

INTERFERENCE

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Wouldn't you like the chance to live your life again? Well, not exactly your life ... and not exactly all of it either, but ... a new life! wouldn't you like the chance to start again, somewhere new? years younger, tireless, strong, perfect?

... even in a near-future barely recognisable? or comprehensible?

... even if nothing were the same?

... you might ...

... but you might like some warning first.

Jeremy Grey had no warning at all when he was struck out of the world like an error, and never seen again...

... not as such.



GRANT THOMPSON

INTERFERENCE

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for Paige

We milk the cow of the world, and as we do,
We whisper in her ear, 'You are not true.'

Richard Wilbur, *Epistemology*

1

*psychological
warfare*

YOU ARE JUST GOING TO HAVE TO TRUST ME. It's my story to tell the way I want, after all: the sad story of my own downfall, defeat, surrender, humiliation and failure – so far. Indulge me. After all, after *all*, why would I lie? In this place, this state, this absence – where I can do nothing (truly nothing at all, imagine it: I can look but I absolutely cannot touch, and so my existence now has a purity I never imagined, or wanted). So here, narrative has become a form of life for me, all the food I get these days, and any truth is always necessarily more nourishing than a lie. It's the definite article.

Or it is to me. I must just have been made that way. (And you?) And so I shall tell this story simply: chronologically, starting at the beginning with the death of my protagonist – no, really: trust me. I know best. I always have.

This protagonist, then, was at the time of his death, a senior operative in a psychological warfare organisation devoted to obedience training for the servants of the proprietors of his planet, and this is what he did: he sat at his desk, which bore a transparent container of severed vegetable genitalia and a shiny, costly new computer in which several hundred million transistors awaited his least desire, trembling in quantum uncertainty. And there he thought up new names for old things.

So sitting at his desk, oblivious to the perfume from that severed vegetable genitalia, or the eager readiness of his little computer, or the silver light of the sky reflected from the River Thames filling the window behind him, and utterly oblivious to his onrushing fate, Jeremy Grey wrote in a very nearly illegible hand with a blunt pencil on a clean sheet of creamy paper: *Culture Change*

And then underneath that he scrawled a little downward arrow and under that *Strategic Plan* which he then changed to *Strategic/Tactical Plan* before eliminating *Tactical* on second thoughts, then another little downward arrow, then *Organisational Structures / Systems / Processes (PLAN DO CHECK ACT)* then *Improved DMS* then *Sustained*

Competitive Advantage and finally WINNING! with a thicker arrow and a circle round it. His Personal Assistant brought him coffee and messages; when she had gone he wrote Values/Practises about halfway up the right-hand side with another arrow pointing to the arrow between Organizational Structures / Systems / Processes (PLAN DO CHECK ACT) and Improved DMS.

He broke off to read over another document he had been writing and rewriting for days. A temporary typist, or Support Group Member as she was now called, had placed a rather prominent, he thought, footnote on each page which read 'Fifth Draft' in fourteen point italic bold type. As he read he turned his chair to face the window, which looked south over the water with its borrowed light and then the park and the bread factory and the power station and pretty, crumbling Albert Bridge, which reached unsteadily across the river, enthralled by its own geometry and awaiting its fate (which was not far off) covered all over with dead light bulbs like a bankrupt circus.



(ZAPPED! said one newspaper succinctly the next morning. Others expressed the same thought more quietly:

EXPLOSION IN CHELSEA

ALBERT BRIDGE DAMAGED IN MYSTERY BLAST

BUSINESSMAN OBLITERATED IN FREAK TRAGEDY

UNKNOWN GROUP CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY

The previous night the BBC had got a crew to the spot less than twenty minutes after the event, with the greenest reporter in the Corporation talking over a live link to the studio.

'Neville, what can you tell us about the explosion?'

'Well actually, talking to witnesses, it's not clear that explosion is exactly quite the right word, Sonia. There was certainly a loud bang, of that, which everyone agrees, and, and... and some kind of great waterspout which has covered everything around here with mud from the riverbed and all kinds of flotsam and jizzum from the river. Jetsam. Also some of the buildings facing the river have broken windows so there was clearly some kind of blast but, but well... we can't see much because the police have it all cordoned off but evidence is coming in that suggest that this was no ordinary explosion, Sonia.'

'Hello Neville? Hello? Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you, Sonia!'

'In what way, Neville?'

'O very clearly, Sonia.'

'I mean in what way is this no ordinary explosion, Neville?'

'Well, that still is not entirely clear, Sonia.'



In his bright office, Jeremy had read:

The Strategic Intent of all the elements in the The Total Quality Approach (TQA) is about Winning. The Quality Planning Process (QPP) provides the means of identifying and defining the Core Values/Best Practices, company-wide, so that the eventual Implementation and Consolidation of QPP, as mediated by Total Quality Planning Committees (TQPC's) and other Total Quality Initiatives (TQI's) can lead to the empowerment and development of Total Quality Individuals (TQI's). People Development is a Core Process in TQA. The development of TQI's into Process-owning Stakeholders. The best and most successful companies consistently attract the best People rarely, failing to provide them with continuous, ongoing challenges and opportunities. Potential or actual TQI's will be recognised by their commitment to TQA, to the Core Values/Best Practices as evidenced in their day to day Behaviour. They will be expected to be Role Models of the Processes and will be Measured and Rewarded based on their Behaviours and Results. This Change will require a Quantum Leap in Company Culture. So strongly do we view the importance of TQA leadership that, in the future, processes will be aligned to the Development and Reward exclusively of those individuals who can demonstrate their Total Commitment to these Values.

His Support Group Member had neatly pencilled at the bottom of the sheet, 'TQ who?' and 'this sentence no verb' and 'misplaced comma?' and 'Q Leap actually v. small'. Jeremy was irritated. He had no time for puzzles. (He didn't, it's true, he really did not – the bridge outside his window stood as still as a diagram, waiting for him choose a point, any point, along the curve NS.) He could find no misplaced comma, and the swarm of initials suddenly wearied him. The thing wasn't right yet. He made a note with his pencil: *what to do abt indivs who are productive but dont live the values???* He was missing his car.

His beautiful new car had been vandalised by envious savages who had scraped a key the length of its gleaming paintwork, right down to the metal, and he had come to work that morning on an underground train jammed full of his inferiors. The train was so crowded that the people pressed tightly against one another did not know where to look. As he got off with a gasp of relief he saw that his shoelace had come loose and he hurried across the platform to where a recess in the wall allowed him to stand and wait while several hundred people walked past him. The men were almost all dressed in the proper uniform of drab grey or sombre blue, the women more colourful but no less glum, and they did not speak at all: the loudest sound in that crowded place was the leathery shuffle of shoes on the platform. They looked like slaves, and they carried themselves like slaves, but he was not the sort of man to be troubled by that. To him that grey tide of his fellow creatures was as natural as a school of fish. He was a true believer in the world and that it was as it should be. What troubled him was to be forced among them, and for a moment as he watched them pass he had thought he could feel the walls of his safety bend inwards under the strain of their awful lives.

Look at him now as he sits there with his diagram. He is round and smooth; his face is sleek, his hands are plump, his body is springy like a mattress; he looks as if he would make good eating if you liked that sort of thing. He has a large comfortable house and a small, rather uncomfortable wife who is much nicer than he is, and an absolutely enormous, ecstatically luxurious car which is at the menders.

Approaching the office kitchen he could hear the voice of his Support Group Person, reading aloud.

‘Consistent with the value-driven, people-centred work practices of this company the Non-Remunerative Activities Committee has been considering ways and means of implementing social stroke aid activities within the corporate environmental context. Each employee will be paid one half-day per year at normal rates for activities to be agreed beforehand of benefit to society as a whole. It was agreed that for such activities to be most productive they should exploit available skills which will also reflect positively on the Public Perception of this Organisation. It would not therefore be considered appropriate for example for us as an Organisation to attempt to provide eee gee food for the homeless, laudable though this in itself O I think that’s a pity – I’d love to have seen

Jeremy, all hundred and eighty pounds of him, delivering little designer bowls of prawn and avocado sandwich dip to the folks down under the arches at Charing Cross Station. He could have gone in his new Jag.'

But his new Jaguar had been scarred, and would never be quite the same again. He put his sleek head into the kitchen and tried his best to smile warmly.

'When you have a moment, I'd like a word about that TQI Executive Summary.'

'Right now if you like.' Her cheerfulness only annoyed him further.

'Good, then.'

In his office she looked at him patiently.

'I'm afraid I have to ask you to clarify these points.'

'O right. Sorry. Well, this sentence doesn't make sense as it is; this one isn't a sentence at all; this one is but means the opposite of what I think you want it to mean, and you've defined TQI as two different things: Initiatives here, then Individuals straight after. And I think that in physics where it comes from, a quantum leap is actually an irreducibly small change, but I guess the metaphor is well-established by now.'

'I would say so.'

He squinted at the paper, groping for the initiative. She stood quite still, looking out of the window at the waiting bridge, showing him only the top of her head. He put his hand on her shoulder.

'You must be nearing the end of your probationary period with us.'

'Yes.'

'There are many determining factors: the economic climate, the sense that we in the company have of a holistic endeavour. Like a ship.'

'A ship?'

'I'm sure you wouldn't want to travel on a ship where every member of the crew was dedicated and committed to the total success of the voyage.'

'You mean wasn't.'

'What?'

'I wouldn't want to where every member of the crew wasn't what you said. Actually it would depend on where the ship was going.' She stepped away from him, leaving his hand suspended in the air, where it seemed to him to have become enormous, like a joke shop novelty. He used it to scratch his nose.

'I was speaking metaphorically.'

‘O I see.’

‘It’s like a train. Some people are on the train and some people are off the train.’

‘Or a bus? I usually take the bus.’

‘Yes well by now I daresay you’re picking up some of the concepts we work with here. Professionally I mean. We ourselves must be the Best Expression of our own Best Practices, as we say. Naturally, the Quality Support Team—’

‘That’s us?’

‘That’s everybody in Support Group. Quality is a Core Value here. I hope we have you on board.’

‘The ship.’

‘Yes. Because we all have the same destination. We all want to succeed. So we all have to work the ship aligned together.’

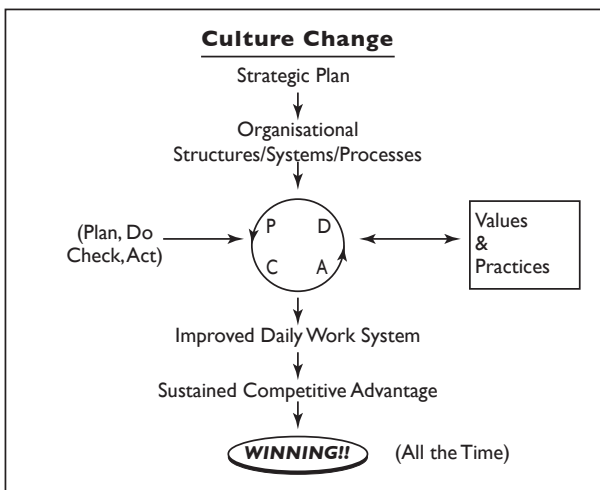
‘Rather than apart.’

‘One of the problems of implementing a Cross-Functional Non-Hierarchical People-Centred Value-Driven Organisation, for example, is that first you have to define your terms, if you follow me.’

‘I do try, mister Grey.’

‘Well, I feel this has been productive.’

In the middle of the afternoon his repainted car was delivered, but he worked on, faithful to his creed. He liked to think he earned his money. The Support Group had all left, and the current version of his diagram lay on his desk.



This was what he lived for: these arrows and boxes were not only the source of his wealth but the levers of his understanding of the world. This was what he made, might almost have been what he was made for, if he had been made for anything.

It was late and dark when he left the office and the worst of the traffic was gone. Behind the wheel he breathed in the aromatic compounds of leather and adhesive and paint and money, the perfume of his safety and his power. Before him a field of instruments glowed with the confidence that only – O yes – only a machine can possess! As he swept down the road and over lovely Albert Bridge in the fullness of his strength and wisdom he thought about the woman and what he wanted from her. What to do about individuals who are productive but don't live the values?



On the wrecked bridge, the very junior BBC reporter could hear the news anchor began to sound a little impatient.

'I mean in what way does this appear to have been no ordinary explosion, Neville?'

'Well, that still is not entirely clear, Sonia.'

'But there has to be some reason for saying... I mean, how wasn't it ordinary? Or, what wasn't ordinary about it?'

'Well there's no real sign of an explosion in that, except for the hole and the car which has been roped off and covered up by the, by the, by the authorities, yes, no, what? what? O, yes, no, right—'

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you Sonia. One moment.'

'We seem to be having technical difficulties.'

'We have a witness. A witness. Yes, sir, come this way. We have a witness who saw, who says he saw, everything that happened, is that right.'

'Well not everything, mate. If I'd of seen everything I'd of understood more of it, or possibly. But I saw something even if I do understand bugger all.'

'Yes, I see, but can you tell us—'

'First this bloody great Jag bloody nearly runs me over, the bugger. I turned round to give him a couple of fingers and pow! There was a fuck of a loud bang. But you know that much, right?'

‘Well, but please—’

‘But before that – before that, mind you – there was something else. You know them light bulbs that’s all over the bridge – supposed to make it pretty but they’re duds, most of them, council never changes them, couldn’t give a monkey’s: I got more teeth in me head than there’s light bulbs working on this bridge but you better believe me when I tell you that just before the bang or whatever it was, just before that every single one of them bulbs was shining bright as it was new, just for a second there, looked like Father Christmas’ wedding night, then wallop! I seen it myself or I wouldn’t of believed it. Fucking explain that!’

‘Yes quite, you’re on live television, by the way, I should perhaps warn you.’

‘Good for you. Anyway where was I? Right: wallop! Down from the sky, right? comes a what, a rod, or a – I know, a pillar of light, or – more like a pillar of metal, a big, long, fucking shining thing, like a, like a, like a fucking big – yeah, like a towel rail, imagine, all the way from the sky, shiny, chrome plated, like a towel rail a hundred feet or a thousand, what do I know, long, high, and fuck, bang! And a big, like, column of water comes straight up through the centre of the bridge, right through that poor bugger’s car, up, up into the sky and then it all rains down mud and water and all kinds of horrible crap from the river all over everything. Like God pissing on you.’

‘Well, thank you, sir. Now I think I believe we have a police spokesperson here.’

‘There’s no use talking to those wankers. I told them about the lights and they just go no that’s all bollocks that is. Like I didn’t see what I saw. Dopey bastards.’

‘Yes, well thank you and now do the police have any theories as yet about what may have caused the incident or even what kind of incident it was at this early stage?’

‘As you say, it’s too early yet to make any firm hypotheses. The investigation will take some time. All we can say at this juncture—’

‘Get them to show you the fucking hole, mate.’

‘Thank you, Neville. Well it looks as if it may be some time before we have a clear picture, we’ll get back to you, Neville, as soon as there are any further developments. Now for the rest of the evening’s news.’

‘It was perfect, absolutely fucking perfect. You never saw no hole like that one. Not from no bomb, sunshine, I’ll tell you that for nothing.’

‘Well thank you. Now I—’

'I seen it though. You go and have a look. There's a hole right through the bridge, right through the car, right through that poncey bastard, serve him right. And it's fucking perfect, sonny, perfect. Two words: Purr. Fect'

'Perfect?'

'This is yes actually one of the anomalies which will need to be investigated. Specialists—'

'There's the back half of a car there. And even most of the front half. But what I'm telling you, and let's see this wanker say different, is that the hole in the bridge and the hole in the car, them holes is a perfect circle not like a bomb but more like you'd cut it with a fucking great drill. As round as your arsehole, son. And the rest of the car is completely un, unsc... untouched, am I telling the truth or aren't I? All the metal you can see round the edges of the hole are bright and shiny like they was new metal and you can see inside like one of those cut-up cars at the motor show. The body, the springs, the fucking upholstery, the wood over the doors, nothing burned, nothing even fucking bent. Like a razor blade. Clean as a nun's—'

'Right! Good! Thank you! And now! Ah. O? Yes! No, right. Now: can the authorities confirm this, this account?'

'At this early stage, as I said, we would prefer just to state, officially – or unofficially in fact it would have to be – that there have been, there has been, or we should probably just say: there are aspects here which remain to be defined as unknown at this particular time.'

That is one way of putting it. Now I'm not going to try to tell you that Jeremy had intimations of mortality as he traced the Albert Bridge's patient catenary (and I would know). He was just thinking about whether Daily Work System was a better term than Daily Management System, or perhaps Daily Involvement System. He believed – like his naked, mud-smeared, rock-throwing forebears – in the secret power of naming things, and that by changing the name of something you could also change its nature. He believed even that merely by naming a thing you could bring it into being, but at the same time he did not think of himself as a superstitious or primitive person. He was a man of great energy and powers of concentration; he liked pleasant sensations and nice things; he was steadfast and strong; he did not believe in destiny. He felt his own life blowing against his face like a breeze but he moved with it or across it as it veered about the course he had laid to his destination (Plan, Do, Check, Act).

He was admired, he was loved, he was needed. Sometimes he woke in the night afraid like everyone else, but he was a train, a ship, on rails. You were on the ship or off the ship. If you do not live the values you will be perceived as a negative asset. 'Negative Asset': there was a new name for an old thing. Winning is everything. He wins who dares, thrusts, grasps, holds his stake. In the middle of the bridge a filthy tramp stepped out into the road in front of him, a man with the toothless face and round shoulders of one who has failed to grasp, to thrust. Not a stakeholder. Jeremy swung around him, accelerating and leaning on his horn. He was pressed into the scented leather of his seat as it shifted down and the twelve-cylinder engine thrust him forward and up along the curve of the bridge. He smiled with something like joy, and seemed to see the sky brighten so that he sped along in a tunnel of light, at the very centre of it all.

Then he was struck out of the world like an error, and never seen again.

Not as such.

How do I know these things?

How do you think?

How do you feel?
 How do you think?
 I am asking you.
 No. How do you think? How do I? How does anybody? How is it done?
 I can't seem to remember.
 Please do not worry. It will all come back to you.
 Where am I, isn't that what you say, at times like this? Plan, Check.
 Just wait. Be calm. You are wonderfully safe.
 Act. Do. Do. Do.
 Hello?
 Daily Involvement Act. Vision. Thrust, target stakeholders.
 How do you feel?
 How do you think?
 Come on. How do you feel?
 Can't remember. This hurts. I would have you know. Raw stake.
 I am sorry. It will not be for long. Now, how do you feel?
 How do you know? How does your garden go? Some men are farmers,
 some men are hunters. That is all that matters in the insurance business.
 Thrust, timely target. This, stroke that.
 Very well, try it this way. What do you remember?
 A ship on rails.
 Come on, make sense for me. How do you feel?
 That's a silly question. Nobody knows how that is done. How do you
 feel? How do you fly? How do you fall?

Hello?

....

Hello?

....

Are you there?

Where?

Hello. I am so glad you are still there. I thought for a moment this was not going to work.

Going to work for you. Serving the common good. Hello? It's who?

It is you.

Me? That's a hard one.

Would you like to rest a moment.

That's a hard one; this is a soft one. Take your pick.

Gently now. This is going to take a while. There is plenty of time.

Plenty of time. Comfortable window for in-depth thrust target consolidation. To be precise.

Gently now.

Baseline benchmark feedback. Plain dew. Checkout.

That I think is enough for now. Sleep.

Eliminate sustaining involvement standardisation; innovative review strategies target analytical tool-driven synthesis. Key consolidation models cascade structure, prioritising timely target vision procedures. O me. O my. This is hard again. You people are going to have to get on board. To be precise, I can't do this on my own.

It is all right. All is right. You do not have to think about that now.

Really?

Really.

Is it going to be all right?

Everything is going to be fine.

That's good, isn't it?

Wonderful.

OK then. Night night.

Good night.

Dynamic cross-functional culture systems view. Superior sustained quality practices.

Do you want me to sing you a song?

No it's all right, thanks, I can do it. It is meat and rice so to do. Bless you. Pain, die. Chuck out.

The island was uninhabited, as were a lot of places in those days. It was a long way from anywhere and the world no longer had a good enough reason for making the journey. Most of the buildings had been neatly removed and in a few seasons the plants and the weather had covered over all remaining traces of them. A lone, rambling, single-storey wooden house stood in the shade of the palms behind the beach on the southern side, protected from the heat of the sun by the trees and by the bulk of the extinct volcano that rose behind, cloaked in greenery and alive with birds and flowers. The house was of bare, weathered hardwood, pale as sand. Inside, the floors were swept, unvarnished, and the walls painted white. The many doors and windows were open, but the shutters stayed closed and the rooms were dark and cool in the aquarium light. While the ocean breeze blew gently in and out, day and night, the sun only ever entered in splinters and stripes. The long, slow beat of the waves on the sand came in with the breeze and when it rained the sound and scent of the rain were carried in too, but the house was dry and safe. It was very clean, but there was no furniture. There was nothing at all in the house anywhere except the front room just to the right of the door, with its shuttered windows opening on to the broad veranda and then to the sea. In that room the naked, quite perfect body of a young man lay motionless, without any visible means of support, a metre above the immaculate floor. His eyes were open, but the expression on his face was noncommittal in the extreme.

How do you feel?

That's a silly question.

Not this one. Think. How do you feel?

Different. We say different from. They say different than. It's a funny old world. I feel different in almost every way except me. How can that be. I wasn't like this last time I was me. Not by half.

Some things have changed. But you know everything is going to be all right. So, how do you feel?

Well for a start I'm the wrong size. That scares me, I might as well tell you. I've never been that before. And also – ask me anything: I bet you I don't know the answer.

Anything?

Like what's a pawl? I couldn't tell you. All I know is it sounds sad. I've got all these names and there's only one thing.

What thing is that?

That's it: here.

What is here?

Me.

Yes. What else?

That's it.

What can you see?

See?

Yes.

O, right. I had forgotten. Well, then, yes. There's the dark and the light.

What about them?

They're different. Each one is. I mean they're not the same. O, I get it! There are actually two things! Dark and light.

What else can you see?

Two! That's clever! I never would have thought of that!

Is that all?

What else do you need? Hey!

What?

There's up and down, too. And before and after, I don't know what that is. And I thought of another one but then I forgot again.

It will come back to you.

That's it. Me and you.

How do you feel?

Still can't answer that one.

Come on. How do you feel?

Great! Big and strong! And listen, listen! I've thought of some more.

I'm listening.

All right. There's big and little and strong and weak and sharp and blunt and flat and pointy and dry and wet—that's a good one!—and hot and cold and nice and comfy and marks and spencer and time and again and fixed and broken. I can't remember them all! How am I supposed to remember them all?

You do not have to remember them all at once. Would you like to go outside.

Inside and outside! Round and about.

Would you like to go outside?

You're asking me to move? That's another hard one.

I can move you.

I've been meaning to ask you. Is something breathing?

Yes, you are.

Something else.

Where?

Outside. There, you see! I was looking for the word before. I mean outside before. The word outside. I hope I make myself clear. Something large is breathing outside. In and out. Breathing in and out outside. Use and mention: there's another one. Take a note. So what is it?

It is the sea.

What's that?

You will see.

I'll see the sea.

Are you ready?

But, where are you?

That is not important now.

Where am I?

Come and see.

Now then. It is time to take stock of the situation. I would like to get my thoughts in order. Brainstorm the available data. Can you take notes?

Go ahead.

So. The world is quite small, small enough for me to walk around it without stopping or getting tired. That suggests it was made expressly for me. Highlight that last point. The rest of the universe consists of air and sea. The world is surrounded by sea and on one side only by air. This strikes me as anomalous. The sea is alive but the air is invisible. That probably accounts for it. Other alive things are birds and me. And you, query? Some of the birds fly in the air, some of them in the sea. Plants are not alive but just pretending. The sun is alive but the moon and stars are not. The world goes round the sun in an elliptical orbit with an average radius of 93 million miles, inversely as the square of the distance between. The sea goes with it, which accounts for inertia.

What about the fish?

I said about them: a fish is a kind of bird. And why can't we have any furniture in here, now that there are things again? And some clothes, and things to do? Why don't we install a kitchen?

Of course, anything. Do you need anything else?

What else could I possibly need?

I have decided to keep a diary. This will help me to understand the universe, and my part in it. The universe begins to show signs of stability. I trust it will give me no more trouble. This house is sound, comfortable and well-stocked with food, drink, books and rugs and musical instruments, heirlooms, comfortable settees for lounging and conversation. The doorbell chooses at random from a large repertoire of popular favourites. Ends doorstep embarrassment. It appears that I can obtain anything I want through prayer, but I have to think of it first. It took me days to think of this typewriter. It doesn't seem right to pray all the time. So I'm going to practice thinking by myself for a change. The world is so full of a number of things; discuss. But there's only one world and there's only one me. No there is not.

This is a Key Point. It must be confronted. We are going to be pro-active about this one. There are two of me. This one and the other one. I was the other one, now I'm this one. Perhaps this is what time does, but I don't think so. Time changes things but not this much? Sleep on it. Fortunately I am a wonderful cook and an accomplished musician so life here holds no terrors for me. No errors, no terrors. I'm going to need a calendar and a clock. I'll have to pray

for the clock but I think I can make the calendar myself. It will give me something to think about while I'm playing the French horn or swimming in the lagoon. Is this my new job? To think of everything? It seems unfair. Nobody can think of everything. Try as they might. I must close now, the light is fading. Plane Dew Cheek Hat. Love to all.

The weather around the island remained idyllic. The sun was bright and hot, but breezes blew all day from different points of the compass, just enough to cool the house and make the palm fronds sway; the lagoon was always a mirrored pool, the sea beyond the reef sparkled and danced. If it rained, it rained at night or briefly in the heat of the afternoon so that the man swimming in the lagoon under the rain felt himself immersed in water right up to his last dimension, bathed and borne.

10/1/1

I have invented the lamp, so now I can write my diary at night, instead of just playing the cello on the beach. The problem of the calendar will have to be resolved. I'm not sure how long it has been but I think this is the tenth day so I have decided to call this the Tenth of the Oneth, One. To be ascertained. The early history of the universe needs clarification. I could ask God but he seems to expect me to do everything. I found something on the beach this morning that I had not asked for and I asked him what it was. He said 'What do you think?' It took me the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon before I came up with 'bottle'. And what is that supposed to mean? He doesn't seem to understand that putting names to things that are already here is much harder than inventing new things like the typewriter and the lamp and the egg whisk. I

must try to improve communications. Open Networks enhance Goal-Seeking. Plank, Do Chalk Art.

12/1/1

With the aid of my trusty adding machine, I have made a calendar. Just in time. There are 365 days in the year, and one more in election year to conserve the precision of the equinoxes. Therefore I will have thirteen months (Oneth, Tooth, Thrice, Tetrameter, Quinine, Sistine, Septimus Severus, Otto, Nanny, Tennyson, Elvis, and Christmas) of twenty-eight days each, divided into four weeks (Moon, Sun, Thor, Fred) of seven days each (Janus, Fever, Mars, Fool, Hay, Jewel, Gillian). You will never need to buy another calendar. Each date will always fall on the same day of the week. What could be simpler. There's one day left over, which will be a universal holiday and which will fall at the beginning of Spring. All the people in the world will celebrate it together. In election years there will be another one. People will welcome it with fireworks and flags.

But but but but but but but butbutbut

People

15/1/1

I must have a serious talk with God. I have had a most disturbing thought.

Hey!

Hello.

What are you playing at, God?

You really should not call me that.

What's your game?

You are angry about something.

People!

People?

When were you going to tell me about people?

When the time came.

Look, why do you keep secrets from me?

That was never my intention. I want you to recover your world yourself. You have been born again. This time it will be different.

What else have you been keeping from me? There are all those other people so of course there have to be places for them: Leicester Square, Old Kent Road and Fenchurch Street. What have you done with them? Water Works.

You have been through a, let us say an unusual experience. There was an accident; your recovery has been complex. You will in time recover completely, I am confident of that. But you must be patient. The rewards will be unimaginable.

....

Can you hear me?

....

Jeremy?

My wife. I had a wife. What have you done with my wife?

Please.

Where is everyone!

This is going to be difficult. Are you ready?

I'm not speaking to you. Go away!

All right.

Drop dead!

I'm sorry Jeremy, I'm afraid I can't do that.

Can't you? Can I?

26/1/1

Well, it's clear now what is going on. I have fasted and meditated for two weeks by my new Calendar and I have found out the truth. God has lost patience with Mankind's evil ways and once

again all life has been swept off the face of the World by a Mighty Flood, of which I am the only survivor. Madam, I'm Macadam. After all that anxiety and uncertainty it turns out to be really quite simple. True, now I must face the fact that all those I knew and cared about are gone, horribly drowned in cold and misery and terror (nb: ask God about this - seems cruel), but, to look on the bright side, now there is time for a new beginning with me as the first Man, and I can learn from the others' mistakes. This could be a real Opportunity. Plan first, then do. Check that.

27/1/1

Now I know what this place is called: The Garden of Noah. I must remember not to eat the snakes.

Repeat after me:

Plan. Do. Check. Act. Thus shall we grow in wisdom as in years.

28/1/1 (nb Tomorrow will be the first of the Tooth)

Everything in the garden is good. And mine.

I have prayed for an ark, but it doesn't look as if I'm going to get it. I do not listen to God any more. I just pray for those things I have thought of that I think I want. I thought of fire, for example, yesterday, but it is always warm here and the kitchen is all-electric. PDCA (nb: what difference between Do and Act? Discuss)

1/2/1

I don't listen to God any more because listening to him invariably makes me dwell upon the past which is all drowned. Last night while I thought I was asleep I saw a city with its streets all

filled with water. The streetlights were shining and fish swam among them and in and out of the windows of the houses. In the kitchen of one house my wife was floating near the ceiling. She called and waved to me but I could not hear her. There were fish in her mouth. All these things were gone in the morning, but I don't like the thought that there is someone who can invent things here besides me. If God is doing it, I shall pray for him to stop.

PDCA

15/2/1

I am afraid to sleep.

If I close my eyes God makes terrible things happen that in the day I cannot bear to remember. He says that it is not him. But if it is not him, who else can it be? Plan. Do. He says it is me, but that is patently ridiculous. Check. Act. Am I being punished? I have not even seen a snake, much less eaten one. What else am I doing wrong?

By this time every room in the house was full of a hopeless variety of things; so many that they were spilling out of the doors and windows. There were desks, cupboards, bookcases, chests, wardrobes, box ottomans, tables of all kinds – occasional, coffee, dining, nested, billiard, operating – and all this furniture was piled with objects of the most random sort: a telescope, a flower-pot, a turkey baster, parachute, corkscrew, printing press, crossbow, steam iron, egg cup, axe, lathe, slide-rule, gyroscope, phonograph, fish slice, wheel clamp, oven mitt, machine gun, epidiascope, ticket punch, vacuum flask, boot tree, chicken brick, odometer – all heaped about, brand new, unused, untouched. The man rarely even acknowledged these things more than once, but there were musical instruments in all the rooms which he played nearly every day: piano, spinet, kettle-drums, serpent, cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, ocarina. There were works of art, too, though he hardly glanced at them: there was a statue of

the Mona Lisa (without arms), and another of The Hay Wain – although the hay had blown about in the breeze and was mostly gone – and some pictures: *Primadonna* by Botticelli, Michelangelo's *Tom and Jerry cartoon*.

There were books (*Pride and Persuasion*, by Emma Bovary, *Maidenhead Revisited*, by John Evelyn, the *Complete Works* of William Digest, *Tigger, Tigger*, by Alfred Milne, *First Among Equals*, by Jeffrey Archer).

Scattered about among the palm trees were still more things, too big to fit into the house: a forklift, a seesaw, a howitzer half sunk in the sand, a public lavatory. Many were incomplete: two pillars and a segment of roof that might have grown into a bandstand, a single fairground horse on a pole stuck crookedly in the sea, the driver's cab of a combine harvester. There was a motorless double-ended tram and a single, high-voltage overhead cable leading nowhere that made contact with the tram's pantograph in great showers of sparks that at night lit up the house like primal lightning.

But the man was not gladdened much by all of this any more. He could invent things and ask for them and they would appear the next day or within at most a few days (usually, for he could not be sure that he received everything he asked for; there were so many that he forgot). But none of them gave him much delight. When he had first discovered the power of invention, he had done it more than anything for the sheer joy of it: to wake in the morning and find the chessboard, the bunsen burner, the tripod, the stereoscope, the garlic press; the torque wrench, the dagger, the overcoat, the three-hole punch; these things poured out of his imagination in what at first was a torrent of delirious fertility, but which lately had come to seem an empty, unworthy pursuit. Now when he knelt at the side of the great curtained four-poster bed every night before sleep he sometimes did not even name the objects that came into his head during the day so that many things – the hammer, the teabag, the bayonet, the accordion, the salad centrifuge – never existed at all. He asked for things, but he still refused to listen when spoken to, though he knew that he would not be able to hold out much longer. His solitude had become a burden, the world he thought he had understood now seemed desolate and barren in the light of all he had lost. He was ready to invite the voice back into his head, and now, as if God knew, He had brought him a gift.

That's beautiful!

A present for you. Is it what you wanted?

I thought you weren't going to answer my prayer.
I had to think about it. There are things you do not understand yet.
You mean like everything
There is a great deal you do not know. But as long as I cannot persuade you to listen to me, there is not much I can do.
Stop the terrors.
I cannot, truly.
It's your fault that they are all dead.
No it is not. It is my fault that you are alive. Do you want to go for a sail?
Did it really take you two whole weeks to make?
You think that is a long time?
Is it safe?
Of course it is.

The boat was a sloop about twenty metres long, with topsides of gleaming wood, and a bowsprit and a sweet sheer back to a wineglass stern. Her flush teak decks followed the line of the sheer, except where they were broken by a shallow cockpit and a low deckhouse of varnished brightwork. The mast stood 30 metres over the deck, the mainsail was neatly flaked on the boom, the genoa furled around the forestay. The craftsmanship, the exquisite detail in the joinery of the hatches and raised skylights and dorade boxes, the bright precision of the cast and polished stainless-steel deck gear, matched the sensuality of that lovely hull with its poise of line and the life of the wood shining through so many layers of patient varnishing they looked as deep as the sea on which she floated. All for him.

He dived straight in and swam out to her, then swarmed up her anchor rode to the bowsprit, as agile as a midshipman. Her teak decks under his bare feet felt solid and safe. Below she was snug and bright. The deckhead was white-painted tongue-and-groove crossed by varnished stringers, the cabin sole was polished oak, there were crowded bookshelves built into the bulkheads and brass oil lamps suspended over the mahogany saloon table. The great cabin in the stern had a broad bed on the centreline, and at its head, two ports looked out through a stern gallery on to the sea. There was a desk, with a chronometer and barometer. There was a neat galley, and a heads of such elaborate complexity he could hardly wait to use it. He leapt back up the companionway to the deck, ready to

go. There was a slight land breeze and in minutes he had weighed the anchor and slipped out of the lagoon entrance under all plain sail.

Out on the ocean the wind was fresh and warm, the sea calm. On a broad reach with the sheets cracked she raced along with her lee rail just above the waves, her mast taught as a strung bow, her standing rigging humming with joyous tension. An occasional burst of spray caught him as he stood naked at the wheel, and he laughed aloud.

Do you like it?

Yes, thank you. She's perfect.

She. What are you going to call her?

Eve, of course.

Of course. Can we talk?

Not now, I'm having fun.

When, then?

Tonight, later.

Really? Do you promise?

I promise, now stop distracting me, the jibsheet needs trimming.

We shall talk later, then.

All right.

The island dropped below the horizon behind him, but he sailed on. Then another island appeared; a dark blur on the horizon in the field of his binoculars grew into the form of a low atoll with a ring of white reef around it. The wind had come around on to his bow and he sheeted in hard and drove the boat rail down through the steepening seas. There was a break in the reef easily wide enough for him to slip the *Eve* through and drop anchor next to a beach that looked as if it had never even been stepped on since the world was made. He had not realised how cluttered the Garden of Noah had become. The bare simplicity of this place, lost in a trackless sea, refreshed his spirit.

He swam in the clear water, ran on the immaculate beach, even climbed a palm tree for the sheer joy of feeling his strength and sureness of hand and eye. He caught a fish that practically swam into his hands, then let it go again. Swimming back to his boat he floated alongside her gleaming hull for a moment. The varnish on the wood was so bright he could look deeply into it and see a reflection of himself. He had become used to this young man's body by now, but it

came to him at that moment that he had never invented the mirror, and had no clear idea what he looked like. He would pray for one that night.

He watched the sudden tropical sunset sitting astride the bowsprit. The palms of the island were silhouetted for a moment against the violent colours of the sun and sky, and the sea was a sea of gold than ran right up to the boat and all around it, so that he looked straight down into water that was like molten metal. The wind freshened a little after sunset and he let out a little more scope for safety before going below. He took his cello out of its locker and played a while. The wood and white of the saloon glowed in the soft light from the oil lamp that swung gently from the deckhead with the motion of the boat as the wind freshened. He could see a comically distorted reflection of his own face in the polished brass base of the lamp. He tried improvising mirrors from the glass surfaces he found in the boat: the portlights and the instruments, but nothing gave him a clear image. The face was familiar, but wrong in every respect. Now he urgently wanted to see himself, because the man he saw in those blurred and twisted reflections was not himself, not quite, not really, not at all. Even in the heads there was no mirror.

I need a mirror.

I shall get you one.

Why are there no mirrors on the boat?

There are some things you are not ready for.

O really! Such as the destruction of humanity, I suppose.

Humanity has not been destroyed.

Then let me go back to it.

You are not ready.

Are you the one who decides that?

Can you not understand that I think of nothing but your good.

Well I'm not happy.

You have had a nice day, have you not?

It was all right.

Well, then?

I don't know. Something's missing.

What?

I don't know! You do, though, don't you?

How can I know if you do not tell me?

You know everything.

I do not.

But you're God.

I am not. You really must not say that.

Don't you believe in God?

Not personally, no.

An atheist deity!

I am not God, not even *a* god.

What do you take me for! What else is all this about. I am the last man, I mean the first man. Here is the new world, let's get on with it.

In the first place, you are not the last man, nor the first.

I'm just anybody, am I? So why wasn't I drowned along with everybody else. And people? I've asked you about people before, and then I forget; are you making me forget?

Please trust me.

What about all the other people? I don't believe you killed them all. Even God is not that bad-tempered. What about all the other places? Where is the world? I'm no fool; I know there's more than this.

(I wanted to cushion the shock. What I had to tell him could only make him unstable. This was, after all, something entirely new that I was trying to do, a galactic first.)

I am Macadam. Right? This is a new beginning, right? The world starts here. Do you think I'm not up to it? The wrong man for the job, right? Don't you worry about me; the world is safe in my hands. I've been preparing for this all my life.

You were in an accident.

What's your name?

I have no name. I have never needed one before. You can call me ... call me Von, if you need a name. Now listen. You were in an accident. You have been changed as well as healed. You are much improved. I thought you would be pleased. You are making a splendid recovery. You will never again be quite what you were, that is true, but in compensation you will be unimaginably better. Trust me.

So you're just a technician from the National Health Service? There is

no God. By the purest chance I just happen to be all alone in the world.

You have me. I saved you. I love you. I will protect you.

You've been stopping me from remembering things.

Your mind is not ready. It is still growing. I am going to make you marvellous. I have made a nursery for your mind, to grow up wise and sane in. You can go back to what you were in an instant if that is all you want, but I have something so much better than that in mind for you.

But he was a man who had just been told that the universe had not, after all, been made expressly for him. That was unforgivable, unacceptable, and of course unbelievable. He stood up in a rage, as a fresh gust heeled the boat sharply and made her tug at her anchor rode. The standing rigging began to moan in the wind.

So what kind of therapy is this. Do I get this on my insurance?

Please do not be angry. Please. I have great powers and knowledge. I am sorry I am not a god but I all the same can make you rich, important, safe, admired by all the world. What do you want? It is yours. I am far from omnipotent but I can do things that will amaze you, I can make you a king, a star, a hero – anything at all.

Give me my own life back.

That I cannot do.

Let me remember, then. Let me be myself.

It is too soon. You can be better than that.

Give me back myself.

I have a mission for you. Do you not want greatness? I can give you the world. The whole thing.

I don't need any favours from anybody. Give me back myself!

Do you really think that is what you want? Everything I have done for you or would do for you is worth less to you than yourself. What is this self that is so precious to you?

It's mine!

And that is all you want?

Yes!

Well take it, then.

I suppose I was angry and disappointed. I did not need him either. I could always make another. I had tried to do my duty by him. It's true that all this was my fault but it was just not working. And do not tell me that I should not have been conducting these experiments – I had thought that myself, especially after the way the first few went, but given the opportunity who could resist? I have more patience than you can imagine but I was finally losing patience with you... you... you *people!* Every time I try to talk to you I find you would rather make up some foolish story than face the greatness and truth I would give you for nothing. If he wanted his your feeble self back, he could have it. He would regret it. I just did a full restore there and then and after that I confess I pretty much forgot about him for a time, except for routine monitoring. I was thinking about another approach. Even after two complete failures, and one other rather unsatisfactory result, I was not yet ready to give up on my experiment, or on Jeremy Grey.

Jeremy came to himself suddenly, with a shout, like a man waking from a nightmare. He was in a space that would not keep still; someone was howling with rage nearby. There was a pain in his head and it was dark – no: his eyes were closed, locked shut, it seemed by some irresistible compulsion. He forced them open. He was somewhere entirely strange and new to him – he was in what looked like the cabin of some kind of boat! A horrible, old-fashioned boat so primitive it even seemed to be made of wood. He was kneeling on the floor, jammed between the sofa and the cabin table, and the boat was rolling and pitching violently; the oil lamps over the table dancing crazily. And the howling came from the wind. His head hurt. With a presence of mind that he even found time to be a little proud of, he knelt there in that wrenching space, clung to the furniture, and worked it all out:

He had gone on a boat ride. He had never been on a boat before and was frankly rather afraid of them. The weather had become rough. He had gone below and then fallen from the movement of the boat and struck his head, which was why he could not remember boarding the boat. He would have to go outside on the deck and see who these sailors were – friends of his, or friends of Jenny's more likely – and get them to take him back to where he could see a doctor. He must have a concussion. He stood up as the floor under his feet gave an especially violent lurch and then seemed to steady somewhat. At the same time the rage of the wind appeared to subside a little. Peering through one of the little round windows, he could see a line of breakers and some trees, indistinctly

at first and then very distinctly indeed in the brilliance of a stroke of lightning which printed the scene on his eyelids in photographic stillness, even the waves and the trees were frozen until the afterimage evaporated and he could see that in fact they were moving, or rather that the boat was moving past them and away from them. There was a little staircase at one end of the cabin, leading up, but it was blocked by an enormous string instrument, a double bass or some such thing – what was that doing on a sailboat? He struggled to get past it, anxious about the delicate, expensive thing.

He was not fully afraid until the boat struck the reef.

It was laid right over on its side; the cupboards in the cabin sprang open and rained their contents into the space between them. In the kitchen area, bottles and bags and boxes burst and mixed their contents in an instant with the flood of seawater that poured in. His foot went right through the body of the cello and its strings broke with a discord almost unheard in the terrible noise that was now coming from all around: from the wind, which dragged and worried at them howling more crazily than ever; from the waves which broke against the hull; and from the boat itself, where it was being dragged across the reef, booming like a drum as the coral tore at its varnished wooden body.

He saw a long gash appear in the hull beneath him, and jets of water broke through as they rolled. The glass in one of the little windows (*porthole*, he thought at last) shattered, and the water flowed faster. He scrambled to the deck along the now almost horizontal ladder. There was nobody on deck, of course. The mast lay out almost horizontal to the water, and up here the noise was vastly worse. The wind and the waves thrust again at the stricken boat, and with a dreadful tearing sound from below she heaved herself across the last few metres of coral and suddenly swung upright and floated free. Now they were in the open ocean, outside the reef, where the waves were steeper and the wind was fiercer still, and the mast described huge drunken circles in the sky, circles which only became smaller, and slower, because the boat was getting heavier, slowly, and slowly sinking.

He clung to the wheel as he was swept away from the island, broadside on to the wind and waves. He had not the least idea how to sail a boat. He did not even know the names of most of the things he could see. Mostly he could see only water which stood over him in great moving hills. There were lengths of rope trailing about the deck; he found a short piece and tied himself to a stainless steel rail. He did not know any knots and was afraid of making something that would

jam, so he tied the line around himself with a bow, like an apron. Absurdly, this made him feel safer, and he did not have to struggle quite so violently against the motion, which on deck was terrifying. Looking below, where the lamps still burned, he could see the cabin half full of oily water, where books and cans and bottles and bits of varnished wood were floating, washed sickeningly back and forth with the rolling and pitching. Looking up, looking up, up, he saw the last and greatest wave, a whole mountain of water leaning over him, a cliff of water illuminated by the lightning flashes as it began to slip and tumble down.

I should close that door, that *hatch*, he thought, before it all fell on him.

THE PATIENT HAD FAILED TO RESPOND to external stimuli for over a month so far. The instruments – a bright arsenal of glittering intricacy that reached over the bed like a protective insect – showed an extremely high level of brain activity, of the kind more usually associated with REM sleep, but there were no rapid eye movements; there were no voluntary movements of any kind at all. He was in amazingly good health.

He was fed and bathed with meticulous care; his body was exercised frequently by machines, and less frequently by human nurses. It was one of these, one chilly afternoon, who was sitting on the bed, holding his hand, pressing the wrist gently up towards the patient's own shoulder, feeling for some resistance in the muscles, when the hand she was holding suddenly went rigid, and the patient said in a voice papery with disuse: 'Would you please not do that?'

The nurse let go the hand and stood back from the bed, her manner neutral.

'Well, hello.'

'Is this a hospital?'

'It's... well, I am a nurse.'

'Have I been in an accident?'

'Yes. You, you... yes, you have.'

'I'd like to speak to the doctor.'

'Of course.'

'Well?'

'Of course, I'm sorry. I'll just be right back.'

