television set. Everyone *inside* London and The New Home Counties was watching porn.

Of the few who caught the broadcast, Malmot thinks, we'll tell them it was a propaganda transmission from mainland Europe – the snail-eating bastards. More reasons to switch off television and protect ourselves from

foreign brainwashing and Orson-Wellesian mischief.

The live audience might suspect, but they'd be too drunk to remember and the makers too busy getting coked up and fucking their way up the foodchain to care. So who's to say what happened? That's if anything happened at all? Ceasal? Never heard of him. Certainly never swore him in as Prime Minister. No, the new Prime Minister is, well, er? Hell. This is where it falls down. Who *is* the new Prime Minister?

Thackory Rampton, despite being able to walk upright, looks like an oily seabird. Gerald Maxim has a good brain and totalitarian sympathies, but never goes anywhere without his rentboy.

Harriet Beasley eats babies; Winona Crackleford is an addict with three legs. Winston Mokele Mbembe doesn't exist.

Geoffrey Durham, Chief of the Police and once one of Malmot's closest allies, makes no bones about his desire to lead the country. He knows all about the dictatorship, but is clever enough not to say anything that could hamper his chances of taking control of it. He's the Ernst Roehm to Malmot's Adolf and far too ambitious to be let anywhere near Number 10. He plans to combine his semi-regular thug police force with the military to create, well God knows what he wants to create, but it won't be pretty. He also likes to dress as an insect for sex.

Well, they say keep your enemies close, but not when they're looking at you through compound eyes and snapping their massive, dripping mandibles at you. So Harriet Beasley it is. No, Winona Crackleford; addicts are easier to control. Or, perhaps Maxim's rentboy could have the operation? That would solve a lot of problems. ...Ah, damnation! It's all too complicated. What he wouldn't give for Bactrian back. And then it hits him – a minute tingle at the base of his brain that sweeps upward into a big, fat, wonderful thought. He *will* have Bactrian back. Maybe not in soul, but at least in body.

“Sincerity Discount Undertakers?”

the telephone operator enquires, as the digital exchange is down again.

“That’s correct,” Malmot answers.

“Just putting you through.”

“Thank you.”

“*Sincerity* Discount

Undeertaakeers,” confirms the sagging answerphone tape. “We’re sorry that no one is present to take youuur call right now. We hope that you wiill try again later when one of our staff iis preseent, as no one iis preseent at preseent. Or you can leave a message after the tone. Remember, you have ouuur sinceeeere sympathieeeeees at this difficuuuuult tiiiiiiiiiiiime.

[Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

“Pick up the damn phone!” barks

Malmot, his

voice crackling from a stained speaker. "I know you're in! You're always in!"

A blood splattered apron lumbers forward through the shadows. It advances with the thud of a footstep and the scrape of the lame leg dragged behind it. Hot breath steams through black/brown rotting teeth. Piggy, onion-skinned eyes swivel in hooded sockets and a voice as stretched and strangulated as the answerphone message calls out:

"I was, eer... buuusy. And whooom do I have the priveliiiiiege of talking tooo? Would that, perhaps, be aaa... Miiisteer Qwerty?"

Malmot pauses, remembers he

chose his alias from staring too long at his keyboard and confirms: “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Aaand would that be the Miiister Qwerty of the deead womaan from the reeservoir; a Miiister Qwerty of the road traffic aaaccident victiim with no heeead or the Miiister Qwerty of the faaat maan?” the terrible voice oozes.

“The man,” chokes Malmot, realising he’s been stacking corpses under the same pseudonym.

“Wiith the cock?”

“Yes.”

“Well, moost meen have a cock. So doo youu mean the maan wiith the cock aaand noo heead or the maaan wiith the cock liiike a fossilised thermos flask?”

“The, urgh, thermos flask. You have such a way with words, Shuster,” says Malmot cringing with contempt.

“I haave a waay wiith the deceased, tooo,” Shuster answers worryingly.

“Well, you’re not having it away with this one. I want his body.”

“They all do!” Shuster cackles. “Your frieend’s proooving quite populaar around here!”

“I, er... I don’t get you.” Something like a chill runs up Malmot’s spine.

“Youu see the veil between the living and the deead is very thin here... Aand a strapping maan liike youur friend... We’ve goot a suiciide victiim... caan’t keeep her eyes off him! Aand

there's a woman who fell out of a Ferris wheel – little more than a bloody pulp, I tell you – she's all over him like a rash!" An edge of resentment creeps into his voice. "So you pick him up tomorrow!" he snarls. "There's only room for one Casanova here."

Chapter Three

Mammon, Mink and Mutilation

Forget my surgical training. The sad truth is I was born to work in advertising. Give me a product name and ten minutes in the toilet with a notepad and I'll return with armfuls of catchy, punning dog-clag. Rhymes flow through me like sewage through a tenement hallway. Don't put me near a piano. I've the keyboard dexterity of a double amputee jihadist – but that doesn't stop me tapping out note sequences of such

ungodly infectiousness that you'll be humming them in your urn.

What a cruel gift to give a man: a talent that isn't a talent and neither the sunny disposition nor cynical superficiality to advance in his career.

And now I make puppets. It's not an appalling job. As far as civilian employment goes, well, I've hauled furniture, stacked crates, operated lathes, CNC routers and a funny machine that puts the threads on bolts, I've worked on the bin lorries, the recycling lorries and landfill sites, I've picked mushrooms grown in bunk beds full of shit and sold sex to the middle-aged woman at the post office in exchange for passport application forms. I've also worked in a

call centre and, I tell you honestly, a couple of hours spent talking to God's greatest creations and you start to question the quality of His workmanship.

So time restrictions, terrible working conditions, no materials, broken tools, a mere four hours electricity a day and Ambler's distinctive take on body odour and racial harmony all seem mild by comparison. But I could do without the fines and the floggings with electrical flex for poor quality work. I listed our limitations. I think it's unfair to compare ourselves with the best of the big Hollywood Studios.

You could say I feel under-appreciated. But I've a slow-boiling temper and I'm still the right side of

sane.

I'm faking a pleasant expression when the tannoy barks into life. Decoding it's the problem – shards of noise through a speaker held together with electrical tape and the power of prayer, delivered by an Albanian receptionist with a harelip.

I make out my name, something about the boss and hospitals. Through to the main office I go and the facts assemble themselves in all their spittle-flecked glory. And soon I'm running home to jumpstart my car and hightail it to the infirmary.

I couldn't tell you what make of car I own. Or the original colour. The rusty parts are orange and the other bits fell

off years ago. Forget the seat belt. I owe my life to repeat tetanus shots.

I don't take it to work. There's the shame – that's one good reason. But there's also the difficulty of obtaining regular fuel, combined with Ambler's consistent attempts to break into it. Now you and I may not understand the hypnotic attraction of pine-shaped air fresheners, but our idiot clearly does. And it's this compulsion that leads him to jam my doors with sticks, shattered pens and anything else he thinks might function as a key in order to get to them. Despite the fact I never lock it.

I don't like my car and I won't speak well of it. I picture it as an assemblage of jagged-edged guillotine

blades perched upon a buckled chassis. My brakes are as reliable as a heroin addict. God knows if I'm allowed to drive it legally. Not only is it unsafe, but I took my test drunk and can't remember if I passed. Not that it matters. The Great Separation crashed all the computer records. I could be a qualified space shuttle pilot for all the DVLA know.

Right, fuel: I've about twenty litres of old cooking oil in my garage, subjected to some chemical process by a madman I met in a bar. Apparently, it's now biodiesel. You'll excuse me if I have my doubts. So I'm overjoyed when my engine starts.

And now I'm driving. I'm watching our English take on Post-War, Weimar-

era Berlin rot around my flimsy metal carapace.

We live in ruins. The water's dirty and there's no gas. Power's intermittent in places, non-existent in others.

Don't count on a working telephone. The gypsies rip down the cabling and sell it for scrap. And the phone companies buy it back because it's cheaper than remanufacturing.

Few industries survive. We had few enough to start with. Nothing tangible, at least.

We've no food and a workforce ill-equipped to grow it. For every man who can work a plough and plant a crop, there's three hundred who won't get out of bed without a clean shirt and a

business plan – a massive and mainly useless middleclass population who refuse to be rehabilitated. They're starving the country.

But let's be even-handed about this. I'm hardly feeding and clothing the nation myself. I make puppets. And for every 'Alfonse The Alien' who cheers someone out of a date with a hot bath and a razorblade, there's another ten of my creations shaming someone else back into one. I'm talking of company mascots, perpetuating the culture of consumerism and the inadequacies of unrequited ownership. So whilst we live in collapsing houses, cooking stolen vegetables over the ashes of our own floorboards, all we really care about is

who's wearing what brand of jeans. Advertising, eh?

But I don't care. I'm a good little hypocrite. I sacrificed my principles long ago. My soul concern is getting to Dromedary in time to save my mercenary hide. And I'm making good time until someone shoots out my back windscreen.

There's nothing in my mirrors. There's nothing *of* my mirrors. They no longer exist. More bangs and my car is now a convertible. You've not known pain until you've driven with broken bits of sunroof in your underwear. Rally racing with lacerated buttocks – I don't recommend it.

Who? What? Where? Why? These

are all questions I'd like answered, but I can't check behind me for glass shards in my collar. Turn my head and I'll slash my throat.

My foot's down so hard the floor's buckling. The whole vehicle's bucking. The exhaust's belching, the engine's blazing and I'm wreathed in dark, choking smoke. I look like a black and white minstrel sitting on a thundercloud.

Fourth gear's gone, fifth gear lost its teeth with the dinosaurs. What gears *have* I got? Low ones. Noisy ones: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

And now I know I've gone mad. The road's grown fur. Am I asleep? Unfortunately not. I'm surrounded by mink. Thousands and thousands of the

horrid, snappy, bitey little bastards racing alongside me. What's the attraction? Am I made of ham? And since when have mink carried firearms? Answer is, they don't. But whatever's chasing them does.

I need to get out of here. And fast. I've one option and it's off road. It's a full-lock left and I'm hurtling through hedgerow into wasteland, fence wire whipping at my face. And I'm still being followed.

Sod this, I figure. And it's foot and handbrake together, a three-sixty spin and soon I'm tangled up in more fencing and a sign marked: 'Landmines!'

The mink and their mysterious aggressor surge past. And God rot me if

it isn't an old man on a souped-up disabled scooter; a geriatric Hells Angel; half machine, half decaying old bigot.

Well, you don't need a helmet unless you're scared of death. And this guy doesn't give a fig for the safety of his paper-thin cranium. Or his appearance, it seems. Take an already ugly old geezer and expose his flappy features to the forces of motion and wind resistance and you're halfway toward this cold, cataract-crowned nightmare vision. I remember a mouth full of teeth like pipe organ tubes.

So I'm beached on the edge of a minefield, surrounded by rampaging mustelids and gun toting grandpas with

grudges. The smart money says I should get out of here before things start exploding. And that's exactly what I do, shedding my glass-filled clothes on route.

And I'm naked in the road when the first mine blows and the pensioner goes up and bits of him come down. So now I know what colour my car is: rich, coagulating red.

A chirpy voice pipes up near my elbow:

“Oi, mister! Wanna buy a piece?”

I look down to see a filth-encrusted boy wearing a ‘Don't be a Gifford!’ T-shirt. He doesn't seem bothered by my blood-spattered nudity. But I am.

“Get away from me!” I bellow,

followed by, “I’m not a paedo!” for the benefit of anyone else within eye or earshot. And I refuse to speak to him until I’ve retrieved my trousers.

There’s a pistol clasped in his grubby mitten. He waves it like a maraca.

“Very good price,” he assures me.

Now it’s bad practice to buy firearms from children and I’ve been burned on a deal before.

“Oh, go on, mate!” he whines, “It’s kosher! It was me sister’s. She don’t need it no more cause the yardies got her one of them stenguns out of the Worldy War Two!” And he starts to go on about how he needs the cash for ‘*Atomic Jive Rodent*’ trading cards, or some such

crap.

“Please, mister! I need *Gerbilux*! He’s got laser eyes! I need him to beat *Felino*! *Felino*’s got Kevlar whiskers and a nuclear arse!”

I have no idea what the Hell he’s on about. I take the pistol. The sight’s off, I notice immediately.

“No thanks, kid,” I say. “It’s a converted replica. You fire that, it’ll shatter the barrel and blow off both your hands.” I pass it back.

“Doesn’t matter, mister,” says the kid. “Just needed your fingerprints on it!” And he’s off into the middle distance before I can find a rock to throw at him.

Now time’s tight and Dromedary’s waiting. My car’s just scrap now, but

scrap has value and I don't want to leave it.

A prostitute approaches. She's high on God-knows-what with an interplanetary complexion. I can't tell whether she's fifteen or fifty. Will she mind my car, I ask? She'll be glad to – for a small consideration of course. She draws the relevant amount in the air and I produce the appropriate banknote.

I'm doing her a favour, I reason, as I launch into a run. I'm paying her to sit down and relax. Okay, the scenery isn't particularly telegenic, but it's got to be better than sucking off tramps for a living.

Meanwhile, she's going through the glove compartment. And then she pulls a

gemmy from her bag, jacks open the boot and finds the petrol can full of cooking oil. And it's a Grade A mentalist we've got here because she pours it over the seats and sets light to them. And I'm too far away to do anything. The remnants of my car pop apart with a tumultuous 'woof!' and a spinning metal something just misses my head. I look up to see my license plate embedded in a tree.

"You're not a team player," says Dromedary. It's an interesting greeting. I've only just walked through the door.

"Depends on the team," says I, devoid of breath. I may be amoral, but I'm not an unscrupulous people-shafter.

He's hooked up to the morphine

drip and soon I'm receiving some woozy lecture on the nature of cooperation and group interaction. I watch him sweating, his big, scarlet bulk rising out of the bedclothes like a fleshy Ayers Rock. Except you've never been climbed, I think to myself. He pauses, scans the darkened room for black cats, blue devils and other opiate-induced flora and fauna before returning his attentions to me.

“Sometimes an angel falls into the gutter,” he starts. He means Rachel. “And meets a guttersnipe.” He means me. “Thank God you’ve no children,” he continues. “You haven’t ruined her for someone decent.” He means himself.

I yank open the curtains and he

screams, clawing at the sunlight. I smile. Fucking vampire.

“We’re all in the gutter, looking at the stars,” I quote, probably incorrectly. He changes tack.

“I know you’re an ‘angry young man,’” he says and, God rot him, he does the quote marks with his fingers thing. “You want to kick against authority; you want to assert your individuality; you want to dye your hair blue, call yourself ‘Johnny X’ and dance all night to crazy punk rock music!”

And I don’t want to do any of those things, because I’m twenty-six, not sixteen. I want to stop drinking, start a family and run a canoe hire business from a log cabin by the side of an

Estonian lake. I want to paddle kayaks in summer, carve souvenirs in winter and raise children that don't die of cirrhosis aged forty-five. But I keep this quiet. No sense sharing your secrets with a sociopath.

“I didn't ask you to join my family,” he says, “But I'm determined to make the best of a bad situation till my niece comes to her senses.”

“Eh?” It's not my wittiest riposte.

Dromedary is a paranoid man who digs into his employee's private lives. When he finds something of interest he's not averse to exploiting it. So when he snouts around and discovers I'm married to a Bactrian girl he spots an opportunity to cuckold me and cement his place in

the aristocracy. But Rachel is no closer a relation to the former Prime Minister than I am to Chairman Mao. Her family pissed their inheritance away three generations ago. She sees through his 'avuncular' interest and finds it downright creepy.

“She’s not your niece,” I say, and I’m about to add “and she’s barely my wife” when he issues some threat and I tell him to go shove the plasma stand up his arse sideways.

“Why, you little bastard!” he cries and throws a half-peeled fruit at me – whereupon I disappear in a puff of smoke and a tinkle of fairy bells because, according to the nurse, it’s all a drug-induced hallucination and I haven’t

arrived yet.

When I turn up for real, it's much the same thing. Only this time I get citrus juice in my eye.

"Transform yourself into a form of gas, will you?!" he snarls as I'm seized by burly men and dragged into an adjoining room. This is nothing new. Staff beatings are Dromedary's main motivational tool.

But these aren't his usual thugs. The suits are too good. No human hair/acrylic mix for these two gents. And they haven't tried hitting me yet. So you can understand my apprehension. This isn't normal.

"Your boss will have explained the situation, no doubt," says the shorter of

the two, six foot one, broad as a barn door, slightly twitchy, and watchful as a fox. He sees me scoping the territory and blocks the exit. “You’re welcome to jump out the window, sir,” he suggests in his Southern barrowboy growl. “We *are* seven stories up, though.” And so I graciously decline.

The second man’s taller and leaner, but equally wide; shaped like an upturned triangle. The scar on his left cheek has a hypnotic pull and a curious, cranberry colouration. It seems too precisely inflicted to have been obtained in the course of standard employment and I’m not keen on the way it joins up with the corner of his mouth.

“So you’re aware of the situation

then,” he states in a manner that’s far too affable for my liking. “Mr Dromedary has brought you up to speed.”

“He’s stoned,” I say. “He threw a satsuma at me.”

“Don’t get smart,” I’m told.

“Do you like your job?” asks Scarface in smooth tones. “Good jobs are hard to find. I hear you got this one through nepotism.”

“I’d never heard of Dromedary when I signed up,” I say, shaking my head. “He certainly didn’t know me.”

“He said you’d say that,” growls Shorter Man, clearly playing Bad Cop to Scarface’s Good. “He says you’re smart but your attitude stinks.”

“He says you’re shifty,” says

Scarface.

“But we don’t necessarily think that’s a bad thing,” says Shorter warmly.

“It’s not a good time to be jobless,” takes up Scarface. “No unemployment benefit. No housing benefit. Shops putting poison in the skips so tramps can’t scavenge the out-of-date food. Not that we have out-of-date food anymore.”

“And not a good time to be homeless either,” Shorter continues, “what with the leopards and all.”

“I’m sure your *wife* will be fine,” Scarface smirks. “Mr Dromedary will see to that. But you... Well, she won’t think you’re so ‘sexily non-conformist’ when you haven’t washed for a year and your arm’s been bitten off!”

“You bite the system and it bites back!” Shorter sneers. “*Quite literally!*”

“I think you get our point,” Scarface concludes. But I don’t. Christ on a bike, I have absolutely no idea what they’re on about.

“Is this a staff appraisal?” I ask. Scarface makes a noise like laughing.

“Funny,” he says.

Our meeting lasts approximately half an hour. There’s a couple of anomalies: I’m shown a picture of a man skewered with a railway spike and asked to draw conclusions from it. And there’s lots of talk about bodies floating face down in canals. But, in a country where everyone’s permanently drunk, threats and cartoonish behaviour are part

and parcel of everyday life. You learn to ignore it. I'm bored now. I ask what's going on. Scarface fixes me with his weird blue eyes.

“You made ‘Alfonse’ The Talking Alien, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Hah! I love that little fucker!” adds Shorter helpfully. I’m starting to suspect he’s a little odd.

“Thanks,” I say, “but I don’t see what this has to with...”

“And, most recently,” Scarface continues, “you’ve been working on full-size replicas of the human body?”

“Yes, that’s the polite way of putting it.”

“And you married into the *Bactrian*

family?”

“Yes, but probably not the branch you’re thinking of. And Rachel, she’s not really my, er...”

“She’s a relative of Mr Dromedary.”

“No, she...”

“I think you’ll find she *is*. Mr Dromedary is the half-brother of former Prime Minister Bactrian – although that information is to stay between you, me, my colleague here...”

“And our friend with the railway spike,” Shorter clarifies.

“Indeed.”

“But I’m not...” I plead.

“Please, Mr Jupiter. You’ll have time to speak afterwards.”

“Best to sit back and listen for the moment, Sir,” says Shorter.

“We need a puppet maker.”

“We need a puppet maker and Mr Dromedary gave us your name.”

“Why?”

“Firstly, because you have the experience and secondly, because he’ll be taking forty percent of your first year’s wages as a finder’s fee,” Scarface tells me.

“He also wants a clear run at your wife,” adds the always charming Shorter, “but that’s very much by the by.”

“C’est la vie,” I say. “You mentioned wages?”

“Yes, Jupiter. You see, we’ve been

observing you for some time. And, whilst we're forced to conclude that your attitude does indeed stink and that you are indeed shifty, psychological profiling suggests that you can be brought to heel like a dog for large sums of money. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'd say there's an element of truth in it. Are you... are you offering me large sums of money?"

"We believe in rewarding hard work," says Shorter.

"Doing what?"

"We require someone to assist with a little, er, promotional campaign."

"And you mentioned 'first year's wages'. So it's a long-term contract?"

"Oh, believe me," Laughs Scarface,

“if this comes off, there’ll be plenty more work in the pipeline.”

“And I’ll be working for you, through Dromedary?”

“No, Mr Jupiter, you’ll be working for us directly. We know how he whips his staff like Hebrew slaves. It’s inefficient. We believe in nurturing talent. We’re progressive. We believe in the potential of people.”

“Sign up with us, Sir, and you need never worry about that goofy, red-faced troll again.”

“And that’s got to be an incentive. But think it over. We’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You know,” I say, as I’m halfway through the door, “when you dragged me

in here, like a kidnap victim, I thought something sinister was going on.”

“Oh, no,” laughs Scarface. “Not in the slightest.”

“Heavens no!” says Shorter. “Why would you think that?”

So I walk past Dromedary steaming in bed, and I’m smiling so wide it hurts.

I’m about to jump ship for an undisclosed job with two unknowns who show strangers pictures of dead bodies. My motivation is the flimsiest of promises coupled with my own rampaging greed. Am I being stupid or is this the coolest thing I’ve ever done? I was looking for an adventure and *it* found *me*. I’m actually happy.

Dromedary signals with a dripping

paw. He asks how my meeting went and then starts questioning my human parentage. Now I no longer have to take this.

“Has anyone signed your cast yet?” I enquire cheerily, rolling his protesting carcass over. And whilst he flaps his podgy flippers, I scrawl “To our very own Elvis the Pelvis, love from the boys at www.fisting.com.”

“He’s big on the scene,” I tell the nurse.

I walk out into the night. It’s black and it’s cold, but not even the smouldering wreckage of my car can bring me down. I feel free. I feel alive. It’s God: nil, Jupiter: one!

Picture the remnants of a supermarket car park. Weeds grow through the cracked tarmac. Faltering allotments ring one half of the perimeter, rusting automobile wreckage the other. The supermarket itself is long gone – looted and firebombed by Walmart shock troops. An abandoned petrol station remains. If you listen, you can make out two leopards fucking on its big, flat roof. A black limousine arrives. Scarface steps out of the shadows and nods. The limo leaves.

Chapter Four

Entry To The Upper Echelons (And Why You Shouldn't Marry Your Sister)

“It’s just a job,” I tell myself. I’m staring at my reflection in a compact mirror. My reflection doesn’t look convinced. He looks downright terrified. The floor’s covered in plastic sheeting, thank God, because if *I* don’t leak fluid on it, I’m

sure Mr Bactrian will. Only I don't know it's Mr Bactrian yet. That knowledge comes later. I *do* know I'm alone with a corpse. And not an attractive corpse. And that today's task is to skin him.

So I signed my new contract on Monday. Scarface and Shorter came around my house and formally introduced themselves as Misters Calamine and Calamari. I guess you need to sound continental to get ahead these days, now that 'English' is a byword for 'inbred'.

We drank nettle tea and I signed my way through an array of papers arranged on the dining room table. Pretty standard stuff.

“There’s a three month trial period,” says Calamine. “Just a formality really, to see how we all get along. If all goes well, there’s a chance of a permanent position.”

“Which means you’ll be eligible for our health and pension schemes,” Calamari tells me, with a look that says I may soon need them.

“You’ve got a pension scheme?” I’m shocked. “Nobody has a pension scheme these days.”

“We do,” says Calamari smiling. “You’re playing with the big boys now.”

