

at the heart of the discourse, is dread. While the nature of God, and the possibility of eternal life go undiscussed, we happily chew over the minutiae of misery. The syndrome recognizes no boundaries; in bath-house and seminar-room alike, the same ritual is repeated. With the inevitability of a tongue returning to probe a painful tooth, we come back and back and back again to our fears, sitting to talk them over with the eagerness of a hungry man before a full and steaming plate.

While he was still at university, and afraid to speak, Stephen Grace was taught to speak of why he was afraid. In fact not simply to talk about it, but to analyze and dissect his every nerve ending, looking for tiny terrors.

In this investigation, he had a teacher: Quaid.

It was an age of gurus; it was their season. In universities up and down England young men and

women were looking east and west for people to follow like lambs; Steve Grace was just one of many. It

was his bad luck that Quaid was the Messiah he found.

They'd met in the Student Common Room.

"The name's Quaid," said the man at Steve's elbow at the bar.

"Oh."

"You're —?"

"Steve Grace."

Quaid ordered a double brandy. He didn't look that well off, and a double brandy would have just

about crippled Steve's finances for the next week. Quaid downed it quickly, and ordered another.

"What are you having?"

Steve was nursing half a pint of luke-warm lager, determined to make it last an hour.

"Nothing for me."

"Yes you will."

"I'm fine."

"Another brandy and a pint of lager for my friend."

Steve didn't resist Quaid's generosity. A pint and a half of lager in his unfed system would help no

end in dulling the tedium of his oncoming seminars on 'Charles Dickens as a Social Analyst'. He yawned just to think of it.

"Somebody ought to write a thesis on drinking as a social activity."

Quaid studied his brandy a moment, then downed it.

"Or as oblivion," he said.

Steve looked at the man. Perhaps five years older than Steve's twenty. The mixture of clothes he wore

Hair, a dirty blond.

Quaid, Steve decided, could have passed for a Dutch dope-pusher..He wore no badges. They were the common currency of a student's obsessions, and Quaid looked

naked without something to imply how he took his pleasures. Was he a gay, feminist, save-the-whale

campaigner; or a fascist vegetarian? What was he into, for God's sake?

"You should have been doing Old Norse," said Quaid.

"Why?"

"They don't even bother to mark the papers on that course," said Quaid.

Steve hadn't heard about this. Quaid droned on.

"They just throw them all up into the air. Face up, an A. Face down, a B."

Oh, it was a joke. Quaid was being witty. Steve attempted a laugh, but Quaid's face remained

unmoved by his own attempt at humour.

"You should be in Old Norse," he said again. "Who needs Bishop Berkeley anyhow. Or Plato. Or —"

"Or?"

"It's all shit."

"Yes."

was not the done thing. You

either smoked Gauloises, Camel or nothing at all.

“It’s not true philosophy they teach you here,” said Quaid, with unmistakable contempt.

“Oh?”

“We get spoon-fed a bit of Plato, or a bit of Bentham —no real analysis.

It’s got all the right markings

of course. It looks like the beast: it even smells a bit like the beast to the uninitiated.”

“What beast?”

“Philosophy. True Philosophy. It’s a beast, Stephen. Don’t you think?”

“I hadn’t -”

“It’s wild. It bites.”

He grinned, suddenly vulpine. “Yes. It bites,” he replied. Oh, that pleased him. Again, for luck:

“Bites.”

Stephen nodded. The metaphor was beyond him. “I think we should feel mauled by our subject.”

Quaid was warming to the whole subject of mutilation by education. “We should be frightened to juggle

the ideas we should talk about.”

We should be walking close to the beast, Steve, don't you think?
Reaching out to stroke it, pet it, milk
it—"

"What . . . er . . . what is the beast?"

Quaid was clearly a little exasperated by the pragmatism of the enquiry.

"It's the subject of any worthwhile philosophy, Stephen. It's the things
we fear, because we don't
understand them. It's the dark behind the door."

Steve thought of a door. Thought of the dark. He began to see what
Quaid was driving at in his
labyrinthine fashion. Philosophy was a way to talk about fear.

"We should discuss what's intimate to our psyches," said Quaid. "If we
don't. . . we risk..."

Quaid's loquaciousness deserted him suddenly.. "What?"

Quaid was staring at his empty brandy glass, seeming to will it to be full
again.

"Want another?" said Steve, praying that the answer would be no.

"What do we risk?" Quaid repeated the question. "Well, I think if we
don't go out and find the beast
—"

Steve could see the punchline coming.

His parents, Cheryl had heard him say, were dead. Killed, they thought.

That appeared to be the sum of human knowledge where Quaid was concerned.

"I owe you a drink," said Steve, touching Quaid on the shoulder.

He looked as though he'd been bitten.

"Brandy?"

"Thank you." Steve ordered the drinks. "Did I startle you?"

"I was thinking."

"No philosopher should be without one."

"One what?"

"Brain."

They fell to talking. Steve didn't know why he'd approached Quaid again. The man was ten years his

senior and in a different intellectual league. He probably intimidated Steve, if he was to be honest about

it. Quaid's relentless talk of beasts confused him. Yet he wanted more of the same: more metaphors: more

of that humourless voice telling him how useless the tutors were, how weak the students.

In Quaid's world there were no certainties. He had no secular gurus and certainly no religion. He

innocent mutton: waiting, patient as stone, for their moment.

Everything was to be doubted, but the fact that dread existed.

Quaid's intellectual arrogance was exhilarating. Steve soon came to love the iconoclastic ease with

which he demolished belief after belief. Sometimes it was painful when Quaid formulated a water-tight

argument against one of Steve's dogma. But after a few weeks, even the sound of the demolition seemed

to excite. Quaid was clearing the undergrowth, felling the trees, razing the stubble. Steve felt free.

Nation, family, Church, law. All ash. All useless. All cheats, and chains and suffocation.

There was only dread.

"I fear, you fear, we fear," Quaid was fond of saying. "He, she or it fears. There's no conscious thing

on the face of the world that doesn't know dread more intimately than its own heartbeat."

One of Quaid's favourite baiting-victims was another Philosophy and Eng. Lit. student, Cheryl

Fromm. She would rise to his more outrageous remarks like fish to rain, and while the two of them took

making a move on her..“We all taste dread once in a while,” Quaid would reply to her, and his milky eyes would study her

face intently, watching for her reaction, trying, Steve knew, to find a flaw in her conviction.

“I don’t.”

“No fears? No nightmares?”

“No way. I’ve got a good family; don’t have any skeletons in my closet. I don’t even eat meat, so I

don’t feel bad when I drive past a slaughterhouse. I don’t have any shit to put on show. Does that mean

I’m not real?”

“It means,” Quaid’s eyes were snake-slits, “it means your confidence has something big to cover.”

“Back to nightmares.”

“Big nightmares.”

“Be specific: define your terms.”

“I can’t tell you what you fear.”

“Tell me what you fear then.”

Quaid hesitated. “Finally,” he said, “It’s beyond analysis.”

“Beyond analysis, my ass!”

real honor that”s at the root of my personality.”

“I’ve got images,” said Steve. “Pictures from childhood that make me think of —” He stopped,

regretting this confessional already.

“What?” said Cheryl. “You mean things to do with bad experiences? Falling off your bike, or something like that?”

“Perhaps,” Steve said. “I find myself, sometimes, thinking of those pictures. Not deliberately, just when my concentration’s idling. It’s almost as though my mind went to them automatically.”

Quaid gave a little grunt of satisfaction. “Precisely,” he said.

“Freud writes on that,” said Cheryl.

“What?”

“Freud,” Cheryl repeated, this time making a performance of it, as though she were speaking to a child. “Sigmund Freud: you may have heard of him.”

Quaid’s lip curled with unrestrained contempt. “Mother fixations don’t answer the problem. The real

terrors in me, in all of us, are pre-personality. Dread’s there before we have any notion of ourselves as

“You’re a liar,” said Cheryl, getting up from her seat, and looking down her nose at Quaid.

“Perhaps I am,” he said, suddenly the perfect gentleman.

After that the debates stopped.

No more talking about nightmares, no more debating the things that go bump in the night. Steve saw

Quaid irregularly for the next month, and when he did Quaid was invariably in the company of Cheryl

Fromm. Quaid was polite with her, even deferential. He no longer wore his leather jacket, because she

hated the smell of dead animal matter. This sudden change in their relationship confounded Stephen; but

he put it down to his primitive understanding of sexual matters. He wasn’t a virgin, but women were still

a mystery to him: contradictory and puzzling.

He was also jealous, though he wouldn’t entirely admit that to himself. He resented the fact that the

wet dream genius was taking up so much of Quaid’s time..There was another feeling; a curious sense he had that Quaid was courting Cheryl for his own strange

“Cheryl?”

“Of course, Cheryl.”

“I know. She mentioned it before.”

“Yes, but it isn’t a fad with her. She’s passionate about it. Can’t even bear to look in a butcher’s

window. She won’t touch meat, smell meat —”

“Oh.” Steve was stumped. Where was this leading?

“Dread, Steve.”

“Of meat?”

“The signs are different from person to person. She fears meat. She says she’s so healthy, so balanced.

Shit! I’ll find —”

“Find what?”

“The fear, Steve.”

“You’re not going to . . .?” Steve didn’t know how to voice his anxiety without sounding accusatory.

“Harm her?” said Quaid. “No, I’m not going to harm her in any way. Any damage done to her will be strictly self-inflicted.”

Quaid was staring at him almost hypnotically. “It’s about time we learnt to trust one another,” Quaid

“Then respect that.”

“What?”

“Silence. Not a word.”

Steve nodded. That wasn't a difficult promise to keep. There was nobody he could tell his anxieties to without being laughed at.

Quaid looked satisfied. He hurried away, leaving Steve feeling as though he had unwillingly joined some secret society, for what purpose he couldn't begin to tell. Quaid had made a pact with him and it was unnerving.

For the next week he cut all his lectures and most of his seminars. Notes went uncopied, books unread, essays unwritten. On the two occasions he actually went into the university building he crept around like a cautious mouse, praying he wouldn't collide with Quaid.

He needn't have feared. The one occasion he did see Quaid's stooping shoulders across the quadrangle

he was involved in a smiling exchange with Cheryl Fromm. She laughed, musically, her pleasure echoing

At the age of six, Steve had been struck by a car. The injuries were not particularly bad, but a concussion left him partially deaf. It was a profoundly distressing experience for him; not understanding why he was suddenly cut off from the world. It was an inexplicable torment, and the child assumed it was eternal..One moment his life had been real, full of shouts and laughter. The next he was cut off from it, and the external world became an aquarium, full of gaping fish with grotesque smiles. Worse still, there were times when he suffered what the doctors called tinnitus, a roaring or ringing sound in the ears. His head would fill with the most outlandish noises, whoops and whistlings, that played like sound-effects to the flailings of the outside world. At those times his stomach would churn, and a band of iron would be wrapped around his forehead, crushing his thoughts into fragments, dissociating head from hand, intention from practice. He would be swept away in a tide of panic, completely unable to make sense of the world while his head sang and rattled.

nothing, it seemed, could bring the world, the speaking, laughing, crying world back to him.

He was alone.

That was the beginning, middle and end of the dread. He was absolutely alone with his cacophony.

Locked in this house, in this room, in this body, in this head, a prisoner of deaf, blind flesh.

It was almost unbearable. In the night the boy would sometimes cry out, not knowing he was making

any sound, and the fish who had been his parents would turn on the light and come to try and help him,

bending over his bed making faces, their soundless mouths forming ugly shapes in their attempts to help.

Their touches would calm him at last; with time his mother learned the trick of soothing away the panic

that swept over him.

A week before his seventh birthday his hearing returned, not perfectly, but well enough for it to seem

like a miracle. The world snapped back into focus; and life began afresh.

It took several months for the boy to trust his senses again. He would still wake in the night, half-anticipating

dark, of being alone.

But then, wasn't everyone afraid to be alone? To be utterly alone.

Steve had another fear now, far more difficult to pin down.

Quaid.

In a drunken revelation session he had told Quaid about his childhood, about the deafness, about the night terrors.

Quaid knew about his weakness: the clear route into the heart of Steve's dread. He had a weapon, a

stick to beat Steve with, should it ever come to that. Maybe that was why he chose not to speak to Cheryl

(warn her, was that what he wanted to do?) and certainly that was why he avoided Quaid.

The man had a look, in certain moods, of malice. Nothing more or less. He looked like a man with

malice deep, deep in him.

Maybe those four months of watching people with the sound turned down had sensitized Steve to the

tiny glances, sneers and smiles that flit across people's faces. He knew Quaid's life was a labyrinth; a map

undeniable relief for him. Academe had overstuffed his mind, he felt force-fed with words and ideas. The

print work sweated all of that out of him rapidly, sorting out the jumble in his mind.

It was a good time: he scarcely thought of Quaid at all.

He returned to campus in the late September. The students were still thin on the ground. Most of the

courses didn't start for another week; and there was a melancholy air about the place without its usual

melee of complaining, flirting, arguing kids..Steve was in the library, cornering a few important books before others on his course had their hands

on them. Books were pure gold at the beginning of term, with reading lists to be checked off, and the

university book shop forever claiming the necessary titles were on order. They would invariably arrive,

those vital books, two days after the seminar in which the author was to be discussed. This final year

Steve was determined to be ahead of the rush for the few copies of seminal works the library possessed.

The familiar voice spoke.

"Early to work."

It was a trap. No: that was absurd. He was offering a book; how could that simple gesture be construed as a trap?

“Come to think of it,” the smile broadened, “I think it’s the library copy I’ve got. I’ll give it to you.”