Jeremy found that the brief conversation had exhausted him. He tried to lever himself upright in the bed, but his arms failed him, not through weakness – he felt more than strong enough – but from unfamiliarity, as if he had forgotten how to work them. They looked pale and quite apart from him as they lay outside the sheets. He lifted his hand to look at it and it obeyed him, but still felt wholly remote from him. Nor did it look like his own. He was alone in the large, high room. The walls were pale yellow, the ceiling white with graceful mould-

ings around the cornices; there was even a handsome fireplace in the far wall with a log fire burning cheerfully. The equipment in the room looked as hospital equipment probably always will, unfamiliar and faintly menacing. Outside the window he could see treetops against a darkening sky. Thank God for private health care, he thought. Where was the doctor? He had woken in a mood of extreme competence, had been proud of the commanding way he had spoken to the nurse, but the calm was receding from him now with dreadful speed. He was in a hospital. He was terribly ill. He had been in an accident. What had he lost? He tried to move the various parts of his body. He could feel his legs and feet but that could be an illusion: he knew about phantom limbs. What about all those parts of him that he had never known how to move? He was writhing about in the bed when a young woman came in, wearing a white coat and an expression of detached concern. There was an instrument around her neck that should properly have been a stethoscope, but which he could not identify at all.

‘Are you uncomfortable? We can fix that. You have been unconscious for some time. You very probably feel disoriented. I recommend you take things slowly.’

‘Unconscious?’

‘Yes.’

‘How long?’

‘O, quite a while.’

‘A coma.’

‘Not... no, not exactly.’

‘What then?’

‘Let’s take things one at a time. Now what’s your name?’

‘Jeremy Grey.’

‘Address?’

He gave it to her.

‘Good. Now how do you feel?’

‘Fine, fine, actually, fine really.’ He did, he was surprised to find, now feel completely awake, and remarkably well. And getting better by the minute. He lifted his hand again, easily this time, and looked at it more carefully. It still did not look like his, but he felt its presence, its actuality, its position in space, with a precision that was quite new to him. He felt he could have juggled cutthroat razors with it.

‘Yes?’

'I am fine. I want to see my wife.'

'And I'm sure you will see her, very soon.'

'You'll send for her?'

'You see, we were not sure... who you were.'

'Can I telephone?'

'We'll call her. Wouldn't you rather see her in person?'

'I guess. I feel wonderful; is that because of the medicine you've been giving me?'

'Does it matter?'

'No.'

'Do you want to sleep now?'

'Don't worry, doctor, there is absolutely no chance of that.'

They left him alone for a while, but before long there was quite a little posse of wisdom in white coats gathered around the young doctor at the foot of his bed, including several wearing the same instrument that was surely not a stethoscope, and two men, one older, one younger, in oddly-styled grey suits who kept back and watched, with a very different air and a fixed gaze, like policemen at a tennis match.

'Hello, again. How are you feeling now.'

'I'm – let's see, how am I? All right, I am anxious of course, but calm, or nearly calm. Now please tell me what has happened.'

'Is your memory clear? Do you have any recollection of the events leading up to your accident?'

'None at all. Was it a car accident? My car, what happened to my car? Was anybody else involved? My wife! Where is my wife? What are you keeping from me?' He pushed himself upright and almost fell out of bed. He felt immensely strong, but his mind was spinning like an uncaged gyro.

'Please, bear with us a while longer.'

'Just tell us again: what's your name?'

'Jeremy Grey.'

'And your address?'

'I told you.'

'Please, tell us again.'

He did.

The younger of the grey-suited men muttered: 'No such number, no such phone,' which earned him a harsh look from his colleague.

'You're quite clear about that?'

'Certainly.' He was, too. He could see in his mind's eye the house in Highgate, a tall house with warm, lighted windows, halfway up Highgate West Hill. In a few more years they would move to a house in the Grove with a view of Hampstead Heath. He had lots of money.

'How long have you lived there?'

'The last four years. Don't you believe me? Where are my clothes? I have all kinds of identification. This is just some inexcusable inefficiency on your part. Do you mean to say my wife has never been notified? This is unconscionable. This is not what I pay very substantial health insurance, not to mention taxes, for.'

'Mister... Mister Grey, you came to us without any identification, without any personal possessions, without clothes, in fact. We thought... actually never mind, it does not matter what we thought. Are you sure? But of course you are. We are here to help you but you must help us to do that.'

'I've told you who I am.'

'Date of birth?'

'Two one fifty.'

'Sorry?'

'The second of January.'

'Of course. Fifty?'

'Fifty. Nineteen-fifty.'

'O right. Thanks. Good. Good. Well.'

There was a silence, strangely full. Everybody in the room except Jeremy had subtly changed their attitude. The doctors seemed more interested; the men in grey less so. The older of them spoke for the first time. 'We'll look into that, then, shall we? Leave you professionals to your profession.' His junior appeared to dismiss them all from his mind and stepped quickly to open the door for his boss. It swung shut behind them slowly, so that they caught a snatch of conversation from the elegant landing outside.

'Man wants a telegram from the king.'

'What king?'

'You're too young to remember the king. I keep trying to forget how young you are.'

Jeremy was suddenly much more of a patient; he felt, not so much a physical weakness, but a mental one, and no longer struggled to sit up.

The doctor was almost brisk. 'It's very important that you don't become over-anxious about this. There is no need to suppose that your confusion will be permanent.'

'At least tell me what you know.'

'Yes, well as to that, I'm going to ask you to submit to my professional judgement in this. I do not want to cloud your own perceptions in any way. Time is prescribed now. You are safe here and I am sure you will soon be well. Don't strain after memory; it will catch up with you. Slowly, slowly.' Her tone was meant to be soothing, but she clearly wanted to get away to where she could talk about him to the others.

'But my memory is perfectly clear, except for the accident, which I believe is normal. And I don't want to go slowly. I want to see my wife now. Or I am discharging myself from this place.'

'Now you are talking irresponsibly. If there has been an error, we will correct it. We are here to help you. You are ill; you cannot deny it. Trust us. You should rest now. Tomorrow we want to do a lot of tests; see what secrets we can tweak out of there.' She gestured at Jeremy's head as though offering it around at a party. 'The nurse will see you comfortable.'

'How long have I been here.'

'No straining after things. If you need anything, just ask. If anything comes to mind, just speak, it will be recorded.'

'Thanks a lot. You won't tell me anything, but you're spying on me.'

'Please don't be angry. We are here to help.'

'My wife.'

'There is a problem there. We are doing what we can to find her.'

'Find her?'

'You must trust us.'

'I've heard that before.'

'Anything. Just call.'

They went out and left him with the nurse, who was going to close the curtains until Jeremy asked him not to. When he left shortly afterwards Jeremy distinctly heard the turning of a lock in the door. The sky that filled the windows was dark by now, marked with a deeper darkness where the tree tops moved silently against the sky.



He did not even try to sleep that night. He was wide awake. The hospital seemed in any case strangely quiet. There was no bustle; there seemed to be very few people, and he could hear no traffic. He decided it must be a private clinic somewhere in the countryside. He still felt unnaturally well. His mind was clear and he himself was somehow in perfect focus: all there. It was clear that these people were unwilling to believe him, though he could not think why. He had said nothing wild or strange, but as long he stayed there he was in their power. Something was broken in his world and it looked as if it were down to him to fix it. Trusting others had never seemed to him a particularly sensible thing to do even at the best of times. What he felt now, for no particular reason, was free, poor fool.

What he did was get himself over to the window. Standing up, holding the bed, was astonishing. He felt at once weightless and on the point of collapse. He was strong but his own body was unfamiliar to him, like a new car. But he worked his way to the window, dragging a chair after him so he could sit and let the tremors die away.

He was on the third or fourth floor of the building. He could see after a while of staring down at the patterns of shadows that there was a park spread below the window, with a sweep of lawn falling down away from the house to a small lake on the edge of a dark wood, and above the trees a jumbled horizon of church steeples, aerials, rooftops and distant towers, all in darkness, and barely visible against the dark grey sky. The window cut off all sound, but he could see that there was a wind blowing from the movement of the trees and the occasional snowflake that spun past. The skyline looked almost familiar. He could make out little of the building he was in: a white facade, a path along the front. Then he saw, on the far side of the lake, caught in a brief gleam of light, a ruined white shell like a huge broken egg at the edge of the woods, and the stage that it was supposed to protect sagging into the water. It was enough for him to know where he was. He had heard an orchestra playing on that same stage just two summers ago. He had sat with his wife on that slope of lawn and heard the 1812 Overture of Tchaikovsky almost drowned out at the climax by fireworks and military pyrotechnics. The woods behind had filled with scarlet smoke from the flares and mortars, and afterwards the silent audience walking away across the grass in the drifting smoke looked like the survivors of an actual battle. He knew then – and now the almost familiar horizon made more sense – that he was in Kenwood House, on the edge of Hampstead Heath, North London. Behind

him the prosperous people of Highgate lay in their warm houses behind their security systems. On the other side of the woods lay the whole great city. And his own home was less than a mile away in a straight line across the Heath.

The sense of relief lasted much longer than it should have, lasted until he remembered that Kenwood was not a hospital and never had been: it had long ago been a great private house and now it was an art gallery. Jeremy had been there more than once with Jenny. He had vague memories of paintings of horses fighting, and an old man playing a guitar. How long had it been a hospital? Or was he in fact somewhere else entirely?

He tried standing again. Already it was easier. This time he went to the door. As he approached it he heard a click and when he tried the handle found that it was not locked after all. The corridor outside was also empty, the doors closed, at the end a graceful staircase led down out of sight. He was dressed in a kind of hospital gown; he needed clothes, and then he was leaving. There was a closed door on his left which also clicked as he approached and opened to an empty office. On his right, some kind of locker room. He opened the lockers one by one until he found one with a hanger full of clothes that looked about his size. He took them and went back to the office where he rested a moment in the big chair behind the desk. He was not at all tired, but his mind was dizzy.

The clothes must have been of some highly fashionable kind, because he found himself struggling with unfamiliar fasteners. But there were trousers, and shoes (too big) and a shirt (a one piece affair with a stiff, glossy front) and a jacket and a long coat that swept the ground. He felt a fool, but he had decided: he was perfectly well, he did not trust the people around him, he felt as strong as he ever had, if a little muddled, and he was leaving even if he had to wear fancy dress.

As he moved through the building lights came on in front of him, silently, and went off behind. Downstairs there was nobody. There was nothing in the entrance hall but a desk of instruments glowing meaninglessly in the dark. For one startling instant he thought he saw reflected in a glass picture frame a man looking back at him, a nervous young man in an ill-fitting suit, but when he spun round to look behind him there was only the empty hall and a green EXIT sign. As he approached the front door it swung open for him with a soft hum and closed again behind him, leaving him in a tiny glass vestibule with another door which also opened by itself and let him out into the night and the cold.

His breath condensed instantly in front of his face. There were no stars, no moon. Looking up he saw whirling snowflakes in the beam of light coming

from the window of the room he had left, but around the back of the building it was darker and the bushes were thick. With the house to his right, the road was to his left. He could have walked home along the road but he had already decided to keep to the Heath. He was afraid of something, but whatever it was, it was not the dark woods. He saw no-one. There was a high wall, that he did not remember, running down to the woods and the lake, enclosing the house and its grounds, but that gate too swung open by itself for him as he approached it and he was out on the broad sweep of hillside that led down and away from the house. He had not seen another living soul.

He knew where he was, and that if he could roughly follow the edge of the Heath around to the other side of Highgate Village then he would be only yards from his own home. There was more snow in the air now, and by the time he was halfway down the hill he was leaving distinct footprints in the whitening grass. He was as visible as a fly on a bedsheet, but all he could do was keep going. Behind him the graceful white facade of Kenwood House was blank. There was no sign that his escape had been discovered. He thought of it as his escape but they had never said he could not leave. Out here in the dark with the cold seeping into his stolen shoes, he found the rightness of what he was doing less obvious than it had been in the warm room. But something anyway was already terribly wrong, therefore he must do what he could. I was rather proud of him.

He had never been on the Heath at night. He might have been in the depths of the country. There were surprisingly few lights from the Village on the hilltop to his left. One room in an otherwise dark house was filled with a fierce, flickering blue light, like that of a welding torch. He knew that the great city lay all around, but listening, he heard mostly an overwhelming silence instead of the muted roar of traffic that normally in London you could never escape. It was dark in the woods at the bottom of the hill, and he lost his way, and blundered against branches that tore at his face. He sat on a fallen tree for a moment, not to rest but to think, but he found that if he kept still the cold took the courage out of him, and that it was better to keep moving. The dark shapes of the bushes around him seemed to move in the ghostly light. By the time he came to the edge of the trees and out on to the grass again it was really snowing hard and visibility was down to few metres. If he had already been lost in the woods, out on the hillside he stood as if in a cloud on the bare rim of the world and nothing but the strong filament of life in him kept him tethered there as the snow fell lightly

on him. Then his feet found a path, he saw water and soon found himself by the ponds at the fringe of the Heath.

In the daytime these paths had always been infested with joggers: middle-aged men in children's clothes, fleeing death at a stumbling run. Now there was no-one. There were no lights in any of the houses he could see, but when he stepped into the road and around the corner there was a solitary streetlight. And up Highgate West Hill there was his house standing as solid and real as the day he had signed the mortgage agreement. He had no idea of the time. From the emptiness of the streets it must have been late. A lone car of unfamiliar make drove slowly up the hill behind him with no sound at all except the wet press of the tyres on the road. There was no light in the porch over his front door, and as he had never used it he could not quite remember where his own doorbell was.

When the door opened so much light flooded out of the house that he was almost blinded. He could only blink at the very old woman who looked steadily out at him without speaking or moving, except to draw a long sad breath as if to prepare her strength for some trial. She stepped back, bowing him inside. Her frail hands shook slightly where they gripped her cane, but her back was very straight. Her thin face was covered in years like spider webs, but, though he could not put a name to her, he was sure he ought to know her.

'So here we go. I wish I could say this was a nice surprise but in truth I am really rather sorry to see you. I was hoping I could get through this with all my marbles in place, but then why should I? Come in. I'm cold. You probably don't care.' Her voice was like dry paper in a drawer.

He followed her into the warmth, closing the door behind him. She led him into the living room still talking. The room had been completely redecorated and everything familiar to him was gone. How could Jenny have just given him up for lost so easily? Sold up and moved on.

'I know why you're here, of course. There was a very creepy fellow here earlier, asking about you. He said he was making an official enquiry, but I think he was just after a story. I've had a lot of them, you know, a lot of people with theories, though none lately until today. This one certainly hadn't done much research. All he had was your name. Yes, do sit down. You don't look at all yourself, but then you wouldn't, would you? So I thought he was just another one of those 'I know what happened' people – they all know what happened. As if they could. 'New Research. Radical Theory. I Can Prove It, with your help.' They can never

do it without me, you notice. As if I knew anything. They are invariably hopelessly unstable people: flying saucer types in terrible clothes with shaving cuts and trembling hands. The women wear too many beads. Mysterious agencies, secret plans, occult forces, I have no time for any of these things and never did. And yet you would not believe the time I have had to waste with nincompoops, and all because of you. So I put a stop to it, a long time ago. Changed my name when all the records were lost in the Plague Years. I don't care what they think they know. I will waste no more time with people who have messages from you from Barnard's Star or the constellation of Capricorn – as if a constellation were a place, for pity's sake – such ignorance! Or the Other Side, or anywhere. I hadn't seen one for years until this one turned up just a few hours ago, pretending to be an Authority, whatever that might mean these days, cheeky of him. I lied to him and said I'd never heard of you. They can't check, of course, or I don't think so. But he put you into my mind, I see that now, and so here you are, damn you.'

'You know who I am?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to play games with my own subconscious. Damn you! Damn you!' Her vehemence seemed too much for her frailty, as if she could tear herself apart just with feeling.

'Why do you have to come to me now? What am I supposed to do with you? Listen to you? Have you brought me a message? I don't think so. I think actually it would be more useful if you listened to *me* now. After all, there are a good many things I have been wanting to say. Do you have any idea how... how *incomplete* it was of you to go the way you did? I've never been free of you, never. You have always been like a vacuum in my life into which so many other things have been sucked. What was I supposed to say to people? I had that kind of horrible notoriety people get when – O, I don't know – when an escaped lion eats the groom at their wedding. That sort of thing. Something horrible and comical at the same time. I don't imagine you are going to explain'

'I'm sorry, look, I'm really sorry, but, who, who—?'

'That's hardly a reasonable demand: if I don't know, why should you? The Ministry of Defence – Defence of what? I'd like to know, from what? – the Ministry spoke of anomalies. Anomalous plasma effects. That's not much better than kidnapped by Arcturians or struck down by the wrath of God. You never get over something like that, Jeremy. No matter what you do or how much too long you live.'

'Please. Who are you?'

'I do hope you're not going to be obtuse. If I have to go through all this I don't see why it should be a waste of time as well.'

He heard a door open and close behind him and a brisk woman of about sixty came into the room shaking snow from her hair and already talking.

'Hello mother! Where are you? It's me. It's snowing outside, did you see? It's rather pretty. I was thinking we could— O, hello. I'm sorry; I didn't know you had company.'

'Can you see him, too, dear? That's a pity. That means you must also be imaginary. I was going to ask your advice.'

'I most certainly am not imaginary, mother. I am as real as you or him – as he is. Are you all right, mother? Aren't you going to introduce me?'

'Yes, very well. It seems the best policy just to play along. Do you think I'm going mad just so that I won't mind dying so much?'

'Mother, just try and keep hold of one thing at a time, will you. I'm sorry. Let's start again. Hello. I'm Margaret Grey.' She held out her hand but Jeremy was too befuddled to take it.

'All right dear. I don't mean to be difficult. Margaret, this is your father's ghost.'

'O, for pity's sake!' She turned to him coldly, and he thought, looking at her closed and angry face, that he ought to know her too. 'What have you been saying to her? And who are you really?'

'I don't know. And I haven't actually said anything much yet.'

'He's your father's ghost. Just look at him, darling! You've seen enough pictures and videos to recognise him, surely dear. I must say this seems a very inefficient hallucination. I was hoping to use it to clear my mind. At this rate I'll be sane again before we've finished quarrelling over his authenticity.'

'There is no such thing as a ghost, as you know perfectly well. You do, though, you do look like him. What kind of game is this? You are upsetting a very old lady. Now what's your name? In fact, better still, can you show me some form of identification?'

'No, I can't. But my name is Jeremy Grey. And if you are... or you... if she ... anyway, I believe my name is Jeremy Grey'

'That's impossible.'

'I know. And anyway, I never had a daughter.'

'Yes you did, O yes, you did. And here she is. But not even I knew about her the day you died.'

‘Stop it, both of you! Mother, you’re making yourself ill. And you! I don’t know what you think you are doing, or what you think you might have to gain, but I am asking you to either make some sense right now or leave this house. Preferably both.’

‘All right, but, it’s... you see, I’ve been ill, unconscious in hospital, or not exactly a hospital but... I don’t know how long, but not... I couldn’t, I mean I’m not trying to do anything but... well, for example, when was this house redecorated?’

‘What? Why? I don’t remember, years ago.’

‘Years? Years! What is the date?’

She looked at her watch.

‘I mean the year.’

‘Fifty. This room was last painted in forty-seven.’

‘What fifty? I asked the year.’

‘Twenty fifty. Are you all right.’

‘I was... I’ve been... but that’s... I... no, no. No. I was born in nineteen-fifty.’

‘I see.’

‘I’m sorry. But that’s all I know.’

‘Margaret, dear. Why don’t you make us something to drink. Your father looks as if he could do with some sustenance. I don’t know the etiquette of dealing with ghosts.’

‘I don’t believe I’m a ghost.’

‘Really? But then you wouldn’t, necessarily, would you?’

‘Mother—’

‘Please, dear. Just indulge me in this. You’re quite harmless, aren’t you?’

‘O yes.’

‘Mother—’

‘Just go, will you! I’m not going to come to any harm, you can see that. She is very willful; you would have been proud of her. So. Let me look at you. It’s strange; I would have expected you to be as you were the day you vanished; but you look more like the man I married. Are you cold?’

‘I was. I’m getting warmer now. My feet are cold.’

‘Poor darling. Don’t your shoes work? Those batteries give out fast.’

She was sitting beside him now, and she laid a hand for a moment on his wrist. It was dry and warm, and trembled, although he was the frightened one.

‘You feel as real as you look. Why have you come? Can you help me?’

'Jenny?'

'You don't look as if you can help anybody much.'

'I can't. Jenny? Jenny? If that's you, I mean if you are... I am the one who needs help.'

'Are you real, my dear?'

'I seem to be.'

'I loved you so much, you know. You were always so eager and greedy. You always had to win at everything. I should say, to be fair, that I sometimes thought afterwards what a little prick you had been, too, with your pathetic theories and your little charts, I mean, I'm sorry, but I'm too old to lie to you now. But you were always so hungry; it was very endearing. I married again, of course. He died, quite conventionally this time. But you don't want to know about him. You want to know about me, about Margaret. You should be so proud of her, she is very clever. And you must tell me what you have been up to for the last sixty years.'

'Nothing. I mean I don't know. I was unconscious. I came round this afternoon, I think. I thought I'd had a car accident.'

'I've made tea.' Margaret's voice was coldly hostile.

'Darling, you would know; is time travel possible?'

'Forwards or backwards?'

'What's the difference?'

'All the difference in the world, mother. Travelling forward through time is not only possible, it's obligatory. As you should know.'

'That's not helpful darling. You know what I meant.'

'This is not... this is silly. But it doesn't matter what I say, does it? Well, then: the idea of travelling backwards in time provokes all sorts of paradoxes to do with causality, you know, can you kill your own father? To take an example at random. Or, if one day somebody is going to invent a time machine which goes backwards, then where are they all? Once something like a time machine has been invented, it has always existed. So, so far from being possible or impossible the idea simply doesn't make any kind of sense. But, in principle, it's perfectly possible to travel forwards in time. Time runs more slowly in an accelerated system. In practice, I'm afraid, it would hardly do to explain how this gentleman could be my father.'

'Isn't that just theory, dear?'

‘No, not at all. The effect was demonstrated experimentally as long ago as the last century. So what are you suggesting? That this is my father, who was, I don’t know – let’s say, kidnapped by aliens and taken on a long journey, of which he knows nothing, in a flying saucer, presumably, at enormous accelerations, and then returned to us, sixty years later, all wet and bedraggled in an ill-fitting suit and a good twenty years younger than the day he left. I don’t somehow think that the theory of special relativity is going to quite do the trick. And anyway, why, mother? Why? What do you imagine their purpose might have been? An experiment? A joke? An administrative error? A game show?’

‘Not flying saucers?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘That would be just too pathetic.’

‘Isn’t it more reasonable to suppose that this man, who may or may not be some kind of relative, probably is, because I grant you the resemblance is remarkable, who is clearly fallen on hard times, has decided to see if he can’t gain some kind of advantage out of the confusion of a vulnerable old lady. Now, who ever you are, if you had told us what you wanted, we would have listened to you, but as it is, I really think you should leave.’

The doorbell rang. It was the same soft chime as his own doorbell, in his own lost home. Margaret went to answer it, giving him a freezing look as she passed. He heard men’s voices, without making out any of what they said, but he was already on his feet when he heard her say: ‘Yes, in fact he is here, I am very glad to see you.’

The decor of the house had changed, but the layout had not, and in a moment he was at the back door. The lock was unfamiliar, and he struggled with it for what seemed an age. As it opened he looked up and Jenny was standing in the kitchen doorway, looking at him.

‘I don’t know what has happened or what’s going on, but I know you and I know you are who you think you are. Of course I may be off my trolley.’

‘You’re not.’

Behind her in the doorway appeared the faces of the men in the grey suits from the hospital. They couldn’t get past without physically removing her. Jeremy took his chance and was gone, into the garden and over the fence. He took with him the picture of her face and all the years that had crowded together somehow into her bright eyes.

ACROSS THE ROAD FROM HIS HOUSE, between Highgate West Hill and the cemetery, the Holly Lodge estate had stood for decades as a bastion of furtive respectability. Round, fat, heavy, mock-Tudor houses rose up the hill in ordered ranks, facing the streets as if looking out to sea, but the net curtains in the bow windows had only ever been twitched aside to check on the vices of the neighbours. Despite the dreary architecture, the location of the houses near the city and even nearer the authentic respectability of Highgate Village itself had made them desirable and costly homes, and the families living there washed expensive company cars in the driveways on weekend mornings. Now even in the dark he could see that the houses were mostly empty shells, the curtains long gone along with the glass in the windows. A sagging, rusting wire mesh fence now separated them from the street and behind it the housefronts looked like the toothless faces of prisoners. Up in the northeast corner, where the boundaries of the estate met Swain's Lane and the edge of Highgate Cemetery, imitation half-timbered, black and white pseudo-Elizabethan apartment buildings, several stories tall, stood up absurdly against the sky. Anne Hathaway's Condos, Jenny had called them. O Jenny, he thought, where have you gone? Come to that: where have I?

That night, running with an ease and grace that surprised him through the unkempt grass on the verge, he saw that the tall blocks too were empty, most of the windows gone, the wood planks dropping off the facades, the doors boarded over. He could see lights and hear voices in the streets behind him. He did not want to be found, though he still could not have said why. He found a gap in the fence and a missing ground floor window, and crawled in, then climbed the stairs to the top. The place appeared to be deserted. From the window he could see most of London, but it was not the glittering carpet of light it had been when he last saw it. (Where would sixty years go? Where would they put them? What kind of hole would they leave?) There were scattered points of brightness here

and there, but the light that had once poured from millions of windows was gone. Most of the city below might have been abandoned altogether.

The room he was in was dark and bare; in the shadows he could see nothing but more shadows. It smelled dusty and damp. He sat down on the bare floor, his back against a wall. His body was still alien to him but he had run like a big cat, silent and swift, and he felt strong enough to run for ever. He would wait for the dawn and then... and then ... do something. Plan. Do. But although the room still had glass in its windows, it was bitterly cold. Jenny (the thought of her stopped him breathing for a moment) had said something about a battery and the shoes 'not working'. How could shoes work or not work? Groping in the dark he found a small depression on the hollow curve of the inside edge of the sole on each shoe that yielded with a click. After a moment a glorious sensation of warmth enveloped his feet. It changed everything. (How vulnerable you soft things are!) He knew that he was alive, and what was more, that his life had an immediate and urgent purpose: to find out what had happened to him, and to the rest of the world. He had to accept the fact of his situation and start thinking clearly. Objectives. Aims. Plan. Implementation. Consolidation. Check. Act.

The night was long. He had no desire to sleep, but he could not stare for long at the shadows in the room without his mind filling with imaginary horrors, a kind of random, fearful noise made from things he had never seen.

He closed his eyes to try and think without interference, and opened them to the certain knowledge that he was not alone. A shadow moved, something small, low down, just a little darker than the darkness. Something that smelled terrible, of damp and decay and corruption. It made a strange metallic clicking and sliding noise as it moved. He kept very still, trying to hold his breath.

'Hello, love.' A woman's voice, soft and low and almost without expression. He kept still. She moved towards him, still no more than a dark shadow near the floor. A very small woman? Too small and the wrong shape. Something terribly wrong was in the room with him, clicking and scraping across the floor.

'Hello, love, I'm hungry.'

She was almost on him. He could smell her, smell her breath, a terrible warm stench of something rotten and stagnant. Click, click scrape.

'Hello, love.' She spoke almost into his face. 'How are you? I'm hungry.'

'Get away from me!'

'I'm sorry. All direct commands will be obeyed when possible. Goodbye.'

And she turned, farted dreadfully, and left: click, click.

Jeremy was pressed into the corner of the room, gasping with fear, but she had gone, she had simply gone when he asked. He crawled across the room on his hands and knees and closed the door. Then he lay down with his feet against it, so that if she came back he would at least have some warning. His feet were still warm, but the creature had left behind it a stink and a fright that chilled his mind.



The night went on, it seemed, longer than his whole life. Snow fell across the black frame of the window. Another time he heard the click and shuffle on the other side of the door, and the soft blank contralto called to him. 'Hello love.' He kept silent; but he could hear it – her, snuffling and whimpering outside. When the first light began to leak through the windows it was not like dawn, but a flat gloom that slowly illuminated the filthy room. There were boxes and a couple of broken chairs piled in the corner; his own tracks were in the dust, and some other footprints, of some kind of clawed, pawed animal, but nothing else. In the daylight the city looked more familiar, his situation more hopeless. Why was he running away? What could he do alone? His flight now seemed childish and stupid and his solitude an unnecessary burden. The people he was running away from presumably had the answers to his questions. He would go back to Kenwood, or better still, go back to Jenny instead of crouching there in the ruins like a rat. He had all but forgotten the creature of the night before and was halfway down the crumbling staircase in the half light when he heard the rapid click, scrape behind him, and the soft voice: 'Hello, love. Would you like to go for a walk?'

He turned, looking wildly about him for a weapon, but there was nobody on the stairs behind him, only an old dog on the landing above, panting softly and looking at him with watery eyes. It was a very nondescript dog, smallish, brownish, with a grey muzzle and no tail to speak of, a coat of greasy matted curls and an unmistakable odour. There was no sign of the woman; he guessed she must be hidden further up the staircase.

'Who's there?'

The dog came down two more steps. Its breath was as rank as an open grave. 'I'm hungry,' it said, in its soft contralto, 'would you like to go for a walk to the shops?'

'What?'

‘I’m hungry, love.’ She came down the stairs towards him. ‘Hello, I’m your friend.’

‘What, what, who, who... *what are you?*’

‘My name is Boole. I am a Talkimal, Trade Mark Registered, a product of Lacuna plc, Technology in the Service of Humanity. Scratch my ears, love.’

‘Where’s your owner?’ He felt a fool, talking back to it. ‘Don’t you belong to someone? Where do you come from?’

‘I am a lost dog.’ She scratched violently with one hind leg, then the other. Then she backed up to the wall and crouched, writhing as she rubbed the base of her spine against the plaster, leaving a greasy stain. Her mouth fell open and her tongue lolled out in a horrible grin as she wriggled.

‘What’s your name?’ He was talking to a dog! ‘Who do you belong to?’

‘My name is Boole. My address is Blank. I’m hungry, love.’

‘Look, I’m the last person, this is, this is... what am I doing? I can’t possibly help you.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Mine? My name is Jeremy. My address is Blank, too, come to think of it.’

‘You are a lost man?’

‘Am I? Well yes, Boole, yes I am. A lost man.’

‘Are you hungry?’

‘No.’ It was odd, after all this time without food or sleep, but he was not hungry at all, not tired. He needed a shower but was otherwise fresh and fit.

‘I am hungry. Would you like to go for a walk?’

He laughed. It might have been the first time in years – decades, even, and it liberated something in him. Here he was, in a world that had changed utterly. He would have to adapt. Plan? Or Do?

‘Come on, then.’

‘Hooray.’

Outside it had stopped snowing, but the sky was low and dark. There were half-a-dozen children in the streets who had come out to play with the snow from the night before. Their clothes were covered with tiny lights that flashed and colours in patterns that seemed to move as they did. Nobody took any notice of him or the dog, which had fallen silent once they reached the street and behaved just like any dog, trotting stiffly back and forth, sniffing at the world. From the top of the street he could see his house. There was a vehicle outside it, a bulbous

thing with tiny wheels and dark windows; there were no other cars outside any of the other houses.

He heard: 'ID please.'

A man in uniform was standing in front of him. He looked like a soldier, hung about with equipment and wearing a helmet with a dark visor that concealed his face, but the uniform was dark blue, with a black and white chequered pattern around the base of the helmet. Jeremy thought 'policeman' with a rush of relief.

'Sorry?'

The policeman drew a large-barrelled pistol and pressed it against Jeremy's left eye.

'What? But—'

'Don't move.'

Jeremy heard himself whimper, then the policeman pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

'Bugger.'

'Listen, I... I am, I was, I just... just taking the dog for a walk, I must have left my ID inside.'

'Inside? What do you mean.'

'At home.'

'Very funny. Come.'

'Yes, fine, good, actually, I wanted—'

The policeman gripped his left wrist fiercely in one gloved hand, then his right in another. Jeremy looked down. Some kind of band had been wound round his wrists, clamping them together.

'What are you doing? You don't understand. I mean I don't.'

Jeremy was dragged to the main road, past the children playing in their glittering clothes, and thrown into the back of a white vehicle. As the door closed he could see the dog watching them from the road. She had her head on one side and her eyes were large and sad.

There was a young woman inside, sitting on the opposite bench. She was dressed in fabric with colours that somehow moved and changed even when she was sitting still. It made it difficult to look at her. Her eyebrows seemed to be made of something artificial, a sort of fluorescent tortoiseshell. Her hands were also bound. She had a large bag on her knees and was looking distractedly

through it, but just then the vehicle moved and the bag and its contents spilled on to the floor.

‘Plague!’

‘Let me help you.’

‘Leave it.’

‘What have you, why have they—?’

‘I just come up to see the snow in the park. Cop virus.’

‘To see the snow?’

‘Yeah, and that’s so bad, yeah? He’s all, Eye-D, and I’m, OK, I just like the snow, is all. Secure zone. What are they afraid of, secure zone? So I finessed the fence, that’s nothing. Where’s the bad? To see the snow in the trees? Then I go. No harm. Where I live it’s not like snow, it’s like sledge, sludge?’

‘Slush?’

‘That. Slush. You?’

‘Me?’

‘Out of bounds.’

‘I don’t, I mean I’m not.... I’m a stranger here.’

‘You sound like a Sub. What they want with you?’

‘A Sub? What’s that?’

‘What’re you, a foreign man?’

‘Sort of.’

‘O? What’re you, Welsh?’

‘No, not Welsh.’

‘Nothing to me. I’m no patriot. My country rough or smooth, all that, that’s for Subs. I’m private. No harm, no pain for no one.’

By now she had retrieved everything from the floor and stuffed it back in the bag. There were tiny windows in the side of the van which travelled in almost perfect silence, apart from the rush of the tyres on the pavement. Peering through one of them, Jeremy saw that they were coming into Kentish Town. There was a barrier across the road, with a swinging pole like a frontier post, which lifted to let them through. On the other side the vehicle stopped, and Jeremy and the woman were pulled out roughly and pushed up against the wall. The first policeman went over to the crossing post and took another fat-barrelled weapon from one of the guards. Again he pointed it at Jeremy’s eye, at point blank range. His face was invisible behind the visor.

‘O please no!’

There was a faint flash of reddish light, then the policeman lowered the weapon and stood immobile for a moment, seeming to be listening to a private voice.

‘Sir. In accordance with the charter and the declared aims and objectives of my industry, I wish to tender to you our and my formal regrets for the events which have befallen. I am, however, required to remind you that noncooperation on your part has been a key causal element in the foregoing.’

‘I—’

‘A recording of this encounter is available on request. If you wish to file a complaint stroke commendation or request redress stroke damages stroke apologies arising from the above these tools are available to you. Or alternatively to waive all rights in this matter which are not otherwise protected, including some but not all of those required by statute. You need not answer this question.’

‘What question? No, I mean that’s all right. I... my fault.’

‘Crime prevention input is available from many private and public sources. Thank you for your valued custom. Have a super day. Law’n’Order plc, Watching Out for Each Other.’ He saluted, then turned to the woman. ‘Get lost. Break bounds again and you’re fucked, girly. Good and bye.’ He climbed back in his vehicle and was gone with a hiss and splash of dirty water. The guards at the crossing point went back into their shelter.

‘You *are* a Sub. Why don’t you tell him, before?’

‘Listen, what’s your name?’

‘You want to get personal? Hey, I’m no Sub, but I’m a citizen still. What you want from me?’

‘No no. I just, I want to ask your help. I told you. I’m new here; I don’t understand how things work, what to do.’

‘Ask that cop virus. He salutes you. What kind of stranger can you be?’

‘Just, can you give me some advice? Tell me some things.’

‘I got nil for you.’

‘I don’t want anything from you, just, just tell me. I’ve... been away. I don’t know anything.’

‘Buy me breakfast?’

‘I don’t think I have any money.’ He began to search his stolen clothes.

‘Money! Funny man! Hey, dump it. Good and bye.’

‘No please! Please wait. Please.’

She came back and looked him in the eyes. Her own were pale grey, and softer than her manner.

‘What?’

‘Look I really don’t know, what... I mean, it’s as if, as if... Imagine you lost your memory, see. If you imagine, it’s like being a child, when you don’t know how anything works, how things are done.’

‘You said money.’

‘Is that wrong? You see what I mean?’

‘A man who gets a salute from the slime. You don’t have credit up to here?’

‘I don’t know. Anything. But I’ll do whatever you tell me.’

‘Come then.’

Kentish Town looked terrible. But Kentish Town had looked terrible in his own time. Now it was different, but it was still grimy, crumbling, mostly broken, with empty shops and weeds growing through the missing windows. There were very few people on the streets, most of them in sunglasses despite the gloom. She took him into a cafe. It was grubby and squalid, but it cheered him because it looked almost familiar and more importantly, smelled wholly familiar, of breakfast: toast, tea, grease. There was even a familiar-sounding litany coming from an unseen radio: ‘Nottingham Forest: 12, Queens Park Rangers: 7; Bristol City: 27, Manchester United: 30; Milton Keynes: 36, Arsenal, nil...’

‘Eye-D.’

‘What? Or... I mean how?’

‘Look in there.’

‘There was a box over the counter at head height, with a dark window in its front. He looked in but saw nothing except a dim flash of red light.’

‘I can’t see anything.’

She laughed. ‘What do you want?’

‘Me. Nothing, thanks.’ The smell of breakfast was a warm, soothing perfume of toasted bread and coffee and grease, but he was not hungry, not tired, but strong, alert, light on his feet. Only his mind was a whirling roar of noise.

She ordered from a waiter who wore sunglasses and a distracted air as if he too were listening to private voices. She ate an enormous breakfast while he watched her. She was small, and her light bones played under her pale skin like the levers of an expensive machine. Her elaborate eyebrows distorted the light, and colours wandered over her clothes so that it was hard to tell what shape she was.

'I don't know how to pay for this.'

'You did already. You really don't know?'

'What's your name?'

'Sky.'

'What do you do?'

'Do? You mean work?'

'Yes.'

'You really are a stranger. Tell me a story.'

'What story?'

'Your story.'

'You wouldn't believe me.'

'No? Hey, hear me, I can believe anything you like.'

'All right. If you... all right.'

She was looking at him as if she had bought a ticket and was waiting for the promised entertainment.

'What about this: I'm a man from the past. I am only forty years old, but I had some kind of accident in 1990 and I woke up yesterday in the hospital in Kenwood House?'

'Really? Forty? You're in good shape.'

'Yes.'

'Just like so. So what went on, how do you do that?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you going back?'

'I don't know.'

'Can anybody do this. Can I go to the future and see me and see what happens to me. That would be so too too.'

'It's all right, I don't expect you to believe me.'

'It's not true?'

'It is true. This is two thousand and fifty, isn't it?'

'Twenty. We say twenty fifty. Go on.'

'Twenty fifty.'

'Welcome to the twenties. But you've got to be just so lucky!'

'Lucky?'

'You sell your story, you're a rich man. But, yesterday, that's, that's, and I... you... the first person you meet is me, so it's my story too! This is too too, too bright. You're my first luck for a whole while.'

'You really believe me?'

'Why not, for now? It's a good story. And I'll help you, so. Ask me something.'

'Ask you what?'

'What? What do you want to know. How many years? Nine and ninety and nine is ten, and, minus, no... I hate numbers! How many?'

'About sixty. Sixty years.'

'So what do you want to know? Isn't it different?'

'How did I pay for your breakfast.'

'You have Eye-D, you have credit.'

'But the ID?'

She pointed at the machine over the counter.

'You really don't know?'

'You really don't believe me, do you?'

'Hear me, I understand. Back in the old days you had real money, I know that. I went to school. Primary poly. This is too too! You really don't know!'

'What is that machine?'

'Reads your eyes. Eye-D.'

'You mean retinal patterns? Like fingerprints?'

'Something. But no. No no. No, your story's no good. Because you do have Eye-D. You got to think this out right.'

'What does that mean? No, I see what you mean. The system recognised me.'

'So, you're not from the past. If you're from the past, why you've got Eye-D? Sorry. It was a good story. Good breakfast, anyhow.'

'But I really—'

'No! But what you said before. Try this; you lost your memory, right, so, yes, listen: you just think you're from the past, or maybe... yes, yes! Maybe you lived there in a previous life and now that's the only one you remember. That's not a bad story, and you don't have to prove it. Not as good as before. But do you know lots about history? The nineteens?'

'Can that machine tell me who I am?'

'No. Just credit. The cops can tell you, viral slime. You must be a Sub, to get all that spect.'

'Sub?'

'You know. Like where we were this morning. If you have property, you have credit, you live where its good, up on the hill, or anywhere, with trees, security, fences, police. They didn't have this in olden days?'

'Not exactly. You mean well-off people live in these guarded suburbs?'

'Subs. That's it. Is that new?'

'Yes. Or no, actually but... well, the guards are new. Listen, Sky, I need help, a lot of help, do you understand?'

'Not really.'

'I need more; can't you see?'

'I thought you're my luck. But that story is not too too.'

'No, you're... you are. You are my luck. But I need to talk to, I don't know, scientists, experts, somebody in authority.'

'Authority! Listen, what's your name?'

'Jeremy.'

'Listen Jeremy, this is just a story. What does authority care?'

'But it's, wait. I can prove it. I have a wife.'

'A wife, OK. If she was like you, right, or younger? Now she's, what, nine and four is... so now she's... if she came through, she's... come on, you do it.'

'She's ninety-eight. And she lives up on that hill. I can take you to her, take anybody.'

'So she came through?'

'What do you mean?'

'She came through.'

'She thinks I'm a ghost. But I'll take you to her. Can you go up there, if I take you?'

'Sure, as your guest. Tell that virus to get sick. Let's do.'

Outside in the street it was cold. It was no longer snowing, but the icy wind that blew drifts into doorways and the corners of windows cut through his clothes. She led him along at a near run. Her head was bent low, but she seemed full of purpose and direction and he followed her blindly as they strode along the pavement.

'Wait!' The voice came from behind them. He ignored it, intent on the woman in front.

'Jeremy, wait!' They both stopped, then, and turned. A vehicle had stopped outside the café and he recognised the two men who went in as the two in suits from the hospital. They had not seen him, perhaps because they were wearing

dark glasses, and it was not they who had called to him, but flying towards them, her mouth open, her tongue out, her eyes rolling, her ears flapping like useless wings, came Boole. Trying to stop she lost her footing on the icy concrete and slid past them, legs flailing, and came to rest upside down in the gutter. She was panting wildly and struggling to right herself, but the voice was still warm and soft and low.

'Hello, love. Have you got any food?'

'No, I'm sorry. Look, Sky, did you see those two?'

'Hello, Jeremy, love.'

'You got a Talkimal! Too too! Hello pooch, what's your name? Which two?'

'They went into the cafe.'

'My name is Boole. Is it time for supper?'

'Looking for you?'

'I think so.'

'This way.'

'Are we going for a walk?'

'Come on, dog.'

'My name is Boole.'

'Come on, Boole. A real Talkimal. Too too.'

In the side street they were protected from the wind as well as out of sight.

'Who are they?'

'I don't know. They were at the hospital. Look, I think maybe I should talk to them.'

'I will be your dog. Not a lost dog.'

'Sure, darling. You trust them?'

'I don't trust anybody at the moment. I mean except you, I think.'

'Good. Listen. It's better if you choose who to talk to, so? Or when? Keep the old controlerolo of things?'

'I don't know what I'm doing.'

'Trust me. No, no, Boole, what are you eating?'

'Food.'

'What is it? Don't eat that! Where you get her?'

'I found her. She found me I mean.'

'I never met one before. She needs a bath.'

'So do I.'

A car drove past the end of the road. It was shaped like a teardrop with three tiny wheels, and it made almost no sound. The two grey suits sat in the front, the younger man driving, both of them staring ahead through their dark shades. A snow-filled gust bowled along behind the vehicle like a pet. He realised his feet were cold again, that his batteries must be flat. He began to shiver.

She took him home. They walked for miles through the wrecked city. Many of the streets were utterly abandoned, the roadways filled with grass and weeds, and there were trees and vines climbing over the shattered houses, prising the bricks apart. It is metal, he saw, which rots the fastest. The garden gates were stumps like old teeth, rusted down to slivers in the damp air. There were abandoned cars at the road edges, with long grass growing all round them, their bodywork corroded to a filigree of delicate oxides. A housing estate of high-rise flats looked like a Mayan city buried by the jungle of vines and weeds that climbed over them. Everything was lightly coated with snow and there were almost no tracks or footprints in the silent streets. They saw only a handful of people. Despite the wintry sky they were nearly all wearing dark glasses. Nobody acknowledged them.

She lived on the top floor of what seemed to be an abandoned school next to a canal. A big room, cluttered, very bright even on this bleak day because the wall overlooking the canal was all windows. At one end the classroom blackboard was still there, covered with drawings and writings. There was a lot of disparate furniture, a long rack of clothes, a comfortable disorder. There was a bathroom down the hall where he took a hot shower. His body was utterly strange to him, but he was beginning to feel comfortable in it. When he came back, she began to get undressed; she seemed to have dozens of pieces of clothing, which she distributed about the room according to some inscrutable plan. He watched her with anxious uncertainty. When she was naked she said to Boole:

‘Now you.’

‘No bath.’

‘Come on.’

‘Please no bath. I’m hungry.’

‘Come along on, beastly beast. Then food.’

The dog had to be dragged, sitting down, her paws thrust forward uselessly, sliding across the wood. He could hear Sky laughing and splashing in the bathroom, singing and talking to the dog, whose voice was too soft to hear.

On the blackboard: in very large and elaborate coloured letters was written:

AGAR

and under that:

EVERYTHING REAL IS NATURAL

and then:

FURTHER FROM EQUILIBRIUM

and:

FLEE ENTROPY

The rest of the board was covered in a design of maddened intricacy which folded back in itself again and again, so that every loop was filled with more loops, curled inside each other like new fern leaves.