“There’s just one more thing,” says Calamine, opening his briefcase. “Nothing to worry about, though. Now, we’ve been through your contract, that’s

out of the way. There's just one more thing we need you to sign." And he passes me The Official Secrets Act. My mouth drops open and my mind goes blank. Calamari claps me on the back.

"Yes, we kept that quiet, didn't we? Thought we'd spring it on you. Thought we'd sound you out a little first – see what kind of stuff you were made of."

"You told me you were from 'Thruster and Parkin,'" I burble.

"On paper, yes," says Calamari.

"And on your payslips, too," Calamine confides. "But, in actuality, you'll be working for His Majesty's Government. Hence this." And he slaps the document before me as casually as if

it were a work colleague's birthday card. Calamari passes me a silver fountain pen.

“Nice pen,” I say.

“It's yours,” Calamari answers. “Now sign.” And, God help me, I do. It's only later that I remember the photos they'd shown me and what I'd taken as drunken bravado – testing the nerve of the new guy – strikes me as something more sinister. Because they didn't seem drunk at all.

So now it's Friday and I'm alone in an abandoned industrial unit in the middle of a nasty estate. I've a hairy-backed carcass with a hog's thighbone for a cock for company and there's a bowie knife with a sinister matt-black

finish in my hand. And I'm wondering, if this is what happens when you say yes, what the Hell happens if you refuse?

Out of fear and the promise of that fat paycheck, it's the fear that keeps me here. The money lost its attraction an hour ago.

I hold the mirror to the corpse's mouth. There's no condensation, just seeping halitosis.

I'm not squeamish and I'm not superstitious. I've cut people open and I've stitched them back together. I'm eminently qualified for this job in terms of skills, experience and my usual mindset. But something's wrong.

I've skinned mink before, sure – for food and blankets, we all have – but

skinning a person seems like an act of desecration. If I thought God cared, I'd be concerned for my soul.

And then there's the stench, and the fear of what it might mean. I don't want to see this man's intestines. It's bad enough looking at that corn cob of a penis. The thought of what this diseased hulk's internal organs might look like has my stomach vaulting. But I'm a professional. I keep telling myself that I'm a professional.

I swap the bowie knife for a scalpel from my old medical kit. Start small, I figure, pressing the blade into his veiny, white flesh. But I can't make the first incision. What's wrong? I was never this nervy in the operating theatre.

I've got to get this thing in motion, and if it takes a big, dumb, decisive gesture to do it, then so be it.

And so I throw the scalpel like a dart, right into his torso. Big mistake. His bloated carcass deflates like a balloon, spraying gas and all kinds of decomposing matter everywhere. Including over me.

When I've finished throwing up in the carpark, I straighten my clothing and consider a trip to the library.

So, I'm going through the shelves and I come to the row we may as well call, 'The Single Man Section'. There's plenty on taxidermy so I pick something at random and read: "Hunting's fun but it can be over all too quickly. If you love

animals and want to spend more time with them, why not enter the exciting world of taxidermy?”

The next book, I suspect, is a parody: “Like hunting? Have you ever thought of doing something *productive* with the animals you murder? A chapter called ‘Catch And Cosh A Cute Companion!’ confirms it.

The third book goes beyond mockery. Two bobcats in Civil War uniforms hoisting the Confederate flag – that’s the front cover. The back cover? Well, why the coyote would want to wear a tutu is anyone’s guess. Still, one large, hairy mammal is pretty much the same as another – even a former Prime Minister – and so I take it to the front

desk.

* * *

Lucas sits quietly by the window. Purple clouds spit acid rain onto the city. Drizzle sizzles on parked cars and expensive paintjobs bubble and burn, flooding the gutters with metallic pigment. He watches a mink liquefy.

It's a rare pause for thought in a punishing schedule. Laura packs a plastic-wrapped squishy something into an insulated, aluminium flightcase.

"Don't stick your head out," she warns, "it'll melt."

"Don't worry," he whispers affectionately, "I've got spares."

“When’s Jupiter due?” she asks, addressing the flightcase to ‘*Vatican City*’.

“Not for a while yet, I think. He’s having trouble finding transport.”

“Is he bringing Elton with him?”

“God, I hope not. The last thing I need’s another lecture on supernatural fish.”

“Speaking of problems, have you paid the rent, yet?”

“No,” Lucas answers. “The police have frozen my account.”

“Looks like we’re moving again, then,” she says.

Lucas has astonishing bad luck with rented accommodation, developing a semi-irrational hatred of lettings agents

in the process. I say ‘semi’ because his grievances are completely legitimate. He’s been lied to with such furious regularity that he makes them swear on the holy books. Not that that means anything these days. When they’re “absolutely, *definitely* going to be in” they’re out. When they’re supposed to be meeting you at a property i.e. out, they’re in. Only they “can’t come to the phone right now” because they’re too busy counting their money.

‘The most infuriatingly rude and ignorant people outside of employment agency staff,’ is how Lucas describes them and that’s a pretty damning indictment.

With half of England’s architecture

crumbling back into dust, it's hard to find rented accommodation. It's even harder to afford it. So sharing with strangers is the only realistic option for a single man. And Lucas will always be single because he insists on wearing a huge, bushy moustache.

Of course, sharing has its downside. You can never be sure what kind of freaks you've moved in with until it's all too late. From students, who'd wake him up at three in the morning to tell him how antisocial he was, to knife-wielding maniacs, he's lived with them and he's regretted it. He particularly hates sharing with small-time drug dealers who fill the living room with smelly young men. There's

nowhere to sit unless you win it in some convoluted card game, and the lights burn twenty-four hours a day until the coin metre runs out and they all migrate to the next pothead's pit.

The buildings themselves have been pretty choice, too, with lead pipes and exposed asbestos. If it couldn't be removed, he plastered over it – wearing an old scarf for a particle mask. Gas fires belched fumes, light switch plates were wired up live. I recall tales of a bathroom floor rotted to nothing more than a thin skin. No defecatory act could be undertaken without fear of crashing, still seated, through the kitchen ceiling and landing on the cooker with a broken neck.

He spent a desperate year in a YMCA hostel, surrounded by schizos, alcoholics and speed freaks. The alcoholic schizophrenics were his favourite; especially when they banged on his door and threatened to stab him for breaking the toilet. He hadn't broken the toilet. That had been the speed freak alcoholic with the mind-rotting syphilis.

When his plans to move into a house with an ex-squaddy fraudster and a wiry attempted murderer fall through, he leaps at the chance to move into a place that smells like a garbage dump, but whose residents hold no prior convictions. The house is robbed the day he moves in. He now shares with his sister.

To all intents and purposes, he appears normal. He doesn't twitch; he's never decorated his bedroom walls with pornographic collages; his relationship with his parents is healthy and he's never shown even the slightest interest in his sister's underwear.

You could cite his moustache as evidence of abnormality but, the truth is, it hides a scar. And not an attractive or mysterious scar, like my sabre wound or Calamine's ferocious cheek-stripe, just a plain-ugly piece of wartime damage. His top lip was torn open by a shard of his best friend's shoulder blade. Something to do with anti-personnel mines, I think. I stitched his face back together.

I restored enough of an appearance to make his life worth living again and he rewarded me with his eternal and deeply weird friendship.

We made a pretty good team, too. My regime was always pretty hot on recycling. Lucas's Health Ministry widened the policy to include human organs. And the United Nations were wrong to call him a compulsive liar. I prefer to think of him as 'pathologically unspecific'. People who deal in arms or, more accurately, arms, legs, lungs, kidneys and corneas often are. It goes with the trade, as they say.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Lucas's execution is some thirty years in the future – and, at this point in the

chronology, well, we've not even skinned the Prime Minister yet.

So we're hidden in Lucas's yard. It feels safe. We're surrounded by high, red-bricked walls, topped with vicious spiked plant life. Horticulture's his other hobby and there's a green wooden glasshouse to my right. Laura's inside. I don't know what she's doing but it seems to involve a lot of bending down and shaking her rump in an exaggerated manner. I like Laura. She's got long black hair and pretends to find me attractive. At some point in the future, I figure I'll... Hah! No! You don't need to know that!

Anyway, I open the back of my new government-issue van and a stinking

soup drains out. Bactrian lies wrapped in a black tarpaulin and the bouquet isn't much better.

“Well, I mean, thanks and all that,” says Lucas embarrassed, “but he's a bit... a bit, er, *ripe* for my purposes.”

“I wasn't going to give him to you,” I say. And then I realise how odd that sounds.

Lucas seems hurt. He takes a deep breath.

“I see. [Sigh] I see. Some relative drops off the twig and you instantly think of old Lucas and his incinerator. Figure you can save the price of a coffin, eh? Because you don't come round any other time, do you?”

But the discomfiture's false. Lucas

doesn't get upset. Even after the landmine, with his face flapping open like a circus tent doorway, he was still jocularly itself.

"You're welcome here any time you want," he laughs. "But what *do* you want?" And he prods the tarpaulin distractedly. "He sure is leaky, isn't he?"

"I burst him," I say.

"Is that jive talk?"

"Popped him," I clarify. "He was full of gas."

"Uh huh," says Laura, coming to join us. "That's jive talk alright." And I'm damned if they don't talk rubbish my way for another five minutes. It's the ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder, or whatever they call it nowadays. They both have it. So I grab them by the shoulders and...

“I love it when he puts his arm around me,” says Laura.

“I’m not sure I care for it, myself,” remarks Lucas. “Darned impudence in my book! But what do you think, darling?” And he’s in the back of the van, soliciting opinions from Bactrian’s body.

“Look!” says I. “Now we can plough deeper into the realms of nonsense or...”

Laura’s got her hand inside my shirt.

“Tell me, Hugo, did you see me in the greenhouse? Were you entranced by

my womanly charms?”

“Always am,” says I, sweeping her up and sitting her down. “But, ample as they are, it’s your professional talent I’m after today.”

“Do tell,” she says.

“I’m all ears,” he says. “Look! My pockets are full of them!”

I have no intention of looking at what Lucas may or may not have in his pocket – I’ve made that mistake before – and so I continue:

“As you’ll have no doubt noticed, I have a corpse in my car.”

“It’s a van,” says Lucas, “but I like the alliteration. Please proceed.”

“Thank you, I intend to.” And I pause because I know they enjoy the

anticipation.

“This corpse,” Laura coaxes.

“Come on!”

“Oh yes. I need it skinned.”

“And then what are you going to do with it?”

“Well, nothing really. You see, it’s only the leather I’m after. Preferably in one piece.”

“Why? Are you making a coat?”

This is Laura’s lateral remark. Lucas, who’s read a great deal of pointless literature, has other ideas.

“He’s making a girdle. A girdle fashioned from dead man’s skin allows the wearer to transform into a wolf.”

“How likely’s that? Look, if we can concentrate on the matter in hand.”

Lucas unwraps the body. He squawks in horror. He's seen the penis.

"Yeh, I recommend you don't touch that. It may be contagious."

He swears again. And then Laura's in the van with him, and there's some muttering I can't quite make out and they return looking serious for once.

"Did you kill him, Jupiter?" It's clear he doesn't want to ask, but he fears he has to. "Only he's taken a blow to the back of the head. His skull's cracked like an egg."

Laura turns to me.

"We can help you this time. If you *did* kill him, I mean. Because we know you and we're sure there must've been a good reason for it. But we can't go

making a habit of this sort of thing. We're one of those businesses that operate in a... in a *grey area*, legally speaking. We can't risk drawing attention to ourselves."

"Your loyalty's touching," I tell them. And it's true. It is. "But you've nothing to worry about. This is all above board. A funny kind of above board, I admit, but all legit just the same."

There's much sighing of relief and I'm informed that giving a little more information might be the polite thing to do. So I tell them what I feel I can: I've been given a body of unknown provenance by an official organisation. They want me to strip the skin and use it as the covering on an animatronic figure.

I don't feel confident enough to remove it, so I thought of my good friends and their years of experience in a related field.

“Well, that's okay then,” says Lucas.

“But we'll have to do it out here,” adds Laura. “I've seen that cock. We can't risk him contaminating the stock.”

“Thanks,” I say. “How much do I owe you?”

Lucas looks shocked.

“We wouldn't dream of accepting your money. Your company, however, is a different matter altogether.”

“You will be expected to dine with us tonight,” adds Laura, taking up the theme. “No ifs or buts!”

Well, there's not a great deal I can say to that. She goes inside for aprons and plastic sheeting. Meanwhile, Lucas strops his hunting knife and starts to tell me about the many gases contained in the human body.

"They're not all flammable," he says, and I'm not sure whether this is scientific fact or entertaining fiction, "but you're best off treating them with caution. You were right to burst that guy. Shifting the gas prevents ignition."

"Ignition?"

"Accidental ignition, of course," he states firmly. "I mean, I like to think my sense of humour has matured over the years. But sometimes the power tools, they throw out sparks – when they hit

bone or a metal pin or a filling or something. You've not seen anything till you've seen a dead nun shooting fire from her sphincter!"

"Sure," I say with a comical nod, "happens every day."

"Check out Laura's eyebrows if you don't believe me! They've only just grown back!"

"Yeah. Right."

"It's her own fault," he continues. "I said, 'Don't go poking around that thing, Laura Larkin, you don't know what's up there!' And what happens? The old girl goes off like a flamethrower! 'That's God's revenge,' I tell her, 'for messing around with one of His own.'"

“You have to be careful with the clergy,” says Laura, returning with another tarpaulin.

“Glad you told me,” I say, “please, don’t ever tell me again.”

There’s talk of using a pressure washer on the body and how “it’s so powerful, you stick it up the nose, it blows chunks of brain out the ears”.

“I don’t want him all saggy and soggy,” I say. I put on an apron and step back. I intend spending the majority of the procedure looking the other way. Lucas hands me a knife. I hand it back. He laughs.

“For an army surgeon, you’re a big girl’s blouse!”

Laura’s poking Bactrian with a

stick.

“You could club seals with that!” she says.

“He probably did,” I reply. “Looks like a bestiality-related condition.”

And we set to work. If you’ve ever skinned anything, you’ll know the deal. So let’s fast forward to dinner. I decline a drink, but Lucas is having none of my protestations.

“Ring home. We’ve got a phone. Call up your estranged harpy and tell her you’re staying over. She’ll be glad to get rid of you for a while. We however, would be glad of the company. At least till morning... when the novelty wears off and we kick you out.” He has such a charming way with words.

My mind wanders back to my last visit. When they balanced body parts on my sleeping form and took photographs. Producing the pictures over breakfast was of equally questionable taste. Well, I'm making my excuses, but they're not taking no for an answer. Soon I'm standing with a glass in my hand and it's too late to leave.

"I'll stay on one condition," I say, "no practical jokes." But it's a vain hope. I know I've no choice in the matter.

Laura flashes those mischievous eyes of hers and Lucas starts to laugh – two lunatics lost in their own world of internal organs and sick humour.

The night goes as you'd expect. It's

fun to start with and the rest is a blur. I wake up in the spare room. My head feels like it's been nailed on and I don't need Laura greeting me at the breakfast table with Bactrian's skin folded over a chair. I don't need her making it dance for me.

“We did a good job,” she says. “But I'm not sure how long he'll last. He's starting to go mouldy. You might need to polish him or something.”

Lucas walks in clutching his forehead.

“You need to tan him. That's what you do with leather. You tan it.”

“What with?” I ask.

“There's a couple of options. You can either use mashed brains and

oatmeal rubbed in or soak it in tree bark and urine,” he answers cheerily. “Take your pick.”

Can my life get any worse, I ask myself. It can. Laura passes me a computer print. I see my own sleeping face. But what’s that on my head? Lucas disappears beneath the table. He returns waving a large intestine.

* * *

I’m outside my secret workshop; my secret workshop in the shittiest part of the city. And I’m nervous. The door’s open and I left it locked. I’m wondering who’s in there. I’ve got a rolled up bundle of human skin under one arm and

I know for a fact that the floor's still covered in human matter. Please don't be the police, I pray. It doesn't matter that I'm working for the government. They see me, they see the blood and they'll shoot on sight. I'm hoping it's thieves. I'll wave Bactrian and they'll run like scared mink.

But it's not cops and it's not criminals. It's worse. I can't speak. My face drops. My stomach cramps. Is that an ulcer I can feel? I turn to leave. Too late, he's seen me. There's a pause, a mere split second, and then it starts:

“Yer know, I can't get 'er out me mind, yer know. It's like... It's like...”

Elton. Sodding Elton. Well, this is a kick in the balls. When you've hauled

yourself out the cesspit, it's always a disappointment when the shit follows you home. Or to your not-so-fucking-secret-anymore workshop. I let out some inhuman cry, like a whale getting harpooned, and the unholy idiot joins in with me.

"I'm screaming because *you're* here," I tell him. "You're not allowed to join in. You can't scream at yourself!" Then again, he probably can. And then I start wondering how he found me.

"You've had a delivery," he says. "Spare parts".

He flicks a switch. I look. I listen. I swear.

"Mew, mew, we are kittens,

Kittens one, two, three,
We mew and mew,
That's what we do,
And then we eat muesli..."

This is the sound of my situation getting stupider. Elton's 'spare parts' come in the form of three automated cats, promoting some long-gone brand of breakfast cereal.

"We are The Crueslie Kittens!" they announce in their deeply creepy way. Then they damn well sing again:

"Mew, mew, we want muesli,
Crueslie's Muesli, mew, mew,
mew,
Mew, mew, we want muesli,

No other muesli'll do,
Try our competitors,
There's nothing betterer,
Take up our test and you,
Will find that your dumps,
Come in easy to wipe lumps,
There's never been a better way to
poo!"

"Great, ain't it?" says Elton,
grinning like an imbecile.

"'Betterer' isn't a proper word," I
answer. But he's not listening.

"There's more! *The* 'It's Tough
Without Roughage' poem!" And, God rot
him, he'll be right. I know he'll be right
because he'll have sat there for hours on
end listening for backwards messages

from Satan.

“‘That’s a mighty fine log’, said the Captain to the owl,

‘I’ll admit were all agog. It’s a whopper!’ he did howl

‘Well, it’s Crueslie takes the credit, Skip’, replied the gracious fowl

‘It’s a belter in your bowl and even better in your bowel!’”

I can’t take it. It’s like being back in the playground again. Only, this time, regaled by some blasphemous simulacrum of a morally ambiguous mammal.

“Let’s play the Turning Off Game,” I suggest.

“What’s the Turnin’ Off game?” Elton asks.

“This!” And I yank the kitten’s plug from the electricity socket. “Now the key to the Turning Off game is not turning it on again until you’ve taken a hammer and smashed up all the little drives with songs about cereal on them.”

He looks at me blankly.

“I ain’t a child,” he says.

“Not physically,” I answer.

“And what’s yer problem with cats?”

“Well, a cat was responsible for my mother’s death,” I say, using dialogue as a plot device,”but I wouldn’t say I have a problem with them. I just, sort of... disapprove of them.”

Elton looks at me blankly.

“Eh?”

“Well, they're elegant. You've got to give them that. But, at best, they're substitute children. At worst, they're parasites. I mean, you can kid yourself that it actually feels some kind of affection for you. But it doesn't, *really*. You're a source of food and warmth. Your cat looks at you and all it sees is a massive tit. In every sense of the word.” Elton just launches into some ramble about how cats and women deserve each other.

“Both the same,” is his insight. “Ignore ya; eat all yer food. An' then, when they want somefin', they stick their arse in yer face.”

“Yes, yes, the similarities are endless. You’re a genius,” I say.

“And then they leave. And you miss them.”

“Okay. Fine. That's just fine, Mr Misogynist.”

“We always want what we can’t ‘ave!” he moans and here we go again. Lost loves and lah, lah, lah!

* * *

It’s cold outside. Climate Change has taken the weather beyond screwy. Last week we had a heatwave, this week it’s ankle deep snow. We’re lucky enough to have a gas burner. It keeps us a few degrees above frostbite. The warmth rises, hits the workshop’s icy

aluminium roof and drips condensation on our heads. There are worse things in life.

I'm building a mechanised body for Bactrian's newly preserved skin. Elton carried out the tanning process. You can't count on his silence. You *can* count on nobody in their right mind believing him.

You see, Elton is notorious for his Lindberg-style meltdown. Formerly a celebrity ventriloquist, his primetime career came to end after appearing on live children's television with his hand up a dead swan and triggering an epidemic of night terrors and bed-wetting. Not entirely stupid, he now earns a crust as the face of a waterproof

mattress cover company and the 'Easy-On Elton' is now the nation's favourite rubber sheet.

Unfortunately, the promotional duties don't take up nearly enough of his time, and so he follows me around. I'm 'charismatic', apparently. In return for my company, he has to work. And I find him jobs that involve wearing protective masks so I can't hear his damn mouth flapping.

He didn't want to tan the skin – oh, that was apparent from the off - but I didn't give him much choice.

“With tree bark and urine,” I ordered, clearly enjoying myself. “Here! I’ve been saving some specially!” I passed him the container.

“Yeh, er... fanks,” he said, clearly wishing he was dead.

“Splish splash! I was taking a bath!” I sang. That gave him something to complain about:

“It *your* urine. *You* splishy splashy in it!”

“Seniority, mate,” I replied, tapping myself on the chest before breaking into a few verses of ‘Singing In The Rain’.

I take great pleasure in dismantling the Crueslie kittens. I stick their heads on poles outside the door. The bodies are too small to slip directly into the skin so we strip them for bearings, motors and other useful components. We even salvage the speech unit, should our puppet friend have to talk at some point.

What he might say, we don't know. The whys, whats and wherefores remain a mystery.

Working for the government's great. We've got a vac-former; crosscut saw; all kinds of powertools. We've even got a welding torch. Dromedary micromanaged us to the point of madness. By contrast, Calamine's been in once, and he just nodded and made enthusiastic noises. We haven't seen Calamari at all – good news, really, as he scares me. He'd scare Satan himself.

We're working long hours but it's... it's fun and I never thought I'd hear myself say that. Hell, I'm even getting decent wages. Poverty made a miser of me. Now I can buy Rachel the things she

wants and deserves, like divorce papers.

So things are going great. It's all... It's all far too good to be true. And that sets my teeth on edge because, as I've said more times than I can remember, everything good is always taken away from me.

I'm sculpting clay bodyforms when I hear something outside the workshop. There's a smashed window covered with cardboard, through which we hear voices – three of them initially. I recognise two at once: Calamari and Calamine. There's something shiver-inducing about the mysterious third, something almost inhuman. The way it switches from robotic monotone to

venomous, nasal gnashing in the flick of a diphthong. The peculiar stresses on certain words, like an actor emoting in his second or third language. Only this man is clearly English. And it's this same voice that mentions my name. I start thinking in swearwords.

Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves goes the saying. Forewarned is forearmed goes another. I want to know what's going on here and who the Hell we've got ourselves involved with. I press my ear against the chilly corrugated cardboard and, from the word in five I catch, I don't like the conversation one bit. It's not the topic – I can't make that out – it's the frigid, mechanical way they communicate.

You can tell from the tone there's a difference of opinion. It's clear that Calamine and the strangulated voice disagree on some pretty fundamental points. Calamari finds this funny. I hear a large vehicle crunch to a halt on the gravel outside. I strain my ears, but it's at this point that Elton starts to talk at me in a loud self-pitying monologue.

I bawl some furious rebuke his way and the weird voice stops sharp. I hear the command for "quiet" and then the crunch of footsteps on the frosty ground. I hear the cocking of firearms and more sinister whispers and I can tell they're heading for the door. I could cheerfully throttle Elton right now. But there's nothing to do but sit tight and wait.

We're all on the same side after all.
Aren't we?

The door flies open, propelled by Calamari's heavy boot. He enters, mouth frothing, clutching one of our cat-heads in his tightly clenched mitt.

"This!" he cries, "Is not fucking inconspicuous! What were you told to be?!" He looks me straight in the eye. "That's right! Fucking inconspicuous!" And he's screaming right in my face by now.