“Thanks.”

“Good holiday?”

“Yes. Thank you. You?”

“Very rewarding.”

The smile had decayed into a thin line beneath his —“You’ve grown a moustache.”

It was an unhealthy example of the species. Thin, patchy, and dirty-blond, it wandered back and forth

under Quaid’s nose as if looking for a way off his face. Quaid looked faintly embarrassed.

“Was it for Cheryl?”

He was definitely embarrassed now.

“Well...”

“Sounds like you had a good vacation.”

The embarrassment was surmounted by something else.

“I’ve got some wonderful photographs,” Quaid said.

“I don’t think of you as being a photographer.”

“It’s become a passion of mine.”

He grinned as he said ‘passion’. There was a barely-suppressed excitement in his manner. He was positively gleaming with pleasure.

“You’ve got to come and see them.”

“I—”

“Tonight. And pick up the Bentham at the same time.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve got a house for myself these days. Round the corner from the Maternity Hospital, in Pilgrim

Street. Number sixty-four. Some time after nine?”

“Right. Thanks. Pilgrim Street.” Quaid nodded.

“I didn’t know there were any habitable houses in Pilgrim Street.”

“Number sixty-four.” Pilgrim Street was on its knees. Most of the houses were already rubble. A few were in the process of

being knocked down. Their inside walls were unnaturally exposed; pink and pale green wallpapers,

fireplaces on upper storeys hanging over chasms of smoking brick. Stairs leading from nowhere to nowhere, and back again.

Quaid's house, though scarcely palatial, was more welcoming than the surrounding wasteland.

They drank some bad red wine together, which Steve had brought with him, and they smoked some

grass. Quaid was far more mellow than Steve had ever seen him before, quite happy to talk trivia instead

of dread; laughing occasionally; even telling a dirty joke. The interior of the house was bare to the point

of being spartan. No pictures on the walls; no decoration of any kind. Quaid's books, and there were

literally hundreds of them, were piled on the floor in no particular sequence that Steve could make out.

The kitchen and bathroom were primitive. The whole atmosphere was almost monastic.

After a couple of easy hours, Steve's curiosity got the better of him.

"Where's the holiday snaps, then?" he said, aware that he was slurring his words a little, and no longer

giving a shit.

"Oh yes. My experiment."

"Experiment?"

"Tell you the truth, Steve, I'm not so sure I should show them to you."

“Pictures.”

“Of?”

“You remember Cheryl.”

Pictures of Cheryl. Ha. “How could I forget?”

“She won’t be coming back this term.”

“Oh.”

“She had a revelation.” Quaid’s stare was basilisk-like.

“What do you mean?”

“She was always so calm, wasn’t she?” Quaid was talking about her as though she were dead. “Calm, cool and collected.”

“Yes, I suppose she was.”

“Poor bitch. All she wanted was a good fuck.”

Steve smirked like a kid at Quaid’s dirty talk. It was a little shocking; like seeing teacher with his dick hanging out of his trousers.

“She spent some of the vacation here.”

“Here?”

“In this house.”

“You like her then?”

a sheaf of black and white

photographs, blown up to twice postcard size. He passed the first one of the series over to Steve.

"I locked her away you see, Steve." Quaid was as unemotional as a newsreader. "To see if I could

needle her into showing her dread a little bit."

"What do you mean, locked her away?"

"Upstairs."

Steve felt strange. He could hear his ears singing, very quietly. Bad wine always made his head ring.

"I locked her away upstairs," Quaid said again, "as an experiment. That's why I took this house. No

neighbours to hear."

No neighbours to hear what?

Steve looked at the grainy image in his hand.

"Concealed camera," said Quaid, "she never knew I was photographing her."

Photograph One was of a small, featureless room. A little plain furniture.

"That's the room. Top of the house. Warm. A bit stuffy even. No noise."

No noise.

Quaid proffered Photograph Two.

roughly covered with a towel.

“What’s the bucket for?”

“She had to piss.”

“Yes.”

“All amenities provided,” said Quaid. “I didn’t intend to reduce her to an animal.”

Even in his drunken state, Steve took Quaid’s inference.

He didn’t intend to reduce her to an animal. However.

Photograph Four. On the table, on an unpatterned plate, a slab of meat.

A bone sticks out from it.

“Beef,” said Quaid.

“But she’s a vegetarian.”

“So she is. It’s slightly salted, well-cooked, good beef.” Photograph Five.

The same. Cheryl is in the

room. The door is closed. She is kicking the door, her foot and fist and face a blur of fury.

“I put her in the room about five in the morning. She was sleeping: I carried her over the threshold

myself. Very romantic. She didn’t know what the hell was going on.”

“You locked her in there?”

“Of course. An experiment.”

table.

“Nice photo, don’t you think? Look at the expression of disgust on her face. She hated even the smell

of cooked meat. She wasn’t hungry then, of course.”

Eight: she sleeps.

Nine: she pisses. Steve felt uncomfortable, watching the girl squatting on the bucket, knickers round

her ankles. Tearstains on her face..Ten: she drinks water from the jug.

Eleven: she sleeps again, back to the room, curled up like a foetus.

“How long has she been in the room?”

“This was only fourteen hours in. She lost orientation as to time very quickly. No light change, you

see. Her body-clock was fucked up pretty soon.”

“How long was she in here?”

“Till the point was proved.”

Twelve: Awake, she cruises the meat on the table, caught surreptitiously glancing down at it.

“This was taken the following morning. I was asleep: the camera just took pictures every quarter hour.

Look at her eyes...”

of course. It's been a day and a
half. She's more than a little peckish."

Thirteen: she sleeps again, curled into an even tighter ball, as though she wanted to swallow herself.

Fourteen: she drinks more water.

"I replaced the jug when she was asleep. She slept deeply: I could have done a jig in there and it
wouldn't have woken her. Lost to the world."

He grinned. Mad, thought Steve, the man's mad.

"God, it stank in there. You know how women smell sometimes: It's not sweat, It's something else.

Heavy odour: meaty. Bloody. She came on towards the end of her time. Hadn't planned it that way."

Fifteen: she touches the meat.

"This is where the cracks begin to show," said Quaid, with quiet triumph in his voice. "This is where
the dread begins."

Steve studied the photograph closely. The grain of the print blurred the detail, but the cool mama was

in pain, that was for sure. Her face was knotted up, half in desire, half in repulsion, as she touched the

It wasn't difficult to see that. The next photo she stood still in the middle of the room, averting her

eyes from the temptation of the food, her entire body tensed with the dilemma.

"You're starving her."

"She can go ten days without eating quite easily. Fasts are common in any civilized country, Steve.

Sixty per cent of the British population is clinically obese at any one time. She was too fat anyhow."

Eighteen: she sits, the fat girl, in her corner of the room, weeping.

"About now she began to hallucinate. Just little mental ticks. She thought she felt something in her

hair, or on the back of her hand. I'd see her staring into mid-air sometimes watching nothing."

Nineteen: she washes herself. She is stripped to the waist, her breasts are heavy, her face is drained of

expression. The meat is a darker tone than in the previous photographs.

"She washed herself regularly. Never let twelve hours go by without washing from head to toe."

"The meat looks. . ."

"Ripe?"

given to feed on. She's trapped with her own horror of meat on the one hand, and her dread of dying on the other. Which is going to give first?"

Steve was no less trapped now.

On the one hand this joke had already gone too far, and Quaid's experiment had become an exercise in sadism.

On the other hand he wanted to know how far this story ended. There was an undeniable fascination in watching the woman suffer.

The next seven photographs — twenty, twenty-one, two, three, four, five and six pictured the same circular routine. Sleeping, washing, pissing, meat-watching. Sleeping, washing, pissing —Then twenty-seven.

"See?"

She picks up the meat.

Yes, she picks it up, her face full of horror. The haunch of the beef looks well-ripened now, speckled with flies' eggs. Gross.

"She bites it."

The next photograph, and her face is buried in the meat.

generation.

Thirty-one: she sleeps. Her head is lost in a tangle of arms.

Thirty-two: she is standing up. She is looking at the meat again, defying it. The hunger she feels is plain on her face. So is the disgust.

Thirty-three. She sleeps.

“How long now?” asked Steve.

“Five days. No, six.”

Six days.

Thirty-four. She is a blurred figure, apparently flinging herself against a wall. Perhaps beating her

head against it, Steve couldn't be sure. He was past asking. Part of him didn't want to know.

Thirty-five: she is again sleeping, this time beneath the table. The sleeping bag has been torn to pieces, shredded cloth and pieces of stuffing littering the room.

Thirty-six: she speaks to the door, through the door, knowing she will get no answer.

Thirty-seven: she eats the rancid meat.

Calmly she sits under the table, like a primitive in her cave, and pulls at the meat with her incisors.

threats and apologies as she'd

delivered day in, day out. Then she broke. Just like that. Squatted under the table and ate the beef down to

the bone, as though it were a choice cut."

Thirty-eight: she sleeps. The door is open. Light pours in.

Thirty-nine: the room is empty.

"Where did she go?"

"She wandered downstairs. She came into the kitchen, drank several glasses of water, and sat in a

chair for three or four hours without saying a word."

"Did you speak to her?"

"Eventually. When she started to come out of her fugue state. The experiment was over. I didn't want to hurt her."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all. For a long time I don't believe she was even aware of my presence in the room. Then I

cooked some potatoes, which she ate."

"She didn't try and call the police?"

"No."

“And what did it all prove?”

“Nothing at all, perhaps. But it made an interesting start to my investigations.”

“Start? This was only a start?”

There was plain disgust for Quaid in Steve’s voice.

“Stephen —”

“You could have killed her!”

“No.”

“She could have lost her mind. Unbalanced her permanently.”

“Possibly. But unlikely. She was a strong-willed woman.”

“But you broke her.”

“Yes. It was a journey she was ready to take. We’d talked of going to face her fear. So here was I,

arranging for Cheryl to do just that. Nothing much really.”

“You forced her to do it. She wouldn’t have gone otherwise.”

“True. It was an education for her.”

“So now you’re a teacher?”

Steve wished he’d been able to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. But it was there. Sarcasm; anger; and a little fear.

“Oh? OK.”

“I’ve got classes early tomorrow.”

“No.”

“What?”

A beat, faltering.

“No. Don’t go yet.”

“Why?” His heart was racing. He feared Quaid, he’d never realized how profoundly.

“I’ve got some more books to give you.”

Steve felt his face flush. Slightly. What had he thought in that moment? That Quaid was going to bring

him down with a rugby tackle and start experimenting on his fears?

No. Idiot thoughts.

“I’ve got a book on Kierkegaard you’ll like. Upstairs. I’ll be two minutes.”

Smiling, Quaid left the room.

Steve squatted on his haunches and began to sheaf through the photographs again. It was the moment when Cheryl first picked up the rotting meat that fascinated him most. Her face wore an expression

completely uncharacteristic of the woman he had known. Doubt was written there, and confusion, and deep —Dread.

He heard a sound behind him, too soft to be Quaid.

Unless he was creeping.

Oh, God, unless he was —A pad of chloroformed cloth was clamped over Steve's mouth and his

nostrils. Involuntarily, he inhaled and the vapours stung his sinuses, made his eyes water.

A blob of blackness appeared at the corner of the world, just out of sight, and it started to grow, this

stain, pulsing to the rhythm of his quickening heart.

In the centre of Steve's head he could see Quaid's voice as a veil. It said his name.

"Stephen."

Again.

"— ephen."

"— phen."

"— hen."

"en."

The stain was the world. The world was dark, gone away. Out of sight, out of mind.

Steve fell clumsily amongst the photographs.

chafed his skin when he tried to move too far.

The floor beneath him was very uncomfortable, and when he investigated it more closely with the

palm of his hand he realized he was lying on a huge grille or grid of some kind. It was metal, and its

regular surface spread in every direction as far as his arms would reach. When he poked his arm down

through the holes in this lattice he touched nothing. Just empty air falling away beneath him.

The first infra-red photographs Quaid took of Stephen's confinement pictured his exploration. As

Quaid had expected the subject was being quite rational about his situation. No hysterics. No curses. No

tears. That was the challenge of this particular subject. He knew precisely what was going on; and he

would respond logically to his fears. That would surely make a more difficult mind to break than

Cheryl's.

But how much more rewarding the results would be when he did crack. Would his soul not open up

the most likely place for Quaid to

have taken him. He could think of nowhere.

Nowhere.

He was lost in a place he couldn't fix or recognize. The shaft had no corners to focus his eyes on; and

the walls offered no crack or hole to hide his consciousness in.

Worse, he was lying spread-eagled on a grid that hung over this shaft. His eyes could make no

impression on the darkness beneath him: it seemed that the shaft might be bottomless. And there was only

the thin network of the grill, and the fragile chain that shackled his ankle to it, between him and falling.

He pictured himself poised under an empty black sky, and over an infinite darkness. The air was warm and stale. It dried up the tears that had suddenly sprung to his eyes, leaving them gummy. When he began

to shout for help, which he did after the tears had passed, the darkness ate his words easily.

Having yelled himself hoarse, he lay back on the lattice. He couldn't help but imagine that beyond his

frail bed, the darkness went on forever. It was absurd, of course. Nothing goes on forever, he said aloud.

Until he hit.

Would he see light as his head was dashed open on impact? Would he understand, in the moment that

his body became offal, why he'd lived and died?

Then he thought: Quaid wouldn't dare. "Wouldn't dare!" he screeched. "Wouldn't dare!"

The dark was a glutton for words. As soon as he'd yelled into it, it was as though he'd never made a sound.

