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Pelican

William Byron

A Thesis

in

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Abstract

Pelican

William Byron

This is a collection of ten stories written in an imaginative vein. They are generally odd in nature, and the oddness consists in the anomaly generated by the juxtaposition of very ordinary characters with extraordinary, even surrealistic circumstances.

The resolutions of the stories attempt to find a balance implicit in the tension between character and situation. Humour is created by the disparities of this kind of juxtaposition. A satirical treatment of the mores and excesses of the human aggregate plays a central role in the collection.

The vehicle by which contemporary life is satirized is one that has its roots in folk and fantasy traditions.

George MacDonald, author of Lilith and Phantastes, has remarked that what appears to be a most terrible outcome, may in reality be for the best.

The medieval symbolism of the pelican that feeds its young with blood from its own breast is an interesting, albeit not entirely convincing symbol, and has been chosen for this collection for its very fragility. We are not sure of the redemption in the sacrifice; nevertheless we are sure of the sacrifice.

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Pot Luck

"Yo de lay ee hoo!" Jim Wiggans bounded through the front door of the manor house and placed a parcel on the hall table. He clambered out of his old tweed jacket and hung it up on the brass wall hook, then fished in its pockets for his pipe and tobacco.

"Jim, darling, you're back early." Julia Wiggans came into the hallway from the kitchen stirring something in a small measuring cup. Her eyes twinkled.

"Gosh, that smells wonderful." Jim sniffed the air. "I'm so hungry I could eat the east side of a cow going west."

"Well, it's pot luck, again," Julia laughed. "Be ready in about an hour."

"Pot luck? Again?" Jim walked over to his wife and kissed the top of her head. "Well, it's only my favorite dish in the whole, wide universe, that's all. You beauty. That's what you are." He beamed at her.

Julia stood on tiptoes and pecked her husband's cheek. "And you're a handsome rogue. Now, what did you buy me?" She walked to the box on the table. "Something fabulous? Mink? Ermine perhaps?"

Jim laughed heartily. "What, more of those? You think you'd be tired of that kind of thing by now. You've got closets spilling over with 'em. Not to mention your jewelry." He lit his pipe, chuckling.

His wife wrinkled her nose at him. "There's no such thing as enough, don't you know that by now?"

"Well, perhaps you're right," Jim puffed happily at his pipe. "Anyway, it's something for the kitchen garden; make us feel a whole lot better." He began to undo the white cord binding the parcel. He pulled away the brown paper wrapping to reveal a rectangular mesh cage, about three feet long and a foot square. "Ta da!"

"Oh, Jim. It isn't!" Julia gasped.

"I don't know what else it could be." He grinned proudly.

"A genuine 'Have Mercy, Pal' animal trap." He stroked the side of Julia's auburn hair and looked at her seriously. "You know, darling, we were both feeling a little bit awful about those wire snares. And it never hurts to be kind."

"What a human being," she looked into his eyes. "I love you, James Wiggans, did you know that?"

"That's enough for me in this life, Mrs. Wiggans."

The phone rang, and Jim went to it. "Don't go away, kid," he said over his shoulder.

"Hello?"

"Am I speaking to Mr. J.Wiggans of 670 Bodkin Way?" The voice sounded as though it was nearly rupturing with bottled glee.

"That's what they call me," Jim answered affably. He winked at his wife.

The person on the phone apparently couldn't be more delighted.

"Well, then, Mr. J.Wiggans of 670 Bodkin Way, this is your lucky day, because this is Mel the Man on radio CYUR, and it's your turn to play, Trivia for Treasure!" A sound of canned applause came over the phone accompanied by some tinny theme music. Jim rolled his eyes ceilingwards. Julia ran into the livingroom and turned on the digital stereo

system to listen in.

"Are you all set, Mr. Wiggans?" Mel the Man sounded breathless.

"Fire away."

"Okey Dokey! Now. For a fabulous prize, can you tell us who invented the bicycle, and when. As you know, you'll have a big four minutes in which to answer. Jay, would you please start the clock." Exaggerated ticking noises began.

"Right," Jim drew a small breath. "I believe it was a blacksmith in Dumfries, Scotland by the name of Kirkpatrick Macmillan. It was...1839; yes, that's it. His bike weighed 57 pounds, had a 32 inch wheel in the front, and strangely, a 42 inch wheel in the back. They were made out of iron. What was really neat was that he carved a horse's head on the front of the wooden frame."

"You have two minutes left, Mr. - wait; what did you say?" Uncharacteristic sputtering sounds filtered across the airwaves. "Why, why, that's absolutely correct!" the voice cried. "And you know what that means," it thrilled merrily, regaining its composure with each utterance. Whistles blew. "You Knew The Trivia, So You Get The Treasure," Mel the Man informed him in low, reverberating tones. More canned applause. And our prize this month, Mr. J.Wiggans, is," a pause for effect, "That's right! A brand new, fully loaded, sensational Jaguar!"

"Well, gee. Thank you very much."

"Thank you for playing, 'Trivia For Treasure'," the announcer warbled. The theme music chimed in and Jim hung up the receiver.

Julia ran out of the living room looking ravished. "Oh, Jim. A Jaguar!"

"I guess we're going to have to get some more garage space," he looked out the front door window to where five new cars were parked by a converted stable. "We're running

out of room."

"Anyway, how nice," she glowed at him. "Er, did you just happen to know the answer? You were so quick."

Jim shook his head and gestured at a small bit of note paper laying on the phone table. "Nope. Last night for some reason, I simply felt I had to know about the history of the bicycle. I remember jotting down the facts and leaving, why I don't know, the paper next to the phone."

"Just another one of these coincidences?"

"I'm afraid so." They hugged each other, laughing.

A while later, Jim was drawing the cork from a chilled bottle of white wine on the kitchen counter. Julia was preparing the meat on the large butcher's block they'd bought in an antique shop.

"Ready for a drink, gorgeous?" he asked.

"I'm ready for a flock of them," she smiled. Jim brought her a glass.

"You've got such wonderful green eyes," he whispered.

"And you've got the most adorable freckles."

"On my nose?"

"Well, not precisely..."

"Honey."

"Sweetiepuss."

Julia walked to the sink and washed her hands, which were greasy from dressing the meat. "I just hate it when my hands get all slimy."

Jim poured himself some more wine. "Does it bother you to, um, clean these things? I

sure don't have the guts for it." He shuddered.

She pursed her lips. "Not really," she said slowly. "After all, it's more honest than simply buying already packaged meat at the Supermarket. And I'm really not fond of all those preservatives they use. Anyway, you're the one who has to catch them in traps. How do you feel about it?"

He sipped his drink. "At first? Not so good. But then I figured that hell, a couple of them a week won't make them extinct, will it? And don't ask me why, but that old guy who lived here before us was right on the nail. You eat these things, your luck improves. Who are we to argue? You explain it; I can't."

"It couldn't just be coincidence, could it, Jim?"

"Well, even if it is, I still don't want to change anything. Maybe I'm getting superstitious, but I like the way things are happening. The car tonight, the lottery last month," he waved his arm around the room. "What about that screw up at the bank with our mortgage payments last year? Their bloody computer fouls up, channels our money through the wrong accounts, and hey presto, they owe *us* money. Think of it." The sauce on the stove began to boil over and Julia turned it down, scraping in some finely diced shallots as she did so.

"God, that smells so good," Jim came over to the stove. "How do you do it?"

"It's simple, really," she said. "First, I rub their skins all over with fresh garlic and oil."

"You're making my mouth water."

"Then I put them side by side in my large roaster and pour on the marinade. I find it takes about one night to really work in. Fifteen minutes a pound for rare at 350 and that's all there is to it."

"How about that heavenly gravy."

She laughed. "You're going to get fat on that stuff," she chided.

"Not in a million years. What did the doctor say? I've somehow got the health and strength of a roaring ox, and the constitution of a seventeen year old. And it was the same for you. He said we must be blessed."

Julia opened the oven door and basted the roasting meat with melted butter. "Well, the gravy is made with the giblets," she explained. "The cats get the heads but that's about it. I was put off a bit by the green color at first, but a little worchestershire sauce beaten up with madeira fixed that up. What I really didn't like was when I had to twist their little necks when they were still alive. That horrible squeaking sound."

Jim got plates and cutlery and began to set the table. "I remember. We tried holding their heads under the cold water tap but they only got more lively." He giggled.

"Yes, that was awful. But I soon discovered that if you put them in the fridge they go to sleep. Then it's no trouble at all. And speaking of trouble, I hate to ask you, but maybe you could bait that nice new trap you picked up today. When you get back, supper's on!"

"No problem, m'lady Jim went back to the hallway and returned with the trap. He opened one of the kitchen cabinets and took down a bottle of rare Irish Whiskey and a small crystal tumbler. He went out through the back door with these things and peered about quietly. It was a large and rather overgrown kitchen garden they had, and it was bordered by dense thickets of old trees. Some snares were still hanging beneath the wooden fence, and he ripped them away. He couldn't stand that sort of cruelty, if the truth were known; he was happy to be done with it. This new trap was far more satisfying. The animal would be lured in by the bait, the door would swing shut, and there you were: fresh game. Jim set the trap beneath some lettuce plants. He poured some whiskey into the glass and

drained it. "Wonderful stuff," he smacked his lips. He refilled the glass to the brim, then carefully placed it in the cage on the small platform where the bait went. He carried the bottle back into the house.

"Have a seat, handsome," Julia had lit the candles and brought the meal to the table. Jim poured them some wine, sat down and rubbed his hands together.

"A leg all right for you, Jim?" Julia poised over the roasts with a carving knife.

"I could gobble a dozen of them," he answered.

They toasted each other and began to eat. He passed her broiled potatoes, she made sure that he didn't use too much salt. Jim asked how come she always got a bigger helping than he did. Julia looked at him and said, "Oink, oink."

When they finally finished, they sat back and had brandy. Jim lit up his pipe and regarded his wife lovingly.

"Tell me," he inquired, replete. "Whatever ^{do} you do with their little suits?"

*

Goose Fable

It was the way of it, that one crisp autumn morning Patrick Cuggy found himself striding through the fields with his great bow. A little something for his table would be nice, and it was a bit of bird he fancied at this time of the year.

Well, it's this way and that he looks. It's up one hillock and down the next. But nary a glance of anything disturbs his meditations.

"Begab," he says to his self. "It's not me that minds this lack of feathered companionship, it's me stomach starting to ask what's for puddin', and I hate to leave the poor creature hungry."

'Tis at that moment that Pat hears a low honking sound, filling the southern sky. "Sure, and it's Master Goose making his way home, and me here to welcome him."

By and by, the honking and crying grew wilder and louder, and soon the flock of them

dimmed the morning sunlight, so great was their number. Pat waited awhile till the lot of them were winging and cackling over his head, and it was then that he unslung his great ash bow, the one his father had been given by the Bishop of Clomrough himself. He pulled a long quill from his belt, and gazed down its shaft to see if it was a true one. It was; and a good thing too, for the long way it must carry.

And now Patrick steps up on a little stone, and regards the passing birds as he notches an arrow.

"I'll be making my apologies to the goose lord now, if you please," he smiles. "For sure, and it's not me whose going to miss." And with that he draws back the great ash bow, and looses a shot so true that the lead goose is falling to the ground before he properly has time to digest what Pat has said to them.

Now, it's some time before Pat finds the floundering lag near a small copse of trees by the hilltop, and to his surprise, the thing's still honking.

"Good day to you, goose," he says as he takes his cap off. "It's business we have together, if you don't mind." His arrow had lodged itself in its neck.

"The same to yourself," the goose answered, with a bit of a catch in its voice. Pat could understand that, all right. He just wondered how anything could speak Irish with a good shaft in its throat. The goose went on.

"Whist, that was some shooting, Pat. I've never seen its like in me time."

"It's the way of it," answered Pat. "Me great ash bow has a sliver of the True Cross in it, so what heathen can stand up to it? Beggin' your pardon, of course."

"The True Cross, is it?"

"The same." They both bowed their heads for a moment.

"Now Pat, it's me who's sitting here thinking how uncomfortable I am, with your fine

cloth arrow almost gagging me, and I'll say it who shouldn't, it's none other than the King of the Geese you've choked this time."

"The King of the - "

"None other. And if you wouldn't mind pulling out this shaft, well now, I'd be by way of granting you three wishes."

"Is that a fact?" Pat sat down on the grass next to the old bird.