"Don't let our friend upset you," says a smiling Calamine, although his tone is less than conciliatory. "He takes it very seriously. And we did ask you not to draw attention to yourself, didn't we?"

It's a plastic cat-head, I think to myself. People find weirder body parts in the gutter after police raids. But I say nothing as the rabid ape unleashes his next salvo. I sit impassive as he talks himself out. It's an old trick of mine. I stay silent until he's used up all his A material and starts weakening his point blustering crap. I then tell him his argument makes no sense and call him 'Cockface'. This *does not go down well*.

Whilst he screams, projecting hot air and spittle my way, I tune out. I'm remembering a snatch of something I heard through the broken window, the freakish third voice: "...motivation through fear. That's what we want to see. Start as we mean to go on, so to

speak.”

There’s swearing, shouting and much gun brandishing. It’s all scenery-chewing, cartoon villain bullshit. Then Calamine walks over, blanks my enquiry as to ‘what this is all about’, and starts smashing things on my desk – although with hindsight, I must say just the inexpensive, easily replaceable items. And then he’s dragging me around the floor by my collar.

“If you beat a dog with a piece of rope,” he whispers cryptically, “it blames the rope. Now clutch your left hand.”

“What?” I say.

“Clutch your left hand,” he repeats.

“No, your *left* hand. I have orders not to

break your right. Now, when I slam the desk drawer, you're going to scream like merry Hell."

"Eh?"

"Just do it!" He kicks the desk. The legs buckle and the whole structure collapses to the floor, scattering papers and stationery. I wail unconvincingly and then with slightly more conviction when he grabs my hand and whacks it with a steel ruler, leaving a ferocious purple welt. "We need a mark," he explains. "You," he points at Elton, "cry like a girl." Elton, staring wild-eyed, doesn't need any prompting. He explodes into genuine tears. Calamari sees none of this. He's too busy daubing the national flag on the wall with a tin of

house paint. He salutes it.

Now you'll think I'm being over dramatic but I swear this is true: the electricity spikes, the lights pop and the dark that was outside is inside. More tame trolls trickle in, like liquid night, and a monstrous thing twists toward us, blocking our escape. Wrapped nose to ankle in a flapping, leather greatcoat surges something... Well, at this point, I can't tell what it is. Is it even human? I hear there are some weird things evolving up in Northumberland.

It's a scene redolent of cheap horror, where the head vampire, flanked by his gurning familiars, reveals himself to the disbelieving hero and heroine. Well, substitute me for the hero and our

cowering cockney Neanderthal for the heroine and you're closer to the truth. I'm expecting the cape-like greatcoat to creak open and belch bats – such is the theatrical feel to proceedings. And then they ramp up the camp some more with the dimming of torches and the lighting of the room with a signal flare. I watch with a sensation of half fear, half fascination as the red glow reveals something very nasty indeed. And it's smiling.

Now, when I say 'smiling', I mean a kind of pulling of the mouth into a tight, rigid circle with brown teeth jutting behind, giving the overall effect of a bashed radiator grill playing hide and seek in a swollen anus. Framing this foul

orifice is a grotesque, grey golem, too tall by far and seemingly made out of right angles.

He strides up to me, his legs so long that each forward step is a swoop. He speaks, and that weird cat's-mewl of a voice curdles my soul like fingernails down a blackboard. I stand silent as the vile entity introduces himself. As Malmot.

There's a whipping-branch strength in his wiry frame as he cuffs me across the face with a leather glove.

"Ow," I say, my cheek burning. "Now where's the need for that?"

"Pig skin," he says smugly. "It makes such a rewarding slap." And he pivots on his paws, prowling the

workshop, poking, prodding and pouring scorn on things he clearly doesn't understand. I can't say I'm listening too intently. No, my attention's focussed on those gloves of his, and where he got them. Pig products are the preserve of the profligate and powerful. The *sinister*, even. Once more, it's the little things that set my nerves a-jangling.

He issues some unrealistic demands: Bactrian is to walk and talk and to do so, 'Convincingly'. Well, we can do talking, but it'll look like a bulldog chewing a wasp. Walking? Well, the Japanese manage it but they have computers, twenty-four hour electricity and millions of dollars. And still their robots move like ducks taking

a shit. So what chance does a third world nation stand? ‘Convincing’ just isn’t going to happen.

Malmot likes to think he understands the common man. Thing is, I’m not common and he sure as Hell isn’t. The jury’s still out on whether he’s undead. Our points of reference are poles apart. So how can he second-guess me correctly? Well, he can’t but that doesn’t stop him interrupting my every sentence with something mind-shreddingly irrelevant. Ten minutes of talking passes and not one iota of information is exchanged.

“The clues are in the words I’m using,” I seethe. “Try listening to them.”

This is the wrong thing to say, and

I'm soon in acute agony. I'm concussed. It can happen when you're smacked round the head with a rifle butt. Elton, who's as weird as Malmot seems to be autistic, pipes up fearfully. There's a brief discussion and they seem to strike some common ground about wheelchairs and old tape recorders.

Meanwhile, Calamari circles me like a shark in a black ocean. I hear a match strike. I hear him open his dumb mouth and, God rot him, if he doesn't go into some hectoring rant. A True Believer, this one. I can't stay focussed enough to listen. My thoughts seem to slide over each other before I can catch hold of them. There's a dull throb at the back of my head and a searing heat at the

front. Sometimes the sensations swap. There are moments of lucidity then the pain drives me back into a kind of echoey, underwater version of my own brain. Words go in, but they don't commit themselves to memory. Only fragments of his deluded diatribe remain:

“You should feel honoured to crawl in the presence of such a great mind.”

“A very great mind. Though you won't understand his methods...”

“... the carrot and the stick...”

“Forward progress...”

“Rowing in time to the beat of the drum.”

“And if that doesn't work, well, you beat their heads instead. Because

what have we got to work with here? Men and women who behave like apes because they've no notion of the greater good."

"We're trying to carve a society out of a dung heap. We're trying to grow food, create jobs, link up the gaps in public services..."

"But the populace won't embrace their own potential..."

"...for the good of the State."

"Disenfranchised. Of course our predecessors didn't help – lying through their teeth, crippling everything they touched, offering our country's arsehole to the Americans and then wondering why we got spunked all over by Islamist terrorists."

“...and then the swing to the Right. And the plagues and The Great Separation and the civil wars.”

“Thank God for strong leadership.”

“England was once a beacon to the world. Now we’re feral children playing in its ashes. But we can burn bright again if we stop the general population pissing in the wood pile.”

“Stop pissing in the woodpile, Jupiter.”

And that’s the last I know. I’m out for the count. My head fills with horrific visions of military parades. I see banners and police beatings and England as a form of bacteria, spreading to mainland Europe in the rat infested holds of creaking, wooden boats. Bacteria in

jackboots.

I wake into dull daylight. Afraid. Worryingly, I also have an erection.

I'm not going in to work today. I'm working on an Advanced Theory of Violent Assault. I figure, after the third or fourth time, something in my head'll rupture and I'll die. Seeing as no-one's sussed how to make a ghost do manual labour yet, I feel death might be my smartest option: an eternity of peace and quiet with just a few brief interruptions from clairvoyants. And I'd like to see them find a clairvoyant. Last I heard, they'd burnt them all. I doubt I'll go to Hell. I can't believe it exists. You tally up God's antics over the last few

thousand years and you have to conclude that He should be burning in it Himself. And with that in mind, the first thing I'm going to do is track Him down and call Him a Cunt.

I consider a brief stint as a vengeful spectre, compile a list of folk I'd like to traumatise and then waste a few moments pondering the mechanics of turning your head inside out and vomiting blood. Do the undead *really* do that? And, if so, how? Is it a skill you have to work on? And then I turn my thoughts back to the real world. I'm not the most motivated of workers today. Probably something to do with the rifle butt and the pistol whipping. So I'm disinclined to open the door when Mr

Calamine comes a-calling.

I'm heating water on the cooker. I figure I'll throw it on him, he'll shoot me and then this whole sorry charade'll be over. It all sounds hysterical but I'm rapidly reaching the end of my tether. I'm not intrinsically evil. Why does the world want me for its punch bag? It's not just the water that's boiling. It's my whole life. Like a bubbling cauldron. And the more I look into it, the more unpleasant things bob up and stare back at me. Then the electricity cuts. So no scalding today then.

With the lights out and the sky so black with angry clouds it may as well be midnight, I fumble in the cupboard for kerosene, or lighter fluid, or just

anything flammable that I can burn in my old hurricane lamp. You don't want to be in the dark with a predator. I want to see the bastard coming. Paranoia's an evolutionary advantage – as you find out in my line of work.

But my fears are unfounded. Calamine's his usual personable self. I don't understand his part in last night's events – and I can't say I trust him – but I feel comfortable enough to put down the kitchen knife. He takes the gesture graciously. He hands me a tomato plant.

“By way of an apology,” he starts.

“But? What? What the?! What the fuck was last night about?!” I shout.

“You weren't in work today,” he continues. “I was hoping to talk to you...

clear a few things up.”

I know what *I'm* hoping, I think to myself, but the chances of a block of concrete crashing through the ceiling and crushing you, you scar-faced Judas, are pretty remote. Again, I say nothing.

His lips are moving, and I know it's a pretty juvenile thing to do, but I'm tuning out again. I hear the soft pitter patter of raindrops on the roof and, before Calamine can even draw breath, I've got my chemical-proof glove on and I'm holding a strip of litmus paper out of the window. I check the colour with a candle. It barely even reacts. And before Calamine can take another breath, I'm in and out of the rain with every saucepan, every bucket, every anything that can

hold liquid I can find.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“What do you think I’m doing?” I say, because it seems pretty obvious to me. “I’m collecting rainwater!” And he shrugs and looks at me nonplussed. “Look!” I cry, and I’m soaking wet as I say it. “I’m not dissolving! This is drinkable!”

Now, I guess it’s different when you’re up in government with purified water on tap. But when you’re leopard-fodder like me, and your choices are weak beer or the desalinated dysentery-juice from the reservoirs, you get pretty excited about conventional rain. I guess it’s all relative. Calamine’s charmingly condescending when he tells me:

“You know I can get you fresh water whenever you want. You just have to ask.”

“And why would you do that for me?”

“Because you’re part of the team,” he says, smiling in the unflattering candlelight. But I’m thinking of those rifle butts again when he says: “Look, I think we’ve had a bit of a misunderstanding. Just give me a minute to...” and he checks his watch. “In fact, less than a minute...” He trails off, starts counting soundlessly. There’s a sudden noise that I can’t even begin to describe – honestly, I can’t – and then he rips off the watch and slings it into the pedal bin.

“No use to me now,” he says. “Do

you own a computer?”

“No,” I say, bemused as ever.

“Good,” he says. “Suffice to say, everything electronic in this entire street is now screwed.”

“Why?”

“EMP.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You won’t. Not if you don’t know what an EMP is. Let me explain: We’ve just flashed your house with an electromagnetic pulse. Or a microwave pulse – I can never remember which it is... though I hope it’s not the second because I believe they make men sterile. Anyway, my point is this: the pulse fries electronic equipment – annoying if you own a computer repair shop, but quite

useful if you suspect a building is bugged. By a building, I mean your house. And now, well, let's just say we're free to talk a little more openly." He pulls up a chair. "So you've met Montgomery Burns then."

"I don't get the reference," I say.

"Right. Probably a bit before your time. I mean Malmot. Tall, thin gentlemen. Grey hair. Grey complexion. Slapped you with a pigskin glove. Screamed obscenities in your face."

"Oh, *him!*" I say.

"Brings a chill to the room, doesn't he? And tends to bring out the worst in our friend, Calamari," Calamine chuckles. "Well, you'll be pleased to know that Mr Malmot bears you no

personal grievances. He's just, how shall we say, a little uneasy around new people. In fact, let's say *all* people. He thinks you win respect by battering them to a pulp. Takes his management strategies from Stalin, you see. Personally, I prefer the subtle approach..."

"You weren't so subtle last night."

"That was nothing to do with me."

"But I heard you outside."

"Maybe you did," he says with an edge to his voice. "In which case, you'll have heard me describe his methods as pointless bluster; you'll also have heard me explain that you're already on side and need no further coercion; you'll have heard me voice my disapproval.

You may not have heard me telling the lads to go easy on you but I assure you – if I hadn't, you'd be in a much sorrier state now."

"My hand?"

"Yes. I was told to break it."

"But you didn't. Well, er, thanks for that."

"Don't thank me, it's just common sense. They wanted you put firmly in your place – but you don't hire an artist and then break his fingers before he's finished the job. That's just backwards. It's plain dumb. But that's the kind of mentality we're dealing with here. They don't think things through."

He seems frustrated, and I get the feeling I'm being told a little more than I

should here. So I do what anyone else in my situation would: I nod my head sympathetically and hope he spills some more.

“So this Malmot: he’s the head vampire?” I prompt.

“And we’re all expected to bite a few necks,” he laughs mirthlessly. “But I choose my necks carefully, you see. This is the thing, though: I can’t guarantee your safety unless you return to work. Because whilst I’m aware that you know comparatively little, it’s still too much. And if you’re not in, you’re out, so to speak.”

“And what’s in it for me?” I ask. “I mean, in being ‘in’?” And I’m starting to sound like he is.

“Well, you’re still eligible for the company funeral plan. Now that can be a wooden coffin in fifteen years time or a shallow ditch tomorrow. Your choice.”

“And, by being ‘in’ I stay ‘out’ of the ditch?”

“I swear, you get smarter every day, Jupiter! Glad to have you back on board!” And he claps me on the back like a drunken uncle.

Meanwhile, I’m wondering why he had to fry my house to tell me this? So I ask in some roundabout way and he tells me that the key to efficiency is commonsense and a flexible command structure. But certain parties have their ways of doing things and perhaps those ways could be handled with a little more

finesse.

“Malmot wants you to report to him directly. This puts you in an ideal position to observe him and the way he goes about things. He’s a secretive man, you see, and some of us feel we’d benefit from a greater degree of transparency, a little more information to help us go about our business.”

He phrases it so eloquently.

“That’s all?” I ask.

“That’s all.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It is.”

“But he kills people. And I don’t doubt you do, too!”

“We do what’s necessary to ensure the smooth running of our country. It’s no

different from any other business. We just retire a little more violently.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Mr Jupiter, of the few emotions you seem to possess, which is stronger? Your fear or your greed? Or, perhaps, it’s your lust? You know, I can get you ten women at the drop of a hat. *Clean* women who’ll pretend to like you.”

“I have a wife who does that.”

“Unconvincingly. I can get you a new one.”

“Can you get rid of the old one?”

“If you say so. But we’ll go back to your greed for the moment though.”

“Let’s.”

And it doesn’t take long to settle on large quantities of cash and clean water.

“I can finally sober up,” I tell him.

“I’m counting on it,” he says. “I’m sick of working with lunatics and drunks.” And he makes some hand gesture at a man up a telegraph pole. And the lights spark back to life. And the man, slips, falls and breaks his leg.

“See what I mean,” Calamine sighs. I can see why they call him Calamine. He's strangely soothing.

So I’ve just taken delivery of a consignment of fresh HO. What’s the first thing I do with it? I’ll give you a clue: I don’t drink it.

England has the lowest birth rate in Europe. There are many reasons for this. Reduced fertility, miscarriages triggered

by poor nutrition, gas clouds full of oestrogen turning men fruity, they all play their part. But our main problem is the water. It's dirty and diseased and it isn't safe to wash in. So we don't. And we honk like rotting lepers. That's one of the main reasons our society's falling apart, why our divorce rate's virtually one hundred percent. Because the English are too repulsive to have sex with each other.

It's not funny. Relationships thrive on intimacy. How intimate can you get with someone you can smell from the other side of the door?

The Department of Propagation run coach trips. For a small fee, they'll run you to the coast. If you don't mind a bit

of pollution, you can hose each other down in seawater and conceive in the ocean. Of course, the French know exactly what we're up to. They steer their boats up to edge of the minefield and shout at us through megaphones:

“Hey, Cow Burner! ‘Allo, Cow Burner! Hey, farkin Little Mermaid! Are you ‘aving sex with your wife? You must smell pretty bad to make your ugly babies underwater! Come to France! We sell you some soap!”

Our prostitutes wash in beer. Rachel wouldn't because she was too tight with money. So the first thing I do with my water is pour a bucket of it over my head. Then I go straight to Lucas's house and give Laura a sponge bath.

The rest of the water goes into storage in the garage. I cover the containers with a tarpaulin, rig a shotgun cartridge to a trip wire and run it across the doorway. There are men pretending to be from the electric company putting new surveillance equipment into my house and I watch one working with a suspicious look on my face.

“Why are you putting a camera in my bedroom ceiling?” I ask. The guy installing the stuff, he starts lying to me, telling me the camera is a ‘power regulator’ or some such crap. I let the matter slide, and our man walks out thinking he’s got one over on me. But I know *exactly* what it is.

So the afternoon finds me strolling

through the market stalls in the Westminster ruins. I thread my way between the punters and the spivs and the tables laden with fripperies that no doubt somebody died for somewhere along the way. I see people selling the clothes they stand in. I see people selling the clothes other people stand in and employing various nefarious tactics to obtain them. I'm wearing a stab-proof vest, a cricket box and, just for devilment, I've got Velcro bands holding rings of inverted fishing hooks in my pockets. I snag two 'dippers' and send them off squealing with their hands bleeding and my footprint on their backsides.

Eventually I find what I'm looking

for. And what's in my bag? Why, it's the camera. And who wants to buy it? Why, the self same guy who installed it in the first place.

Because my life cannot follow any logical path, my workshop's transformed itself into a dental practice. I walk in. I walk straight out again. I don't remember a waiting room. I don't remember a receptionist. I don't remember the people queuing up to register. I've packed in drinking and it occurs to me that I may be having a seizure. Then Calamine steps out wearing a surgical smock.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“Sometimes,” he says, “it's just not

worth explaining.” And he doesn’t – just leads me into a room. I walk into what I think was my fibreglassing area to find an increasingly manic Calamari masked and holding pliers, with his boot on a fat man’s chest. He appears to be extracting teeth. Or, at least, attempting to.

“But it looks so easy on television,” he cries, his voice like a suppurating wound. He clanks something into a kidney dish. “You, boy! You were a surgeon!”

“Not a dental surgeon,” I say hesitantly.

“Don't be a sissy.. Come over here and rip this man's teeth out!”

“Mmmfff, mmmnnnnffff!” insists the chair-bound man through a mouthful of

cotton wool.

“Or I could just *punch* them out, Sir,” Calamari offers, “but where would the fun in that be?” And he croaks like a blood-spattered gargoyle, rolling his dilating eyeballs. “No. Let the boy do it! He skinned the body, didn’t he?”

“With respect, Calamari,” says Calamine, less-than respectfully, “let’s leave it and get the real dentist back in.”

“But that’s just defeatist talk.”

“Jupiter’s got the shakes today,” Calamine continues. “First day on the wagon. Probably seeing pink elephants. Bad time to let him near anything with major arteries.”

“Why? He looks like he’s used a mop before.”

“With respect, this was meant to be a purely recreational activity. It would be best if we kept it non-lethal.”

“Oh, to Hell with you, spoilsport!” And he throws down his instruments and stamps what’s probably a cloven hoof. “I thought this would be fun! Well, *damn it!*”

There’s a muttered exchange. I don’t know what’s said, but the fat man’s unceremoniously ejected into the waiting room – his mouth still stuffed with cotton wool and whatever else seemed necessary at the time – to mutter gas-addled nonsense at people so desperate for dental treatment they ignore him. Calamine may be playing the voice of reason in this charming little

vignette, but he's in no mood to be nice to yours truly. Calamari smiles mirthlessly, miles away in some dream world of violence and rough sex. Where's his morals I wonder? But, given I'm experiencing the delirium tremens and not one hundred percent sure I'm even awake, well, you could accuse me of splitting hairs. Calamari seats himself in the dentist chair and swivels his body and pickled onion eyes toward me.

"I've been promoted," he tells me, to Calamine's obvious chagrin. "And this is my little celebration. We're experimenting with the notion of Fear," he explains – failing to explain anything. "Or, at least, we *were*. It seems someone

here present doubts the validity of our endeavours. Someone who *wasn't promoted* because he *couldn't be trusted to follow procedure*." He glares at Calamine who shuffles grumpily. "But I'm not a bitter man," he spits unconvincingly, "so I'll let it slide this once. ...*Just* this once."

"Thank you, Sir," says Calamine through barely-suppressed contempt.

Calamari clutches a sheath of papers in his claws. He flicks to an index card and holds it up to the vari-tint lenses of some uncharacteristically geeky half-moon reading glasses. I imagine what a fat, muscular owl would look like if it was plucked and you crayoned bulging veins all over it.

“So I guess you’ll be wondering what this is all... about. Well, I don’t think I’ve truly got the measure of you just yet, so let’s see what *you’re* all about first, shall we? Now, I’ve got your file here. Let’s see... Hugo *James* Jupiter. Pompous name for a peasant, isn’t it? Born June the blahdy blah, year two thousand and blah, blah, blah. Mother, deceased – death by... Death by... Well, that’s a Hell of a way to go isn’t it? Saw the whole thing did you? Bet that screwed you up?”

“Yes,” I answer. “It’s fair to say it did.”

“Father, deceased. Also insane. That figures. Grandfather, pyromaniac. Three convictions for fire-raising,

including the burning down of a butcher's shop. Now why would someone want to burn down a butcher's shop, I wonder?"

"I was told he was some kind of militant vegetarian."

"You mean, 'militant vegetarian, *Sir!*'" he spits. I look to Calamine. He shrugs. I figure it's better to play along.

"Militant vegetarian... *Sir!*" I say, the words rankling.

"You see, I doubt that," he continues, "because, according to this piece of paper, he was apprehended carrying a toasting fork and a large bottle of tomato ketchup."

"I have nothing to say to that... *Sir.*"

"Wearing a 'Kiss The Cook!'

apron.”

“I didn't know that.”

“Age ten to sixteen – children's home. And then you were adopted by your Aunt, a *Madame Salome*. Now, I've heard of her.”

“Lots of people have, Sir.”

“Popular lady.”

“Again, I...”

“Have nothing to say, yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I have nothing to say.”

“But this school report does: ‘Young Mr Jupiter excels at Art, Biology and Arson.’ Seems the apple never falls far from the tree. Well, I hope you take after your mother's side,

Jupiter, or you'll be tucked snug in a Laughing Jacket before you're thirty. But, by the looks of this... it seems you're halfway there already. Hey, Calamine! Are you sure this guy's up to it?"

"Psychological assessments suggest he's not mad. Just deluded and amoral. He's also contradictory and prone to acts of dumb insolence."

"Not too dumb, I see. You went to university."

"I did, Sir."

"And you studied... Hang on... I thought you were an army surgeon?"

"I was, Sir."

"But you studied *Veterinary science*? Specialising in – what's this? –

‘Pachyderms?’ What’s a pachyderm when it’s at home?”

“Elephants, Sir.”

“Why in Hell’s name would you want to specialise in elephants?”

“You have to specialise in something, Sir.”

“And does it help you in your everyday life?”

“Not yet, Sir, but there’s always hope, Sir.”

“And then you enlisted?”

“Not exactly.”

“Conscripted?”

“I was press-ganged, Sir. I got whacked on the back of the head with a bottle and woke up in a Tesco battalion during the Battle Of Newcastle. When

they found out what I was, they sent me out patching up the war horses, the attack dogs and the carrier pigeons.”

“So how in Hell did you find yourself operating on soldiers?”

“We ran out of food, Sir. We ate all the animals. Well, I still had surgical experience so they gave me a couple of textbooks on human anatomy and set me to work on the squaddies.”

“So you're not a qualified doctor?”

“I am, Sir. Just not a *people* doctor. Which is why I can't get medical work in peacetime.”

“Ah!” Calamari exclaims. “I did wonder. I was thinking you'd been struck off. You know... wandering hands... that kind of thing.”