And then another thought: a real baddie. Suppose Quaid had found this circular hell to put him in

because it would never be found, never be investigated? Maybe he wanted to take his experiment to the limits.

To the limits. Death was at the limits. And wouldn't that be the ultimate experiment for Quaid?

Watching a man die: watching the fear of death, the mother lode of dread, approach. Sartre had written

that no man could ever know his own death. But to know the deaths of others, intimately to watch the

educator, was obsessed with terrors because his own dread ran deepest.

That was why he had to watch others deal with their fears. He needed a solution, a way out for himself.

Thinking all this through took hours. In the darkness Steve's mind was quick-silver, but

uncontrollable. He found it difficult to keep one train of argument for very long. His thoughts were like

fish, small, fast fish, wriggling out of his grasp as soon as he took a hold of them.

But underlying every twist of thought was the knowledge that he must out-play Quaid. That was

certain. He must be calm; prove himself a useless subject for Quaid's analysis.

The photographs of these hours showed Stephen lying with his eyes closed on the grid, with a slight

frown on his face. Occasionally, paradoxically, a smile would flit across his lips. Sometimes it was

impossible to know if he was sleeping or waking, thinking or dreaming.

Quaid waited.

seemed very loud in his head; and

second, that he felt a constriction, a tightness, around his temples.

The photographs show Stephen clumsily reaching up to his head. A harness is strapped on to him, and

locked in place. It clamps plugs deep into his ears, preventing any sound from getting in.

The photographs show puzzlement. Then anger. Then fear.

Steve was deaf.

All he could hear were the noises in his head. The clicking of his teeth. The slush and swallow of his

palate. The sounds boomed between his ears like guns.

Tears sprang to his eyes. He kicked at the grid, not hearing the clatter of his heels on the metal bars..He screamed until his throat felt as if it was bleeding. He heard none of his cries.

Panic began in him.

The photographs showed its birth. His face was flushed. His eyes were wide, his teeth and gums

exposed in a grimace.

He looked like a frightened monkey.

All the familiar, childhood feelings swept over him. He remembered them like the faces of old

In his head, he could hear his tongue clicking. He could hear his mucus too, moving sluggishly in the
panic-constricted passages of his nose, blocking and unblocking in his ears. Now he could detect the low,
soft hiss that waited under all the other noises. The sound of his mind —
It was like the white noise
between stations on the radio, this was the same whine that came to fetch him under anaesthetic, the same
noise that would sound in his ears on the borders of sleep.
His limbs still twitched nervously, and he was only half-aware of the way he wrestled with his
handcuffs, indifferent to their edges scouring the skin at his wrists.
The photographs recorded all these reactions precisely. His war with hysteria: his pathetic attempts to
keep the fears from resurfacing. His tears. His bloody wrists.
Eventually, exhaustion won over panic; as it had so often as a child. How many times had he fallen
asleep with the salt-taste of tears in his nose and mouth, unable to fight any longer?
The exertion had heightened the pitch of his head-noises. Now, instead of a lullaby, his brain whistled

going to lose his mind without giving up a single clue.

One word, one miserable word was all Quaid needed. A little sign as to the nature of the experience.

Or better still, something to suggest a solution, a healing totem, a prayer even. Surely some Saviour

comes to the lips, as the personality is swept away in madness? There must be something.

Quaid waited like a carrion bird at the site of some atrocity, counting the minutes left to the expiring

soul, hoping for a morsel.

Steve woke face down on the grid. The air was much staler now, and the metal bars bit into the flesh

of his cheek. He was hot and uncomfortable.

He lay still, letting his eyes become accustomed to his surroundings again. The lines of the grid ran off

in perfect perspective to meet the wall of the shaft. The simple network of criss-crossed bars struck him as

pretty. Yes, pretty. He traced the lines back and forth, 'til he tired of the game. Bored, he rolled over onto

his back, feeling the grid vibrate under his body. Was it less stable now? It seemed to rock a little as he

fall. It would slip between the bars and be lost. But no. It was finely balanced across two sides of a lattice-hole;

he could still save it if he tried.

He reached for his poor, poor shoe, and his movement shifted the grid.

The shoe began to slip.

"Please," he begged it, "don't fall." He didn't want to lose his nice shoe, his pretty shoe. It mustn't fall. It mustn't fall.

As he stretched to snatch it, the shoe tipped, heel down, through the grid and fell into the darkness.

He let out a cry of loss that he couldn't hear.

Oh, if only he could listen to the shoe falling; to count the seconds of its descent. To hear it thud home

at the bottom of the shaft. At least then he'd know how far he had to fall to his death.

He couldn't endure it any longer. He rolled over on to his stomach and thrust both arms through the

grid, screaming: "I'll go too! I'll go too!"

He couldn't bear waiting to fall, in the dark, in the whining silence, he just wanted to follow his shoe

down, down, down the dark shaft to extinction, and have the whole game finished once and for all.

The man wanted him to fall. The bad man — what was his name?
Quake? Quail? Quarrel -Automatically

he seized the grid with both hands as it tipped even further over. Maybe
he didn't want to

fall after his shoe, after all? Maybe life, a little moment more of life, was
worth holding on to —The dark

beyond the edge of the grid was so deep; and who could guess what
lurked in it?

In his head the noises of his panic multiplied. The thumping of his
bloody heart, the stutter of his

mucus, the dry rasp of his palate. His palms, slick with sweat, were los-
ing their grip. Gravity wanted him.

It demanded its rights of his body's bulk: demanded that he fall. For a
moment, glancing over his

shoulder at the mouth that opened under him, he thought he saw mon-
sters stirring below him. Ridiculous,

loony things, crudely drawn, dark on dark. Vile graffiti leered up from his
childhood and uncurled their

claws to snatch at his legs.

"Mama," he said, as his hands failed him, and he was delivered into
dread.

rest of his life, all but the

simplest responses, were shattered, the pieces flung into the recesses of his memory.

When the light came, at last, he looked up at the person in the Mickey Mouse mask at the door, and

smiled at him. It was a child's smile, one of thankfulness for his comical rescuer. He let the man take him

by the ankles and haul him out of the big round room in which he was lying. His pants were wet, and he

knew he'd dirtied himself in his sleep. Still, the Funny Mouse would kiss him better.

His head lolled on his shoulders as he was dragged out of the torture-chamber. On the floor beside his

head was a shoe. And seven or eight feet above him was the grid from which he had fallen.

It meant nothing at all.

He let the Mouse sit him down in a bright room. He let the Mouse give him his ears back, though he

didn't really want them. It was funny watching the world without sound, it made him laugh.

He drank some water, and ate some sweet cake.

pictures. Pictures that made him feel very strange.

They were all pictures of dead people, every one of them. Some of the pictures were of little children,

others were of grown-up children. They were lying down, or half-sitting, and there were big cuts in their

faces and their bodies, cuts that showed a mess underneath, a mish-mash of shiny bits and oozy bits. And all around the dead people: black paint. Not in neat puddles, but splashed all around, and finger-marked, and hand-printed and very messy.

In three or four of the pictures the thing that made the cuts was still there. He knew the word for it.

Axe.

There was an axe in a lady's face buried almost to the handle. There was an axe in a man's leg, and

another lying on the floor of a kitchen beside a dead baby.

This man collected pictures of dead people and axes, which Steve thought was strange.

That was his last thought before the too-familiar scent of chloroform filled his head and he lost consciousness.

“What are you doing down there? I said get up.”

Bracing himself against the crumbling brick of the doorway Steve got to his feet. The policeman shone his torch at him.

“Jesus Christ,” said the policeman, disgust written over his face. “You’re in a right fucking state.

Where do you live?”

Steve shook his head, staring down at his vomit-soaked shirt like a shamed schoolboy.

“What’s your name?”

He couldn’t quite remember.

“Name, lad?”

He was trying. If only the policeman wouldn’t shout.

“Come on, take a hold of yourself.”

The words didn’t make much sense. Steve could feel tears pricking the backs of his eyes.

“Home.”

Now he was blubbering, sniffing snot, feeling utterly forsaken. He wanted to die: he wanted to lie down and die.

The policeman shook him.

bastard, with his bloodshot eyes and his dinner down his shirt was really getting on his nerves. Too much money, too much dirt in his veins, too little discipline.

“Mama” was the last straw. He punched Steve in the stomach, a neat, sharp, functional blow. Steve doubled up, whimpering.

“Shut up, son.”

Another blow finished the job of crippling the child, and then he took a fistful of Steve’s hair and pulled the little druggie’s face up to meet his.

“You want to be a derelict, is that it?”

“No. No.”

Steve didn’t know what a derelict was; he just wanted to make the policeman like him.

“Please,” he said, tears coming again, “take me home.” The policeman seemed confused. The kid

hadn’t started fighting back and calling for civil rights, the way most of them did. That was the way they

usually ended up: on the ground, bloody-nosed, calling for a social worker. This one just wept. The

tification, found none, then

scoured his body for fleas, his hair for nits. The policeman left him then, which Steve was relieved about.

He hadn't liked the man. The people at the Hostel talked about him as though he wasn't in the room.

Talked about how young he was; discussed his mental-age; his clothes; his appearance. Then they gave

him a bar of soap and showed him the showers. He stood under the cold water for ten minutes and dried

himself with a stained towel. He didn't shave, though they'd lent him a razor. He'd forgotten how to do it.

Then they gave him some old clothes, which he liked. They weren't such bad people, even if they did

talk about him as though he wasn't there. One of them even smiled at him; a burly man with a grizzled

beard. Smiled as he would at a dog.

They were odd clothes he was given. Either too big or too small. All colours: yellow socks, dirty white

shirt, pin-stripe trousers that had been made for a glutton, a thread-bare sweater, heavy boots. He liked

other. It frightened him. All he

wanted was to sleep. To lie down and sleep.

At eleven o'clock one of the warders unlocked the gate to the dormitory,
and all the lost men filed

through to find themselves an iron bed for the night. The dormitory,
which was large and badly-lit, stank
of disinfectant and old people.

Avoiding the eyes and the flailing arms of the other derelicts, Steve
found himself an ill-made bed,

with one thin blanket tossed across it, and lay down to sleep. All around
him men were coughing and

muttering and weeping. One was saying his prayers as he lay, staring at
the ceiling, on his grey pillow.

Steve thought that was a good idea. So he said his own child's prayer.

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, Look upon this little child, Pity my...

What was the word?

Pity my — simplicity, Suffer me to come to thee."

That made him feel better; and the sleep, a balm, was blue and deep.

Quaid sat in darkness. The terror was on him again, worse than ever.

His body was rigid with fear; so

him, after all. Quaid would

live 'til morning.

His body had relaxed a little now. He swung his legs out of bed and switched on the light. The room

was indeed empty. The house was silent. Through the open door he could see the top of the stairs. There was no axe-man, of course.

Steve woke to shouting. It was still dark. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but his limbs no

longer ached so badly. Elbows on his pillow, he half-sat up and stared down the dormitory to see what all

the commotion was about. Four bed-rows down from his, two men were fighting. The bone of contention

was by no means clear. They just grappled with each other like girls (it made Steve laugh to watch them),

screeching and puffing each other's hair. By moonlight the blood on their faces and hands was black.

One of them, the older of the two, was thrust back across his bed, screaming: "I will not go to the Finchley Road!

You will not make me. Don't strike me! I'm not your man!

I'm not!"

Suddenly, the applause faltered, as somebody came into the dormitory.
Steve couldn't see who it was;
the mass of men crowded around the fight were between him and the door.

He did see the victor toss his shoe into the air however, with a final shout of "Fuckler!"

The shoe.

Steve couldn't take his eyes off the shoe. It rose in the air, turning as it rose, then plummeted to the
bare boards like a shot bird. Steve saw it clearly, more clearly than he'd seen anything in many days.

It landed not far from him.

It landed with a loud thud.

It landed on its side. As his shoe had landed. His shoe. The one he kicked off. On the grid. In the
room. In the house. On Pilgrim Street.

Quaid woke with the same dream. Always the stairway. Always him looking down the tunnel of the

stairs, while that ridiculous sight, half-joke, half-horror, tip-toed up towards him, a laugh on every step.

Crowley would be let in: he always invited violence. This had all the marks of a near-riot; it would take hours to settle them down again.

Nobody questioned Steve as he wandered down the corridor, through the gate, and into the vestibule of the Night Hostel. The swing doors were closed, but the night air, bitter before dawn, smelt refreshing as it seeped in.

The pokey reception office was empty, and through the door Steve could see the fire-extinguisher hanging on the wall. It was red and bright: Beside it was a long black hose, curled up on a red drum like a sleeping snake. Beside that, sitting in two brackets on the wall, was an axe.

A very pretty axe.

Stephen walked into the office. A little distance away he heard running feet, shouts, a whistle. But nobody came to interrupt Steve, as he made friends with the axe.

First he smiled at it.

The curve of the blade of the axe smiled back.

Then he touched it.

It took Steve a very short time to orient himself. There was a spring in his step as he began to make his

way to Pilgrim Street. He felt like a clown, dressed in so many bright colours, in such floppy trousers,

such silly boots. He was a comical fellow, wasn't he? He made himself laugh, he was so comical.

The wind began to get into him, whipping him up into a frenzy as it scooted through his hair and made

his eye-balls as cold as two lumps of ice in his sockets..He began to run, skip, dance, cavort through the streets, white under the lights, dark in between. Now

you see me, now you don't. Now you see me, now you —Quaid hadn't been woken by the dream this

time. This time he had heard a noise. Definitely a noise.

The moon had risen high enough to throw its beams through the window, through the door and on to

the top of the stairs. There was no need to put on the light. All he needed to see, he could see. The top of

the stairs were empty, as ever.