"Think on it, Pat. Sure, and I have it in me to grant such things. Some animals can, as I'm sure your honour knows."

Pat thought about new thatch for his cottage, plenty of food for his pot, and maybe a fine woolen shawl for his old mother, bless her. And it wouldn't be Patrick Cuggy if a drop of the poteen wasn't worked into the bargain, neither.

"Never say I'm not a Christian," he answered, taking out his clasp knife. "We'll just take a wee bit of a dig at that arrow."

"You're a gentleman, Cuggy."

Pat worked the better part of an hour, nipping here and slicing there, and it was rough work. Now and again, he'd make the goose hop, by accident.

"Hist, lad," it would honk. "'Tisn't stoness these feathers are growing on."

But he kept to the job, thinking about the three wishes, and anyway, bless him if the work wasn't interesting. Still, it turned out to be a bad business. The more he tried to be careful, the more damage he did. The shaft had done its deed too well.

"Pat, it's me who's dying. They say that when geese pass away, they can smell the snow, and Cuggy, I'm thinking it's Christmas."

"There's no help for it," said Pat sadly. He held the King of the Geese in his arms, its bill and feathers dripping great drops of blood all over Pat's sleeves. "Is there nothing I

can do to ease it?" he asked.

But the noble goose craned his neck upwards as though searching the sky, and with a languid hiss, sent his spirit soaring.

"Faith," said Pat. He gave a Hail Mary.

Now after a space, Pat got to thinking, and he thought that if Master Goose hadn't kept his bargain, well sir, he was free of the deal, too. And his mother, bless her, was still hungry. So he opened his knife again to dress the bird on the spot. "I'll get one of me wishes, any road; food for the pot," he thought.

Imagine his surprise, then, when he cuts open the old bird's cavity and finds a heavy, shining golden egg.

"By the Saints in Paradise," is what he said.

So he puts the golden egg in his pocket and the bird over his shoulder and whistles off home, thinking of nothing but the lovely world of opportunities laid at his feet.

And they stewed the goose in a copper pot for supper, too. The old liar.

*

Cleaning House

Larry Abbot figured that he had it good. While most of his pals busted their keesters slugging away at the old nine-to-five, he was privileged to loaf about his house. At least after he'd finished cleaning up, anyway. Not that he minded housework - why, he'd been at it for five years now and had it down to a science. Vacuum the carpets at ten while eyeballing the babes on television doing their aerobics, pop the dishes in the machine, then crack a beer while reading the box scores in the paper. Around three o'clock, maybe thaw out a couple of steaks for supper. The Good Life; and all because his wife was the family breadwinner.

Nancy Abbot worked in a development laboratory in the University. Just what exactly it was she developed, he had little idea, but apparently it was enough to win the big bucks. And, after all, that was what mattered. That's what kept him in cigars and cold brewski.

He had to chuckle when he thought of it.

Nancy was a mousy looking drink of water with coke-bottle glasses and protruding teeth. You couldn't say she was fat, but at the same time, she was not thin. Solid, was the way Larry thought of her, and, given that she stood four feet nine inches in her black penny loafers, the total effect was one of roundness. She almost always wore light green angora sweaters and plaid skirts. She didn't speak much, but seemed blissfully content in the evenings gazing at him with blinking eyes, as she nibbled animal crackers with her short, pink fingers.

But he had to admit it; the chick was bright. Even as a teenager, she'd had a reputation in Lindenville for being some kind of a genius, and when she graduated with an obscure scientific doctorate at the unheard of age of eighteen, it seemed to prove the fact. She settled into her parents' old house and began working almost immediately at the University. She appeared happy and content. When Larry Abbot started hanging around her home, Nancy was, at first, surprised, then giddy, then overjoyed. When he asked her to be his wife, she fainted.

Well, all that was five years ago, and any sniggering from his old pals had by this time, tapered off into a sort of awed wonder at both Larry's smarts and his king-of-the-cool lifestyle. Because Larry did not settle easily into the role of devoted househusband, not him. The way he looked at it, she just about owed him for marrying her. And if he had long hours during the day with nothing to do, well, who was she to complain if he enjoyed the odd drink with one or another of the single neighborhood women? Maybe more than a drink, too, he'd wink goatishly at his buddies in the tavern. Larry was pretty certain she didn't know, anyway. She didn't seem suspicious; hell no. When she was at home she'd just, as usual, stare at him, grinning. It bugged the creepin' Jesus out of him, but Larry

Abbot had more sense than to say anything.

Still, in some ways she was handy to have around. Why, just yesterday, when the vacuum cleaner had apparently expired with a dusty death rattle, damn him if she simply didn't take it downstairs to her workroom to fix it up. And she did just that, too. He could hear her down there, humming tunelessly but happily as she worked, finishing with a small squeal of delight when it was repaired. She'd brought it back up to him and grinned.

Larry finally rolled out of the hay around ten o'clock and wandered into the kitchen for some java. He stuck a cigarette into his mouth and scratched absently at his unshaven cheek. He slurped some coffee and gloated over what a great day he had planned for himself. Get the housework done, shower, then maybe wander over to where that new lady on the block lived, the one with the great legs. Well, someone had to be the Welcome Wagon, didn't they? Larry chuckled, and finished his coffee.

He wheeled out the vacuum cleaner from the closet and plugged it in. Nancy certainly did a big job on this sucker, he thought; plug looks kind of funny, though, probably some new energy saving gizmo from the lab. He switched it on lazily, noticing that it made a weird sort of droning noise, a far cry from its usual ear-shattering racket.

"Probably works better than before, too," he figured. That's when it stopped. It didn't exactly turn off, but it refused to be pushed another inch along the broadloom.

"Sweet," he shook his head, as if this is what he'd expected. Larry walked around the vacuum cleaner; tugged at it this way and that, all to no avail. Finally, he planted himself in front of it, and in a frustrated gesture of impotence, delivered it a good swift kick to the headlight.

"Fucking thin -"

Two things happened rather quickly. First, the machine incredibly seemed to rear up

and open its induct hole. Second, it seized his foot.

"What in hell," Larry fell to the floor. The thing was actually sucking -slowly, to be sure - but none the less sucking his leg into its recesses. Ingesting him. He started kicking at it with his free foot, but the strange device proved to be too quick for him; its metallic maw snapped it up also.

"Fucking thing's got both my feet!" Larry yelled. Now the machine was working up past his shins, just taking him in slowly, but all too surely.

"Help!" Larry roared over the noise of the vacuum, but it did no good. At this time of the day, most of the people on the block were either at work - like Larry's pals - or shopping, or at aerobics class down at the "Y". Even if anyone were jogging by, they'd be unable to hear his growling howls because of their walkmans.

"Goddamn Yuppy neighborhood," he observed between groans. The horrible thing had already gobbled him up past his knees, and appeared to be gathering speed with every inch - maybe not speed, but relish.

Weirdly enough, there was no pain involved, only an eerie, numb sensation as if, alongside of being devoured by a vacuum cleaner, he was also being administered novocaine as an added feature of the service. Another thing: the vacuum's hose didn't seem to be swelling or anything; it was as though normal dust were coursing down its crop.

Now it was above his waist, and Larry didn't care one bit for the deadening feeling in those regions. He had long been proud of his feats between the sheets - seldom, of course, with his wife - and had often boasted to his chums that the ladies referred to him as the "Trojan Horse".

He was growing faint, now, starting to black out. In a last ditch bid for freedom he put his hands on the sides and pushed for all he was worth. No good; not too smart, either. The

machine was ready for him. With a deft, quick snap, it had his hands, and with a couple of eager gulps, was up to his elbows.

Larry Abbot rolled his head helplessly from side to side, muttering awful obscenities punctuated with sobs. The vacuum cleaner had reached his neck, now, and he wasn't sure which was more horrible: the ticklish scratching of its coarse bristles on his Adam's Apple, or the disgusting smell of engine oil. Of course, both observations were well beside the point. The thing was stretching its aperture wider now to accommodate the last of him, his head. He was rapidly losing consciousness when, as if from another world, he heard the sound of the front door opening and closing quietly. It was Nancy. She was grinning at him and waving.

"Frig you, stupid bitch!" he cried weakly. Then, he vanished.

Nancy Abbot whistled notelessly as she unplugged the vacuum cleaner. She opened up the machine, took out its dust bag and strolled into the kitchen. She emptied the bag into the garbage can, and all that came out was an assortment of dustballs, some dirt and the odd paperclip. There was a small screwdriver in her purse, and with it she made a few adjustments on the machine, clucked over it sadly, then carried it outside to be picked up for junk.

She poured herself a small glass of applejuice, then telephoned the department store on Main Street, the one she used to buy scientific toys from when her mother would give her allowance.

"Hello," she piped into the phone. "Do you carry any good vacuum cleaners?"

Dear Helen

Dear Helen,

I suppose you think this is kind of, you know, weird, getting a letter from me now that I'm ah, dead and all. That rolls off the tongue nicely, I think. Don't you, Helen? I mean, "now that I'm dead". Sort of has a ring to it. I like that. But it's really not all that strange; it's not as if I couldn't have mailed it just before I - well anyway, just before. Know what I mean?

Whatever. Just thought I'd let you hear from me, in case you were wondering how I was doing. Well, to begin with, it's a bit chilly, over here. Doesn't bother me much, though, not like it used to. As a matter of fact, it's kind of nice. Never knew just how clear things could be once... don't mind me, dear, I ramble a little, nowadays.

Come now, Helen; calm yourself. Pretend that this is simply a cruel jest on my part - in bad taste, too. Sure, that's it. I probably had Andrew MacLean or one of my other pals

who you like so much mail this to you. Right? Actually, you never were very nice to my friends, were you, o wife of mine? Winos and jocks you called 'em if I recall correctly. Never good enough for your crowd. Your crowd; did I ever tell you how much I loathed your friends? Tight-assed pansies and shit pokes, the lot of them. But like I said, calm yourself, my love. That's the way. Brew yourself a mug of that herbal tea, like you always do when you get tense. Wish I was there to give you a nice massage. Would you enjoy that, Helen? My fingers on your neck right now? On your body?

I don't know, maybe I was always in your way, like you said I was, before this happened. I guess I was just an insensitive boor. I mean, who was I to laugh at your habits, your friends, your get-togethers. What did you call them? Sabbats! That was it. How stupid of me to imagine that a husband and wife should do things as a couple. I mean, what is this, the middle ages? Tsk, tsk. Of course, I never believed in all that crapola anyhow. You know, there you were, singing hymns to the Solstice and dumb old me asking you for help with the Christmas tree. Or when we went shopping together for presents, I got mad cause you wanted to buy them from that stupid curio shop - you remember, the one that your friend Lilith runs - instead of at the department store. Lilith, what a load of bushwa. Didn't you once tell me that her real name was Jane before she - what did you call it, ascended? Lilith.

Gosh, the memories are coming fast and furious now, Helen. What about the time I came home from the ballgame. Sheeit! What a match. I was flying with beer and feeling great and I get home to a house that looks more like a church than anything else. I mean, how many of those assholes did you have in there, anyway; twelve, wasn't it? And all of them squatted on the broadloom making droning noises. Let's get serious, honey. The place stank like a cathedral, and what was his name, oh yes, George Morrison. George fucking

Morrison standing over the lot of you as if he were the damn pope. "He's murmuring", you hissed in my face after I asked just what the bloody hell was going on. You hissed in my face, Helen. In front of them. Still and all, I guess his "murmuring" must have improved considerably after I gave him a shot in the mouth, chuckle, chuckle. It's only that I was feeling a little jealous; a little horny, too. Okay, so I was drunk, have it your way. But I kept getting this feeling, you know, inside my head, that this Morrison creepo was after something a little more than enlightenment, get me? And sometimes, sometimes I thought that you talked about him in a funny way, with a dreamy look on your face. Your lovely face, my dear. Has he been seeing you now that I'm not around? Does he melt all over you in the dark, my love?

Don't cry, Helen. Pour another cup of herbal tea for yourself. There, now.

I don't know, for me the shit really started flying in the high wind when you miscarried late last year. By god, when you told me you were on the nest, I was so proud that you could have popped me with a pin. A son. That's what I wanted and damn me if you weren't giving me one. Christ, but I was proud. I must have strutted about at work like balding peacock, because everyone knew just how happy I was. But then, midway through your term, you soured on the idea or something, said he wasn't ready to manifest on our plane. That's when you started brewing a different kind of tea, wasn't it, from a pouch that Lilith brought you. A pouch with Chinese letters on it. My, how it stank. Then, in the fifth month, you lost our child, Helen. Our son. It was a boychild, you know.