“No, Sir.”

“Speaking of which, you’re married aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir. Just about.”

“But no children. Pansy are you?”

“*No*, Sir.”

“Sterile?”

“It’s a possibility, Sir. Most people are these days.”

“We can get that checked out,” says Calamine, sliding sarcasm beneath Calamari’s radar.

“Good. We need all the breeders we can get. Even peasants. Now it says here that you’re a Nazi sympathiser.”

“No, Sir!”

“Oh, I forgot. It’s not terribly

politically correct these days, is it? You like to be called ‘fascists’.”

“No, Sir. I’m *not* a fascist.”

“But I was told *specifically* and I mean *specifically* that *you were*. You own several books on the Third Reich.”

“I own books on crocodiles but I’ve never chewed off an antelope’s face.”

“Jupiter!” Calamine barks. “‘Never chewed off an antelope’s face, *Sir!*’ is what I think you meant to say.”

Is he joking, I wonder, because I’m losing track here.

“Yes. Okay. Fine. Never chewed off an antelope’s face, *Sir!* Never laid an egg either. Not to my knowledge.”

“Well, that’s a shame because we

were thinking about going in a Far Right direction and we wondered if you might be able to tell us how to go about it. ... Hah! Only joking. That was a joke. But, seriously, what's your problem with fascism?"

"I'm not big on genocide, Sir."

"Oh, I see. Not got a foreskin, have we?"

"I..."

"Sir!" Calamine interrupts, "If his genitals are an issue, I'm sure we can get them checked, too."

"Fine," says Calamari.

"And, if his foreskin is a problem, we may be able to provide a replacement."

"Yes, that's *fine!*" Calamari snaps.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not taking my seniority seriously?”

Suitably admonished, Calamine laughs into his hand. Calamari turns to me again.

“What *are* your political beliefs, Jupiter? Do you even vote?”

“Yes, Sir. Always.”

“Really? I mean, you surprise me. Tell me... who do you vote for?”

“Sorry to say, Sir, everybody except your lot, Sir!”

“Well, at least you’re honest. ... Because we *do* keep records and I hate liars.”

“But I will be voting for the government in future, Sir.”

“That’s appreciated, Jupiter. But

I'll let you into a little secret, shall I? In all those years you were voting for everyone except the government, did anyone except the government ever win?"

"No, Sir. They... No, they didn't."

"Well, actually, Jupiter, they probably *did*. It's just we took all their ballot forms, shredded them and fed them to pigs. Perhaps, not *every* year. Sometimes the turnout was so low we'd win with just a pair of mad old lesbians. But *most* years, I'd say, our elections were as crooked as a crackwhore's labia."

I'm cautious when I ask: "But surely that's corruption, Sir? The same as lying? And you said you hate liars?"

And you made a kind of hand gesture like a gun, to imply you shoot them.”

“And I do. I strap them across the barrels of field artillery and blow them into the sky. But electoral fraud is different. By *physically destroying* opposition votes, we ensure a *physically greater* percentage of our own. Now argue semantics all you want, but a greater number of votes is a win in anyone’s book. And that’s not dishonest. More a kind of *delayed action* truth. And it doesn’t matter if we bend a few facts to get there.”

Well, that’s an ‘interesting’ philosophy, I’m thinking to myself, when along comes the history lesson:

“After all, it was Cicero, in 54 BC,

who said, ‘Unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen. It is our aim, not our language, which must always be the same’. Don’t you agree?”

“Er...”

“And there’s a few more things you should know about this little democracy of ours.”

“Do you think this is prudent,” Calamine protests. “Only I...”

“Prudent my Aunt Fanny! He’s got this far, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, Sir but...”

“Yes-Sir-but-nothing, Calamine!”
He takes a deep breath.

“Settle yourself in, Jupiter.”
Calamine advise me. “Here comes the

Gospel according to Saint Calamari.”

Calamari doesn't hear. He's addressing the invisible masses at some imaginary political rally:

“So perhaps it's best if we start at the beginning: the systematic ruination of the country followed by The Great Separation, starvation and rioting. And how Mr Malmot, being an extremely senior military commander, assembles the shattered remnants of our armies and leads us against the Scots/Welsh coalition, tames the Gypsy warlords, subjugates Manchester, seals off the Cannibal Territories with the Longpig Blockade and establishes the Civilised Territories. You'd think we'd get some respect for that, wouldn't you?”

Calamine yawns. Calamari turns purple.

“And what happens when we return?” he continues, positively frothing at the mouth. “The heroes?! The lads who went out there and put their lives on the line?! I’ll tell you, shall I?! We’re treated like scum. The liberal press despise us. People on the street, people we defended, spit on us and call us murderers. And we find the same wet mimsies who sold England down the river in the first place expecting to retake control!

“And peace is Hell. All peace brings is dissent and cries of ‘I want this and my human rights entitle me to that’ and ‘I’ve got curly hair so if you don’t

give me a diamond-covered house you're oppressing me!'. Every little oik wants his share of utopia, but he's damned if he'll put the graft in to get it. And our beloved ministers are already plotting how to waste our limited resources to give it to them.”

“And so I killed them all,” interrupts a disembodied voice, a voice like bacteria multiplying in a wound. “Systematically. One by one, and in the most devilishly amusing ways. In fact, it's become something of a hobby of mine – pruning the parliamentary rosebush. I believe I'm on my third.”

I've heard those tones before. I didn't like them then and I certainly don't like them now. I don't like the

black, backlit shadow that moves independently across the paper walls of our fake dental laboratory. I don't like the knowledge that those self-same paper walls are all that separate us from the tangle of tree roots that somehow form the body of one Mr Malmot. I don't like his long, grey fingernails gouging through them.

“And I stepped unto the breach once more,” seeps that terrible voice, as his sepulchral skull oozes through the torn partition. “And I made all the right noises. And I promised to hand over power as soon as free and fair elections took place. But, you see, I didn't. I synthesized democracy instead. I rigged up a government from my own stooges.

Clever, yes?

“But this is the *really* clever part: not even *they* know! They’re all such dissipated dreamers, they don’t suspect a damn thing! They think the daily achievement of nothing is normal!”

“Parliament’s just a pantomime performance for the public,” Calamari explains. “The military runs this country.”

“And I run the military,” Malmot laughs.

“Impressive,” I say.

“Impressive? Yes. I’m proud of my achievements. But interesting? Well, I’m afraid not. I’m sick of staging parliament, Jupiter. I’m a soldier not a playwright. I don’t care about story arcs;

I don't give a damn about character motivation for ethnic minority candidates in Kent. I'm not Shakespeare. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but what about the tank? I find heavy artillery the most direct form of communication, don't you?"

"It does what it's meant to do, Sir."

"It does what it's *designed for*," Malmot replies. "And a democracy, for all its much-vaunted, high-minded intentions, does not. Dictatorship is a simple and honest system. Straightforward and efficient. Democracy is like running a cookbook through a shredder and expecting the wastepaper to make a recipe. It's a jumble sale jigsaw with half the pieces

missing.”

“But people like freedom of choice, Sir.”

“What makes you assume they have it? However, point that out and they don’t take kindly to it. So we’re not going to. We’re going to make them believe they’ve chosen dictatorship themselves, that they’re a part of it. And once they’ve tried it they’ll love it. Give a man a flag and a gun and he’ll follow you to the ends of the earth. And I don’t care what anyone says – there’s not a woman out there who wouldn’t trade two good husbands for a mean-eyed bastard in a black uniform.”

Have you heard of ‘Wernicke’s

disease'? It affects heavy drinkers. A deficiency of vitamin B1, or thiamine, leads to a blurring of consciousness and damage to the optic nerves. I'm suspecting I've got it. More worrying though, the DT's have hold of me and I'm feeling increasingly odd.

Delirium tremens last between three and ten days. Sufferers experience both visual and auditory hallucinations with a fatality rate of between one and twenty percent. So, looking on the less-than-bright-side, there's a one in five chance that I might die. And whilst I'm staring Death in the face, shaking and sweating, my head full of blue devils and pink elephants, my stomach trying to crawl out of my mouth, Malmot chooses

to tell me that the dead man we've reanimated is former Prime Minister Bactrian. We're to take him on a campaign tour – part propaganda mission and part test to see if our drunken nation notices anything odd about him. If not, well, the plan is to slaughter all the Opposition and Independent Members of Parliament and make their robotised corpses behave so badly they disgrace British democracy forever. I take all this as calmly as I can. I vomit for an hour solid.

I'm left with Calamine, who instantly becomes tolerable again.

“So we're to part ways,” he says.

“Good,” I reply, “because you never stick up for me when he's

around.”

“I’ve been too busy watching my own back to watch yours. Haven’t you noticed? I’m not exactly Mr Popular these days. Seems they don’t like independent thought.”

“Planning a Night Of The Long Knives, is he?”

“When *isn’t* he?”

It occurs to me that Calamine might be plotting something himself. I’d like to know what. But he won’t be drawn on the subject. Not straight away. He returns to the matter in hand.

“Now this is the situation: you and your fat, mental friend are to complete former Prime Minister Bactrian and then report to Calamari at this address.” He

hands me a business card. It seems to be for a brothel. "In between, you're to pick up two suits from *this* address," another business card, "and make yourselves presentable. You'll be going on tour with Calamari and assisting with maintenance and operation. Always refer to former Prime Minister Bactrian as 'former Prime Minister Bactrian'. Not, 'The Dead Guy', 'Old Coffin Bollocks', or anything of the like. 'Former Prime Minister Bactrian.' Understand?"

"I understand," I say, less than graciously. "Do we have to take Elton?"

"I thought he was your assistant?"

"He's a human hemorrhoid. I'd rather he stays here until we're suicidal

enough to need him.”

“Okay. That's fine. Now, Women. We can provide you with women along the way. We run things on military lines and understand necessity. However, I will level with you and tell you that we can't guarantee the quality. So, if you choose to remain faithful to whoever, I would suggest that you ride her before reporting. You won't be coming home for a while.”

“You're a cunt,” I tell him. I would add ‘insensitive’ but it sounds so wet liberal.

“I'd call myself a pragmatist. It's a mindset that exists outside of standard romantic notions of honour and decency. If you have any common sense you'll

follow my example.”

He throws me something.

“Officer's stripes? I was never an officer?”

“I thought all army doctors were officers?”

“Not me. I was generally referred to as 'Hey, you!'.”

“Well, be something greater than yourself,” he says. “Or, at least, fake it until you can. Trust me, you'll need all the rank you can get when we bury democracy.

These are the other things Calamine tells me:

1: The infantile bickering of the petit bourgeois will never advance society.

2: Complete freedom means the time, space and opportunity to complicate your existence with irrelevant crap.

3: Dictatorship is just a derogatory term for a one party system. A one party system need not be corrupt.

Although, let's be realistic...

4: It always is.

So...

5: Let's build civilisation on our own terms, rather than those of genocidal mad men. Meaning...

6: Malmot.

And so...

7: I'm to report to him secretly.

Remember...

6: Don't get found out.

7: Don't get killed.

And lastly...

8: This is not as weird as it gets.

By *any* stretch of the imagination.

I don't know why Calamine seems to trust me. I wouldn't say *I* trust *him*. I think he assumes I have principles.

* * *

Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. What they don't tell you is that a little power corrupts stupidly. Case in point: Geoffrey Durham. Short, round body, thin head

and gaunt face. How do you get that kind of combination? Well, I don't know, but he's got it. Imagine a Prussian helmet with feet.

He's a mass of dangling objects, from the luxuriant moustache to the half-lampshades that jut from his rounded shoulders. He calls them epaulettes. I call them ridiculous. But they complement the gold brocade nicely, as does the vainglorious patchwork of military ribbons that span his pigeon chest.

Clothes maketh the man, they say, and Durham seems to think so. In fact, let's check out his wardrobe. There's the usual collection of sensible tailored whatnots and then, if you look to the left,

you'll see the rolled-up sleeping bag he wears when pretending to be a caterpillar. And there's the butterfly costume he puts on before leaping out of it. But his pride and joy is his black, semi-articulated dung beetle exoskeleton. If it weren't for the inconvenience of his day job, you'd be hard pressed getting him out of it.

So you'll be wondering what kind of job this fine specimen holds down. Well, as I think I may have mentioned earlier, Geoffrey Durham is a man of responsibility. He's the Chief of Police.

We're down in the depths of Police Headquarters. Durham stands up from behind his outsized mahogany desk, paces the length of the dank, grey

dungeon he calls his office, ducks beneath a heavy oak lintel and disappears up a windy, stone staircase to attend to whatever's troubling his horrid mind. Watch his feet. See those tiny and incredibly shiny shoes jerking up and down in a clockwork goosetstep. Even the sound of his footsteps is pompous.

Further, past the cells we go, to plaintive protestations of innocence from within and heel-clicks and salutes from corned beef-faced subordinates in bad brown shirts without. Down a staircase and the stone blockwork melds into excavated rock. Did I mention the corridors? The place is littered with them, stygian tunnels of varied depths

and materials, all fetid with male stench. Because standard premises aren't enough for a man of Durham's vaulting ambition. And so he's got teams of convict labour burrowing deep beneath London, carving out secret passages and subterranean caverns.

What he'll do when his underground lair is completed is anybody's guess. I doubt it'll be pleasant though.

London: crapitall shitty of England; full of movers, shakers, fakers, bakers, thieves, conmen, conwomen, catwomen, thickos, sickos, Marxists, racists, unemployed bassists and women called Mercedes with penises. And I'm seeing

them all as I prowl Dirtygirl Street, hunting for the brothel on Calamine's card. I'm not alone, I'm afraid. My expensive new suit's attracting attention and I've a trail of at least a dozen prospective companions, all touting for my business. I don't know what to tell them. Folk get so offended when you refuse sex that I've given up explaining. I just sigh and tell them to join the back of the queue. I say 'queue', but it's more of a parade now, a kind of whore convoy. And I'm leading them on a wild goose chase around Soho, looking like a crazed gangbanger with eyes bigger than his stomach.

Well, I find the place I'm searching for, a classy-looking establishment with

frightening security. I wave farewell to my travelling companions because, as the gorilla on the door insists, you wouldn't bring fast food to a restaurant, would you? And it's equally plush inside – all high ceilings, soft furnishings and staggeringly pornographic paintings. In fact, very reminiscent of Aunt Salome's place, where I was paid to provide general security and to bring cups of tea to the rich sadomasochists chained in the dungeon.

I find a clothed woman. She turns out to be the Madam. She has no idea who I am but recognises Calamari's description, so I set off round the rooms to find him. But I'm out of touch with

brothels and unsure what the current etiquette is. Is it still rude to stare? Perhaps it's ruder not to? I don't want anyone to think I'm judging them. On any criteria. So I force myself to make eye contact. But this doesn't work, because for every pretty girl I smile at, there's one of Malmot's goons hanging out her back-end and jigging away like a clockwork automaton. Then a thought occurs to me: do I really want to see Calamari on the job? I've a head rammed with disturbing memories. One more trauma might tip me over the edge. So I figure I'll take myself downstairs and see if the Madam has any filthy anecdotes. And she does.

When the goons have all reached

their suitable conclusions, they assemble in the largest room. There's no Calamari, I notice. Roll call reveals another absentee and the cry goes up to extract him from his convincingly affectionate paramour. She shouts encouragement as he struggles, semi-dressed across the landing and then falls down the stairs with both feet wedged in the same trouser leg. Everyone laughs.

We're all armed, myself included. But, whereas my companions carry pretty hefty-looking handguns, I've been issued with a wooden truncheon. This is hilarious, apparently. I take it in good humour and the head goon rewards me with a pistol, albeit a weedy revolver. There's some kind of plan, but clearly

no-one thinks it worth telling me about it. Not that I'm bothered. The less I know, the less I have to take responsibility for. I decide to keep my head down and allow myself to be ferried into a large black vehicle. I'm told we're going to pick someone up.

"Bactrian? I mean, *Former Prime Minister* Bactrian," I say, correcting myself.

"Who gives a fuck?" says the head goon. "We don't."

I soon realise I'm travelling with maniacs. Good company, but maniacs all the same. And I get the feeling they're paramilitary.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Oh," someone answers, "just a bit

of hired muscle.” And they all laugh.

I don’t get to find out anymore. We soon arrive at somewhere or other. And there’s Calamari. And shoehorned into his wheelchair, looking about as dead as it’s possible to get to my newly sober eyes, sits Former Prime Minister Bactrian.

“No one’s gonna fall for this,” I say. “Nobody’s *that* stupid.”

“Have a little faith,” says Calamari. “This *is* England!”

The first stop’s *Knightsbridge* for something called a ‘meet and greet’ – or is it a ‘shake-and-fake’? I can never remember. We’re here to meet the bulbous little sods in charge of British

Industry. What's left of it.

In the past, their nefarious naughtiness in pursuit of power and the pound was frowned upon. Now Malmot's here to bullshit them round to his way of thinking. We keep Bactrian under wraps until the press have been nobbled and all the guests are well and truly plastered.

You can ascertain how important people are by how busy they're supposed to be. Piers Dordogne, the horrendously unattractive chairman of *English Electric*, spends the majority of his days dreaming up easily-remedied business dilemmas he can set right when asked by shareholders what use he is to man or beast. Around this usefulness, he

slots the twin tasks of under servicing and overcharging his clients.

Charles Bunnyfroth occupies an inordinate amount of time chairing a quango, a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation; an investigative committee paid to stare up its own backside till it sees something. This 'something' will almost always be in complete agreement with the government that isn't supposed to be associated with it, and almost always ludicrous. Because Bunnyfroth is stark, staring mad. When asked to look into allegations of vote-stealing made by Opposition members, he discovered that the majority of names on the electoral register belonged to dead people. To

stop this obvious corruption he flattened all the cemeteries.

“I’ll stop those dead bastards!” he’s been heard to say. On numerous occasions.

Tristram Shelley-Tewks is a semi-professional launch party guest and incorrigible ponce. He spends his mornings ‘rebranding’ companies and his afternoons trying not to hate himself. To ‘rebrand’ you pick some random words from the dictionary, splice them together in a pseudo-logical fashion and then add a couple of vowels to the end. The resulting guff is then sold to a stupid person who needs a new name for their unfashionable business.

But times are hard for Shelley-

Tewks. With hyperinflation to worry about, the last thing a manufacturer needs is a big sign with a nonsense word on it. This reflects the uselessness of his creativity and, in turn, the complete pointlessness of his existence. No one else seems to mind, though. They love his garish neckties.

Amidst these people and countless other blights on the face of the Earth, you'll see me. I'm scowling at something, I expect. I'll be in a bad mood. Because I've never liked Knightsbridge. I've never liked anywhere in central London. I can't stand the crowds and their constituent components: the Sweaty Blockers, the Random Gropers and the Terminal

Fuckwits; not to mention rogue priests, perverts and psychiatric patients with blades – sometimes all three in one convenient package.

I hate the Beautiful People; the headless chickens in their black-market designer labels. And I truly despise the wannabes in their *counterfeit* designer labels, topped off with ridiculous baseball caps. I don't understand why they choose clothes over their children's food.

This whole circus... it's all artifice, the illusion of status. The fact we're here to celebrate Industry is beyond laughable, beyond contempt. There's cash to be had machining poor quality firearms, but that's about it. The last new

product manufactured in this country was Bactrian. And *I* made him.

Well, we've got a fantastic stage for today's events: a massive, raised platform nestled into the bombed-out ruins of a twelve-story department store. The whole front face of the building is missing, the upper floors long since collapsed and the roof open to the heavens like some square Coliseum. The blank, glassless windows on the back and side walls glow like bloodshot eyes, streaming light from the poisonous red sky. At weekends, they use this place for hangings.

Today's Bactrian's big test, and we're making things easier for the big, dead lummoX by getting the press

absolutely blind drunk. Because the last thing we need are sober photographers.

I've avoided the hospitality tent, trying desperately not to avail myself of the free drinks. Instead, I station security there to push people back in if they look anywhere near sober – kind of reverse bouncers.

Now back to that big stage: I can see Dordogne, Bunnyfroth; and there's Shelley-Tewks, wringing his hands and weeping silently into a handkerchief. I'm in position, way up in an opposite building, clutching binoculars and a radio control handset. Calamari, stationed at the sound desk on the other side of the street, turns and gives me the thumbs up. We're live in five. I flick on

my switches, push the twin control sticks forward and Bactrian's distant body stiffens. I inch his wheelchair forward. He ascends via a ramp, flanked by the goons from my car journey. And then it occurs to me: the platform's so high and the goons so big that the audience can barely see the former Prime Minister. Clever Malmot, I think to myself. And what's this I can hear? It's one of those mass-produced public relations women I mentioned a while back, the ones with a clipboard instead of a left nipple, briefing the hammered reporters:

“Before we start, *guys*, they're not gonna tell you this officially, but Bactrian's had a stroke. It's no biggy. We don't want you to make a big fuss of

it, *guys*. But that's the deal. That's why he's in the chair, *guys*. He's still all there, *up top*, but you might find him a little, kind of...immobile. So don't you go too hard on him, *guys*, because you won't win friends picking on cripples."

I hear Malmot's lies on the tip of her tongue and it makes me laugh. Only this morning he told me:

"The wheelchair? Why, it's an absolute godsend. It's a politically correct bullet-proof vest."

As I might have mentioned, we're a cynical, cynical organisation. Is two 'cynicals' enough? No? Well, add a third. Then add a fourth when you discover Malmot's added further distractions in the form of a number of

Z-list celebrities. We've got Dougal 'Pretty Boy' Hamstrung, the hunky presenter of a house makeover programme; Patty Rankle, who once played a busty barmaid in a long forgotten soap opera, and Dave Cosmos. God knows what Dave Cosmos does.

Bactrian starts to talk. I'm not sure what he's going to say because Malmot edited the tape from previous speeches. And how's he going to pre-empt the questions? Where's he been? South America? Why's he come back? The Ceesal hoax? Then back to South America again. How were Elvis and Hitler?

Well, we've been smart enough to scramble the public address system,

treating the audience to a chorus of static hum and feedback. And it seems we have someone else on our side: God. For once.

I've been willing the sky to crack open for some time. Now it's happening. And what kind of downpour will we get today? Acidic, that's for sure. But will it be Nitric, Carboic or our old friend, Sulphuric? Well, whadaya know? It's Sulphuric! And I figure it's time for this young gentleman to find some cover. And I watch the heavens open from the shelter of a doorway with no room attached. And I see the rain sluice the streets of suits. Acid rain: the disinfectant man created to wipe out his own bacterial presence.

“God pisses on all of us,” says a kindly faced squatter, white bearded and trying to relieve me of my wallet.

“Especially you,” I say, as his fingers find the fishhooks in my pocket.

Rain pours down and down, forcing herds of human cattle into the indoor market and the reassuring arms of consumerism. But I’m happy just watching.

The individuals who brave the storm, threading their way through the caustic raindrops – where are they going? And why challenge the rain to do it? I frame them with my fingers. With the purring water to silence their words, they lose their place in time and the mundane scheme of things. They become

iconic. Knightsbridge in the rain is beautiful, a sea of rippling reflections; wet, kinetic and dangerous, like the sex you always dreamed of. It's a place of little mysteries; commonplace intrigues lent myth by the rain's filter. I could learn to love it.

Well, the questions *did* come up but Calamari had the fantastic idea of shoving a walkie-talkie under the dead man's shirt and answering them himself. So, no doubt, there was a degree of political ranting with a violent sexual subtext. But, do you know what? Nobody cared. They all were too busy thrusting out their jaws and presenting their best

sides to where they thought the photographers were. I guess it must've been hard to tell from way up on stage, but the entire press contingent were busy vomiting in a ditch, stricken with alcohol poisoning. You see, you give me a job and I do it well.

So the mission's been a complete success. We've passed off a carcass as a living dignitary. Now for Stage Two: the destruction of democracy.