Then the bottom stair creaked, a tiny noise as though a breath had landed on it.

No clowns, he said to himself, as he stood watching the door, and the stairway, and the spotlight of the moon. Quaid knew only fragile minds, so weak they couldn't give him a clue to the nature, to the origin, or to the cure for the panic that now held him in thrall. All they did was break, crumble into dust, when faced with the slightest sign of the dread at the heart of life. He knew no clowns, never had, never would. Then it appeared; the face of a fool. Pale to whiteness in the light of the moon, its young features bruised, unshaven and puffy, its smile open like a child's smile. It had bitten its lip in its excitement. Blood was smeared across its lower jaw, and its gums were almost black with blood. Still it was a clown. Indisputably a clown even to its ill-fitting clothes, so incongruous, so pathetic. Only the axe didn't quite match the smile. It caught the moonlight as the maniac made small, chopping motions with it, his tiny black eyes glinting with anticipation of the fun ahead.

stroke.

Quaid knew him.

It was his pupil: his guinea-pig, transformed into the image of his own dread.

Him. Of all men. Him. The deaf boy.

The skipping was bigger now, and the clown was making a deep-throated noise, like the call of some

fantastical bird. The axe was describing wider and wider sweeps in the air, each more lethal than the last.

“Stephen,” said Quaid.

The name meant nothing to Steve. All he saw was the mouth opening. The mouth closing. Perhaps a

sound came out: perhaps not. It was irrelevant to him.

The throat of the clown gave out a screech, and the axe swung up over his head, two-handed. At the

same moment the merry little dance became a run, as the axe man leapt the last two stairs and ran into the

bedroom, full into the spotlight.

Quaid's body half turned to avoid the killing blow, but not quickly or elegantly enough. The blade slit

now, as though it was chopping a

log. Yawning wounds four or five inches deep exposed the shiny steak of the philosopher's muscle, the

bone, the marrow. With each stroke the clown would tug at the axe to pull it out, and Quaid's body would

jerk like a puppet.

Quaid screamed. Quaid begged. Quaid cajoled..The clown didn't hear a word.

All he heard was the noise in his head: the whistles, the whoops, the howls, the hums. He had taken

refuge where no rational argument, nor threat, would ever fetch him out again. Where the thump of his

heart was law, and the whine of his blood was music.

How he danced, this deaf-boy, danced like a loon to see his tormentor gaping like a fish, the depravity

of his intellect silenced forever. How the blood spurted! How it gushed and fountained!

The little clown laughed to see such fun. There was a night's entertainment to be had here, he thought.

The axe was his friend forever, keen and wise. It could cut, and cross-cut, it could slice and amputate, yet

There was pain without hope of healing. There was life that refused to end, long after the mind had

begged the body to cease. And worst, there were dreams come true..**HELL'S EVENT**

HELL CAME UP to the streets and squares of London that September, icy from the depths of the

Ninth Circle, too frozen to be warmed even by the swelter of an Indian summer. It had laid its plans as

carefully as ever, plans being what they were, and fragile. This time it was perhaps a little more finicky

than usual, checking every last detail twice or three times, to be certain it had every chance of winning

this vital game.

It had never lacked competitive spirit; it had matched life against flesh a thousand thousand times

down the centuries, sometimes winning, more often losing. Wagers were, after all, the stuff of its

advancement. Without the human urge to compete, to bargain, and to bet, Pandemonium might well have

fallen for want of citizens. Dancing, dog racing, fiddle -playing: it was all one to the gulfs; all a game in

before the race began, but

Cameron wanted to listen to the warm-up commentary, just to hear what they were saying about his boy.

“ . . . atmosphere is electric. . . probably tens of thousands along the route. . . ”

The voice disappeared: Cameron cursed, and toyed with the dial until the imbecilities reappeared.

“...been called the race of the year, and what a day it is! Isn't it, Jim?”

“It certainly is, Mike —”

“That's big Jim Delaney, who's up there in the Eye in the Sky, and he'll be following the race along

the route, giving us a bird's eye view, won't you, Jim?”

“I certainly will, Mike —”

“Well, There's a lot of activity behind the line, the competitors are all loosening up for the start. I can

see Nick Loyer there, he's wearing number three, and I must say he's looking very fit. He said to me

when he arrived he didn't usually like to run on Sundays, but he's made an exception for this race,

because of course it's a charity event, and all the proceeds will be going to Cancer Research. Joel Jones,

afternoon. Couldn't ask for a better day, could we Jim?"

Joel had woken with bad dreams.

"You'll be fine, stop fretting," Cameron had told him.

But he didn't feel fine; he felt sick in the pit of his stomach. Not pre-race nerves; he was used to those,

and he could deal with the feeling. Two fingers down the throat and throw up, that was the best remedy

he'd found; get it over and done with. No, this wasn't pre-race nerves, or anything like them. It was

deeper, for a start, as though his bowels, to his centre, to his source, were cooking.

Cameron had no sympathy.

"It's a charity race, not the Olympics," he said, looking the boy over. "Act your age."

That was Cameron's technique. His mellow voice was made for coaxing, but was used to bully.

Without that bullying there would have been no gold medal, no cheering crowds, no admiring girls. One

of the tabloids had voted Joel the best loved black face in England. It was good to be greeted as a friend

tance. Marathon technique was a different skill altogether. Besides he was so short-sighted he wore wire rimmed glasses so thick they gave him the look of a bemused frog. No danger there. Loyer; he was good, but this wasn't really his distance either. He was a hurdler, and a sometime sprinter. 400 metres was his limit and even then he wasn't happy. Voight, the South African. Well, there was not much information on him. Obviously a fit man to judge by the look of him, and someone to watch out for just in case he sprung a surprise. But the real problem of the race was McCloud. Joel had run against Frank "Flash" McCloud three times. Twice beaten him into second place, once (painfully) had the positions reversed. And Frankie boy had a few scores to settle: especially the Olympics defeat; he hadn't liked taking the silver. Frank was the man to watch. Charity race or no charity race McCloud would be running his best, for the crowd and for his pride. He was at the line already testing his starting position, his ears practically pricked. Flash was the man, no doubt of it.

around his neck caught the sun and the crucifix he was wearing glinted gold as it swung gently beneath his chin.

Joel had his good-luck charm with him too. Tucked into the waistband of his shorts, a lock of his

mother's hair, which she had plaited for him half a decade ago, before his first major race. She had

returned to Barbados the following year, and died there. A great grief: an unforgettable loss. Without

Cameron, he would have crumbled.

Cameron watched the preparations from the steps of the Cathedral; he planned to see the start, then

ride his bike round the back of the Strand to catch the finish. He'd arrive well before the competitors, and

he could keep up with the race on his radio. He felt good with the day. His boy was in fine shape, nausea

or no nausea, and the race was an ideal way to keep the lad in a competitive mood without over-stretching

him. It was quite a distance of course, across Ludgate Circus, along Fleet Street and past Temple Bar into

and to work out his tactics. Over 800 metres the boy was a natural: his stride was a model of economy, his rhythm damn-near perfect. But more, he had courage. Courage had won him the gold, and courage would take him first to the finish again and again. That's what made Joel different. Any number of technical whizz-kids came and went, but without courage to supplement those skills they went for almost nothing.

To risk when it was worth risking, to run 'til the pain blinded you, that was special and Cameron knew it.

He liked to think he'd had a little of it himself.

Today, the boy looked less than happy. Women trouble was Cameron's bet. There were always problems with women, especially with the golden boy reputation Joel had garnered. He'd tried to explain that there'd be plenty of time for bed and bawd when his career had run out of steam, but Joel wasn't interested in celibacy, and Cameron didn't altogether blame him.

The pistol was raised, and fired. A plume of blue-white smoke followed by a sound more pop than

running order. Loyer was at the

front of the pack, though Cameron wasn't sure whether he'd got there by choice or chance. Joel was

behind McCloud, who was behind Loyer. No hurry, boy, said Cameron, and slipped away from the

starting line. His bicycle was chained up in Paternoster Row, a minute's walk from the square. He'd always hated cars: godless things, crippling, inhuman, unchristian things. With a bike you were your own

master. Wasn't that all a man could ask?

— And it's a superb start here, to what looks like a potentially marvellous race. They're already

across the square and the crowd's going wild here: it really is more like the European Games than a

Charity Race. What does it look like to you, Jim?"

"Well Mike, I can see crowds lining the route all the way along Fleet Street: and I've been asked by

the police to tell people please not to try and drive down to see the race, because of course all these roads

have been cleared for the event, and if you try and drive, really you'll get nowhere."

"Who's got the lead at the moment?"

That was a hard lesson to learn, Joel had found. When the pistol was fired it was difficult not to go for

broke, unwind suddenly like a tight spring. All gone in the first two hundred yards and nothing left in reserve.

It's easy to be a hero, Cameron used to say. It's not clever, It's not clever at all. Don't waste your time

showing off, just let the Supermen have their moment. Hang on to the pack, but hold back a little. Better

to be cheered at the post because you won than have them call you a good-hearted loser.

Win. Win. Win.

At all costs. At almost all costs.

Win.

The man who doesn't want to win is no friend of mine, he'd say. If you want to do it for the love of it,

for the sport of it, do it with somebody else. Only public schoolboys believe that crap about the joy of

playing the game. There's no joy for losers, boy. What did I say?

There's no joy for losers.

were the only occupants of the back streets. The rest of the living world, it seemed, was watching this race.

Cameron unlocked his bicycle, pocketed the chain and pad-locks, and hopped on. Pretty healthy for a

fifty year old he thought, despite the addiction to cheap cigars. He switched on the radio. Reception was

bad, walled in by the buildings; all crackle. He stood astride his bike and tried to improve the tuning. It

did a little good.

“— and Nick Loyer is falling behind already —”

That was quick. Mind you, Loyer was past his prime by two or three years. Time to throw in the

spikes and let the younger men take over. He'd had to do it, though my God it had been painful. Cameron

remembered acutely how he'd felt at thirty-three, when he realized that his best running years were over.

It was like having one foot buried in the grave, a salutary reminder of how quickly the body blooms and

begins to wither.

Impossible as it seemed it was Voight's face that glanced back out of the smoked glass windows; he

was even dressed for the race..Cameron didn't like the look of this at all. He'd seen the South African five minutes earlier, off and

running. So who was this? A double obviously. It smelt of a fix, somehow; it stank to high heaven.

The Mercedes was already disappearing around a corner. Cameron turned off the radio and pedaled

pell-mell after the car. The balmy sun made him sweat as he rode.

The Mercedes was threading its way through the narrow streets with some difficulty, ignoring all the

One Way signs as it went. Its slow passage made it relatively easy for Cameron to keep the vehicle in

view without being seen by its occupants, though the effort was beginning to light a fire in his lungs.

In a tiny, nameless alley just west of Fetter Lane, where the shadows were particularly dense, the

Mercedes stopped. Cameron, hidden from view round a corner not twenty yards from the car, watched as

the door was opened by the chauffeur and the lipless man, with the Voight look-alike close behind,

the gutter, a black rabbit with a

white collar, someone's lost pet. Flies rose and fell on it, alternately startled and ravenous.

Cameron crept towards the open door as quietly as he was able. He had, as it turned out, nothing to

fear. The trio had disappeared down the dark hallway of the house long since. The air was cool in the hall,

and smelt of damp. Looking fearless, but feeling afraid, Cameron entered the blind building. The wall-paper

in the hallway was shit-coloured, the paint the same. It was like walking into a bowel; a dead man's

bowel, cold and shitty. Ahead, the stairway had collapsed, preventing access to the upper storey. They

had not gone up, but down.

The door to the cellar was adjacent to the defunct staircase, and Cameron could hear voices from

below.

No time like the present, he thought, and opened the door sufficiently to squeeze into the dark beyond.

It was icy. Not just cold, not damp, but refrigerated. For a moment he thought he'd stepped into a cold

curious, so curious. There was nothing to do but descend.

In his nostrils the scent of the place teased. He had a lousy sense of smell, and a worse palate, as his

wife was fond of reminding him. She'd say he couldn't distinguish between garlic and a rose, and it was

probably true. But the smell in this deep meant something to him, something that stirred the acid in his

belly into life.

Goats. It smelt, ha, he wanted to tell her then and there how he'd remembered, it smelt of goats.

He was almost at the bottom of the stairs, twenty, maybe thirty, feet underground. The voices were

still some distance away, behind a second door.

He was standing in a little chamber, its walls badly white-washed and scrawled with obscene graffiti,

mostly pictures of the sex-act. On the floor, a candelabra, seven forked. Only two of the dingy candles

were lit, and they burned with a guttering flame that was almost blue. The goaty smell was stronger now:

and mingled with a scent so sickly-sweet it belonged in a Turkish brothel.

Laughter.

“I believe we — tomorrow — all of us —”

Laughter again..Suddenly the voices seemed to change direction, as if the speakers were moving back towards the

door. Cameron took three steps back across the icy floor, almost colliding with the candelabra. The

flames spat and whispered in the chamber as he passed.

He had to choose either the stairs or the other door. The stairs represented utter retreat. If he climbed

them he'd be safe, but he would never know. Never know why the cold, why the blue flames, why the

smell of goats. The door was a chance. Back to it, his eyes on the door opposite, he fought with the

bitingly cold brass handle. It turned with some tussling, and he ducked out of sight as the door opposite

opened. The two movements were perfectly syncopated:

God was with him.

Even as he closed the door he knew he'd made an error. God wasn't with him at all.