And then I began to get worried. Paranoid, you called me. But I pinched a bit of that tea you'd been drinking - I'd noticed that you'd stopped taking it - and gave it to a chemist pal of mine for analysis. It was an abortive drug, wasn't it, my dear? Something they used in ancient times to purge the body of demons. That's what my friend told me. I can remember

him saying how there were hundreds of small shops in the city that sold such things, passing them off as health foods. He explained that many of these places were fronts for *witch covens and satanist groups*.

That's when I found the doll, Helen. I'd just gotten home and was planning to confront you with this delightful information, but you weren't there. You were out with your friends, somewhere. I remember that I didn't feel too well, like my head was spinning. There were pains in my stomach, too. I went into the bathroom to try and find something, anything to feel better, and I found the doll. At first, I didn't realize what it was. Just imagine me groping around underneath the sink for the medicine, and my hand closed on it. A small thing, shaped like a chubby man in a sports coat. That's what clued me in, Helen, the sports coat. Hadn't it just been a week since you had taken my tweed jacket "to mend the pocket"? At the time I was pleased, because you hadn't shown so much interest in months. And here was this small mannikin dressed in a swatch of my coat's material. It was sort of sticky, my dear, and I remember the smell. It smelled of sex.

I guess I passed out then, dear Helen. But as I passed out, I realized the lousy truth. Everything went black but I could hear voices chanting, even though I knew there was no one in the house. Then a horrible, cold blindness.

And I woke up here. It's so clear, here, Helen my love. No pain, no sorrow, no regrets. You really should congratulate yourself, you know. Your amateurish magic did the trick. Not the poison that you laced my coffee with; oh, that made me ill, but it would have passed. No, it was the doll and the coven that pulled it off. Congratulations, Helen, magic is afoot! Still, one serious flaw in your plan, indeed in your whole philosophy, is that, if even a little bit of it is real, why just imagine what else might be real, too.

Ghosts? Vampires? Revenge from the grave? Weren't you always afraid of dead

things, my love? George Morrison was. You'll see on the news tonight how he was found in his bed, drained somehow of all his fluids. On the news. Tonight. But it was his eyes that mattered to me. The look in them. They were the last to empty, Helen; his living eyes.

I long to see your eyes, my dear. Watch for me when you go to your lonely bed. Watch your closet door.

Our son misses you, my love.

Yours forever,

Michael

*

The Owl of Now

Of course, there were the arguments. There were always the arguments. And for some these disputes provided the pin upon which the camaraderie of the Bollocks Club balanced. Without them, the evenings passed mildly, trotted along obediently and went their way with sheepish leers. Regrettably dull, those nights wasted within the club's precincts when its members would fall helplessly into accord.

It was the slick play of cranial sabres that first drew Stearns Potter through the doors of the Bollock's. Of people, ne knew little and cared less. Of things delightful he made ridicule. Language was not, for him, a wonder, it was a deadly weapon. And here he found a haven, among the sort of men and women he might contend with happily.

Best of all was Committee Night, a monthly gathering of the more socially rabid members, listed in the club's roster with a red asterisk next to their names. On these

occasions, those who had a point to make could toss their names into a bucket, which would then be thoroughly mixed around by Thomas, the club's person. Thomas would then proceed to dip a hand into the pail, and draw forth the slip bearing the name of the night's speaker. This would, in turn be read by the Chair, as Thomas was an imbecile, incapable of thought, let alone letters.

The chosen one would thereby have a half an hour in which to pontificate to the growling assembly upon whatever they deemed fit, provided it stepped well outside of the bounds of decency and was suitably contentious. No interruptions were brooked during the course of these orations, though the members were provided with pen and paper and encouraged to take notes. These would be referred to afterwards, during tea and rebuttal hour, at which time everyone could sit around comfortably and yell at one another.

A peek at the club's guest register would reveal that on each Committee Night, the number of visitors was somewhat diminished, in that few strangers ever returned after an evening of being berated or sneered at, or being pointed out as a splendid example of the strides taken in Special Education. All in all, it was Stearns' favorite event.

"For me, it's the entire focus of the club," he remarked in the bar to William Swann, a Bollocks acquaintance.

"How so, Potter?"

"Cut and thrust, Swann, cut and thrust." He raised a menacing eyebrow. "Surely you see that?"

"I sometimes wonder," Swann answered.

"Well, don't," Stearns butted in. "It's bad for the intellect. Look at me, for instance. I know something, I act upon it; I breathe it; I stab with it. *I love with it, for god's sake!*"

Two women in black wandered by their table, face to face, arms on each other's

shoulders, giving the room a rousing chorus of an Inuit throat-singing classic. Stearns and Swann paused as the frightening interruption puffed its way through the lounge, then vanished into the washroom. Appreciative applause from some tables. Yet others raised clenched fists in solidarity with the statement. At least one called for strong drink.

Swann was silently brooding when Potter turned back to him with a flourish, as though the preceding tableau had deftly underscored his point.

"Well, there you are," he grinned.

"No, I'm not, I'm not there in the bloody least," countered Swann, somewhat petulantly. His lower lip protruded.

Stearns drained his creme de menthe blanc, clucked, and gestured at the bartender.

"You don't think, Potter," Swann eased his shoulders, "You don't suppose that we're the least bit cliquish, do you? I mean, that poor fellow last visitor's evening, the one who locked himself in the cellar, weeping..."

"Hell with him. Not my fault if there's morons on the loose."

"Very kind of you, Potter, I'm sure."

"Look," Stearns tried reason. "This is a club. A select club. And we're in it, don't you see?" African polyrhythms filtered out of the speakers - politically correct African polyrhythms. "We have to hold together within the bounds of our definition of the thing. If we allow ourselves to get lax, well, we'll lose it."

A member sitting at the bar, dressed as Bozo the Clown turned around and added his feelings. "He's right you know. This is a very select establishment." He paused to adjust his red rubber nose, then continued. "We don't want just anyone in here."

"No indeed," nodded Potter.

With spring came the Club Ball. It was Bollocks policy to mount one of these events quarterly, and they were called Dances of the Self. Upon these occasions no orchestra was required; the participants wore personal stereos, chose whatever sounds might be in step with their particular world-view, and simply expressed themselves on the dance floor. Absent was the herdlike mentality foisted upon those who waltzed or capriced to a bandleader's syncopations. Here, the polished boards resounded only to the clacking of heels.

Those not involved in the dancing stood around the sidelines, smoking small cigars, or pipes made of glass, the scented tobaccos bubbling gently through Amaretto. Others glared at the ceiling, then scribbled hastily in ornate notebooks, lest the heated light of their inspirations should evaporate before being captured for the next literary quarterly. Some of them dialogued in groups of few, mostly about the shortcomings of persons gathered in other secretive enclaves, engaged in whispered deliberations of their own across the hall.

All of them seemed oblivious to the growing hoard of swirling bodies capering mutely before them.

Potter left the dance floor. To be sure, he enjoyed a turn around the ballroom. Truth to tell, he considered himself a rather fine dancer, as long as he could choose his own selection to move to, and wasn't called upon to pay heed to his partner's steps.

Now he was replete with the thing. After an hour or so of manoeuvring around some sixty persons wildly throwing themselves about with studied abandon, well, he'd had his fill. No less a filter than a clam, he just kept of them, of the contact with them, what he needed.

William Swann had remarked earlier that the whole affair resembled a roomful of mutes afflicted with St. Vitus' Dance. It wasn't so much that this bothered Stearns Potter, as much as made him reflect upon the concept of silliness, which, in its turn, prevented him from giving himself over to his usual spirit of brio while on the floor.

He removed his headphones and left the ballroom. Deciding on a drink, he went down the hallway, passing a member on her way into the ballroom.

"Oh, good evening, Caitlin." he greeted her affably, ignoring the diving flippers she wore. "Have a good time."

"Smell something!" she called back gaily, going through the door.

The lounge was empty but for his friend Swann, who sat alone at the bar, and a couple of men nearby at a table. He took a barstool, saw what Swann was drinking, and ordered two brandies.

"Evening, William."

"Potter. How's the dance going?"

"Actually, pretty well. You ought to go up. Enjoy yourself." Potter sipped his drink.

"Why not?" Swann cleaned a speck of something off the bar. "Animated manikins leaping all over each other; hey, who could ask for anything more?" He gargled with laughter, spilling brandy on his shirt as he did so.

"That was elegant."

Swann plied his handkerchief to his mouth and suit. "Excuse me. Ah, Pelham!" he called the bartender. "Two more, if you don't mind," he motioned over the snifters.

"You're sure you're all right, now?" Potter asked, somewhat pointedly.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine," Swann waved at him with his handkerchief. "Look. Have I ever told you why I like owls?"

Stearns regarded his friend closely, marvelling over just how easy it was for the faculty of human reason to come unstuck.

"William," he adopted a supportive mien, "What the fuck are you talking about? Owls." His eyes darted around the lounge to see if anyone was listening in. There were still only the two men in the dark corner, who by now had their heads nearly glued to each others'.

Swann continued. "Let me explain. Some years ago, before you were a member here, I had a good friend by the name of Francis Burbage. He too, was a member of the Bollocks."

"I heard about him." Stearns lit a cigarette, nodding, "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he killed himself. But before he did, he used to go on about them all the time."

"About..."

"Owls," Swann pushed an ashtray over. "Owls and their ways."

One of the two men had come to the bar for drinks, his face sweaty and flushed, and was apparently engrossed in their conversation. William and Stearns glared at him.

"Hoot." the fellow said as he walked away.

Ignoring the man, Swann went on. "As an emblem of wisdom, he used to say, they were unparalleled." He sipped his drink. "But only as a symbol. The reality was much different. The truth of the matter was that they are shifty little beggars as likely as not to shit on your head if you weren't sharp. And he was one to know; after all, he kept three of them in his study."

"So the gentleman liked owls. What's this got to - "

"Wrong. He *loathed* the filthy things. All that really mattered was the idea of them. The numinous concept of them, existing somewhere side by side with the concepts, if you will, of everything else. A plane of perfect forms, he called it."

Potter butted out his smoke. "So the man read Plato. Hardly anything new in that."

"True. Except that poor Francis made a religion out of it. It became his lodestone. Eventually, he had his three owls, who were by the way, sisters, stuffed, and he mounted them on the headboard of his bed."

"Revenge for shitting on his head?"

"To absorb their emblematic properties."

"And you want me to believe that this juggernaut of sanity actually killed himself?"

Potter stood up and yawned loudly. "Where's the bartender."

"That he did. The last time I saw Francis, he explained to me that life was only a mug's game. The very next day he hid himself in his dog's house and consumed an impressive amount of liquid bleach. He was cremated rather than buried on the considered instruction of the Bollocks Ad Hoc Committee ad Grievance - his only real family - who vowed they'd plant nothing in the green ground that might contain a pollutant or have a half life. So Francis Burbage ascended to the morning stars in white wisps of clean smoke. His epitaph reads, as per his instructions, 'Adieu, adieu, the Owl of Now.'" Swann got up and buttoned up his coat. "Well, I must be going." He put his hat on. "Oh, by the way. I have his urn in my apartment. You must come see it sometime."

"The Owl of Now..." Potter shook the proffered hand. "It went that far, did it?"

"Eh?"

"He ended up referring to himself as 'The Owl of Now', didn't he?"

"Oh, I see what you mean." He put some bills on the bar. "No," he said slowly, "Burbage relished the idea of choices. Thought they were there for a reason. He was never one to choose the lesser of anything. I think he was simply saying goodbye to something."

"What?"

"Adieu, Potter."

*

A View of Gulls

He slept awhile and dreamed of the sea hag, olive and hideous, routing about the ruined floor of the sea, feeding upon dead offerings.

As he opened his eyes, the great three masted schooner was careering its way to the eastern horizon, and was barely visible in the rays of the rising sun.

"So," he reflected. "I am left." He inhaled a deep breath of the salty air, slowly revolving his head to relieve a cramp in his neck. Time to take stock of things. From his position on the beach he readily observed that the tide was out, and that might enjoy six, perhaps seven hours here in the daylight. There was much to think about. And now, for once in his life, he had the time to revel in contemplation. Certainly, that in itself was rare. He blew some rebellious locks of hair out of his eyes and squinted down the shoreline. Miles upon miles of smooth white sand, dividing the ocean from the palm trees, disappearing round the south spit of the small island, where the angry combers smashed upon hard rock. Beyond, a small lagoon, heavy with the scent of old mangrove and tropic

season.