We're charging down the motorway in a tour bus that looks like a huge, black whale. An armour-plated whale, if there is such a thing. The few vehicles on the badly-maintained road, they get out of our way. Fast. We're not slowing down for anything, even potholes. We hit bomb

craters and structural fissures, and we scud out of them like a shark breaching some shitty, tarmac ocean. We've got the goons in the back. They love it. They say it feels like flying.

“Enjoy it while you can!” Calamari snaps. And then he turns to me with a look that could boil water. “*Irregulars*. Fucking ‘Brownshirts’. They call themselves police, but they’re little more than thugs. I wouldn’t bother getting to know them. They won’t be around for very long.”

I’m not used to conversing with Calamari. He makes me nervous.

“Why are they here?” is all I can think to say.

“Just a little extra business,” he

says warily. “Why the sudden interest?”

“I’m nosey,” I answer.

“Then you should consider becoming a spy,” he hisses, and then snarls when I him ask what the pay’s like. It’s a double bluff on my part. I’m wondering if he knows about my deal with Calamine.

Night falls and I’m lying in a tiny bunk, wondering what kind of organisation I’m a part of. We’re a curious mix of military, secret police and thugs. This isn’t usual. Why would a man with an army at his command send out a team of civilian jobs?

Well, all will become clear – or, at least, *clearer* – later. Now, respect the frailties of an old man, will you, and

stop the recorder. This ageing carcass requires the bathroom.

* * *

“A day off?” I can’t believe it.

“Time off for good behaviour,” says Elton. He’s been drafted in as message boy.

“Where’s Calamari?” I ask.

“We’re to pick ‘im up from *Chiquita’s* on *Dirtygirl Street*. It’s easy to find, ‘e says. It’s situated directly opposite a massive mobile telephone mast, an’ the hookers in the window wear radiation suits. ‘E says ‘e’ll be inside, ‘briefin’ female agents. Till then, you’ve got the day ter ourselves.”

So I end up nursing a beer I have no intention of drinking, in some roadside

hellhole somewhere, with Elton trying to impress the goons. The atmosphere's surprisingly convivial and he takes the opportunity to get all gynaecological about a Bulgarian exchange student he once had the pleasure of – 'Strong jaw muscles,' being one of the cleaner comments.

"She was a big star on the *Squelchin*' scene," he says.

"*Squelching*?" roars a thug. "Is that like *Sploshing*?"

Elton rubs his hands together, warming to the topic. "Totally, totally different, my friend. *Sploshin*' involves mess: mud, paint, custard pies an' the like. With *Squelchin*', well, it's a purely sonic form of pornography, wiv the

emphasis on the sounds produced.”

I’ve mentioned Elton’s creepy voice before. Now we’re hearing his creepy thoughts.

“What’s the point in that?” sneers the thug and makes some joke about “Not seeing no ‘points’ at all”.

“The thrill comes from yer interpretation of the sounds,” Elton explains. “Yer own filthy imagination!”

“But, surely you could fake it?” I ask.

“Real aficionados can tell. Different parts of the body ‘ave distinctive acoustics, which the trained ear can distinguish between.”

“Uh huh?” says I. Maybe my tone conveys more than intended.

“You're judgin' me!” he protests. “But it ain't *my* idea. The Equal Opportunities Commission dreamt it up. They thought the porn industry discriminated against the blind and put the first tapes out as talkin' books.”

“Interesting.” I say. “So how do you get into the industry?”

Elton thinks for a second.

““Ard work an' a big resonant chamber!”

Time and drinks pass. The drinks get shorter and more potent whilst the group get shorter and more impotent. And the talk gets plain stupid.

“It's funny,” says somebody, “but all over England scores in Languages and Maths exams fall but Chemistry

grades go through the roof. It's so they can [belch!] ...It's so they can manufacture their own drugs."

"It's good to see children planning ahead," says another.

"Damn right," agrees a third. "But I wouldn't want my kids doing it. No way. No kid of mine's gonna earn more than his father."

We decide to hit the town or, more accurately, nose around the crack dens on our isolated stretch of road. We fail to find any amenable women so we move on. We check out the local landmark, the great, grey, steel-girdered remnants of a bridge and note that it's been hit by an aircraft: an airship, we reckon from the billowing fabric. A

mangled propeller creaks above our heads, spinning like a pinwheel in a nest of wreckage, and it's decided that I should climb up into the dark shards to check for survivors. Now, I'm no fool. This isn't about survivors. It's a test of nerve. So I figure I'll climb up just high enough to get a better look, shout down some juicy details (severed limbs, that sort of thing) and then shimmy down, home and dry, with a little credibility in my pocket.

So I'm shinning my way up some bit of structure; I can't recall what exactly, but I remember it being cold to the touch and scaled with jagged rust flakes. The shitty, brown river's squirming I don't know how far beneath

me, and I'm thinking, what the Hell am I'm doing? And then I know what I'm doing. I'm falling. And I don't see my life before my eyes. I just see black.

I figure the World mustn't want me in it anymore. It's trying to suffocate me beneath an avalanche of pain. I feel like my eyes have been soaked in lemon juice and tapped back in with a mallet. There's agony in other places, too, but the concussion's got me, scrambling the signals to my brain, so I don't know what does and doesn't hurt from one minute to the next. I could cheerfully die. And, when I finally open my lead-weighted eyelids, it seems I have. I'm face to face with Jesus.

Now, if you're familiar with me and my beliefs, you'll know I have no problem with the Big J. I think he had some quite intelligent things to say for himself and wouldn't recognise the corrupt, misogynist cult that was created in his name. He certainly wouldn't appreciate his posthumous rebranding from religious firebrand to soppy proponent of castrated love. It would make him sick. That's why I burned all his churches down.

However, that bullying piece of shit he calls his father is another kettle of fish entirely. So I figure I'll extend the hand of friendship to Mr Christ but, if talk turns to his wanker Dad, well, I won't be pulling any punches.

I ask what's going on. He says nothing. I ask again, but the Risen Lord remains unobliging. He has an oversized fingerprint on his forehead. That's unusual, I think to myself.

“Moving in your mysterious ways, are you?” I ask. But Jesus isn't moving at all. He's six inches high and made of plastic. And he's attached to the wall in front of my face. So it's a disappointing conversion back to atheism for yours truly.

I've woken up in bed in a white room with clean linen and clean underwear. I don't appear to have been interfered with in any way.

Now a good practice, when waking in a strange environment, is to examine

the ribcage for stolen organs. It's wise to check that all your parts are present and correct before accepting breakfast. Lucas taught me that. It's whilst executing these basic checks that I look down and discover a terrifying anomaly: Jesus again, staring blankly from the region of my crotch.

What kind of mentality puts the face of the Messiah on the front of a pair of y-front underpants? One slip of the contents and it looks like Jesus is sticking his tongue out.

“Christ!” I accurately observe.

I can't find my clothes, so I wrap myself in a sheet, noting that, although I may not've lost a kidney, I've still got a pretty nasty gash on my side. I make for

the door. The sticky handle slips in my fingers. I figure it's blood from the graze on my palm. But the gashes've scabbed over. And there's blood on the handle, clear as day. I feel a chill creep up my back, a chill that grows and grows as I twist the knob and nothing seems to happen.

But the door's not locked. That was my worry and I'm glad to be proved wrong. I step out onto a dark landing. I reach out for the ivory white banister and I scream silently. What my bleary eyes took for the handrail turns out to be a scrawny arm. And that arm retracts, lightening fast, into the hunched figure of possibly the most peculiar person I've ever seen.

Christ, it's repulsive – almost rodent-like. But what sex is it? I can't tell from the black, basin-cut hair. It watches me from dark sockets, twitching its head like a housefly.

“Fuuuuuuuuck, you're ugly,” is a thought that shouldn't get said out loud, but does.

The creature's response is surprising. “Yes, the good Lord has gifted me rather idiosyncratic features. Not for me the sin of vanity.”

I don't know what to say. I'm still feeling woozy. I'm unsteady on my feet. I reach out to steady myself on the *actual* banister, but it's further away than it appears and I fall flat on my face.

“Sorry,” I say, picking myself off

the floor, “but since I left Jesus, I’m having problems with perspective.”

The little creature’s face takes on a thermo-nuclear glow. “Yes! Yes! I know! Jesus puts everything into perspective!” And it raises its hands to the sky, flinging blood from bandaged palms up the wall and all over me. I dry retch, thinking of HIV and hepatitis.

Now I’m nervous. I decline the offer of a dirty handkerchief and wipe my face with the sheet. I laugh awkwardly. The creature turns and beckons me down the creaking stairs. What can I do? I’m not armed. I follow at what I think is a safe distance, through a bead curtain and into a pine-floored room. The walls are bright white and

bloodied, red handprints everywhere. What isn't spattered or smeared is Jesussed. I mean, it's got a picture of Jesus on it. If The Lamb of God isn't starring beatifically from over here, then he's starring beatifically from over there, usually above some ditty declaring his greatness whilst ignoring his dislike for anything resembling a graven image. Handmade pro-God tapestries adorn the few surfaces the Big J. hasn't got to and Mary, Mother of God, gets a look-in on a cushion cover.

Getting haemorrhoids on that hard floor – God forbid they sit on the Holy Virgin's face – sit two more creatures, imploring the gigantic Jesus above the mantelpiece for assumption. They're

small, spindly and I could probably snap them with one hand. But they're still truly terrifying.

They say God heals the sick. He also recruits them. Four more creatures sit in four wheelchairs, systematically gouging themselves with kitchen equipment. The most senior of these figures looks up from the steak knife embedded between the radius and ulna of his left arm and saws – in, out, in, out – to the sickening sound of tearing sinew.

“Good morning,” he purrs. “You’ll forgive us for not greeting you... en masse, but we find the stairs so much trouble, these days. Our piety has left us somewhat debilitated. But I trust Novice

Peter has been taking care of you?”

“Yes, Elder Adam,” Novice Peter replies, tugging the forelock of his appalling haircut. “But soon I hope to be a cripple, too, Lord willing.”

It’s not a recognisable word that comes out of my mouth.

Elder Adam wheels forward, leaving burgundy daubs on his tyres. He’s so close I can feel the heat from his decomposing mouth. “Well then,” and he reaches into his cardigan to produce my papers. “Well then, young Hugo...” and he taps my photograph with the talon that sprouts from his bandaged mitt, “welcome home, brother.”

“I...” I start, but the words stick in my dry throat.

Elder Adam smiles wide and warm. “You have questions. It’s only natural.”

“How did I get here?” is my eventual croak.

“Ah! You’ve found your tongue, child. Well, the good Lord put you on this Earth to glorify him.”

I nod furiously. I figure it’s best to agree. I’ve heard of religious extremists scoring the soles of a captured nonbeliever’s feet before. Then they can preach all day and he can’t run away. That’s God’s love for you.

“Er, yes. I... I understand that,” I say. “What I meant is... how did I get here... in this place, with... with you?”

“You cried for help and we

answered. You went to the bridge,” answers the female Elder Paul. “That was your cry!”

It seems they’ve got me figured for a suicide attempt.

“You went to the bridge,” Elder Paul trills in her soprano voice, “and you jumped. But we caught you. And we know what you did was a sin, but the Lord forgives those who repent.”

Obviously ‘caught’ me metaphorically, I reason, or I wouldn’t feel like I’d been hit by a truck.

“Many of our brethren come from the bridge,” Intermediate Solomon explains excitedly. “It is the duty of those still afflicted with the curse of walking to find souls to save. And what

a soul you are! You already wear the wounds of the stigmata! How pious you must have been before your deviation from Jesus!”

Suddenly, everyone’s studying me. And so I check out my reflection in the polished wooden floor – all wrapped in white linen, with my injured head and hands, and the great gash in my side. I look like I’ve been crucified by work-experience centurions.

“Yes, it is an auspicious occasion,” confirms the very-pregnant Under Elder Eve who’s clearly been under Elder Adam.

“God must truly be thanked for bringing you home to us!” says Novice Luke. “You are a sign, my prodigal one,

a sign that even the most devout, even those that bear the true, God-gifted wounds of the stigmata, may fall from grace. You are a reminder that we must not backslide. We must slash our devotion into ourselves, lest we forget!” And he takes up some bladed implement.

“Please!” I say, attempting a calm voice and failing miserably. “Please! Don’t slash anything! Look: I don’t have the stigmata. I’ve never had the stigmata!”

“It’s useless to deny,” says Novice Peter.

“You *can’t* deny it,” says Elder Adam, “the evidence is clear to see, as plain as day; the wound of the crown of thorns etched into your forehead!”

“It’s acne and a head injury!” I bawl.

“No!” cries our maniacal collective simultaneously. “It is the wounds of Christ!”

“As is this!” Elder Adam whispers, unwrapping the swathes of dirty bandage around his hand and letting the loops fall silently to the floor. He takes a pen and jams it through the rot-edged sphincter in his palm, pushing a plug of congealed matter out onto the rug. His expression remains beatific throughout, suggesting that, not only is this perfectly normal behaviour, but a noble pursuit children should be encouraged to emulate.

“Disinfectant,” I creak, backing as far as the walls will allow.

“No disinfectant,” says Novice Peter, “because we are pure both in faith and physiology. There was no disinfectant for Jesus, after all. And what right do we have to something denied to Jesus? No, there will be no disinfectant for any of us, including you. For what is rot, anyway, but the slow return of our bodies to the Lord, bit by bit.”

I don't like the sound of 'including you'. Something about it sets me climbing the walls, searching behind the hangings for some kind of window to jump out of.

“Yes, we are pure,” says Elder Paul in her increasingly high-pitched voice. “As were you – to bear the mark

of the crown of thorns. But do not fear. You can be again.”

“I’ve never been pure!” I scream. “This isn’t stigmata. It’s a great, big spot brought on by drug use and adrenal stress!”

“Let he who is without sin,” answers Novice Peter with his truly horrible grin. “The straight and narrow path may prove difficult to see at first, but turn it to the side and you will find it to be the broad, shining blade of the Stanley knife.”

“But I’m *really* bad! I’m pure hate!”

“Then it’s a good job we found you.”

I tear at the Jesi (is that the

plural?), ripping down the images, searching desperately for the deity that disguises the door.

“Ah! The Devil is once more within him,” observes Elder Adam. “See! See how he desecrates our home; our faith! Seize him gently, brethren, and scourge him til he sees the Bright and Shining Light.”

Now call me old-fashioned, but I don't fancy being scourged. Fair play, it was nice of them to lend me the Jesus y-fronts, but I don't intend being razored to within an inch of my life for the privilege. It's just not cricket, kids.

What are my options? Well, I don't stop to consider them. I see Elder Adam's huge, serrated knife waving

about and I decide I'm taking it off him and sticking it into the first freak who comes near me. It doesn't matter that it's still imbedded in his forearm.

So I dive forward and the next moment's like something out of The Sword in the Stone, only with an old man replacing the chunk of rock. And I've got my foot on his shoulder. And I'm yanking the knife handle, and he's screaming at me. And there's this almighty ripping sound, a fountain of arterial spray and...

Well, Elder Adam may love God, but I doubt the Good Lord returns the sentiment with the same degree of intensity. Because I extract the knife, but not without removing one of his ears in

the process. I slip and slice the thing clean off. It arcs through the air and lands in Novice Peter's lap with a big, wet plop.

“My God!” Peter cries.

“Sweet Jesus!” croaks Elder Adam, spewing blood like a fire hydrant. “His knife work is outstanding! Though the Devil may be upon him, it is clear he was sent here to set us on the Lord's path! Mutilate us, brother Hugo! Maim us for Jesus! Kill us, good Christian and send us back to our God! Truly(!) we're all going home in an ambulance tonight!”

My stomach gives out. Everywhere.

“Debase us, Knifeman Hugo!” bawls an orgiastic Novice Peter. “Vomit upon us! Defile us so that we may be

humble before God!”

I clamp my hand over my mouth. It doesn't stop the retching, just redirects it sideways.

“Cut my head off and throw up down the stump!” pleads Under Elder Eve.

Now I'm not used to being taken so literally. So when they ask me to kill them, I tell them no, if they really want to die and, *I mean really*, then they're going to have to do it themselves... Well, you can say I'm surprised when they take me at face value. Suddenly I'm standing in a pool of guts.

I'm in the street. I've escaped. Crowds again. Everywhere. I guess the

human race must've reached the top of the evolutionary arc and slid down the other side. I mean, how many thousands of years have we been in existence and we still haven't worked out how to walk round each other? But I tell you one thing: everyone moves out the way for the man in the Jesus Christ underpants.

“I thought you'd defected,” Calamari growls.

“We lost 'im on the bridge, Sir,” Elton interrupts.

“You lost him on the bridge? How can you lose someone on a bridge? A bridge is three parts: a beginning, a middle and an end, and each one of those parts is clearly visible from any two of

the others.”

“An’ then there’s the bits that go upwards, Sir: the supports. Well, these bits that go up... ‘e went up ‘em. We don’t understand what ‘appened next. We fink...”

“I don’t care what you think. I suspect you don’t think at all. I’ll find out myself. *You*, Jupiter, standing there in your blasphemous knickers! What happened to you?”

“I fell, Sir. Then I was held captive by religious maniacs. They disembowelled themselves and I escaped.”

“At least somebody’s showing some bloody initiative!” Calamari snaps.

We're behind schedule. There isn't time for full recriminations so he herds us straight onto the bus. I risk his wrath and ask a question.

“Mr Calamari?”

“Oh, for fuck's sake! What?!”

“How did you find me, Sir?”

“I've had unpleasant devices implanted under your skin. Whilst you slept.”

We offload Elton. The next stop is Cobleigh On The Wold and a grand, gala fundraising ball. Funds for what, I don't know.

So, how best to describe Cobleigh? Well, half's a beautiful, bucolic paradise of gently rolling hills,

wildflower meadows and tiny, tucked away cottages you can barely see from the road. Then there's Hangman's Wood, which is every bit as horrible as it sounds. And then there's Battencross Manor. Which is worse.

I don't know what it is with rich lunatics and architecture. Imagine the Houses of Parliament eaten and then passed out as a stool by some colossal camel. Add turrets and Alzheimer's for the full effect. When dusk falls, its crooked spires cast brutal, serrated shadows the breadth of the village. Mention its name and the locals go white and mutter about full moons and missing children. They speak of a beast. They speak of many things, but little makes

sense.

If the Stemset Building is the entrance to Hell then Battencross Manor is its exit.

But it's not the architecture that bothers me, or the coterie of freaks that stalk its hallways. It's the memory of what we did there that haunts me to this day.

So picture the scene: black night; our great whale of a tour bus winding along a narrow, twisted road – little more than a dirt track gouged through a Brothers-Grimm forest of gnarled, acid-bitten trees. There's no light save for our dim headlamps and the flickers of marsh gas. We've bogland to our left and collapsing rockface to our right. We

dodge quicksand, falling rocks and something large and fast-moving that I'm sure should be extinct. It leaves its claw-marks along the length of the bus.

“Battencross Manor survived the Civil War,” a big goon tells me, ashen-faced, “because no one dared go near it.” And I shiver.

We exit the woods past the cemetery, where flame-torches up-light ungodly stone angels and Death watches us with empty eye sockets from his perch above the gatehouse. And I swear he moves. Just a little.

The Manor rises up to meet us, a dark arachnid abortion wreathed in fog. The floodlights *would* guide our way up the winding gravel driveway, but the

floodlights appear to be exploding. A smartly attired man with a waxed moustache and smoking jacket is smashing them with a log. He salutes as we pass.

An upstairs window flashes cyan blue as an unknown individual attempts to reanimate pig carcasses with an electric generator. I can't help thinking he'd have more success with animals that still have heads. Furious-faced, he hefts their lifeless, decapitated torsos to the window and launches them into thin air. He adopts a joyless smile as they hurtle downward, exploding on impact with the patio furniture on the Italian terrace. An old woman shields herself with an umbrella. She has meat in her

hair. I look left and see a man beating his wife with a stuffed dog. This is not as weird as it gets by any stretch of the imagination. There's more. There's *always* more.

We approach the great front entrance. The family crest shows two goats copulating. The male has three testicles. And when a female visitor points this out to her immaculately dressed gentleman companion, he drops his trousers to reveal a similar arrangement. I don't get to see what lies beneath her turquoise ballgown, but the man does and points at it with furious enthusiasm.

It's unusual to see Calamari stuck for words. His rugged jaw line thrusts

its way into my field of vision.

“During the conflicts, because of the Republicans and the danger in the cities and all that sort of thing, the Battencross clan chose to isolate themselves. They became self-sufficient in, er, *all sorts* of ways. Ways you or I might find a little... *over-familiar*.”

“Small genepool stuff?” I suggest euphemistically.

“Erm? You could put it that way. So... so don’t be surprised if you encounter people you might consider a little, er...*special*.”

“Inbred?”

“Special,” says Calamari coldly.

“I’m sure they’re all very nice people,” says I. I don’t condemn folk till

after I've met them. Speaking of which...

I've been observing the goons over the course of the journey. They've got a hierarchy and a leader in the form of a huge, cauliflower-eared brute called Spencer. I doubt we're ever going have a conversation about Art or classical music, but as far as belching and leering at women go, we get along fine. They follow Calamari's directions to some loose degree, but there's clearly no love lost between the factions.

"We usually take our orders from Mr Durham," Spencer tells me. "Old Beetle Bollocks."

"What kind of orders?" I ask.

"Oh, dishin' out a few right-

handlers on an as-and-when basis,” he says, rearranging his knuckles. “Guess you could call us freelance troublemakers.”

“Oh,” I say. But I’m wandering off the point. Let’s backtrack a little:

“Inbred?” I say.

“Special,” says Calamari.

“I’m sure they’re all very nice people, Sir,” I say.

“Are you ‘special’, Sir?” asks Spencer, insolence etched all over his face. “You look ‘special’, Sir.”

Now Calamari may be intelligent and deeply political but let’s not forget that he’s also a man-mountain prone to violent rages and bouts of impromptu teeth-extraction. I’m expecting a violent

reprisal, maybe something testicular loosened with a blunt penknife. Maybe the rules have changed, or the insane monster's switched to a more effective medication, because he just laughs his horrid laugh and claps Spencer on the back. Spencer seems confused. Calamari just smiles. Spencer looks wary. Calamari adopts the tour guide position at the front of the bus. We're all waiting for something nasty to happen. But it doesn't. Not yet.

“Okay,” says Calamari. “Now, I think we all know why we're here. This is a two-pronged mission: Jupiter, you're to spike the drinks with surgical spirit, wait until they're all half-poisoned and then roll Former Prime

Minister Bactrian out. See if you can get them to pledge some money. Be polite – these are a better class of inbred. And, if Lady Battencross propositions you, you're to give her whatever she wants however she wants it.” And he points to the door. “Now, Spencer,” he continues, “you and the Brownshirts: You’re to locate young Lord Battencross...”

“Sir...” I start, about to ask something important – can’t remember what it was now.

“That’s all you need know!” he barks. And he presses a jar of ethanol into my arms and shoves me down the steps. But the briefing’s still audible through the window so I listen in.

“...And deal with him,” Calamari

concludes.

“Brutally?” Spencer asks.

“I’ll leave that to your professional judgement,” says Calamari. “Just keep it quick, quiet and clean. Keep that in mind and you can do whatever you want.”

It sounds like they're planning to kill Lord Battencross, so I decide to stay in full public view the entire evening. I wouldn't put it past Calamari to frame me. And I straighten my tie and stride purposefully into the manor.

Right. Imagine blocks, great stone blocks, piled in the halls, stacked haphazardly in the walls and slipping silently from the vaulted ceiling and almost braining me. Whatever money the estate generates, it clearly doesn't go

into maintenance. I'm inside the building now, but the moss, mould and toadstools say different. Pull back the ivy and you'll see the family portraits; fifty variations on the Hapsburg-jaw.

I survey my fellow guests, all beautifully dressed and all deeply, deeply weird. Darwin would weep. Take a photograph and you'd have all you need to disprove evolution forever.