Needles of cold penetrated his head, his teeth, his eyes, his fingers. He felt as though he'd been thrown

The lighter was already glued to his hand, the sweat on his fingers had turned to frost. He tried to

ignite it, against the dark, against the cold. Reluctantly it sparked into a spluttering half-life.

The room was large: an ice-cavern. Its walls, its encrusted roof, sparkled and shone. Stalactites of ice,

lance-sharp, hung over his head. The floor on which he stood, poised uncertainly, was raked towards a

hole in the middle of the room. Five or six feet across, its edges and walls were so lined with ice it seemed

as though a river had been arrested as it poured down into the darkness.

He thought of Xanadu, a poem he knew by heart.

Visions of another Albion —"Where Alph the sacred river ran, Through caverns measureless to

man, Down to a sunless sea."

If there was indeed a sea down there, it was a frozen sea. It was death forever.

It was as much as he could do to keep upright, to prevent himself from sliding down the incline

towards the unknown. The lighter flickered as an icy air blew it out.

Cameron half turned. Voight's double was at the door, as was the chauffeur, and the third man in the

Mercedes. He wore a coat apparently made of several goat-skins. The hooves and the horns still hung

from it. The blood on its fur was brown and gummy.

"What are you doing here, Mr Cameron?" asked the goat-coated man.

Cameron could barely speak. The only feeling left in his head was a pinpoint of agony in the middle

of his forehead.

"What the hell is going on?" he said, through lips almost too frozen to move.

"Precisely that, Mr Cameron," the man replied. "Hell is going on."

As they ran past St Mary-le-Strand, Loyer glanced behind him, and stumbled. Joel, a full three metres

behind the leaders, knew the man was giving up. So quickly too; there was something amiss. He

slackened his pace, letting McCloud and Voight pass him. No great hurry. Kinderman was quite a way

behind, unable to compete with these fast boys. He was the tortoise in this race, for sure. Loyer was

lapsed into their dead arms exhausted, his youth broken and his strength spent. The enquiring fingers of the dead continued to pluck at him, long after the doctors had removed him from the track, examined him and sedated him.

He knew why, of course, lying there on the hot tarmac while they had their pricking way with him.

He'd looked behind him. That's what had made them come. He'd looked — “And after Loyer's

sensational collapse, the race is open wide. Frank the Flash McCloud is setting the pace now, and he's

really speeding away from the new boy, Voight. Joel Jones is even further behind, he doesn't seem to be

keeping up with the leaders at all. What do you think, Jim?”

“Well he's either pooped already, or he's really taking a chance that they'll exhaust themselves.

Remember he's new over this distance —”

“Yes, Jim —”

“And that might make him careless. Certainly he's going to have to do a lot of work to improve on his present position in third place.”

voices of his tiring limbs. Running

on tarmac was hard on the feet, hard on the joints. Not that that would make a man take to praying. He

tried to put Loyer's desperation out of his mind, and concentrate on the matter in hand.

There was still a lot of running to do, the race was not even half over. Plenty of time to catch up with

the heroes: plenty of time.

As he ran, his brain idly turned over the prayers his mother had taught him in case he should need one,

but the years had eroded them: they were all but gone.

"My name," said the goat-coated man, "is Gregory Burgess. Member of Parliament. You wouldn't

know me. I try to keep a low profile."

"MP?" said Cameron.

"Yes. Independent. Very independent."

"Is that Voight's brother?"

Burgess glanced at Voight's other self. He was not even shivering in the intense cold, despite the fact

that he was only wearing a thin singlet and shorts.

transfiguring into a column of shimmering silver. The face was no longer human, no longer even

mammalian. It had become a fan of knives, their blades glistening in the candlelight through the door.

Even as this bizarrerie became fixed, it started to change again, the knives melting and darkening, fur

sprouting, eyes appearing and swelling to balloon size. Antennae leapt from this new head, mandibles

were extruded from the pulp of transfiguration, and the head of a bee, huge and perfectly intricate, now sat on Voight's neck.

Burgess obviously enjoyed the display; he applauded with gloved hands.

"Familiars both," he said, gesturing to the chauffeur, who had removed the cap, and let a welter of

auburn hair fall to her shoulders. She was ravishingly beautiful, a face to give your life for. But an

illusion, like the other. No doubt capable of infinite personae.

"They're both mine, of course," said Burgess proudly.

"What?" was all Cameron could manage; he hoped it stood for all the questions in his head.

time. This time it is Hell's event, Mr Cameron, and we shall not be cheated of the prize."

"Hell," said Cameron again.

"You believe don't you? You're a good church-goer. Still pray before you eat, like any God-fearing soul. Afraid of choking on your dinner."

"How do you know I pray?"

"Your wife told me. Oh, your wife was very informative about you, Mr Cameron, she really opened up to me. Very accommodating. A confirmed analyst, after my attentions. She gave me so much . . .

information. You're a good Socialist, aren't you, like your father."

"Politics now —"

"Oh, politics is the hub of the issue, Mr Cameron. Without politics We're lost in a wilderness, aren't

we? Even Hell needs order. Nine great circles: a pecking order of punishments. Look down; see for yourself."

Cameron could feel the hole at his back: he didn't need to look.

"We stand for order, you know. Not chaos. That's just heavenly propaganda. And you know what

Westminster. Often it has been run

at the dead of night, unheralded, unapplauded. Today it is run in full sunshine, watched by thousands. But

whatever the circumstance, it is always the same race. Your athletes, against one of ours. If you win,

another hundred years of democracy. If we win . . . as we will . . . the end of the world as you know it.”

At his back Cameron felt a vibration. The expression on Burgess’ face had abruptly changed; the

confidence had become clouded, the smugness was instantly replaced by a look of nervous excitement.

“Well, well,” he said, his hands flapping like birds. “It seems we are about to be visited by higher

powers. How flattering —”

Cameron turned, and peered over the edge of the hole. It didn’t matter how curious he was now. They

had him; he may as well see all there was to see.

A wave of icy air blew up from the sunless circle and in the darkness of the shaft he could see a shape

approaching. Its movement was steady, and its face was thrown back to look at the world.

More by accident than intention

his knee caught Burgess under the jaw as he passed, and the man was sent sprawling. Cameron's soles

slid on the floor out of the ice-cavern and into the candlelit chamber beyond.

Behind him, the room was filling with smoke and sighs, and Cameron, like Lot's wife fleeing from the

destruction of Sodom, glanced back just once to see the forbidden sight behind him.

It was emerging from the shaft, its grey bulk filling the hole, lit by some radiance from below. Its eyes,

deep-set in the naked bone of its elephantine head, met Cameron's through the open door. They seemed to

touch him like a kiss, entering his thoughts through his eyes.

He was not turned to salt. Pulling his curious glance away from the face, he skated across the ante-chamber

and started to climb the stairs two and three at a time, falling and climbing, falling and climbing..The door was still ajar. Beyond it, daylight and the world.

He flung the door open and collapsed into the hallway, feeling the warmth already beginning to wake

nothing he'd ever felt before. To have been so close, yet survived. God had been with him after all.

He staggered along the road back to his bicycle, determined to stop the race, to tell the world —His

bike was untouched, its handlebars warm as his wife's arms.

As he hooked his leg over, the look he had exchanged with Hell caught fire. His body, ignorant of the

heat in his brain, continued about its business for a moment, putting its feet on the pedals and starting to

ride away.

Cameron felt the ignition in his head and knew he was dead.

The look, the glance behind him —Lot's wife.

Like Lot's stupid wife —The lightning leapt between his ears: faster than thought.

His skull cracked, and the lightning, white-hot, shot out from the furnace of his brain. His eyes

withered to black nuts in his sockets, he belched light from mouth and nostrils. The combustion turned

him into a column of black flesh in a matter of seconds, without a flame or a wisp of smoke.

ritual the significance of which

they could not know. Yet somewhere in them they understood the day was laden with sulphur, they

sensed their lives stood on tiptoe to reach heaven. Especially the children. They ran along the route,

shouting incoherent blessings, their faces squeezed up with their fears. Some called his name.

“Joel! Joel!”

Or did he imagine that? Had he imagined, too, the prayer from Loyer’s lips, and the signs in the

radiant faces of the babies held high to watch the runners pass?

As they turned into Whitehall Frank McCloud glanced confidentially over his shoulder and Hell took him.

It was sudden: it was simple.

He stumbled, an icy hand in his chest crushing the life out of him. Joel slowed as he approached the

man. His face was purple: his lips foamy.

“McCloud,” he said, and stopped to stare in his great rival’s thin face.

McCloud looked up at him from behind a veil of smoke that had turned his grey eyes ochre. Joel

Christ's sake, don't look back."

"What is it?"

"Run for your life!"

The words weren't requests but imperatives.

Run.

Not for gold or glory. Just to live.

Joel glanced up, suddenly aware that there was some huge-headed thing at his back, cold breath on his

neck..He picked up his heels and ran.

"— Well, things aren't going so well for the runners here, Jim. After Loyer going down so

sensationally, now Frank McCloud has stumbled too. I've never seen anything quite like it. But he seems

to have had a few words with Joel Jones as he ran past, so he must be OK."

McCloud was dead by the time they put him in the ambulance, and putrefied by the following

morning.

Joel ran. Jesus, did he run. The sun had become ferocious in his face, washing the colour out of the

And it wasn't so bad, this being alone. Songs began to fill his head:
snatches of hymns, sweet phrases

from love songs, dirty rhymes. His self idled, and his dream-mind, unnamed and fearless, took over.

Ahead, washed by the same white rain of light, was Voight. That was the enemy, that was the thing to

be surpassed. Voight, with his shining crucifix rocking in the sun. He could do it, as long as he didn't

look, as long as he didn't look —Behind him.

Burgess opened the door of the Mercedes and climbed in. Time had been wasted: valuable time. He

should be at the Houses of Parliament, at the finishing line, ready to welcome the runners home. There

was a scene to play, in which he would pretend the mild and smiling face of democracy. And tomorrow?

Not so mild.

His hands were clammy with excitement, and his pin stripe suit smelt of the goat-skin coat he was

obliged to wear in the room. Still, nobody would notice; and even if they did what English-man would be

so impolite to mention that he smelt goaty?

gestures were. But at the beginning

he'd been innocent: not knowing what to give or how to give it. They began to make their requirements

clear as the years went by, and he, in time, learnt to practice the etiquette of selling his soul. His self

mortifications were studiously planned and immaculately staged, though they had left him without

nipples or the hope of children. It was worth the pain, though: the power came to him by degrees. A triple

first at Oxford, a wife endowed beyond the dreams of priapism, a seat in Parliament, and soon, soon

enough, the country itself.

The cauterized stumps of his thumbs ached, as they often did when he was nervous. Idly, he sucked on

one.

“— Well We're now in the closing stages of what really has been one hell of a race, eh, Jim?”

“Oh yes, It's really been a revelation, hasn't it? Voight is really the outsider of the field; and here he is

streaking away from the competition without much effort. Of course, Jones made the unselfish gesture of

“It’s how you play the game.”

“Right.”

“Right.” “Well they’re both in sight of the Houses of Parliament now as they come round the bend of

Whitehall. And the crowds are cheering their boy on, but I really think it’s a lost cause —”

“Mind you, he brought something special out of the bag in Sweden.”

“He did. He did.”

“Maybe he’ll do it again.”

Joel ran, and the gap between himself and Voight was beginning to close. He concentrated on the

man’s back, his eyes boring into his shirt, learning his rhythm, looking for weaknesses.

There was a slowing there. The man was not as fast as he had been. An unevenness had crept into his stride, a sure sign of fatigue.

He could take him. With courage, he could take him.

And Kinderman. He’d forgotten about Kinderman. Without thinking, Joel glanced over his shoulder and looked behind him.

pursuer, whatever it was, forget

everything except overtaking Voight.

But the sight at his back wouldn't leave his head.

"Don't look back": McCloud's words. Too late, he'd done it. Better to know then who this phantom

was.

He looked again.

At first he saw nothing, just Kinderman jogging along. And then the ghost runner appeared once more

and he knew what had brought McCloud and Loyer down.

It was no runner, living or dead. It wasn't even human. A smoky body, and yawning darkness for its

head, it was Hell itself that was pressing on him.

"Don't look back."

Its mouth, if mouth it was, was open. Breath so cold it made Joel gasp, swirled around him. That was

why Loyer had muttered prayers as he ran. Much good it had done him; death had come anyway.

Joel looked away, not caring to see Hell so close, trying to ignore the sudden weakness in his knees.

Joel's stride lengthened a little. He was within two metres of Hell's runner.

"Look... Behind. . . You," said Voight.

"I see it."

"It's. . . come. . . for. . . you."

The words were mere melodrama: two-dimensional. He was master of his body wasn't he? And he

was not afraid of darkness, he was painted in it. Wasn't that what made him less than human as far as so

many people were concerned? Or more, more than human; bloodier, sweatier, fleshier. More arm, more

leg, more head. More strength, more appetite. What could Hell do? Eat him? He'd taste foul on the palate.

Freeze him? He was too hot-blooded, too fast, too living.

Nothing would take him, he was a barbarian with the manners of a gentleman.

Neither night nor day entirely.

Voight was suffering: his pain was in his torn breath, in the gangling rags of his stride. They were just

fifty metres from the steps and the finishing line, but Voight's lead was being steadily eroded; each step

could run.

He passed Voight, joints fluent: an easy machine.

“Bastard. Bastard. Bastard —” the familiar was saying, his face contorted with the agonies of stress.

And didn’t that face flicker as Joel passed it by? Didn’t its features seem to lose, momentarily, the illusion of being human?

Then Voight was falling behind him, and the crowds were cheering, and the colours were flooding

back into the world. It was victory ahead. He didn’t know for what cause, but victory nevertheless.