All of this he could easily picture without being there. He had charted the island for the Company; this had been his commission, Royally decreed. In a day of expansion, this island - his island now, in that he felt truly a part of it - was a godsend both to his country, but also to himself. To any young gentleman willing to apply himself to his work, willing, and here he smiled ironically, to grovel in the right quarters, this was an age of gilt-edged opportunity. The chance to become of importance. Heady realms, indeed. He laughed out loud, startling a flock of birds of paradise into troubled flight over the green jungle.

He had been such a young man. Apprenticed to an old chart maker, he had for years existed on a relentless regimen of sextants, constellations and Mercator's Projection. He was read in Latin and Greek, along with his native Spanish. Proper manners had been beaten into him with his lessons; there was no future in loutishness. In time came introductions to sundry minor merchants, and the society in which they moved. Parties, balls and dinners followed one another like trained dogs in the market. And fashionably, he forged valuable friendships in the bedrooms of both women and of men.

Now, on the beach, this life seemed far removed, its rot beneath him. Because it gave him amusement, he spent an hour studying a small, blue crab, hobbling about its business on the sands before him. It too, was abandoned on the island, and he felt as if he could almost see eye to eye with the ugly wretch. In its claw it carried a morsel of putrifying nourishment - fish, he guessed from the sharp white bones jutting from the mottled flesh. It sat down near the waves and began to feed. There was a raw simplicity about the act that impressed the man. A crab, sitting half in the water, nibbling on a moldy bit of fish. Every now and then a larger wave would bowl the small animal over, or threaten to seize

its horrible meal and make off with it, but the crab seemed to him to be unperturbed. There was always something else to dine upon, when one's palate was not overly dainty. This island held plenty of food for the crustacean. He watched as it finished its meal, poke fussily through the bones, and finally wandered sideways down the shoreline. The width of beach, he noted, had somewhat diminished over the past while, as the incoming tide was swelling up. The sands beneath his feet felt damp and unyielding.

He recalled his final days at home, seeking this appointment with every wile and trick at his disposal. The lies, angry and rank, told by him and of him as he and his rivals fiercely sought the Royal commission. And it had been him who prevailed. The patrons and sponsors he had cultivated were able to drop a word here and there, always in the correct ear, ensuring that the royal presence would regard him in a favorable light. And as for the others, well there would surely be more expeditions?

Screaming gulls coursed over his head, bringing him back to his surroundings. How beautiful they were, he thought, craning his neck backwards to see them. Without artifice or pretense they lived in a savage yet natural paradise. An incoming wave stung his cheek as the water rushed boldly further up the shore and he shook the water out of his eyes. Now the tide had almost reached him, and he could but grin at its regularity. All things here are as they were when they were set here, he smiled. A coarse, rugged beauty, devoid of corruption, greedy courtiers, criminals in lace and especially - he scanned the horizon - mutinous crewmen. The great ship had been hours gone, had sailed away with its gang of cut-throat *bastardos*. Of the officers, none had been left alive; the slaughtering had been unthinkable horrible. All he could recall was being plucked from the depth of his dreams and beaten up the gangway to the deck. It was awash with gore and blood, the stench of powerful drink mingling with the whining pleas for mercy from the Captain. He received

none, and had been flailed to death before the young man's eyes.

They had left him here on the beach. "For the crabs, señor," a toothless sailmender explained to him in solemn, minute detail.

He tried to flex his arms, but the sand in which they were buried felt like the weight of ages. A large comber washed over his head and retreated. He spat the briny water out of his mouth and shook the dripping hair out of his eyes. Another wave; this time the sea remained pooled around his neck, and small shells and weeds were being trapped beneath his chin. He looked up at the gulls that circled above the beach as the ocean covered him once more. It drew back, gathering itself, he imagined, for the final deluge, and he began to laugh.

"How absolutely marvelous!" he roared. And the sea took him; rushing in to claim the beach to nearly twenty paces behind him.

Above, gulls rode the airy thermals, and their mindless chorus of raucous screams and cries echoed over the ocean.

*

A Question of Judgement

It had been a long time coming, this trip home, and the crew of the *Revelation* were eager with anticipation to get back to Earth. The supply ship had been on a chartered mission into Antares' second quadrant, a small mining outpost rich in avalazinium, yet seemingly lacking in everything else. Hence each ten years a Goods and Services Voyage was made to the planetoid, bringing with it such items that made life, while not luxurious, at least bearable for the doughty crew of miners dwelling there. Foodstuffs, beverage and clothing made up the greater bulk of the manifest, the rest of it comprised of holographic films, synaptic pleasure energizers, mail cassettes, and even the odd novel for the less educated among the ranks. In return, the ship received a full compliment of the rare element. And the pay dividends were huge. All in all, an agreeably equable trade.

Since the discovery of avalazinium, isolated in miniscule particles from the otherwise useless ore on Titan, space travel had taken on a startling new dimension of possibility. And of urgency. Indeed, the scientists of the late 'nineties had nearly soiled themselves

with relief upon the unfolding of its properties. Here was vindication! An element less stable than Plutonium, but at the same time as reliable and as harmless as mother's milk was just what they'd been salivating after for some twenty years. Cold fission? Peanuts. Clean energy? A cinch. The element had an efficiency rating of 100%, and delivered more energy per proton than was hitherto dreamt possible.

Productivity on Earth had ground to a near halt when it was proven beyond all cavil that a lot of new forms of cancer owed their nasty little existences to the industrial status quo. Pointe finale. Slowly, things began to clear up; the air smelt, well, of nothing for a change. Oxygen-vending machine interests went belly up. Acid rain became a hideous memory as thick tufts of hair started regrowing on people's gleaming pates. Devotees of bottled water now slaked their thirsts from rivers or lakes or even from the taps in their kitchens. Automobile accidents were a thing of memory only; cars were refashioned into farm tools. Rest homes sprung up all over the globe to accommodate the erstwhile Tzars of Industry, who now had nothing to play with.

But the economy suffered. In a scant ten years the Gross Worldly Product sagged, then simply fell to pieces. People were healthy, but impoverished. Starvation quickly outstripped every other disease as the biggest killer within what used to be known as the 'developed' nations. Underdeveloped nations were soon left to fend for themselves - queerly enough, this changed nothing in their hapless lifestyles as foodstores were greedily hoarded and local rationing became the order of the day.

And then, avalazinium had been isolated, and everything changed. The History Simulators told the whole story; a late night in a nearly bankrupt university lab, a lonesome scientist sobbing before a small reactive energy matrix, the tears streaming down his face awash in the light from the fledgling source of raw power. His joyful words,

etched forever alongside of Archimedes', "Eureka", and Bell's, "Come here, Mr. Watson, I need you," ran something like, "Christ, this is going to be good."

And it was. In no time at all, civilization picked itself up, dusted itself off, and once again seized the reins of destiny. Before too long it surpassed all of its past efforts in the suit of easeful living and capricious enjoyment. All this and no harm to the environment. Mankind was off and running; humanity went for it. Stratification of the masses once more rocketed into vogue. After all, there had been years of piteous privation in these matters, and now it was time to reclaim position and place. Of course, there was the *little* matter of discovering a reliable source of avalazinium, which, after all, made this merry-go-round twirl in the first place. It was not to be found on the Earth, so space exploration became a huge investment opportunity.

2.

The captain of the Revelation , J.L DeChambois, was standing in the ship's lounge, hands in pockets, gazing through the viewport into the obsidian blackness of inspace. Though he'd made this trip twice before, the sensation still gave him the willies. Indeed, it hardly felt as though the ship were moving, although it was, truth to tell, galloping through the cosmos at the alarming rate of light years a day. All because of the "Slinky" principle. Time and space, which were really one and the same anyway, didn't only move in a curve, as was first suspected. More on the order of an infinite spiral, resembling, if anything, a child's slinky toy; the kind of thing that could walk down a staircase. Propulsionary physics, after being stymied by this fact for eons, cottoned onto the idea that - and this had been a hazy theory until avalazinium - given enough of both speed and breaking power, the spiralling path of space itself might be neatly side-stepped, and you

could blithely catapult through the center of the "slinky". When this was achieved, the problems of time and space were nil, seeing as how you weren't in time and/or space.

Captain DeChambois shuddered, and turned from the viewport. On these return voyages, there really wasn't much to distract a body. The ship merely repeated, in reverse order, the trip it had made out. This had become a built-in program for all inspace vehicles, in that conventional guidance systems were utterly confounded by the lack of reference points in this medium of travel.

He yawned and wandered from the lounge to the communications pod, more out of boredom than anything else.

"Good evening, Ratigan," he ducked under the low doorframe.

"Captain," the other nodded in return. "I have something interesting for you."

DeChambois turned and sat down. Ratigan flipped through a small pile of disks, as though searching for something.

"Here it is. Lend an ear, sir." He popped it into a playback unit and fiddled with a volume control. Hissing static sounds snapped through the air.

"So, what of it?"

"Hold on a minute... Now."

All at once the expected static was interrupted by the sound of singing, faint and unclear, but singing nonetheless. The captain sat forward. "Why, that's...I didn't know you went in for Handel." He looked at the radio operator suspiciously. "Where's the joke?"

"No joke, captain." Ratigan shook his head. "I picked this up off the continuum band not a half hour ago. I have no idea what in hell it is. It shouldn't be there; that much I do know. Absolutely impossible." The two men listened closely to the ghostly singing, then Ratigan punched a few keys on his console. "Now, watch, I'm channeling the signal through

an active extrapolation loop. There." The crackling static vanished with a pop, and the pod's octophonic speaker complex sang forth flawlessly.

"Why, that's beautiful," DeChambois conducted the music with his finger.

"I agree," Ratigan adjusted the sound matrix. "But it still shouldn't be there." He exhaled nervously. "Captain, we're in inspace. Sound is part of the conventional relativistic plane. As are radio waves, psi-grams, light or zeta emanations." The singing continued joyfully; a diapason of thousands of voices apparently not giving a hoot for the conventional relativistic plane or any of its ukases.

"Perhaps it's a flaw in the main chipbank." The captain didn't appear all too overawed with the development. "Might well be leaking from Abenacky's cubicle upstairs. The man's wild for the classics." He lit a small cheroot, studying Ratigan's worried face. "Look," he added gently. "I know where we are - or aren't-- but this could be the result of a dozen things. We don't really know all there is about inspace yet, contrary to the recruitment holograms. Maybe some signals, uh, get sucked in here when we do. A sort of 'slipstream' effect." He reached over and patted the other man on the shoulder. "Isn't your shift about over, Sam?"

"Half hour, sir."

"Well, meet me in the lounge. I'm buying." DeChambois stood up, stretching. "Oh yes. Bring me a disk of that music, it's lovely. Make an interesting collector's item, someday. I wonder what they're singing about. Spanish, isn't it?"

"I believe it's Latin, Captain."

DeChambois left the pod and sauntered along the carpeted hallway towards the Command Deck. He was heartily fed up with thinking about paradoxes on trips such as this. For

example, they would arrive on Earth, tomorrow, though because of their utilization of the 'Slinky Effect', the concept of tomorrow had no meaning. Nor did yesterday, today, or the middle of next week. Add to that the idea of distance, movement, A to B, upside down or inside out - all of it irrelevant. This was simply a *new thing*, and that was all there was to it. Not a few men had gone mad trying to disprove it. One could demonstrate through aerodynamics that bees couldn't fly, too, but so what?

Hence the ship had been rigged with every conceivable gadget to lull the crews' mind into believing that all was as it should be. Natural lighting was timed to the Sun's rhythms. Movement justification monitors, integrated within the craft's superstructure, ensured that people could sense forward thrust. All the crewmembers adhered stubbornly to the polite conventions; bidding each other, "Good morning" or "See you later", or "Say, my watch has stopped, do you have the time?"

The Command Deck was quiet when DeChambois arrived, as he'd hoped it would be. The *Revelation* had been fitted with a 360° polyglass observation dome from which it was piloted, and on normal, outspace jaunts the scenery was stunning. Now, they may as well have been staring at black paint. Hopkins, the resident expert on trans-vector inspace navigation, removed his headphones as the captain came in..

"Earth tomorrow, J.L." He made a brief note on the screen before him. "And high time."

"I'll tell the world." DeChambois sat opposite the man and regarded the screen. "The Universe, I take it, is unfolding as it should?"