We push through the throng, past someone who may be Malmot in disguise, and there's seething old dowager, Lady Digitalis Battencross, in all her cacky-fingered glory.

Okay. I want you to picture Lady Battencross. She's an interesting looking woman. She used to travel to Africa to

shoot endangered species and enjoy the last vestiges of institutionalised racism. On her last trip, she'd caught a particularly vicious stomach bug and lost two thirds of her bodyweight in the form of violently-evacuated excreta. What's left no longer fits the epidermis. She looks like she's been deflated. Her empty skin hangs in huge fabric-swathed folds, from armpit to ankle, like a flying squirrel. You've heard of 'Dowager's hump'. Well, this is 'Dowager's rudimentary wing membrane'. Throw her out the window and she'd glide.

You'd think looking like an airborne rodent would dampen her social standing. But you'd be wrong. You see, it's what's inside that counts.

And what's inside our Lady B. is a fully-functioning reproductive system. In a social circle that's been inbreeding itself toward total sterility, a fertile woman's hot property. Even a widowed old gorgon with a face like a bag of spanners can be a goddess.

She surrounds herself with arselickers, aspirants and dirty old toffs who want to impregnate her. It's all too much for her son, Lord Timothy Battencross, eighteen years old, and currently skulking round the buffet with a scowl on his face.

Young Timmy is going through a rebellious phase, "searching for truth and honesty in a life hitherto characterised by bourgeois privilege."

His words, not mine. Like all teenagers, he likes to sit back and pass judgement on people, which is why he's thrown his hat in with the Socialists. They love redistributing his trust fund for him. There's talk he may become their next leader. He's certainly ugly enough. Perhaps this is why Calamari wants him dead.

A drunken cellist counts his drunker ensemble into an unrecognisable piece of music and I gather the ball has started. Time to disguise my humble origins and work the room. And I try, but all I meet with are blank faces and quickly-turned backs. I could let it bother me, but I prefer to remain philosophical. After all, surely it's better to be rejected by

people who *don't* know you than people who do. And I content myself with the knowledge that, however bad I'm doing, Elton would be doing worse.

I locate the only non-alcoholic drink in the building and I find myself a corner to hide in. And what do you know? The woman with the turquoise ballgown approaches me.

“Are you a baboon?” she asks. I'm at a loss for words.

We're joined by the gentleman with the three testicles, unless I'm very much mistaken.

“Maybe he's a rhesus monkey?” says the man. “I shot one of those in Rangoon.”

“No, dear,” the woman replies,

“that was your father.”

“Really! And the gorilla I shot in Sumatra?”

“Your mother.”

“Which explains...”

“Yes, dear. The inheritance money.”

“Gosh! Suppose I’d better take their heads off the wall.”

“Nonsense, dear. You shot them fair and square.”

I’m guessing this is a joke. Either that or I’ve finally slipped into schizophrenia.

“Excuse me!” interjects a beard with a person behind it. “I’ve got an honorary degree in animal husbandry. *I’ll* identify him.” And he grabs my hand

and starts examining my fingers. “No fins,” he concludes. “He’s not a fish.”

“I’m human,” I whisper to the woman.

“Bunkum!” the beard spits. “How many balls do you have?!”

“Two...” I say warily. I’m not in the mood for show and tell, so I make my excuses and leave. Calamari collars me on some staircase or other.

“Is everybody drunk yet?”

“No, Sir.”

“Why not?”

“The ethanol reacted with the punch and caught fire.”

“Is that usual?”

“Round here, Sir? Anything goes. I’m sure I saw somebody eating a chunk

of potassium earlier.”

“And?”

“His face melted.”

“Yes, that sounds like potassium alright. Any sign of young Lord Battencross?”

“I believe he’s sulking in his room, Sir.”

“Why?”

“He thinks eating potassium is ‘decadent’.”

“Well, it *is* expensive. Tell me, Jupiter, is he alone?”

“He’s an extremely unattractive young man, Sir, so I would imagine so.”

“Hah!” Calamari cries. “*Perfect!*” And he stalks off with that shark’s smile and his eyes lit up all horrible. I figure

it's time to fetch Bactrian. There's little else I can do.

All the events in my existence, they come as self-contained chapters book-ended by bursts of truly cataclysmic weather. It's always been so. My mother died in a thunderstorm. My father was taken away in a blizzard. Bongo was stolen in a heatwave and I was married during a mudslide that collapsed the registry office. Tonight, dear reader, it's raining fish.

Well, I don't know why it happens. It just does. I'm standing by the bus. Bactrian's half-in, half-out of the luggage compartment and it occurs to me that we didn't build him to withstand plummeting cod. So I grab his legs and

ram him back into his armoured container. All around me, I see toffs with nets, toffs with bed sheets, toffs with their petticoats outstretched and their underwear showing, all trying to catch tomorrow's dinner.

Like I said, I'm used to stormy portents of doom. But my meteorological omens are usually explicable by science. Fish, though? Fish isn't weather. Fish is just plain bloody stupid. Fish takes the piss. Fish is a middle-fingered salute direct from God.

I take a while to ponder what the Almighty's chosen to infuriate me with this time. Something truly, unbelievably horrible, no doubt. Ten to one, there's Lord Battencross involved and I'll lay

even shorter odds that you'll find yours truly, up to my damn neck in it, and screaming.

Did I mention why I stopped going to church? Well, you tell me how Torment creates a good man? All God's 'chosen' people, He shat on them. Turning to piety, that's the brain's defence mechanism. God *isn't* testing your faith, He's testing your *endurance*. Like a kid burning ants with a spyglass; or pulling the legs off a spider. Or Josef Fucking Mengele, for Christ's sake.

God's the drunk parent who burns His children with cigarettes for sport, orchestrating genocides to fill the quiet patches in His eternal diary. And on a smaller level, a deeply personal level,

He singles out individuals for special, degrading treatment. This is how I find myself in Lord Battencross' bedroom with a pistol in my hand.

I wondered how my life and the teenager's death would intertwine. It seems I'm to end it. But then...

The room, for all its red flags and posters of Che Guevara, is still the epitome of genteel poverty; it's beautifully furnished and larger than my whole house. The wallpaper screams elegance. The bed sheets may be worn but they're still silk. It's just the seven dead goons that ruin the feng shui. That and the young man with his face slashed up into mosaic pieces.

"Don't bother with the boy," says

Calamari. “He’ll bleed to death soon enough. Shoot Spencer.”

Spencer, kneeling at my feet, looks up at me. I raise the gun to his temple. And I freeze.

“Amateur!” he spits. Calamari snatches the weapon and unscrews the silencer. “The bang is very important,” he explains.

Two shots at point-blank range; Spencer’s skull explodes; he collapses, leaking red into the Persian rug.

“Now take this,” says Calamari, handing me the gun. “And, for God’s sake, smile. You’re a hero!”

I watch him bend over the twitching corpse.

“Who’s ‘special’ now?” he asks,

jamming his fingers into the entry wounds.

I feel sick. I turn back round in time to catch him digging in the dead goons holsters. He takes out Spencer's semi-automatic. He presses the barrel to my forehead and pulls the trigger. Click! Nothing but a click.

"Dud bullets!" he laughs. "Just in case."

I don't ask just-in-case-what? I *know* what.

"Now swap those magazines for live rounds," he growls. "And look sharp! We're expecting visitors."

The English stiff upper lip? It's a myth. Lord Battencross ebbs away in his mother's arms and the poor cow

explodes with grief. The air's full of tuxedos and crinoline gowns and suddenly, as the man found holding the gun, I find myself standing on the window ledge with a makeshift noose around my neck.

“No, no!” Calamari cries. “He stopped them!”

I don't know what happens next. I pass out from asphyxiation.

Durham sits in his prison cell, half-heartedly adjusting the mandibles of his stag beetle costume. I mentioned before that he likes entomological role-play. He sticks on a pair of antennae and he sets about getting down and dirty the six-legged way, with no forethought for who

might charge in and arrest him. In this case, me.

Now get this: Circumstantial evidence has worked in my favour for once. If you believe the papers, then I'm the brave Army officer who rumbled Durham's plans and set out on a doomed mission to foil them. I may not have saved young Lord Battencross, but I took on his executioners – single handed, I might add – and dealt out summary justice. I then set off with a team of crack commandoes, tracked the vile, insectoid pervert down and stormed his filthy lair. I confiscated his weapons, burned his massive haul of drugs, liberated the underage prostitutes he kept chained in the basement and then

delivered the scheming coward into the hands of the authorities to face trial and a firing squad. The Brownshirts have disappeared and now I'm a hero. But that's if you believe the press. And who's just nationalised all the newspapers and replaced their editors with government-friendly stooges? Clue: Begins with 'M'. But I'll level with you: I only went on Durham's capture mission because no one remembered to tell me not to. What I'll be doing later, at his interrogation, is anyone's guess. I'm just going with the flow.

So Durham flops backwards on his domed wingcase and promptly slides off the plank bed and onto the floor. He was apprehended rubbing abdomens with a

disinterested women half his age. She looked relieved when we burst through the window. I guess dressing up like a giant dung beetle just isn't everybody's bag. Was the huge ball of shit real? I don't know. Tear gas makes for a pretty good room deodoriser.

You wouldn't take this man, currently floundering around helpless on his back, for the criminal who ordered Lord Battencross's assassination. Equally, you probably wouldn't figure him for a sinister paramilitary leader. Well, you'd be right on the first count and wrong on the second, because our Mr D. is far more than an arch deviant in shiny neoprene trousers and bicycle-lamp-lens compound eyes. Yes, Dirty

Old Durham is as damn near to a Chief of Police as possible in a corrupt country where authority rests in the hands of those who shout loudest and hit hardest. His 'Brownshirts' rule the streets, second only to Malmot's more menacing and seldom-seen-in-daylight secret service. Durham wants to merge the two factions with the Army and declare himself Leader of Everything. So you'll understand when I tell you that Malmot has taken umbrage to this and chosen to frame his former colleague for murder.

So he's hauled off his shell and dragged into your classic darkened room. The bare desk with the bright lamp, the smooth-talking but sinister

questioner with the fuming cigarette, the dark figures looming in the background – I'm one of them – they're all present and correct. All we need's a nervous breakdown and a signature and we can be out of here and back in time for breakfast.

But our beetle's made of sterner stuff. He knows all the tricks. He's wise to any subtle, mental manipulation. Professional pride, I figure, but, having been an extractor of confessions, he's unlikely to give one without an almighty struggle. Bring on the pliers, I think to myself, because he sure ain't going for the sweet talk. And then I feel slightly ashamed of myself. Perhaps, I'm becoming desensitised.

Durham's skewered like a pincushion, sharpened bits of this, that and the other jutting out of him at various angles. Is he bothered? Ask the stenographer. Forty-eight pages of yawns and non-committal grunts would suggest not. In fact, the written record reveals little except me losing my temper.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" I find myself yelling. "How many fucking legs do you think he's fucking got?!"

Because the torturer can't seem to tell where Durham starts and the beetle suit ends, the big twat keeps hammering away at extremities made of vacuum-hose and papier-mâché and wondering why he's not getting anywhere.

After another twelve pages of nothing much, even our mild mannered stenographer's stamping her little feet and calling him a retard and Calamari winds up asking the poor lad to leave. Then it's grumpy faces all round as the incompetent youth takes the walk of shame and Durham bids him goodbye with six different middle fingers simultaneously. You'll notice he hasn't spoken yet. I'm wondering if he can. Perhaps he communicates in clicking noises?

This is all too much for Calamari who has, in the past, applied for a torturer's position, but was turned down for being over-qualified.

He strides forward and smacks the

ringing metal lamp with his massive, meaty fist – directing it into the prisoner’s bulbous eyes.

“Take the mask off.”

“No,” comes the answer in a surprising, bronchial bark. I’d expected a sustained chirrup and a quick tune played on his back leg. I have to say I’m disappointed. A black, hairy limb reaches forward for a cigarette and pokes it into the pink-lipped hole between the antler-shaped jaws on his helmet.

“I’d say it was good to see you,” he says. “I really would. Only some wanker’s blinding me with a lamp.” Master of understatement is our Durham.

I’ve told you about Calamari’s taste

for the theatrical manipulation of fear. But it's hard to get the psychological edge over a six-foot-six monster dung beetle wreathed in shadows and smoke. He cuts a menacing figure alright. So, it's with barely concealed disappointment that Calamari orders the blackout curtains opened and we ditch the Gestapo-style melodramatics in favour of good, old-fashioned sunshine.

I guess this particular species of insect must be nocturnal – or at least realise how ridiculous he looks in broad daylight – because the helmet comes off. Where once was a tall, brooding man-beast we see a short, scowling Don Quixote in a wrinkled wetsuit. He sucks in his hollow cheeks and fixes his piggy,

red eyes on each one of us in turn.

“So much for the spirit of interdepartmental cooperation,” he growls. “I look around me at your – hah! – ‘Interrogation Room’ and your – ahem, hah! – *strong-arm* boys here, and it occurs to me that someone’s got a different definition of the word.” And he stubs his cigarette out on the table, much to Calamari’s twitchy annoyance.

He unfolds like a Swiss army knife, striking the ash into Durham’s lap. He leans in close, his hair bristling and his flint-axe teeth glinting in a jaggedy row.

“Now,” he hisses. “How can I put this politely...” And what happens next isn’t nice.

Okay, I don’t know your familiarity

with professional sadism, or how rapacious your appetite for maiming and mutilation might be, but I'll hazard a guess, suggest it's low, and further suggest that you keep it that way. Curiosity's a strange impulse that can lead us into situations our sanity can't handle. With that in mind, I'll keep things light and leave out any references to the removal of fingernails, testicles and electric shocks, and the unfortunate things that can be done with a length of old-fashioned dynamite fuse. It might make the following harder to follow, but I figure that's for the best. There's a reason they call it 'blissful' ignorance. I *will* tell you that Durham spends the next ten minutes upside down. I pull my

fingers from my ears and catch the next conversation midflow:

“... and *you* claim to be the Chief of Police,” Calamari continues. “Well, let’s examine that statement a little closer.”

“Yes, lets!” says Malmot, making yet another unexpected entrance. The door slams behind him, the air turns grey around him. He steps forward, we take two paces back. He has *that effect*. “What *exactly* are you chief of? A thriving black-market economy, perhaps? How nice. My *official* economy barely exists.”

“Sounding bitter,” Durham jeers.

“You’ve also got your dirty mitts on drugs, firearms, prostitution and

people trafficking. Lucky you. I've got the ability to raise taxes that nobody pays."

"You got the Army," Durham spits bitterly. "You got *our* Army!"

"I *rebuilt* the Army," Malmot corrects, "from damn-near nothing. And now the hard work's done, you want to take it all away from me." And he pauses. "You know, it's the sense of betrayal that hurts the most." And he sighs. And he smacks his former comrade in the mouth with a glass ashtray.

"What the hell is this about?" I whisper to a dark shadow standing next to me. But they don't know either. I figure all will become clear eventually.

But how long does ‘eventually’ take.

“You don’t deserve an army,” Durham taunts through split lips and crimson gushings. Malmot considers his response.

“I hope you like hanging by your ankles, because we’re going to lunch. So do try not to breathe in too much blood. Can’t have you drowning on us, can we?” He’s halfway out the door when he adds, “Oh, and just one more thing before we leave, something to mull over: We found your little subterranean bunker. Bit of a health risk. Full of vermin. So we *fumigated* it for you. No, don’t thank me. Do be a dear though, and sign this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the bill. Gas doesn’t come cheap, you know. Still, you can always redirect the money from your wages bill. After all, it’s much smaller now.”

And so we adjourn to the canteen. I’ve no notion what we’ll return to. I don’t recall what I eat. I just remember fighting to keep it down.

“Ah! Still alive, I see. Excellent!” says Malmot clasping his hands together. “Well, I feel we got a little sidetracked earlier. So let’s start again, shall we, and explain why such a loyal servant of His Majesty should find himself snatched in the middle of the night.”

“Yes, do please,” snarls a sarcastic Durham.

“Well, it seems a number of your more senior Brownshirts were involved in a little incident at Battencross Manor the other day.”

“The crowd control officers you requested?”

“The men I *made you lend me*. Yes.”

“And you know how much I hate the fact you can make me do that, don’t you?”

“Yes, it’s half the reason I do it. There has to be some perks to running the country. Anyway, it seems your boys went a little bit mental, assassinated Lord Battencross and would have moved on to the guests if Jupiter here hadn’t interrupted them.”

Durham shoots me a seething look.

“My men *don't* go mental. You set them up!” he spits.

“Yes, I did rather,” Malmot sneers. “But that’s what I do to young gentlemen with orders to kill me.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” says Durham.

“Audio!” Malmot orders and a disembodied voice fills the room. It’s Spencer, the Brownshirt thug I supposedly executed:

“He’ll be there, skulking in the background somewhere. When we’ve fulfilled all our contractual obligations, so to speak, we grab the old bastard by the shoulders and ram him, head first, through the windscreen. Make it look

like a traffic smash. Simple as...”

“And you’re sure about this?” asks an unknown voice.

“Sure as sure. Chief D’s orders, straight from the beetle’s backside, as they say.”

“You can see,” Malmot teases, “the esteem in which your men hold you.” And when Durham makes a disrespectful noise, he subjects him to an unpleasant procedure. What happens next? Well, once again, I have the transcript. It’ll be quicker if you read it out:

MALMOT: Now, if you’ll just stop burbling blood and let me finish...

DURHAM: Yes. [Sarcastic] Sorry.

M: Okay. Now, what would you say if I said I had evidence that you were behind the murder?

D: I know what you want me to say. You want me to confess. I won't, though.

M: You won't? Well, what if I was to show you... In fact, I *will* show you! Look at this! It's a flowchart! See this heading: 'Bloodbath at Battencross Manor' – it feeds into a box marked 'Class Warfare' before splitting off into two possible directions: 'Death and Glory' and 'Complete Proletariat Revolution'.

D: All of which has nothing to do with me.

M: Well, you can *say* that, but if you look here, next to the caption, 'Our

Wise and Benevolent Ruler', someone's drawn a picture of you wearing a big crown.

D: No one will believe I did that.

M: You dress as an insect for sex.

People will believe anything about you.

D: But... But...

M: No buts. Someone stab him with something.

D: Aaaaah!

M: That's for planning to kill me. Now, about this Revolution.

D: There is no Revolution! You know that as well as I do!

M: But, if there's no Revolution, how can there be a Counter Revolution?

D: I... Aaaaagggggh!

M: Exactly. Now, listen to me. I

said, *listen* to me, Durham! If you stop wailing then you might find this interesting. You see, in a few weeks time – not sure of the date, but it'll probably be a Friday – a group of men dressed suspiciously like your bullyboys will start a vicious protest against democracy.

D: Why?

M: Haven't worked that out either. Some kind of scandal or something. Anyway... There'll be all kinds of violent mischief, culminating in the armed occupation of New Downing Street. They'll have about two hours to declare a new government with a stupid name, issue some weird decrees, make themselves thoroughly unpopular, before

I invoke the Emergency Powers Act. You remember what that is, don't you?

D: Yes. We used it before. It's a license for you to declare martial law.

M: It is. And the first thing I'll do is flatten Number Ten with the 'Brownshirts' inside it.

D: But you'll be killing your own agents.

M: No, there's an escape tunnel. I'll be killing members of your extended family I bus in specifically to provide bodies. But that's by the by. Martial Law means no more fannyng around with Parliament and crappy old democracy – just the rule of my iron fist!

Oh, remember the old days, when we reclaimed London and toasted our

success from the top of a Chieftain tank?! It'll be like that. Only, this time, I'll be up on the turret and you'll be smeared all over the tracks! *Hurrah!*

All Present: *Hurrah!*

M: And then it's onwards and upwards toward *official* dictatorship! Not sure which way we're headed yet. Could be socialist – you'd like that, wouldn't you? – or perhaps we'll go goose-stepping off in the fascist direction? I haven't decided. Perhaps we'll do *both*, like the Castro boys' Cuba: set off to the left and end up marching back on ourselves from the right!

I hate it when conversation gets too

political. Throw in a smattering of Finance talk and you'll find me staring out the window thinking about sun-dappled woodland and fast-flowing streams full of trout.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, Malmot's talking about establishing a Corporate State. Every country needs to stand on its own economic feet, he says. But Durham believes our economy is based upon the production of cheap alcohol, counterfeit clothing and reliant on poseurs drinking themselves to death. With that in mind, why not play to our strengths and open England as a massive tourist resort?

He mentions Cuba again and someone else mentions that tourists bring

in fresh DNA.

“And you’ll need DNA if you’re going down the fascist route,” says Durham, “because too much of this Far-Right-Racial-Purity malarkey and you’ll end up as a nation of window-lickers.”

“It’s a fair point,” says Malmot. “But there’s one other business option we haven’t considered yet.”

“And what’s that?”

“Warmongering. We’ve nothing better to do.”

We stand in hushed silence. We’re a hundred years behind the rest of the world in weapons technology and starting a war would be suicide. But that’s for the future to decide. We’re here to interrogate the prisoner, Malmot

reminds us, and soon we're back into his alternate reality of Revolution and Counter-revolution.

“I didn't put King William back on the throne to have you haul him off and guillotine him!” he snarls.

Well, we won't be leaving until Durham 'confesses' his involvement in something or other. So I decide to get out of here. In mind, if not in body. I picture myself on the banks of a crystal-clear Estonian lake, eating beef sandwiches with a new wife and the children I don't have yet. We're all smiling and no one's drunk. But Durham can scream louder than I can think and soon the kids are screaming, too. And I consider that God must have been in an exceptionally

malicious mood when he gave misery a broadcast frequency.

Well there's nothing for me to do until Durham signs his confession, and he can't sign it till Malmot's finished making it up. But instead of sitting down and applying himself to the damn document, the evil wraith's left his beetle friend to stew in a blindfold and earmuffs and decided to drive me home in his great big, horrible car. Is he going to kill me? There's no chauffeur, no bodyguards and, when I do tune into the damned weird noise he calls his voice, I get the distinct impression he's attempting to be friendly. I don't like being in enclosed spaces with him. I find

the whole experience distinctly unnerving. Why's everyone rushing to confide in me all of sudden? Do I look like a sympathetic listener? More likely, it's because I'm unknown and expendable. There's no way I can use their secrets against them.

"You know what *bugs* me about Durham? Get it? *Bugs* me?!" he jokes. I get the feeling I should laugh. I manage some kind of chuckle, but my thoughts are back in the interrogation room.

"But seriously," he continues. "I've sent some good tarts that man's way and he always turns them down. It's a small thing in the scheme of things, but it registers on a subconscious level. It's suspicious. We know he likes women;

you caught him with one. But I wonder if knows what to do with them? I mean, in a conventional sense? Has he ever had penetrative sex? Or does he just rub buttocks in a nest of wood shavings?

“An army may march on his stomach but it thinks with its balls. There’s only so much space in a testicle, Jupiter, and if it’s full of semen then there’s no room for ideas. Full bollocks, empty head. You can’t trust a man who doesn’t ejaculate regularly because his brains are being squashed. It makes him prone to all kinds of peculiar notions. Dressing up as an insect being one of them.”

“I understand,” I lie.

“He was a good soldier, you know;

brutal, completely amoral, not much of a personality so to speak, but a brilliant organiser. Very efficient.”

We turn a corner into some rough-looking part of town I don’t recognise.

“This car’s armoured. The tyres are reinforced,” he tells me and sets about mowing down pedestrians to demonstrate. Some go over the top, some go underneath. Again, I suspect I’m becoming desensitised.

“Have you read Machiavelli?” he asks.

“I’ve read ‘The Prince’ and it was...”

“It’s pretty dull, isn’t it? Not half as juicy as you’re led to expect.”

“To be honest, Sir, it bored the tits

off me.”

“But you remember the part about Borgia and Ramiro De Orco?”

“Not entirely, Sir.”

We turn another corner. More dull thuds, more flying bodies.