There was Cameron, he saw him now, standing on the steps beside a man Joel didn’t know, a man in a

pinstripe suit. Cameron was smiling and shouting with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, beckoning to Joel from the steps.

He ran, if anything, a little faster towards the finishing line, his strength coaxed by Cameron’s face.

Then the face seemed to change. Was it the heat haze that made his hair shimmer? No, the flesh of his

This wasn't Cameron. Cameron was nowhere to be seen: so Cameron was gone.

He knew it in his gut. Cameron was gone: and this black parody that smiled at him and welcomed him

was his last moments, replayed for the delight of his admirers.

Joel's step faltered, the rhythm of his stride lost. At his back he heard Voight's breath, horribly thick, close, closer.

His whole body suddenly revolted. His stomach demanded to throw up its contents, his legs cried out to collapse, his head refused to think, only to fear.

"Run," he said to himself. "Run. Run. Run."

But Hell was ahead. How could he run into the arms of such foulness?

Voight had closed the gap between them, and was at his shoulder, jostling him as he passed. The

victory was being snatched from Joel easily: sweets from a babe.

The finishing line was a dozen strides away, and Voight had the lead again. Scarcely aware of what he

was doing, Joel reached out and snatched at Voight as he ran, grabbing his singlet. It was a cheat, clear to everybody in the crowd. But what the Hell.

On the steps, Burgess was screeching like a wild man. Quite a performance. Cameras were snapping, commentators commenting.

“Get up! Get up!” the man was yelling.

But Joel had snatched Voight with his one good arm, and nothing was going to make him let go.

The two rolled around in the gravel, every roll crushing Joel’s arm and sending spurts of nausea through his gut.

The familiar playing Voight was exhausted. It had never been so tired: unprepared for the stress of the

race its master had demanded it run. Its temper was short, its control perilously close to snapping. Joel

could smell its breath on his face, and it was the smell of a goat..“Show yourself,” he said.

The thing’s eyes had lost their pupils: they were all white now. Joel hawked up a clot of phlegm from

the back of his thick-spittled mouth and spat it in the familiar’s face.

Its temper broke.

The face dissolved. What had seemed to be flesh sprouted into a new resemblance, a devouring trap

Joel's one good arm was under its lower jaw, just managing to keep it at bay, as he cried for help.

Nobody stepped forward.

The crowd stood at a polite distance, still screaming, still staring, unwilling to interfere. It was purely a

spectator sport, wrestling with the Devil. Nothing to do with them.

Joel felt the last of his strength falter: his arm could keep the mouth at bay no longer. Despairing, he

felt the teeth at his brow and at his chin, felt them pierce his flesh and his bone, felt, finally, the white
night invade him, as the mouth bit off his face.

The familiar rose up from the corpse with strands of Joel's head hanging out from between its teeth. It

had taken off the features like a mask, leaving a mess of blood and jerking muscle. In the open hole of

Joel's mouth the root of his tongue flapped and spurted, past speaking sorrow.

Burgess didn't care how he appeared to the world. The race was everything: a victory was a victory

however it was won. And Jones had cheated after all.

"Here!" he yelled to the familiar. "Heel!"

Four paces. Three — And Kinderman ran past it to the line. Short-sighted.

Kinderman, a pace ahead of Voight, took the race without knowing the victory he had won, without

even seeing the horrors that were sprawled at his feet.

There were no cheers as he passed the line. No congratulations.

The air around the steps seemed to darken, and an unseasonal frost appeared in the air.

Shaking his head apologetically, Burgess fell to his knees. “Our Father, who wert in Heaven,

unhallowed be thy name —”

Such an old trick. Such a naïve response.

The crowd began to back away. Some people were already running. Children, knowing the nature of

the dark having been so recently touched by it, were the least troubled. They took their parents’ hands and

led them away from the spot like lambs, telling them not to look behind them, and their parents half-remembered

the womb, the first tunnel, the first aching exit from a hallowed place, the first terrible

The familiar, deserted, relinquished all claim to human appearance and became itself. Insolid, insipid,
it spat out the foul-tasting flesh of Joel Jones. Half chewed, the runner's face lay on the gravel beside his
body. The familiar folded itself into the air and went back to the Circle it called home.

It was stale in the corridors of power: no life, no help..Burgess was out of condition, and his running soon became a walk. A steady step along the gloom-panelled
corridors, his feet almost silent on the well trodden carpet.

He didn't quite know what to do. Clearly he would be blamed for his failure to plan against all
eventualities, but he was confident he could argue his way out of that. He would give them whatever they
required as recompense for his lack of foresight. An ear, a foot; he had nothing to lose but flesh and
blood.

But he had to plan his defence carefully, because they hated bad logic. It was more than his life was
worth to come before them with half-formed excuses.

and his head was aching with

cold.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely to his pursuer.

The voice that came back to him was milder than he'd expected.

"It wasn't your fault."

"No," said Burgess, taking confidence from its conciliatory tone. "It was an error and I am contrite. I

overlooked Kinderman."

"That was a mistake. We all make them," said Hell. "Still, in another hundred years, we'll try again.

Democracy is still a new cult: It's not lost its superficial glamour yet. We'll give it another century, and

have the best of them then."

"Yes."

"But you —"

"I know."

"No power for you, Gregory."

"No."

"It's not the end of the world. Look at me."

"Not at the moment, if you don't mind."

the symbolism might flatter. It

was a cul-de-sac.

Burgess stood still facing the wall. The cold air was in his marrow, and the stumps of his thumbs were

really giving him up. He took off his gloves and sucked, hard.

“Look at me. Turn and look at me,” said the courteous voice.

What was he to do now? Back out of the corridor and find another way was best, presumably. He’d

just have to walk around and around in circles until he’d argued his point sufficiently well for his pursuer

to leave him be.

As he stood, juggling the alternatives available to him, he felt a slight ache in his neck.

“Look at me,” the voice said again.

And his throat was constricted. There was, strangely, a grinding in his head, the sound of bone rasping

bone. It felt like a knife was lodged in the base of his skull.

“Look at me,” Hell said one final time, and Burgess’ head turned.

Not his body. That stayed standing facing the blank wall of the cul-de-sac.

into the Palace of Westminster..**JACQUELINE ESS:**

HER WILL AND TESTEMENT

MY GOD, SHE thought, this can't be living. Day in, day out: the boredom, the drudgery, the frustration.

My Christ, she prayed, let me out, set me free, crucify me if you must, but put me out of my misery

In lieu of his euthanasian benediction, she took a blade from Ben's razor, one dull day in late March, locked herself in the bathroom, and slit her wrists.

Through the throbbing in her ears, she faintly heard Ben outside the bathroom door.

"Are you in there, darling?"

"Go away," she thought she said.

"I'm back early, sweetheart. The traffic was light."

"Please go away."

The effort of trying to speak slid her off the toilet seat and on to the white-tiled floor, where pools of her blood were already cooling.

"Darling?"

"Go."

ugly feeling, as though she'd been kicked in the head. Still, he couldn't catch her in time, not now. Not even if he broke the door down.

He broke the door down.

She looked up at him through an air grown so thick with death you could have sliced it.

"Too late," she thought she said.

But it wasn't.

My God, she thought, this can't be suicide. I haven't died. The doctor Ben had hired for her was too

perfectly benign. Only the best, he'd promised, only the very best for my Jackie.

"It's nothing," the doctor reassured her, "that we can't put right with a little tinkering."

Why doesn't he just come out with it? she thought. He doesn't give a damn. He doesn't know what it's like.

"I deal with a lot of these women's problems," he confided, fairly oozing a practiced compassion. "It's got to epidemic proportions among a certain age-bracket."

Does he think I'm a lamb?

Musing, he glanced up at his framed qualifications, then at his manicured nails, then at the pens on his

desk and notepad. But he didn't look at Jacqueline. Anywhere but at Jacqueline.

"I know," he was saying now, "what you've been through, and it's been traumatic. Women have

certain needs. If they go unanswered —"

What would he know about women's needs?

You're not a woman, she thought.

"What?" he said.

Had she spoken? She shook her head: denying speech. He went on; finding his rhythm once more:

"I'm not going to put you through interminable therapy-sessions. You don't want that, do you? You want a little reassurance, and you want something to help you sleep at nights."

He was irritating her badly now. His condescension was so profound it had no bottom. All-knowing,

all-seeing Father; that was his performance. As if he were blessed with some miraculous insight into the

nature of a woman's soul.

You're not a woman. You don't look like a woman, you don't feel like a woman —

“Did you say something?”

She shook her head.

“I thought you said something. Please feel free to be honest with me.”

She didn't reply, and he seemed to tire of pretending intimacy. He stood up and went to the window.

“I think the best thing for you —”

He stood against the light: darkening the room, obscuring the view of the cherry trees on the lawn

through the window. She stared at his wide shoulders, at his narrow hips. A fine figure of a man, as Ben

would have called him. No child-bearer he. Made to remake the world, a body like that. If not the world,

remaking minds would have to do.

“I think the best thing for you —”

What did he know, with his hips, with his shoulders? He was too much a man to understand anything

of her.

“I think the best thing for you would be a course of sedatives —”

Now her eyes were on his waist.

unfortunately, his flesh resisted such magic. She willed his manly chest into making breasts of itself and it

began to swell most fetchingly, until the skin burst and his sternum flew apart.

His pelvis, teased to breaking point, fractured at its centre; unbalanced, he toppled over on to his desk

and from there stared up at her, his face yellow with shock. He licked his lips, over and over again, to find

some wetness to talk with. His mouth was dry: his words were still-born. It was from between his legs

that all the noise was coming; the splashing of his blood; the thud of his bowel on the carpet.

She screamed at the absurd monstrosity she had made, and withdrew to the far corner of the room,

where she was sick in the pot of the rubber plant.

My God, she thought, this can't be murder. I didn't so much as touch him.

What Jacqueline had done that afternoon, she kept to herself. No sense in giving people sleepless

nights, thinking about such peculiar talent.

Ess in an appalled silence no
interrogation could hope to penetrate.

Person or persons unknown had clearly dispatched the doctor to where
neither sedatives nor therapy
could help him.

She almost forgot for a while. But as the months passed it came back to
her by degrees, like a memory of a secret adultery. It teased her with its
forbidden delights. She forgot the nausea, and remembered the
power. She forgot sordidity, and remembered strength. She forgot the
guilt that had seized her afterwards
and longed, longed to do it again.

Only better.

“Jacqueline.”

Is this my husband, she thought, actually calling me by my name? Usually it was Jackie, or Jack, or
nothing at all.

“Jacqueline.”

He was looking at her with those big baby blues of his, like the college-boy she'd loved at first sight.

But his mouth was harder now, and his kisses tasted like stale bread.

“Jacqueline.”

sounded like. But what was the

use of that? Better the truth.

“Darling, I’ve gone off the rails a bit.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

Have you, you bastard, she thought.

“It was while you weren’t quite yourself. You know, when things had more or less stopped between

us. Separate rooms. . . you wanted separate rooms. . . and I just went bananas with frustration. I didn’t

want to upset you, so I didn’t say anything. But it’s no use me trying to live two lives.”

“You can have an affair if you want to, Ben.”

“It’s not an affair, Jackie. I love her —”

He was preparing one of his speeches, she could see it gathering momentum behind his teeth. The

justifications that became accusations, those excuses that always turned into assaults on her character.

Once he got into full flow there’d be no stopping him. She didn’t want to hear.

“— She’s not like you at all, Jackie. She’s frivolous in her way. I suppose you’d call her shallow.”

“You’ve never let me explain,” he was saying. “You’ve always given me one of those damn looks of yours, as if you wished I’d —”

Die.

“— wished I’d shut up.”

Shut up.

“You don’t care how I feel!” He was shouting now. “Always in your own little world.”

Shut up, she thought.

His mouth was open. She seemed to wish it closed, and with the thought his jaws snapped together, severing the very tip of his pink tongue. It fell from between his lips and lodged in a fold of his shirt.

Shut up, she thought again.

The two perfect regiments of his teeth ground down into each other, cracking and splitting, nerve, calcium and spit making a pinkish foam on his chin as his mouth collapsed inwards.

Shut up, she was still thinking as his startled baby blues sank back into his skull and his nose wormed its way into his brain.

clothes were folded inwards, and the

tissue of his stomach was plucked from his neatly packaged entrails and stretched around his body to

wrap him up. His fingers were poking from his shoulder-blades now, and his feet, still thrashing with

fury, were tripped up in his gut. She turned him over one final time to pressure his spine into a foot-long

column of muck, and that was about the end of it.

As she came out of her ecstasy she saw Ben sitting on the floor, shut up into a space about the size of

one of his fine leather suitcases, while blood, bile and lymphatic fluid pulsed weakly from his hushed

body.

My God, she thought, this can't be my husband. He's never been as tidy as that.

This time she didn't wait for help. This time she knew what she'd done (guessed, even, how she'd

done it) and she accepted her crime for the too-rough justice it was.

She packed her bags and left the home.

I'm alive, she thought. For the first time in my whole, wretched life, I'm alive.

I am not a courageous man, and I never have been: so I'm afraid of what may happen to me tonight.

But I cannot go through life dreaming all the time, existing through the darkness on only a glimpse of

heaven. Sooner or later, one has to gird one's loins (that's appropriate) and get up and find it. Even if it

means giving away the world in exchange.

I probably make no sense. You're thinking, you who chanced on this testimony, you're thinking, who

was he, this imbecile?

My name was Oliver Vassi. I am now thirty-eight years old. I was a lawyer, until a year or more ago,

when I began the search that ends tonight with that pimp and that key and that holy of holies.