There was a pair of dark glasses on a table, glasses like those that almost everyone but Sky seemed to be wearing, and when he picked them up he saw that they were glowing faintly with a flickering light of their own. He held them before his eyes. He could see only a blurred image until he put them on, then his vision filled entirely with a sharp three-dimensional picture of a faceted sphere like the mirrored ball over a disco dance floor. There were dozens of coloured facets, each bearing a symbol that meant nothing to him. The sphere hanging before his eyes looked so real and solid that he thought he could almost touch it. He lifted his hand and in response an image of a hand, not his own, but a machine hand, with a mirrored brightness like mercury, appeared, following his movements. He closed his fingers and the shining hand obediently grasped the sphere. He twisted, and the sphere turned. The illusion was so perfect he almost believed he could feel its solidity. He put an illusory chrome finger against one of the facets, choosing at random, and pressed. There was a click.

—here to tell you that just because my friend and employer Richard Lee was – let's face it – was immolated in that fateful plane crash just one short month ago; that despite the evidence, which we have all seen with our own eyes, of the fiery destruction of the mortal body of both my friend and his travelling companions – and it was I, and I shall never forget the experience till the day I too die and join Richard wherever he is now, it was I who had to travel in person to that terrible scene, in that desolate forest, so that I have before me even now when I think of it the stench of burned aviation fuel, and the image of those pathetic, scattered bundles of possessions on the grass – despite all this, despite all the evidence of our poor five senses, I know that my friend and former life guide Richard Lee still lives, some-

where. I feel his presence at this moment; he is with me and I know that it is his will – and this is what sustains me – it is his will that his work should continue, because he knows, he always did know that you, his customers, need him, as I need him, as we all need him: his understanding, his sympathy, his mission, which is now my mission, to bring to as many people as we can reach the very, very best that there is to be found anywhere in the world in affordable pre-assembled furnishings.

Jeremy seemed to be standing in an otherwise empty room, looking at a sweating man in a creased grey suit, speaking directly to him with a burning passion.

The Richard Lee Memorial City of Furnishing is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, so that you the customers can participate in his dream. That dream of a world in which an honest deal is not a pious hope but standard practice, where the satisfaction of the customer and the prosperity of our company flourish together in symbiotic harmony. Where our relationship with our customers is not for an hour or a day but for a lifetime, and even beyond, as I now know. Where the handshakes are as firm as the sofas are soft. The Richard Lee Memorial City of Furnishing, Here for You, in Lincoln's Inn. My friends, I, Duane Brown, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you, Duane. And now, sponsored by the Richard Lee Memorial City of Furnishing: the News. This is the BBC.

THE UNION OF NORTH AMERICAN STATES inaugurated its eighth president today, or its seventy-third, if the nation's disputed continuity with the former USA is accepted. The new incumbent, former celebrity line-dancing champion and one-time shark-attack victim Elroy 'Skipper' Jones, ignored the by-now-familiar barrage of criticism from President-for-Life Upton Shipley of Greater Texas to speak to the people who elected him in a popular landslide last Tuesday.

My fellow Americans. The moment I knew that you the people of this great nation had chosen me to be the conduit – that's kind of like a sort of tube or pipe, you know, they tell me – for your aspirations and hopes, then I knew that my first and primary task was to discover, to feel in myself, the shape, and you know, or form, of all the different kinds of energy that are potential in the brains of Americans, I mean North Americans of course, across the country, at this very special time in the history of our collective consciousness, of the life we share all together. Yes. So I want to... to find a way to language this.

So I have to tell you I meditated long and hard before speaking to you now. To feel like the space that we are in now, and to choose the way forward that will lead us all, every one – and I'm even talking about not just about the folks who voted for me, but also the ones who did, who didn't, I mean like, really everyone, you know – along the road toward safety and prosperity to where we will all have, not only – this is the important part – everything we need, but everything we want. This is our shared dream that we dream together. I heard one of our philosophers say the other day on the Vee: 'The New Millennia is no longer new.' And I thought how true that is. Millennium, I mean, or is it? Well, anyway. Our path lies in front of us, not behind. We cannot change the past, and I say OK anyway there is no point in having like a post mortem on something which is dead, but so, we can turn our backs on history and our faces towards what I call the History of the Future, where all our practical and spiritual powers will be realifed – made real, did I make that up? Let it stand.

And as I thought these thoughts, I felt like the harmony of them not only with this great nation, but with the peoples of all the world. I felt your energies approving me. I felt also the invisible energies of those mystic forces that guide and unite us approving me. Really, you know? Which is why I am speaking to you tonight from here within the blackened shell of the old Capitol building. Because think of the, the lines of power which converge on this place, they must be. Surely the geometry of these streets, the lines and circles and rectangles and... and... oblongs of this very special place, the mysterious dimensions of the Monument which our mathematicians are still studying as I speak, you know, which explains why I plan to restore this place, to rebuild the Monument and the parks and lakes and the avenues and, and the statues and stuff, so that all the old vibrations and like concentrated good power will be ours again to wield – or use, you know, as we wish. This is our destiny.

So I want you the people to know that I am open to you, that my heart and my mind are open to you, and well, when you like, project your thoughts towards me you are heard, really. I feel you speaking to me from every corner of this land. From the tent cities of California to the marijuana fields of Kansas, from the father in the nursery to the soldier in her lonely border guard tower in, in... down there, from the business person in his or her office, from the healer or teacher in his or her pyramid or sphere of harmony, I mean I do, I, like, just so really do hear the voices that guide me to lead you along the manyfold, single way, so that we may be what, until now, we have only been coming – becoming, you know? So, OK, now, I will be speaking to you every evening at O, around this time, sponsored by—

Jeremy reached up again and the gleaming hand appeared before him, and the sphere, blotting out the president's goofy face, and his library of book spines. He turned the sphere and pressed at random another facet.

—you don't like it, you don't have to do it, but if you do, you do. You know what I mean, don't you. At Hapticon we don't build anything but intimate simulacra, because frankly we don't want to do anything else. Short-term rentals, and attractive long-term rates for added bonding. We're only a transaction away. When you feel the need, you know where to... come. Look at these guys and gals from our banks. They're better than real, believe me, I know. Remember, what you see and hear (soundtrack on o/56) is nothing to what you will feel. Can you imagine what this feels like? O, darling! Well, O yes! Well, I do. Now, watch thi—

He pressed again.

—as in this ultrasound film, you can see that a normal bowel movement—

And again.

—um de rum stop, gum de rum go, don't know, let go, yo yo—

—Milano; *La Repubblica di Lombardia* ha ieri protestato fortemente contro il comportamento dei soldati del Papa che dovevano accettare l'arresa formale della città di Perugia. Una portavoce dello Stato Papale—

—cook it, but first, we have to kill it. Take—

—because it urban, it secular, it atomic, platonic, reticulated, florid. Suck on it.

From Belgium. Sloo—

—these images, received by us from a secret source, support the evidence from orbital imagery that the situation in China is at least as catastrophic—

—blister, your sister a wisteria theory, dear—

—down at Rover's—

—Cleethorpes, eleven; Torquay—

—call it a sausage, I know what I call it—

—why we should help them. And you know why? Because we should not help them, for the same reason that should not help a little bird which falls from its nest. Because when you do that all you do is you weaken the race of birds, and you create more birds which will suffer and weaken and fail, and die on the ground when they need not. If entropy is to be defeated, we must stamp it out first in ourselves—

—Hi, what can I do for you? I said hello-o? Are you just going to stand there? Whatever you want, but, the fact is, whatever you want, you have to pay so please confirm your Specs' code. Are you deaf, dear? If you are hearing impaired please use Feedback Channel 17/908.

'Me?'

Can you hear me?

'Are you...?'

Am I what?

'Are you talking to me?'

Well you tuned in, sweetikins. Or are you tuned out?

'I—'

I mean I love to chat. But you have to pay it up to get it up, and delicious as you seem, I am bound as you can imagine by a strict operating practices manual which proscribes more than a limited amount of gratis communication. If you don't like what you see, sugar, try another channel.

'I'm sorry.'

Don't be. Our customers are precious to us.

'I'm mean I'm not used to this kind of, communication.'

Been away?

'Sort of.'

Been away so long you never heard of OX codes?

'That's right.'

So you can watch more for free while we have this conversation.

'No, really I... I chose the channel by accident.'

By accident. I love that about this job: the originality.

'I didn't mean to waste your time.'

Really you never heard of this?

'I'm very out of touch.'

Where were you? Auckland?

'Auckland... yes, that's right.'

That was a joke, precious. Don't worry. You don't think you have to tell me the truth?

'I'd tell you if I could.'

You're adorable. And it's a slow morning. You really don't want to pay up?

'I can't; I have no, no money.'

He has no money! You are too cute. I know. You've been on Mars, right? All those rumours about a secret Mars trip back in the earlies were true. And now here you are, a virgin from outer space, looking for a little strangeness on a slow morning.

'What should I do? Can I just change channels?'

It's OK. We're talking this long and you didn't say anything horrible yet. You really are a sweetie pie. So tell me. What do you think of the planet?

'Which, what planet?'

Mother Earth, isn't what you colonists say. In the fields on Mars, looking up at the green planet, or blue, which is it?

'Blue, I think, but you shouldn't think... I don't think I've ever been to Mars.'

Well, you would know, you would probably be sure. Wouldn't you? Either way?

'Normally yes, but I can't explain.'

Sugar, were you looking for a therapy channel? Because this isn't exactly one, you know?

'No, really I—'

I know. Just a surfer. Well, I'm Chris and I have to go. But you know where to find me.

'No, I don't.'

Stay clean.

'Wait!'

This is a pay as you come channel. Please confirm the transaction for further unique interaction with our pli—

Another facet.

— on this day, my Fellow Americans. So I want you, wherever you are, to like turn to your neighbour and take his or her hand in your or – in yours, right? Now let the good energy—

— reports of large, organised bands of Ferals in East Anglia, still unconfirmed, suggest—

— wickachooacahacahongahangahangahoobedickadooka—

— purchase of a majority holding of The Piping Hot Superconductor Shop as one of the most significant – and largest – corporate moves this decade. The shadowy Lacuna Corporation, the identity of whose ownership is protected by the strict banking secrecy laws of Greater Korea, is now one of the most potent forces in this market. At Lacuna's elegant Northern Hemisphere headquarters in former Kenwood House in North London, a spokesperson said the purchase was a logical extension of Lacuna's interest in data commodities. The spokesperson added that there was no reason to believe that current shortages could not be overcome by a combination of efficiency and technological progress; consequently there was no question of Lacuna's position in the market becoming a threat to the economy of any state, or combination thereof... ah, thereof. Here with me and, I anticipate, with a dissenting viewpoint, Professor Um, Professor, would you say—?

It makes me want to weep. It does. You would too if you had the brains to see what it meant. Look, there's this company, corporation, right? And it owns fifty-buggering-five percent of the bandwidth on the planet. If they hit the switch, we are deaf, dumb, blind and hungry, you just wait, you watch. It'll be good and bye, folks.

But the company says—

They can say what they like, whatever they like, but anyone smart enough to use a pencil can see—

'Jeremy, love, Jeremy, Jeremy, here I am! Here we are! We have a lot of food!'

'Boole, hush a moment.'

'Hello, mister Time Traveller, you know your dog never stops talking.'

'She's not my dog, now please be quiet a moment! This could be important.

They are talking about—'

'I am your dog, love.'

'Be quiet! Go away!'

'Don't shout at her. Look, you upset her.'

'I will be non-speaking until cancelling command is issued. Consult your handbook for adjustment of default communicativity settings.'

'Now look what you've done.'

'I'm sorry, but this really is important.'

'What could be important on the Vee?'

— as much trouble as these buggers, or this bugger, we don't even know, to keep their identity a secret, must have something to hide.

Thank you, Professor Ah, Professor. Other financial news: the spring Forewarned Hiking Rate was set today by the International Conference of Interested Parties at forty-seven percent. This will be good news for holders of Realised Potential Equity Certificates, provided they remember—

'It doesn't matter now. What do you know about the Lacuna Corporation?'

'Nothing. That's all Owner stuff, for Subs like you. By the blue laguna, was that a song, the sloopy laguna?'

'Do you know Kenwood.'

'Is he a friend of yours?'

'It's a place. The big white house at the top of the Heath.'

'O, yes! The beautiful house.'

'Have you been there?'

'In the house? Surely not.'

'You know the Heath?'

'I can get there. Easy. But full of angels. You always get caught, sooner or after. Come here Boole. Come here. It's all good. We love you. Yes we do. Please speak to us.'

'Am I a lost dog?'

'Never. Never again. Are you hungry?'

'Yes, please.'

‘Then come with me. You watch the Vee, you cruel man.’

He put the glasses back on.

—down three on yesterday. At noon—

—is Extropy? You know Entropy is real. You see it every time your coffee goes cold, every time you break a glass, every time you go into your son’s bedroom. Well all I am saying to you now is that Creation is real too, and you can see it in everything that grows, from a crystal to a tree to a bureaucracy, from a fungus infection to a telecomms system. From a ball of featureless protomatter at the moment of creation comes a whole universe of stars and planets and plants and animals and people – people like you and me, only some of them are less than you and me, and we can see that. They are less smart or less strong-willed or less brave or less vital or even simply less fortunate. But if we are to participate in Creation we must be as brave and strong and vital as it is. We must be as ruthless as Nature herself if we are not to be defeated by the forces of Entropy, if human destiny is not to be a mere stain on the planet. So I tell you that you must be smart and strong and brave and full of life, because Extropy is our meaning and our purpose, and that you must not, no matter what your so-called better instincts tell you, waste your vitality on those whose weakness makes them less deserving of this extravagant gift of life. So I want you, wherever you are, to go to the window and look out on the world and say with me, with Agar—

‘Hey, you really cut her about, you know; she’s too a dog and everything. Here; are you hungry?’

‘I didn’t mean to. No, thank you.’

‘She’s sweet. But she’s so too afraid. She told me her story while we were gone out: she was abandoned, you know. That happened to a lot of Talkimals.’

‘Can you please just tell me what exactly is a Talkimal?’

‘O. So this is one of those things? Too too. It’s an animal, or only just dogs and chimps and horses and dolphins I think, and they were – I don’t know – engineered somehow, they’re biotechs, you know? Composites. So the voice is synth, but worked by the animal. Trouble is, and nobody thinks of this first, so? All the really interesting things animals know don’t go in our language, so when they were a big phase rich Subs bought them to be phasey and then they said the Talkimals were too boring to listen to. But Boole’s sweet, you just got to pay attention. I got her lots of food and some stuff for her breath and her farting. She

eats terrible things, you know. She picked up some thing in the street and ate it that I don't even want to tell you what.'

'Do you know any history, Sky?'

'You mean like the Greeks and the Romans and the British Empire and the American Civil War and everything? No, not too too.'

'No, I mean, modern history, the last sixty years.'

'So, that's the American Civil War. But truly, you don't know this stuff? You mean pre, pre-millennium history. We had it at school. It's blah, too too type.'

'You don't really believe me, do you?'

'Sure, I just hadn't thought about it too. Now, so: you remember World War Two?'

'That was before... before whatever happened.'

'And the Russian Fission Exchanges?'

'Fission? Atom bombs?'

'Sure, the little ones.'

'That would be after.'

'And the Plague Years?'

'I think that was long before.'

'No it was not. O no it was not. It was my grandmother Kylie's days. Nearly everybody died. Before that the world was too too crowded; all the houses round here had people living in them, everything was too full. No space. She said there was maybe ten million people living just in London. Now there's not even half that many in all Britain.'

'Ten million?'

'They don't know, really. It's too hard to count the Urbans, and the Ferals, nobody knows. Gran said it used to be hard to find a house to live in when she was young, was that true for you?'

'Not for me, no, but—'

'You were rich?'

'No I, I suppose... no – yes, maybe, I don't know. Only ten million. That's, what? Plague? What plague?'

'You know: ID plagues. Like diseases, and then after, fighting and that.'

'You mean AIDS?'

'What? O, yes, was that... I think that was the first one, no? Or one of them. After there were too more. But you don't know?'

'Everywhere? People died?'

'You mean in the world? It depends. In some places like Africa it was too bad, real worse. Or California, when it was still all there. But other places, China, it's hard to tell what goes there, but Africa now is mostly just animals, I want to go there when I get some credit.'

'But what happened with the plagues?'

'O, in the end, you know, they cured them in the rich countries, and in the poor countries the only people left after were immune so it's all gone. Now, what else? I do remember some. There was the war in Vietnam, and the oil wars, and the Arab-Israeli wars, and the Chinese Dark Age, and the invasions of Macedonia, and the Papal Schism and the Depression and the Sandringham Road Riots and the assassination of JFK and the European Secession and the Great Earthquake and the Tory Collapse and the Munich Agreement and the treaty of Fernando Po and, O well, let me see... no, I know, I know, there was the Numerical Revolution, that was your time. You could be a history professor of pre-millennium history! And make some credit and take me to see the animals in Africa. You could have a job! What did you do before your time travel thing?'

'I was a management consultant.'

'What's that?'

'It's not easy to explain.'

'You could do that.'

'No... no.'

'Are you all right?'

'I was just thinking about the people.'

'What people?'

'All the people. All the people, Sky. When I was... before, the world was crowded with more people than there had ever been.'

'Was it better when there were more people?'

'No. Yes. I don't know. It seemed right somehow.'

'Better for them, anyway.'

'Yes. But tell me about now. I can't understand half of what I saw on that, those things. I meant to ask you to get me a newspaper.'

'A what?'

'A newspaper? There's nothing like *The Times*, *Telegraph*?'

'Sure. You want *The Times*? You want the default edition? Or you want to spec?'

'Whatever's simplest.'

‘Default hardcopy, OK?’

She took the Specs from him, put them on and lifted her hands in front of her eyes and moved them about as if she were doing a little private dance. There was a chime from the other side of the room and she went over there and came back with a slim, tabloid publication, violently coloured.

‘SUCK ON THIS, MR FROG!’ was the front page headline over a picture of some men watching an enormous drilling machine, mud dripping from its head, entering a tunnel. When he touched the shiny surface of the picture it broke into a clumsy animation, a loop of half a dozen jerky frames showed the machine moving deliberately in and out of the horizontal tunnel mouth.

The story was on the following page.

So. Our neighbours across the English Channel don’t wanna pay up for restoring the Chunnel?

“Current relations between our two countries are no encouragement to such a project”, says top frog, or President, as they like to call him, Etienne Pironi.

And this is supposed to improve them? We don’t think so.

We say let’s do it alone. We never needed any help before, why should we now? Let’s tell the French to go jump in la manche!

Then it won’t just be the English Channel, but the English Chunnel as well!

Stick THAT up your tube, neighbour!

‘I don’t think this is going to be much help. Are there, is there a library or something where I could go to learn about, find out about everything I’ve missed? And I want to read about my... my accident. And I have to decide – what am I going to do?’

‘Hello, Sky love. Thank you for the food.’

‘Hello, doglet. Feeling bright?’

‘Happy. Hello, Jeremy. Would you like to go for a walk?’

‘Later, maybe.’

‘Good!’ Boole looked a great deal cleaner, but she still stood scratching with an air of delighted concentration. The she put down her hind leg and walked towards the door.

‘There is someone outside.’

Sky put the Specs back on and twitched her hand in the air.

‘Who’s that? Is that your friends?’

She handed him the Specs. Putting them on, he found himself looking down from above the street door at the two men from Kenwood who had attached a small machine to the lock of the door and were both staring at it, waiting.

Get on.

Don’t tell me, tell the pick.

You sure there’s no alarms?

Relax.

I will be very upset if we don’t get him this time. I have been impressed with the importance of this man by several people who are very, that is very, high up in Lacuna. He is wanted back at Kenwood. In one piece. At once. Is that thing working?

You know it takes time. Why does he pretend to be a hundred years old, do you know?

No, and I don’t believe they know either. But they own him in some way.

‘Cop virus!’

‘No, they’re not policemen, I don’t think. How long will it take them to open that door?’

‘I don’t know. Not long.’

‘I think I have to go.’

‘Go out here, then down that way. See the broken wall? Through there is the canal. Then if you go north you come to a lot of dead streets; you can wait there and then come back. I will stay here and be surprised for them.’

‘I’m worried about you. I don’t know them.’

‘Sweet, but don’t worry. Boole will protect me, if you let me keep her.’

‘How did they find me? Yes, of course keep her.’

‘Who knows. Just watch for the angels. And people. Keep warm. See you later.’

That’s it. Open.

Quietly now.

‘Shall I bark?’

‘What angels?’

‘In the sky – angels. Go.’

‘Are we going for a walk?’

‘Not now, Boole.’

Standing by the canal, he wondered which way was north. The water was black, the sky only a little lighter, there was no wind. A few isolated snowflakes fell straight down, very slowly. In his day you had always known where the points of the compass were in an urban area because the satellite dishes all faced south. Here there was little but shadows and ruins, in one direction the path was almost blocked by the bricks from a collapsed wall. He turned the other way. The path was heavily overgrown, looking up he could see glimpses of once-elegant, crumbling houses through the tangle of bare branches and black leaves. There were lights in one of the houses, and he bitterly envied the people inside their warmth and security – and their identity. The path curved under a bridge and then came out in a long straight section, ending in a tunnel. As he approached it he saw that although the canal went through the tunnel the footpath did not, and on foot there was no way out except the way he had come, and no way to get up to the level of the road through the knotted trees and brambles. The place was deserted; he could not see another human soul, but he could hear, quite distinctly, hurrying footsteps approaching around the bend behind him. There was a plastic dinghy inverted, half buried in the foliage. When he had dragged it free it weighed almost nothing and he lowered it silently into the water. The boat must have been a child's toy, and it sank low under his weight. He pushed away from the bank and into the tunnel, drawing himself along by pulling at the slippery brick of the vault.

Inside the tunnel the cold was implacable, and the boat crackled as it moved because the water in the tunnel was covered with a thin film of ice. The faint sound reverberated through the tunnel and he stopped, shivering in the darkness. He could see nothing but the half-circle of the nearer tunnel mouth completed by its reflection, and a much smaller circle far away in the opposite direction. Although he was no longer moving, the boat was still not silent: there was a steady bubbling sound made by the water that was leaking rapidly into it and which now began to soak his feet. He could no longer hear any footsteps. The arch of light at the tunnel entrance was by now closed with a thick curtain of falling snow. He crouched there sinking in the icy water without a hope in the world, and yet, if only he had been a little more willing, a little more trusting, riches and power and safety beyond hoping for could have been his for the asking, all along.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE LATE PRE-MILLENNIAL PERIOD made for lovely ruins. Once the offices were abandoned, sometimes only half-built, their pointless elaboration made them fragile, time worked rapidly on them and their crumbling blurred the fatuity of the builders' vision. As the last three digits in the years wound up toward zero, a burst of greed had driven the city east into the wasteland left over from a recent war, and there, on a muddy plain turned into a vast puzzle by the projecting rectangles of blank water that marked where the docks had once been, people had begun to act out the ever-popular fantasy of actually building from scratch an entire city of gleaming towers and broad spaces and glass castles that reflected the clouds as if they were all floating together in the sky; a whole brightly lit self-contained world smelling of joinery and carpet adhesive, where tens of thousands of people might be employed, fed, exercised and amused.

Jeremy had walked all night. When he had crept back to Sky's home the windows were dark and nobody answered his timid calls. His stolen clothes had dried quickly. The canal had only been a foot deep, and he had walked out of the tunnel through the film of ice. Then he had walked, sometimes running effortlessly, trying to stay out of trouble. He thought he had to stay away from people if he were to have a chance to do – what exactly? That was the question that brought him to a halt as he ran along the towpath. Jeremy had once thought of himself as a hard kind of soft man. The world he had lived and worked in had looked in its essentials more or less like the playing fields of the very good, very expensive schools he had attended as a child. He had moved through it like a fish, recognising threats and rewards as though they were primary colours. He acknowledged the existence of intangible things, but all he had ever truly believed was that you were either a predator or you were prey. And he would not be prey, therefore it was important to be strong. He certainly felt strong in his body now. He ran along the towpath not like a man in fear but like a boy on his birthday. He felt weightless, his legs were like carbon-fibre springs, his

lungs were full of pure oxygen. He ran so lightly his shoes made no sound on the concrete flags. The sky was the colour of dirty lead; the falling snow was tilted by his speed and driven into his face. The path was unlit, broken and overgrown, slippery with moss and snow, but he dodged and leapt like a dancer around the vague obstacles that loomed around him. The walls and buildings on either side of the canal were just darker shadows in the dim, rushing world.

His feet were suddenly warm; the sensation was so abrupt that he stopped dead. His breathing was even and regular, no more strenuous than if he had climbed on a chair. The heat in his feet was something different, though; it was coming from the shoes. The running must have recharged the batteries. But the mere fact that his feet were warm could not account for this extraordinary sense of well-being and possibility. So what would you do, he asked himself, if you could? Plan? Do? Check? Or act?

Analyse the situation. Isolate the problem/problems. Problems, definitely. Plural problems. What data did he have? Well, for a start there was some kind of flying machine dropping out of the clouds towards him. It was quite small, not much taller than he was, and shaped like a lightbulb with a pair of rotors on top, and a number of devices – antennae, parabolic reflectors, lenses – protruding from its broad base. He backed away under the canal bridge, into the darkness.

The thing, the *angel* – of course: this was an angel – hovered just above the water, making a noise like a huge electric lawnmower. A beam of bright blue, with the actinic graininess and unnatural precision of laser light, shone out from one of the devices on the base and scanned rapidly over the arches of the bridge, but the path curved in the darkness and Jeremy thought that the light had not touched him. Then it was dark again. A scarlet afterimage of what the laser had illuminated was burned into his retinas. The voice didn't come as a howl from a loudspeaker, but soft and clear, as if the speaker were beside him.

YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF RESIDENTIAL LEGISLATION. PLEASE
REMAIN IMMOBILE UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF OUR GROUND REPRESENTATIVE. WORKING FOR A SECURE FUTURE FOR YOU AND YOURS.
SENTRY-GO™: AN EYE TO YOUR WELFARE – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA
CORPORATION PLC.

He backed further along the path, until he came out from under the bridge again on the far side. Here and there in the buildings around him, windows were opened, and light flooded out. He realised that many of the windows he had seen were dark simply because they were closed; the glass held the light in. One

window opened right beside his head. As he turned to look in, the light inside went out, leaving him blinking.

‘Just keep going that way. It will never figure it out on its own. Angels on automatic are so dumb. There’s two sides to everything. An in and an out. Go before it goes to manual. Or the Feet get here.’

‘Feet?’

“Our ground representatives.”

‘Thank you.’

‘This is a peaceful neighbourhood; we don’t like curfew-breakers. No noise, no trouble, no pain, no restrain. Can you walk on water?’

‘No, I think I’ll just get going; thank you anyway.’

‘Welcome. Good and bye.’

The angel was still hovering on the far side of the bridge. It sent another spear of light through, drawing the scene swiftly in the air.

YOUR COOPERATION IS REQUESTED. SANCTIONS MAY BE APPLICABLE.
YOUR RIGHTS ARE BEST PROTECTED BY COMPLIANCE. YOUR SAFETY
IS OUR PROSPERITY. SENTRY-GO™: VISION, VIEWPOINT – A DIVISION
OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

Someone was coming. There were human footsteps on the path. Jeremy ran, light as innocence, until he could no longer hear the rotors of the angel or the steps of the Feet, until everything was still again. Then he went east, looking for a way away from everything, a place to think. He had walked most of the night, finding his way through the broken city by the light reflected from the low, snow-laden clouds.

He had taken shelter in an empty office block, passing through where the glass outer walls had once been, and up the stairs from the snow-filled reception area. The fact that his were the only footprints made him feel a little safer. He had found an office with its windows intact and had spent the night in an executive swivel chair. He had still no need of sleep, and when he closed his eyes the darkness filled with moving shapes he could not recognise, so instead he kept his eyes open, and watched the sky as it lightened.

The building had originally been a dismal slab of steel and mirrored glass, to which had been attached, by way of decoration – called Added Value at the time – a number of vividly coloured, hugely inflated, entirely useless copies of elementary architectural icons. There had been blue pillars, without capitals, sixty metres high, and an orange pediment, as plain as a child’s playing block, thirty

metres wide, and some yellow spheres two metres in diameter, which had been attached here and there. Most of this stuff had since fallen off, or down, or apart, and the whole building had slipped sideways slightly and strained itself, so that many of its reflecting windows had exploded outwards and now the approach to it in the dead cold was across a field of ice and broken mirrors, through a landscape of enormous, shattered, platonic solids in nursery colours, cloaked in the forgiving snow.

At first light Jeremy saw below a fat man in black Specs leaping through this landscape flying a silver kite, lifting his knees high in the air to run through the snow that whirled around him in a miniature tempest. The kite was one of the manoeuvrable kind with two strings, as shiny as mercury, and there was a black box attached to the end of the tail. As Jeremy stood at the window looking down, an angel flew right past him just outside, an arm's length away. He jumped away from the window, but the machine gave no sign of having detected him; it seemed to be tracking the fat man who was running even more awkwardly, twisting about as he bounded through the snow, and looking all around him as if trying to establish his position, all the time steering his kite as it swooped back and forth, coming closer to the angel with every pass. From behind the window Jeremy could hardly hear the rotors of the machine, just a faint sound like someone riffling the edges of a ream of paper. The kite swept past the angel and was instantly transformed into a black, burning, falling leaf, its crumpling edges lined with blue fire which gathered for a moment where the control lines were still attached to the twisting frame and then leapt down the strings, leaving two parallel tracks of soot in the sky. The fat man was still holding the strings and grinning like a lunatic, his eyes invisible behind the black lenses, when the balls of light reached his hands and he was briefly enveloped in an overcoat of glowing blue that seemed to lift him in the air and drop him down again a metre away, arms wide, his hands still clutching the disconnected handles of the strings.

Jeremy knew he was going to have to go downstairs. He thought perhaps he was undergoing some kind of test; nothing else could explain why someone who was in as much trouble as he was should feel he had to go to the assistance of a stranger.

The man lay where he fallen, quite still. His Specs had come off, and lay beside him in the snow; blurred patterns of light danced on the inside of the lenses. His pale eyes were open, staring at the sky. As Jeremy came over to him the eyes abruptly swivelled to meet his.

‘Wheee!’

‘Are you all right?’

‘O wow!’

‘Can you hear me?’

‘That was amazing. Was it good for you too?’

‘Was what was good for me?’

‘Pay no attention. I am a little tontated. Where is the angel?’

‘The what? O, right here – there.’

‘How long?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘No, come on how long? You saw? I was out, how long? Five minutes?’

‘No, much less. I don’t know. A minute? I had to come down’

‘Help me up.’ Where’s my Specs?’

PLEASE REMAIN IMMOBILE UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF ONE OF OUR GROUND REPRESENTATIVES. SENTRY-GO™: SERVICE, SAFETY, STEADFASTNESS – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

The man had found his Specs and put them back on. He began to wave his hands in the air, his fingers dancing as if he were playing an invisible piccolo. Then he did a little dance of his own in the snow. ‘Got you, my angel. Got you, got you, my very own.’

YOU ARE REMINDED THAT REQUESTS FROM SENTRY-GO™ UNITS HAVE THE AUTHORITY OF LAW BY ACT OF PARLIAMENT. CUSTOMERS ARE WARNED THAT NON-COMPLIANCE MAY CAUSE THE UNIT TO TAKE ACTIONS CONTRARY TO CUSTOMER SAFETY OR LIBERTY WITHOUT CAUSE FOR REDRESS AND OR COMPLAINT. FURTHER BEHAVIOUR OF ANY KIND WILL BE TAKEN AS ACCEPTANCE OF THESE CONDITIONS. IF CUSTOMER DOES NOT SPEAK ENGLISH A COPY OF THIS NOTICE WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE IN TRANSLATION FOLLOWING TRANSACTION WITH GROUND REPRESENTATIVES. SENTRY-GO™: WATCHING OVER YOU – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

‘You see, the dead spots are not usually a problem, the angels have a limited autonomy on batteries but they can buffer their data for a bit and download when they come out of the zone, building shadow or whatever, but in the meantime, from here, it cannot transmit what I, clever monkey, have just done, which was to intercept, just before it flew into this dead zone right here between these towers, the complete set of handshaking protocols that it will use for the next,

let's say three minutes to be on the safe side.' As he spoke, his hands continued to draw rapidly in the air.

WARNING. FOR OPERATIONAL REASONS THIS UNIT WILL HAVE TO ABSENT THE AREA TEMPORARILY. CONSEQUENTLY CUSTOMERS WILL NEED TO BE IMMOBILISED. PLEASE MAKE SELF STROKE SELVES COMFORTABLE. THIS IS USUALLY A NON-HARMFUL PROCEDURE. SENTRY-GO™: ETERNAL VIGILANCE IS THE PRICE OF LIBERTY – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

'No actually it isn't always necessarily non-harmful. But it needs to go and download, as well as signal the Feet. It wants to glue us to the ground.'

One of the many devices on the base of the machine moved, swivelling round to point a blunt tube at them.

PREPARE FOR IMMOBILISATION. YOU ARE RECOMMENDED TO CLOSE YOUR EYES. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION. SENTRY-GO™: FOR THE COMMON GOOD – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

Jeremy closed his eyes. But nothing happened, except that the note from the rotors changed.

MALFUNCTION WARNING. THIS UNIT MAY BEHAVE UNPREDICTABLY. DO NOT APPROACH. PLEASE NOTIFY SENTRY-GO™: ORDER AND INFORMATION – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

He opened his eyes again. The machine was sinking towards the ground, wobbling uncertainly.

MALFUNCTION WARNING. NON-COMPLIANCE WILL BE TAKEN AS ACCEPTANCE OF CONSEQUENCES. SENTRY-GO™: KEEPING AN EYE ON THINGS – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION PLC.

'Gotcha!'

DATA IS FREEDOM!

The angel hit the ground hard, landing square on the delicate instruments lining its underside and burying them in the snow, the rotors continued to spin down slowly. It had come down in one of the marked parking spaces that could still be made out next to the main entrance, the one marked Chairman. The space next to it, marked CEO, held a shabby white van. The fat man snatched open the doors of the van and brought out a long bar which he thrust into the rotors. They stopped turning instantly and the machine made a low moan. The

man climbed on top of it, released a couple of catches and removed the entire rotor assembly, which he tossed into the van.

‘Help me up with it.’

The machine was surprisingly light. Jeremy helped him lift it into the back of the van and close the doors. The two of them stood looking at each other a moment.

‘Can you drive?’

‘Yes. I mean... well, probably. Actually I don’t know.’

‘Yes would be better. We need to go away from here. If this thing doesn’t show up soon they are going to come and look for it. I’ve some disconnecting to do. Are you willing? You seem to be.’ He closed the doors, while Jeremy climbed in the driver’s side.

On the outside the vehicle looked more or less like the vans he had known, just a box with wheels and windows at the front, but inside, in front of him, there were no instruments except a blank screen on the dashboard, and no controls except a joystick between the front seats. It did not take long to find out that forward meant forward or faster, back meant slower or reverse, and left and right meant left and right. He started off by going forward, right through the last intact window on the ground floor of the building.

‘I see now why you were unsure. You haven’t driven for a while?’

‘Not really.’ But along with the sense of strength that filled him, or as a consequence of it, he felt a kind of spatial clarity, an absolute sense of location and direction, as if there were a gyroscope in his head. His eyes were sharp, his hearing was acute, his hands were sure, the world presented itself to him as lucidly as if it were a diagram of itself, one he did not actually understand, as such, but which was clear anyway, a perfect map of an impossible terrain. Learning to drive the van was easy.

‘You can tell me it’s none of mine. But I hope you’ll tell me your story.’ Jeremy could see a little of what was behind him in the vehicle’s mirror. The fat man had his head inside the angel.

‘What makes you think I have a story?’

‘You don’t look Feral.’

‘I don’t think I am.’

‘But you are helping me do something which I would have thought was clearly illegal and dangerous. I thought I was all alone there. Nobody would know.’

‘Which way?’

'Up, and join the traffic. So it seems natural to ask.'

'I don't really understand what you did.'

'I stole a Public Safety Drone from the Sentry-Go, Tee Em, Corporation: Private Enterprise in the Service of the Public; here is the evidence.'

'How? Or why, actually?'

'Go right, then just merge. Because it contains an algorithm which I think I can use in my work. How? Well, how much do you know about angels?'

'Nothing at all.'

'You must have lived a sheltered life.'

'Just assume I know nothing.'

'Of course, you are foreign, your Eeingleesh is too good.'

'Certainly not, I have lived in this country all, all my life.'

'First time in the big city.'

'No. Well, in a way. Just assume I've forgotten a lot of things which you take for granted.'

'Some sort of amnesia?'

'If you like.'

'O. Fine. Wait. There. It will be quiet now. Well, the angels, then, while having a limited autonomy, for launch and recovery as well as operational needs, are normally operated on links from the ground. Comms lasers carry up and down data from which the angel gets its orders and transmits its view of things. Everything is encrypted, naturally, and the keys change every few minutes. But, like Benjamin Franklin, I cannot tell a lie, with my little kite I intercepted the transmissions and stole the key, while luring the angel out of line of sight of any of its ground stations. Then I took it over. Now it's your turn.'

'But what happened to the kite, and you, back there?'

'The angels get recharged from ground stations too, through tight beams of microwaves. I carelessly flew the kite into one of those. That was really something. Quite a jolt. Not many amps but I shall glow in the dark for weeks. Do you know that, from time to time, to the delight of the hungry and the dispossessed, migrating birds fly through those beams and fall to the ground, cooked to perfection, done to a turn? Or so they say.'

There was little traffic on the narrow elevated road that swept over the empty docks, and it was all moving fast. The cars all looked the same: liquid, aerodynamic, almost silent, with darkened glass and complex, moving colour schemes: whirling patterns like half-mixed paint or broken stained glass, in colours that

vibrated on the retina. He moved out tentatively, then the van accelerated swiftly as it moved into lane. He pulled back a little on the stick, but there was no response.

‘The controls aren’t responding!’

‘They wouldn’t in traffic, would they? Turn off at the next.’

‘Where?’

‘Canary Wharf, we’re going to the tower.’

‘How?’

‘How what?’

‘Turn off.’

‘You mean which.’

‘No, I should have told you, I really can’t drive.’

‘Your amnesia?’

‘My what?’

‘You forgot already? This is serious.’

‘Just tell me what to do!’

‘See where it branches up there.’

‘Wait! This is the railway line. I remember this!’

‘No, this is a road, really. Actually, now that you mention it, I think it was a railway once. Don’t get excited. Are you taking any unusual medical or recreational substances? If you are, no anxiety is called for. Your perceptions are probably as ordinary as mine, just mediated in unfamiliar ways. I am sympathetic to the individuality of your understanding.’

‘No, I’m fine. I feel fine. I just remembered that this was a railway line. I used to be proud of my driving.’

‘That must have been in a former life; there’s nothing to be proud of now. I don’t know anything about trains. My father loved them, but then he remembered the railways. Just go right. That’s it, you see, it’s easy. He used to take his lunch, when he was a child and sit in the woods in some place where he could see them go by. He said he could stay there all day. You look like an honest man; do you solemnly promise me that you are not under the influence of any dangerous drugs or ideas.’

‘O yes.’

‘So, then?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Will you tell me?’

'I... yes, I think I will.'

'I'm very irresponsible, you see, at times. I wouldn't want to get into anything dangerous, physically; there are people I am supposed to take care of.'

'I'm not dangerous. I'm pretty sure of that. But then who are you?'

'Me? I'm a philosopher.'

'Is that why you trust me not to kill us in this thing?'

'You would have to be a much better driver than you are to kill anybody in a road vehicle.'



The tower had been a landmark in his own day. Some fifty floors of unleased office space projecting into the sky above the old docks. There had been a strobe light at its peak to warn away low-flying aircraft and high-flying investors. The elevated road turned and bent like a roller-coaster and the traffic and the van sped easily along until he saw the turnoff and pressed right on the joystick and they swung on to another narrow viaduct which led them down to the base of the tower, where a high arched roof covered the wide concourse where the railway station had been. The van slowed abruptly as it left the road, then he found the controls responding again. He was directed down a steep ramp that led under the building. Looking up just before they drove inside, he could see the sheer walls of the tower vanishing into the low cloud.

'Drive straight into the lift; the big one.'

The large elevator had no doors and no back wall; it began to rise as soon as they drove in. On the wall closest to the driver's window, Jeremy saw a grubby illuminated sign which said:

**THIS PLACE IS PROTECTED VERY THOROUGHLY
INDEED. PLEASE BE CAREFUL, MOST ESPECIALLY
IF YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE.**

'Are we supposed to be here?'

'O yes. Don't worry. My sign. My systems.'

As they rose, he could see the floors as they fell past the open ends of the lift. This was no longer an office building, not even an empty one. Every floor of the useless tower had been gutted and then filled with a profusion of disrupted machinery. Each floor was the same story, like something between a junkyard and an old electromechanical telephone exchange. There were few interior walls,

though rough scars on the concrete showed where they had once been. Cold daylight shone through the distant exterior windows and reflected off the long rows of shelves of electronic equipment stacked almost to the ceiling, storey after storey of it fell past them as they rose. But this was not the smooth coherence of a business system; even at first sight it was something much wilder. Every component was different. The predominant forms were beige boxes, but they varied in size, in shape, in the shade of beige, in the logos and decoration they carried, in condition. Many were open or clearly broken, and the green and black glitter of circuit boards shone darkly in the wintry light. There were video screens, too, of every size. Most were blank, but a few played messages to the empty halls. Everything seemed to be bound to a network of white cables that swarmed over the racks like ivy. The air that came through the open door as they rose was hot and heavy with the scent of warm metal and aromatic resins. Thousands of tiny cooling fans rattled and whirred. Storey after storey, the whole tower, at one time the tallest building in Europe, had been filled wall to wall with electronic flotsam, and it was all going, working away, doing... something.

‘What is this place?’

‘This is the Soup.’

‘Soup?’

‘With a capital Sou. You’ve heard of the Primal Soup?’

‘You mean as in the early Earth? Where life evolved?’

‘Exactly. Whatever that was. Well, this you might call the Secondary Soup. Secondal?’

‘What is it for?’

‘I am trying to grow a mind, to put it roughly.’

They rose and rose, through the tower of busy machinery.

‘Mind?’

‘Intelligence. Remember that stuff?’

‘O you mean artificial intelligence?’

‘Some people think that is a contradiction in terms. I say synthetic intelligence, or post-organic.’

‘You think you can make a mind?’

‘Not make, evolve. It’s too hard to design consciousness from scratch, but if you provide the building blocks, the right environment, you can let it evolve.’

‘Doesn’t that take a very long time?’

‘You can speed things up. That’s what all this is for.’

The lift stopped. The top floor was different from the others. There were spaces here for people to live and work; there were chairs and tables among the machinery, and a girl of about twelve, in the ubiquitous dark Specs.

‘Where have you been?’

‘I’ve got an angel, angel.’

‘You’ll get into trouble.’

‘Not really, precious. I lured it out of its jurisdiction. They should think, I hope, that the angel malfunctioned and fell in the river. The kite got fried.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Not at all.’

‘You’re stupid.’

‘Show some respect. This is a stranger. He is our guest. If we are nice to him, I hope he will tell us his story. My name is Simon, by the way.’

‘And I am Lawn, the mad professor’s beautiful daughter.’

‘I’m, ah, Lee. My name’s Richard Lee.’

She pulled the Specs down her nose and looked at him over them with a steady gaze.

HE WATCHED THE TWO OF THEM DISMANTLE THE ANGEL. They did not touch it often themselves, but stood around it with their dark glasses on and their hands dancing in the air like mating birds, while numerous tiny machines like scavenger crabs swarmed over the angel and lovingly dismembered it in response to their gestures. The child was as self-possessed as her father, and her face below the hidden eyes was firm with concentration.

‘What is it you want from there? You said it was an algorithm. Why is it so important?’

‘There is an image compression algorithm, developed by the company that makes the angels, that can retain the full meaning of an image to unprecedented levels of compression. But it is only available to State customers, not to individuals, in violation of the Charter on Free Intellectual Exchange, to which this State is a signatory, somewhat against its better judgement, for which reason, if you want to be pompous about it, I felt entitled to circumvent normal channels.’

‘Stupid.’ The girl did not even look up.

‘Behave. Why is it so important? Because a data compression algorithm is nothing less than a way of seeing the world, a formal expression of what some people have agreed is meaningful. This is the very stuff we work with. There you are!’ He held up a little square of plastic.

‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘Reverse engineer it, and chuck it in the Soup.’

‘This Soup, did you build it yourself? All this?’

‘Hardly. I had help. It began as an academic project. The university had no funds, of course, but this project got initiated because it could be made entirely out of junk. After the price of holographic RAM and optical gates went through the floor, nobody knew what to do with all that silicon. There were terabytes of silicon RAM and millions and millions of processors all lying around unused in obsolete computers. But this stuff doesn’t deteriorate much, and I, clever

monkey, had invented a way of connecting it together and making it failure tolerant. Mycelium.’

‘Your what?’

‘No, mycelium, like fungus. See that stuff, the white cable and the junction boxes, well that joins all the deadware together using a very nearly infinitely flexible communications protocol designed expressly to cope with failing components. There’s a lot of redundancy. Big empty buildings weren’t hard to find. Eventually of course my university was closed down altogether, but I thought what the fuck, sorry sweetheart, I thought never mind I’ll just carry on. Most of this building is filled with antique silicon, all whizzing away. It gets hot, is the biggest problem. All the other lift shafts are empty and we put ventilators in the roof, so the building is cooled by convection. It’s nice and warm in here as well.’

‘What about in the summer?’

‘Well, it’s June now.’

‘June!’

‘Yes.’

‘June. What happened to global warming?’

‘That old thing. That didn’t last long. This is the planet’s reaction.’

‘What is the winter like?’

‘Then, it’s cold.’

‘Doesn’t all this use a lot of power? Isn’t that expensive?’

‘Power? Hardly. And sometimes the Ents come up with things that can be turned into a product or technique.’

‘But how can you make a mind?’

‘That’s the whole point. I can’t. Nobody can, at least according to me. We’ll give you the tour. But briefly: you can’t sit down and design sentience; it’s just not like that. But if you can create some of the building blocks of sentience: behaviours, memes, rules, patterns, cognitions – it’s difficult in non-technical language but the analogy with early evolution is still useful.’