“See! Windscreen’s not even chipped! Anyway... Borgia makes De Orco governor of Romagna. 1501 A.D I believe. De Orco’s a vicious psychopath and Borgia tasks him to reduce crime by any means necessary. And he does it, but makes both Borgia and himself pretty unpopular in the process. So Borgia has the clever idea of hacking his governor in half and leaving the bits on the piazza at Cesena with a block of wood and a sticky knife. It’s an open secret who did

it.

“Well, the masses think this is marvellous because cruel De Orco’s dead. And Borgia thinks this is marvellous because he has both law and order and immense popularity.”

“And was Durham to be your De Orco?”

“Once he’d cleaned up the streets, yes.”

“But you never got round to killing him?”

“No. He never got round to cleaning the streets. You’re looking at me blank. Perhaps I should explain: Durham and I parted friendship when the war ended.”

He backs the car up, squishing an

old woman in a tinfoil hat, and continues: “Insects again. Where you and I might see an ants nest, he sees a socialist utopia and sets about trying to emulate it. So I’m setting up sham parliaments for the European Union’s benefit, hoping for some foreign aid. Meanwhile, he’s saying, ‘sod the rest of the world’, and starts demanding we run the country like a giant fucking beehive. At this point, I realise he’s a tiny tad unhinged and persuade him to try policing, where this might be to his professional advantage. It’ll keep him from under my feet and, being a brutal nut, he might just be good at it. That’s when I hatch the De Orco plan.

“Now, how shall I put this? Well,

you expect your police to be a little corrupt. However, you also expect them to solve some crime along the way. It shows willing. It goes some way to justifying the salary.

“But Durham doesn’t care. He’s getting his pay direct from the criminals, letting them do what they want. Which leaves him more time to do what *he* wants. And what the drunken little dung-baller likes most of all is plotting my downfall and the confiscation of my army.

“But I didn’t work long and hard buttering up mad old Generals just to hand everything to the first nutcase in rubber trousers who comes along.”

“Would he know what to do with

an army?" I ask.

"Probably kit them out in stripy jumpers and send them off on a ten mile pollen hunt. There'll be weapons training, self-defence classes and lessons on how to build a bivouac out of little wax hexagons. So what do you think? ...Yes or no?"

"I'm guessing it's a no then, Sir."

"Yes, Jupiter, it's a no."

We drive up to a checkpoint. It's past curfew and a black-visored, heavily-armoured leopard handler asks for our documents. I can't see his animal, but I notice his leash disappearing up a tree.

"Oh, it's *you*, Sir," he says upon sight of Malmot. "So sorry." We drive

on without delay.

Now I don't know how to talk to Malmot. He despises independence and looks down on deference. Silent? You're plotting against him. Shy? You're hiding something. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. So I figure I'll just come out with it. Best to bite the bullet and accept the bollocking if it comes.

“Durham's plot, Sir... His revolution... How much of it's, er... *accurate?*”

Malmot makes direct eye contact. I wish he wouldn't. He should be watching the road. There's more thuds and crunches as he explains:

“You mean, how much of it's

bullshit?” And he laughs. “Remember Calamari’s speech in the Dental surgery? About delayed-truth? Well, this is similar. We’re reshaping the actuality to match the intent; making the crime fit the punishment, if you will.”

“All of it, from the butchering of the landed gentry, fomenting dissent in the capital, and the march to power on Downing Street, it’s all pure Durham, direct from his own secret papers. We’re just providing the people, the opportunities, the triggers, and putting everything into action a little earlier than he might have planned. And if we change the cast a little, make the division between the good guys and bad guys a little clearer cut, perhaps tack on a

happy ending, well, if it was a film script, he'd still get his name on the credits."

"But he can't lead a revolution from a prison cell, Sir."

"He can if he escapes. Or if we say he's escaped. Then he's twice as useful to us. 'Reds under the beds' and all that. Nothing like the threat of robbers to get the girls screaming and the boys running downstairs with baseball bats."

Well, I've had enough of Malmot's sage-like wisdom for the night so I'm relieved when we arrive at my house.

I hope he doesn't try and kiss me, I think to myself, because there's clearly an ulterior motive here. Fortunately, he doesn't. Just bids me goodbye with a

formal snort and tears off with his wheels squealing.

And I'm standing on my front step, just about to put my key in the door, when the damn thing creaks open in front of me. And there's Calamine, smiling like he knows something I don't. Which he always does. Smiling like he's just screwed my wife. Which he might have.

"Do you want to know what the future holds?" he asks me obliquely.

"Only if it's extremely, extremely uneventful," I answer because, by this point, I'm exhausted.

"I've been talking to your wife," he says.

"Oh, yes? With your penis?" Is this jealousy I'm expressing? Surely not. The

woman despises me and the feeling's more than mutual.

“Well, er, no,” he stammers. (You'd be surprised how prudish these men-of-action can be. Won't look at a woman sideways unless there's a wedding ring handy.)

“She wants you back. You're a hero now. You can expect to be treated like one.” He leans in close. There's a glint in his eye. “Would you like to know something else interesting? The tests came back and you're not infertile! Well, that's funny, I thought to myself. So we went through your bins and discovered that your wife has been taking black-market contraceptives! Isn't that good news?!”

“What? That my wife didn’t want to breed with me because she thought I was a waste of space?”

“No, the wanting you back.”

“She wants her widow’s pension. Already spent it, probably. Really, Calamine, as far as good news goes, this is, well... it’s just *shit* news, isn’t it?”

Calamine seems unfazed.

“You’re a hero,” he continues brightly, “you should make the most of it. I’ll take your report in the morning. You have some repopulating of the species to do!” He looks at me and laughs. “See you tomorrow, bright and early,” he says with a wink. “Or bleary-eyed and saddle sore!”

But cold, emotionless sex with

someone who expects gratitude doesn't appeal to me right now. I'm a hero. I have options.

Tomorrow becomes Today and the rest of the Future lines up accordingly. There's a knock on the door, but it's not Calamine. Calamine never shows.

"Special delivery!" says a man in a grey jumpsuit and peaked cap, handing me a docket to sign. I look at him and he looks at me. It's the gentleman with three testicles from Battencross Manor.

"Three corpses, mate," he says in a broad Geordie brogue. "Reckon you'll want 'em round the back. We'd bring 'em in for you but she's hurt 'er wrist." He jerks his thumb toward his female

companion, sat behind the wheel of a large, refrigerated van. The turquoise dress is gone but I recognise her red hair and mad, brown eyes. She waves.

“Shot ‘em ourselves,” he adds with a wink. “In Rangoon!”

“Couldn’t you deliver them to the workshop?”

“No, you’re not there,” he answers with impeccable logic. “And these things need careful storage. We’ve got some mechanical gubbins too. Couldn’t give us a hand, could you? Only she’s...”

“Hurt her hand. Yes, I know.”

Soon my shed’s full of mangled metal and human meat. I’m not happy. Bang goes my quiet weekend.

I contact Malmot. It takes ages to get through to him. Nobody knows who I am. The people who do, don't care. Then I realise that I don't own a phone and I've never been given a contact number. So whose is this mobile and how did I know what to dial into it? First things first, though...

"Ah! So you've got them, then?" says Malmot.

"Yes, Sir."

"Wondering who they are, aren't you?"

"The corpses? Yes. Yes, I do."

"Do you *really* want to know? I mean, *really*?"

"Er..."

"[Gleefully] Well, the black

fellow, he's Nelson Churchill, Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Though there isn't much of either at the moment. Pay particular attention to his neck. We used a garrotte and it bit quite deeply. The woman – can't remember her name offhand. Campaigns against landmines. We thought it'd be funny if she started campaigning *for* them. No foul play involved. Drank herself to death. Turned yellow and dropped off the twig, so, perhaps, a lick of paint's in order. ...And don't fiddle about with her. I don't appreciate that sort of thing."

"I've got an estranged wife, Sir. I'm not some weird loner."

"I've never known a marriage

certificate stop a pervert.”

“Yes, but...”

“And you *are* a weird loner – let’s not kid ourselves.”

“But...”

“Don’t interrupt. Now, last but not least – drumroll please! – we have Nathaniel Davenport, Leader of the Opposition – now leading the chorus in the Choir Invisible, God rot his righteous soul. Bled to death from an arrow in the femoral artery.”

“Very clever.”

“Yes. Keeps the evidence hidden in his trousers, so to speak. He’s our star turn. So get him on ice and sharpen your skills on the other two. He needs to be perfect. Now how long do you think

you'll need?"

"Do you have any engineers? I could prototype an animatronic skeleton and they could copy it. That'd save time. They'll need to resize for the woman though. Can't have her insides a foot and a half taller than her skin."

"[Tetchily] Yes, yes. I don't need the technicalities."

"Yes. [Icily] Sorry... Sir."

"On a different note, I see you're using the phone. Got the number then?"

"Yes, Sir. Though I don't know how. I..."

"Good. Got to go now. Goodbye."

* * *

Now let's jump to the backstage area of the 'Le Monde' exhibition Centre. Our ingredients are: one Malmot; one Jupiter; one bespectacled speechwriter; a sound technician with an old laptop computer; eight Goons (assorted); one dead anti-landmine campaigner; one dead Shadow Home Secretary; one dead Leader of the Opposition.

The speechwriter has a problem with something. He's a moany old git with spectacles and long, wavy hair.

"I just think that the Minister for Agriculture would give the statement, Sir. It's an Agriculture-related kind of thing."

"I don't care," answers Malmot, his

nose buried in a weapons systems catalogue. “That lot out there, they *certainly* don’t care. Anyone who *might* will be intoxicated. Anyone who *did* is mad. *You*. *You* are the only person in this entire country who cares.”

“But attention to detail, Sir, it’s...”

“Not necessary when the public has the attention span of a three-year old. A stupid three-year old.”

“But we’ve got a Minister for Agriculture here. Why aren’t we using him? It doesn’t make sense, Sir.”

“Does anything we’re going to say today make sense? Sure, there’s a sort of pseudo-logic underpinning it all, but it’s really just offensiveness for its own sake.”

“But...”

“You’ve got to play to your audience, boy. We’re dealing with the indigenous Englishman. Outrage is all these brain-dead chav goobers can express. Except pride in their own stupidity, of course.”

Now we jump to the Main Hall, Le Monde Exhibition Centre and an assembled cast of press, policemen and punters: human effluent in general.

“So let’s just recount what we know about Davenport,” says the white-haired reporter in the grey trench coat to the camera wrapped in barbwire. “The man, not the crockery! Ah hah! Well, he’s a man on a mission. But does that

mission extend beyond redecorating Downing Street? Detractors say he's all roundabout and no horses. 'Where's the policy behind the rhetoric?' Supporters, however, claim..."

"Previously," says the concrete-haired female reporter with the alcoholic shakes to the large camera armoured with riot shields, "Davenport was best known for his role as Shadow Foreign Secretary – regarded as the most pointless job in politics by many, given our country's status as the leper of Europe."

"So far," continues the white-haired reporter, "Davenport's time in Opposition has been characterised by a distinct lack of dramatic action – exactly

what we'd expect from a stop-gap leader who..."

"What's the problem?" drawls the paralytic cameraman.

"I was going to say he poses no real threat to the Prime Minister. But I don't know who the Prime Minister is anymore."

"Just start mouthing a name and I'll jerk focus like someone's bumped into my arm," says the cameraman, swigging on a container of meths.

"Davenport!" bawls the reporter in the bright red suit from the late night gossip show to his co-presenter's breasts, "What do we know about Davenport? What do you *want to* know about him? Well, he's here to give some

kind of big speech... but let's forget about all that boring stuff, eh Roxy? Here's three facts you may not know about our possible future Prime Minister!"

Roxy's lilac contact lenses home in on her autocue.

"*Fact One:*" she slurs, her swollen red mouth chomping up and down on some words. What's she using for lipstick? Car paint? You could listen to her talk but you'd regret the effort afterwards.

"And they say men have the damaged chromosome," says Malmot charmingly as we watch from a discreet balcony.

Roxy's red-suited companion looks

like he spreads diseases round fashionable gatherings.

“There’s simply no reason for that man to exist!” Malmot fumes. “Nail him to a cross and boil him alive in raw shit. At least that way he’ll provide some entertainment.”

Roxy throws back her head like a howling wolf.

“Dooooooooon’t *quote me on that!*” she bawls, and they head off to exchange genital parasites in the toilets.

I’m wearing a false moustache, but it’s unlikely anyone would recognise the hero of Battencross Manor anyway. I’m just not that impressive lined up alongside barely legal TV presenters with drug habits and Tourette’s.

The conference centre buzzes beneath us, the atmosphere tense like a hanging. Who'll die today, I wonder.

The Nation's alcoholism works in our favour. We want them ill-informed and irrational. We've our own journalists, ready to deploy, but there's no need just yet. The independent press are doing us proud. Wonky-bollocked bullshit's been mislabelled as Fact. Diagrams legitimise distilled-conspiracy theory and a mix of half-truths and downright lies ensure our walnut-brained audience has stoked itself into a drunken rage. There's a very real threat of violence – if we handle things correctly – and a sense that something truly terrible is about to happen.

The public being the public have decided that whatever Davenport's going to say, they won't like it. So they line the auditorium with blank banners and paints, ready to protest against 'it' the moment they know what 'it' is.

Prowling the aisles is the self-same child who tried to flog me a pistol on my hospital trip, now selling rotting veg at exorbitant prices to dissidents and old reactionaries alike. Credit cards accepted. And, for cash, you can get a nice little half-brick. And, for a banknote of the right denomination in the pocket of the right person, there's always an upgrade to a ringside seat. If you can't inflict a head wound from *that* distance, there must be something wrong with you.

Our speechwriter's looking nervous, twisting his long, wavy hair and blathering about 'context' and so on and suchlike. We all laugh when he mentions 'believability'.

"It's too late now," I tell him, grinning.

Malmot 's looking at me. He's cackling to himself. Am I really that funny?

"Well, we've wound up the right-wingers simply by being here," he laughs, "but Davenport's crowd are lefties."

"Tolerant bastards!" I swear. "You'll have to go some to offend those sons of bitches."

"Hah!" goes Malmot. "Now, the

second best way to wind up a lefty is to tell them they can't have something. It doesn't matter what it is. It doesn't even matter if it exists or not. It doesn't matter if it's dangerous and it might kill them. Tell a lefty he can't have a hat full of sea snakes and he'll run round with a placard and an earnest whine until he gets one. It doesn't matter about the poor sea snakes, who might not want to be in a hat. It's the lefty's right to have a hat full of sea snakes that counts. And he'll carry on pounding that fact into you until his flesh bubbles up in venom-filled fistulas and his heart explodes. Then God help the poor children with ouija boards hoping to contact Satan. It's yawns all round as our lefty's ghost gets

through and treats them to an inconclusive report thanking the snakes for their public-spirited cooperation.”

“What’s the first best way?” I ask dumbly.

“Just watch,” he tells me.

“Watch what?”

“Watch this!”

Okay. I realise that for someone who claims to have no feelings, I’ve spent a lot of time talking about them. That was a mistake. I don’t want your sympathy. I certainly don’t want your empathy. You start empathising with me and you might start acting like me. And then you try moving into my territory and I have to kill you. Horribly.

But I would like to think you could

share in my malicious pleasures. And, as far as things-that-shouldn't-be-fun-but-are go, this is a pretty special moment.

Now, I never got to be a proper father. I've never had a child reach adulthood thanks to the CIA. So this is as close to seeing one of my kids in a school play as I get. (Bactrian in Knightsbridge doesn't count; I had the delirium tremens at the time.)

I watch as my three undead children ascend the stage, resplendent in their shiny electric wheelchairs: Davenport; Churchill and the woman I now find is called Laetitia Veetabycs.

Cheers and jeers rend the air and my heart swells with pride knowing that something I've created should be having

such a profound influence on complete strangers.

“I’m finally having an effect on the world,” I whisper to myself.

“You’ve scribbled your first penis in the wet cement of History,” says Malmot, eyes aglow. “This is the dawning of the Death of Democracy!”

“Sounds like a song,” I say, and we drawl our way through a few cynical refrains, sung to the tune of ‘Age of Aquarius’. You could almost call it ‘teambuilding’. But our disillusioned speechwriter wants none of it.

“Poor boy,” Malmot teases. “What a terrible thing it must be to have political convictions.”

Laetitia Veetabycs rolls up to the

especially lowered podium. Our sound technician presses play on his laptop and, by the time an unconvincing female voice has finished renouncing all her previous beliefs and advocated rearmament as a means of boosting the economy, we know we're on for a riot.

“Face it,” she says. “Guns create job vacancies. ...In all sorts of ways.”

Nelson Churchill does nothing to calm the waters. I don't recall what he says, but I remember Speechwriter crossing himself and asking the Lord for His forgiveness.

“If you're worrying what God thinks of your script,” says I, ever the sermonising atheist, “you should have asked him to proofread it. Then it's His

own damn fault if he's too busy killing children in a famine, somewhere, to give it the once-over." And damn the little pen-pushing bastard if he doesn't curse me for a son of Satan.

Back to the stage and Davenport's vainglorious entrance – all blaring fanfares and electricity-guzzling lighting effects to drive the environmentally-minded audience into a state of apoplexy. Lasers shoot party logos across the ceiling. A back-projected screen shows Opposition propaganda, intercut with our own split-second subliminal calls for violence, public nudity and spontaneous defecation. You don't want to know what we've put in the smoke machines.

“My friends...” Davenport crackles over ear-rending levels of profanity.

“Tread water,” Malmot tells the sound technician.

“My friends, if we could just have a moment’s quiet...” says Davenport.

Malmot signals with a cigarette lighter and black security helmets seep into the crowd like rogue cells in a bloodstream. Short bursts of violence secure an uncertain silence punctuated only by the weeping of children. The technician gets the go ahead and we’re back in business with some affable preamble and a few lame jokes. You know the deal.

“Raise the pace,” says Malmot and the technician nods.

“Reedon Gifford!” Davenport growls. “Whilst Gifford’s end was terrible and *extremely* regrettable – let us make no bones about that –

his part in our nation’s decline extends far beyond the explosive tangerine he rammed up his rectum. Like so many right-wingers before him, he galvanised support by uniting the populace in a shared hatred. He planted the seeds of endemic, institutionalised xenophobia. It was a crop that his successors harvested and saw our complete and total ostracism from the European Union.”

Murmurs of support from the audience.

“See,” says Malmot, “all good lefty

stuff.”

“We were thrown a lifeline,” Davenport continues. “Unfortunately, the test of our loyalty to the common European cause, to assist with the economic rehabilitation of Hungary, was something of a poisoned chalice. It is a regrettable fact that a country’s most marketable export may not be to everyone’s taste. And, whilst I abhor the exploitation of women, whilst I wholly support the rights of the individual to practice faiths with doctrines of a more stringent nature, I suspect that we would have been best served steering away from the moral high ground and extending a helping hand to our Hungarian pornographer friends. We’re

all *born* naked, after all. If by ensuring the job security of people who choose to *remain* naked, we can keep bread on the table and food in our children's mouths, isn't that a good thing?"

This doesn't please the politically correct factions, but Davenport ploughs on. As much as a dead man can be said to plough, that is.

"And so we found ourselves in a situation that even meaningless sexual intercourse couldn't save. And then, of course, came The Great Separation – with starvation and war as an afterthought."

"I like it!" Malmot enthuses to the shamefaced Speechwriter.

"Our children grow up – and I use

the term loosely – malnourished and physically and intellectually stunted. Poor nutrition claims increasing lives year on year – more so this decade than the last two put together. This is intolerable.”

Somebody claps. Half-heartedly.

“It is a government’s duty to provide for the electorate,” says Davenport, to which Malmot shakes his head.

“Hah! Well, *no*, it’s the public’s duty to work for the furtherance of the State.”

“It’s our role to provide solutions to problems that the general public are ill-equipped to deal with,” says Davenport. “But, to provide a solution,

we must find it first. And to do that, we must be prepared to think the unthinkable and turn it into an unthinkable reality. Because politics is not a popularity contest. *Because it's the bitter pill and not the sugar bullet that cures the illness!*

“Now, I hope I’ve impressed upon you the severity of our predicament. We’ve no more options open; no lifelines left. It’s time we took that bitter pill. *It’s time we take our medicine!*

“Now, contrary to speculation and misinformation the solution is not donkey meat. No matter what the government may think, *there simply isn’t enough!* Extincting a species is a short-term fix that leaves us more desperate

than before. The donkey is our last untainted resource. It must be nurtured and protected. Anything we harvest from it must be replenishable. *Yes, 'replenishable' is the key word here!*"

What's that phrase? The one about the silence at the centre of the storm? Well, Davenport's sitting in it.

"Milk..." he says, which is enough for the vegans, who start the first big push for the stage. Little do they know...

"Yes, milk is replenishable," Davenport continues, "it contains calcium and it's very good for you. But we're also going to need protein, and a ready source of protein is... *is Semen!*"

Malmot collapses into hysterical laughter and Speechwriter was right to

damn me for a devil because I'm deriving yet more enjoyment. The sight of an auditorium of furious little fuckwits, fuming over our malicious concoction – it fills me with something that could be joy.

But heads crack, limbs snap and hysteria breaks loose. Bricks batter brains, bats break backs. Folk lose their footings and ribcages explode under tumbling bodies; breath lost is never regained. The auditorium becomes a Martian world: a sea of writhing limbs; a sky solid with putrefying fruit.

But nothing stops the sloganeers. Oestrogen Proactive parade with banners daubed with tadpoles and 'We've Swallowed Enough!' and the

chant rings out:

“Spunk...no thanks!
We won't drink wank!
Spunk...no thanks!
We won't drink wank!”

An order goes out and Davenport rolls to the rear of the stage, sheltering from vegetables and the smaller, more metallic forms of objection exploding left, right and centre.

“Okay,” Malmot tells the technician. “Let's get ridiculous.”

“The semen,” starts Davenport, “can be removed in the same manner as the milk. With, er, *specialised* machinery. This will, of course, mean

jobs for experienced farm workers and we intend to keep productivity high with a series of experimental initiatives.”

“Donkey Porn!” comes a cry from the audience. “No to the exploitation of female donkeys!” cries a red-haired woman I seem to recognise.

‘Donkey Rape! Coming to a Town Near You!’ reads a slogan on an ethnic print poncho held by her male companion; and they rally the crowd with increasingly ludicrous accusations.

“I think you know those two,” says Malmot with a smile. “Oh, the joy of Agitation! I learned everything I know from Oswald Mosley.”

“I said nothing about animal pornography!” Davenport pleads. “With

an ever-growing livestock population and the inevitable improvements in milking techniques, we intend to have two billion gallons by the year...”

And then the *real* carnage starts.

“Wind it up,” Malmot gestures and a snatch squad retrieve Davenport from the stage. “Arm yourselves,” he barks. “We’re leaving!”

But he doesn’t say which direction we’re leaving in. Every path’s choked with blunt-object-wielding maniacs – and I include the police in that definition. They’re kind enough to carve us an exit route – through the flying fists and grimacing faces – but they release the leopards before we’ve a chance to use it.

And then it's every man for himself.
And I'm charging down some staircase
or other, fast as my legs will carry me.
And then I run into Calamine – about a
week and a half late by my reckoning.
And we don't stop to greet each other;
we just run.

“What happened to ‘tomorrow’?” I
pant, remembering our meeting at my
house.

He holds up the bloody wound
where his little fingernail used to be. I
notice he's running with a limp.

“Staff Appraisal,” he tells me. “A
little test of my loyalty.”

“Did you pass?”

“With flying colours. I've friends in
high places and a twin brother I despise

immensely.”

“That’s great,” I say, ear cocked for thundering footsteps, scraping claws and violent screaming. “Now I suggest we run faster.”

And we’re travelling downwards at such a speed that I swear my ears are popping. And we’re out of the fire escape and hiding behind a roof support in the freight area, the blood punching the backs of my eyeballs. My lungs are bursting and my sharp breaths slice through the silence and echo the length of the loading bay. I pull my shirt over my mouth to deaden the noise, but I sound like a steam engine and the world knows it.