But the story begins more than a year ago. It is many years since Jacqueline Ess first came to me.

She arrived out of the blue at my offices, claiming to be the widow of a friend of mine from Law

School, one Benjamin Ess, and when I thought back, I remembered the face. A mutual friend who'd been

as if to throw a bucket of cold

water over me. I suppose I was enamoured from the start, and she sensed the electric atmosphere in my

office. Me, I pretended I was merely being polite to the widow of an old friend. I didn't like to think about

passion: it wasn't a part of my nature, or so I thought. How little we know — I mean really know —about our capabilities.

Jacqueline told me lies at that first meeting. About how Ben had died of cancer, of how often he had

spoken of me, and how fondly. I suppose she could have told me the truth then and there, and I would

have lapped it up — I believe I was utterly devoted from the beginning.

But it's difficult to remember quite how and when interest in another human being flares into

something more committed, more passionate. It may be that I am inventing the impact she had on me at

that first meeting, simply re-inventing history to justify my later excesses. I'm not sure. Anyway, wherever and whenever it happened, however quickly or slowly, I succumbed to her, and the affair began.

to have in my life whatever the

truth of her past. She possessed a marvellous sang-froid, she was witty, bawdy, oblique. I had never met a

more enchanting woman. It was none of my business how she'd lived with Ben, what the marriage had

been like etc., etc. That was her history. I was happy to live in the present, and let the past die its own

death. I think I even flattered myself that whatever pain she had experienced, I could help her forget it.

Certainly her stories had holes in them. As a lawyer, I was trained to be eagle-eyed where fabrications

were concerned, and however much I tried to put my perceptions aside I sensed that she wasn't quite

coming clean with me. But everyone has secrets: I knew that. Let her have hers, I thought.

Only once did I challenge her on a detail of her pretended life-story. In talking about Ben's death, she

let slip that he had got what he deserved. I asked her what she meant. She smiled, that Gioconda smile of

hers, and told me that she felt there was a balance to be redressed between men and women. I let the

and cry, and usage leaves its marks.

But she had a power to transform herself, in the subtlest way, making that face as various as the sky.

Early on, I thought it was a make-up trick. But as we slept together more and more, and I watched her in

the mornings, sleep in her eyes, and in the evenings, heavy with fatigue, I soon realized she wore nothing

on her skull but flesh and blood. What transformed her was internal: it was a trick of the will.

And, you know, that made me love her all the more.

Then one night I woke with her sleeping beside me. We slept often on the floor, which she preferred to

the bed. Beds, she said, reminded her of marriage. Anyway, that night she was lying under a quilt on the

carpet of my room, and I, simply out of adoration, was watching her face in sleep.

If one has given oneself utterly, watching the beloved sleep can be a vile experience. Perhaps some of

you have known that paralysis, staring down at features closed to your enquiry, locked away from you

That's how I felt that night, looking down at her extraordinary features,
and as I chewed on my
soullessness, her face began to alter. She was clearly dreaming; but
what dreams must she have been
having. Her very fabric was on the move, her muscle, her hair, the down
on her cheek moving to the
dictates of some internal tide. Her lips bloomed from her bone, boiling
up into a slaving tower of skin;
her hair swirled around her head as though she were lying in water; the
substance of her cheeks formed
furrows and ridges like the ritual scars on a warrior; inflamed and throbbing
patterns of tissue, swelling up
and changing again even as a pattern formed. This fluxion was a terror
to me, and I must have made some
noise. She didn't wake, but came a little closer to the surface of sleep,
leaving the deeper waters where
these powers were sourced. The patterns sank away in an instant, and
her face was again that of a gently
sleeping woman.

That was, you can understand, a pivotal experience, even though I
spent the next few days trying to

me to picture her as prey to such skill, than mistress of it.

That's a man speaking of a woman; not just me, Oliver Vassi, of her, Jacqueline Ess. We cannot believe,

we men, that power will ever reside happily in the body of a woman, unless that power is a male child.

Not true power. The power must be in male hands, God-given. That's what our fathers tell us, idiots that they are.

Anyway, I investigated Jacqueline, as surreptitiously as I could. I had a contact in York where the

couple had lived, and it wasn't difficult to get some enquiries moving. It took a week for my contact to

get back to me, because he'd had to cut through a good deal of shit from the police to get a hint of the truth, but the news came, and it was bad.

Ben was dead, that much was true. But there was no way he had died of cancer. My contact had only

got the vaguest clues as to the condition of Ben's corpse, but he gathered it had been spectacularly

mutilated. And the prime suspect? My beloved Jacqueline Ess. The same innocent woman who was

she was on the verge of killing

herself, she had found, in the very deep-water trenches of her nature, faculties she had never known

existed. Powers which came up out of those regions as she recovered, like fish to the light.

Then she showed me the smallest measure of these powers, plucking hairs from my head, one by one.

Only a dozen; just to demonstrate her formidable skills. I felt them going. She just said: one from behind

your ear, and I'd feel my skin creep and then jump as fingers of her volition snatched a hair out. Then

another, and another. It was an incredible display; she had this power down to a fine art, locating and

withdrawing single hairs from my scalp with the precision of tweezers.

Frankly, I was sitting there rigid with fear, knowing that she was just toying with me. Sooner or later, I

was certain the time would be right for her to silence me permanently.

But she had doubts about herself. She told me how the skill, though she had honed it, scared her. She

needed, she said, someone to teach her how to use it best. And I was not that somebody. I was just a man

reputation I had began to deteriorate; I lost briefs, I lost credibility. In the space of two or three months

my professional life dwindled away to almost nothing. Friends despaired of me, colleagues avoided me.

It wasn't that she was feeding on me. I want to be clear about that. She was no lamia, no succubus.

What happened to me, my fall from grace with ordinary life if you like, was of my own making. She

didn't bewitch me; that's a romantic lie to excuse rape. She was a sea: and I had to swim in her. Does that

make any sense? I'd lived my life on the shore, in the solid world of law, and I was tired of it. She was

liquid; a boundless sea in a single body, a deluge in a small room, and I will gladly drown in her, if she

grants me the chance. But that was my decision. Understand that. This has always been my decision. I

have decided to go to the room tonight, and be with her one final time. That is of my own free will.

And what man would not? She was (is) sublime.

For a month after that demonstration of power I lived in a permanent ecstasy of her. When I was with

reasons made it no easier.

I broke down: lost my job, lost my identity, lost the few friends I had left in the world. I scarcely

noticed. They were minor losses, beside the loss of Jacqueline. .
.”. “Jacqueline.”

My God, she thought, can this really be the most influential man in the country? He looked so unpre-possessing,
so very unspectacular. His chin wasn't even strong.

But Titus Penifer was power.

He ran more monopolies than he could count; his word in the financial world could break companies

like sticks, destroying the ambitions of hundreds, the careers of thousands. Fortunes were made overnight

in his shadow, entire corporations fell when he blew on them, casualties of his whim. This man knew

power if any man knew it. He had to be learned from.

“You wouldn't mind if I called you J., would you?”

“No.”

“Have you been waiting long?”

“Long enough.”

“I don't normally leave beautiful women waiting.”

“What I get in return for giving you the privilege.”

“It’s a privilege, is it, to know your name?”

“Yes.”

“Well. . . I’m flattered. Unless of course you grant that privilege widely?”

She shook her head. No, he could see she wasn’t profligate with her affections.

“Why have you waited so long to see me?” he said. “Why have I had reports of your wearing my

secretaries down with your constant demands to meet with me? Do you want money? Because if you do

you’ll go away empty-handed. I became rich by being mean, and the richer I get, the meaner I become.”

The remark was truth; he spoke it plainly.

“I don’t want money,” she said, equally plainly.

“That’s refreshing.”

“There’s richer than you.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. She could bite, this beauty.

“True,” he said. There were at least half a dozen richer men in the hemisphere.

“I’m not an adoring little nobody. I haven’t come here to screw a name. I’ve come here because we

She was stranger and stranger, this one.

“What do you mean?” he replied, playing for time. He hadn’t got the measure of her; she vexed him, confounded him.

“Shall I recite it for you again, in bourgeois?” she said, playing insolence with such a smile he almost felt attractive again.

“No need. You want to learn to use power. I suppose I could teach you —”

“I know you can.”. “You realize I’m a married man. Virginia and I have been together eighteen years.”

“You have three sons, four houses, a maid-servant called Mirabelle. You loathe New York, and you

love Bangkok; your shirt collar is 16½, your favourite colour green.”

“Turquoise.”

“You’re getting subtler in your old age.”

“I’m not old.”

“Eighteen years a married man. It ages you prematurely.”

“Not me.”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Dare?”

He was excited. He hadn't been so excited in a dozen years. He drew the blinds, locked the door,

turned off the video display of his fortunes.

My God, she thought, I've got him.

It wasn't an easy passion, not like that with Vassi. For one thing, Pettifer was a clumsy, uncultured

lover. For another, he was too nervous of his wife to be a wholly successful adulterer. He thought he saw

Virginia everywhere: in the lobbies of the hotels they took a room in for the afternoon, in cabs cruising

the street outside their rendezvous, once even (he swore the likeness was exact) dressed as a waitress, and

swabbing down a table in a restaurant. All fictional fears, but they dampened the spontaneity of the

romance somewhat.

Still, she was learning from him. He was as brilliant a potentate as he was inept a lover. She learned

how to be powerful without exercising power, how to keep one's self uncontaminated by the foulness all

most secret of ways to tease
pleasure out of his stale nerves.

In the fourth week of their affair they were lying side by side in a lilac room, while the mid-afternoon

traffic growled in the street below. It had been a bad bout of sex; he was nervous, and no tricks would

coax him out of himself. It was over quickly, almost without heat.

He was going to tell her something. She knew it: it was waiting, this revelation, somewhere at the back

of his throat. Turning to him she massaged his temples with her mind, and soothed him into speech.

He was about to spoil the day.

He was about to spoil his career.

He was about, God help him, to spoil his life.

"I have to stop seeing you," he said.

He wouldn't dare, she thought.

"I'm not sure what I know about you, or rather, what I think I know about you, but it makes me. . .

cautious of you, J. Do you understand?"

"No."

"I'm afraid I suspect you of. . . crimes."

“My head”s aching.”

“Tension, that’s all, just tension. I can take it away, Titus.” She touched her fingers to his forehead,

relaxing her hold on him. He sighed as relief came.

“Is that better?”

“Yes.”

“Who”s been snooping, Titus?”

“I have a personal secretary. Lyndon. Yo’ve heard me speak of him. He knew about our relationship

from the beginning. Indeed, he books the hotels, arranges my cover stories for Virginia.”

There was a sort of boyishness in this speech, that was rather touching. As though he was embarrassed

to leave her, rather than heartbroken. “Lyndon’s quite a miracle -worker. He’s maneuvered a lot of things

to make it easier between us. So he’s got nothing against you. It’s just that he happened to see one of the

photographs I took of you. I gave them to him to shred.”

“Why?”

“I shouldn’t have taken them; it was a mistake. Virginia might have.. .” He paused, began again.

“Deceased.”

“He brought me some other photographs, not as pretty as the ones of you.”

“Photographs of what?”

“Your home. And the body of your husband. They said it was a body, though in God’s name there was precious little human being left in it.”

“There was precious little to start with,” she said simply, thinking of Ben’s cold eyes, and colder hands. Fit only to be shut up, and forgotten.

“What happened?”

“To Ben? He was killed.”

“How?” Did his voice waver a little?

“Very easily.” She had risen from the bed, and was standing by the window. Strong summer light carved its way through the slats of the blind, ridges of shadow and sunlight charting the contours of her face.

“You did it.”

“Yes.” He had taught her to be plain. “Yes, I did it.”

murderess? No, that would spoil my life.”

“Is he blackmailing you? This Lyndon?”

He stared at the day through the blinds, with a crippled look on his face.

There was a twitch in the

nerves of his cheek, under his left eye..“Yes, if you must know,” he said in a dead voice. “The bastard has me for all I’m worth.”

“I see.”

“And if he can guess, so can others. You understand?”

“I’m strong: you’re strong. We can twist them around our little fingers.”

“No.”

“Yes! I have skills, Titus.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“You will know,” she said.

She looked at him, taking hold of his hands without touching him. He watched, all astonished eyes, as

his unwilling hands were raised to touch her face, to stroke her hair with the fondest of gestures. She

made him run his trembling fingers across her breasts, taking them with more ardour than he could

summon on his own initiative.

coaxed him deeper, whispering.

“I won’t break, you know. Virginia may be Dresden china, I’m not. I want feeling; I want something

that I can remember you by when I’m not with you. Nothing is everlasting, is it? But I want something to

keep me warm through the night.”

He was sinking to his knees, his hands kept, by her design, on her and in her, still roving like two

lustful crabs. His body was awash with sweat. It was, she thought, the first time she’d ever seen him

sweat.

“Don’t kill me,” he whimpered.

“I could wipe you out.” Wipe, she thought, then put the image out of her mind before she did him

some harm.

“I know. I know,” he said. “You can kill me easily.”

He was crying. My God, she thought, the great man is at my feet, sobbing like a baby. What can I

learn of power from this puerile performance? She plucked the tears off his cheeks, using rather more

strength than the task required. His skin reddened under her gaze.

He said nothing; just knelt there, facing the window, while she washed her face, drank the coffee they'd ordered, and left.

Lyndon was surprised to find the door of his office ajar. It was only seven-thirty-six. None of the

secretaries would be in for another hour. Clearly one of the cleaners had been remiss, leaving the door

unlocked. He'd find out who: sack her.