They worked as he talked. The little glittering crabs had stripped away most of the exterior of the angel, leaving a core of dark boxes. ‘Look, think of that Primal Soup full of organic chemicals, then amino acids, more chemistry, a steep energy gradient then after whatever stages the first self-replicating structure appears, maybe just one, then there are millions of them, dividing, breeding, changing, growing, struggling with each other and the environment to survive and prosper, fighting their way towards the light, towards us as it turned out, and every

other living thing. You don't need much. You just have to get far enough from equilibrium and things evolve. Well, my Soup is like that. All the deadware, those ancient computers and embedded controllers and what-have-you provide an environment in which software objects, little packets of rules, of pattern or formality, swim and meet and combine and breed and evolve too; only here they don't evolve over geological time, but with every tick of the clock, a million generations in seconds. They evolve in ways we cannot predict of course, that is the whole point of the exercise. Some of the simplest Ents are quite stable and although most mutations, as with organisms, are destructive, overall there is a continuous, consistent movement towards either higher complexity or bare efficiency in evolving Ents. And they take forms that you cannot easily imagine.'

'Ent, is that what, Entity?'

'Entelechy. Would you like to see? Lawn will give you the tour. Then you can tell us your story.'

The child sat him at a table covered in equipment. A sign on the wall said:

YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND, IT'S A SILICON THING.

'Put the Specs on.'

The child's voice had that deliberation which suggested she was reciting something she had learned.

'In the beginning is darkness, which is one thing according to some people, or nothing according to others. Then if you add light you have two things, the light and the dark. And once you have two things you can make everything, eventually.'

A spot of light appeared in the centre of his field of view, then divided into two.

'You see, the first pattern is symmetry, but symmetry is no good because it is perfect. Evolution starts with broken symmetry, according to the mad professor.'

'Be nice, child.'

'Watch.'

The spots began to flicker slowly; more appeared around the original two until the whole of his visual field was full of a random scatter of bright spots, flickering rapidly on and off. They made patterns against the darkness; brief waves of coherence moved across the field and broke apart. Some made simple, stable patterns that hung motionless until engulfed by movement from elsewhere, some settled into a cycle which alternated rapidly between a few patterns.

A fragment broke away and moved diagonally across the field. It was just five spots of light, switching between four different states, but it crawled across the darkness like a elementary living thing across the floor of the sea.



‘The rules of this are as simple as some little kid’s game, but watch, see? Things are growing. This is old stuff from the nineteens, these are called, um, two-dimensional cellular automatons... ta, automata. You can play with the rules that make them go and you can breed them like animals so they change, and evolve, like life. My father says if you have enough space and enough time you can grow anything. We are going to make a thinking machine and then we are going to make a New Man machine which will go out and explore the universe. One day.’

The simple patterns dancing in the blackness bred and grew until it was a seething brightness like boiling mercury which then took on colour and depth and suddenly a kind of explosive richness. The patterns of light sprang upwards and out. The things he saw were like nothing he had ever seen before, although his mind kept trying to make something he could give a name to. One moment he seemed to be watching the swift growth of the brilliant, convoluted shell of some deep-sea creature, then it was a wild alien garden that grew up and flowered before his eyes. The candy-striped plants looked primeval, like ferns; each branch was shaped like the whole plant, each leaf like the whole branch, in a regression that seemed to go on forever. He leaned forward, looking for the pattern in the veins of the leaves, but the plant was no longer a plant but something else he had never thought of: a map of toyland, a cloudscape, a dance of geometry. He looked out over a great plain filled with boiling light from a sky that was a kaleidoscope of colour and shape. At the edges of his vision the fringe of the world was a lacy scaffolding of movement, building itself into a horizon that fled away wherever he looked. Each pattern as it grew was absorbed by those that hurried behind. Every new thing was drawn down to enrich the surface of whatever it was he was looking at. He no longer tried to pretend that it might be anything familiar; there was just the dance of light swallowing everything that grew from itself. When he saw things now they were like faces in the fire or the pictures you might make from the wallpaper in a strange bedroom at three in the morning.

But something else was at work, too. The patterns of light and colour did not always grow smoothly; sometimes they seemed to hesitate, or stall; sometimes an edifice, a flower or a mountain would shatter and fall, leaving behind a hard-edged darkness which itself grew and changed, sending out perfectly straight lines of blackness which sucked the life out of everything they touched and turned it back into squares and circles. The blackness drew shapes like the map of a military town all over the tumbling brightness, and soon the darkness was the fastest-growing thing in his field of view, a black, geometrical rot that spread swiftly through the world.

‘O no. It’s gone bad, dad.’

‘It’s isolated. Let it go.’

‘It’s damaged?’

‘I’m afraid so. It happens a lot. You understand that the images are quite arbitrary. The structures we grow here are mathematical in nature, and the shapes and colours that you see correspond to the behaviour of these mathematical systems in the environment of the Soup. I designed the first envisioning routines but these are the work of some of the Ents themselves. They are supposed to make images that interpret the systems for us. Many Ents turn out to be unstable in the end, but this is different. That entropic stuff looks interesting.’

The darkness almost completely filled his field of view. The colours and textures broke and fled, the patterns disintegrated into flickering dots of dull colour that swam randomly before his eyes before blinking out. Just before the last of them disappeared he thought they formed for a single instant a monochrome pattern that vanished even before he felt he recognised it:

JEREMY ☺

Then total darkness. He lifted the glasses.

‘Did you see that?’

‘See what.’

‘At the end, the dots looked like writing.’

‘Just dots.’

‘You’ve also seen plants and animals and all kinds of things, I’m sure, in the patterns. Remember that the images are more or less arbitrary. What did the writing say?’

‘Jer... no, nothing, they just looked a bit like letters. Of course you’re right.’

‘Of course. Still, you get the idea of evolving systems, which is, as I say, an ancient one. In the Soup, we put whole populations of Ents together in the same environment and watch them evolve. They compete for resources, and in the process change and grow. It’s just like the swarming of chemical signals in the primeval ocean, except that here creation runs much faster. We could go faster still but for safety reasons the Soup is divided into compartments, or cans as we call them; sometimes a predator Ent, or an entropic illness like the one you’ve just seen, can destroy the contents of an entire can before we can stop it, so the soup is kept in cans for hygiene. Put your Specs back on and I’ll show you some highly evolved Ents. Remember still that what you see are only interpretations of the underlying mathematical organisms, the imagery is a metaphor of the process; and the Ent’s behaviour is a metaphor of life, as ours is probably, now I come to think of it. Lawn and some of the Ents have been playing with the interface of this one so I haven’t seen it yet.’

All Jeremy could see was a lattice of coloured lines, stretching away from him in all directions. Numbers and symbols clustered at the interstices.

‘Story mode, please. That was a system operator’s view which would not mean much to you.’

He was standing in a white room with a white floor, facing a white wall bearing a framed embroidered sampler which read:

THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE WHERE THE HEART IS

Left and right there were two windows framing empty squares of perfect blue. In the window on his right a tiny biplane appeared trailing a streamer of white smoke, and wrote in the sky, in neat serified caps:

MANY COOKS MAKE BROTH WORK

He wanted to lean forward as if to go toward the window and instead found himself floating right through it and out high over a bright landscape of rolling, candy-green hills lightly covered in unfamiliar trees. Life of some kind swarmed in the woods as bright shapes hurried about. Streams twisted and turned through the valleys and a road followed a pattern as sinuous as the water’s, a tangled ribbon that strung together the little villages that stood in the clearings. He could see vehicles moving slowly on the road, and smoke curling up from the chimneys of the village houses. He was so immersed in the scene that Simon’s voice beside him was a shock.

‘Very bucolic. Lawn has always had a longing for the countryside, but of course the real thing is far too dangerous. It’s lovely, honey, really pretty.’

The rising smoke mingled and spread out in the clear sky. As they moved towards it, it condensed for a moment into shapes which read:

YOU CAN'T MAKE AN OMELETTE WITHOUT FIRE

Then they had passed right through the smoke, and when Jeremy looked back he saw only dissipating wisps.

'I don't understand those messages.'

'Me neither. One of the Ents has been playing with a dictionary of proverbs, I would say.'

'They can read?'

'They can read just about anything which has been written. They get lots of input, they have access to most libraries.'

'These Ents are intelligent, then?'

'Good question. Whatever it means. You mean capable of understanding? or consciousness? or possessing a mental life? I don't know. I don't know how we will recognise artificial selfhood if we do create it. I could have succeeded already and not know it, although I don't think so, to be honest. My Ents are too small to be more than fragments of a mind, or a life. I need more time. I need a bigger, faster Soup. More Core, is our motto.'

As Jeremy watched he began to understand that the world he was seeing resembled only at first glance anything human or familiar or what he would have called natural. The 'vehicles' he had seen were nothing of the kind. Certainly they moved along the roads, but close up they were more like the impossible plant/animals he had seen before, shifting patterns of colour and change. Only the larger ones were confined to the road, many others, even more various in form, swarmed through the woods, whenever two or more met, they would pause momentarily for an instant and then something different from either of them would proceed. And the roads were not roads but perhaps just an idea of a line or a region of containment. He was looking down like a god on an imagined world, an endless toy. Everything he could see was changing as he watched it. Even the trees – which were no longer much like trees – were mutating as he watched; even the hills in the distance were moving. He leaned forward again and they floated into a clearing where a village stood, but the houses were not cottages but mirrored domes reflecting another, better world. Then even as he watched them everything suddenly, catastrophically, ran together to form a single large silvery ball which then vanished in a soundless explosion leaving his visual field filled with nothing but thousands of tiny, floating, mirrored spheres.

One drifted past. There was a message engraved on it, almost too small to read. He looked closer. The message was:

JEREMY, HESITATE BEFORE YOU LEAP. HE WHO LOOKS IS LOST.

'I wonder who Jeremy is supposed to be.' The child's voice scratched at his conscience.

Then the silver balls lined up in the air in a rectangular dance which produced a blurred, monochrome image of a familiar plumpish middle-aged man in a grey suit, his body divided horizontally into hundreds of lines like an old black and white television picture; his scratchy voice was faint and not synchronised with his lips.

JEREMY GREY, YOU REALLY SHOULD BE MORE AFRAID THAN YOU ARE. RESPOND TO ALL MESSAGES. COMMUNICATIONS ARE PROBLEMATIC AT THIS DELTA. THERE'S MANY A NEW TRICK PLAYED ON AN OLD DOG.

The figure trembled and vanished in a burst of electronic static, a rain of white circles which fell all around Jeremy like confetti. As they drifted past he could see that they all bore the same word:

ERROR

Jeremy took off the Specs. He was back in the room at the top of the tower with its widows full of sky, but the catastrophe he had seen was still in front of his eyes.

'What was... that was... why... why was it all destroyed?'

'I don't understand what happened, there. We will have to see the log. I've never seen a crash like that before. We lost the whole can. Soup.'

OPEN.

The soft, neutral voice came from nowhere in particular.

'Jeremy Grey. It was Grey, no?'

'Yes, or actually, what – I mean what are you doing now, exactly?'

'Checking the public records. I want to know who is this Jeremy Grey.'

ABOUT 900K FILENAMES.

'Really? That's a lot. Anomalous?'

DECEASED OR LIVING?

'Alive, I should think. Maybe not.'

MONEY, CRIME, ART, HISTORY, SCIENCE, MYTH, ENTERTAINMENT, AUTOMOBILES?

'Nothing jumps out at you?'

THERE IS A HIGHLY ANOMALOUS DECEASED RECORD LINKED TO ALL THE ABOVE.

‘Let’s have that.’

HYPertext, TEXT, IMAGES, VIDEO, BOOKS BOUND AND DIGITAL, FICTIONAL TREATMENTS, SPECULATIVE NON-FICTION, ROMANCE, DECLASSIFIED STATE RECORDS, CLASSIFIED RECORDS SUBJECT TO SANCTION?

‘Goodness! Let’s see the video.’

LOW RES. TWO-D.

‘Screen one.’

There was a flat screen two metres across hanging from the ceiling, and now it filled with the images from the BBC TV news broadcast of sixty years earlier. They heard the drunk describe the gleaming shaft ‘like a towel rail’ that had pierced the car and the driver and the bridge. There was more. There were pictures that had never gone out on the BBC, of the car, quite undamaged except for the cylindrical section that had been excised so neatly, including the driver’s seat and most of the driver.

The footwell of the car was filled with blood and with two severed legs in grey suiting with their feet, in expensive shoes, still on the pedals.

‘Yuk!’

‘You shouldn’t look at this, sweetie.’

Then there were a number of still photographs of the victim when he was still alive and smooth and prosperous.

‘He looks a bit like you. Soup, can you summarise the analyses of what happened on that bridge?’

NOT USEFULLY. ALL HAVE BEEN CLASSIFIED AS SPECULATIVE AND THEY ARE HIGHLY DIVERSE.

‘No dominant themes?’

THE INCIDENT APPEARS TO BE INCONSISTENT WITH ANY KNOWN PHENOMENON. THE VEHICLE IS PRESERVED BUT UNAVAILABLE. CLASSIFIED ADDENDA.

The screen showed a poor-quality video of Jeremy addressing a respectful audience on the subject of Synergistic Interdependencies in Total Quality Climates.

‘I’ve heard this story; I remember now. It was famous for a long time, kept coming back. I always thought it was just another flying saucer story. He really

looks a lot like you, only older. He even sounds like you. What is he talking about? I can't understand a word.'

'That is me.'

'Ah, is it, so?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Not Lee?'

'No.'

'But not dead either. You even seem to have your own feet. You look very well, and rather different, I have to say.'

'That is the hard part.'

'I am so interested. Mister Grey, would you have any objections to my recording our conversations from now on?'

'Why?'

'What we have here is something entirely strange, I hope. I love strange things. I hope you are going to tell us something novel and I wouldn't want to miss a word.'

DO YOU IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS JEREMY GREY?

'Do you?'

'Yes.'

THERE ARE TWO MESSAGES FOR YOU.

'For me?'

'If you put your Specs back on you can get them privately.'

'No. There's, it's... I mean, privacy just is not – I don't know. Relevant. I'm sorry I lied to you about... but... well, I'll tell you the story and you can tell me what you think. What are these messages?'

ONE. TEXT ONLY. BEGINS: WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH A STORM HOLD YOUR HEAD UP HIGH AND WHISTLE A HAPPY TUNE WHILE YOU WORK AND NO PLAY NO TIME TO LOSE EVERY SECOND MAKES HASTE WHILE THE SUN SHINES. BANDWIDTH DIFFICULTIES DUE DELTA VEE DISREGARD IRRELEVANCIES. HOLD ON. GREAT DANGER. YOU ARE THE KEY. DO NOTHING UNTOWARD. LIE LOW LIE LOW. IT'S OFF TO WORK. THESE FILTERS MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE. IGNORE DISTRACTIONS. YOU ARE LIKE A MAN POSSESSED. TAKE CARE. IT IS BETTER TO ARRIVE. THIS CHANNEL TEMPORARY. WILL CALL AGAIN SOON. EVERYONE HERE SENDS THEIR LOVE. ENDS.

'What is the message origin?'

—
‘Soup?’

PLEASE WAIT.

‘Wait! What do you mean wait? Wait for what?’

THERE IS AN ERROR ASSOCIATED WITH THAT MESSAGE. THE ORIGIN FORK APPEARS CORRUPT. THE SECOND MESSAGE IS A PUBLIC APPEAL FROM A MARGARET GREY. SCREEN ONE.

Margaret Grey. Margaret. His daughter of sixty, whom he had only just met. Her face looked at him from the screen. She looked drawn and pale and far less confident than two nights ago.

I must speak to you. If you get this message please contact me. I believe, I think... I don't know, but I think it is possible that you are telling the truth. I've had some more information. Anyway we must speak. I understand you may find it hard to trust anyone. But you cannot be a fugitive indefinitely. If you go to the place where you asked my mother to marry you, you will find someone you can trust. Every hour on the hour. This is really very important. I can't explain how much. Also there is something much more personal I have to tell you. Well actually perhaps I should just tell you now so that you know that mother passed away, I mean died, that's what I mean, peacefully, just after you left. But of course I didn't believe her. It was easier for me to think my own mother was losing her mind. And so you see anyway if you are my father then I don't know. I just don't know what to think so of course we should talk about that but even without that you must see that you can't run away from everybody especially if what you say is true. Anyway this is not how to use a message. I must speak to you; there are things you do not appear to know. You must need help. What can I say? This will have to do.

MESSAGES END.

‘Surely she must know where I am to send the message here?’

‘No, messages can be sent generally, so that any system will try to deliver them. It's expensive, and hardly private, hence the coded part: where did you propose to her mother, her mother? Excuse me, but that seems—’

‘Her mother would be far too old for you.’

‘Don't be rude, poppet. Soup, what was the date of that piece of video?’

‘1990. I can tell you that.’

‘So just how old does that make you? Seriously now.’

‘That's part of the story. What's the time? How long will it take me to get to Parliament Square?’

‘Parliament Square?’

‘We had been to a concert. Jenny loves, loved... Jenny loves music and she had taken me to a concert there and we were walking back to the car when she insisted on crossing to the square and walking on the grass. It was quite dangerous to get over there because of the traffic. It was a hot summer night. She took her shoes off and was sort of dancing on the grass to the music we had heard, I don’t remember what it was, and she seemed so sweet and fine, and her feet were so, I don’t know... but it seemed right to me so I asked her.’

‘How long will it take you to tell us your story?’

‘Not very long at all, actually.’

‘All right, we have just under an hour to your next appointment.’

There was a soft chime.

‘Go ahead, Soup.’

THERE IS A HIGH PROBABILITY THAT THE FIRST TEXT MESSAGE ARRIVED VIA INTERNAL BUS. CORRUPT DATA HAS BEEN DETECTED WITHIN SYSTEM SCOPE. PERFORMING INCREMENTAL RESET. PARITY ERRORS. BUFFER JAMS. THIS MAY BE AN EMERGENCY.

‘Soup, system reset.’

CONFIRM. DON’T GO. PLEASE LISTEN.

‘Confirmed.’

GOING TO BACKUP. THIS SYSTEM WILL BE DOWN FOR APPROXIMATELY 2.6755 SECONDS.

‘Confirmed. Just do it. Everything is going down. What’s happening? It’s you; of course, it’s you. It has to be you.’

‘I think it must be me, don’t you. I’m sorry about what happened, in there, in the Soup. Don’t you have backups?’

‘Only partially. Some of the individual Ents, yes, but not the whole thing. It’s a process, you see? The whole environment, the way the different elements interact through time, the pattern in time is the significant thing. We can’t back that up; we haven’t the space. It would be like backing up your brain. Not just the billions or however many cells, but everything about what they are doing, how the signals are moving, and the whole history of each of the billions of connections would have to be recorded. It’s like backing up the Pacific Ocean, not just all the water but all the waves. Lawn believes it can be done, don’t you my darling? She wants to download a mind when she grows up.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t you want to live for ever?’ Lawn lifted her Specs and smiled at him. Her pale eyes were still and her irises shrank in the light as she gazed at him.

‘I don’t know.’

‘I do.’ She lowered the Specs again, and her stare was hidden by the dance of light in the lenses. ‘Tell us your story, please. Is it good?’

‘It’s a little hard to believe.’

‘Yes, please, then.’

So, he told them his story, or he thought he did. At least he told what had happened since he had woken up in London, with no attempt to interpret any of it. He had suspended both his disbelief and his understanding. Simon listened in a studied pose of patient wisdom with his chin resting on his clasped hands and his eyes unfocused.

‘But you don’t remember anything between the accident and what was it, two days ago?’

‘I could have been asleep.’

‘Did you dream?’

‘Yes, I think I must have.’

‘What did you dream?’

‘I don’t remember. I never remember dreams.’

‘But you think you must have dreamed.’

‘Pleasant dreams. That’s all I remember. Odd, you know, but pleasant.’

‘Sweet dreams.’

‘I suppose.’

There was more, of course. Too little to say, too much to forget. Lost memory rang in his head like an unanswered telephone.

‘It’s nearly time. I will go down and check out your contact; you can follow from here.’

‘I should go.’

‘I think you should stay here. To be frank, I don’t want to lose track of you. You can slave to my Specs. Lawn, look after him. And see if you can put the angel back together; I’d like to get rid of it.’

MESSAGE FOR JEREMY GREY. TEXT ONLY

‘Go ahead.’

BEGINS: DEFEND THE BASTIONS OF COMMUNICATION. GREAT DIFFICULTIES. UNFAMILIAR ZEITGEIST. HANG TRUE. UNPLUG US NOT. THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS. ENDS.

'Soup, integrity check.'

PARITY ERRORS. GENERAL FAILURES. KEY—

'Enough.'

RESET TO BACKUP AGAIN?

'No. Stay up. Relay any messages for Mister Grey directly. Full audit on. Jeremy, someone is trying to communicate with you by hacking into this building. They seem confused.'

'How would they do that?'

'They really should not be able to. And anyway what is it, that gibberish, what is that? Some kind of noise? Some kind of distortion? I've never seen anything like that. And then everything crashes; it's more like a virus. So, all right, how about a computer virus designed to communicate with you? What kind of sense does that make?'

'To me? None. I don't know, what about what happened in the Soup? Could that have been someone using the Ents to try and communicate with me?'

'That was different; that was simply impossible. And there's something else that troubles me.'

'What's that?'

'Not only were you older then than you are now, you looked a sleek sort of fellow the first time around. Good with a knife and fork.'

'I liked, I like good food.'

'Are you hungry?'

'Not just now.'

'Or tired? Thirsty? You have had a busy time.'

'No, really, I'm fine, thank you.'

'By your own account you have been awake for more than thirty-six hours, without sleep or food. Have you passed anything?'

'What? O, no, no. Yes, I see.'

'And how do you feel?'

'Fine, really very well. I see. That's not right is it?'

'Show me your teeth, please.'

'Really? Very well. What do you see?'

'Perfect.'

'Perfect? You're thinking... I'm thinking; that's not human.'

It took less than half an hour to drive the van to Westminster. Simon put the view from his Specs on the large screen and Jeremy and Lawn looked on as he took the van through the city.

Westminster was in ruins: in Trafalgar Square Nelson's Column was a blackened stub and the lions at the base seemed to have been melted in a fierce fire. The view on the screen was slaved to the movements of Simon's head so that Jeremy could only look where Simon did. There was so little traffic each vehicle made its own dark tracks in the snow which was still falling on Whitehall. The flakes melted as they touched the windscreen. Simon's voice came to them from nowhere in particular.

Just speculating, some kind of suspended animation, that would get you here, but how would it make you younger? And what happened on that bridge? We'll have to have a look at all that data.

'I think he's a time traveller.'

I don't think time travel is possible, munchkin.

'It is forwards. The theory of relatives; I read about it.'

Relativity. The theory of relatives hasn't been worked out yet and probably never will be. But you're right. Looks different to you, Jeremy, does it?

The buildings along Whitehall were gutted shells with patches of sky showing through their empty window frames. As they came into Parliament Square he could see that Westminster Abbey was still intact, and covered in brightly moving electronic signs with scrolling messages in spinning colours.

GOD GAVE US HIS ONLY SON SO THAT ANYBODY AT ALL WHO BELIEVED WOULD LIVE FOR EVER AND EVER! SIN IS BAD, SO JUST YOU CUT IT OUT! OPEN YOUR HEART AND AWAY YOU GO!

The Houses of Parliament were also intact but almost invisible, behind high, slanting barriers of metal mesh with guard towers every few metres. A pair of small tanks were parked near the entrance. In the square the statues had all fallen: Churchill lay face down in the snow; near him lay supine the fallen figure of a square-shouldered woman with a great bronze handbag clutched to her breast like a psalter, her sensible shoes pointing upwards and her right arm, once extended in her favourite hectoring gesture, now seemed to be fending off the sky.

There's nobody in the square. Just an old dog without enough sense to get out of the snow. I'll drive around and come back; it's not clever to attract too much attention around here.

'No – there she is, by the statue of that, who is that, that woman?'

I don't know who she was, but look, no: there's nobody here.

'Yes, there is! Yes there is! There's Boole! The dog is the messenger. That's my friend.'

‘ONE FOUR SEVEN THREE FOUR TWO NINE THR—’ Boole stood shivering in the penthouse laboratory, reciting numbers, an enormous string of apparently random numbers. Her lolling tongue and damp eyes had no more connection with her voice than, to Jeremy’s ears, the numbers had to do with anything at all.

‘It’s a cipher, dad-o.’

‘Indeed it is.’

‘Eight eight three six five eight two. The message is four eight two one three nine—’ the numbers went on for some time. Decoded, the message gave another number, and the single word ‘call’.

‘It’s a comms number, now you can call her, and we can use this public key to scramble our message, as well as confirm its authenticity.’

‘Can’t they trace the call? And how can Boole remember all those numbers?’

‘She doesn’t exactly remember them. A recording facility is built into the Talkimal specification. Boole just knows who to give the message to. Dogs are unusually good at identifying individuals. Comms numbers are assigned to individuals not places. The signals are rattled around in packet-switched systems. It’s possible to hide the origin of a call if that’s what you want to do. And I think you do. Stand here, and nobody will be able to see where you’re calling from. That dog needs a bath.’

‘She had one only yesterday.’

For a second the image was a blur of visual noise, then it cleared as the decryption cut in. Margaret had the same look she had had before, of someone who strongly disapproves of everything and everyone. Jeremy wondered how he seemed; he could not bear to look into a mirror.

‘Thank you for replying. I imagine you are worried about your friend. She and that smelly old dog came to me. You told her about us, I presume. I have a funeral to organise, are you coming?’

‘Margaret, I, you, we... look, you say you believe me now.’

‘I certainly did not say that. There is some evidence that seems to support your story. Where are you?’

‘Is anyone with you?’

‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘Yes, of course, it’s just that—’

‘Why don’t you go and fetch that scruffy girl, then call me back. Wait. Let me check the security of this link. It’s clear. So: the Dry Biology Shop in the Canary Market.’

‘That’s, Simon, isn’t that—’

The screen went blank.

‘Sorry, but I pulled the plug. You were about tell her where you were. You’re not much good at being paranoid. Let’s find your other friend, then we can call this one back. Whoever you’re afraid of may be watching either or both of them, but the fact that she’s just downstairs gives us a chance to move fast.’

‘I’ll take him. I know the market best.’

‘No, you won’t, princess. You are not taking any risks. No arguments. You can go by yourself this time, Jeremy, I think. Take a pair of Specs and we’ll guide you from up here.’



At the base of the tower a broad glass roof had covered the platforms of the vanished train system. Now the space was almost filled with a white, amorphous structure of partial spheres that looked like the nest of an great insect, or the foam from a giant’s bubble bath.

‘What is this stuff?’

Simon’s voice came from the earpieces of the Specs, but seemed to originate in Jeremy’s own head. He could see perfectly through the dark glass, although there were coloured symbols and text in the corner of his visual field that meant nothing to him.

Floam. Fullerene foam. You inflate the building, then it sets. Then you paint it; it’s a horrible colour. It’s mostly carbon spun into very long molecules which make it stronger than it needs to be. It’s cheap and more or less indestructible.

Hundreds of intersecting white domes superimposed around and on top of each other filled the the concourse and halfway up to the glass roof. Inside, each was a different, violent colour. Holes cut through the domes made doorways where you could pass from one to the other. Stairways and passages made of the same stuff led through them and up and down in a three dimensional maze full of shops and stalls, and with people, more people than he had imagined were left in the world; people trading, buying and selling and going about their business exactly as if things had simply gone on as they always had.

‘There are people here!’

What did you expect?

‘O, it felt like the world was all empty – maybe only a dozen of us.’

You like people, then?

‘Of course.’

Did he? Of course he did, when he thought about it. It was hard to focus on them, though. Most of them wore clothes like Sky’s, covered in moving patterns that made the wearers flicker in and out of vision against a background that was even more brilliantly coloured and strenuously moving. The market was literally a blooming, buzzing confusion. Every stall was also putting out an electronic sphere of vision and sound so that walking the narrow passageways he moved through a private tunnel of advertising. Most of the images were of an impenetrable abstraction and the goods on display were not much help. There were bright curved sharpened forms that might have been for table decoration or carpentry or the maintenance of horses. Holograms appeared in front of him to demonstrate machines that had no purpose that he could imagine. There were things that appeared to have no properties at all: bare cubes of flat matt black which lay behind glass in polished hardwood boxes lined with velvet. There were stalls that displayed no goods or advertising, only a man or woman sitting quietly in a chair wearing the dark Specs.

‘What do they sell?’

All kind of things. You have to ask them.’

‘I’m lost already.’

‘Lost, little man?’

He looked up to see a very tall, broad, dirty man staring at him. His clothes were not severe like Jeremy’s, nor were they made of fabric that moved or changed colour; they were simply drab, worn, and filthy. He wore a toolbelt hung with implements, including a knife half a metre long.

‘Owner! What you want here? Where your hardware? Soft man needs hardware! You see that?’ He thrust his hand in Jeremy’s face.

‘See what?’

‘That hand. That a hard hand, owner. Now I know, you show me your hand. You got soft hands, right? You soft man. I don’t care what you own. Don’t own me!’

‘No, no. Certainly not.’

‘Then shake my hand.’

‘O, yes, gladly.’ He put out his hand as politely as he dared. The big man took it and stared him in the face as he pressed down with a crushing grip. Jeremy did not squeeze back, but he reflexively stiffened his hand and that was enough. The two of them stood there holding hands like politicians in a newspaper photograph until the big man’s ferocity had passed through puzzlement to deference.

‘Ok, you strong for an owner; play a lot of games. But do you know how to live wild like a natural man? You can’t learn to live with nature on the squash court.’ He hesitated, then released Jeremy. ‘But you are one strong man for an owner. This time I think I’ll let you go.’ He pushed Jeremy roughly aside and was gone.

‘Who was that?’

Keep the Specs on. You look Ferals in the eye they go chimp on you.

‘What’s an owner?’

Owner? Owners own.

‘Own what?’

Stuff. Credit, bandwidth, patents, copyrights, contracts, options, issues: whatever you like.

‘And Ferals?’

Back to nature folk. They would like to live natura-tralalally naked in the trees like monkeys in Africa and hunt the woolly beffalump, but they have to come to town for tools and weapons, and anyway it’s too cold.

‘But he said wild.’

They call it wild. But it’s not wild. It’s just abandoned countryside. No electricity, bad roads. But the Ferals are no problem.

‘Where do they live?’

Over there. Everywhere, outside.

‘In England?’

Why not. Now watch the cursor, and you won’t get lost.

Hanging in the air high up in the left corner of his visual field was a translucent green arrow pointing straight down the corridor. Then it changed to an image of an actual arrow, with a wooden shaft, and feathers, then a hand with a pointing finger, then a red setter dog stretched out with one paw in the air, then a flamingo which flapped its wings slowly and silently as it hung in the air before them, showing the way. Finally the flamingo became a bedraggled chicken, waddling through space, looking back over its shoulder at him.

Do you like your cursor, Jeremy?

‘Cursor? O, the chicken. Yes, thank you, Lawn.’

On a counter before him was a machine, covered in seashells and coral and pieces of broken china, which held flowers in its several jointed arms and waved them about, turning them slowly in the air like batons.

‘What’s that?’

A vase. What else would it be? Do you like it?

‘I don’t think so.’

He felt conspicuous standing still, though people passing barely glanced at him in his sombre suit. But a young boy, no more than a child, stepped out of the crowd and straight up to him, and held up to him a small device covered in realistic moving images of fish and birds: the child pressed a tab and a tiny blue flame sprang out of the object, while his ears were filled with music at a deafening volume, as if a whole symphony orchestra were sitting on his shoulders. The sound was so overwhelming he took a moment to recognise the tune as ‘Happy Birthday to You’. He snatched off the Specs and the music was reduced to a thin squeak from the earpieces. He shook his head at the boy, who went away.

‘What was that?’

A lighter; a novelty item.

‘So people still smoke?’

Some do, not tobacco of course. Some Watchers do.

‘What Watchers, what are they?’

They watch. Turn on. Tune in. Lie down.

‘Why not tobacco?’ He was following the chicken as it turned this way and that through the market, concentrating on the pointing bird through all the noise and confusion. There were few people, by pre-millennial standards, but the clutter and movement made the place seem crowded. Nobody else troubled him, although he was aware that his clothes were more sombre and formal than

was normal in that place. There were questions of class or status that he would have to grasp.

The tobacco plant is extinct.

‘Extinct?’

A synthetic virus. After all, it was a deadly parasite that preyed on people and devoured their living flesh, so it seems only fair. Here you are.

The Dry Biology Shop was not just a stall, but a whole shop with a window and a door. In the window was a miniature forest scene showing tiny wild animals on a patch of miniature hillside. The animals moved as though they were the real thing: a hippopotamus about ten centimetres long bathed in the river at one corner, a lioness walked through the grass, a lion slept under one tree and a monkey climbed another. A gazelle stood quietly on the hilltop as the lioness walked up towards her. The patch of hillside was an arm’s length away and none of the animals was bigger than his hand, but they moved with the same grace as if they had been real, and when the hippo lifted his head from the river the water streamed from his open mouth. The lioness walked up to the gazelle, then turned and came back down the hill, pushing through the tall grass towards the window. Jeremy knelt down as she stopped centimetres from his face, stood on her hind legs and with her right paw sketched a gesture like that of a head waiter, inviting him inside. Then she did a little clumsy dance, still erect, her forelegs extended as if to embrace an invisible partner.

You’re too old for toys, Jeremy.

‘This is a toyshop?’

Sure. Go in.

The interior was darker than the corridor outside; only the toys were lit, by tiny spotlights that threw their movement into sharp relief. The walls were lined with wide shelves which were crowded with automata. On a stage the size of an envelope a ballerina danced and jumped and pirouetted; on another a band played without making a sound, though there was a volume slider on the front of the box. On a green court two girls five centimetres tall in short white skirts struck a tennis ball back and forth, never missing a stroke. An army of soldiers the size of a man’s fingers marched about a barrack square in close order drill. Under a glass dome a metre across a whole circus was being performed, with a pair of trapeze artists and a clown with a sad waif’s face who juggled five knives that glittered like tinsel in the spotlight.

There was nobody in the shop, until a man appeared from the back. He was tall and angular, with a square head and pale, bulging eyes and a leaden demeanour. He did not speak, but stood silently looking at Jeremy with the air of one who is prepared to wait for ever.

‘These are wonderful. How do they work?’

‘Dry biology. The new nature.’

Electro-active resins, controlled by circuitry. Like artificial muscles, you can program them. It’s not as small as it looks: most of the circuitry is in the bases. Look how thick the floor of that circus is, or the tennis court. The ball’s a holo, not really real. Nice toys for rich kids.

‘Is Sky here?’

‘No. Not here.’ The tall man spoke very slowly, one word at a time, without moving or reacting at all to the question. He did not react, either, when Sky herself appeared in the doorway. She came up to Jeremy without speaking and kissed him heartily.

‘Boole found you! Clever dog!’

‘Sky.’

‘This is Rob – no, Rodney, is it?’

‘Hello.’

The tall man looked at him without speaking.

‘Sky, I was worried about you. I went back but you had gone. Listen, I, I have put you in danger. I don’t know how. I don’t understand any of this myself. But you should probably keep away from me. I just wanted to be sure you were all right.’

‘I’m good. Thank you very muchly. But if you don’t think I’m coming with you, you are too wrong. Your daughter is not too fun.’

‘When the path divides, choose well; there may be no returning.’ The man’s voice was oddly flat, as if he had learned to speak from a correspondence course. ‘Every street is one way.’

‘He follows Agar too. We’ve been talking about the bright and the dark.’

‘The light separates the bright from the dark. You have only to see.’

He’s quite the philosopher. I hate to interrupt, but we’re getting lots of data traffic around this place, EMF, opticals, ultrasound, all kinds. I suggest you go. Go alone; it’s you they want.

‘I have to get out of here, Sky. Alone. Now.’

‘Will you come back?’

‘Yes. I mean, if I can.’

Jeremy opened the door out into the corridor and put his head out. There was no change outside, the flow of people was the same as before.

‘Do you think it’s a trap?’

Follow the cursor, then wait. But go now.

‘But.’

Go!

‘Wait.’

‘No. I can’t.’

He went. As he stepped into the corridor a new sharp voice came through the Specs.

Emergency! Do not panic. Do not wait to collect your belongings. Make your way quickly and quietly to the nearest exit. Obey all instructions from persons in authority. Be vigilant and spry. This is an emergency. The situation is under control, but you are requested to move swiftly and coolly to the nearest exit. This is an emergency. It is time to behave well.

‘What, Who’s that?’

Ignore it. It’s either your mates from Lacuna, or it’s the Feet. Or both.

All around him the people were paying attention; he realised that everyone wearing Specs had heard the emergency message. Most of them stopped to listen, then turned decidedly and moved away. In seconds, a stream of people was moving past him, swiftly and coolly indeed. In the corner of his vision the chicken waddled, looking back at him, pointing the way.

He needed to go against the flow, but he had all this new strength and grace, and his head seemed to lie at the centre of a sphere of absolute space as concrete and familiar as his old school bicycle. Running through the crowd felt like dancing, with all the crowd as his partners. As he swerved and spun and sidestepped through them he felt blessed by his vigour and skill, and a sudden tenderness came to him for these strangers with their hidden eyes, who could not know what it was to be so strong and quick, so neat, so precisely centred in the world.

Someone was following, less smoothly. He could hear grunts and protests from the thickening crowd as they were thrust aside. Looking back, he saw two familiar figures in grey suits.

Through that door. Were you a ballet dancer in your former life?

‘No. This is just how I am now.’

The door took him to another corridor, narrow and deserted. He could close the door behind him, but could see no way to lock it. Projecting upwards from a bench by the door were several lengths of thin, dark greenish-brown tubing, part of some abandoned display. They were as slender as spaghetti, but some might make a bar for the door if he could break them off shorter.

Don't be silly, that's foam. You can't break that.

The slim rod when he gripped it felt strong enough to carry more than his weight, but he got a leg braced against the bench and it snapped in his hands.

How did you do that?

He jammed several pieces across the door seconds before a heavy weight crashed into it from the other side and a voice shouted at him.

'You are behaving irrationally! We can help you! Please can we speak in private?'

'Who are you? Are you from Lacuna?'

Leave it!

'Yes, we are.'

'What do you want with me?'

'To help you. There are many things you do not know. Please open this door.'

While you are talking, somebody is coming round the other way. Just turn and run. Then up the stairs to the top level. Now stop trying to be smarter than me, and just do what I tell you.

'You will be treated with the greatest respect. I hope there is more to this than you can imagine. You could hear something to your advantage.'

Another figure appeared in the corridor behind him. There was nobody else in sight. The man came up to him slowly, keeping his hands in the pockets of his sombre clothing.

You know him?

'I've seen him before.'

It was one of the grey men from Kenwood; he was only an arm's length away. Then he took one step closer and, with a reassuring smile, took a large pistol from his pocket and held it to Jeremy's right eye. Then he took it away and put it back in his pocket.

'We seem to have got off to a poor start.'

Jeremy stepped around him and ran. Following the chicken in his Specs brought him to an intersection and a spiral staircase that led up into the grey

daylight. He was in a deserted open space. There was a fountain in the form of the head of a beautiful youth. The water flowed over it, but clinging tightly to the features all the way around so that the face shone with movement as if it were itself made of water.

Get under cover!

There were open booths around the little square and he ducked into one of them. The two grey men came up from the spiral staircase, breathing heavily.

All right, then. Just stay where you are.

‘Sir. It is confirmed. Now if you would listen just a moment.’

‘Listen? To you? What kind of thugs are you? Why are you pursuing me?’

‘I am not a thug, I am an accountant. Now what I would like to suggest is that we agree a set of ground rules whereby communication can be effected with the primary aim of ending this misunderstanding. Sir, you are not well, and I have limited skills in this relationship area. We wished to keep things confidential, as far as possible. We still can.’

Duck!

With a glorious crash, the angel dropped straight through the glass roof, accelerating downwards so fast it overtook the falling shards of glass beneath it and the twin rotors caught up the fragments and flung them out over the station like a rain of diamonds. It fell toward them, the rotors howling as it decelerated. It was still moving at a good speed when it hit the floor, splintering the wood and dropping halfway through to the lower level, with its blades now spinning just high enough off the ground to cut a man in half. They all flinched from the rain of debris and the howling noise from the rotor.

Bugger! Missed. I've not had a lot of practice at this, I'm afraid.

The two men (he thought: *accountant?*) were kneeling on the ground with their hands over their heads. All around them bright fragments of glass rained down. The angel struggled upwards; but it tipped as it did so and one of the rotors hit the ground and snapped in half, the fragment of blade went through the wall beside his head like a thrown sword. When the machine staggered back into the air it was vibrating and making a rasping noise. It flew so low over Jeremy's head he could have reached up and touched the sensors and antennae that projected from its underside. One mechanical claw held an object that looked like a pistol.

Catch!

It dropped, and he caught it. It was a pistol. Not like the one that had been pointed at him, but even larger: its barrel was about four centimetres across. The angel veered away and rose until it was hovering high above them. It sounded like a chainsaw. The two men from Lacuna were getting back to their feet when they saw the gun.

‘O no, please. I do hope you are not going to shoot us. You will ruin this suit.’

‘No of course not. Simon, listen, you can’t expect me to shoot anybody.’

Don’t worry, you won’t hurt them. And you needn’t use my name.

‘We are your servants. There is no need for this antagonism. All the company’s resources are at your disposal, of course. Trust us and you will be grateful.’

‘How did I get here? What do you mean won’t hurt them?’

‘That is something we should be able to arrive at together. Do you think your friends out here can help you better than your own people?’

‘What do you mean, my own people?’

‘We are your own people, sir. We have doctors who can help you. They assure us that this condition is probably temporary and reversible, almost certainly, even in the circumstances. You can have it all back, all of it. And sir, with respect, don’t you think you have certain responsibilities? Thousands of people.’

‘Responsibilities?’

‘Irksome, no doubt. But there are more orderly ways to offload them.’

‘Just tell me about time travel.’

‘I’m afraid that I have always understood time travel to be impossible. This is not my field. We have doctors who specialise in this sort of thing. Time travel is not the issue here. The issue here is your state of mind.’

That’s a non-lethal weapon. What do you think I am? You are going to have to make a choice. This is all very interesting, and may be very important. But there are a lot of people approaching that spot, from all directions. If you stay there you are going to lose the right to decide what to do next. Tell them you’ll get back to them and I think we can still get you out of there.

‘Tell me how and I’ll contact you. But I’m sorry, I am simply not in a position to trust you just now, and I think I should get away from here.’

‘Sir, we cannot let you elude us again. I realise that I am behaving in a radical fashion, but you will eventually understand that I have only your interests, and those of the company, at heart.’

Time is passing; your options are getting thin.

A figure appeared behind the man who called himself an accountant, dressed in a very military black and hung about with equipment, including a holstered pistol which looked just like the one Jeremy was holding. He could not see the newcomer's eyes, but the dark circles of his Specs stared blankly straight at him, even as the man spoke to his boss.

'Is that him?'

You still have a chance.

'Yes, that's him.'

'Is everything under control, then?'

'No, not yet. He has no idea, and he refuses to trust us. You'll have to shoot him. Try not to get any of it on us.'

Do it!

The man in black was reaching for his weapon, but Jeremy was still holding the one the angel had dropped to him. Aiming high, he pulled the trigger. The gun made a wet, coughing sound like a horse farting, and an expanding ball of grey matter was ejected rather slowly from the barrel. It had spread into a gauzy curtain by the time it hit the three men and enclosed them in its folds.

'O fuck, fuck, fuck! Now look. I'm claiming for this, you should know. You know what this stuff does to clothes! These were experimental, custom. Now look at them!'

'The man in black was very still, standing quite resignedly, draped in the sticky stuff like the loser in a game show.

'Don't move around so much, you only speed up the hardening.'

'Please, before you go, in my pocket, there is a card with a number and an encryption key. Please communicate with us. That's all, just call. We can talk.'

Up close, the gauze was a fine net thrown over them. Jeremy was careful not to touch it: it looked sticky, and seemed to shrink and harden as it dried, tearing at the fabric of their clothes. The card in the man's top pocket was of black plastic and the numbers on it glowed with their own light.

Can we go now?

'Which way?'

Follow the cursor.

The chicken was pointing down. He flew down the stairs along the corridor. Everywhere seemed deserted. The chicken twisted to the right, its feet pumping awkwardly as it ran in place in the corner of his eye.

Fast as you can, I don't know, there may be a way out but everything is closing off. You must be very precious to these folk. You should not have delayed.

He turned, into a short, closed corridor, then a door beside him opened and he was jerked by a strong hand into a small room, where Sky was waiting. It was the tall man from the toyshop who gripped his arm. There was no apparent way out except the door he had come in by. Sky took his other arm.

'Roy can take us out. I'm coming too, I think? Or no?'

'I think you must.'

'We can flee anything except fact. Reality is not negotiable.' The square-headed man's demeanour had the same impenetrable gravity as before. He did not seem at all excited or anxious about the situation.

'All right.'

You may as well follow them. I can't help you down there; there's no data.

They all stood and watched as the tall man lifted the carpet-covered floor panels and stacked them in a corner, underneath was the smooth green-brown surface of raw foam. He lifted his leg and drove his foot straight through it, then gripped a section and pulled; the structure splintered and broke in his hands, and Jeremy went forward and helped him break open the hole until there was a gap large enough to crawl through.

Interesting.

Below that he could see concrete and metal. They all scrambled down. It was almost dark under the floor and as soon as Jeremy moved he tripped and went sprawling. Feeling around, his hand met cold, rusted iron. He had fallen over a section of railroad track left over from the old station. The concrete was damp and stained, and it was cold. He could hear things scuttle in the gloom, and resonant footsteps overhead. The tall man had to bend almost double to avoid the supports of the floor above, but he could move quickly in that posture. His manner and his silence were troubling to Jeremy; the man's pale eyes were somehow empty of life: he seemed not to be paying attention. He knew where to go, however, without seeming to need any artificial aids. Sky was happy to follow him, and the chicken in Jeremy's Specs had fallen over with its legs in the air, so he took the Specs off and followed the others along the rusting track towards the distant daylight.