"Swimmingly." Hopkins scratched his neck. "One funny item, though."

"How's that?"

"The ship's memory seems to believe that we're going to re-enter just this side of

Pluto."

DeChambois studied the flat, table-like computer with a frown.

"That's ridiculous. We exited near Jupiter."

"Yet we're going in by Pluto. The computer can't be wrong, Captain. Its deoxyribonucleic engineered circuits are totally incapable of placing us anywhere but exactly from where we left. I mean, I built the damned thing, I should know."

"All right," the Captain stood up. "How long till we reach Pluto?"

"We retransfer in about three hours. Then outspace to Earth? A day, tops." Hopkins scratched his curly beard. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

The navigator folded his arms and addressed the Captain. "Call me fanciful if you will, but unless our entire system has gone mad, we would re-enter near Jupiter, no ifs ands or buts. Suppose for a moment that that's exactly where we are going to pop out."

"But if this thing is telling us Pluto -"

"What if everything has been rearranged? Or is being rearranged as we speak?" He leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands. "We might find ourselves in the same place, but with everything else gone to hell in a handbasket. Hmm?"

DeChambois gaped at him. "Nah."

Hopkins patted some sweat off his brow. "Our Solar System depends upon a very delicate network of checks and balances. Move anything an inch out of the true, and everything else will scrabble for a new position. Rush for a better seat, as it were."

The screen in front of them beeped twice, then went green in preparation for incoming messages. The two men looked at each other and then at the computer as the words paraded across in red letters; **tranference to outspace ten seconds -vector check - all as**

preordained - goodbye, and have nice day - click.

There remained no time at all to worry about this unseemly shift in schedule. One moment the Command Deck was dark, the next, flooded with the astral light of outspace. The twelve or so crewmembers at the helm blinked, looked at each other, and then as one turned to Captain DeChambois for clarification.

"Shift to manual override," he hoped he sounded matter of fact, then whispered to Hopkins, "Um, where are we?"

"Passing Mars, by the look of things," answered Hopkins, somewhat unscientifically.

"Captain," Ratigan's troubled voice chattered over the ship's intercom. "I'd say there are some weird signals coming from Earth Station Z."

"How so?"

An anxious pause. "Something about...seals, sir."

DeChambois leaned on the polyglass view window and peered out. "Seals?" he asked in a weak voice.

"And some sort of bowls, Captain. Bowls of something spilling over the mountains." That the radio operator balked from going on was obvious to everyone. "And Captain..."

"Take a deep breath, Ratigan, it'll be okay."

"Captain, I understand there's a big lamb in the city. And that choir has begun singing again, but louder." Everyone heard Ratigan's loud sob.

DeChambois opened a radio channel on a Command Deck console. "This is the *Revelation*. Earth Station Z, reply, please."

"Nothing sir, just some music; sounds like a jazz solo."

"*Revelation* reporting for duty. Please reply," he listened for any kind of answer.

"By God, that's a trumpet, of all things!"

The Physics Recording Officer shouted over the confused din, "Captain, Earth's gravity appears to have diminished by some 66%."

"There's a preacher or something babbling about plagues and purple whores," Ratigan broke in wildly, then began shrilling merrily to him.self, "Can you tell me how to get-how to get to Sesame Street?"

"Someone relieve that man, he's had - " The Command Deck abruptly lit up vividly then returned to normal as a comet of considerable size shot past them, streaking towards Earth, momentarily highlighting a deck filled with horrified faces.

"What do you make of this, Hopkins?" the Captain asked.

The Navigator answered with what DeChambois thought to be a nauseating attempt at humor. "Well, they tell me Venus is pleasant in this portion of the elliptic."

The singing now filled the ship, and messages ran into each other forming a collective jibbering in all the languages of Earth, and each of them in a fine, desperate fettle. The word, "locust", was featured often.

"Turn that damned radio off!" the captain barked.

"It is off, sir," returned a crewman, a tad testily.

"Sir, the planet seems to be, well, burning," the telescreen officer warbled.

"And...and there is a ring of giant white, birds it looks like flying around it."

Captain DeChambois sat down in his chair slowly. "Okay," he gazed around the deck. "We're quits with this." He took a magnetic stylus and made a brief entry on the computer.

"Navigator."

"Captain"

"Get us the fuck out of here."

"Nicely put, sir."

The ship vectored off its course, shearing closely past the Earth, which, at this point, might as well have been called the Cinder, in terms of realistic nomenclature. The singing grew to a deafening pitch.

"Well," DeChambois shook his head, regarding the awful conflagration. "We missed it."

Hopkins joined him at the window, fitfully tugging his moustache.

"Well judged, sir."

Lumaa 1.

In a time before the cold, and after the great light of summer, there was a small family whose father had gone to the land some seasons earlier, and who had passed away bravely. Behind him he left a wife, a son and a young daughter. The father had known the ways of ice and beast, and his family was proud of his name. And because his son had learned well from the hunter, they called him Amaruq, the Wolf, after his father.

Amaruq provided his family with all they could possibly need or want, so much so that there was too much good meat for such a small group. In hard times Amaruq would give out part of his kill to less fortunate wanderers, supplying them with meat and skins so that none would feel the horror of starvation.

Now the mother, who was a spiteful woman, grew envious of her son's renown. Indeed,

she loathed to hear his name, which was the name of her husband, spoken with so much awe among the people, and in time, her bitterness and gall blackened her heart. Instead of being pleased with Amaruq's skills, she complained about all the work she had to do, what with dressing animals day in and day out. She whined, claiming that there was too much food to prepare. By and by, she decided that she would put an end to his hunting, thereby placing herself once again at the center of village attention. She waited until he slept one afternoon, and then ruined his eyes by massaging them with blubber. The boy awoke soon after and was confused, but calm.

"Anaana," he said. "My eyes are dark."

She answered him scornfully.

"Piujuq - it is good thus -my son. I will care for us now."

He called to her again.

"Anaana," he sighed. "Bring water, that I might bathe my eyes."

"Auka - no," she said. "That your eyes are blind is a mark of your lack of filial respect. So your father would have it."

"Anaana," he called for her a third time, but she had already left the igloo.

When the father had seen death approach he had managed to crawl out onto the ice of the river. In this he was wise, for he'd known that when the river thawed, there would be a good chance that his frozen body would float to his village on a ice flow. In this way, the people would know what had become of him. So it had happened, and his wife and family had been looked upon in high esteem in that such a farsighted man should be of their family.

But now the mother had to provide for the family, taking with her the young daughter.

She found that it was yet more to her distaste to go on the land for weeks at a time, clumsily seeking the fish and small animals to feed her family. Her heart grew even colder as she wearily ran after such game as she could manage. Again, she blamed her ill fortune on Amaruq. He, she saw, kept her from being looked upon as an elder, as an inummarik, in the village. While she and her daughter subsisted on birds and fish, she fed Amaruq on spoiled fox meat, complaining that it was all she could catch.

The family, by winter, were impoverished and had to rely upon the generous natures of their relatives in the village for food. One cold night, a white bear, nanuq, began to claw at the ice window of the snow house. The mother leapt up to shoot it with her son's bow, but so powerful was the weapon that she could only draw the arrow an inch.

"Amaruq! Lazy boy! Will you have us dead in the maw of the bear?" she shrieked, tearing at her amautiq.

"Anaana," he answered quietly. "Put my father's bow in my hands that I may use it." When she did so, he pulled back the bone arrow with ease, and, guided by the animal's roars he aimed and shot. The bear ran off some yards, and died.

Amaruq caressed the bow as tears ran down his cheeks. He no longer felt helpless and useless in the dark igloo; he could still help his family.

His mother's scolding voice broke into his thoughts.

"Useless boy," she mocked him, "see were your arrow has flown. You have killed the neighbors' sled dog, and the people have scared away the nanuq. My luck indeed to have a helpless invalid for a son." She left the igloo, clucking. Once outside, she skinned and dressed the dead bear, and hid its carcass in the snow with cunning and secrecy. Then she ate her fill of the warm meat, and bade her daughter do the same. To Amaruq she gave rotting walrus hide, wailing that it was all they had to eat. Then she left for tea at her

friend's fire.

The sister hated the mother for the shameless way she was deceiving Amaruq. Rather than eat all the fresh game that she'd been given, she had hidden some beneath her annuraaq, and now that the old woman was gone, she pressed it on her brother.

"Eat, brother," she said. "This I was given by a friend." She did not want to deepen his sorrow by condemning the mother.

"Nakurmik, thank you, little sister," he answered sadly. Amaruq knew full well from the taste of the meat that it was bear, and that his mother had lied.

"Ilaali, brother, you are welcome." She brushed some dirt from the skin he was sitting on. "Why are you sad?"

"I am tired, sister."

Springtime came, and once more the mother took the daughter and went on the land to hunt. Amaruq sat alone in his world of darkness in the village, enjoying the warm sun on his upturned face. In the mid part of the morning Amaruq heard the sound of a loon winging its way over the village, and a strange impulse made him call out to it for help. The loon landed near him and spoke to him, explaining that his blindness was the result of his eyes having been stung with fat. Not far from the village, it explained, there was a magic lake which might well wash his eyes back into health and clarity. The loon said that he could fly him there, if Amaruq so desired.

Amaruq was aware only of the cold wind on his face as they flew over the mountains. He held tightly to the bird's foot, and shortly, felt that they were descending rapidly.

"I am taking us to the bottom of the waters," explained the loon. "You must stay there

until your lungs fill with fire and the shadow of death reaches for you. Tukisiviit? Do you understand?"

"Tukisivunga. I understand."

Together they dove deep into the icy lake, and Amaruq could feel the schools of fish darting about them. He thought his head would explode with want of air, and he struggled. The loon seized his neck in its beak and swam to the surface.

"Amaruq," he demanded. "What do you see?"

"I see only the outline of the sun," he answered. So again the loon dragged him to the depths. This time he was aware of the long cold weeds which grew near the very bottom of the lake. Amaruq tried to put the thought of breath out of his mind, but before long, he could hear the blood coursing through his veins and singing loudly in his ears. He broke free from the loon and swam for the surface as quickly as he could. When he came into the air the bird was again by his side.

"Amaruq," it asked again. "What do you see?"

"I see the land and the mountains," he answered, "but they are as of one shade only."

The loon covered him with his wing and this time brought him to the very bottom of the water, and Amaruq's hands sifted through the cold silt of the lake's floor. The chill worked its way to his bones, and though he knew that he had never been this close to death, he was not afraid. He stayed so long this time that he felt his heart would break, and his mind drifted in the small eddies and currents as one who has already gone over to death, as though his spirit had ceased considering life. The loon, who was wise, saw all this and pushed him back to the surface.

"Amaruq," it asked for the third time, "what do you see?"

"I see seven ptarmigans on the fourth mountain top beyond," he cried. "And I see too

that you are the size of a beluga. My sight is restored. How can I repay you?"

"Aa," the bird was pleased. "This lake is magic, but has few fish. Perhaps you could put some into it from time to time. I am fond of fish."

"Gladly."

Amaruq hurried back to his village and entered the igloo before his mother and sister returned. At once he perceived that the caribou skins he had been given to sleep on were old and dry compared to the others. He resolved to pretend to be still blind as they came into the snow house.

"I am thirsty, Anaana," he said. "Give me water." When he saw that the water she gave him was brackish and ridden with lice, he spilled it on the ground and said, "Why would you serve me filth, Anaana?" At this the mother grew frightened and at once passed him her own cup.

Now Amaruq went back to the land to hunt for game, and again there was plenty in the family and village. He saw the land with a new clarity and he never forgot to stock the magic lake with choice fish for the loon, whom he often saw flying over the snows. One day, Amaruq stood on the shore of the sea with his mother and sister. He spied a school of whales basking in the sun and raised his harpoon.

"Anaana," he shouted in the wind. "Fasten this end of the rope about your waist that we may pull in the whale together when I strike it."

"Aa, yes, my son," she answered. "Be sure to harpoon the smallest among them, that we may not be sorely tested." She tied the stout cord around herself.

Amaruq nodded, then seeking the largest of the whales, cast the harpoon with all his might into the beast's body. Instantly, he let go of his part of the rope, and the mother was

dragged, screaming into the ocean. As she was pulled into the waves, she shrieked out for all to hear, "Lumaa, lumaa, lumaa!" It is him!