Now I’ve fired a gun in combat

and I've seen the Red Mist turn men into animals. I've seen them glaze over and hunt their fellow man like hounds running down a fox. I've seen it on the battlefield. Hell, I was seeing it in the playground when I was seven. Violence is always just a hair's breadth beneath the surface. We've cracked that surface and now we're reaping what we've sown.

The fire escape doors splinter open and what bursts out clearly wants to kick someone until his skull splits open. There's ten of them, armed with chairlegs and bloody shards of mirror; and I don't plan on being the next thing they pulp. I see a ventilation duct, dark, dirty, dripping, looking like something

you'd plug a colostomy bag into. Suddenly, I'm on Calamine's shoulders, and, before I know it, I'm levering the grill off and I'm in that duct. And then we're both inside. And they can follow us in, I reason, but it's a confined space and, if they want me, they'll have to queue. And I'll take the face off at least one of them before I go. And I make some heroic statement to this effect, which Calamine finds uproariously funny.

“We have pistols,” he reminds me. And when somebody invades our privacy, he puts a bullet between their eyes and laughs even louder. No one seems to bother us after that.

“So what have you been up to?” he

asks. “Apart from the obvious?”

“So *that’s* the first best way to wind up a leftie,” says Malmot with a curdled chuckle, when we’ve reconvened in the big, black armoured bus. “Not because it’s disgusting and so plainly stupid, but because the production of semen is a solely male preserve and the pro-feminist factions perceive it as sexist.”

“And eight hundred people died because of a perception,” says I.

“Eight hundred people were *admitted to hospital* over a perception,” Malmot corrects me. “Seven hundred and fifty of them critical. Fatalities are separate. No word of them yet. Still the

counting up to do. Standard practice is to pile up all the bits in a room and see how many complete bodies you can make.”

“Fun for all the family, then,” I hear myself comment. I can’t say I’m feeling so proud of myself anymore.

“Don’t be such a fuddy duddy,” Malmot snaps. “People have been killing each other over perceptions and misinterpretations for thousands of years. Who are you to go against precedent?” And then the smile creeps back across his face. “But let’s not argue over that now. Oh, we’ve crippled the Opposition, all right. And once we’ve sent Nelson Churchill out Jew-baiting and lynched Laetitia Veetabycs for

twinky-snatching, there'll be rioting from Land's End to the Hadrian's Wall Blockade. They'll be deader than stone dead ducks."

"What about the other parties?" I ask.

"Oh, they'll try to capitalise on the chaos," says Malmot, "just as we intend to. But the beauty of these single-issue organisations is that they tend to embarrass themselves the minute they emerge from their dank, backroom boltholes. England has an allergy to tie-dye ponchos, you know, and self-righteous, barely-literate protest songs. Some pansy calls for peace and the general public respond by praying for a tank battalion. We're going to give them

that battalion.

Chapter Five

Corrosive Urine And Other Forms Of Passive Resistance

It's time to get out of London. We get a couple of hundred miles, maybe, and then we break down. It's my fault. I have trouble with authority.

It's childish, I know, but I'd taken to urinating against the wheel arches under cover of night. It was my little gesture of disrespect. What I hadn't

realised was that I'm some sort of biological freak. I'd given up alcohol and my body was expelling the toxins, with the result that my urine turned highly caustic.

And so we're driving along when, suddenly, there's a screeching, a grinding and all the noises in-between, sparks trailing down the road behind us and the back wheels flying past us and off across the motorway. My piss has eaten through the axle.

"That was an armoured transmission," says Calamari bemused. I say nothing. I hide.

I'm keeping myself nicely out of the way when I notice something unusual: tyre tracks disappearing into nowhere. I

trace them through tangled, brambled undergrowth into a deep ditch, where I discover an overgrown wonderland of massive pornographic vegetables: Novelty GM, the feral crop of a crashed lorry.

The mummified driver hangs entwined in wrist-thick tendrils, garlanded with nipples and tomatoes and crowned with an arse-like pumpkin.

I beckon Speechwriter over. He misreads my grim smile.

“Don’t you feel *any* kind of sympathy?” he says, exploding into wet-liberal apoplexy. “What kind of a man are you? *You! You*, with your corrosive urine and your tinkering around in dead people’s innards and your starting riots

and your stupid false moustaches?! Is your mother proud of you?!”

“Yes,” I tell the pompous little twat. “She was. But now she’s dead. She was hit by lightning and burned from the inside out, right in front of me. I was ten. Is *your* mother proud of *you*?”

Speechwriter doesn’t know what to say to that. Speechwriter’s mum runs yoga retreats and has an open relationship with some hippy fuckwit who paints his bollocks with woad.

A tow truck pulls in, sees me holding a gargantuan carrot phallus and pulls straight out again.

“This may take some time,” Calamari says.

We're in a pub. I'm drinking the only non-alcoholic option available: my own distilled urine. And if that's not enough to curdle the soul, we're in Lincolnshire.

If all's going to plan, a contingent of phoney 'Brownshirts' should be marching upon New Downing Street right about now. Soon after, they'll be bombed by whatever collection of aeroplane parts our engineers can coax into the sky. We don't know what form this aircraft will take but we're all agreed it should be called 'The Phoenix'. The propaganda opportunity's too good to miss.

Calamari has a warped idea of relaxation. If he's not punching children

in the arm with a sharpened corkscrew, he's suggesting we all go for a leisurely narrowboat trip down the remnants of the Grand Union Canal. But there isn't much of the canal left to cruise down, so we've run aground and decamped to a delightful dive situated between an abandoned themepark, the various sites of an electricity plant and the *Rampton* mental hospital. It's weird and I don't like it, but we're stuck in stasis until Malmot makes contact. When? We don't know. I mean, how long does it take to destroy a capital city?

In this little backwater, the only contact with civilised society is the weekly shipment of *Country and Western* records from some mythic

nearby town. Television's referred to as 'the Devil's Box' and the genepool's so tiny it makes Battencross Manor look healthy. There's one attractive woman here and she's deceased. Her plaster death mask stares out from behind the bar.

"Who's that?" I ask.

The landlord, broad and barrel-chested, fight-mashed face and a nose like a sheep's stomach, pivots on the heels of his cowboy boots.

"Mother," he says, expanding our matriarchal theme.

"Yours?"

"Everyone's," is his teary-eyed and deeply worrying answer.

"The last human being in

Lincolnshire,” mutters Speechwriter. “Before they de-evolved back into apes.”

Our armed escorts – the State Security Staff, or whatever you want to call them – they’re outside, kicking something. No one seems concerned by the gunshots. I sip my horrid drink. Speechwriter’s being thoughtful.

I pull back the thick, crusty curtains. “It’s snowing!” I say.

“No, I think you’ll find that’s fallout from the powerplant,” says Speechwriter. He pushes his spectacles up his nose and passes me what appears to be the local newspaper.

“You know what this means,” he says, tapping the page.

“What?”

“We’ve underestimated them.

Somebody in this village can read.”

Calamari walks in, wearing that pleased facial alignment that means he’s been up to no good. He must have found something to fuck. Now, relaxed and refreshed, he decides to have a conversation with us.

“We’re leaving,” he says. “So douse the place in fuel and set light to it. And *you*, Jupiter: take the landlord outside and hang him.

...I take no pride in my actions that night.

Chapter Six

The Predictable Descent into Chaos

“Any word from London?”

“Plenty of words,” answers a smirking tough, polishing his rifle. “Just none of ‘em repeatable.”

I’ve seen housework elevated into an art form. Our Security Staff take gun maintenance into fetish territory. I guess it kills the time between killing people. So whilst they beaver away at their bang-sticks, I watch the grey wreckage of the English countryside roll past the

windows, wondering what kind of a city I'll return to. Will I still have a home? Will I still have a wife? And do I care either way? Because she's not a nice person and I'm... I'm worse. I'm a murderer.

"You were pretty handy with that rope back there," says the polisher.

"I had a gun to my head," I protest.

"Erm, *no*," he answers. "I don't think you did."

"It *felt* like I did."

"Never hold up in court," he says with a shake of the skull. "But don't beat yourself up over it."

"I was only following orders."

"Hah! Didn't wash in Nuremberg, won't wash here!"

“I can’t say I care for the analogy. I’m not a Nazi.”

“I know. They gassed their victims. You threw him out of his kid’s treehouse and hanged him with his own belt. Then you jumped on him and swung on his legs.”

“I was trying to do the decent thing.”

“What? Humiliate a dying man?”

“No! I, er... I read it somewhere, or something. You swing on their legs and it breaks their neck. It makes it quicker.”

“Not the way you do it, pal!”

I can’t look him in the eye. I’m not feeling especially proud of myself at the moment.

“The first kill,” he says with a

sudden seriousness, “it never sits well. Not if you’ve got a conscience. You just got to think of yourself as a round in a gun. It’s someone else who aims the gun; it’s someone else who pulls the trigger. We’re just bullets, man. We go where the gunpowder takes us.”

“So I shouldn’t feel guilty?”

“No. You should *always* feel guilty. Because, if you don’t, well, you may as well hand that soul of yours straight to the Devil.” He casts a cautious eye over Calamari and with that sideways wisdom, he puts down his rifle and starts to polish his boots.

But I don’t have a conscience to trouble me, just a very real sensation of falling downwards whilst still standing

up. It creeps over me from time to time, leaving me a little numb, but I always get over it eventually.

So time ticks on without me. The miles slide beneath our wheels. When the waking world calls me back, it's to confuse me with unexpected scenery.

“Where are we? The fucking Peak District?!”

No-one's answering. If they weren't all so busy with their combat boots and tins of dubbing, I'd swear I was surrounded by extremely ugly statues.

Where there should be the expansive horizontals of a newly-flattened London, there's diagonals, curves and the odd unexpected vertical.

Green in colour and grassy in texture, it appears to be countryside, replete with luscious rolling hills and... *gun emplacements?!*

Well, call me old-fashioned, but I've never seen a mountain with a door in it – let alone an armed checkpoint. This is Malmot's work. It bears all the hallmarks of a gateway to Hades.

Speak of the spindly shit and He shall appear. He unfolds himself from an overhead luggage locker. And whilst that last image may not be factually accurate, it's still my abiding memory of the moment. He manifests in smoke and brimstone and his words unravel in a lazy purr.

“Welcome to Colchester

Barracks.”

Colchester had a varied and interesting history – right up to the point where it collapsed into the ocean. Prior to that, there were the famous rucks between the Romans and Boudicca’s Iceni tribe – characterised by butchery, sexual assaults and temple-burnings – and then, in the thirteenth century, it became popular with Flemish weavers.

Things hotted up a little during the first English Civil War when Cromwell’s boys besieged the city and starved it into submission. Attempts to frighten off the Parliamentarians with a bloody big cannon failed when it fell from the battlements, shattered and

passed into legend as the ‘Humpty Dumpty’ from the nursery rhyme. “All the King’s horses and all the King’s men” couldn’t put it back together again. So the Royalists surrendered and the Roundheads shot ‘em.

Fast forward a few hundred years and we find military chiefs building a major barracks here. Why? Because “higher than average levels of female promiscuity” ensure “a steady supply of the resources essential to a smooth-running military unit.”

And it’s for this same reason that Malmot chooses to refortify the walled city and the army compounds, reopen the nightclubs and turn Colchester into his base of operations.

Now you'll have watched a few war films. You'll know what these bases look like and the way they're run. Well, take that basic notion and then wind the architecture back a couple of thousand years. Take away the barbwire fences and concrete and substitute colossal earthwork ramparts. Once you're past the gates, you proceed up a deep trough into the main enclosure, a bowl-rimmed plateau of epic proportions atop what's basically a Bronze Age hillfort. But hillfort doesn't do the thing justice. It's a mountainous structure, pockmarked with semi-buried buildings and crowned with the funnels and gutters of a complex water catchment system. There's no electricity – the wind turbines have yet

to be assembled – and the light comes via bonfire and flame torch, casting flickering shadows over black, hunchback vehicles. Now and again, something large and mean clanks past on steel tracks, engines roaring on rough-arsed biodiesel. Hordes of soldiers carry out incomprehensible duties. I hear barked orders, female laughing and male grunting.

Places like this don't spring up overnight. They take years to plan and decades to build. God knows what it takes to keep them secret, but I'm sure it's measured in lives. And God knows why Malmot requests my company on a midnight stroll of the perimeter – just me, him and two semiautomatic-toting

soldiers in scowls and greatcoats.

“Are you an ambitious man?”
Malmot asks me.

“*Quietly* ambitious, Sir. I don’t like treading water but, equally, I don’t like to rock the boat.”

“What a nicely vague mishmash of metaphors, Jupiter. Clearly you know which side your bread’s buttered.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And who’s baked it.”

“Er, yes, Sir.”

“But you’re not about to spread the jam, are you?”

“Spread the jam, Sir?” Feigning ignorance: where would I be without it?

“Spill the beans,” he persists.

But I’m not about to spill anything. I

know the deal. It starts with secrets and ends with intestines. And to Malmot? Well, I'd rather slit myself open in a shark enclosure — for all the compassionate treatment I'd get.

“Ah, your hesitancy does you credit,” he says at last. “It’s a fool who talks about himself too readily. A great man has admirers to do so for him.”

I don’t ask him where he stands on the autobiographies of famous dictators, because, at this point in the proceedings, I’d no notion I’d end up as one. I just shuffle my feet a bit.

It’s a bitterly cold night. It’s not a fact worth remarking upon, but there’s an awkward silence and I need something anodyne to fill it. So the temperature gets

mentioned and he turns to me with a funny look on his bony face.

“I often get the impression that what you’re saying is different from what you’re telling me.”

It’s an accurate enough observation. So I leave it to pass without comment.

“I, myself,” he continues, “I, myself, never discuss myself—except to state that my wisdom and benevolence is but a counterpoint to my intrinsic sense of place and purpose.” And he stops in his tracks to ask: “Is that clear?”

“As crystal, Sir,” I say, although I mean ‘mud’.

“A moment ago I asked about ambitions. I was wondering where you saw yourself in the scheme of things.

Where you wanted to be. And how you saw yourself getting there. And whilst I have no doubt that you'd misuse power if given it, I don't think you seek it in itself. Because I suspect that you resent it. Because, for all your amoral posturing, you have an innate sense of fair play and arbitrary authority goes against that."

Am I being condemned or complimented? I wait for the summation.

"You see, I like to get the measure of my employees and there's something of the perpetual dissenter about you, Jupiter."

"I wouldn't know, Sir."

"I think *you do*. I think you do know but you're not letting on. You're

disturbingly well behaved for an artist and that's not usual. It worries me. I can see the anger seething beneath the surface, but it's not going anywhere productive. Or even *destructive*."

"I did hang someone, Sir."

"But you didn't enjoy it."

"I, er, *might have*, Sir."

"No, Jupiter, you're lying. Calamari was there and he says you seemed pretty indifferent to the whole business. So where is all this boiling rage going to, I wondered, what's he channelling it all into?"

"I'm luke-warm on cats, Sir."

"No, that's not it."

"I dislike touching other people's shoes."

“No, no, no. Stop toying with me. I know you’re your problem is, boy, and it’s God. You *hate* God. You want to destroy Him.”

“I, er... Well ...” I stammer. But what can you say when someone’s sussed your most degenerate desire? “Er... It’s an idea that had...”

“Had occurred to you at some point. I understand. You’re trying to phrase it in a manner that doesn’t make you sound like a complete lunatic.”

“Er...”

“And you’re wondering how I know. After all, it’s not the kind of thing you let slip in common conversation.”

“It had crossed my mind, Sir.”

“Well, it’s simple really. You see, you talk in your sleep. And I have a woman who writes it down.”

“But?”

“Like Calamari said, we’ve had unpleasant things implanted under your skin. We record your every utterance, Jupiter. Which is how we know about your little chats with Calamine.”

“Oh.” Is that the bottom falling out of my world or the world falling out of my bottom?

“Yes. *Oh, indeed.* But let’s not worry about Calamine for now. It suits my purpose to leave him at his liberty. But this killing God business...”

Well, if he’s expecting me to elaborate unprompted, he’ll be in for a

very long wait. And it's some time and an awful lot of awkward silence before he takes up the reins again:

“You’ve offloaded all responsibility for your actions on God and now you’re so busy plotting some childish form of revenge you’ve forgotten to engage with your day to day existence. You behave, not because you chose to, but because you’ve exhausted your anger screaming at the heavens.”

I suppose he’s half-right. The half-wrong bit he’ll learn about later. But why am I so prevalent in his thoughts?

He attempts a friendly tone when remarking:

“Certainly knocks the old Oedipus complex into a cocked hat, doesn’t it?!

Killing God, I mean. There must be a name for it?”

“ ‘Deicide’, Sir.”

“I knew you’d know it. Rather discredits your ‘quietly ambitious’ pen portrait though. I’d say ‘vaulting psychotic’ might be a more accurate and to the point description.”

“I’m not mad, Sir.”

“Don’t worry, Jupiter, it wouldn’t matter to me if you were. I’m not here to judge you. In fact, I might be in a position to turn your fevered dreams into a reality. You see, I also harbour a dislike for The Almighty and whilst I won’t be rubberstamping intergalactic butterfly nets or deity-sized stunguns, I *would* be prepared to fund you – should

you choose to crush religion here on Earth. I can't say the money's great, not when weighed against your immortal soul, but you might find it an enjoyable diversion."

Well, I'm warming to the idea. My mind is awash with ideas.

"We could run a food-distribution project, a kind-of 'The Lord *doesn't* provide, the State *does!*' thing?"

"Yes! Now you're talking!" he says with a forced enthusiasm — before contributing his true thoughts. "Or something similar... only *without* the food distribution and featuring sex, perhaps?! You know: like deconsecrating the churches and turning them into bordellos."

“I feel my solution has more theocratic legitimacy, Sir.”

“Yes. But mine’s more fun.”

Well, you can’t really argue with that. So I don’t. And whilst Malmot’s thinking about rolling around in baptismal pools filled with honey and prostitutes, I’m figuring the practicalities of my new commission.

“Would this be more of a desk-based job?” I ask. Malmot looks at me strangely.

There’s that moment in an earthquake, where the soil rears up like the ridges of the ocean and tears forward like a tidal wave. I like to think of it as a mass grave running down its prey. Imagine those same seismic motions

occurring in my stomach. But is it tanks, tectonic plates or the fear of my guaranteed damnation that troubles my gastric tracts? Who knows? Well, God does, but it's no longer in His interests to tell me.

Malmot takes me aside, his clammy claw on my shoulder. He's not something you'd want in your personal space and now he's wrapped round me like a cape.

"You know, Jupiter, as I look at you, I find myself changing my mind. I can't help thinking you'd be wasted in some propaganda ministry, scribing 'Ten Good Reasons to Hate Thy God'. I think the future has brighter things in store. You're not *entirely* repellent. You have

a contrary charisma, rather like a donkey. You owned a donkey, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sir." And I take a step back, fearing a lurching fumble. But Destiny has an even crueller fate waiting than a clumsy seduction attempt.

"But I wouldn't say you look like one. No, you're more like a weasel. Or, perhaps... Yes, thinking about it, there's something vulpine about you, something of the fox."

I could thank him for what I presume are meant to be compliments but I don't want to encourage him. Whatever he's getting at, he can get to without my assistance.

"I personally dislike your

appearance,” he tells me, and I breath a heavy sigh of relief. “It’s that look of low cunning, like you’re about to tunnel into a chicken coop and scamper away with feathers in your teeth. But I know the general public and I know their preference for people of middling intelligence. Nobody likes a smart arse, after all. And the ladies – the ladies love a hint of danger. And you’ve got it, Jupiter, what with your care home upbringing, your long fingers and your major personality flaws. You’ve no conscience. You’ve killed. I don’t care what they say in polite company, women find that kind of thing sexy!”

“If it’s alright with you, Sir,” I try, “I’d rather not discuss the hanging.”

“Nonsense, Jupiter! It was your finest hour. If you hadn’t proved your worth back then... Well, you’ve served your initial purpose; we were going to have you destroyed. But we saw another side to you there and it set me thinking. And talking to you now, about smacking the smile from God’s smug face, I can see you’ve got a certain fire in your belly, and it occurs to me that we might extend your duties into the public arena.”

Now this is starting to sound ominous.

“Look down, Jupiter. Tell me what you see.”

“Tarmac, Sir.”

“Yes, Jupiter. Tarmac. We’re standing on a runway. Now why, you

might ask, would we need a runway?"

"Aeroplanes, Sir."

"Exactly! But we don't have any aeroplanes, do we?"

"What about The Phoenix?"

"It exploded on takeoff. But just because we don't have any aeroplanes now, it doesn't mean we won't have any in the near future. And this is where you come in again."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to." He pauses, looking me up and down. "Ever done any acting?"

"I pass myself off as a decent human being every day."

"Good answer! Now do me a favour will you: stand up straight,

shoulders back and smile like you're stifling wind."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing, but I do it anyway.

"Now repeat after me: We must crush the jackal of upstart American imperialism beneath the boot heel of English military might!"

"We must crush the jackal of upstart American... Eh? What?" I'm halfway through the sentence before I realise what I'm saying and start to suspect where it's going.

"Ha hah!" cries Malmot and claps.

"?" I ask with my eyebrows.

"!" he answers with his.

But there are very few nouns in the facial-movement dictionary so we

resume verbal communication.

“You’ll be wondering where these aeroplanes are coming from,” he resumes. “Are you familiar with the CIA?”

“The Central Intelligence Agency?”

“The Central Interference Agency more like. You name it, they’ve fiddled with it. I don’t think there’s one part of South America they haven’t funded to overthrow another. And if we look to the Middle East, there’s the arming of the Mujahideen against the Soviets, shoring up the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban and a couple of decades spent fucking around with Iraq and Iran... I could go on, but we’d be here till morning. I’ve long since stopped seeing

the logic in it myself. I suspect they pull the names out of a big Uncle-Sam top hat and hold a sweepstake on the outcome.”

“Yes, but I still don’t see how this concerns me.”

“Very simple, my fine young friend. They’re going to fund *me* to topple *you*.”

Sometimes I wonder if I’m actually dead. They say we create our own Hells. And with my nasty little mind, well, what could be more unpleasant than the continuation of my own nasty little existence? And then I start wondering how I died and, when no suitable demise springs to mind, I’m forced to conclude that I’m still alive. Such is the case on this occasion.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not going to

ask you to do anything particularly complex,” Malmot continues. “I don’t know how you handle responsibility, but I doubt it’s particularly well. No, your job will be to stand on balconies looking grimly determined and saluting.”

“And threatening American interests.”

“There may be an element of that. Yes.”

“And getting shot at, no doubt.”

“There’s probably a large element of that.”

“And what if I don’t fancy it?”

“Then we stick your head on Davenport’s corpse and you do it anyway.”

“Dead?”

“That was the impression I was trying to convey.”

“Oh!”

“Yes. *Oh!*”

“Then you have my full and wholehearted support,” I growl through gritted teeth.

“Excellent. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have the recapture of the capital to plan. I’d be grateful if you’d retire to your quarters and design yourself a uniform.”

“What kind?”

“Black, of course. And don’t forget the hat. I’m thinking ostrich feathers, that sort of thing.”

“But it’ll look ridiculous!”

“*No, Jupiter, you’ll look*

ridiculous. That's the whole point. The world needs to hate you, and it can start by hating your dress sense. I haven't time to let your Inner Twat shine through."

End.

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#1 AMAZON BEST SELLER

ANN ABRAMS

MOBIUS

Table of Contents

[Before](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[After. Let's Wallow In Filth](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[The Many And Varied Uses Of The
Human Head](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Mammon, Mink and Mutilation](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Entry To The Upper Echelons](#)

[\(And Why You Shouldn't Marry Your
Sister\)](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Corrosive Urine And Other Forms Of
Passive Resistance](#)

Chapter Six

The Predictable Descent Into Chaos