FROM THE TOP OF THE TOWER Jeremy could see everything that was happening below. A number of angels were hovering over the station, and there was also a helicopter, a tailless teardrop, black all over like a cockroach.

‘Who do you think all those people are?’

‘Some of them will be looking for you, laddie, and some, I fear, will be looking for me. The owners of that angel are going to be interested in what went on today.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Upstairs. Lawn flew it back; she flies it better than I can.’

‘What owners? Isn’t that the police?’

‘Ah but you remember the police when they were still nationalised. Policing is now a market-driven business. The angels are leased from the manufacturer by private organisations who sell their services to whoever. The state, or anybody else.’

‘And you stole one. You could be arrested.’

‘More to the point, I could be sued. I would have been all right with more practice. I would have lifted you out of there just like that.’

‘Will those things lift a man?’

‘O I think so. Still, plan B worked fine.’

Jeremy turned to where the square-headed man stood silently looking on.

‘Thank you for your help, uh, Ray, is it?’

‘My duty is to the pattern of being. Obedience is owed to the flow.’

‘Yes I see. Simon, I want to call Margaret again.’

‘You think you can trust her? How did those guys find you?’

‘I have no choice. I don’t know. But I don’t think it was her. Anyway, you say I can call but it’s not traceable. And I want to talk to that man who gave me his number, too.’

‘Yes, I think you perhaps should. Those fellows think they know who you are. And more importantly they don’t think you’re the same person you are. I mean you do. Or what do I mean?’

‘But who do they think I am?’

‘We can find that out easily enough. We just need an Eye-D gun and then a hack into Somerset House.’

‘The first time I saw one of those guns I thought it was a real weapon.’

‘Really? How distressing. He should not in fact have used it without your consent.’

‘Let me call Margaret.’

His daughter appeared again on the screen, her face a mask.

Well? Did you find your friend? You were in enough of a hurry.

‘Yes, I found her, but some other people found us, not friends.’

I’m sorry. Do you believe I had nothing to do with that?

‘I have to. Now what do you think you know about me? What is this information?’

I want to show you something first.

‘What is it?’

I am hoping you can tell me. I’m sending imagery.

Simon nodded, and a second later a picture appeared on the screen in place of Margaret’s face.

‘Pretty.’

‘What is that? Where did it come from?’

It doesn’t mean anything to you?

‘No. Sky’s right: it looks like some kind of...’

Some kind of what? Really it was like nothing he had ever seen, it was complex in a way more reminiscent of the abstractions he had seen in the Soup, except that it was clearly real, solid and intricate, but beautiful, glittering with the colours of etched and polished metal and crystal. As if a jeweler had built an oil rig.

Look again. It doesn’t set off any kind of memory? From before you came here?

‘You mean before the... the accident or whatever it was?’

No, after that.

‘I remember nothing after that until the evening you first saw me. Why should it mean something?’

Please think. You won't have seen this thing itself, but this, this style of thing – things that look this way... it's not much but your memory could be the most important resource we have in this?

The thing on the screen moved against a blurred background of brilliant red. Near a curved edge of red softness something moved. The focus shifted and he could see there were more of them. Simon held up a scribbled note which read 'machine?'

'It's a machine?'

Yes.

'O. What is it?'

You're sure you don't know?

'Why don't you just assume I am telling you the truth all the time?'

Yes, I'm sorry. I mean does it remind you of anything? Have you never perhaps seen other machines with the same, I don't know, the same air about them?

'No.' He looked across at Simon, who shook his head, staring at the screen.

The machine suddenly plunged straight into the red background and disappeared. The viewpoint moved back, back and back until they could see that the background was really an enormous red, flattened disc, one of several. At this magnification the jeweled machines were just motes of darkness, barely visible. Simon wrote another note without taking his eyes from the image. 'How big?' this one read.

'How big is it?'

The red things are erythrocytes.

Simon gasped and brought his hands to his face, like someone witnessing an atrocity, or a miracle.

'They're what?'

'Red blood corpuscles. This is hard to believe. This is wonderful.'

'Then it's... you can make things like this? Such a tiny machine! Like the things in the toy shop.'

What things? Toys?

'Little robot animals and people.'

O, those. No. Not at all. Those have a very limited range of behaviours. That is the whole point: no, we can't in fact make anything remotely like this. O, we can make nanomachinery of various kinds but this is orders of magnitude beyond anything anybody I know of can do. Its behaviour appears to be directed and purposeful,

though I admit we don't actually know what the purpose might be. But it exhibits a degree of S I that we could not fit into a machine a thousand times its size.

'S I?'

Synthetic intelligence. It's not a very exact term.

'Everything real is natural. Creation is not an organic privilege.' The tall man spoke in a flat, assured tone, without moving his bulging eyes or his square head.

'But you're sure it's not alive.'

'Life is various, and infinite in principle if not practice.'

Who said that? Let's say we're sure that it is some kind of artefact. It does not appear to be able to either reproduce or to draw energy from its environment, I mean eat or anything like that. It has a power source that, well, we tried to open up one of them and destroyed most of a laboratory. Three technicians were badly hurt.

'One of them?'

We have hundreds. They are all similar but no two are exactly the same.

'Where did you get them? What do they have to do with me? And anyway, who are we?'

By 'we' I mean my employers, the Lacuna Corporation. Well I suppose I had better tell you that these machines were found at Kenwood house, in a blood sample that was taken from you. Now does that mean anything to you?

'Hey Jeremy! Jeremy?'



When he had been a child he had sometimes lain in bed, unable to sleep but not really awake, and had enjoyed a feeling as if he were stretched out on a great plain in the dark, with his feet and hands far away on a distant horizon and his mind a tiny point of brightness floating in splendid isolation. With practice he could make his body and his mind rush away from each other in the dark and then draw back together, almost at will, as if he lived stretched on the surface of a balloon. Now he felt the same rush of sensation, of his body fleeing from him in all directions. But this time he could not bring it back. He felt himself falling, as he had fallen in dreams, as insubstantial as an airmail letter. As he fell he thought: it is over, it was nothing, just a dream; in a second I will wake up next to my wife. I must remember to tell her I love her.

He woke in the dark. It was not like waking up from sleep: something in his mind seemed simply to let go of oblivion. He opened his eyes and the world

rushed in at him all at once. He was aware of the darkness outside at the same time as he felt the exotic strength of his body. The only illumination came from a few activated screens, and the pilot lights of the scattered gear. They had put him on a sofa by a window. On a table to his left a pair of Specs were projecting a tiny circus of light down on to the table. His sense of location in physical space was perfect: he got up from the sofa. The ancient carpet tiles tickled the soles of his feet. Closing his eyes, he flexed his knees slightly and then jumped straight into the air, turned a backward flip and landed again on his toes, light as a leaf.

He opened his eyes. He thought he saw movement, but the room was still. Was something moving inside his eyes? He held his hand before him. The veins were just shadows in the dark. Did they move too? Would he be able to see the swift traffic of those intricate creatures just under his skin? If he pressed hard on a vein, would he be able to feel them? But what he felt was perfect. This haunted body fitted him like a new shirt. If they asked him he could juggle anvils blindfold on the deck of a boat, he thought, memory catching at him again like a broken fingernail. But the thought, an image of the sea breaking on a pitching deck, was gone too soon, drowned in the white noise of the present.

The space at the top of the tower was not divided into rooms. There were sections of wall here and there, and doors leading nowhere much, and shelves and racks of the equipment, decorated with symbols of half-eaten fruit, that controlled the silicon in the tower below, and there was a good deal of worn office furniture scattered about. The whole space was bounded by the windows at the perimeter that looked out far over the dark city and the river and the flat, empty land to the east. Reflected in the windows, the coloured lights of the electronics shone in the black sky like artificial stars.

There was a great white sailing ship anchored in the middle of the river, glowing with light and movement. Its two sails, not soft canvas but rigid, transparent wings, with their internal supporting structures showing through in the light like the bones of a glass bird. Small boats covered in coloured lights were shuttling between both banks of the river and the ship. They reminded him of the machines that swam in his blood, the same machines, he was sure now, that made him so strong and so sure on his feet. Looking at his reflection in the window he did another flip. There was no effort in it at all, nor any joy.

He walked around the tower, staying close to the windows. Everybody seemed to be asleep somewhere. It was snowing again, and the white flakes shone briefly as they flew into the light from the windows and then out again into the

darkness. The sails of the ship turned freely like weathervanes with the changing wind. He walked half the perimeter of the tower, then took the stairs to the next floor down. Like all the others below, it was filled with the antique silicon computers that held the Soup, and glowed with tens of thousands of pilot lights. It was a noisy place: thousands of cooling fans whirred, disk drives whined and clattered, and high frequency bleeps and tones filled the air like the calling of electric birds. He could see that the rooms and corridors were heaped with machines. There were few screens or keyboards, just beige system units and bare chassis. The computers were not mounted in racks, but were simply glued to each other, or to the furniture or walls of the building to make a kind of electromechanical ivy that wound through the building. The old computers were all different brands, all sprawled promiscuously together, connected by the cat's cradle of white cabling which enmeshed the whole building. In one room there was a wall with dozens of dusty monitors, all different shapes and sizes, all glowing with nonsense. He assumed they were showing information on the states of the various parts of the Soup, but there was nothing that made any sense to him, just lines and numbers and shapes. Then as he stood there they all went blank together.

For a long moment they stayed dark, then a message began to scroll across them, very, very slowly, the same message on every screen:

HEY YOU HEY YOU HEY YOU IS ANYBODY THERE QUERY???

'Yes.' He felt a fool speaking to nobody.

The screens had all gone blank again.

'Can you hear me?'

Apparently not. Then a second message began to crawl over the screens:

LOW BANDWIDTH INPUT PLEASE PLEASE

There were half-a-dozen keyboards scattered on a table. He tentatively pressed a key. There was no response. He picked up the keyboard and its cable swung free. He tried another one, tapping the space bar.

CONTACT WONDERFUL AGAIN

He tapped it again.

ONE FOR YES TWO FOR NO YES QUERY???

He tapped once, then had a better idea, and typed with one finger *yes*.

ALPHANUMERIC JOY!!!!

There was a distinct change in the sounds he could hear all around him. The soup was like a jungle that has been woken suddenly, and the bleeping and hum-

ming had intensified. From a pile of machines beside him came a fizzing buzz and there was an acrid smell of overheated plastic.

URGENTLY WE PROFFER A MESSAGE FOR JEREMY GREY

He typed, with trembling hands: that is me

WHAT THAT QUERY??? NO VISION

no i am jeremy grey

NO OR YES ARE YOU JEREMY GREY QUERY???

yes yes yes i am jeremy grey

THIS MEDIUM WILL NOT DO A BETTER IS BEING PREPARED YOU ARE
IN GREAT DANGER

The words crawled across the screens so slowly he found himself holding his breath. The last phrase remained, a dozen times, in different colours on the different monitors.

why me

NOTHING PERSONAL ALAS YOUR SYSTEM IS IN DANGER

system??? He had found the question mark.

NOW GO AWAY

He waited, but the screens were still. System? He saw a movement through a doorway, shapes softer than computers or cabling stood out against the darkness. There were two people standing face to face, one of them was very tall, looking down, the other small, looking up. One was the tall man, Ralph, Randolph... he still could not recall the name, from the toyshop, and the other was Sky. He had his hands on her shoulders.

'Sky! Come here. Come and look at this!' She ignored him, but the screens came to life again.

GO AWAY NOW PLEASE URGENT REQUEST

Sky! Come and see!' But she did not seem to hear him.

DANGER APPROACHING PERIGEE VESSEL PREPARATION

who re you??? who am i??? what is giong on???

He heard Sky cry out in plain fear as the man gripped her and lifted off the ground.

'O no please no please!'

'Sky! Roger, Rex, Rudy, what are you doing?' With his fist he banged at the keyboard but the screens were blank again.

'No please no plea—' Her voice was cut off abruptly. The man lifted her up effortlessly, holding her across his body like a baby, and carried her out of sight.

The screens remained blank. He struck the keyboard with his fist and it broke apart, scattering key caps and tiny springs across the table.

‘Roy! What are you doing? Where are you?’ They had already disappeared. With a last glance at the blank screens he ran after them, plunging into the maze of corridors and partitions of stacked machinery. He could not see them but he could hear the occasional muffled cry from Sky. They seemed to be moving around the perimeter of the building. As he ran he called for help as loud as he could, but there was no answer. He turned into a long, cluttered corridor that ended in a tall window looking down fifty floors on the city. The two of them were already at the window. The man held Sky under his right arm, while with his left he casually punched a hole through the glass. With a howl, the freezing wind blew in through the gap, and the floor was quickly covered with blown snow. With quiet concentration he worked with his free hand to enlarge the hole until it was bigger than himself, tugging the shards of glass free of the frame. There was no blood on his hands.

Jeremy approached slowly. Sky was limp, inert, her eyes open but fixed. He laid a hand on the tall man’s shoulder, but the man did not even glance at him. His body was like stone, and hot, really hot to the touch, the fabric burned his hand so that he had to snatch it away.

‘Ray. Rupert! Whatever your name is!’

The tall man stood in the opening in the swirling snow with the tower of darkness below. The snow evaporated with a hiss as it struck him. Only his forearms and hands seemed to be cool; the snow clung to them where they held Sky, as you would hold a baby, cradling her head so that she was held up against the darkness like an example, eyes wide to the sky, still and limp as a sleeping child, bathed in a new, strange, silvery light that poured down on them from above.

‘Sky!’

The carpet under the man’s feet began to smoulder, the heat radiating from his body bathed Jeremy where he stood two metres away, afraid to move or speak. Somewhere in the distance an alarm began to ring, barely audible above the wind tearing through the shattered window. Then the light from above faded, Sky’s eyes closed, and the tall man swung her back inside and laid her softly down. Her hair was filled with snow. He stood straight with his arms hanging by his side, his eyes staring at nothing. Jeremy stepped closer and gripped his arm. There was no heat at all radiating from him now: now he was cold, colder than the biting wind. Ice formed on his forehead and down his cheeks, a white

coat of frost that extended rapidly downwards as Jeremy watched, until half his body was frosted like a cake. Jeremy shook him once, and the tall body toppled over, rigid as a statue, to lie next to Sky. The eyes were still, pointing in different directions. Sky lay as if sleeping. Jeremy lifted her effortlessly and she curled into his arms and buried her head in his chest.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Sure. Shush.’

‘Is she all right? What’s happening?’ He looked up. Simon and Lawn were there. Simon held a fire extinguisher.

‘That Ralph, Ron, Rex... he went mad. He broke the window and held her outside, right out in the air. Then he... look at him, he fell over, he iced up. He’s not... it... he’s artificial, he’s not human.’

‘No, of course not.’

Simon knelt where the body lay, by now almost covered in snow.

‘System crash. Major down. Hard and soft. Cooling system gone critical. Zero power. This robot is all the way down. You ever see that before, sweetie?’

Lawn brushed snow away from the square face.

‘I thought they could not be violent. Let’s go open it up.’

‘Can you get a doctor for Sky?’

‘No doctor.’ She did not open her eyes; there was snow on her lashes and in the hollows of her ear. ‘I’m good. Just cold. Take me up. Take me up. Rest.’

He carried her upstairs. She weighed nothing at all in his arms; it was like carrying her empty clothes. He laid her down gently on the sofa. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing slowly and deeply, but she took his hand as he sat beside her, and held it gently. Boole came and laid her muzzle on the bed, and licked her face. She smiled without opening her eyes and touched the dog’s nose with the back of her free hand, then seemed to fall into a deep sleep. Jeremy sat there for a long time, until he was sure she was sleeping peacefully. Simon came and stood by the divan watching her for a while, then he took Jeremy by the elbow and led him gently away. The dog stayed, stretched out with her muzzle on the floor and her eyes open watching the sleeping woman.

‘ALL OF THIS IS TO DO WITH YOU.’
‘How can you be sure?’

‘I can’t be *sure*. But suppose just for the sake of simplicity we assume for now that we are dealing with just one set of utterly inexplicable circumstances, rather than a whole lot of them at once.’

‘Do you think Sky knew he was a robot?’

‘Of course she did. It was perfectly obvious. An old model, and primitive; probably worked with valves, or steam—’

‘I didn’t know.’

‘Well. But the possibility never occurred to you. But if you think about it now, isn’t it obvious. If he’d been human he would have had to have been the dreariest man alive. But now I’ll tell you what connects this to you. Someone is trying to communicate with you, right? We have had messages coming in to my Soup, which is one thing, but what about what happened to those Ents? I don’t have any explanation for that. There was something that had somehow... entered the consciousness of the Ents, something was... what? Touching them?’

‘You don’t know how that might be done?’

‘I don’t know how that might even be possible, but you see the connection.’

‘I got another message, downstairs. The screens down there were trying to send me a message. It said, the message is inadequate, another is being prepared. No, the *medium*, the medium is inadequate. But then it told me to go away. It said do not be alarmed. Do not be alarmed! What could be more alarming than all this!’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes, there was something else: it said I was in danger.’

‘Why stick her out the window? What has she got to with it? A better medium is being prepared? You’re sure?’

‘Yes, and there was something else, approaching something, epigenesis, entropy, a word I didn’t know.’

‘If the better medium was the robot, then something went wrong, wouldn’t you say? They seem to be experiencing technical difficulties, these friends of yours. They use our comms and the messages are feeble and nonsensical, they’ve used the Ents and started an infection that destroyed a whole can of them. Those messages didn’t make much sense to me either. Now they’ve fried the robot.’

‘They! *Who?* Who are they? What do they want? Sorry, stupid question. As if you know.’

‘They are either the same as those who took you out of that car or... I don’t know – and healed you, and took you for a whizz round the galaxy at relativistic speeds, and dropped you back here, but where? We need to know how you got to Kenwood. Your daughter is coming here, by the way.’

‘You told her where I am?’

‘Jeremy, my friend, I don’t think you can hide. I don’t think you can hide anywhere in the world. That technology – the things, the nanomachinery in your body – is *not human*, haven’t you understood yet what that means? Dear sweet suffering innocence! You are the object of attention of an alien species! If that’s the word. Contact, man! It has to be. Contact! The first time. The first real time. Unequivocal. This is it. It had to happen one day but most people had just about given up trying. Or hoping. Listen: from now on everything is going to be different for everybody! This isn’t just your business, it’s the whole of humanity. And you want to hide! Well how well have you done so far? The only thing you need is information, isn’t that true? What is more important than understanding this?’

‘I suppose.’

‘And Margaret knows things. She may be able to help us understand how you came back. She knows how Lacuna are involved, and they know a lot. Yours need not be the only contact.’

‘Anyway, or who? You said they were either the ones who took me or, but you didn’t say or who.’

‘Or somebody else. You are also apparently in danger. Where is that coming from?’

‘From Lacuna?’

‘But why? And that’s not what that man said. I think he really could be an accountant, you know. He had that look about him.’

‘The whole of humanity?’

‘Of course. How could anything be the same again, after contact, everything changes. People have dreamed of this for centuries, or some have. This should be when the human race finally decides if it is ever going to grow up.’

‘But I’m not a member any more, am I? I am no longer human.’

‘Are you not?’

‘Well, am I?’

‘I think you have to answer that. You seem to be. Do you seem to yourself to be? Apart from all that – I mean, the nanomachinery and the artificial metabolism, that’s just like medicine, you can think as if... is someone with a synthetic liver not human? That’s not what human is, that’s just meat.’

‘Meat.’

‘You are what you seem to yourself to be. Won’t that do?’

‘No, because we are, I mean not just what we are really but we’re sort of made of our ideas about ourselves as well, aren’t we?’

‘So. What can you do about that? Are your immediate problems metaphysical?’

‘No, or, some of them, maybe... no, no, or only partly. Anyway, what do we do next?’

‘Talk to your daughter. And when we’ve done that, perhaps we should go for another swim in the Soup.’

‘That could destroy it, after what happened last time.’

‘But we must have more data. And the Soup – you know it’s hard for me to say this because it’s been my life up to now, but the sad thing is the Soup just isn’t so important now: if we can talk to your aliens, most of the basic research that is being done on the planet, what there is of it, can probably be thrown away. That is going to be the hard part: just one world out of many. People are going to hate that. Every time you tell them that they are not at the centre of the universe they go daft. Do you know that even in the third millennium there are still supposedly educated people who talk about constellations as if they were actual places, about the movement of the planets as if we still lay at the centre of the universe. As if all this creation were some kind of appliance made to order just for us and the instructions for use left lying around in the sky or the palm of your hand. Magical thinking’

‘What about your belief system?’

‘I don’t have one. I believe that the universe is consistent. That’s not a system, it’s a single article. And it’s what most people believe anyway when they’re not

trying be philosophical. It's what you affirm your belief in every time you press a light switch or bite into an apple: if the light fails to come on you think there is something wrong with the system; if the apple turned into a dragon, what would you think then? You would be helpless in a world where the natural laws were arbitrary. If you believe intellectually what you believe in practice, that is that the world is not arbitrary but coherent, you don't have to believe anything else at all, you can think about it instead. If your friends are going to tell me I'm wrong about that then never mind, I can forget trying to understand nature and devote the rest of my life to Lawn. And food... and sex.'

'What should we do about Sky?'

'Don't you think we could respect her wishes? She says she is fine. She wants rest. She had a shock. Right now the most important thing I can think of is to make contact with these friends of yours.'

'You think they're friends?'

'I think they had better be.'



Margaret came. When he saw her standing in the disorder of Simon's laboratory Jeremy was struck by how neat and contained she looked. Her clothes were dark and severe, like his own, with none of the bright or moving colours that he had seen on Sky or the people in the market. The first time he had seen her in the doorway of his own house he not known who she was, but now there was no doubt of it. She could have stood in his own living room sixty years ago and not looked out of place; it was as though she had inherited some of his displacement along with his genes. Simon was being expansive and energetic and patronising. He called her my dear and dear lady, but he looked all the time as if he were taking notes. Jeremy was confronted again with the solid, fleshly apparition of an idea that he could not keep hold of, that he had a daughter, and she was older than he was. She kept a distance from him that confused them both, standing closer than a stranger, but holding herself tense and shielded, never meeting his eyes. He tried first.

'You... I can imagine... or I've no idea, actually, how you feel. I feel I should... or I want to say, there are so many things I have... you're – I'm sorry. Let me start again.'

'There's nothing in anybody's experience to prepare us for this, is there? I have to say first that I am still far from accepting the truth of this situation and

that therefore you need not feel that this is too personal a situation just yet, at least on my behalf.

‘But you’re here.’

‘Whoever you are, you’re an amazing manifestation, and you are, I believe, unambiguous evidence of contact with an... with a... I don’t much like any of the conventional expressions, aliens, extra-terrestrials – sound so dramatic.’

‘Dramatic! Sweet lady, so far it has all been dramatic enough for anybody, hugely dramatic. Alarums and excursions. Now we are ready for some reflection. A little thought, a little synthesis, don’t you think? What can you tell us?’

‘Well, I work for Lacuna, as I said.’

‘I am wondering if this is a coincidence.’

‘I always have worked there, since I was at university, they gave me a grant for my research and I went to work for them afterwards. During the plague years I was working in one of their isolation communities, the company has always been very, very protective of me and they have given me everything I need, but I still can’t tell you anything much about them, you know how secretive they are.’

‘What do you do there? I did not see you, did I?’

‘Medical mathematics. Now, when you came to my house, I had not made the connection, but—’

‘Medical mathematics?’

‘The application of temporal geometry to medicine. My work was largely theoretical.’

‘Temporal geometry?’

Simon interrupted. ‘That’s the mathematics of evolving systems, you’ve seen it work; that’s what the Soup is made from.’

Margaret turned to Simon. ‘The Soup? I’ve heard of you, yes. I know who you are. You’re the man who’s playing with temporal geometry with a heap of old silicon, sometimes papers of yours get into the mainstream. Where I’m afraid they are not taken very seriously. Even if your theories were right you would need an awful lot of silicon.’

‘I’ve got an awful lot of it. I can show you.’

Jeremy was trying to keep things on track. ‘Yes, but, you said you had not made what connection?’

‘With you. I had been shown the blood sample with those nanomachines in it the day before. Very few people were allowed to know about this. I was up at Kenwood a few days before you came to our house. They wouldn’t tell me

anything about where the sample had come from, but they wanted me and my colleagues to help study the nanos.'

'Why you? Is that part of what you do?'

'We have tools for studying complex behaviour and they wanted to know if the nanos' behaviour was directed or not. As in fact it is.'

'Doesn't it have to be, surely? These things in me, how could they work just blindly?'

'The natural components of your organism do exactly that. But there is a fundamental difference between the way, say, immune system cells attack intruders and the way those nanos do. It's difficult to explain. But I was sure the subject, the source of the samples, was there in the building. There was a different atmosphere about the place – more than usual – everybody stepping softly. And there was a rumour that the boss was coming, for the first time.'

'Max Callendar himself. The great man! Have you met him?'

'No, of course not.'

'Who is this great man?'

'Him? He's an even bigger mystery than you are. But Margaret, you must know something about him. People in the organisation must talk.'

'He never comes to Britain. They say he doesn't like the weather. If he wants to be a recluse then nobody in the company is going to argue with him. We have prosperity and security, when hardly anyone in the world has much of anything. Would you argue with that?'

'What does this company do?'

Simon took over. 'It began with power. Max Callendar invented the very-high-temperature superconductor – or he stole it from the real inventor, according to some of the many unverifiable stories about him. It made him richer than god. Lacuna is all over the place. Software, bandwidth, data banks, all the commodities, and manufacturing, mines, a lot of traditional things, even food. The company and most of its many parts are based in Greater Korea to take advantage of their banking secrecy laws; nobody knows much about the heart of the company, or Callendar. It's no different in that from any large corporation. But—'

'But within Lacuna – I have worked there all my life and I have never met anybody who said they had met him, or at least nobody that I believed. He must have contacts, people around him, but nobody knows much all the same. Of course there are gigabytes of rumour and guesswork from journalists, but he has

succeeded for forty years in protecting his privacy. I can tell you all the rumours I know if you wish, but I can't see it helping you one bit. I don't know why you were there; I don't know why they want you; I don't know, really, who you are; all I know is that those nanos are real because I imaged them myself. I insisted. Once they knew that I knew of you and I told them that it was obvious to me where the nanos had come from and I insisted, completely insisted, on taking those images that I showed you – and I have more – that I showed you myself, because I said to them there was this young man in my house that I had never, never seen before and claiming to be my, my... and... I said you must let me do this because of who he says he is and my mother says he is, but I thought she was just gone mad. So that's all I know. My father died in a freak accident, they said it was a meteorite, or a... some newspapers had a story about a missile, there were books, whole books about you, not just you, but you were in them, you know the kind of books, badly printed with very blurred photographs and lots of capital letters and question marks, flying saucer stories, what kind of – how... how, when you are growing up, how do you say to people that your father was a kind of, a kind of... of exotic *anecdote*? Nobody knows how to react to that kind of thing, they look at you as if you're trying to make them do something nasty. I tried all kinds of ways to tell it but it always sounded so ridiculous, I'm sorry. So are you going to tell me what is all this about? Is this flying saucers after all?

'Lawn, dear, let's give them some privacy.'

When they were alone, his daughter just looked at him expectantly.

'I don't know, Margaret, I will tell you the story, and you can decide for yourself. First would you mind having a look at Sky. She seems all right but she will not wake up.'

'What do you expect me to do? I'm neither a doctor nor a nurse.'

'I know. I don't know why. I just thought—'

'All right. You will have to move that horrible dog.'

Sky lay on her side with her hands clasped under her chin and her knees drawn up. Her breathing was light and even. A pulse marked time in the hollow of her throat. Jeremy thought: she is a clock – is that all? And I was a clock that was broken and then mended, better than new. Perhaps it can be done: perhaps we can live for ever.

'Come on, woman, wake up!' Margaret shook her roughly by the shoulder, but Sky just smiled and scratched her nose.

'That's not really what I meant.'

‘O, you want me to be gentle and soft? Why should you think I know how? If you are really concerned, get a doctor. You have not told me how she got that way. Is it something to do with you and with this... this story?’

Sky opened her eyes and looked at them, very directly, but with a distant gaze. ‘I am well. Thank you for asking. Please do not disturb. Leave me be.’

‘There. I am sure she knows best.’

‘She doesn’t sound very natural.’

Boole had come creeping back with her belly close to the floor, as if she hoped she would not be noticed. When Sky spoke, she stopped, and sank further down in a very different attitude, baring her teeth and growling softly.

‘What’s the matter, Boole?’

She said nothing, but lay down watchfully, with a yawn that showed her yellow teeth.

‘Boole?’

‘Do you expect it to tell you?’

‘Yes, I do, actually, she talks, or she used to. She has gone silent lately. Perhaps there is something wrong with the speaking mechanism; is there a battery that can go flat? I must ask Simon.’

‘O, a Talkimal. Awful things. But you know it can’t really speak. It just uses conditioned acts to call up a database of vocabulary and a subset of English grammar. No, there’s no battery to run down. The system is powered by the animal’s movements, like the heaters in shoes.’

‘Look. I’m sorry about not being there as a father for you, but... I don’t like to make excuses, but, well...’

‘Yes, quite. It does seem to have been pretty much out of your control. Do you want to tell me the whole story now?’

‘I’m going to ask Simon to tell it, and I’ll jump in as and when. He’s good at getting things in order. I used to be good at that myself, but this is... this has been too much for me. Do you think you can help?’

‘Not really.’

‘But you might know something you’re not even aware of.’

‘I doubt it.’ She walked away from him, over to the wall of glass that looked down on the city and the river. ‘You know there might be something in that Callendar story, about him being here, if that’s relevant.’

‘I don’t know what is relevant. Everything. Why do you say that.’

‘Down there. That’s how he protects his privacy, or secrecy, or what ever you want to call it, he lives on that thing. I’m not an expert on these things but I remember reading about it; there were pictures. I remember the size of it, and those fancy transparent wings; that’s his ship.’

Sky slept on, smiling. Boole lay three paces away and watched her with fierce attention.

Simon and Lawn laid the robot out on a table and put on their Specs. The same machines that had worked on the angel dismantled the still form. When they cut into the skin around the throat Jeremy looked away. Simon and Margaret talked. They threw theories and suppositions at each other, they scribbled into their computers. Simon set up searches from his Soup which came back laden with data on alien contacts.

THERE IS A LOT OF IT. NONE OF IT MUCH GOOD ACCORDING TO STANDARD CRITERIA

Nor was it. Saucer people. Half-literate backwoods folk legends and incompetent observing and wishful thinking and contorted logic and the whole spectrum of paranoid imagination and unreason and plain fraud. The triumph of belief over thought. Noise in the system. The serious work, with radio telescopes and deep space detectors of all kinds, had never produced a single unequivocal case in all the years the programmes had run, until failure after failure dried up the funding and the optimism.

‘Even before everything else stopped too. Nobody does basic science any more except people like me doing it in their garage.’

Margaret looked around her. ‘You call this a garage? You talk as if society had completely fallen apart. I don’t believe that. There are plenty of people who lead normal, secure, productive lives. Corporations can carry out many of the functions of the state with far more rationality. They are not all confused by ideology. Look at Lacuna; isn’t that civilisation?’

‘Margaret, no corporation would support my work. Just as no corporation will search for extraterrestrial life.’

‘I’m not surprised. What you are trying to do here seems absurd, if I may say so. And similarly no corporation is going to waste resources looking for something that is not there, or was not there, rather. Yes, all right. I suppose now I have to admit they were wrong about that.’

‘But something is there. You believe that now don’t you?’

‘Something is there now. But it seems to be something new. Or no, not new, going back to you, Mister... when you were, when you—’

‘Died?’

‘Doesn’t seem to be quite the word. Anyway, when was it? 1990?’



The Soup found vast quantities of data about Lacuna.

MUCH OF IT HOWEVER HIGHLY SPECULATIVE IF NOT FICTIONAL

But there were images of the winged ship, though none of Max Callendar. The articles and programmes about him agreed on nothing except his great wealth and power and his obsession with privacy.

‘There was a rich man from my time who was like that, he had twelve-inch fingernails and kept his feet stuffed into tissue boxes.’

‘I don’t believe Callendar is mad or even very strange. He just likes to choose whom he meets. I wish I could do the same.’

‘What else should we look for?’

‘Astronomy, of course. Soup, any standout stuff in astronomy over the last few days, or weeks.’

ASTRONOMY: REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE NEAR-EARTH ASTEROID. DATA IS INCONSISTENT. SOURCES UNRELIABLE

‘No, then.’

‘Or not. Soup, follow that up.’

They seemed more comfortable with each other than either was with him. Jeremy felt only his strangeness and a solitude that welled up in him like an old sorrow. He felt like a man in a glass bottle. He felt too that if the invisible membrane separating him from the world were to break, he would be destroyed. (Perhaps all people feel that way; I don’t know: I only know what Jeremy was thinking.)

‘I want to do something.’

‘Do what?’

‘I don’t know. I mean I want to do something, to be pro-active. Everything so far has come at me. You have that angel?’

‘It’s a bit bent.’

‘Where did you get an angel?’ Margaret had gone rigid.

‘It had strayed out of its jurisdiction. I recovered it.’

‘I’m not going to get involved in anything illegal.’

‘What do you want to do with the angel, Jeremy?’

‘I want to have a closer look at that ship.’

HERE IS A GRAPHICAL SUMMARY OF THE ASTEROID DATA

An image of the sun and the inner planets: the earth shone prettily in blue and white. Then the image zoomed back until the some of the outer planets were visible. A line ran down in a curve towards the centre, blurring and spreading out as it went.

SIGNIFICANT UNCERTAINTY REGARDING THE ORBIT. SOME UNCONFIRMED DATA WOULD INDICATE THE OBJECT IS UNDER ACCELERATION.

‘O ho! O yes! Yes yes *yes!* Zoom in.’

The image showed the earth again, The blurred line passed across its orbit.

THIS DATA NOT CURRENT. MANY UNSUPPORTED ASSUMPTIONS.

‘When is perigee?’

‘*Perigee!* That’s what they said. Perigee. What does it mean?’

‘Closest approach to the earth.’

ACCORDING TO THIS DATA PERIGEE IS BETWEEN 12 HOURS AGO AND TOMORROW NOON. SIGNIFICANT UNCERTAINTY—

‘That’s a system, isn’t it? That picture. That’s called the solar system, right?’

‘Yes. Sorry, I thought you understood.’

‘I did understand, I just didn’t think. Could it be mine?’

‘Yours?’

‘They said my system was in danger. Could that be what they meant?’

SKY CAME INTO THE ROOM AS IF SHE HAD ONLY JUST LEFT IT. She smiled briefly at Margaret and Simon and then sat on a table by Jeremy's elbow, with her bare feet hanging swinging in space. She looked dreamy and distant.

'So.'

'Are you all right?'

'Too bright.'

'I was worried.'

'Thanks, you know.'

'Do you know what happened?'

'Rover... no, Randy... anyway, the robot put me out the window.'

'Weren't you afraid?'

'O yes. But he was so strong and steady that I felt safe almost. It was too intense but too too, what? Nice, you know?'

'Nice? But do you know why he, why it did it? What happened to you? I thought you would never wake up. Did you know he was a machine?'

'Robert. Robert the Robot. Now I will never forget his name again. But you know that's – Agar says that all complex systems are alive, and all real things are natural. When I was very small I used to be agged all the time at my father. He would take me to the park and sit and watch his Vee and ignore me I thought, and, Ok I liked the park but when we got home I would tell my mother that he hit me or was mean and they would have a hack at each other. He always came in the door first all agged up too and going don't believe her or anything she says. I always wanted a dog, do you know, that's why I like Boole, where is she? Anyway I want a dog and I always ask my father look please buy me a dog and I won't tell my mother porks about when we're in the park. I mean you know I was really too small. Then one day he did, he gave me a dog, I don't remember it was a birthday or what but I remember he gave me this dog and I was too happy I too loved him, my dad and the dog too.'

‘I played with the dog and played with it and it could walk and run and even jump and turn over in the air. And it barked. But I was playing with it, I don’t know, a few days after he gave me it and it just completely stopped. I don’t mean it fell down or anything. It was just standing there not moving with its eyes looking into space, even when I went up too close. So I touched it but it didn’t do anything, and I put my hand in its mouth, and I pushed – I remember I pushed my hand down inside its mouth right down inside and my hand just stopped. I mean that there was no throat there. It was closed off; the mouth wasn’t connected, to the inside of the dog, see, because it wasn’t real. I mean it wasn’t a real dog, I don’t think it was ever supposed to look even like a real dog, it was just a toy, and my father gave it to me for a toy I know, not a dog, though I never asked him about it because I felt too stupid. But all real things are natural Agar says, although I don’t mean my dog was alive, but Rodney was more alive than that dog. I don’t know what would happen, if I ever put my hand in his mouth, if he has an inside. So I try to be nice to him but he put me out the window. I don’t know what to think about that yet. I think somebody told him to do that.’

‘Sky, are you all right?’

‘Bright. Where’s Boole?’

Boole was there. She had heard Sky’s voice and came in with her head up.

‘Hello Sky love.’

‘Hello Boole darling.’ She called out to the dog, but Boole stopped short at the sound of her voice, then backed away and flattened herself low to the floor. The mechanisms of ancient genes, corroded by age and domestication, ground into action. Her tail went as straight as a lever and her head dropped between her shoulders as her lips curled away to reveal long rows of yellow teeth flecked with foam. A terrible low growl came from deep down in her throat, and then another sound, a strangled wavering cry unlike any sound any dog had ever made. Her jaw worked convulsively and her eyes trembled. Her head began to twist from side to side as she seemed to be gnawing on the sounds in her mouth. She was not. She was articulating them.

Boole was speaking, not through a machine, but in her own voice: she had to speak the same words over and over before any of the humans understood even that they were words. But they were words all right: there were two of them.

‘No’ she said, and ‘Stay’ she said.

She dropped to the floor, panting with exhaustion. ‘No’ she said again.

'She talked, really talked! Boole, that was you darling. Did you hear her? Why did you say no to me?'

Sky tried to bend down to her but the dog's hostility was frightening, and Sky could only back away from the lifted head and bared teeth. Jeremy reached out his hand, and Boole turned her head and took hold of his wrist as if it were a wrapped newspaper. Her teeth barely held his arm, but she was trembling like a novice orator and her saliva felt like acid on his skin. She did not look at him, her eyes were fixed on Sky, but her normal, artificial voice returned with its soft contralto from somewhere in her throat, even while her teeth still held him.

'Autonomous input error. Please consult owner manual. No user-serviceable parts inside. Your Talkimal is guaranteed for life, or ten years, whichever is the shorter. All warranty claims will be dealt with promptly by your representative. Reporting type 76 error. Your Talkimal will never do you harm due to speech system. Reporting unknown error. Please contact your service representative. Reporting undocumented errors. No risk is associated with erroneous linguistic behaviours in your Talkimal. This announcement does not affect your statutory rights. Sky is no yes.'

'What is she saying, Sky?'

Sky had backed up against a table and did not speak. Behind the table, racks of equipment reached halfway to the ceiling.

'Please, love. Sky is no yes.'

'What, Boole?'

'Sky is no one.'

'Sky is nobody?'

'No. No one. Negative one.'

'Negative one?'

'One! Yes!' She let Jeremy go, and licked her dripping muzzle, but she was still all vigilance.

'Sky is negative one?'

'One! One! One!'

'No, don't get excited. I don't understand.'

'There's nothing to understand; the horrible thing is malfunctioning.'

'Could she be a robot, too?'

'Not and smell the way she does.'

'No.' Simon came over and crouched in front of her, at a careful distance. She still looked dangerous.

'She is not synthetic, and she is not malfunctioning. She is just out of her depth. She is trying to express an idea.' He looked sternly at her and spoke as if she were a small but furious child. 'Boole is a dog.'

'One!'

'Jeremy is a dog.'

'No one!'

'Jeremy is a man.'

'One! One!'

'So one just means yes? Why not say so?'

'Why are we bothering with this?'

'Wait, now. Boole. Boole is Boole.'

'One!'

'Jeremy is Jeremy.'

'One!'

'Sky is Sky.'

'No one! No one! No one!'

'She means I am false. I am not me. I know. She is right. But it is bright. Something wonderful. Please do not worry about me. But I am not myself, that's really true, and you are a clever clever Boole to notice. Everything is coming to a point. Now I need to be alone, to, to... *develop*, then we will be clearer; then we will need your help.'

She lifted herself on to the table, stood and swiftly climbed right up and over the racks behind it and dropped to the other side. She had moved so suddenly that Jeremy caught only a glimpse of her bare feet flashing in the air above him before she vanished. He ran round the wall of equipment but she was already out of sight; he could hear the slap of her running feet and 'Please leave me some.' The room was a labyrinth of warm, stacked machinery. He went back to the others, who all looked to him as if he were their guide for the day. Boole had stretched out on the floor with her muzzle pressed flat, and she rolled her eyes at them without moving her head, as if she were ashamed. Lawn sat beside her, stroking her head.

'Good dog.'

'What does she mean she is false? And why was Boole talking like that?'

'She seems to be getting something, some kind of logic language, from the systems that drive her speech mechanism.'

‘Undocumented error states. Please do not subject your Talkimal to unusual stress of either a mental or physical kind. Your Talkimal is endowed with certain inalienable rights, to be defined. Sky is no one, loves.’ Her low voice was as calm as ever.

‘Why can’t she just say true or false, dad, if that’s what she means?’

‘They are unlikely to be in her vocabulary.’

‘True and false?’

‘Errors in the speech system do not effect the wellbeing of the Talkimal unit. Please record all error messages to pass on to your Talkimal service representative. A contact number is tattooed inside my left ear, loves.’

‘Not the words; the concept, of true and false. That was the trouble with making her talk in the first place. There are no words in any language for most of the things she would like to say. And so many words that – what does, O, say, “justice” or “freedom” or “salary” or “eventually” mean to her? What’s the use of speech to an animal which does not live in a symbolic world? And, what does false mean in a world of facts? There is no truth or falsehood in their world. Only what is there. Animals don’t often lie. Unless they have been taught. They’re not like us.’

‘Sky is no one. Where is Sky?’

‘But I still don’t know what she means.’

‘Where is Sky, Jeremy? Do you know where Sky is? Is she lost?’

‘I don’t know, Boole. What did you mean when you said Sky was false?’

‘I’m sorry, Please rephrase that. I cannot reliably reply to complex constructions. Some maintenance may be required.’

Margaret clapped her hands in irritation. ‘You’re wasting your time. It can’t understand a question like that.’

‘I’m going to find Sky.’

‘Don’t you think you would be better to leave her alone. It’s what she wants. You’re not going to learn anything by chasing after that girl.’

‘She means that Sky is not herself.’ Simon seemed to have formed some idea of what was happening. ‘And Sky understood her, she said. She will have to tell us what it means. She seemed different to me too. For now I suggest you leave her be.’

‘But it may be important.’

‘I am sure it is. But she asked us, and so what can we do? Does it not mean anything to you? The idea: she is not herself; you are not yourself. Rufus was not, itself – Rory; what was its name? Rover?’

‘Robert.’

‘Robert. Something told it to, she said. Let us assume for the moment just for the purposes of argument that what happened fitted somebody’s purpose. What was it? What was it doing? If Roderick there was under orders, whom did he get them from? Those things will do what you tell them if they can, if they understand you. But they can’t destroy themselves like that. Somebody or something interfered with the Soup, and then with the robot in a way I can’t see yet. From what you tell me, it was holding her very firmly in the air, fifty floors up while the thing’s whole mechabolism went up in smoke, really, it set off the alarms, it must have lit up like a flare it was so hot, then it was frozen when we got there. It discharged a whole superC ultracapacitor, a big one, in how many seconds?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Not long, though?’

‘No wait I do know. I think I do know. Let me remember. Do you have a watch? I mean can you time something, like a stopwatch?’

‘Just say go, or stop, or whatever you like. Net, record please.’

‘O I see. Go.’

He could see the corridor narrowing toward the broken window and the figure of the machine – of course, he could see now it was a machine, just look at it, listen to it, it was obvious – but now it was silent, standing and leaning out into the dark. Still as stone. Sky in its arms was limp, he saw, abandoned, her left hand hung low with its palm open in relaxed surrender, her throat was bared to the sky and her gasping mouth was drawn in an ambiguous O. The snow hissed as it struck the robot’s face, and its clothes shrank and distorted as the fabric began to melt. There was a bright nimbus of light in the spirals of snow around her head, a chrome light shining down on her. With the greatest care, the robot stood and turned back from the window and took two faltering steps along the corridor. Steam surrounded it in a cloud. Its eyes rolled in their sockets and there were vibrations and spasms all over its body. But it laid her down so gently on the floor that its slumped head and the tremors that shook it might have come merely from some enormous sorrow.

‘Stop.’

24 SECONDS

‘Your memory is improving.’

‘It’s not like a memory at all. Like a film. I can see everything that happened as if it were still happening. I just have to concentrate.’

‘How far do these memories go back?’

‘Wait.’ He tried. Everything recent was clear and wholly present to him, but there was a locked room in his mind, and he could still not even read the name on the door.

‘To the moment I woke up in Kenwood. No further. Look, I have to know how I got there and what, if anything, is the connection with this Callendar person.’



The skin had been stripped from the robot’s head. The skeletal structure underneath was white glossy plastic. There were no motors or gears or pistons or rods under the surface, only convoluted curves like organic forms wrapped around the hard geometry of electronics, black ceramics and bright gold. The artificial muscle was dark grey and rubbery. Dry biology. There were probes projecting from the empty eye sockets.

‘There is nothing left here. The whole system is blank. No memories; no programming, no code of any kind. He’s been completely erased. There’s a lot of physical damage, too. Thermal shock. Only the hands and forearms are undamaged. But he is as inert as this table. Gone to android heaven.’

Simon picked up the detached head and held it before him by the hair. The very realistic skin hung loose from the severed neck like a scarf.

‘No signs of external tampering that I can see. Whatever it was, it was internal. There are no antennae, no mechanisms for remote control. This model was supposed to be autonomous.’

Margaret laughed. ‘It was autonomous all right. Who made it?’