From that day onwards, Amaruq and his sister lived peacefully among the people, and so great was his skill as a hunter that the village never again knew hunger or evil. There are legends among the people that the mother's wails of accusation may be heard in the wind if one strays near the shore where she was drowned.

*

A Wake of Ducks

Eamon McReavy passed away with his face set in a surprised snarl, not unlike the less-than-pleased expression the pigs hanging in his butcher shop window mutely offered to those passing by in the street. It was as though Death had caught him napping, or had leapt down at him from the rafters in the meat freezer with a thunderous 'Hawl'. Which is where they found him; as frozen and as dead as the geese and drakes which constituted his livelihood.

"Sure, and it was a foul sight, I'll tell the world," offered Constable O'hare, adjusting the black armband about his elbow. "And not one I'd care to be taking to bed with me." He shivered dramatically, and peered over his shoulder to where the coffin lay, as if he half

expected the corpse to sit up and tell in any ghastly details which might have been glossed over.

Aloysius McReavy privately agreed, but spat. "Christ, man, watch your tongue. And this at me own brother's wake, telling gundi-man stories like a wise woman out of the bog. Mind it, eh, or I'll thrash you fine." He glared at him menacingly.

"All right for you," rejoined O'Hare, "but I still say there's something devilish about his face." He sniffed.

"It's a fine face. It's a good face; and maybe it's a damn sight better than that horrid lump of liver you're sporting by way of a face! Foosh!" he punctuated.

The two men squared off and began circling each other warily like cocks in a barnyard involved in a territorial dispute.

"Smell bones," challenged Aloysius, darting and weaving and pumping his fist in and out like a piston.

"Strike me and see where you light," boasted the other, lumbering about the floor. His clenched hands were as hard, knotty and big as old turnips.

The two of them were large, wiry individuals, and had they really gotten down to cases, there is no telling what awful damage might have been the result. O'Hare made disparaging remarks as to his opponent's lineage and forebearers. McReavy jeered back that while all that might be well and true, at least he *had* an ancestry to speak of, and not merely a birth certificate from a charitable institution for fallen women. Some of the guests clustered around and offered encouragement in the form of whistles and chirrups at the two of them, who by now were simply glowering at each other, their faces set with the grim resolution of bulldogs gnawing on oxtails. Wagers were made; flasks uncorked.

However, the boom, as the song goes, was never lowered. For just as the action

approached fruition, Aloysius and O'Hare, much to their discomfiture, found themselves being shaken by the neck like two dusty gollywogs.

"Faith, and at a solemn occasion like this," scolded the familiar voice, whose rumbling timbre called up a whole array of guilty associations. "It's not far from my mind to be booting your bloody duffs. Blackguards." The shaking ceased.

Aloysius rubbed his neck and groaned. "Father Doran! Christ!...bless me, Father; sure and it's my fault and I'm as sorry."

"No, it's me who's to blame," confessed O'Hare. "Who am I to be casting insulting remarks on the fine name of McReavy? Your brother has the face of a sleepin' angel, Aloysius." This was added through his teeth.

"Amen," nodded Father Doran meaningfully. He enjoyed a reputation in the parish of being the kind of shepherd who carried a big stick. One source had it that he had hung an altarboy out of the belltower of Saint Gibben's by the feet, bawling that the next time the lad filched the wine from the vestry, damn him if he wouldn't pitch him right out of the window, and watch as Hades itself opened its dreadful maw to swallow the sinful miscreant. The unfortunate boy swore off the sauce, vowed celibacy, eschewed gambling, and took to waxing the church's floor every Saturday night from then on in.

"Add one for Rome," Father Doran had chuckled.

At any rate, the room had by now filled itself with mourners, milling around in small, dark circles; the men muttering and the women keening. The good priest made his passes over the coffin, liberally sprinkling it with Holy Water and mumbling in the Latin. He turned to his audience:

"Dominus vobiscum," he rumbled.

"Et cum Spiritu tuo," the congregation supplied.

A sound like a pig having its head slowly hacked off with a dull, rusty butterknife, or if you prefer, the keening, started up again. Father Doran continued his offices.

"Man that is born of woman has not far to go and is full of misery." He cocked an eyebrow and added gravely, "faith, the thing is finished. Now raise your voices in adulation of the Holy Lord who, in His wisdom has plucked our friend Eamon from this vale of tears and woe. All is dross and doomed to dust. Keep that in mind, flock. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

A long and languid 'Amen' chorused through the room.

Aloysius gave a quiet sigh, hands in pockets, eyes on the ceiling. Already, the atmosphere in the room was undergoing puzzling and mysterious changes. From the opposite corner, a man with a fiddle was scratching out a timeworn log dance to the obvious delight of the throng. And there was Brigid O'Laughlein, the baker's wife, suspected of perfidy in low places, commencing to caper. She was in the process of 'cutting a capon', a nauseating thought in Aloysius' book.

Hugh and Fin Cuggy were grunting and heaving, standing the coffin up against the wall, by way of making space for merriment. They were the shipfitter's boys, and had deeply etched grins on their ruddy faces, doubtless from too many pulls at the jug.

Sister Agatha of the Mysteries was threading her way towards him. A thin moan escaped his lips.

"My poor, poor lad," she soothed, her face shining like a peeled onion. It was her creed that anyone not Irish was not Catholic, and anyone not Catholic was guilty of debauched immorality to rival that of Chinese Hatchetmen.

"May the Martyr of Golgotha comfort you in your loss, Aloysius," she simpered.

"Thank you, Sister," he shook his head, "but faith, Eamon and myself were never that

close, as all the world knows, and it's me who's to be left with the bill for this wake. That's the loss I'm feeling." He glared askance at the coffin. Why did he sense his brother smiling? Aloysius rubbed his eyes. Perhaps he was overwrought. Sometimes a fellow could be suffering a considerable deal of stress 'inwardly', and not know about it. That was it. He'd read as much in a magazine. And this nun was simply offering what some members of society referred to as 'supportive behavior'. No need at all to be disgusted with her.

Yet he couldn't help feeling a wee bit hard used. 'Twas no secret that he and Eamon had had a terrible falling out some seven years earlier. And all of it over the fact that Eamon thought they should 'sail off to America' to find their fortunes together. A terrific man for harboring strange ideas, was Eamon. But Aloysius would have none of it. Together, they had a tidy sum of money from their inheritance and he'd figured that it was, "Safer sleepin' in the Bank of Ireland than parading it through the barrooms of New York City."

"It's a small county," Eamon had countered, "And we've never seen the out of it. Me eyes is weary, and I've the wanderlust on me two good feet."

"Sure, and anyone would have thought it was your brain with the wanderlust, for it seems bloody apparent that it's given up croffin' in that ugly coconut you're balancing on your fat neck. America," Aloysius had jeered.

"You're a riggardly fellow with a pound, McReavy," and with that, Eamon had walked out.

In time, the idea, as well as the argument had vanished, but the ill will rooted itself between them, like a terrible third brother. Eamon went to work in the butcher shop, and proved to be so adept at hacking apart joints of meat that it was no time at all before he became a partner, and by and by, sole proprietor. That he was given to muttering when he

worked, people found strange, but seeing as how his chops were lean and his scales fair, he made a success of it.

Aloysius went into business for himself, mainly the importing and exporting of spirits and wines. The two brothers never spoke to each other again.

And now Eamon was gone, gathered to the Morning Stars. Aloysius regarded the wake gloomily. Maybe a drink was what he wanted, to calm him down. Sister Agatha was still in front of him, bobbing up and down like a sympathetic cork.

"Maybe a drink is what I'm after, Sister, to still me waters," he voiced. "If you'll just excuse me..."

"Certainly, Aloysius," she clucked, then turned and hurried off after young Liam Rooney, whom she perceived to be making off with a brace of bottles of stout hidden in his shorts.

Aloysius wended his way to the refreshment table.

"A large glass of the sauce, Tim," he cried over the growing din to the barman. "And hark; it's a drink I'm after, none of your Scots bilge water."

"Poteen?" grinned the barman.

"Poteen," answered Aloysius. "And like I say, a tumbler full."

"Tim winked approvingly, and from beneath the table produced a brown earthenware jug. He uncorked it, and with deft, experienced hands poured a generous measure of the clear fluid.

"Ah, the libation of Angels," smiled Tim.

"The stuff nightmares are made of, but it's what I'm craving," rejoined McReavy. He drank deeply. "Will you join me in one?"

Tim Cuggy smacked his lips in agreement. For years he had served in the office of

being the town's carpenter, and as such had carved out a humble but sufficient living for himself and his mother. They lived in a cottage by the bog, and she was said to have had a way with hens. As a young man, Tim had held the noble post of Church sexton, an enviable position to be sure. However, one morning, Tim had taken a "bit o' bacon" for his breakfast, forgetting that it was a Friday. He had work to do in the Church's tower that day, changing the bell ropes. The story went that the instant he laid hands upon the bells, he was assaulted by scores of small, winged devils flying about his head, snapping at him with sharp, black teeth. "Divils, I tell you," he'd said. "No bigger than monkeys in the zoo. With grey faces on them. Divils!" Tim resigned as sexton and took up his work as town handyman. But often on Friday mornings, people could look up from their breakfast plates to see Tim's anxious face peering in their windows, as though reminding them what might well happen all for a "bit o' bacon".

"Another drop, Aloysius?" Tim asked.

"It will shrivel the hairs in me nose, but why not?" said McReavy.

"Your brother was a good, fine man. An example of what I'd call upstanding."

"Even in death," said Aloysius, eyeing the coffin. His hand shook. Eamon's face - his dead face - had been fixed with a strange, friendly smile. Friendly, but at the same time rigid, as though he were vying for one's attention. Indeed, the mortician had plied his trade so skillfully that Eamon had been endowed with an aura of command and presence. Surely, Aloysius had crossed the room, but the corpse still seemed to be somehow intent upon him. He swallowed. This must be what they called a 'phenomena of optics'. One read about it in those arty pieces sometimes appearing in the newspapers.

"Excuse me, will you Tim? I'd better go toast the dead before the devil has his chance."

Aloysius walked over and raised his glass to his erstwhile brother.

"Here's to you Eamon, you poor, lubberin' oaf. Maybe now, this time, I'll get a word in without argument. Oh, aye. Sure and you can stare at me all you want, you great, mute ape, but you'll let me have my say." He snorted, looking over his shoulder. After all, one didn't want to be observed berating a standing corpse. Not when one was swilling poteen, anyway. Still, he was upset; Eamon had died in arrears, and Aloysius was the only relative left to see him buried and done with. And this wake was going to culminate in many small bills, adding up to the type which could nibble away anyone's good-will-to-all-men.

"Well, anyways, your health, in a manner of speaking," toasted Aloysius.

"That's a fine way to be saying goodbye, you feckless soak," came his brother's voice.

Aloysius had believed, up to now, that he knew all about the emotion of nauseating horror. He was also convinced that, having reached the estate of adulthood, he was done with such things. Hearing his brother speak, however, gave him occasion to reevaluate his position in a startled instant. A thin yodel of terror escaped his lips, and he all but rooted into the Church's foundations.

"Say what?" he hissed.

Years later, when Aloysius would be an old man, and the bare-foot Gossoons would demand of him what was the bravest moment of his life, he'd have the answer at the ready. Turning around to meet the source of that voice is what he'd tell them, without skipping a beat. As it happened, in one scant second his disbelief got up, walked out, and suspended itself from the nearest meat hook.

The awful sound went on.

"That's better, look at me when I'm addressing you."

"It's the drink," Aloysius reasoned. "I've simply taken a spot too much of the poteen, and me nerves are leaping about. That's all." He smiled. "I'll be seeing the bann sidhe,

next thing you know." He chuckled, wagging his head.

"Sure, and she's a lovely woman. Don't be talking against her."

"Is that a fact?" asked Aloysius, immediately biting his tongue. To be hearing a dead man talk is one thing, but to enter into an engaging discussion with it concerning Faerie Women was quite another. True, he took a drink, but that was really no excuse for this moribund vision.

"Um, Eamon," he ventured, wanting to be a good sport, "As I see it, you're supposed to be dead, so for you to be speaking is out of the question. You must see that? Therefore, I'll just stroll quietly to the bar and - "

"Stop gibbering, man," rasped Eamon. "You'll attract attention. Look, there's something I'm dying to tell you."

Aloysius winced. "Your humor is quickening, at any rate. What is it?"

"It's this way," continued the ghastly spectacle. "I've been giving some deep thought about Tir nan Og."

"Tir nan Og?"