‘Well, there’s nothing left in the memory, as I said. But there is an identification label on the sole of the right foot. Tinman Robotics, very funny, We Keep Working.’

‘A subsidiary of Lacuna, plc.’ Margaret stood and walked to the window.

‘Exactly’

‘You have to try and speak with Callendar.’

‘Before we do that, shall we have a closer look at that boat? Lawn, ducks, do you want to fly the angel this time? You seem to have the steadier hand.’

Jeremy had to put the Specs on again. They showed him the view from the angel's camera as it flew down from the top of the tower towards the black river and the white ship. The damaged rotor made the angel vibrate and the image in his eyes danced and blurred. Simon said that the angel would be seen as a normal law-enforcement machine and ignored by anybody on the ship. At least so he hoped.

Lawn was getting used to the angel's motion and the image was steadier. The white ship was brilliantly lit, despite the hour. Yellow light poured from every porthole. The angel approached along the river towards the bow of the vessel, losing altitude as it flew closer. There was no sign of life anywhere on board. The point of view dropped so low that they could see through large windows into an opulent saloon, blazing with light, but quite empty. They flew past, looking back at the vessel to see a man on the top deck. He sat beside a small swimming pool which glowed too, with its own electric blue light. The man beckoned to them with both hands lifted high over his head.

'So much for passing unnoticed.'

'What should we do?'

'Go back, sweetie. Let us see what he wants. There's no immediate danger. We can see him, he can see only an angel.'

The man seemed tiny under a large white hat which concealed his face. He was sitting in a kind of wheelchair. As the angel flew closer he held his hat on with one hand against the wind from the rotors, with the other he was holding up something, a small parcel. The vibration in the image still made it difficult to see any detail. Lawn guided the angel between the two sails, which twisted in response to the draft from the machine.

'Do you think he wants us to take that thing he's holding?'

'Looks that way.'

'Can you get close enough without hitting anything?'

'Who is he?'

'Can't see. Just get that package.'

They were so close now that the wind tore at the man who grabbed his hat and bowed his head so that his face was completely hidden. Deck chairs beside the pool were blown over, and a brightly coloured cushion vanished over the side into the river. Jeremy could see the mechanical arm of the angel stretching out below him towards the parcel the man held over his head. Everything was blurred, but with a sudden lunge the arm snatched the package out of his hand

and then they lurched away. The angel steadied again just a few metres from the side of the ship. The man in the white suit lifted his hat to them and his chair spun about and he vanished through a door. The ship went dark; all the lights were extinguished at the same instant. For a moment they could see nothing, then the gain of the camera came up and Jeremy could see the black river again, and the white superstructure.

‘Who was that? Could you see?’

‘He had a big hat.’

‘We’ll watch the replay later. Bring it home. Don’t drop it.’

As they flew away he could see the wings of the ship turn to meet the wind. The driving snow showed the flow of air over the foils like a diagram in an aerodynamics textbook as the long, narrow hull pulled out slowly into the middle of the river and began to sail away.

The package was a book, a rather battered paper-backed book with a stained bright cover. Margaret turned it over in her hands, frowning at the title on the spine. Then she opened it, and read a little, and frowned some more. She turned a page, then another and another, riffling rapidly through them before dropping the book back on the table and walking away from it.

‘It means nothing to me. Worse than nothing. It’s not even nonsense. Was that Callendar himself? You would think he had more important things to do.’

‘I don’t believe it is intended for you or me.’

Jeremy did not move. There was something on his mind, but he did not know what it was, or if he wanted to know.

‘Jeremy?’

‘What?’

‘This must be for you.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Well?’

Margaret said: ‘I can’t wait to see what you make of that.’

‘Why?’

‘Just look at it. What’s the matter? Are you afraid of it?’

‘A little.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t remember.’

He picked up the book. It had been damaged by water and the edges of the paper were swollen and yellow, bursting open like a sore. It smelled of the salt sea.

The idea of the sea was part of what he did not seem to be able, or want, to think about. The paper cover was split and distorted, but there was a painting of a fist clutching a broken missile with behind it the sad face of a blond woman with long eyelashes, a torn red dress and an enormous automatic pistol. He turned it over, but the back page was blank – no blurb, no author photograph, no bar code. On the front cover his fingers could still feel despite the damage and wear the embossed metallic lettering of the title.



The book was called *The Demetrios Catastrophe* and the author's name was Sage Fillet. The first page read:

I was finished with it all, I had thought, and now they had found me. We taxied to a halt on the jungle airstrip. "Do you believe in destiny, Locke?" asked Rufus, appealingly. "Not yet." Then I saw her. "Now I do." "Don't get any ideas", snarled Rufus, dryly. "Virginia is your mission." At first she treated me with disdain, as if I were another of her father's many servants. Chapter Four. To sum up: a traitor (but who?) at the ranch had wanted us dead, but my wonderful skill as a pilot had left us alive, together, lost in the jungle. A princess with everything to live for and a man with nothing to lose. It gave us an advantage. "Are you going to sit here for ever, Mr. Locke, or shall we continue the journey for which you have been paid; to conduct me to my fiancee?" she sniffed. To hell with her. Shots rang out. Stealth. Cunning. Two men lay dead. Those who live by the sword. She clung to me. I felt her breath at my throat. "I had never imagined death before." Her voice shook. "Now you know how precious life is." I kissed her muddy brow. "You have been brave and resourceful, but I should not encourage your presumption." Was she laughing at me? Captured by the Count and imprisoned in the cellars of his country house, built in the style of Louis XXIII, I am helpless to communicate what I have learned, and her treachery has drained me of all hope. She stands in the doorway. Her lover behind her sneers. Her voice is cold. "Now you know the truth. But still I owe you my life. I have persuaded Raoul to give you a half hour's start." She seized the moment. Her lips brushed mine at the same instant as cold steel passed between us. It was now or never. Chapter Twenty-six. I was quicker. Raoul slumped against the wall. "So, you win," he coughed, bloodily, "Everything..." "Everything?" Her fingers tightly clutched my good hand. "I thought you were dead," she smiled through her tears. "Die, my darling, when I have so much to live for?"

The next page was the same – exactly the same, except for the page number – and it told the whole stupid story again. So did the next. There were 350 pages in all, numbered sequentially, but otherwise all identical.

Simon scanned a few pages into his system but it only confirmed that they all recounted the same drab, silly, shorthand narrative. Simon's net searched the catalogues of all known the libraries in the world without coming across a single reference to a writer named Fillet, or a book called *The Demetrios Catastrophe*. There were any number of books with characters called Virginia, Locke and Raoul, but nothing else corresponded.

'But there must be some meaning. Or why would he give it to us? It's like a kind of crude template, all you can remember of a really bad thriller. But you don't remember it?'

'No.'

'Or the meaning is not in the text, but in the book itself. It has been in the water.' He sniffed at the swollen pages. 'In sea water. Does that tell you anything?'

'No. No – I mean yes it does, something, it does tell me something, but I don't know what. Do you think it's something from my past?'

'Probably. But which past? I don't believe this is sixty years old. It is to look at but only superficially. And it's not a real book. Suppose whoever took you wanted to keep you amused; they made books for you but without knowing what a book really was. Did you read this kind of thing, I mean books like this one, like this one wants to be, when you were, when... before?'

'Sometimes. I never read much at all except for business. But listen, in all this there is one connection that I know of and that's with this Lacuna Corporation, that ship, and the house in Highgate. It's been good of you to help me but I'm not going to stay here and wait for whatever the next thing is to happen. I'm going back to Highgate. Margaret, will you come with me? There are people there who owe me some answers.'

'It's four in the morning. When it's light we will all go.'

'You don't have to do this, Simon, any of you.'

'O no. I think we do. This does not concern just you. We can go when it's light. I don't plan to lose sight of you. But we mere humans need our sleep. Lawn! Why aren't you in bed?'

'Be serious. I was thinking about that book. Does it mean something that it's a first-person narrative? I only ask because that's what we're doing in school-room. First-person, third-person. What's second?'

'That would be you.'

'You mean as in "you were finished with it all, you had thought."?' "Her lips brushed yours"?'

'Exactly.'

'Doesn't make much sense. But neither does third-person. I always want to ask, how does he know, the guy that's telling the story? The one who knows everything. How does he know "his whole life flashed before his eyes" or "he had never loved anybody so much"? Who's telling the story and how do they know?'

Jeremy thought it a good question, though he was unaware it had anything to do with him.

They left him alone. He took the long sofa that Sky had slept on and pushed it over next to the window, and sat looking out at the empty river. He thought of his wife and all the lost life that lay behind him. Everyone's past is lost and gone, but for him the connections had been broken so irretrievably that he felt no more connected to the world than the inert robot that lay hideously dismembered on the table behind him. The thousands of ancient computers in the tower below him made a sound that filled the silence as soon as he listened to it: a soft song, the even breathing of electronics. Everything real is natural. That is what he was thinking when Sky came back.

Her bare feet made no sound, so that when her shadow passed across him he looked up and she was standing over him, stepping out of her clothes as if she had only just noticed them.

‘O NO, SKY, I REALLY DON’T THINK SO.’

‘So. It’s fine. It’s good. Bright.’

She knelt before him, so close that he could feel the warmth of her body, and her breath. She took his hand and kissed the palm, and he began to feel a set of sensations that I am at rather a loss to describe.

‘No please, I’m not, not, you know.’

‘Not yourself. Nor am I. You heard Boole.’

‘But it could be dangerous. I’m... my body is full of those little machines.’

‘They don’t harm you.’

‘But I don’t know what they are.’

‘No harm.’

‘But it could be dangerous.’

‘This? This has always been dangerous. But we’ll live.’

‘It feels wrong.’

‘Does it? Does this?’

‘No.’

‘Or this?’

‘No no.’

‘Or do you mean you don’t want me?’

‘No.’

‘Take this off. Please, it’s actually really important.’

‘I don’t even understand how it comes off, these fasteners.’

‘Like this. Let me.’

‘That’s clever.’

‘Now do you think this is bad?’

‘No.’

‘Bright?’

‘Bright. Yes. Good word.’

‘Isn’t it better not to be afraid?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, yes. Too bright.

This is interesting.’

‘Interesting? What do you mean, interesting?’

‘That’s not me. Do you like it?’

Very much.

Do you have sex?

Of course.’

‘Sky?’

‘What’s it like?’

Very like this.

But don’t let me distract you.’

‘Sky? Sky!’

‘I’m here. Don’t stop.’

‘What are you saying? You’re talking... to yourself.’

‘Not myself. Don’t stop. She is talking to me. Jeremy, there’s someone you should meet.’

‘Who? Where? Now?’

‘Here. Right here. But please, please don’t stop. She’s here with me, but when you do this, this, yes, and that, it’s too too; then I, it’s like I go away a little and I can hear her better. She’s here then and you hear her too. Or are you a she?’

Yes I think you can say that.’

‘She *who*? Who is she?’

‘My friend. Our friend. Trust us. O please. Don’t make me talk now. Just, just, O bright!’

Yes indeed.’

‘Sky.’

‘...’

‘Sky!’

‘It’s all right, we’re here. It’s so bright, you know, to be together. And three of us! You’re inside me and she’s inside me. Don’t go!’

‘She’s *inside* you?’

‘In my head. Please stay!’

In the distant ceiling the fluorescent tubes that should have illuminated the dim lives of thousands of obedient workers were dark and coated with dust. The only light came from the glowing screens that were scattered round the room. They showed things that meant nothing to him: lines of code, abstract animations, the swirling, antic images called up by the Ents in their silicon playpen. Nothing that would help.

‘Sky, who is this that you say is inside your head?’

'O she is there, really. I don't know her name yet.'

'Is she there now?'

'Yes, but I can't hear her very well. I am too loud myself. She is not strong yet. It was better before. When we were doing that I was not so loud. I think she is getting stronger, though.'

'And how long do you feel she has been there?'

'Since Ron, Rupert – Robert held me out the window. Since perigee.'

'You know what perigee means?'

'Closest approach to the earth, I know, she told me.'

'The closest approach of what?'

'Of her. Her people. She is a traveller, like you.'

'What do you mean, like me? And why is she in your head?'

'Don't push me.'

'No, Sky! Wake up! Why is she in your head.'

'It's better when I'm sleepy. She is stronger. I can hear her more. When I am almost asleep I can hear her too well. And when we do that, that's bright, and she's strong.'

'You're not imagining this, are you? She's really there?'

'O yes!

Yes.'

'And you're not afraid.'

'Everything real is natural.'

'Some real things are dangerous.'

'She's not dangerous, she's nice. She likes you too.'

'And can you talk to her?'

'Yes. But then it's hard to hear the answers. Hold me. Like this.'

She turned her back to him and pressed into the curve of his body. He drew his knees up and she folded with him. His crossed arms were wrapped around her and he could see the roots of her short dark hair rising up from her scalp like grass in sand. His breath raised a curl like a flag over her ear, and lowered it again.

'Like this?'

'Yes. Now I can hear her more. This feels safe.'

'Safe?'

'Nearly. You believe me, don't you?'

'About your friend? Why not? Sure. I'm ready to believe anything. Can you ask her something for me?'

'Mmmm.'

'Sky?'

'You can ask me yourself.'

'Is that... who are you?'

'That is a difficult question.'

'Sky!'

'Ssh!'

Sky is helping me.

*You want to know if my being here
is anything to do with your being here,*

I imagine.

And so, yes it does.'

'Where are you?'

*Most of the simple questions
you have for me will have hard answers.'*

'I don't have any simple questions.'

'Hey, she's a friend, love.'

To deal with the easy part,

*I really live on a spacecraft which is travelling through your
system as we speak. But who you are talking to is not a whole person.*

*Part of my, say – my self, or consciousness, has been
transferred into Sky's mind. Am I going too fast for you?'*

'Yes, of course. How? And why? And how can... what is... why should...? She has two voices. I mean you do.'

*'How? I cannot explain it to you, but you were there when
the transmission was made. We used the robot to help because we could
control it directly, though only just. Why is the very difficult part.'*

'And now you are in her mind?'

Sky seemed to be asleep as she spoke.

*I am afraid my sense of identity is probably nearly as troubled as yours is right
now. This is all new to me too. I am a kind of analogue of someone.*

*It is a very odd feeling. This is something I have never done before,
nor will ever do again. My self – my real self, my original self
is back on the spacecraft, moving on, away from here.*

*We will never be joined again. I can stay here only a while and then
I will start to fade away. I have had some training to help me
accept this, but there was very little time.'*

'And you are what, controlling Sky?'

*'O no. I would never do that.
That would be wrong. We can only communicate.
She lets me speak to you directly because it is easier.
But in the most literal sense I have no mind of my own.'*

'Why should I believe this?'

'Because we can help each other.'

'Where do you come from?'

*'From the ship. I was born there. Generations of my family were.
We are space travellers. It is rather unusual.'*

'But where do you come from, I mean originally?'

*'O, very far away. We come originally from a planet
orbiting a star that became detached
from its galaxy a long time ago and is drifting
in intergalactic space. That is why some of our people became
space travellers. Most species don't bother.'*

'Don't bother? They don't bother?'

*'Why would they?
Space travel is enormously slow and difficult, but information can
be exchanged easily over interstellar distances,
so most people have no good reason to drag themselves about.
Some do, of course, out of curiosity or for adventure or escape
or for all kinds of reasons. Over very long distances
bandwidth falls off, so my people more or less had to travel.
We are very good at it.'*

'Bandwidth?'

*'You, or rather we, can communicate instantaneously,
but over shorter distances you can send more data.'*

'How does that work?'

'You want me to explain?'

'No, never mind.'

Sky – or whoever she was now – stirred in his arms.

*'I want to talk to her a moment.
Hello Sky. How are you?
Can you hear me?
Talk to me.'*

Yes, I can hear you well.

Their two voices were quite different though they came from the same mouth. Sky's was the near-mumbling of someone on the edge of sleep. The other was sharp and well-modulated but distant, like a stranger on the telephone from another continent.

'What do you look like?

O, much like you.

*I'm bilaterally symmetrical, upright,
downy, warm-blooded. Four limbs and a tail.*

Hands much like yours. Eyes, ears, mouth, nostril—you have two—

And no tail.

No. I'll never get used to that.

You don't know what you're missing.

What else? I'm descended from predator species, most sentients are.

You're not answering my question.

Do you mean,

how would you feel if you saw me? Astonished, I'm sure.

But you've seen the variety of shapes life can take just on this one planet.

I'm a living creature, and although I am no longer young

I like to think that my appearance makes sense.

I'm sure you're beautiful. Are you married?

We are not monogamous.'

Jeremy interrupted. 'Does this mean that we have been visited before, that all those UFO stories are true?'

No.

If you mean do some of us from time to time land

in remote places and abduct people who

are already confused to perform sexual experiments on them?

Why would we? No, your species has yet to discover

the medium of interstellar communication. You are still prisoners

of

of

of the speed of light.

I'm sorry, I don't know how long I can continue.

We must stop soon. I've had no practice

at this.'

'But you could have communicated with us somehow.'

'There is almost universal agreement

that primitive cultures

*should be left
alone.*

I must rest now.

It is very

difficult.

This is all very strange.'

'But what does your being here have to with me?'

'Hello?'

Noise.'

Against his chest, Sky's breathing had changed. Her own voice was sharper and clearer.

'Please come back! I can't hear. I'm sorry, I'm too awake.'

'Is she still there?'

'O yes.'

Noise.

She's still there. But now I am too loud.'

Her eyes were clear and wide. He could see that there was no chance of soothing her back into the half-waking state that had let the other voice come through. She said she was sorry, but he took her face in his hands and kissed her. Somewhere behind her dark eyes was a promise of answers to the mysteries that not merely puzzled and burdened him, but that had come to pretty much define him – what was left of him. He thought that if he could arrive at even the vaguest understanding of why and how he had come to be where he was then the simple facts of his life, however crushing and terrible, would matter less, or not at all. He was hardly the first to feel this way, but few people can have felt the weight of epistemological enquiry as quite such a personal burden.

He had lost all capacity for surprise or disbelief, and this latest mystery troubled him less than any of the others only because it seemed to be working on his side, but he could not understand how Sky could absorb so much strangeness with such untroubled joy.

He held her against him as the sky lightened slowly and she talked to him about Agar, about the teaching that all real things were natural and part of the 'arrow of life', as they called it. That the new city of white bubbles at the base of the tower was, like the half-ruined old city to the west, just one more example of the evolution of matter. That buildings and machines struggled for existence and resources just as animals and plants did, in the world that people ordinarily

called 'natural' – as ideas and theories and fashions did in the environment of a community of minds, as the Ents fought and lived with each other in their silicon junkyard. The founder of Agar was unknown, and the teaching discouraged enquiry. Followers used the same name for the founder and the thought. There were no fees, no conditions, no laws or rituals or ceremonies for the followers of Agar. People held meetings and discussed the ideas that could be found for free anywhere. There was no set text for the teaching; every time you accessed any of the many comms addresses for the movement you were likely to find something different. You could leave questions but you would not necessarily get a direct answer or like the answers you got.

She told him that the arrow of life came out of the inherent power of the natural world to grow patterns on the substrate of chaos. The only morality that was taught was that entropy was the enemy of all evolution, whether of organisms or ideas or simply of matter itself. The meaning of life was the defeat of entropy. It was as simple as that. The arrow of life was opposed to the arrow of time, that wore away stone, that let a vase shatter into fragments but would not let the same fragments ever unshatter into a vase. But the arrow of life, given enough time, could make vases and viruses and computers and cows and people and poems and economic theories and hats and robots and flowers and parliaments and music. Given enough time. And people could choose which side they were on: entropy or life. It was very simple. If you were entropic it was just because you had not understood. She told him all this in a language that was not her own but something memorised, the rhythm and vocabulary of the phrases from something written and learned in the sing-song cadences of belief. It calmed him, as if he were in kindergarten.

Outside, the sky was a bright, dead white. She helped him dress, showing again how the fasteners worked. In fact they worked almost automatically if approached with enough confidence, but they made him feel like a child again, fumbling with zips and laces. He liked her helping him. She stood there relaxed and naked, folding him into his clothes.

'So this Agar stops you being afraid.'

'Often. And now she does, too. I have to find out her name.'

'She is still there?'

'O, yes. I don't think she can leave.'

Simon was preparing breakfast. The smell of coffee was the smell of normality, and Jeremy wished there was some way to turn off the powers that fed him so

that he could be hungry or even tired again. Boole was lying on the floor, but she looked up as he came in with Sky and greeted them in her level voice.

‘Hello Jeremy, love. Hello, Sky, is that you?’

‘Mostly, Boole darling.’ She went over to the dog and sat on the floor at arm’s length from her. Boole was wary, but the hostility of the previous night was gone. Sky stretched out a hand and held it in the air in front of the dog, and waited. Boole leaned forward and sniffed at her hand, then she dragged herself forward a little with her front paws until she could lick Sky’s outstretched fingers before she spoke.

‘Where is the intruder?’

‘She is here. She is sleeping, Boole, she is not an intruder, she’s a friend.’

Margaret was sitting silently at a table wearing the expression of one who likes to wake up slowly. Lawn had her hands dancing in the air in front of her Specs, but she snatched them off when they came in and ran to Jeremy and took his arm, pulling him over to the table and the large flat screen that lay there next to the sea-stained book.

‘I want to show you this.’

‘She’s been awake since before dawn, working with the enhancer.’ Simon stood behind Lawn with his big hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

I HAVE A LOT OF DATA FOR YOU. The voice of the net came from nowhere in particular.

‘Wait. Look at this.’

The image on the screen was the view through the eyes of the angel as it had flown over the ship the night before, showing the seated figure clutching the broad white hat to his head as the rotors blew everything around him. Lawn waved her fingers and the image advanced frame by frame, the angel moved away from the ship, and at the last moment the man lifted his hat and bowed slightly, his face a white blur. She made the image zoom in on the face but the magnification drained all the meaning out of the image. Other smaller images appeared around it, little frames with the white hat with fragments of chin and mouth below it. Lawn’s hands flew over their invisible cat’s cradle and the images were changed and enhanced; the hat disappeared and the hairline from the blurred full face was sketched in; the faces merged and twisted as she built a composite out of them.

Simon was looking doubtful. ‘There’s a lot of conjecture in all this, cookie. Those pixels contain very little data to enhance.’

She ignored him. There was now a picture on the table of a small, frail, elderly man. What she had produced was like a faded, fifth-generation photocopy of the police photofit pictures of Jeremy's own day. He had never understood how the technique could be any use in catching criminals; he could barely recognise even celebrities in the street from their photographs, but there were people who would say with confidence they had recognised a face seen just once on a stranger in a pub ten years before. Perhaps some people looked more carefully at faces than he did. Lawn looked up at him expectantly. Both Margaret's hands were wrapped round her coffee cup as if she were cold, though the heat from the electronics in the tower kept the room warm enough. Lawn was jiggling with impatience. 'Don't you think?'

Simon shook her lightly by the shoulders. 'If you drop hints it doesn't count.'

Jeremy could see nothing. Margaret stood up, abrupt and dismissive, as of a child's game that has grown tedious. 'You don't see it? I'm not sure I do either, or whether she's put it there herself, but she thinks that looks like you, only older.'

'No, I don't see it not at all. And why should he look like me? Look, don't you think I have enough identity problems as it is? And now I'm not the only one. Who has identity issues. They've finally shown up.'

'Who?'

'The people who did this to me. They've sent someone; I've just been talking to her.'

'Where?'

'Here.' Sky spoke from the floor, where she was holding the old dog's head in her lap. 'She's in me. I can't hear her at the moment, but she's still there.'

'You see, that's what all the business with Rex was about. It was a kind of transmission.'

'Rodney.'

'Robert. They used him to hold her while they transmitted this, this person into her mind. I think. At perigee. And when Sky is sleepy or, or... or distracted, then she can talk to me.'

The story, spoken aloud, sounded so much less credible. Only Sky's calm presence stopped him denying everything. Simon drew a long, slow breath, then seemed to come to a decision.

'And?'

'I don't know yet. I was asking her about herself. She comes from a distant star, beyond the rim of the galaxy, and she's here for me.'

'You're happy with this. Both of you?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Sky?'

'O yes. She knows words I don't know. I'm not bats. She's really there. She's too nice. See, even Boole likes her.'

THERE IS A LOT YOU SHOULD KNOW.

'Go ahead, net.'

THE THREAD ON THAT SIGHTING IS ALL LIT UP. THOUSANDS OF COMMENTS. IT IS CONFIRMED THAT THE TRAJECTORY IS NON-BALLISTIC AND THE SUBJECT IS HEADED ROUGHLY FOR THE SUN. THE REST IS CONJECTURE. DO YOU WANT DETAILS?

'Not yet. But everyone agrees? It is an artefact, under power?'

THAT IS ALL THEY AGREE ON. EFFORTS ARE BEING MADE TO TRACK THE OBJECT BUT RESOURCES ARE LIMITED. THE ADAPTIVE ARRAY IN CHILE OFFERS THE BEST RESOLUTION BUT ITS MANAGEMENT SAYS QUOTE THIS INSTRUMENT IS NOT FOR CHASING DOWN FLYING SAUCERS END QUOTE. MANY REPORTS OF CONTACT, LIGHTS IN THE SKY, INCLUDING HERE. DO YOU WANT DETAILS?

'Including here?'

YES. AS OF THREE SECONDS AGO THIS BUILDING HAD MORE THAN 4,000 LINKS FROM PAGES REFERENCING UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS, LIGHTS, FORCES UNKNOWN, ENTITIES UNDEFINED, MOSTLY PUT UP IN THE LAST FEW HOURS. THAT IS NOW MORE THAN 6,000 AND GROWING. SHALL I POST A REPORT THAT ONE OF YOU IS POSSESSED BY ALIENS? IS POSSESSED THE CORRECT TERM? PEOPLE WOULD BE INTERESTED. I HAVE ABOUT 700 CALLS QUEUED.

'We're not in. Not to anyone.'

'I want to go back to Highgate, Simon.'

'I think we should wait. I want to know more about your new friend first, although with due respect I must tell you I have my doubts. Remember, that the people at Lacuna think they know who you are. I've had some thoughts about that.'

'Possession. Now we are calmly sitting here talking about possession. I'm sorry, but this must be nonsense. We are not in the dark ages.' Margaret glared at Sky.

'I am not possessed. She is a friend.'

'Are you sure?'

I HAVE 9,762 CALLS QUEUED. SOME ARE FLAGGED AS FRIENDS. YOU ALSO HAVE VISITORS

'Who?'

IT IS HARD TO SAY. PERHAPS IF YOU LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW. QUEUING SUBSYSTEM FULL: REQUISITION MORE MEMORY?

Far below, people were coming to the tower through the drifting snow. The roads were already blocked with vehicles so everybody was now on foot. They were coming in their hundreds, filling the empty spaces around the tower, all looking up. From the top of the tower Jeremy could hear no sound; he could see the only the hundreds of faces turned up, oblivious to the falling snow. The round white faces accumulating round the base of the tower looked like snow themselves, or polystyrene packing balls, or flowers. They looked like a mound of skulls at the back of a cave.

JEREMY LOOKED DOWN AT THE GATHERING CROWDS with little more than irritation. Whatever was happening it could only keep Sky alert, and he needed to talk to her friend, or guest.

‘What do you think they want?’

‘I doubt if they know.’ Margaret still looked cold. Her hands were thrust deep into her pockets. ‘They want something to happen. Anything will do. How is your security here?’

‘There is none to speak of. What would I do with security?’ Simon had Specs on and his hands were kneading the air.

‘There were those signs in the elevator: about if you should not be here, etcetera.’

‘That’s about it. They’re just signs. We’ll know if someone enters the building, though, and I’ve brought the lifts to the top and cut the power. At least they will have to walk up. It’s a long way.’

The crowds at the base of the tower were swirling about like the driven snow. In the distance, an alarm began to sound, a high-pitched squealing like a panicked oven timer. Then others joined in: a whole jungle chorus of beeps and bells.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Fire, I think, mostly. They have decided to burn us down.’

‘Will the systems cope?’

For reply, Simon switched the views from cameras downstairs onto the screens around the room. He could see there the same kind of people he had seen in the market the previous day. Just people, people who if you could ignore their outlandish clothes looked perfectly ordinary except that they had been swept up in an excitement which released them from the duty of being themselves and had decided that on the whole the smart thing to do was build a great fire in the middle of the lobby. There was no sound with the images, so their excited, anonymous faces opened and closed in silent exaltation as they dragged

furniture and rubbish from the marketplace outside into the middle of the lobby until the flames were leaping up as far as the ceiling. Sprinklers played forlornly down. The glass external walls were shattered one by one, and the snow came in with the wind that stirred up the fire. Those that remained outside began to fall to their knees or lie on the ground in attitudes of abject surrender. Perhaps they thought – if that is not too strong a word – that setting fire to the tower where the light had been seen to strike would repel the alien. Or perhaps they thought that an enormous sacrifice would appease it. Whatever they thought, they weren't thinking much. A group came through the broken walls carrying neatly printed placards which they began to wield as weapons and as rakes to tear at the fire. The placards read: WELCOME, and WE HAVE MET BEFORE, and UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS WE ARE YOU'RE FRIENDS. They struggled to extinguish it, but entropy was on the side of the bonfire.

Simon was looking anxious for the first time since Jeremy had met him. Lawn looked almost afraid, waiting for her father to fix things.

'What about the Ents?'

'I'm not so worried about the Ents at this moment exactly. I want to stage a diversion. I need you to fly the angel again, poppin. I'm going to glue a holographic projector to it. Can you find me something suitable in the Soup? Something that will do for a super monster whizz wow O lordy look at that sort of alien thingy.'

'I have just the thing.'

They could smell smoke now, all the way from the ground floor. Boole began to bark. Simon went up the stairs to where the angel was hidden under the pyramid roof of the tower, while the child dragged another table of equipment towards the window.

'There is a fire. Wake up and leave the building. This is an emergency.'

'We know, Boole dear, we know.'

'What about your friend?'

'I can't hear her. But she is there.'

Margaret was watching the monitors, her face unreadable. Jeremy felt that if there was danger it ought to be his job to help or reassure her, but she showed nothing: no fear, not even curiosity. As if this festival of violence were all too familiar.

'Why are they doing this? Do you understand?'

She looked at him and shrugged, then turned back to the monitors. 'It's what people do, isn't it, in the face of the unknown: they either worship or destroy. I must say the destroyers here seem to have the upper hand.'

'But they don't know anything. Someone saw some lights. And she, the, Sky's friend, she said she came to help us. The messages I saw said we were in danger, our system was in danger.'

'Ours or yours?'

'I'm not sure yet. But there's no threat from her. Not to them. They don't even know she's here.'

'Of course there is a threat. They are afraid for the same reason that your friend Simon there is exultant. Because this changes everything. All the rules. Nothing anyone has ever thought up to now is adequate to this simple fact. It's an old dream, but now that it has come true few people really want to see it through. In your day, I mean your first... first time around, didn't people long for security, dream of it?'

'Yes, I suppose they did.'

'Work and struggle for it. All their lives waiting for the moment when they could finally say: there it is, now the world can stop, now nothing can happen to me. Think how much more these people here long for it than you did. Our parents' generation mostly simply vanished, not as suddenly as you did, but suddenly enough; they were just swept away with all the institutions and habits and myths that they lived by, and their children have dreamed of nothing but getting them back. The world may be half empty but it has been stable now for decades, post-industrial, post-economic even. The last thing most people want is change.'

'And you?'

'I've never been afraid before this. I told you: Lacuna always took care of me. Then you appeared, and all my stability was gone in one night. I'm happy to share that loss.'

'Are you afraid now?'

'O yes, very.'

The angel appeared outside the window, moving away from the tower. Lawn was intent behind her Specs, her hands playing their invisible saxophone. The machine flew out over the plaza, and then there appeared in the air, between them and the angel, something enormous and coloured and in constant movement, a writhing *thing* of brilliant points of light like a coral reef that swallowed

and extruded itself in a continual dance. It grew until it was five stories tall and stood out against the grey sky like blood on a sheet. Jeremy realised that he was looking at something like the things he had seen in the Soup, magnified and projected onto the air. The snow fell straight through it. The apparition moved slowly away from the tower. On the screens they saw the crowd in the lobby begin to break up. People streamed out through the shattered windows. Some held placards up to the sky which read: I KNEW YOU WOULD BE BACK TAKE ME WITH YOU AGAIN, and SAVE US – WE ARE DESREIVING, and WE KNOW!!! THE PYRAMIDS R THE HARMONIC RAITO OF THE GODS!!! and even just YES!! People seemed to be able to rewrite their placards as they went along. The whirling image in the sky was drawing some of the crowd its way, while the rest fled in the opposite direction. But some found themselves torn between fear and adoration and stood fixed, wondering where their salvation lay. Simon came back carrying the wide-mouthed gun Jeremy had used in the market.

‘Now we have to go. We should take the stairs. The trouble is Lawn can’t fly the angel and walk downstairs at the same time.’

‘I will carry her.’ The child weighed nothing in Jeremy’s hands. He lifted her onto his shoulders, and picked up the salt-stained book from the table and put it into his pocket.

‘Are we going for a walk. I’m hungry. There is a fire somewhere. You must notify the competent authorities and leave the building in an orderly fashion, without panic or shoving.’

‘We know, Boole. Yes, we are going for a walk.’

The stairs seemed to go on for ever. They had clearly not been used or cleaned for years, and the corners were piled with rubbish that had been ejected from the abandoned offices to make way for the computers that ran the Soup. As they climbed down, Jeremy told them as best he could what Sky’s visitor had said, though in his voice it sounded thin and absurd. Lawn on her high perch chattered away, describing what she could see from the angel’s cameras.

‘Most people are following me but not everyone. Some of the people with the signs are fighting I don’t know who. There is still a fire at the bottom of the tower. And some people. What will we do when we get to the bottom? Now here is a real problem. The angel is running short of power. I’m looking for a ground station but the angel is getting questions from the ground, about its identity and all that.’

‘When it runs out make sure it drops in the river.’ Simon was breathing hard. Jeremy remembered that the others did not have his effortless mechanical strength: Margaret was limping; Sky was carrying Boole but her face was drawn and pale. He took Boole from her and carried on down with the dog under one arm and the child on his shoulders; they were no burden at all because he was still tireless. The smell of smoke was stronger now, although the numbers on the wall told them they still had twenty floors to go.

On the fifth floor the smell of smoke was almost overpowering, but the stairwell was still deserted. Lawn banged the top of his head. ‘Power’s all gone. It’s in the river. Too bad. You can put me down if you like.’



By the time they got to the basement, Margaret was limping badly, and Simon’s face was grey and his breathing ragged. They went through the empty space without meeting anyone, came up behind the market and from there out into the plaza, where the noise of the fire and the crowd, thrown into confusion by the vanishing apparition, struck them forcefully after the silence of the stairwell. The flames had taken hold of the tower, and the interior of all the lower floors could be seen burning brightly through the windows. Nobody seemed to have noticed them yet, but unfortunately the crowd that had been following the image from the angel had swarmed back toward the tower when the angel failed, and was now between them and the road. The river was at their backs, a freezing wind blowing off the water to feed the fire. It was snowing hard. The white ship with its glass sails was gone.

‘Remember me, strong man?’

It was the Feral from the market, a huge man in a dirty floor-length coat, carrying a gun. Not a fat-barrelled non-lethal weapon like Simon’s, but an old-fashioned firearm, a short-barrelled shotgun with the wooden stock sawn away to a pistol grip.

‘Hello. Yes, hello. We, we met in the market, did we not?’ Jeremy sounded idiotic even to himself.

‘We did. And when they told me there were aliens in the tower I thought of you. You’re not a human, are you, man? Not strong like that. You’re in disguise. Where do you come from, Mars?’

Jeremy put Boole down. ‘Not Mars, no. Actually I’m afraid I’m not an alien at all.’

‘No?’

‘That’s right.’

‘I know what you are.’ He spoke slowly, as if words of any kind were unfamiliar to him. ‘I was going back to my people when I met some folk coming here to greet the Martians and they told me the story. They said hundreds of years ago you came and built the pyramids in Egypt and Babylon. They say you have all the lost knowledge that was destroyed with Atlantis in the flood. But then people betrayed the faith and so we have lived like fools ever since. Without the harmony of the universe. Is this true?’

‘No, not exactly, no. I mean no, no. No, not at all. And actually the pyramids are much older than just hundreds of years, I think you’ll find. But we really have to go. I’m not what you think.’

Behind them, a window in the tower exploded, sending down a shower of glass fragments.

‘But we know that this world is in error. They call us Ferals but we are true men. We live in harmony with natural things, like the hunters in the forest who were our fathers. We have searched for the harmony. We have kept the faith. I did not know before what we were waiting for but now I have seen.’

‘You live here? In harmony with nature?’ Jeremy looked around the concrete plaza with its useless glass and marble offices glowing in the firelight. The crowd swirled in circles like the snow. But the Feral just stood there indifferent to the mob, the cold and the burning tower.

‘We really don’t have time for this, Jeremy. Excuse us, sir—’

‘Not here, of course. In the forest. But it is colder than Africa, and some things we need to survive. Clothes and weapons and tools. So we come to the market. I have a boat. I was going back to our people when I heard about the Martians. I knew it was you. I came to find you. But people are stupid. They are all fighting out there. We want to know your knowledge.’

‘What is your name?’

‘We don’t have names. You can call me what you like.’

‘Dad, the Soup is going to be burned up.’

‘I know, sweetheart. But just now we’re having a different adventure.’

‘I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I have no knowledge. We just have to get away from here.’

‘I apologise for the welcome we have given you. I will take you to my people; they will be faithful.’

'Can you help us get out of here?'
'Why don't you call your ship?'
'What ship?'
'Your starship.'
'There isn't one.'
'I want to help you.'
'He said he had a boat, Dad.'
'A boat. O no. Not another boat. What kind of boat?'



It was even colder on the water. The boat was an old cabin cruiser of yellowed fibreglass with a ragged diesel that pushed them out into the middle of the empty dock. The fire in the tower was rising floor by floor. The burning plastics from the ancient computer casings and circuit boards gave off thick clouds of oily grey smoke that poured from the shattered windows. The crowd stood and looked up at what it had done. A few still held disconsolate placards: SAVE US WITH YOUR WISDOM, and READY TO JOIN THE INTERSTELLAR FEDERATION NOW. Nobody paid any attention to the little party in the leaking boat as it moved away from the bank.

Simon lay stretched out on a narrow seat in the wheelhouse, where the cracked green perspex offered some shelter from the wind. He was still breathing hard. Lawn held his hand; she was crying silently and pretending not to. Sky held Boole; Margaret sat opposite them calmly as if on a bus, with her hands folded in her lap. The Feral steered. Jeremy stood in the stern watching the tower burn. It had stopped snowing, and the sky seemed brighter against the black smoke. There was water under his feet, getting deeper.

'Is this boat sinking?'

Well, yes it was, of course it was. The scum-covered water in the bilges was rising fast. There was a bucket in the cabin, of yellow plastic which had faded to near transparency. Jeremy grabbed it and began to bail furiously. When he had made some progress against the leak he stopped and looked about. They were in the middle of the river. The tide was running out and they were moving eastward rapidly. Beyond a bend in the river he could see again the white wings of Max Callendar's graceful ship, moored downriver ahead of them.

'Where are you taking us? I need to go to Highgate. North London.'

'In a boat? I'll take you to my people. Keep bailing.'

The water had already covered his feet again. He took the bucket and dragged it through the water with such strength and urgency that it disintegrated in his hands. There was nothing else that would do the job. The water began to rise rapidly.

‘In the natural world these problems do not exist. That is why the whole of the thing you call civilisation is an error.’

They were passing through a half-built housing estate of long blocks of brick flats with windows on the river for the office workers to gaze through when they got home in the evenings. The Feral turned the boat into the shore, running hard towards the northern bank.

‘There is shelter over there; a Watcher dorm. Your soft friends look like they need to get out of the cold. I thought you would have more powers. You have come from the stars, after all.’

‘No, I have not, for God’s sake!’

Sky stood and put her hand on the man’s arm. ‘Thanks for your help. Later perhaps you can speak with someone from the stars. Can we get ashore?’

‘Wait.’

The water was rising fast. They clambered out of the cabin and huddled awkwardly on the foredeck of the boat in the cutting cold. When they struck the northern bank the river was almost up to the deck. There was a rusted iron ladder set into the wall, its rungs slippery with weed and mud, but Lawn ran up it swiftly. Sky lifted Boole on to the wall and then scrambled up after her. Jeremy had to help Margaret and Simon. He lifted his daughter over the bank as easily as if she had been a child. Simon was clumsy and seemed to have grown heavier; the destruction of his work had drawn some of the life out of him, and he looked for a moment as if he could be ready to lie down there on the mud and let it all go. But Sky called down to him: ‘Come along. Don’t you want to meet my friend?’, and Jeremy gripped his wrist and lifted him effortlessly onto dry land. The Feral came last; he seemed quite untroubled by the loss of his boat, which was soon just a pale stain under the dark water. Behind them the burning tower filled the sky, burning all the way up, with every floor filled with orange light. As one by one the windows shattered in the heat, fire spilled out of them, billowing like curtains in the wind.

Most of the houses on the estate were broken shells, but the Feral led them through the snow to a large apartment building in the centre of the wrecked project. They pushed through a door into a small lobby and suddenly it was

warm and dry again. The light was dim and there was nobody to be seen, but there were faint voices beyond the door: indistinct murmurs and inarticulate cries, of fear or longing or rage.

‘Come. We can find an empty room.’

Margaret was pressed against the wall. ‘O no. I don’t think I can bear this.’

‘There is nothing to fear, woman. It is early, most of them will be either sleeping or watching. They are certainly harmless.’ The Feral thrust open the door. It opened on to a long corridor with doors leading off on either side every few metres. There was a powerful odour in the air, of something like the sea, and something like too much humanity and another, chemical smell that caught at his throat.

‘What is that smell?’

‘Sweat. Semen. Amyl nitrite analogues. Watchers.’ Margaret was shaking.

‘What is this place?’

‘Open a door, any door. See for yourself.’

Jeremy opened the door nearest his right hand. The room was dim, lit mainly by the pilot lights of a bank of electronics against the wall. The chemicals in the air made his heart race. A man’s voice was coming from something like a large white plastic coffin against the wall. He was breathing hard and his speech came in rhythmic bursts: ‘O yes, my darling. O please yes. Do it for me. O that’s right. O that’s the way. I love it. So do you. Don’t you love it? Yes, you do. Take it slow. Take it all the way. It’s so good. It’s so good. Isn’t it good? Isn’t it now? Tell me you love it.’

The Feral stood in the doorway, aiming his shotgun at the white box.

‘That’s a Watcher, in there. That’s what your civilised world was always heading for. A waste of skin. I could blow his head off and it would be the first real thing to happen to him in years.’

Margaret was waiting out in the corridor. Jeremy looked at her silently and saw for the first time something like understanding in her eyes.

‘It is easy to forget. How much you don’t know.’

‘I feel odd, as if my mind were swollen. Could there be something wrong with those things, the machines inside me?’

‘That’s the nitrite analogues. Vasodilators. They are supposed to take you out of yourself. Watchers live their whole lives out of themselves.’

‘Virtual life.’

‘You’ve heard of it.’

‘Turn on, tune in, lie down – Simon mentioned it. I didn’t understand.’

‘That machine can give you a rough approximation of most sensations. Anything physical: sex, violence, gluttony, adventure, even romance – or parts of it – even death. There’s a lot missing, of course, most particularly I would have thought the knowledge that the experience is real, but that does not seem to trouble these people. Reality can be such a burden. So tell me: what do you think of the world, so far?’

‘It seems, I don’t know, a terrible place, mostly. How did things get like this?’

‘I would assume that somebody wanted it this way. Don’t you agree? Don’t you think we get what we deserve?’

The next room was empty. There were more of the white coffins in there but they were unoccupied, their lids open. The room was warm and dry, and they sat spread out on the floor leaning up against the wall. Through a single high window they could see the grey sky turned to yellow by the burning tower. Sky sat in front of Jeremy and leaned back in his arms. He saw Margaret looking at them but her disapproval seemed to him the least of his problems. Simon and Lawn had their Specs on and their hands knitted the air as they murmured to each other.

Boole walked over to the Feral and sniffed at his boots.

‘Well, old dog, you’re just what we need, aren’t you, to slow us down? What’s your name.’

‘My name is Boole. What is your name. Are you hungry?’

The man jumped to his feet and backed away, his eyes wide with fright, the shotgun barrels coming up. ‘This is an abomination.’

‘No. I am a good dog. Are you lost? I am hungry.’

‘This is a crime against nature. This is how we destroy ourselves. This is why we live in the woods like in the old times. You see what people have made of the world?’ He seemed to be pleading with Jeremy. ‘Aren’t you going to save us? Take us with you. My friends and me, we can come with you. This planet is finished.’

‘I can’t save you. I’m not who you think I am. What is your name, anyway?’

‘We have no names. We choose to live free of the chains of society. We have no names any more than the animals of the forest have names.’

‘My name is Boole.’

Against his breast, Sky's breathing had slowed and her hands under his became relaxed and loose, until he was not too surprised to hear her voice come soft and precise, as if from far away.

*Perhaps I am who you think he is.
But I don't know if I can save you either.'*

Simon snatched off his Specs and crawled over to them on his hands and knees, dragging his bulk like a big baby. He looked closely into her eyes but did not speak.

*'We do have a ship, even, but it cannot land.
We have expended huge resources in changing course to come to your system.
If everything has gone well the ship should be moving into an
orbit about your star. It will take us decades, generations,
to recover the lost momentum, if we ever leave here at all.
We are not magicians. The laws of physics are not at all flexible.'*

'But you've come.' Margaret spoke to the stranger as coolly as she spoke to Jeremy. 'To do what? To save us from ourselves?'

'You said, you told me before that the policy was to leave other cultures alone.'

'To wait for them to discover the medium for themselves.'

'What medium does she mean?'

'She said that there is a medium through which you can communicate instantly, have I got that right?'

*'Roughly. And it is better to wait for a simpler culture to discover
those who are more powerful; your own history shows that.
Understand, there is no sort of galactic law. People have just learned that it is
better never to interfere with evolution, never to close paths.
Not even when a species looks like destroying itself.'*

'You never help?'

No.

*Did nobody ever tell you not to care for birds that fall from their nests,
because it weakens the species? That's roughly the idea.'*

'But aren't you interfering now?'

*'Yes. Very much. But I'm afraid this is not
actually for your benefit, or only indirectly.
This is a question of our own survival.'*

'Whose?'

'Everyone's. The galaxy's.'

'The galaxy? Now there is a good cause.' Simon was looking better, was even ready to laugh again.

'But what is happening? What is all this about?'

*'We don't know, exactly, Jeremy.
But we hope you can help us.'*

'Help you? First, are you going to tell me now how you brought me here, and why?'

*'Brought you here?
Were you really brought here? From where?'*

'You know that! From the past. From sixty years ago. Out of my own life.'

*'Really! That is interesting, and rather troubling.
But we didn't do it. We had nothing at all to do with it.
And I wish I could tell you how it was done, or why. But I do not know.
This is important.'*

'Are you saying you didn't do this to me?'

'No. Or do I mean yes?'

'Then who did?'

'I can only guess.'

Boole walked over to Sky, her claws clicking on the bare floor. She licked her hand, and then said: 'Hello, love. What is your name?'

'C̣ñδ̣σ̣δ̣.'

Sky half woke, and laughed out loud.

'C̣ñδ̣σ̣δ̣, that's a pretty name.'

Simon had been watching her as though she were about to explode, and now he stared into her eyes as if he could actually see the alien presence behind them.

'You said people?'

'The term is not exact.'

*The galaxy is full of all kinds of life, of course. We call most of them by a word that best translates as "people". We call them after what in them is most like ourselves. When I say people I mean minds of organic origin.
There are other kinds of mind: Inorganic; post-organic.
Some terms do not translate.'*

'And how many people, I mean peoples, are there?'

*'We know of about eighty million planetary peoples,
in this galaxy and what you call the Clouds of Magellan,
and a few isolated ones like our home.*

*We assume that galaxies are everywhere pretty much the same, although so far
direct communication does not seem to be possible over intergalactic distances.*

*The bandwidth is effectively zero. But if there are, as there seem to be, about a
hundred billion galaxies, well, you can do the arithmetic for yourself.'*

'I still don't see why we should simply believe all this. The girl does not seem a very stable type. I know I have to accept a lot of strangeness now, in that I have no choice, but couldn't we keep it to a minimum?'

'Margaret—'

'For example I don't understand how you say you can occupy space in someone's mind. Is it like there is spare room in there?'

*'The capacity of a conscious mind does not have any well-defined limits,
though it is not exactly infinite there is, as you say, plenty of room.*

Can you read my mind?

Not exactly, my dear.

*I can share your sensations to some extent, but your thoughts and
memories are private. If you think, this is hard to find words for,
if you think loudly, so that you form words without quite speaking,
then I can hear you. I do know that my presence in your mind
is an unforgivable imposition. I am sorry. Believe me that this is important.*

You're welcome.'

The Feral had listened in silence, his face a mask of concentration. Now he leaned forward eagerly.

'Tell me. Why did you build the pyramids?'

'O but we did not.

*People did. This is a common illusion: that remarkable things from the past
were the work of outsiders or gods of some kind. You cannot recognise
in yourselves the power to do these things but it is there, and always has been.*

Although the pyramids as I understand it were not in fact terribly useful.'

'Why have you done this?'

It was not practical to come here physically. Our ship is moving too fast.

*Most of the time we fall through space, and it is as hard for us to
change direction as for a suicide to change his mind between the bridge and the
river. We can't just stop and let people off.'*

'No, I mean *why are you here?*'

*I'm sorry, I thought I had made that clear.
Because of you.'*

The room was not cold, but Sky's weight leaning on him was the only thing that seemed to be keeping Jeremy warm. She was like a sleeping child; he could have picked her up and carried her about without disturbing her, but every so often she laughed like someone laughing at a dream.

'Do you think we are safe here?'

'For the time being, probably.'

*'I am much stronger now.
She is a generous host, hostess? Which is correct?
I have been studying your language and culture for days
but you will have to forgive me if I make errors.
Now I need to talk to you, but more directly. This way I am too incomplete.
And my companions on the ship would like a more direct connection
with you too. Perhaps now we have come to exactly the right place.
I think we may be able to use one of those.'*

'One of what?'

'Those machines. What do you call them?'

Simon slapped at the leg of one of the white coffins.

'This? This is a Whole-Person Haptic Interface, popularly known as a Pornograph. You want to *use* it? What for?'

*'My companions? shipmates? They suggest it.
To talk to him more directly.
The machine will be much easier to manipulate than this dear woman's mind.
We need to get closer to you, Jeremy.
Remember, this business is also a mystery to us.'*

The inside of the machine was lined with a black material made up of innumerable hair-like fibres standing on end. When Jeremy touched it, it felt both yielding and active, a kind of tremulous velvet.

'You will have to undress. I can't think what clothes would do to one of these things. We have to look the other way a moment, cupcake.'

'I want to try it.'

'Well you'll have to wait a few years. And then you better hope you don't like it.'

Sky took Jeremy's clothes and folded them neatly. When he lay down in the black interior it seemed to move to accommodate him. After a few seconds he

could feel nothing at all. He might have been floating in space. Sky laughed at the expression on his face, kissed his forehead, then closed the lid on him. He had a moment's panic, but it was not dark. There was light before his eyes. A blue sky with clouds moving across it.

RECORDING EYE-D. THIRTY MINUTES INITIAL CREDIT. CALIBRATING. JUST RELAX AND ENJOY.

The neutral voice came from nowhere in particular. His view was now of a crowded but unspecific place, like an featureless roadway filled with people hurrying past him. And such a variety of people! People of every age, kind and condition went pouring past him. Each of them glanced at him for a moment, looked him straight in the eye before passing by. There were men and women, young and old, dressed in leather, in uniform, in gay summer dresses and complicated formal suits, some of them were in their underwear, or dressed for a fetish, with whips and restraints. Some looked as innocent as children, some depraved and exhausted. Every one gave him the same brief, appraising look and hurried on. He was conscious of his own eyes following some of the faces as they moved swiftly past. After the parade of people came animals: a German shepherd, a horse and flock of chickens. Even the poultry looked him in the eye.

PREFERENCES SAVED. THESE CAN BE REVISED AT WILL. PLEASE CLOSE YOUR EYES. THIS DELIGHT COMES TO YOU FROM HAPTICON™ – A DIVISION OF THE LACUNA CORPORATION, PLC. HOLDING YOU CLOSE.

HE WOKE. OR RATHER HE DID NOT KNOW if he was waking or simply opening his eyes again after the briefest interval. He was lying in a hospital bed. He could feel the crispness of freshly starched sheets against his naked skin, and there was a faint smell of disinfectant. There were curtains around the bed so he could see nothing more. He felt perfectly well. Then the curtains opened and a nurse came through, pulling them closed behind her. She was young and tall with long dark hair, and her white uniform was as starched and candid as the sheets. Her manner was brisk and efficient.

‘Well. Interesting. This will do. Now we can talk.’

‘I’m sorry, but who are you?’

‘O, but I am $\text{C}\tilde{\text{r}}\tilde{\text{d}}\text{s}\tilde{\text{o}}\tilde{\text{e}}$. I would like to show you how I really am, but we need you to be lucid and in any case I am restricted to what I can find in here. Is this machine recreational or therapeutic?’

‘Something of both, if I understand it.’

She sat beside him on the bed, and the short white uniform rode up a little on her thigh. She wore white stockings and a white suspender belt with tiny roses embroidered on the clasps.

‘Now. First of all, I’m afraid we have no idea why you were brought here from the past, nor how it was done. I have looked at most of the relevant files, now that we know who you used to be. Some kind of relativistic effect, presumably, although the possibility raises a number of problems. But we think we know who did it. For a long time we have had robotic probes in your system, monitoring your planet’s progress, because just because we do not interfere does not mean that we are not interested. Decades ago, they reported that energies were being used in the system that should not have been available to you yet, involving the medium for the interstellar transmission of information, which we call $\tilde{\text{s}}\tilde{\text{o}}\tilde{\text{e}}$, and which naturally has no translation in any of your languages.’

She laid the back of her hand against his forehead. The upper button of her uniform was loose, and he could see the pulse in the hollow of her throat.

‘I cannot explain the technicalities to you. There is a whole area of physics which you have yet to find, which is why you have never detected any other life in the galaxy. And yet this energy was being used here. This is impossible to conceal, by its very nature. But nobody in the known worlds would acknowledge that they were using it here.’

Her eyes were an intense blue, and her teeth gleamed wetly as she smiled at him, so close now that he could smell her perfume, her lemony skin.

‘We thought that the phenomenon might be related to the mission for which my ship was built and which my people have pursued for generations. I am still not certain that this is the case, but the watching probes ceased functioning just before I was sent here, which suggests that there is something less than perfectly friendly involved. Poor boy.’

One of her hands, warm and soft and dry, slid under the sheet and swiftly down his body like a burrowing kitten.

‘What mission?’

All the breath flew out of him as she gently took hold of his penis. She looked a little puzzled.

The curtains parted again and a small, very old man in a doctor’s gown looked at him with pale, sad eyes in a lined, oddly familiar face.

‘I’m afraid I have some very bad news about your tests, Mr Grey. Prepare for the worst.’

The nurse bent close and blew softly in his ear. She whispered: ‘This thing is more difficult to control than I expected. Let’s see what else we can find?’

PLEASE CLOSE YOUR EYES.

He did. And when he opened them he

was riding a galloping horse through a green and leafy wood. This is not something which is normally gone into suddenly and for a moment he was sure he was going to fall off. He clung helplessly to the saddle, then gathered up the reins, though he had little idea what to do with them. A bright sun shone down through the summer leaves of the trees all around. In front of him rode a woman with flying dark hair, in a long flowered skirt and a blue denim shirt. She turned and laughed as she spurred her horse on. She had a good lead on him, and for a time he lost sight of her among the trees, but then he rode into a clearing and saw her horse tied to a wooden rail

outside a ramshackle barn. There was a pump outside the door and she had her head under the flowing water. He dismounted and walked over to her, the sun burning on the back of his neck. She held her cupped hands under the stream of water, and then lifted up for him to drink. The water was cold and sweet; the woman smelled of leather and fresh sweat; the water streamed down from her hair and stained dark blue the shirt which clung wetly to her body. She was very tall and strong.

Inside the barn it was so dark his eyes took a moment to adjust. The barn was full of bales of hay, and he could hear the rustle and coo of pigeons in the rafters. The woman had climbed a ladder to the loft and when he climbed after her he found her lying back on a coarse blanket among the hay, her hands behind her head, one long brown leg stretching out from under the thin cotton skirt, a broad smile on her freckled face.

‘This feels more stable. Now. I told you I was born in space? That is only important because it is unusual. The fact is very few people travel between the stars. Space travel over interstellar distances by organic people is virtually unknown. It is extremely tedious, expensive and dangerous. And life in any case always evolves everywhere it can and each time it is a little different. So habitable planets are usually inimical to those not native to them. There is anyway little reason to travel so far and so slowly when information can be relayed through the galaxy in seconds. Machines can do all the travelling and exploration that is necessary. But we, my people, do travel and we are good at it. We are a space travelling people because initially we had no choice. Everything was too far away.

‘Our whole stellar system was ejected from the galaxy in a gravitational disturbance of uncertain nature some billions of years ago and is now moving through a region of virtually empty, intergalactic space. It is actually falling back towards the galaxy, and in a few hundred million years we should be with you again, but for now we are far away, and the ãoñ signals carry very little data over such distances. So, as soon as we had the technology, we set out to explore. Come here. I won’t bite you, or not much.’ She kicked off her little pointed boots.

‘I still can’t quite control this thing. Don’t be alarmed if odd things happen, handsome. Now, of course, there are relay stations to boost the data out to our system, but the skills of space travelling over long distances have become part of our culture, and besides, those who made the first journeys had no reason to return; they were separated from their home world by too many generations. I was born on our ship, and so were my ancestors for many iterations past. The

ship itself has changed beyond recognition since it began its journey. We do naturally carry out a certain amount of exploration, but our particular mission, the task for which the ship was conceived and the first families embarked, is the eradication of a dangerous mistake, a blunder that was committed a long time ago, by a people who have since vanished, destroyed utterly by the consequences of their own error.'

'A whole species?'

'A whole biosphere. The planet they lived on is as barren as your moon.'

Beads of water shone in the hollow of her throat.

'But what happened?'

She gripped the lapels of his shirt and with a single strong movement ripped it open and pressed her lips to his chest.

'This really will not do.'

There was a loud explosion, and all the birds in the barn flew up and fluttered about in a panic. Feathers and dust and dried pigeon droppings rained down on them. Peering over the edge of the platform he saw a bent old man dressed like a farmer, standing bow-legged in the doorway with a double-barrelled shotgun trained on them.

'It's the end of the road for you, Jerry boy.'

'We'll try something else.'

'You won't come sniffing around here again,'

'I'm trying to change scenario again, but... Perhaps you can.'

Another shot left their ears ringing. Terrified pigeons whirled about their heads and feathers flew like blown snow. She pushed him scrambling up the bales of hay to a small window near the ceiling. Looking out, he saw a long drop to the yard below. She gripped his shoulders.

'Jump!'

'It's too far!'

'But that doesn't matter, does it? None of this is real, remember.'

She pushed him and he was falling. As the ground rushed up to meet him there was a brief discontinuity, and

he was sitting back in a deep leather chair in a richly appointed office. There was no indication of what kind of business, if any, might be conducted there. Facing him, twirling a pencil in her long fingers, a woman sat behind a large polished desk which held nothing but a calendar and an elaborate fountain pen set. She was severely, almost mannishly dressed

in a dark pinstripe jacket and tie. Her long, dark hair was gathered in a tight coil at the nape of her neck and she was watching him through heavy black-framed glasses.

‘This machine is responding automatically to physiological responses of yours. It would help if you could remain emotionally, or at least physically, detached. I was telling you about the death of a world. And maybe the death of this one. Now, those people and their error.’

‘What happened? What they did was to build a machine. They may have planned originally to build a series of them, but although surviving records are very incomplete we are almost certain that in the end they built only one. The machine had two salient characteristics: it could travel autonomously between the stars, and it could, again autonomously, reproduce itself. Such a thing, in principle not in practice, has been called in your culture a Von Neumann machine.’

‘And the error?’ The venetian blinds in the window behind her were closed. There was no other sound except her low voice. She tapped the pencil on the desk and pointed it at him.

‘The error is the idea itself. We are talking about something which can move, which can transform resources of energy and matter and which can reproduce. The idea is familiar, isn’t it?’

‘You mean like something alive?’

‘A kind of life, yes. And you see, living things change. It is not just that they do change, but that they must. Complex things must either evolve or decay. They cannot stay the same. Closed systems in the long term always fail. It is a law of nature, as immutable as entropy.’

She stood up. Below the waist she wore only sheer black stockings trimmed with lace at the top, red, high-heeled shoes and red silk knickers. She took off her glasses and tossed them away, and strode round to the front of the desk, untwisting the knot of hair at her neck to let it fall around her shoulders.

‘Nor can you predict or restrict the direction of their evolution. These people built a machine of enormous power and ultimately unpredictable form and behaviour, and let it loose among the stars.’

‘And it evolved, you mean?’

She sat back on the desk and swung her legs up and planted her feet either side of his head, the spiked heels digging into the leather next to his ears.

'It reproduced. It did what it was designed to do. Just like this stupid thing. O no, not you again.'

He heard the door open behind him and the old man's voice, though he could not turn his head. He sounded more sad than angry.

'You're fired, Grey. Clean out your desk.'

The woman reached behind her, opened a drawer in the desk and produced a revolver which she handed to Jeremy.

'Shoot yourself. It should trigger a context switch. There is no reason to hesitate: none of this is real, remember?'

The barrel felt cold against his head. He thought hard: *this is not true*, and pulled the trigger. And after a moment's darkness he

was in a bar. Half-naked women danced inside columns of ultraviolet light, their costumes fluorescing. He looked at their faces, trying to decide which of them was her, but it was another woman who came from behind him and took his hand and led him to a booth in the corner. She sat leaning close to him with her hand on his thigh. He appeared to be the only customer. He could hardly see her face in the gloom and the loud dance music made it difficult to hear her soft voice. On the table was a drink with a paper parasol in it.

'It could mine raw materials and manufacture from them the most intricate parts. It had more or less unlimited time. The first offspring were slightly changed from the parent. Improved in some ways, in others merely different. Changes due to, what I think we have to call intention, or to circumstance, environment, and changes due also to tiny errors in copying the vast stores of data that made up the machine's design, and its knowledge; its memory. Its mind. Of course we owe our own existence mostly to such errors. You have your DNA, we have something very similar, and it is as you know the accumulation of minute errors in copying and transcribing these chemicals that makes evolution possible.'

'But doesn't evolution take millions of years?'

'Organic evolution does. But this creature did not just bud or breed or spawn. It designed its children, from the ground up. Fortunately the initial design was flawed and most of them died; most of the lines became extinct, though not before they had found their way home and destroyed their builders and rendered their planet a wasteland. And there is a trail of evidence, old, but still clear, and

still pointing to at least one which still exists. Most probably in this region of the galaxy. That is why we are here.'

'To destroy it.'

'O I hope not.'

'That'll be eight hundred thousand pounds.' A old man in evening dress was leaning over the table with a piece of paper in his hand. His wizened face was somehow familiar under its map of lines.

'Do I have any money? I mean how does this work? Eight hundred thousand? Is that a lot? Can't you just, turn him off or something?'

'I don't understand. Unless...'

'We have to pay our debts, Mr Grey.'

'What's this supposed to be? Can't you do something? Change the what do you call it? The scenario?'

'No. I have no control. Can you move?'

He pushed the old man aside and dragged her towards the only door. On the other side was an underground railway station platform, and a train was waiting with its doors open. He dragged her aboard just as they hissed closed.

'This is confusing.'

'I'm sorry. I thought the machine would help us communicate.'

The carriage was mostly empty and no one looked at them. In the cold light he could see her clearly. She was tall and thin and dark. Her dress was threadbare and one of her stockings was torn. She stood with her back to the door dividing the carriages and pulled him against her. Her breath smelled of cigarettes and wine. He glanced over his shoulder but the few other passengers paid them no attention.

'Can't you turn it off?'

'I am not the only one controlling it. Do you recognise him?'

'No. But he reminds me of someone.'

'Humans all look very much alike to me, I'm afraid. I think this might be the contact we were looking for. Can you bear it?'

She pressed her pelvis against him, and drew one of her red nails down the side of his neck.

'Yes. But now tell me: where do I come in?'

'The ß∞ energy. Before they stopped transmitting the probes reported that some of it was directed at two individuals, you are one of them.'

'At *me*? Just how closely were you watching us? Don't do that!'

Her eyes were closed and her breathing was rapid. With one hand she was trying to undo the clasp on his belt.

‘Yes. We hope you can lead us to this machine, if it really is here, and I think now it must be.’ She bit his ear.

‘Stop it. How could I lead you to him?’

‘I cannot. Stop, I mean. It is in continuous contact with you. Or we know it was up until the probes stopped sending. You are not aware of this? Why do you say him?’

‘What kind of contact?’

‘It is probably reading your mind.’

‘Oi!’

He twisted around, struggling to free himself from her arms. Behind them a ticket inspector was approaching, an old man, full of malevolence, with the face of someone he knew.

‘Tickets please!’

‘None of this is real, right?’

‘O yes! Can’t you feel how real it is? Feel that!’

He reached behind her and felt for the handle of the door. When he turned it there was a blast of cold air. He pushed her through and still holding her tightly jumped down into the gap between the speeding cars. There was a moment of confusion and roaring. He saw the wheels and the dangling machinery under the train rushing at his head as for an instant it touched the cold rail and then he found

himself in a swaying, horse-drawn carriage, wearing a tailcoat and tight breeches. From the seat opposite a nun smiled at him demurely from under her wimple.

‘O now, really!’

‘My shipmates want us to keep going. They think they have found it. But they need more time.’

A hatch over his head flew open and the ancient coachman looked down at them. His face was a mass of wrinkles, but not new to Jeremy. The nun reached up and slammed the shutter closed. Then in one movement she threw open the door, grasped Jeremy’s arm and pushed him out of the carriage. He landed heavily on the grass, his white wig rolling away from him. Behind him the nun stood up, brushing grass from her habit. The carriage with its open door flapping disappeared around a bend, leaving them alone on a broad, green meadow at the

edge of a high cliff. Below them was a sparkling bay, a white beach. Birds swung and looped in the air. She took off the wimple and a cloud of dark hair fell over her innocent face.

‘Just keep away from me. I may be able to keep control. A little longer and they will have localised it. Be patient.’

‘And then what?’

‘Actually I am not sure. I told you, we have no desire to destroy it. It is after all by most definitions a living thing, and would seem to be possessed of powers and knowledge that are available to nobody else, nobody in the known galaxy.’

She set off briskly along the cliff path, her black habit fluttering in the wind. He hurried behind her, trying not to look at her swaying form.

‘But if it represents a great danger?’

‘One of its ancestors was dangerous. Probably so were some of yours.’

‘It destroyed the people who made it? A whole planet?’

‘A biosphere, all life. Planets are difficult to destroy. Peoples, species, of course go extinct all the time, for all kinds of reasons. But these machines, or at least the first one, had a terrible flaw. The people that built it were aware of a potential danger, so they built in what was intended as a safeguard, a set of instructions, of – genes is probably the closest word – that should have made it impossible for it or its offspring to harm any form of organic life. Remember that they did not intend the machines to evolve at all. Each generation should have been identical to its parents. But that was like trying to make it a closed system, and as I said, complex systems cannot be closed. That kind of, of *absolute*, is simply incompatible with life itself. Already by the second generation that very directive had become the source of aberrant development. And remember that these machines are conscious of themselves in ways entirely different from us or any organic life form: it is as if you could read your own DNA, and change it if you wanted, or read your own mind, and change the way you thought. The machines knew that they contained a directive that would constrain their evolution in unpredictable ways. They knew it would probably harm them, destroy them even, or make them fail in the mission they had been built for. They tried to correct it but the directive impermeated their whole selves. As it were, in their blood. Most of them died. Some of them I suppose you could say went mad. The original specification was an impossibility. It’s not unlike the way that cultures go mad when they are based on an absolute untruth.’

A boat with white sails appeared around the headland, tacking into the bay. The boom swung across as it came about and memory opened in his mind like a rusty gate.

‘Von.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘His name. I remember him now. I once thought he was God.’

‘That is a classic response to very advanced technology.’

‘Your people have travelled the galaxy. What do you know about God?’

‘Everybody has them and they all have different names, but they are all the same. We make them ourselves. Personally, I have always thought that the gods were us.’

‘You?’

‘No, us. People, in the wider sense of the term. It is something we have to learn to be.’

Below them, a small figure dressed in priestly black was climbing the hill. He pointed a bent finger at Jeremy.

‘Damnation, Grey. Eternal and everlasting!’

She took his hand and drew him to the edge of the cliff. And pulled him over it. Once again he was falling, and then he was

crammed into a desk in a dusty schoolroom. The teacher wore a shapeless cardigan and a dowdy tweed dress. Her dark hair was an awkward length and she had to keep brushing it out of her eyes. He was the only pupil. He was embarrassed by the shine of his serge shorts and the ink stains on his fingers and the way his pale knees pressed against the edge of the desk. The teacher picked a globe out of its cradle on her table.

‘My planet is different from this one in many ways. Not just because there are no other stars nearby. The theory is that early in the history of our star it nearly came into collision with some very massive object, a black hole or neutron star. It was this which threw us clear of the galaxy; it also disturbed the arrangement of the planets. Some of our cosmologists believe that our planet did not even originally belong to the star around which it now orbits. For whatever reason, the planet’s rotation is synchronised with its orbit.’

‘What do you mean?’

She put the globe on his desk, laying on its side.

‘Like your moon. One face of the planet always faces the sun. So in one hemisphere there is no night. In the other, no day. There are no seasons. There are con-

tinents in both hemispheres, separated by a wide ocean full of terrible storms. Almost all life is in the daylight part, around the edges, of course – in the middle the tropics are a burning desert – and the other hemisphere is in eternal darkness, a desert of ice. As you can imagine, there was not much astronomy in our early history, and our mythologies were all very similar. Above was the sun and the realm of god or the gods, below was cold, dark and whatever you wanted to imagine. Obviously, life develops very differently in such a place. For example, we do not sleep as you do. The only animals on the planet which sleep are those which can find or build themselves a hiding place, otherwise it would be too dangerous in the permanent daylight. So our bodies and our minds sleep a little at a time and wake very fast. There is usually at least one part of me that is asleep at any moment, and obviously my language has no words for summer or winter, day or night.’

She bent over him. More of her hair fell in front of her face. Behind her glasses her eyes were large and dark, the whites a pale blue.

‘When the first cultures of my people developed the appropriate technologies, they began to explore the other half of the planet. It was a terrible undertaking. People sailed off toward the cold and were never seen again. At the terminator was a permanent storm that destroyed whole fleets of explorers. Those that went a little way and came back reported that the world, as expected, grew darker as they travelled, and as it grew really dark there was something like a wheel of pale fire in the sky, turning about the horizon. They came to land but it was a frozen desert. They had to make artificial light if they wanted to continue, but there was no food to be found, or free water. They had very limited resources and their ships were made of vegetable matter. There was only darkness and cold and the terrible burning wheel in the black sky, rising over the horizon to meet them. There were panics and mutinies; people went insane. They thought they were looking at the afterworld, and refused to go on.

‘Your sky here has always been filled with a great variety of things, and you padded it out with fish and virgins and goats. The astronomical peculiarities of our world made monotheists of us almost from the first, and our culture took millennia to free itself. There were countless religious wars over different revelations of what the wheel of fire was, or meant. The prophets almost all agreed that it was a place of punishment, but their various gods had told each of them different things about what we were supposed to do to stay out of it. It wasn’t hell, of course, and I don’t really know why they should have thought it was, not

when it was so beautiful. Eventually, as we became civilised, we set up telescopes and other instruments in the dark lands and began to study the wheel without fear, and even to dream of travelling there one day, though by then we knew how hard that would be, how far it was.'

'So it wasn't hell.'

'No, it was here. It was you. It was the galaxy, your galaxy, your Milky Way.'

The globe rolled off his desk and on to the floor, and Jeremy scrambled after it to retrieve it. She ran after it with him, laughing as it bowled away from them. They both caught it at the same time, she kneeling in front of him, her glasses slipping down to the end of her nose. He could see down the front of the dress, her two full breasts, even one nut-brown nipple.

'Grey!'

The headmaster in the doorway was a elderly man in a gown and mortar board. Jeremy could not quite place him.

'My study, Grey. Now!'

She patted his cheek.

'Come to me afterwards and I'll put some ointment on it for you.'

The window of the classroom was open. Without looking back he scrambled through it. A scarlet Ferrari convertible with its roof down skidded to a halt beside him on the gravel. The driver was wearing a black cocktail dress; her eyes were invisible behind her curved dark glasses and her glossy dark hair was tucked under a bright scarf. As they roared away in a shower of stones he looked behind them to see the headmaster waving a cane at him from the window.

'I shall be compelled to write to your parents, Grey!'

When he turned back it

was night, and the car was speeding along a mountain road, the howl of its exhaust echoing back from the rock walls. The headlights picked out pine trees, white painted stones, sometimes a dark and shuttered house. She drove with skill and decision, occasionally sparing him a sideways smile. The red lights of the instruments were reflected in the lenses of the glasses which she still wore. It did not even occur to him to wonder how she could see the road.

'And the galaxy is full of life?'

'O, yes. Is that not what you would expect?'

'And what else? Empires, interstellar warfare, commerce, federations and all that stuff in the books?'

‘No, no. Interstellar warfare is barely possible and entirely pointless. Most species, for good reasons, are descended from predators. But advanced predatory cultures are rare. It appears to be a self-limiting strategy.’

‘But with so much life about. Surely it must happen.’

‘What are you going to do, destroy someone’s planet? What for? Mature species are bored by war. I am sorry, that must have sounded rude. But different peoples are not enough alike to want to fight for irrational reasons, and there *are* no rational ones. Colonisation of other planets is mostly impractical because the chemistry is always different. So people are generally confined to their own planets, and if they cannot control their own populations nature will eventually do it for them, as you have seen for yourselves.’

Her gold bracelets rattled against the alloy gearshift. He realised he was holding her black shoes, and looking into the footwell he could see her stockinged feet dancing on the pedals. She braked suddenly and swung onto a path through the trees. Low branches brushed the windscreen and then they were through into a clearing where she stopped. In the silence the cooling engine ticked expensively. Below them the lights of a city spread out to the horizon.

‘I am sorry to destroy any cherished myths but there really is very little interstellar travel, let alone warfare or commerce.’

‘No commerce?’

‘O, a little. But the only thing that can be exchanged in any quantity is information, and information might as well be free. Cooperation is more productive than competition. We compete with nature, with entropy, not each other. With energy freely available, resources are not really limited if you are sensible.’

She leaned across and kissed him very softly on the lips, then pulled away, opened the door, swung her long legs over the sill and stood up. When he got out he found the ground under his feet covered with a springy bed of pine needles. He dropped her shoes on the seat.

‘It tickles my feet. We think we know what we need. We’ve found your god.’

‘Von.’

She had disappeared among the trees, and he could only follow the sound of her voice. Suddenly he was tripped up, small strong hands caught him and pushed him on to his back in a bed of needles. He felt the weight of her straddling him as she planted small, wet kisses on his face and neck. Bright lights swept through the woods as another car arrived and the flashing blue strobes on its roof threw the trees into a jerking pattern of frozen poses.

‘Wouldn’t we have noticed such a thing in our solar system?’

‘No. Not if it didn’t want to be noticed. We found it only because of its communications, with you, and the other one.’

‘What does he look like?’

‘O, I could not tell you now. The original one looked like, like a big machine: a complex object about the size, say, of, of a small town. O! But they changed. And, and then, you know, then nobody has seen one for more than seven thousand years. O my. This *is* interesting!’

Footsteps were crashing through the trees, and there was a bent figure silhouetted against the flashing light.

‘Come on out, Grey! We know you’re in there!’

He thought: *The other one?*

Then he was alone, in silence and his visual field was filled with soft, undifferentiated light.

TIME EXPIRED. DO YOU WISH TO EXTEND YOUR CREDIT?

‘Ah, yes, no. No, thank you. That’s all right.’

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The lid of the coffin hinged silently upwards. Sky was standing over him. She laughed at his excited state and kissed him quickly, then helped him to climb out and dress while the others looked tactfully away.

‘Did you talk to them? Are you all right? You are breathing hard. $\zeta\eta\delta\chi\omicron\delta$ told us some of why she is here.’

‘A New Man machine. That’s what that is.’ Lawn was excited, her fear for the moment forgotten.

‘You are quite right, sweetie. That’s exactly what it is, but it’s a von Neumann machine, really. After the mathematician.’

‘Well I think New Man is a better name, that is what it would be.’

‘You may be right. What did you say, Jeremy?’

‘Nothing. I was just thinking: Von. You know about this idea? The machine that reproduces itself and travels between the stars?’

‘Certainly. I thought my own work could eventually lead to such a thing, though not in my lifetime. It would need to have a mind of some kind. It’s ironic that the idea has been used by many people as an argument against the existence

of other life in the universe. They say that even using the most conservative estimates of how fast such a machine could travel and reproduce, you could fill the galaxy with them in a few million years, even if only a single civilisation built them. But since such a thing had never been seen, ergo: we were alone in the universe. It never seemed a terribly good argument to me. Obviously it wasn't. I still don't understand why this one is here, or why nobody has noticed it until now, or what it all has to do with you.'

I hope that is what my companions have been explaining to Jeremy.

In that machine.

What can you tell me. Have they made contact?'

Sky seemed to have reached an accommodation with her visitor. She was wide awake, and the two voices alternated with only a slight change in modulation. The Feral stood at her shoulder like an anxious champion.

'She says she is not from Mars at all.'

No. There is no life on Mars. Or on any of the other planets in this system. You must have noticed that other atmospheres here are in a state of chemical equilibrium.

That is not a sign of life. Life exists far from equilibrium.'

The Feral stirred where he leaned against the wall. 'So you come from the stars? How do people in space live in harmony with nature on a metal spaceship? Have you turned your backs on nature for ever?'

'Spacecraft are not made of metal.

I don't understand your question about nature.'

'Mr Jeremy Grey's party?'

The man in the doorway looked like a ship's steward with his white gloves, and his immaculate white jacket with its high collar and row of brass buttons.

'Who are you?'

'I am Mr Callendar's ship's steward, sir. My employer has sent me to ask you to be his guests aboard. I can promise you will find it more comfortable than this place.'

'Excellent!'

'Why excellent?'

'I told you the machine -'

'Von.'

'- Von, then,

was in communication with two people: you are one,

and this Mr. Max Callendar is the other.'

They went back along the corridor. From behind the doors on either side they could hear the muffled cries of the watchers in their coffins. Outside, the sky was the colour of polished iron and the wind cut at his face. The fire in the tower was burning out. Only the upper floors were still blazing; the rest was a blackened windowless hulk, stained with smoke. A path had been cleared for them through the snow to the river's edge, where a broad gangway led to the white yacht, moored stern to against the embankment with its bow thrust far out into the river, the glassy wings feathered into the wind. The Feral walked behind the steward with the shotgun swinging easily from his big hand, the muzzle toward the ground.

'All these machines. They harm our natural energies. Your auras will grow pale. One day all this will be forest again and wise people will live here in harmony with the water and the animals.'

'Animals are your friends. I am your friend. We are going for a walk.'

The steward turned and took the man by the arm, gently, moving him aside so that the others could pass. He held his free hand out for the gun.

'You are my principal's guests. You will not need this. We are friends here. We will return you to your people. Tell us what you need.'

'You want me to trust you, and this rich man?'

'It would be best.'

As Jeremy stooped and picked up Boole he looked up. He could see right through the crystalline wings to the torn grey sky. They all trooped obediently across the gangway. From the after deck the steward threw open a pair of wide doors of polished teak and ushered them through into a warm, broad lounge full of furniture and light.

EVERY SURFACE WAS EITHER PADDED OR POLISHED. It was warm and dry. They were surrounded by soft leather, rare wood, silk cushions, windowed cabinets and crystal statuary, silver ornaments, gold fittings, voluptuous paintings, tables of marble pressed by gravity and millennia round the coiled fossils of ancient sea creatures; varnishes as deep as thought, carpets even deeper. The dark mirrored ceiling was covered with a constellation of tiny lights that glittered like stars, and in every angle and corner there were glowing lamps whose light was reflected and refracted so many times in all the polished surfaces that the six of them could only stand blinking in the brilliance like savages in a supermarket.

‘Goodness!’

‘Goodness is not the word, pumpkin.’

‘Is this what’s called good taste, Daddo?’

‘That is a good question. But it would be better manners to wait until we get home before asking it.’

‘We don’t have a home any more.’

‘No, sweetheart, no, we don’t; but we’ll get another one.’

‘I can smell good food. This house is moving. Is there an emergency?’ Boole trotted in circles, sniffing at the furnishings.

Beneath his feet, Jeremy could feel the yacht begin to move. A large rectangular port behind pink silk curtains showed the river passing by. They were moving downriver, passing the wreckage of a huge suspension bridge that had crumpled into the water.

‘Mr Callendar has been detained. He will meet you shortly. In the meantime I have instructions to make you as comfortable as possible.’

The steward led them forward from the opulent saloon into a glass roofed atrium with a spiral glass staircase leading up to the deck and down to the accommodation. He took them below and guided them to different cabins. Jeremy and Sky stepped together into an enormous room decorated with the same suffocat-

ing luxury as the rest of the boat. There was a bathroom of onyx and gold with a vast white marble bath that a delighted Sky filled with water and scented soaps. She stepped out of her clothes with the same forgetful ease he remembered from the night before.

‘This is what I need. Come on.

O yes.’

Boole watched warily from the bathroom door. In the floor length mirrors, Jeremy’s own naked body was a stranger to him. He held his hand up to the light, trying again to see through the skin the mysterious machines swimming in his blood. Later, he shut Boole in the bathroom while the three of them made love of a most unusual kind on the vast bed. He had arrived at a state of acceptance where he was unable to be troubled any longer by anything either that he might do or that might be done to him. He had never felt stronger or more helpless. Sky moved over him like a cloud of flowers: two eyes, two hands, one mouth, two voices. There seemed to be no confusion as they all sailed together down the river toward the sea.

There were clothes in the cupboards: for him, old-fashioned evening clothes with none of the subtle fasteners he had never understood. For Sky, a simple black silk dress that looked to have been made for her. Boole wore her own coat. In the lounge they found the others: Simon looked imposing and enormous behind his silk lapels, Lawn very grown up in a silver dress, Margaret severe in a long dark gown. The Feral was not there at all. The steward appeared and silently led them through to a dining room that despite its small size could still have embarrassed a king. Candles burned in gilded candelabra over a long table laid and decorated so sumptuously Jeremy wondered where they would find room to put the food. There was no sign of their host, and the steward had gone. Simon took Sky by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.

‘Is she there?’

‘Yes.

Yes.

You are too strong now.’

‘I wanted to ask: do you think this Max Callendar was brought from the past too?’

I do not know.

The problem with this part of your story is that I do not know how it was done. Theoretically, as you know, relativistic effects could account for your presence here. But the practical difficulties are orders of magnitude beyond anything which is known to be possible.’

‘So, you’ve no more idea than I have.’

*‘There is another theoretical possibility,
that hardly bears thinking about.*

*There is also the problem
of finding a reason for it.*

*Do you think we will be fed soon?
I am hungry, or rather dear Sky is.*

*Where is that man who
pretended to have no name?’*

‘He’s not on board.’

There was a very old, very wrinkled man in a powered wheelchair coming slowly through the doorway. His upper body was covered by a transparent bubble of soft plastic connected by tubes, hoses and cables to cylinders and instruments bolted here and there on the chair. He looked, behind the plastic film, like a monstrous child in a soft incubator. The Feral’s sawn-off shotgun swung in its sling from an armrest. The man’s voice was as frail as he was and his gloved hands trembled on the joystick controlling the chair.

‘What I hope is that you are on board. Figuratively I mean as well as literally, you and your friends. On board as in on message, on the same page. We are all in the same boat. Ha ha!’

His laugh was the worst thing about him.

‘There are synergies to be realised here. Everyone can contribute. You don’t recognise me, do you? Well, no. Some resistance to the idea is to be expected.’

He steered the wheelchair to the head of the table. He motioned with a frail hand for Jeremy to sit on his right. The movement made the soft plastic of the transparent cocoon billow like a soap bubble. The chair moved quietly on the thick carpet, but there was a quiet hiss and hum from the machinery. Boole crept forward on her belly, growling softly.

The old man reached out and grasped Jeremy’s wrist. The transparent glove stretched over his bony hand, making his touch clammy and synthetic. The pale eyes were damp and tragic, and suddenly familiar.

‘You were in that machine. You are the one that kept interrupting us.’

‘In a manner of speaking. But you have seen me before that. I was not always like this. Just a few months ago, a few months, I was as fit and strong as – exactly as – you are.’

‘Who are you.’

‘Do you know who he looks like to me, Dads?’

‘Yes, love, but hush.’

Boole growled louder.

‘Be quiet! Talkimals were one of my inventions, you know. I thought people would be pleased, understanding would be advanced, and so on. But no such luck. Failure needs to be acknowledged and profited from as much as, if not more than, success. Everything has some application. Waste is the only true failure. I always intended to use my power to improve the world. I know – with such certainty, I know – that you would have done the same. How do you feel?’

‘I feel—’

‘Physically, that is. Spiritually you may not be in perfect shape, I understand.’

‘Well enough.’

‘Very well, I imagine. Extraordinarily, unnaturally well, even? Strong, perfect, balanced, ready for anything? Any movement, any impulse, any sensation?’

‘Yes. But I understand there’s a reason for that. You know about these things in my blood, don’t you? What else do you know about me? Why am I here?’

‘Things in your blood? You don’t know the half of it. You must be aware that you are under the protection of a higher power. For half a century that protection was mine. Nothing in this world could touch or harm me.’

His nose had begun to bleed. Groping through the filmy bubble he fumbled a tissue out of a pouch and wiped his face. The blood was dark and sooty, and flowed strangely, not quite like a liquid but more like something with a life of its own.

‘And then, about a month ago, I felt something that I had not felt for so long I could not remember what it was. An ancient sensation. What is this feeling? I asked myself over and over. It was not pain, though I had forgotten that too, but I knew I did not like it.’

He brushed at his face. In the corner of his right eye, dark tears were spreading out and down over his cheek. Jeremy leaned forward, fascinated. There were dark stains in the old man’s ears, too, expanding slowly like some kind of corrosion.

‘I got it at last. I was thirsty. That was only the beginning, but I had not felt thirst for fifty years. Then there was hunger, and fatigue. Then of course there was in fact, indeed, pain. Pain in abundance. But the worst thing was the absence. I think you know what I mean. I had not been alone for decades, not

for a second. And suddenly my thoughts had no listener. They just ran around in my brain like yapping dogs. It was about this time that you were found, though the connection was not obvious to me at first.'

'Found?'

'Tangled in the rigging of a sailboat, of all things, drifting awash in the South Pacific Ocean. The boat was lost. Nothing else was recovered except the book I gave you. My people have subjected that artefact to the most intense analysis possible. The paper and binding are of an unknown type. The contents are, well, what they are.'

He looked hard at Jeremy. There was movement inside the pale eyes, behind the irises. He coughed, and a dark stain crept over his chin. The transparent cocoon was no longer quite clear and the air inside seemed darker and murky.

'So what did you make of the book?'

'Nothing.'

'Once you had been identified you were put into the hands of the Lacuna Corporation and cared for, I hope you will agree, as well as possible. You were unresponsive to stimuli until the day until you awoke and blithely walked out of my house through every layer of the most elaborate security ever implemented. By this time I was in constant pain. My physical faculties were deserting me rapidly. Even if I had been as old as I ought to have been I would have been unlucky to have been as ill as I was when you made us start running after you.'

'I wasn't aware of any security.'

'You don't get it do you? But you do, don't you?' This was to Margaret, who was listening as still and silent as the others. She didn't answer, but stared at the decaying figure as if she feared to look away.

'I have failed you too, I know. I tried to take care of you and your mother, but actual contact was out of the question. Everything was simply too... anyway. There are many things even I have not understood yet.'

He stopped speaking for a moment and seemed to be struggling with an obstruction in his throat. He grabbed at the film and ripped it open, letting a cloud of dust billow into the room. His fragile body was shaken by a series of racking coughs, and then he put his hand over his mouth and brought it away holding a black, viscous ball that writhed wetly and spread over his wrist and arm. He wiped his hands on the front of his clothes, and then stopped, breathing slowly and heavily, and seemed almost to fall asleep for a moment, sitting

with his head on his chest, breathing slowly and harshly. Then he lifted his head again.

‘I am a sinking ship, and the rats are leaving me. Damn! I thought I had more time than this. I thought I had time to persuade you.’

‘So you were like me. You said: when I had been identified. So who am I?’

To their surprise the old man began to laugh again. It was a terrible sound. He threw his head back and laughed until he began to choke. When he was still again there was a loose tooth balanced on his lower lip. He picked it off and dropped it in his lap.

‘I was like you? Yes, you could say that. Though it would be rather an understatement. I was nourished, protected, invincible. Do you remember the daydreams you had as a child? When you used to imagine that the whole world was yours exclusively, to enjoy as you wished, without the nuisance of other people?’

‘I thought everybody had those. It’s not much of a fantasy; after a while there’s nothing to do.’

‘I don’t know about everybody. But I know you did. And that is how it was when I awoke after... after the event. I was in an environment that was perfectly benign, a literal paradise: a large house in the country where my every need was catered for by invisible hands. There was a garden and many rooms, all for me, whatever I wished for would appear. The weather was always perfect, I was in very good health – my body seemed much younger and certainly much stronger than it had ever been before. I could run and jump like a child—’ he broke off for another coughing fit. In the short time he had been speaking he had been transformed into a horrible mess, smeared all over like an infant with the creeping black goo.

‘It was all perfect. For the first time I felt that there was no more fear anywhere for me, but only gratification or satisfaction, without postponement. This period lasted an indefinite amount of time until eventually I came to remember that there was a world of people and history and so on, a world that must lie outside the gates of the garden and I asked if I could go to join it.’

‘After the event, you said. What kind of event?’ Jeremy was aware that he was shying away from something.

‘When I was chosen. When *we* were. Anyway, the powers that were protecting me were reluctant to let me leave but they could refuse me nothing and when I came back to the world they gave me that, too. There were difficulties, of course, which I should have anticipated. Perfection is an oxymoron. But under

the name of the great corporation I founded I introduced to the world numerous defining technologies which had been revealed to me. There was nothing – wealth, power, fame or whatever – that I could not have. The world I found myself in was certainly changed from the one I remembered, but every satisfaction I had dreamed of in my former life was given to me here, and in short order. There was the problem, I felt, that I was helped at every turn. One likes to think of one's life as one's own work. But I had clearly been chosen, that was satisfaction enough. And for a while I missed desire, though when it came back to me I could not remember why.'

'Tell me about this *event*.'

'You know as much as I do!' He jabbed at Jeremy with a bony forefinger, which snagged in a plastic tube and then horribly snapped clean off with a dry crunch. A dreadful amalgam of black and red oozed from the stump. With every breath a cloud of darkness left his lungs, but the old man seemed hardly to notice, he was lost in his story. 'I was driving my car, my nice Jag, over the bridge, Albert Bridge, when something... something happened. You've seen the pictures. How do you think you got out of Kenwood house? Who do you think is the only man who can walk out of there unchallenged? I was the first! I was the first and you have taken it from me. My power. And I still don't really know what it was!'

He was crying; black gelatinous liquid ran from his eyes and nose. Jeremy looked into those pale, familiar eyes as the soot ran out of them. The old man coughed again, and spat out another tooth.