"Aye. Tir nan Og. The Isle of the Young. The place our pagan ancestors went after they passed on. Tree laden with fruit, lively young maidens at hand, never a day's toil. This heaven and hell gambit is looking a little chancy, from where I'm standing. Sort of a fifty fifty wager, and considering the notion of losing... I never was that much of a punter, Aloysius. I want to go to Tir nan Og."

"You're damned if you even think of it!" spat Aloysius.

"I'm damned if I'll be buried," growled Eamon. "I'm hardly looking forward to tomorrow, to be planted like an old spud. But there are all kinds of wee, horrid creatures down there, looking forward to it, with relish. Ugh."

"And what do you expect me to do about it, see to it that you're buried with mothballs?" said the other, getting into the spirit of the debate.

"It's simple," went on the cadaver, ignoring the remark. "Late tonight, you're to steal my body out of this crate, put me in a boat, and send me off from Padraig's Dock. From there I'm on my own. Why, it's as easy as prayer to a bishop."

This is getting nasty, Aloysius thought. Stealing bodies was vulgar work. At best, it could only be construed as a grim undertaking. At worst, it could wind a fellow up in prison, or more likely, bedlam, which is probably where he belonged anyway, if this exchange was an indication of things to come. But for the life of him he was unable to summon up any reasonable excuses.

"The coffin will be too light; they'll know," he croaked.

"Haw! There's the beauty of it," chortled the grisly object. "In my shop, in the back room, mind, you'll find twenty frozen ducks or so. I want you to get them in a gunny bag, replace me with them, then seal the coffin, which, as my brother, is your right. No one need ever know. Eh?"

"Christ," was all Aloysius could produce.

"Now, get ye hence, quick."

"And it's me who thought you said ducks."

In its wisdom, Life offers us a wide array of experiences and tasks, and they are not always pleasant. Aloysius dwelt upon this thought a few hours later as he made his way furtively towards the Church, the gunny bag of frozen ducks bumping painfully on his back. He had to obey his brother's wishes. Uncanny things had a way of getting their own back if one didn't. He didn't want to think of goblins, vampires, or even the dreadful Yow

Boy of Lough Leah calling on him in the dark marches of the night, but he couldn't help himself. Just the same, he felt like a base wretch as he skulked across the graveyard that abutted the Church. Off to his left, a freshly dug grave yawned in the ghostly moonlight. It made him think of a toothless mouth waiting to be fed. With a shudder, he realized that it was for his brother.

The Church loomed in the dark with a mien of righteous disapproval, and Aloysius rested for a moment by its cellar window.

"Easy, lad," he counselled himself. He dabbed at the sweat on his brow with a handkerchief. He took the small crowbar which he'd thoughtfully brought along and jemmied the window open. "Quietly, quietly," he mouthed, pushing the sack through.

Perhaps it was the darkness of the cellar; maybe a simple case of overextended nerves, but the unhappy fact remains that the bag of ducks slipped from his fingers and made a hellish racket as it hit the floor, doing everything but quacking to Aloysius' horrified ears. He leapt in after them and quietly pulled the window to, certain that at any moment the basement door would be flung open to reveal Father Doran, or perhaps God Himself ablaze with hideous fury. But no; a few moments passed and nothing happened, except that Aloysius thought that he could hear a soft voice singing.

"What in the name of heaven," he gargled. He clicked on his flashlight and played it across the tiled floor towards the coffin.

"My wild, Irish Rose..." Sure enough, the thin, reedy tenor was emanating from his brother's casket.

"The sweetest flower that grows," the voice trilled.

"Shut up, can't you, you frightening moron?" Aloysius whimpered.

Eamon still had the weird, fixed grin on his face, and if anything, it appeared even less

reassuring in the cold beam of the flashlight.

"On a fine night like this I always give one of the old songs," the voice said a bit blearily.

Aloysius sniffed cautiously. "What's that I smell? You haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Embalming fluid," returned Eamon. "It's good stuff."

Aloysius had heard enough. "Well, clam up. You'll have us excommunicated." He muttered pitifully as he hauled Eamon's body from the casket. It was heavier than he had guessed, and at one point he overcompensated and the corpse slipped and landed on its face with a loud slap.

"Very genteel of you, I'm sure," it said sarcastically.

The ducks, once in place, reminded Aloysius of a geometrical sketch he had seen somewhere. He sealed the lid and dragged his brother's mean clay to the window. It looked clear, so he heaved him up and through roughly and then scrambled out himself. He stood for a moment in the crisp air, panting from both exertion and worry. He darted over the grounds to the gravedigger's shed, and could have yowled with relief to see an old wheelbarrow near a mound of fresh sod in the shadows. Almost chattering with fright, Aloysius hurried back with it to where Eamon lay indifferently on the grass, then bundled him into the thing.

"Now for the bloody wharf," he whispered. They were only a matter of blocks away, and he ran the distance, thinking of haunted rickshaws, thinking of being safe in bed, but most of all, imagining himself languishing glumly in the common gaol.

They were half of the way there when Murphy's Law, in the incarnation of a drunk accosted them.

"Faith," he slurred, "and who's the unfortunate in the barrow?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine, who you've never heard of, sloshed to the gills," was the hasty reply.

"He looks stiff, all right," the man nodded.

They finally made it down to the docks. Aloysius paused to catch his wind behind a closed haddock vendor's stall. The stench was terrific. He peered about; further along, down the wharf, a riotous gang of stevedores were pouring out of a pub, but heading in the opposite direction. He bolted down the nearest wharf, placed his brother in an abandoned dinghy, and shoved it out into the moonlight sea with his foot. He waved goodbye, for reasons he couldn't fathom. Eamon was propped up in the prow of the boat, gazing back at him like a ghostly figurehead.

The funeral service the next day went by quietly, save for when the pall bearers picked up the coffin. Unhappily, it rattled as though it were filled with Spanish castanets.

"Me brother always had good, strong knuckles," explained Aloysius.

"Ye'll be sad to be saying adieu to him, eh, laddie?" Father Doran gave him a clap on the back which near felled him.

"Well, Father," Aloysius replied, watching the box being carried off, "sure, and I'm thinking of it rather as 'Bon Voyage'."

"Amen," said the priest.

*

Sparrow

You're bound to it," my uncle had nodded with bleak satisfaction.

He was right too, though as usual not in the way he saw it. At least from where I stood. You see, blood and honor were two things I'd always kept yards apart - and certainly pigs didn't even enter the equation. Oh, let me introduce myself; name of O'Grady, Timothy A. O'Grady. The A's for Aloysius, which was my grandfather's name. My father's name is Hugh, but you might argue that it weren't no more, because he'd been dead these five weeks. Well sir, normally you'd be right on the money, only it was on account of him that I was facing this awful business. So, in that case I guess Hugh would be as good a handle as anything else. Better, actually, seeing as how it was his moniker in the first place. And even though I'd been named after a nasty branch of my mother's family, Tim suited me just

fine. Tim. I kind of liked the feel of it, made me feel like no end of a real guy. Maybe I'd better go back a ways before this starts making even less sense than it already does. Got no right confusing folk.

You see, my family had always been what the better folk in Wellsport call "detached". Lovely word, ain't it? Detached As if you had jiggled free of something you were supposed to be a part of in the first place. Like an attachment on some fancy machine, you were a piece of equipment. Of course, what the people meant by that pretty word was that the O'Gradys didn't quite go by the standards. This was all hogshit, you understand, because we just plain didn't feel like being a part of the crew. Going to Town Council meetings, bitching about every damn little thing... One time, I remember they passed out this big, useless petition to enforce people to pick up their dog crap from the park. Right after they'd done it, too. No sir, not me. I mean, damn dog's got to go somewhere. May as well be the park, if you ask me. Keep the muggers on their toes that way. Not only that, but from where I sit, a dog's going to get mighty uppity if he sees his master scooping up after him with a shovel every time he drops one. Start taking on airs. But then, nobody wanted my opinion; we O'Gradys were always contrary.

The head honcho of the Town Meetings was one Mrs. Eva Miller. As far as she could see, she was the leading luminary of the whole friggin community. There wasn't a committee, ad hoc group, caucus or task force that didn't have her brand on it, and brother, she ruled her flock like something out of old Egypt's land. Adolf Hitler could have learned from her, although I think he'd probably have called up the Civil Liberties Union first. Whatever, we didn't care for the woman, and she loathed the ground we walked on, which was okay from our point of view seeing as how we didn't have to talk to her, or go to the meetings. Couldn't help feeling bad for her husband, wimp though he was. Called himself Robert

Miller, but everyone addressed him as Bobby. Seemed to fit him, too. You can't respect a fellow who has to be in by ten every evening, and who hands over his pay envelope to his wife unopened. A guy has to earn a name like Robert or William or whatever. Anyhow, came the day when I guess Bobby'd had enough. Must have been around then that his better half decreed that they'd both go in for jazzercise. Well, we all have a shit level, and this certainly hit Bobby's. He hopped into the family Ford and gunned off down the road drunker than a wet duck, picked himself up a call girl from the roadhouse down past Kelly's farm, and ended up killing the both of them when he turned the car onto the railway tracks and collided with the 9:20 out of Greenton. He'd been doing better than 85 when they collided, too. I can't help imagining that he'd have a sick grin on his face when they found him, that is, if he still enjoyed the luxury of a face. As it was, you couldn't tell him from the hooker in the car, and neither of them looked like anything human. State Police had to wash them out with a hose, I'm told. His tombstone reads, "Robert Miller", by the way, though I can't fathom what's buried there. Probably just an empty suit.

Now, if the better people of Wellsport didn't care for us, there were some here and there that we got along all right with. Mostly the farmers and tradespeople, who'd congregate for a cold one in the evenings. You see, these folk didn't fit either, for one reason or another, among the town's gentry. This is the sort of bull waller that can only be found in small farming communities like ours. Some people don't seem to want to be reminded that they ever had a thing to do with the soil, or that they ever helped foal a horse, or shovelled out a barn. Because now they have *real jobs*; that's what they call 'em. Real jobs. Like running a high fashion outlet, or becoming the manager of Burgers O Rama, these are the pursuits that they think will give them a deeper, broader understanding of themselves. Makes you sick to think of it.

Well, anyway, the local farmers would gather of an evening to jawbone awhile and drain a couple of pints. Don't get me wrong, there were some hard cases among them too. Uriel Moss was one for the book of wonder. He was in onions, about six hundred acres of them. A great, grim, bearded behemoth of a man with a dour look to him. All my life, I believe I can recall hearing him utter six, maybe seven words. But rumor has it that when he finally took a wife, he got himself pissed as a newt on this awful onion mash he liked to brew, performed sword dances for her until dawn, then ran roaring into the woods, clasping his new bride to his chest, the both of them jay naked. Whew!

Moss was palsy walsy with this old fossil named Joe Benn. Joe was the village soak, and the scourge of all the higher ups. They liked to compare him, unfairly I thought, with his father, David Benn, who died in the bug house, moaning about big yellow spiders. Joe wasn't like that, and from where I sit it wasn't his fault if he drank. You see, Joe came home one night about a year ago and found his wife, Helen, in the bathtub. She'd slit her wrists with Joe's safety razor, and had written the word "hate" across her belly with her own blood. When Joe found her, she was dead white, and had an empty grin tightening up her face. After that, he began to kill the bottle pretty good and moved into a rooming house downtown. "Can't stay there," he told me. I guess I don't blame him, neither.

Sometimes a damn decent crowd would assemble in the tavern, which is called Adam's Rib, by the way, on account of the first owner's name being Adam, and because he used to cook up some swell ribs. He got burned pretty badly in a grease fire, though, and now he lives in a home down south where they keep him in ice water. The name stuck, just the same. We'd gather in there and spend half the night whooping it up and boozing till you wouldn't know who you were, and didn't much care, anyhow. Of course, you'd pay for it in aces next morning when you hauled yourself out of bed with a face like the devil's, sick of

sin, but it all seemed worth it every now and again. Does wonders for the head to blow it out on the odd occasion. Working on a farm made it easier too. I didn't have to put up with having people babble at me in an office. My family's in pigs and has been since the first O'Grady moved into these parts. I don't have to go up to the swine and say, "Tim O'Grady. Let's have a conference," or anything like that. Still, the pigs think I'm all right seeing as how it's me who feeds them. Sometimes, I used to sing to the pigs, usually just before they was led to the blood house. I figured that they'd at least harbor a fine memory of me that way. Before the sledge hammer came down, that is.