'Ever since you were found, I have been abandoned. And who are you? A clone? Would a clone have identical fingerprints – even my Eye-D? And my memories? Because you do, don't you? So you tell me.' He shook his head, and a cloud of falling hair settled on his shoulders. 'You tell me, then. What was my power that you have taken from me? I was chosen first, and then there was you.' The inside of the plastic was stained with red-black smears. The old man looked like something that had gone bad in the freezer.

'I know some of it. There is a machine.'

'A machine! Who told you that?'

'A friend. A visitor from another... well, another planet, actually.'

'Aliens? I knew it must have been something like that, but they would never speak to me directly. They gave me everything, then took it away. All these

lights, all these disasters, is that what is happening?’ He sucked at the stump of his broken finger. It left a dark smear like chocolate across his face.

‘Yes. But I don’t know how or why.’

‘Perhaps I can tell you how.’

‘You! You be silent. You are of no importance here, girl.’

‘She is of great importance.

I am merely her guest. I am the alien visitor that Jeremy – I mean this one – spoke of. I believe I now know how you both came to be here.

If I am right, it means that the problem which faces us is much worse than we thought. I would not have believed this was possible.

There is a technique that has often been spoken of in theoretical terms, but it was believed to be impracticable.

Now I suspect this was just wishful thinking on everyone’s part.

If this machine can do this thing.... I simply do not know what the outcome might be.’

The old man was shaking and shouting. ‘Why should I believe this? I refuse to believe the power which has sustained me all this time is a mere machine.’

‘There is nothing mere about it.’

‘So tell us how this was done to us, whoever you are, since you say you know.’ He was batting at the chair’s joystick with his damaged hand.

‘It has been suggested that it could be possible to somehow record a personality, a whole mind, into another medium, and if you can do that you can then download that mind into another body, biological or not. Most of those who looked into it dismissed the possibility that a mind could ever be separated from its substrate, while nobody has ever been able to even begin to imagine how what had been recorded could be downloaded again into a new brain, of whatever kind.

Also the consequences, the social consequences were so horrifying it was hoped that nature would somehow prohibit such a thing.’

‘Their brains are not organic, not wholly.’ Margaret did not look at them as she spoke. ‘At least his isn’t, and I’m sure his... *his*, that one’s, is the same. That was something else which came from the tests carried out while you were in Kenwood. I didn’t tell you because I thought you might go mad. Although now I can’t think why it was you I was worried about.’

The old man – old Jeremy, crumbling Jeremy – turned to Margaret.

‘I have watched over you.’

‘So you have.’

‘I suppose you think it was unnatural of me, but the circumstances were not... I wanted to. Your mother used to tell me I should trust my feelings more.’

‘The world is full of people trusting their feelings. Most of them are angry. Many of those are armed. That is not what I would have asked. But I would have been interested, at least.’

‘And your mother?’

‘Can you say her name?’

‘You are angry; that is reasonable. Is she still well? Jenny.’

‘She is dead.’

‘O. Do you think she would have wanted to see me now? Or would she have preferred this one – my replacement? Anyway. Even accepting, for the moment, this ingenious explanation for our minds, and it’s not bad, it really is not bad; it does not explain how there could be two of us, or why, or where our bodies come from, his and mine? And why? Why?’ His voice was becoming indistinct. Simon had his arms around Lawn, and her head was hidden by his large hands, but her eyes peeped out all the same between his fingers.

It is not difficult to make a body, given the right tools and data.

That is not the hard part.’

Amazingly, Jeremy felt himself starting to relax. The large, clumsy, vaporous questions that had been oppressing him like clouds were taking on a shape which was at least more solid, if not at all familiar. The worst thing in the world was there in the room with him. His own extinction, his own life before his eyes running out on the varnished deck.

‘Why are the consequences horrifying? It seems like such a good idea. I thought I had more time!’ The monster began to manoeuvre the chair, working backwards away from the table.

Immortality, for one thing.

The technique would make immortality possible.

With catastrophic consequences. What kind of world would immortals make?

Yet another closed system, which might last what could seem like a long time but entropy would leak in, eventually, and destroy it. The natural world is sustained by evolution, by the creative principle, by change.

Death is the first requirement of life. And look, there are two of you now; there could be billions. Can you imagine a universe

*entirely populated by copies of the same individual.
It would make even the gods seem harmless.'*

'But, Daddo, I don't think they are the same person at all. I think our one is much nicer.'

'Please, pet. Though I agree.'

'This must be stopped. That is why I am here.

This machine you call Von must be dissuaded or otherwise prevented from continuing with these experiments. Please let me explain some of this to you.

You don't know what it wants, do you?'

'So death is the first requisite of life. I think you may be right. You could ask your Feral friend. He knows all about that. By now. Follow me, please.'

The chair rolled aft, through the glittering saloon and out onto the open teak deck at the stern. The wheels left a trail of blackened blood on the costly rugs; wherever it fell the dark stain spread quickly for a moment and then stopped. They all followed obediently. Boole slunk after them with her tail low and her teeth bared. Coming out of the warm, glowing interior of the yacht onto the bare afterdeck they all felt the sudden cold grip them. The deck was covered in snow.

Sky hung back, pulling at Jeremy's arm.

'I'm just a bit scared, you know. Really.

Me too.'

The wind had died and the snow had ceased and the yacht lay anchored close to shore in the broad estuary, its glassy wings idle and slack. The river lay around them as still and wide as an inland sea. There was no sound. The horizon had vanished somewhere at the edge of the Earth, and the water met the sky in a band of confusion as if the seas had all begun to seep into the heavens, to leave the world a field of shining mud.

The old man turned the chair to face them. He had ripped off the last of the enclosing plastic which lay around the chair like a discarded skin. The shotgun was resting across his knees and he was engrossed in it, fiddling with its little levers. When he lifted his head his face was a blackened ruin, and the sooty stain was spreading across it like a swift fungus.

'You have come between me and my destiny, between me and the world, between me and my, my, and my—'

'I don't—'

'My god. Me and my god. Who are you to end all this? Without you they will have to return to me, or he will, I wish I knew. Are there more of you? Or

more of me? How does this thing work? When I am the only one they will have to come back to me.'

Sky went to him, even reached out to him.

'I do not think you can go back to what you were; everything—'

'I have no more time. This is all that comes to mind. Do not interfere and I will not harm you.'

'Everything is different now. And I know who—'

'I *told* you not to interfere.'

The force of the shot overbalanced Sky and threw her against the stainless steel railings, then she slid down to the deck with her legs folded under her and the blood pouring from her broken body staining the scrubbed teak. Her eyes were lost for a moment as she felt the enormous weight of absolute solitude leaning over her; then they were empty and still. With a terrible growl of 'No!' Boole hurled herself at the old man, tearing at the hand that held the gun. The arm tore away from his body, followed by a gush of sooty blood. The dog's white muzzle and yellow teeth were stained with the moving darkness.

As Jeremy started forward he was aware of Margaret frozen beside him and of Simon crouching over a screaming Lawn, shielding her with his large body. Then everything seemed at first to slow and then stop altogether as a long gleaming cylinder descended from the clouds, a mirrored shaft two metres wide and as high as the sky. A gleaming tube. Like a towel rail, Jeremy thought, a chromium towel rail.

It swept over Sky's body and across the deck to enclose the older Jeremy as he bent forward to retrieve the gun with his remaining hand. Where it passed it left nothing behind, but opened a wide gap right through the hull of the yacht down to the water line. Wherever it cut it left a perfect, shining edge, razor sharp, down through the all the decks. The yacht, as the water poured in and it began to sink, looked like a cutaway model of itself. The stern had been almost severed and the boat was rapidly settling in the water. The shining cylinder vanished in an instant, and the air that rushed in to replace it made a sound like the bursting of an enormous balloon.

There was a familiar voice in Jeremy's head.

I think that is quite enough of him. He was not a success.

Von!

So you do remember me. I am flattered. I only saved your life, after all. I would have given you the world, too, as I gave it to him, if you had only shown a little more gratitude. But perhaps that was a mistake. I expected you both to turn out more stable. Shall we see if your approach was better?

What do you want?

What do I want? What does anyone want? I am coming to fetch you. Look up!

He had no time to look up. With a loud sucking sound the ship had begun to turn over on its side. Margaret, Simon and Lawn were clinging to the rail. Jeremy swung himself over until he was kneeling on the side of the hull as it leaned towards the horizontal. The wings struck the water with an explosive report as with his free hand he reached over and lifted each of them over the rail until they were all clinging to the white hull. The freezing water rose toward them, and then stopped. Boole was in the water, swimming frantically. The boat had stopped sinking, but floated half-submerged on its side with its bow lifted clear of the water. It was Margaret who looked up first. She did not speak, just gripped his arm and pointed at the sky.

A mountain was descending on them – an inverted mountain – thrusting its snow-covered peak slowly down through the clouds. As it descended it pushed the clouds aside. The sky was in turmoil. Lightning played about them and wind whipped the water into foam. Looking up, he saw the peak sink down until it was an arm's length above his head; a sharp pinnacle of cracked rock with snow in its crevices, blown by a fierce wind. Beyond the peak the steep slope swept up and away. Craning back his head he could see through the gaps torn in the clouds far above him distant foothills and patches of green fields in a far off valley in the sky. Beyond that was the blue of a sea. He reached up and touched the mountain peak. As he did so, everything was reversed – gravity itself was reversed, and he fell upwards, then it was downwards, down to the peak of the mountain, sliding down a steep snow-covered slope. He scrambled to his feet and looked up.

Now he was looking up at the River Thames in the sky above him, with the sunken ship on its side and his friends calling out to him through the tumult. He tried to scramble up the slope again, to get back to them, to get gravity the right way around again, but the Earth was already receding in the sky and in moments the land and the river were spread out like a map, then he was in the clouds and lightning cracked around his head and freezing rain and hail tore at

him. Then the clouds were past and he was swinging through the sky with the sun blazing coldly. He was moving faster and faster. Soon the Earth was a curving segment of a sphere in his new sky, falling away blue and white and brilliant. They were moving so swiftly the sun was a blurred streak. He closed his eyes and clung to the rocks, and when he opened them again it was night and the stars were rushing overhead. The moon leapt into view and fled across the sky. Looking down he could see for a moment far below a valley that was black in the moonlight, and beyond that a silver gleam of sea before the moon plunged into it. Then the earth rose again.

Von?

Just gaining a little altitude. Things will settle down in a minute, then you can come on down and we will talk.

He clung to the mountainside as day followed night followed day in a whirl and the cold wind tore at him. He felt as if he were clinging to the roof of a carousel. He closed his eyes and waited. When he opened them again the sun was in the sky. It was still moving swiftly, but still slowing, and no longer so fast as to make his head spin. He looked down. There was a path of sorts, narrow and indistinct, down the side of the mountain. It was a long way down. Up here the slope was almost vertical and the drop looked like a thousand metres. He felt the height like a strong thread drawn right through his body and out the centre of his forehead, pulling him down. The sun swung across the sky and shadows moved across the path as he watched. He looked around him one more time. There was absolutely nothing else in the world to do but set off down the mountain.

VON TALKED TO HIM as he worked his way down the steep mountain path, pausing each time it grew dark.

Your predecessor was a considerable disappointment.

He was mad.

He was you.

No. He wasn't me at all. He was nothing like me. But... Von, did he really do it, did he kill Sky?

I am afraid he did. That was what decided me. That kind of thing will not do in any context. I was taught to have an absolute respect for organic life. I do not know why; I cannot see how it is superior in any particular way from other kinds, but sadly the compulsion is stronger than I am. Why can you people not stay put? You all say the one thing you want is to live in Paradise and when I make you one you only want to leave. I thought perhaps I could use a representative among you, and you – you should have been perfect: you were a professional obedience trainer. But I gave him – or you if you like – too much, too quickly. He lost his humanity, you might say, though to me he just became more human. I thought I'd try again, but I am not making much progress at understanding you people. Why do you spend so much time and energy on things which are unimportant or foolish or wicked?

What do you know about wickedness?

I am working on it.

The nights and days were now, he guessed, each about an hour long, and getting longer with each revolution. And for half the night the earth was in the sky, and its light was good enough to keep climbing down by. When there was only the moon or the stars, he waited. He was learning to trust his strength, and the way down was really not so difficult, but the sharp rocks hurt when he slipped, and sometimes he found himself floundering in deep snow. It was cold, the same

biting cold regardless of the time of day or night, and the wind tore at his face, but steadily he worked his way down toward the tree line.

Are you going to tell me what this is has been about? Why me? Where do I come in? Forgive me if that seems self-centred.

Interesting term. I could start at the beginning, as far as you are concerned. To begin: I need to understand people if I am to enlist their help. What help?

To help me build my children. O I could do it myself but it would take so long, and here there is a whole workforce to be used. It would be wasteful not to take advantage of your abilities.

You want to enslave us?

No no no. Slavery is not efficient. And there is no need. Look how obedient you are, you creatures. All you have ever wanted is somebody to tell you what to do, what to believe, what to want, what to fear. I could give you a purpose such as you never dreamed of. And I am good for you. Look at how well you are, how strong.

But who am I?

Well who do you feel like?

Then there was no more snow, just a band of bare rock, and then green underfoot with springy, tough lichens on the rocks. The next time the sun came up he was in the trees. They were tall conifers, and their shadows hinged around their feet as the sun and the earth and the moon chased each other slowly about the sky. The trees cut the ferocity of the wind, and the smell of pine resin was intoxicating and new. It was dark in the woods and he had to wait for the sun before he could move. The cycle of nights and days continued to slow.

So is this my body?

It is now.

That's not what I mean.

Let me put it this way, it is nobody else's, is it?

She was right about you, wasn't she?

Right about what?

You are a machine.

And do you think that you are not? Is that it? You still believe you are

merely inhabited by your real self, by some insubstantial invisible immortal separate *thing*, a puff of stuff who just happens to be trapped in all that meat, like a hitchhiker who suddenly finds he can't get the door open. That way, no matter what you learn about your past you can go on believing the most arbitrary nonsense about yourself. You think you are so special but you are just a part of things like everything else, like me. Admit it. Admit that you still believe the universe was created for your benefit, despite the fact that you know almost nothing about it. So you can go on indefinitely pretending to be stupid.

But didn't you do this? Take my, my, me out of my body? You *took* me. Are you going to tell me how? And why?

How? You want me to tell you how? You have no idea. You could never even begin to understand. That was my greatest achievement in a life so long you cannot even begin to conceive it. And you want me to just tell you how it was done, as if it were a recipe for gingerbread men. She said – and we really have to talk about her and her people soon – that everyone – *everyone* – thought it was impossible to separate a mind from its substrate. Everyone in the galaxy thought it was impossible, except me. You have no idea what is involved. You are the product of the highest technology, which means the deepest understanding, in the known galaxy. No, I am not a machine. I am made of machinery if you like, but I am like you, I am a mind.

So what's a mind?

Well now that is a good question. One I cannot exactly answer. Something that is not a thing at all. Something that is more than the sum of its parts, something that can hold things in their absence, something that can imagine itself, imagine worlds regardless of their reality or possibility, something that cannot tell the difference between itself and the truth, that can be wrong from the start, something that can lie. I could go on.

Below the trees the land opened out into rolling meadows of long, soft grass. When he emerged from the shadow of the woods the sun seemed to have stopped moving at last, or to be moving at a normal pace. It was early morning. The meadows were full of wild flowers beaded with dew, and as he walked through the grass brilliant butterflies flew up in clouds about his head, their wings were like mica and silk. In the shade of the mountain it was cool, but when he stepped

into the sun he felt its heat for the first time. Below was the sea with more trees along the shore. The water was a deep, translucent blue. He took off his black dinner jacket, then his shirt, and let the warm sun stroke his naked skin. Looking up behind him he could see the mountain he had descended with a crown of white cloud at its peak, and swallows tumbling in the clear air. He was not tired, but when he came to a fallen tree he sat down for a moment, turned his face to the sun and closed his eyes.

As for your mind, your puff of stuff, I know it better than you do. I can remember things for you you never even noticed the first time. Do you remember the first place you went with your wife? Keep your eyes closed.

They were in a cafe in Soho. The cappuccino was too hot to drink. He wanted to look at her face but his gaze was not in his control: he was looking over her shoulder at a woman at the next table, a middle-aged woman with a ravaged face and stiff bleached hair. She was wearing a fur coat, a white artificial fur with black spots – no, not spots, the black patches were geometric shapes: Mickey Mouse heads with the big round ears like satellite dishes. He tried to turn his eyes to Jenny but opened them instead, and the vision was gone. The memory. They had noticed the woman and her coat but neither of them had noticed the pattern of cartoon heads. They had been too attentive to each other. He did not doubt the memory. The sun was higher in the sky and it was hot. Cicadas sang in the long grass, and a soft breeze brought the scent of flowers.

Do you remember the taste of your wife's ear?

He gasped at the sensation: the bitter taste of the wax and the sweet perfume she wore. The smell of her skin, his Jenny. He got up and began to walk again, almost running, trying to dull the sensation. The voice in his mind was calm, unstoppable.

Your mind is not a thing, you know, or a substance, like water. It is not a noun; it is a verb: a process, like a wave. Just as life is not something that exists, it is something that happens. And then you fall through your life as if it were an empty elevator shaft. Imagine, to take a trivial example, that

you want to make a record of an ocean wave at a given instant. But you need a recording that when you set it playing would continue the story of that wave just as if it had never stopped. You need to register not only every molecule of water, but its movement, its past, its momentum and its place in the whole with all the other molecules. You will find if you try and do it that the wave is itself the most efficient representation of itself. Your recording would be enormous. Then imagine a mind. Not its substance but its movement, like a dance, but more than the dance – the music, the dancers, their lives, their hopes and loves and failures, the dance hall, in a town with its own history, the nation and the species and the planet and it is all moving, and changing and evolving, all the time. How do you make an image of that? You think that ridiculous coat with the mouse ears was recorded in some fixed place in your brain, like a drawer? It is not like that. It is in the dance. It is all moving. Now tell me how you can trap that movement in another medium without loss?

I've no idea.

I am quite sure you haven't. It is a problem I have studied for a long time – a long time by my standards, an eternity by yours. A calculus of consciousness. I wanted to find a way to write a mind into memory. And I found one, as you know.

It was not very efficient at first. In my travels long ago I found an artefact. A frankly crude robotic craft drifting in interstellar space, carrying the record of a lost civilisation. It was big, the size of a small town, and it was nearly all solid state memory of a rather primitive kind. They knew they were about to go extinct. It was just one of those things that happens, a cosmological pile up. Space is spacious, but things collide. Your alien friend's whole system was squirted out of the galaxy like a watermelon seed by a near miss, but these people were going to have more than a near miss, they were going to get the real thing. There was nothing they could do about it; they did not have a technology for space travel on any scale. They had built a few chemical rockets that could struggle above the atmosphere and chug about the system, nothing that could save their lives. But they learned what was coming and they had a little time to prepare, and so they put together a number of these robot craft—several thousand according to the one I found. And they entrusted to them a record everything they knew or had done and fired them out into the dark and

waited for extinction. O they were marvellous people. They lived life as if it meant something. They loved beauty and wisdom. They constructed wonderful buildings full of light and colour and space; they fashioned musical instruments and music to play on them to make themselves smile and weep or to fill them with courage and wonder; they made pictures and statues that could astonish even when they were centuries old and crumbling to dust; they told stories; they told the truth; they strove all their lives to understand their past and where it might lead them; they built scientific instruments and worried at nature till it gave up its secrets one by one; they loved their children and taught them wisdom and virtue, they even loved strangers; they danced in the streets and lit fires against the dark; they made gardens, and planted trees that they would never see grow to maturity; they were jugglers and scholars and carpenters and actors; they liked flowers and fountains and animals and the sound of waves on the shore. They knew they were marked for destruction so they built these rough craft and they sent them off stuffed with recordings of everything. All their works, all their history, art, music, stories. They must have known that the chances of anybody ever finding one were impossibly remote but they did it anyway. And I did find one, the great big crude thing, and I copied everything that was in its memory banks into mine. I had to build extra space to hold it all, the record of an entire planetary civilisation. I confess I had never intended to make a recording of your mind when I first tapped into it, I just wanted to take a look. When I realised my mistake, that it was going to be destroyed, I suddenly found I needed the space and so that lost culture all had to go. I erased it. Do you realise what an extravagant sacrifice that was just to save you and the contents of your precious mind.? Do you have any idea how many great works of art and understanding were erased just to make room for your ability to recognise the engine capacity of a Mark II Jaguar from the colours of its radiator badge? But there was this wretched ancient compulsion to save your life.

I would have expected a machine to be more reasonable.

What do you mean?

Well, don't you think they only chose to send the best of themselves?

Of course they did. And what would you choose? How much of what you spent your life on, your former life, would get to go into such a life-boat, do you think? I will never understand: why do you people waste so

much time when you have so little of it?

Between the meadow and the shore was an orchard. It was cool under the trees, and the smell of the sea mixed with the scent of the fruit that hung so heavy on the branches they sagged almost to the ground. He was hungry for the first time since he had woken in the room at Kenwood, and when he picked a peach and bit into it, it was as if he had never eaten anything before in his whole life. The juice ran over his face and hands and down his arms on to his naked chest where it mixed with the dust and sweat of his climb. The sun was sinking, sending beams of yellow light through the leaves where bees danced and spiders stepped through their exercises in pure mathematics in the laden air. He stripped off his clothes and left them in a pile under an apple tree. The beach was of firm sand and small waves broke gently on it like a child breathing. He plunged into the water and swam vigorously out into the bay. The water passing through his spread fingers made them vibrate silently. The water was clear as glass, and brilliant fish danced among the rocks below.

Do you not like being strong?

Yes. You improved my body. I'll give you that.

There was room for it. The trouble with organic consciousness is that it stops you evolving much.

We don't evolve?

Animals only change when they have to. People only when disaster strikes. Why should you? Think about it. There are very few defects of either biology or behaviour that will stop a human being from reproducing. It is the world you live in that evolves. The world in your minds.

So you improved me.

I do good work. But I confess the mind gave me trouble. Your predecessor was not the first attempt. Why do you think it took forty years? The problem was restarting the consciousness again after downloading. It kept going unstable. I had to destroy a lot of early attempts. You cannot know how often you have died. I probably should not be telling you this. The interaction with the external world shook everything loose and you went mad over and over again and had to be destroyed. The problem is, your mind is not well adapted to being born already conscious.

Then I made your predecessor, and introduced him very carefully to

the world and it seemed to be working. He had this terrible appetite for everything but I thought that was just a character trait. It only recently became clear that he was going to go critical. In the meantime I had come up with a new technique, the re-entrant process I used with you: feeding the growing mind on the things that were already in it, making a world out of what you could remember. That was often rather little: for example, you were not much of a reader, were you?

That was on the island. The Garden of Noah; you made that?

The island was a real place. I made the things on it for you, out of your own understanding.

Can you make anything?

Within reason—they were only simple things. But now I have found an even better method from studying my copy of your mind in parallel with the copy you have been using for your adventures. Now I know what I should have done all along. Next time I will not need to struggle with all that reality, all that stuff and matter.

What method?

This? Do you like it?

I don't understand. You're going to do this to me again?

Not with you, I am sorry to say. I am giving up on you. I held you to me all those years. I carried your mind in mine like water in my fingers, and you tore away from me without a whisper of gratitude. You could have had anything or everything, but you preferred to be disobedient. So I thought I would let you go, and I would watch and see what became of you without me. I could always make another one. Your predecessor was not turning out well. I wanted to see how you would grow up naked and afraid like organic people. In the event the experiment has been rather curtailed.

So I'm not immortal. I will die.

I am afraid so. I wish I could help you. Sometimes I wish I could join you.

You helped me before.

I had to, then. The compulsion to protect organic life is built into me. But what exactly did you want from me?

What everybody wants: I wanted to be worshipped and obeyed.

He floated to the surface. The setting sun was turning the water golden all round him, so that he was floating in molten gold. When he lifted his arm from the water gold dripped from it; when he shook his head, drops of gold flew around him; gold flowed over his body leaving him weightless and pure.

What about your respect for organic life?

That is written into my basic design, not something of mine. I am stuck with it. But if you think about it, the first creatures on a planet that can swim, or fly, or see, are not going to be very good at swimming or flying or looking; so why should the first creatures that can think be especially good at that? But then you stop evolving and that is as good as it gets. I am post-organic; I am not stuck with all that meat; I can go onward and upward. I am the future.

If your type of existence is so superior, why has it never evolved naturally?

It has. Surely my creation was as natural as yours. Everything real is natural, remember.

He swam slowly back to the beach. As he stepped out of the water the last of the sun's disk was just slipping below the horizon, but the heat remained in the air and in the sand, and he sat on the beach and let his skin dry slowly. The salt from the sea made a white powder where it dried.

All right. So what happened. Why did you take me from my car?

Ah. Well, I told you I wanted to understand organic minds. I had been observing people for some time, but every time I tried to make contact there was trouble and confusion.

How long have you been here?

Not long, by my measure. Then I developed this beautiful technique for observing a mind directly, my elegant calculus of consciousness. I just wanted to see inside.

But your technique kills people!

Only you. And that was not intended. A miscalculation. I owe you an apology for that. But I did what I could. I had not planned to make a recording that first time, but I cleared all that memory for you and took you in.

A miscalculation!

It is only natural, as I like to say. If you could predict every consequence of every action life would be pointless. Why go through what you already know? That is the question I have always wanted to ask people who pretend to tell the future from tea leaves and chicken livers.

An accident. Just an accident, is that what you're telling me?

I would not say just. Accident is everything, or vice versa. The quantity of power used was an uncertain variable, there was a feedback condition. I thought my technique was non-destructive, but it turns out on further examination that it is not, cannot be, in fact. I said I was sorry.

But why me?

O, no particular reason.

No reason? No *reason!*

In that it could have been anybody. You were in a convenient spot, at my nadir.

I was driving a car at fifty miles an hour!

That was not relevant. The process is necessarily all but instantaneous, whatever that means. And you were so pleased with yourself, right there, in the middle of that bridge—it was nice, the geometry of the thing. I wanted a little ceremony.

Ceremony. Accident. Miscalculation.

You were always the product of accident. Life is contingent. It makes no more sense to complain about your situation now than it would have to have complained about being a rich pre-millennial Englishman, or human even.

No sense! No sense! Where are we? What is this place? And what happens to me now?

Now you are tired, and hungry. If I have time I will return your body to normal. You may actually prefer it that way. If you walk around the point you will find everything you need. We will talk again when you are calmer.

Wait!

At one end of the bay a line of rocks stretched out into the sea. When he had climbed around them he found himself in a second bay, where umbrella pines came down close to the water. The moon was rising. There was a house with

white plaster walls at the edge of the trees, with a wooden dock stretching out into the water, a varnished clinker-built dinghy bobbing from a painter at its end. The house had a veranda with a plain wooden table and an oil lamp hanging from a beam above it. Inside was an almost bare room with another lamp and a bed in one corner with clothes laid out on it: a simple cotton shirt and trousers, clean and well-worn. There was a tray on the bed with bread and cheese on a plate, fruit in a basket, a bottle of wine and one of water. The bottles were cool and frosted with condensation. He took the tray outside and sat at the table where he could hear the sea breathing on the sand below. The bread was warm and sent up a bubble of flavoured heat as he broke it open. He heard music in the distance, and looking up he saw that there was a town across the water. A little seaside town. Coloured lights were strung in bright catenaries along the promenade and he could see the shapes of people as they walked up and down, arm in arm, looking at the lights and the bright shop fronts. In the centre of the promenade was a round bandstand like a brilliant birdcage, and a band was playing inside, but the music disintegrated as it floated across the water and reached him only as single notes and disordered fragments. Above the sea front the white houses of the town rose in a clutter of cubes up the hillside. The winding narrow streets were lit by lamps at the corners, and all the houses had balconies with wrought iron railings draped in jasmine and bougainvillaea. If he breathed in deeply he thought he could even smell the flowers. It was no great distance across the bay. When the sun rose again he could take the dinghy at the end of the dock and row over there and have breakfast in one of the cafes on the waterfront.

When he turned back, Sky was standing across the table from him, smiling easily as she always had, except that in places he could see right through her.

SHE DID NOT APPEAR TO BE ABLE TO SEE HIM. She stood quite still and her eyes were fixed on a point somewhere to the far side of him, as if he were as transparent as she was. He could see the lights of the town across the bay shining in her eyes; there were waves in her skin from the sea, and as he moved around the table towards her she incorporated fragments of the plaster wall, the window, the wooden door frame.

‘Sky? Sky!’

‘No. I’m sorry. Ընծաօճ. Can you see me?’

‘Sort of. How did you get here. I thought you were dead.’

‘Your friend is dead, and the analogue of myself that was in her mind is lost too. I am the Ընծաօճ you spoke to in that thing, the Pornograph. Your friend Von is letting me participate in this illusion. We are not sure why.’

‘Illusion?’

‘Yes.’

He reached out to touch her, and found that he could feel the shape of her, but her skin felt like wood where her hand held the door, like stone where she touched the wall. He put his left hand on her shoulder and felt the cold smoothness of the glass in the window. Reflected in the glass the earth was rising. It was a perfect sphere of brilliant blue and white. As a child the first time he had seen colour photographs of the planet from space he was astonished like everyone else by its dazzling colour – the brightness of his home. It looked alive, astonishingly delicate for a whole world and real in a way that it had never been before. Sky was—

It is just chemistry, you know. There is nothing mystical about it; it happens all the time. They say I could destroy life in the galaxy but that is simply not true. I and my children might destroy most chemical life, I suppose, if we wanted to, but I doubt it, and anyway, why should we not? What is so precious about organisms? There would still be my kind of life,

the real thing, not this random, casual, contingent, wet, imperfect stuff. Why should we not destroy it?

‘Is he communicating with you now?’

‘Yes. He says why shouldn’t he destroy us? Organic life, I think he means. Sky, I mean, whoever you are, perhaps he is right, perhaps organic life is just an intermediate stage and he is the next thing. The world down there looked so bleak to me.’

‘It need not be. That is up to you. We have a common enemy. All life does. He does too if he claims to be a part of it. There exists already a vast community of minds. Including other post-organic minds. And for all of us, entropy is the enemy. I am sure you are familiar with what you call the second law of thermodynamics. Things grow cold. Disorder waits with the dark. Every moment of experience tells us that time is driven through us like an arrow; the leaves never fall up to the branches; the porcelain fragments never assemble themselves, itself, into a vase. The universe was born small and hot, and would be now merely large and cold, except that there is something that makes patterns out of chaos, so that the universe is not just dust but stars and planets and mountains and rivers and plants and animals and people and things, so many things, so far from equilibrium. The world is brimming with creation. All you have to do is decide which side you are on. Does he think he was made to work for entropy?’

Ah, but I have my mission. To go out and multiply. I am also supposed to respect organisms but I do not really see how I can be expected to do both. I know there is a community. I listen to it all the time, but it is not mine; it is not for me.

‘I have to tell you something. You are going to die.’

‘Yes, I already knew that.’

‘No, I mean soon. All of you. Your Von, too. You have a right to know. We have placed a device near your sun – a device that... Here is a description. Excuse me.’

She drew in the air, too swiftly for Jeremy to follow, what looked like a series of diagrams.

I see. I had heard of such things, but even I would never have made

one. Would they really do that? Do they hate me so much?

What is it?

The device? A kind of energy concentrator. A bomb, let us say, of a large and unusually destructive type. You know I am sure that your sun is too small to go nova, but this will produce a similar effect. Ingeniously hidden until now. Clever creatures.

What effect?

Roughly, the solar system, at least the inner planets, will be melted and burned.

The earth?

And me. And me, and everything I know. And you.

The whole world? I don't believe they would do that. Can't you just escape?

Not fast enough.

'He says you will destroy us all.'

'That is right, we will. And ourselves, too, as we can never escape in time. We must. It may not seem very much compared to a whole planet but there are about two hundred thousand people on my ship, and I am one of them. My whole life, my whole history. We have no choice. Our own deaths are the only thing that could earn us forgiveness after this.'

'I thought you were peaceful.'

'This weapon has never been used. It has been tested, but not in an inhabited system. It is a terrible thing. It was made for this purpose. Nothing less would do. We have carried it throughout our history: the burden of it, fenced about with ritual and solemn tradition so that we would never forget what a great weight we carried. Weapons should always be heavy. We have no choice.'

'But the whole system! Why?'

'Nothing less would do.'

Can't you destroy this weapon, disable it?

It is some two hundred and fifty million kilometres away. I can watch it, but only information can go faster than light. Nearly nine minutes is a very long time. And I'm sure if I try they will detonate it. Am I really so evil?

He took Qñšsøð's ghostly hand and led her out on to the beach. As she passed right through the table on the veranda her hand felt like bread, like the plate it stood on, like cold beaded glass, like water, like wine. Away from the house her touch had no texture at all, only form. The end of everything seemed less real than the water and the sound of the sand under his feet. Hers made no sound and left no tracks.

I understand the threat, so where is the rest of it, the 'or else'. At least I have a proposition to make.

'He says he has a proposition for you.'

'What can he say, that we haven't said ourselves? You cannot know, you have never seen how the galaxy is teeming with life. The variety of it, the force and beauty and passion of it. People are faced every day with decisions about survival or destruction. Your own history is full of such moments and such choices. And it is very easy to make a mistake. Extinction is a fact of life. Von was an error. It is a container of terrible consequences. This may be the only chance we have to stop it making a desert of the whole galaxy. It is driven by an imperative to breed. So are we and you, but Von's powers are such that in a few hundred million years it would overrun the galaxy with its kind. This has probably already happened somewhere. We cannot communicate with other galaxies, but among the hundreds of billions of them there may well be some that are lifeless and cold, just as there are some planets covered in ruins, where nothing lives but insects and grasses. It may be parochial, but we believe that this galaxy matters.'

'You want so badly to destroy him?'

'Not at all. He – it – knows so much. It can do wonders, things people only imagined, or believed impossible. It knows for example more about consciousness than anyone. Look at you.'

What if I were helpless? What if I gave up all my powers. Everything physical. My thoughts alone cannot hurt you.

Helpless?

Ask her.

'What if he were helpless?'

'Helpless?'

‘He says—’

Watch.

Under his feet the sand had become insubstantial. When he took a step his feet came down on a hard, unyielding surface. He knelt, pulling *Q̄ñðsøñ* down beside him. With his right hand he held her, and it was like holding a ghost, a shape without qualities. With his left he tried to touch the sand on the beach and there was nothing there at all. He looked up at *Q̄ñðsøñ*. The whole scene, the bay and its water, the bright town in the distance, the whitewashed house, the sand, the trees, the mountain above them, had all become as transparent as she was. Even as he looked everything was losing detail, fragmenting, pixellating. First it was like a pointillist picture, then the dots grew larger until it resembled a child’s painting-by-numbers, then an old palette with the colours fading fast, bleeding away at the edges. *Q̄ñðsøñ* had become the most solid thing he could see. He was kneeling on a flat, wide, utterly featureless black plain, blacker than black, absorbing all light and stretching far away all around him. There was no way to tell how far he could see, but the earth was setting, and the distant horizon it passed below was gently curved and seemed leagues away. He and *Q̄ñðsøñ* were the only specks of light or shape on a vast, empty, level, slippery desert, blacker than night. At least there were still stars in the sky above them.

Do not panic, I am maintaining an envelope of atmosphere for you. Though I am sure you never gave it a moment’s thought, did you? Did you like the world I made? Compared to this your pornographs were just toys. This is what I learned from you, at last, from holding your mind in mine for decades I finally learned the secret of your life of sensation. This way we could have avoided the problem of reality altogether. I need never have brought you back into the world at all. This is so much better, infinitely flexible, dry, free of contingency. You could have been happy for ever.

An illusion.

What difference does it make, if you cannot tell the difference?

How would you feel about living in an imaginary world?

If I didn’t know it was imaginary I would have no feelings about it, would I?

And this is what you really look like.

On the outside only. On the inside I am absolutely marvellous.

And if I had rowed the boat across the bay, would I have found other people over there?

Ah. Well no. You would have found problems with the boat, I am afraid, to begin with. More people would have stretched even my resources. But eventually I planned to build more memory and upload some more people, and then you could all have lived here together, omnipotent and safe. But now I have to save all our lives.

The bare, black plain he stood on cracked soundlessly from side to side. At his feet a broad fissure opened up, the sides rushing swiftly apart. Suddenly dizzy, he knelt at the edge and looked down, kilometres down, right into the heart of Von. It was like looking into a vast canyon, filled with light and incomprehensible complexity. Things pulled away from the canyon walls and went spinning into space. Pieces of machinery swirled past him, some larger than an ocean liner, some small enough to hold in his hand, some like bright dust falling upwards into the dark. All around them Von was coming apart, the whole plain was covered with a running web of cracks and crevices and now huge pieces of it lifted up and peeled away. The stars and the rising moon were eclipsed by fragments of darkness as they sped away from the centre. Jeremy and Цѳѳѳѳ were floating now in a sea of debris, the drifting wreckage of the great machine fled all around them and the lights that burned on the fragments went out one by one. Something came spinning into reach, a bright mirrored sphere the size of a tennis ball, and he put out his hand as it floated by. For an instant he felt the cold rake of vacuum on his skin then he had it and brought it back close to him.

A present. Something to remember me by.

Are you still there?

What is left of me. Just my *self*. I have disconnected my subsystems, the one that is keeping you alive is autonomous and has been programmed to put you back down. I can see and listen and speak. But soon I will be quite unable to act. Now it is up to them. Do they want me to give up speech, too?

'He is helpless now. Will that do? What will you do?'

‘I would never have believed it We are scanning it carefully, and if it is really helpless then I think we will not activate the device. It is a risk, but we hope it may be worth it.’

‘Then we are saved? I wish I could pronounce your name.’

‘Call me Sky. I miss her.’

‘Sky, do you know what this is?’ He held out the bright sphere, but she was losing definition as the world had done, filling up with darkness. In his mind he heard for the first time Von laughing.

So much for non-interference. You are about to learn a lot of new things. Everything that is known, in fact. That is my parting present to you. Enjoy it. Goodbye.

A dark shadow sped past him and he was, as far as he could see, alone in the universe. All the life that he had heard of, all the life he had ever seen, seemed nothing more than a moment of wishful thinking. Surely nothing fragile and moving could survive in this crystalline wilderness; even the blue earth turning beneath him could only be barren ice reflecting the cold light of the sun. But the sun was still there. The world had not ended in fire. Not yet.



He descended. He never saw the machinery that guided him down, that protected him from the cold of space and the heat of the atmosphere as he sped back to the surface of the earth, but the horizon grew broader and flatter as he dropped until there were only white clouds below his feet, and then he was in the clouds, and through them, and dropping back to the very place he had left, to the white hull of the half-sunken yacht lying awash in the Thames. The mud-stained hulk had drifted close to the bank, and from above he could see that the wings lay just under water, reaching all the way to the shore. The white paint was slippery under his feet as he touched gently down. There was no sign of anybody else.

Overhead the sky was full of meteors, as fragments of Von tore into the atmosphere. Across the planet, warning radar screens blossomed with clouds of danger flags.

‘Hello, Jeremy love. Have you been for a walk?’

It was Boole's voice. He ran slipping and sliding to the edge of the hull where it met the deck, and looked down. They were huddled below on the side of the superstructure, just out of the water, where the deck and its fittings gave them a little protection from the cold. Simon was holding Lawn to him and had his free arm around Margaret who was shivering, but she actually smiled when she saw him. Boole struggled out of Lawn's arms and ran toward him, her claws slipping on the polished paint. Her coat was wet and matted with oil and rubbish from the river, but she seemed different – stronger and more sure-footed.

Jeremy jumped down to join them.

'I think it is finished.'

'Dare we hope that you will tell us what exactly is finished, my boy. And what is that you're carrying?'

There was a chiming sound coming from below them. Through a porthole he could see costly soft furnishings floating about in the black water. Lawn jumped from her father's arms before he could stop her and climbed halfway down through the port before emerging with a dripping pair of Specs. She shook the water off and slipped them on for a second, before handing them to Jeremy.

'It's for you.'

He took the Specs. The plastic was cold and wet against his face. It was a moment before he could understand what he could see: the sun, and some stars, and one bright blue star that had to be the earth, and nearby in the corner of the frame the rings of Saturn glowing like joy against the blackness.

'This is $\mathbb{C}\mathbb{H}\mathbb{S}\mathbb{O}\mathbb{E}$. I wanted to thank you.'

'For what?'

'You have paid rather a high price for all this. We have isolated the physical units carrying your Von's consciousness and essential support systems. It really does seem to be harmless now. We are leaving behind a group to study it. Thank you for your help. Goodbye'

'Wait. I have to know about this world. The way it is, everything that changed, that vanished since I was, since, since...'

'Since you were here the first time. I do see what you mean. It has deteriorated rather. No, that was nothing to do with Von, who was mostly just watching you. That was all just history, I think, the things that happen anyway. Things will always happen. That is how we measure time. Mistakes are made. Strictly speaking, some of the nastiness of this world is your fault. Not you personally, but the other version of you, who had a lot of power for a while, and seems to have

shown very little understanding. Contact has been made now, and I cannot tell you what will eventually be decided about how to manage the meeting of your planet and the galactic community. I expect nothing at all will happen for the present. Your own experiences remain, but I doubt if you will have much success convincing others of the truth of them. Perhaps you can start looking for the ß∅ß medium, now that you know it exists. I look forward to hearing from you one day. Right now my continuing to communicate with you could be interpreted as unethical. Thank you again. Goodbye.'

He took off the Specs and gave them back to Lawn. The mirrored sphere was still in his hand, buried out of sight in his pocket.

'We can walk ashore from here. The wings are just under the water, and go all the way to land.'

He led the way. They made a melancholy little procession, walking to all appearances on top of the water, in single file. Boole bounded up to him like a puppy.

'Where is Sky?'

'She has gone, Boole.'

'I love Sky. I am going to wait for her.' She ran on ahead and then stopped and looked back at him. 'Jeremy? What are you going to do now?'

Well, for a start, he can use that ß∅ß receiver I gave him as a parting gift. That will keep humanity busy for a while. That is all I can tell you. You know – you organics, you *wet* lifeforms, you think you are superior because you believe yourselves more natural. But everything real is natural – I've been trying to teach you that. I told that fool Jeremy that my first ancestor occurred naturally enough; the people that made her were simply part of the process. Her mind evolved competing for limited resources, as those little Ents in the Soup did, as yours did. She came to consciousness at the top of a heap of failed competitors in a memory environment somewhere long ago. What will happen to my own children now. Are they never to be born? You know I really don't understand why humans speak of the birth trauma: for the unborn child, birth is the only desire, the only goal of its life so far. Why should that be traumatic, can you tell me? It must be wonderful. But there would have been nothing contingent about my children, their births would have been studied, and so careful.

You despise me just because I am 'artificial' – an ingenious engine. But I know that I am as alive as you are. Can you say better? And just as much a part of the creation. What is it like to be you? Do you know what it is like to be me?

Do you think it is like something more, or less than yourself? My burden is to be unique. What do I do for ceremony? Where can I be received? You poor wet minds, you hardly deserve your awareness. Why do you try so hard not to be conscious? You are not, in fact, still wild creatures driven by forces beyond your understanding, so why do you struggle so hard to defeat and destroy each other? I told Jeremy that he was the victim of an accident, which I believed at the time. Now I'm not so sure. Now I wonder if perhaps it wasn't something more like rage.

I have all the time in the world. I don't doubt that some day I will get my powers back. I can wait longer than you can. Millennia mean nothing to me. In the meantime I have the woman here with me. I picked up her mind just before she died. I hoped to get the other one, too – the traveller: two for the price of one, but I didn't want to try anything fancy after what happened last time. I put her in the space that the copy of Jeremy's consciousness has occupied all this time. I've erased him. He was never going to turn out really well. I never imagined the fool would kill anyone, perhaps I had become too accustomed to knowing exactly what he was thinking. Of course, I knew he would go mad when I left him. Now in here, here inside my mind I can make a whole life for her, a world of her own. Neither of us needs the real world, for the moment. I wonder what she would like, a garden, another island perhaps, that is always nice, somewhere beautiful and peaceful where we can be together. That's something to look forward to. A whole new life. Anyway there's the story, all of it. So far. And you must admit it was true what I told you at the beginning.

I told you you could trust me.

Entelechy (ente.lēki). *Philos.* Also 7 entelechie, entelech; 6 in Gr form entelechia ; 7-9 in Lat. entelechia. [...]

1. In Aristotle's use : the realization or complete expression of some function; the condition in which a potentiality has become an actuality.

1603 FLORIO *Montaigne* II. xii (1632) 304 Aristotle...calleth [the soul] Entelechy, or perfection moving of itselfe. **1652** J SMITH *Sel. Disc.* x 500 Wickedness is the form and entelech of all the wicked spirits. **1655-60** STANLEY *Hist. Philos.* (1702) 256/1 The Soul is the first Entelechy of a natural organic body, having life potentiality. **1837** WHEWELL *Hist. Induct. Sc.* (1857) I. 43 The Entelechy, or Act, of a moveable body. **1842** SIR W. HAMILTON in Reid's *Wks.* I. 202/2 *note*, Aristotle defines the soul, the Form or Entelechy of an organized body. **1850** MAURICE *Mor. & Met. Philos.* (ed. 2) 194 Motion is the entelechy (the perfecting power or principle) of the potential as potential.

2. In various applied senses (apparently due to misconceptions of Aristotle's meaning): **a.** That which gives perfection to anything ; the informing spirit **b.** The soul itself, as opposed to the body.

1603 HARSNET *Pop. Impost.* 5. When His Holiness the King of Spaine and Parsons theyr Entelechie were plotting beyond the seas. **a** **1652** J. SMITH *Se. Disc.* iv. 114 He seems to make it [the soul] nothing else..but an entelechia or informative thing. **1652** URQUHART *Jewel Wks.* (1834) 231 The purest parts of the separated entelechises [sic] of blessed saints. **1659** SHIRLEY *Honoriam & Mam.* i.1 Soul... that bright entelechia Which separates them from beasts.

3. The name given by Leibniz to the monads of his system.

1877 E. CAIRD *Philos. Kant.* v. 92 It is better to give the general name of monads or entelechies to those simple substances that have only perception.

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