So I'm in the Rib one night about five weeks back when the phone rings behind the bar, and everyone gets real quiet because the only reason they should be bothered here at this hour is if trouble was on the wind. Some of the men hissed at the barkeep, "tell her I'm not here", or "I'm in Church", and such jokes, which, even if they were as stale as last month's biscuits, still managed to raise a guffaw from the lads. There's a regular ceremony to these things, I guess. Well, he hangs up the receiver and turns to me with a perplexed face on.

"Tim," he says, "It looks like your dad's dead."

"Mike," I answered - he calls himself Mike, "I guess he is."

That's how you have to deal with it, you see. People die all the time, and so far, no one's been able to do anything about it, least of all tell you when it's going to happen. So you get yourself ready for it as best you can, then it ain't no big jolt. Just the same, I felt my stomach give a lurch at the news.

"What happened, Mike?" I wasn't really there anymore. I'd been automatically shunted into that compartment of the brain reserved for tidings of this sort, and that's not a pleasant place to be.

"God damn son of a bitch boar gutted him. I'm sorry, Tim."

Well, that was a delicate way to put it, I remember thinking. But it was the truth, and shit is shit no matter how you wrap it, I guess. The thing was, I felt bad, but not that bad. A part of me looked upon it like it was some kind of play, as if he weren't really gone, just hiding in the wings. Maybe that's what happened when you died. You just took a breather away from the story awhile. Wait and see, my dad would say; that was a saying of his. Wait and see.

Maybe I should tell you a bit about him, get the two of you acquainted, so to speak. He had been born some fifty-one years ago to Aloysius and Theresa, nee McReavy, O'Grady, my grandparents. Now these people were Catholics of the deepest hue, and when I say Catholic, I mean R.C. None of your damned Church of England sort, who get a charge out of referring to themselves as Catholics. Well, they just aren't, that's all, though they go through the motions.

Hugh O'Grady was brought into the world with a caul, and some folks think that gives a person what my granny used to call 'the sight'. That's nothing but horse shit, of course, because my dad never exhibited nothing of the sort. Except when he'd cuss and swear that the bloody pigs would surely be the death of him some day, but Christ, that was just bitching. Every now and again though, he'd get this far away look on his face, and I'd wonder where in hell he was. You know, like when you're talking to somebody and you can feel their absence. It wasn't a matter of bad manners, either, more like as if he'd been drawn out of reach, usually by something he'd rather not know about.

But mostly he'd be available in the ways that all fathers are: whaling the tar out of you if your work wasn't finished, teaching you the difference between sparrow and robin eggs and avoiding the topic of sex as though it would poison him to speak of it. He used to send

small rounds of paper running up kite strings somehow, telling me he was signalling the geese. The man kept our farm in one piece, and if it wasn't the finest in the county, well, it wasn't headed for bankruptcy, either.

One day in the autumn a strange looking guy in a black coat came while we were slopping the hogs. I say 'we', but I was no more than four or five years old, and dad made me feel real big and important by telling me it was my job to watch the pigs' tails, because you never knew more about a porker than by watching them. A curly tail meant a well disposed pig, he imparted. But if the sons of bitches straightened them out, it was time to take a quick walk. I was thrilled by the position, and damn me if I let up for a second in my solemn vigil. My dad could feed them in safety, I figured, because I was watching tails.

Anyway, we were absorbed in our respective tasks when this stranger appeared out of nowhere. Now I had no love of men wearing black coats. Ever since I was so high, my parents had warned me that if I was bad, well, they'd have to call the Man. And when the Man came, there would be no court of appeal. He took bad little boys away, and that was the end of it. What he did with them when he got them to his lair was mercifully not talked of. But maybe that was worse. My imagination had no problem coming up with punishments and torments far more gruesome than any my folks could invent. There were windy nights when the old trees would scratch and tap on my window, and I'd lie in my bed, sleep impossible, considering what he might do. I didn't know, perhaps he'd even go so far as to lock me in a small dark closet with hanging puppets for company, I'd think, at which point I'd have to turn on my light and read.

Parents are usually vague in their descriptions, but that didn't matter. I knew what the Man looked like, and this fellow was right off the blueprint. At that time I reasoned that my past sins were being called to account, and that a hideous reckoning was at hand.

Or that perhaps the Man hadn't seen too much by way of business lately, and had come to speak to my father about a possible trade. Me for gold, or something. Whatever the case, I felt sure that my time had come, that I had been sold out, and that the Man would take me away.

"Morning, friend," the man grinned at my dad. "Fine looking youngster you got there."

"Morning yourself, mister," my dad stood up smiling, then looked down at me. "Sure, and he's a good boy. He's watching the pigs' tails right now." He nodded gravely.

"Watching the pigs' tails, is it?" the man went on. "Well now, that's a heavy responsibility. And that's what I'm here to talk about, sir. Responsibilities. Given much thought to your future and financial security?"

My dad scratched the back of his head. "Well sir, let's go into the kitchen for coffee and you can tell me all about it."

They shook hands and walked towards the farmhouse, speaking in hushed tones, and I was left to myself. One thing was certain, neither love nor money was going to make me stop watching those pigs' tails. No way. I figured that if it was my future on the farm hanging in the balance, well, it wouldn't be for breach of duty that they sent me away. I watched those friggin tails real close for a good hour. And sir, if I tell you I know what a pig's tail looks like today, you can believe me.

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Saturdays were when people got buried in Wellsport. The dead ones, that is. Seemed to be a sensible way to run things, in my book, because funerals give you something to mull over, and what with the next day being Sunday, you were a little keener in getting to mass

on time. Made you pay attention, too. Nothing quite like seeing a body planted in the sod for setting you to wonder about things.

Well, that's when they buried my dad, then. On a cold, wet Saturday morning. I remember there were about twenty-one of us, relatives and friends, standing in a sorrowful ring around the grave. Some of them wept openly, others wagged their chins and swore that life was the misery. I stood next to my mother, holding an old, rickety umbrella over the two of us. Damn thing kept on flapping inside out in the wind, making a God-awful ripping sound every time it did so. It was like trying to hold on to an angry crow.

Service was quick, though. Father Kilpatrick galloped through the business as fast as damn-it, most likely because he was suffering from the grippe and wanted to get back to his port before the chills took him. I tossed in the first spadeful of earth, and figured that it was a queer way to show respect for the dead, heaving a shovelful of watery mud at them. As I stood back and bowed my head, I couldn't help but notice a small stream of brown water running into the open hole. I mean, it was like Dame Nature was almost eager to get to work in that grave. Let me say this, mister, it gave me pause. It wasn't the sadness nor the horror of death, no sir. It was the bloody efficiency of it.

Some years back they had to plow out a small part of the old cemetery, and if I stopped here to recount some of the general hoopla that went on in the Town Meetings about it we'd be here till the middle of next week, and still be a furlong from the point. It's enough to know that every town contains any number of folk who uphold the sanctity of old bones, and friggin around with them ranks a close second to opening the seventh seal or something. Argument wasn't worth the air, though. When they finally dug up the old plot there was simply nothing there. And I mean nothing. You'd expect a lick of wood or maybe

an old knuckle bone, but no, all there was was earth. Well, the Holy Bone Society took their lumps and all, but soon after began chattering about the repose of mortal souls. Are souls mortal? There's a thought.

You see, folk anywhere don't like the idea of dying. It's not one of those things anyone talks about with certainty, because last time I heard, it's a bit of a puzzler as to what happens. Seems to me it's the thought of vanishing without a trace that gives most folks the willies. That's probably how come they get so upset if you go scooping up their tombs and such, just so a new street can be built. The upshot of all this is that we have a weird inclination to set up monuments to death. Everywhere you look, seems to me, there's no end of plaques, testimonials, tombstones. All of 'em fine reminders that people die.

First Ash Wednesday I can remember - I was five, Father Kilpatrick smeared oil on my head, pointing out that I was dust and that I was going to end up dust. Set me up real well for the day, that did. I hid under the laundry hamper and wouldn't come out for a bushel of cherries. I guess what it all comes down to is this: I'd rather not think about it.

About three years ago they wanted to put up a statue in the center of Wellsport of one of the Town's boys who hadn't come back from the war. Now after the Great War, it seemed as though an Eleventh Commandment had come thundering out of the heavens demanding that every municipality in the Union had to put up an effigy, bronzed up and proud, of one of its fallen sons. Problem was, which one of our boys was going to be honoured for all the world to gush over and the pigeons to shit on? Well, rule one was that they had to be dead, and all to the better if the tale of their slaughter was amply sprinkled with gruesome details.

The thing was, none of our lads had shown enough sense to get themselves butchered, and this was the cause of a good deal of embarrassed bickering in the ranks of the Town

Council. A wounded boy with a Purple Heart just wouldn't cut the mustard. Anyway, there were about six of them in town drawing relief and lining up at the liquor store every morning waiting for it to open. We even had a crazy one who'd chase the little kids in the park when he wasn't busy eating worms out of a dixie cup. His name was Harry Jenkins, although to me it's pretty much a moot point whether or not you can still have a name when you lose hold of your mind. One way or the other, though, it was all the same for Harry because he ended up getting his face shot in with both barrels, when he carried Elbert's little daughter Mary into her kitchen cackling, licking her golden curls. Poor girl's head was soaking wet, I'm told, from spit, if you can feature it. Well, Elbert took one look, quoted from the Bible, and let him have it with Sweet Emily. That was the end of poor Harry Jenkins. When Elbert stood up in court he just looked sour and said, "Can't have maniacs out to my place." Judge let him off with a lecture, and a warning to be more careful with Sweet Emily, too. I was at his farm about a month ago, and there he was, calm as daisies, shooting squirrels off fenceposts with the same gun. His daughter's kind of forgotten, though they tell me she's got a thing for washing her hair.

Whatever, they never did get to erect a statue in our town, although someone finally got the idea to haul the old Civil War cannon out of the dump and into the park. Folk had a grand time shining it up and oiling the barrel. Even had a brass plaque rigged up for it. "The Boys", it read. It was the best they could do, I suppose. They don't make statues out of the live ones.

Believing, as I do, that things not only don't make sense, but don't have to make sense,

it came to me as no surprise when my Uncle Thad declared that the pig who had done for my father 'must have justice meted out to him'. This was delivered not a week after the funeral. Apparently he had spent the last seven days brooding over the fact in his barn, with nothing for company but the old rosary left to him by a senile nun who used to beat him when he was a schoolboy.

Thaddeus O'Grady was my father's older brother by ten years, and he didn't just live his life, he waged it, modelled on the belief that he was the protector of the family. The fact that no one paid him any attention lent him a deep glow of constant frustration. Frankly, I was frightened by him, because when he'd visit my parents on Sundays or holidays, he obviously thought it would interest me if he'd stare my way, open his toothless maw, and flip his greasy old moustache at me. To this day, I am sure he disgusted my mother, though she pitied him.

Now, I had already planned to butcher the hog that killed my father, if only because it was dangerous. Not out of revenge, at least not wholly out of it. You couldn't help but take a little bit of satisfaction out of the job, true - but I was damned if I'd raise the thing to the level of holy zeal, as Uncle Thad wanted. And sir, he wanted it. He raved, almost drooled with it. At last he was elevated to the position of defender, a thing denied him for ever so long. I could understand that. He bawled that the dead wouldn't sleep, and I was half afraid he'd start twirling that moustache again.

But at the same time, I agreed with him, demented though he was. The dead weren't sleeping. No, they were singing quietly, after their fashion.

They were singing that to bury them was hardly enough. I tell you, their chorus filled my days with something like wonder, and at times, mister, it was loud enough to break my heart. Because they weren't only singing about themselves, but about me as well.

So I killed the old pig.

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What with one thing and the other, I got on with it. The business of being a farmer and all. The winds have chilled to an awful degree and the damned snow has been piling up for three or four weeks now. The plumbing in the Town Hall froze up a while back, I suppose leaving the Council even more full of shit than usual.

But that's all right.

This morning I went out into the cold to feed the pigs and there was a late traveller in the yard. A Song Sparrow had perched himself in the dead apple tree and he was just trilling away as sad as could be. I imagine the little guy was wondering where in hell he was. So I whistled back at him and off he flew. I fed the pigs, singing.

Well, goodnight. Mornings seem earlier every day.

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Note

1. "Lumaa" is based upon a short transcription of an oral Inuit tale, published in "The Newsletter," by the Kativik School Board; Spring 1990 issue.