He pushed the door open.

Jacqueline was sitting with her back to the door. He recognized the back of her head, that fall of

auburn hair. A sluttish display; too teased, too wild. His office, an annex to Mr Pettifer's, was kept

meticulously ordered. He glanced over it: everything seemed to be in place.

"What are you doing here?"

She took a little breath, preparing herself.

This was the first time she had planned to do it. Before it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision.

He was approaching the desk, and putting down his briefcase and his neatly-folded copy of the

bounden duty to inform Mr Pettifer of
the situation.”

“You did it for the good of Titus?”

“Of course.”

“And the blackmail, that was also for the good of Titus, was it?”

“Get out of my office —”

“Was it, Lyndon?”

“You’re a whore! Whores know nothing: they are ignorant, diseased
animals,” he spat. “Oh, you’re
cunning, I grant you that — but then so’s any slut with a living to make.”
She stood up. He expected a riposte. He got none; at least not verbally.

But he felt a tautness across his
face: as though someone was pressing on it.

“What. . . are. . . you. . . doing?” he said.

“Doing?”

His eyes were being forced into slits like a child imitating a monstrous
Oriental, his mouth was hauled
wide and tight, his smile brilliant. The words were difficult to say —
“Stop.. .it. . .” She shook her head.

“Whore. . .” he said again, still defying her. She just stared at him. His
face was beginning to jerk and

prevent her ripping him apart. He

worked all this out quite coolly, while his body twitched and he swore at her through his enforced grin.

“Cunt,” he said. “Syphilitic cunt.”

He didn’t seem to be afraid, she thought.

In extremis he just unleashed so much hatred of her, the fear was entirely eclipsed. Now he was calling

her a whore again; though his face was distorted almost beyond recognition.

And then he began to split.

The tear began at the bridge of his nose and ran up, across his brow, and down, bisecting his lips and

his chin, then his neck and chest. In a matter of seconds his shirt was dyed red, his dark suit darkening

further, his cuffs and trouser-legs pouring blood. The skin flew off his hands like gloves off a surgeon,

and two rings of scarlet tissue lolled down to either side of his flayed face like the ears of an elephant.

His name-calling had stopped.

He had been dead of shock now for ten seconds, though she was still working him over vengefully,

degree.

She saw no reports of the death in any of the papers, and nothing on the news bulletins. Lyndon had

apparently died as he had lived, hidden from public view.

But she knew wheels, so big their hubs could not be seen by insignificant individuals like herself,

would be moving. What they would do, how they would change her life, she could only guess at. But the

murder of Lyndon had not simply been spite, though that had been a part of it. No, she'd also wanted to

stir them up, her enemies in the world, and bring them after her. Let them show their hands: let them

show their contempt, their terror. She'd gone through her life, it seemed, looking for a sign of herself,

only able to define her nature by the look in others' eyes. Now she wanted an end to that. It was time to deal with her pursuers.

Surely now everyone who had seen her, Pettifer first, then Vassi, would come after her, and she would

close their eyes permanently: make them forgetful of her. Only then, the witnesses destroyed, would she

be free.

men reading the news at the limit of her vision. As the weeks passed they didn't come any closer to her, but then neither did they go away. They waited, like cats in a tree, their tails twitching, their eyes lazy.

But the pursuit had Pettifer's mark. She'd learned enough from him to recognize his circumspection and his guile. They would come for her eventually, not in her time, but in theirs. Perhaps not even in theirs: in his. And though she never saw his face, it was as though Titus was on her heels personally.

My God, she thought, I'm in danger of my life and I don't care.

It was useless, this power over flesh, if it had no direction behind it. She had used it for her own petty reasons, for the gratification of nervous pleasure and sheer anger. But these displays hadn't brought her any closer to other people: they just made her a freak in their eyes.

Sometimes she thought of Vassi, and wondered where he was, what he was doing. He hadn't been a strong man, but he'd had a little passion in his soul. More than Ben, more than Pettifer, certainly more

him, tried to picture how he might return to her, she feared for him.

Vassi's Testimony (part two)

"Of course I searched for her. It's only when you've lost someone that you realize the nonsense of that

phrase "It's a small world". It isn't. It's a vast, devouring world, especially if you're alone.

When I was a lawyer, locked in that incestuous coterie, I used to see the same faces day after day.

Some I'd exchange words with, some smiles, some nods. We belonged, even if we were enemies at the

Bar, to the same complacent circle. We ate at the same tables, we drank elbow to elbow. We even shared

mistresses, though we didn't always know it at the time. In such circumstances, it's easy to believe the

world means you no harm. Certainly you grow older, but then so does everyone else. You even believe, in

your self-satisfied way, that the passage of years makes you a little wiser. Life is bearable; even the 3 a.m.

sweats come more infrequently as the bank-balance swells.

But to think that the world is harmless is to lie to yourself, to believe in so-called certainties that are, in

affection are in danger of being trampled out by the thousands of moments that assail you every day, like
children tugging at you, demanding your sole attention.

I was a broken man.

I would find myself (There's an apt phrase) sleeping in tiny bedrooms in forlorn hotels, drinking more

often than eating, and writing her name, like a classic obsessive, over and over again. On the walls, on the

pillow, on the palm of my hand. I broke the skin of my palm with my pen, and the ink infected it. The

mark's still there, I'm looking at it now. Jacqueline it says. Jacqueline.

Then one day, entirely by chance, I saw her. It sounds melodramatic, but I thought I was going to die at that moment. I'd imagined her for so long, keyed myself up for seeing her again, that when it happened

I felt my limbs weaken, and I was sick in the middle of the street. Not a classic reunion. The lover, on

seeing his beloved, throws up down his shirt. But then, nothing that happened between Jacqueline and

myself was ever quite normal. Or natural.

I followed her, which was difficult. There were crowds, and she was walking fast. I didn't know

was her apartment. And I

stayed there, or in the vicinity, for the next two and a half days, not quite knowing what to do. It was a

ridiculous dilemma. After all this time of watching for her, now that she was within speaking distance,

touching distance, I didn't dare approach.

Maybe I feared death. But then, here I am, in this stinking room in Amsterdam, setting my testimony

down and waiting for Koos to bring me her key, and I don't fear death now. Probably it was my vanity

that prevented me from approaching her. I didn't want her to see me cracked and desolate; I wanted to

come to her clean, her dream-lover.

While I waited, they came for her.

I don't know who they were. Two men, plainly dressed. I don't think policemen: too smooth. Cultured

even. And she didn't resist. She went smilingly, as if to the opera.

At the first opportunity I returned to the building a little better dressed, located her apartment from the

porter, and broke in. She had been living plainly. In one corner of the room she had set up a table, and had

smell of her underwear. But I

wanted something to remember her by; to picture her in. Though on reflection I never met a human being more fitted to dress purely in her skin.

So I lost her a second time, more the fault of my own cowardice than circumstance.”

Pettifer didn't come near the house they were keeping Mrs Ess in for four weeks. She was given more

or less everything she asked for, except her freedom, and she only asked for that in the most abstracted

fashion. She wasn't interested in escape: though it would have been easy to achieve. Once or twice she

wondered if Titus had told the two men and the woman who were keeping her a prisoner in the house

exactly what she was capable of: she guessed not. They treated her as though she were simply a woman

Titus had set eyes on and desired. They had procured her for his bed, simple as that.

With a room to herself, and an endless supply of paper, she began to write her memoirs again, from the beginning.

had understood herself best embracing someone else: seen her own substance clearly only when another's

lips were laid on it, adoring and gentle. She thought of Vassi again; and the lake, at the thought of him,

was roused as if by a tempest. Her breasts shook into curling mountains, her belly ran with extraordinary

tides, currents crossed and recrossed her flickering face, lapping at her mouth and leaving their mark like

waves on sand. As she was fluid in his memory, so as she remembered him, she liquefied.

She thought of the few times she had been at peace in her life; and physical love, discharging ambition

and vanity, had always preceded those fragile moments. There were other ways presumably; but her

experience had been limited. Her mother had always said that women, being more at peace with themselves than men needed fewer distractions from their hurts. But she'd not found it like that at all.

She'd found her life full of hurts, but almost empty of ways to salve them.

She left off writing her memoirs when she reached her ninth year. She despaired of telling her story

and mottled. Only his eyes glittered, and those like the eyes of a mad dog.

He was dressed immaculately, as though for a wedding.

“J.”

“Titus.”

He looked her up and down.

“Are you well?”

“Thank you, yes.”

“They give you everything you ask for?”

“Perfect hosts.”

“You haven’t resisted.”

“Resisted?”

“Being here. Locked up. I was prepared, after Lyndon, for another slaughter of the innocents.”

“Lyndon was not innocent, Titus. These people are. You didn’t tell them.”

“I didn’t deem it necessary. May I close the door?” He was her captor: but he came like an emissary to

the camp of a greater power. She liked the way he was with her, cowed but elated. He closed the door, and locked it.

He looked into her, the muscles of his face ruffled by anticipation.

“I hope so.”

“Where to?”

Still she didn't guess what had brought him to the house, his affairs
neatened, his wife unknowingly

asked forgiveness of as she slept, all channels of escape closed, all
contradictions laid to rest.

Still she didn't guess he'd come to die.

“I'm reduced by you, J. Reduced to nothing. And there is nowhere for
me to go. Do you follow?”

“No.”

“I cannot live without you,” he said. The cliché was unpardonable. Could
he not have found a better

way to say it? She almost laughed, it was so trite.

But he hadn't finished.

“— and I certainly can't live with you.” Abruptly, the tone changed. “Be-
cause you revolt me, woman,

your whole being disgusts me.”

“So?” she asked, softly.

“So. . .” He was tender again and she began to understand. “. . . kill me.”

It was grotesque. The glittering eyes were steady on her.

“You should. I’m weak. I’m useless to you. I taught you nothing.”

“You taught me a great deal. I can control myself now.”

“Lyndon’s death was controlled, was it?”

“Certainly.”

“It looked a little excessive to me.”

“He got everything he deserved.”

“Give me what I deserve, then, in my turn. I’ve locked you up. I’ve rejected you when you needed me.

Punish me for it.”

“I survived.”

“J!”

Even in this extremity he couldn’t call her by her full name.

“Please to God. Please to God. I need only this one thing from you. Do it out of whatever motive you

have in you. Compassion, or contempt, or love. But do it, please do it.”

“No,” she said.

He crossed the room suddenly, and slapped her, very hard.

“Lyndon said you were a whore. He was right; you are. Gutter slut, nothing better.”

He walked away, turned, walked back, hit her again, faster, harder, and again, six or seven times,

dozens and dozens of them, like

offerings around the Statue of the Virgin.

“Anything you want,” he said, “Jacqueline.”

In her belly she felt something close to pain as the urge to kill him found birth, but she resisted it. It

was playing into his hands, becoming the instrument of his will: powerless. Usage again; that’s all she

ever got. She had been bred like a cow, to give a certain supply. Of care to husbands, of milk to babies, of

death to old men. And, like a cow, she was expected to be compliant with every demand made of her,

when ever the call came. Well, not this time.

She went to the door.

“Where are you going?”

She reached for the key. “Your death is your own business, not mine,” she said.

He ran at her before she could unlock the door, and the blow — in its force, in its malice — was

totally unexpected.

“Bitch!” he shrieked, a hail of blows coming fast upon the first.

In her stomach, the thing that wanted to kill grew a little larger.

unsubmissive women. Whore; heretic; cunt; bitch; monster.

Yes, she was that.

Yes, she thought: monster I am.

The thought made it easy. She turned. He knew what she intended even before she looked at him. He

dropped his hands from her head. Her anger was already in her throat coming out of her — crossing the

air between them..Monster he calls me: monster I am.

I do this for myself, not for him. Never for him. For myself!

He gasped as her will touched him, and the glittering eyes stopped glittering for a moment, the will to

die became the will to survive, all too late of course, and he roared. She heard answering shouts, steps,

threats on the stairs. They would be in the room in a matter of moments.

“You are an animal,” she said.

“No,” he said, certain even now that his place was in command.

“You don’t exist,” she said, advancing on him. “They’ll never find the part that was Titus. Titus is

gone. The rest is just —”

The pain was terrible. It stopped even a voice coming out from him. Or was that her again, changing

had no fear of them, of course,

except that they might spoil her handiwork before the final touches were added to it.

Someone was hurling themselves at the door now. Wood splintered: the door was flung open. The two

men were both armed. They pointed their weapons at her, steady-handed.

“Mr Pettifer?” said the younger man. In the corner of the room, under the table, Pettifer’s eyes shone.

“Mr Pettifer?” he said again, forgetting the woman. Pettifer shook his snouted head. Don’t come any closer, please, he thought.

The man crouched down and stared under the table at the disgusting beast that was squatting there;

bloody from its transformation, but alive. She had killed his nerves: he felt no pain. He just survived, his

hands knotted into paws, his legs scooped up around his back, knees broken so he had the look of a four-legged

crab, his brain exposed, his eyes lidless, lower jaw broken and swept up over his top jaw like a

She nodded.

“Come Titus,” she said, clicking her fingers.

The beast shook its head, sobbing.

“Come Titus,” she said more forcefully, and Titus Pettifer waddled out of his hiding place, leaving a trail like a punctured meat-sack.

The man fired at Pettifer’s remains out of sheer instinct. Anything, anything at all to prevent this disgusting creature from approaching him.

Titus stumbled two steps back on his bloody paws, shook himself as if to dislodge the death in him, and failing, died.

“Content?” she asked.

The gunman looked up from the execution. Was the power talking to him? No; Jacqueline was staring at Pettifer’s corpse, asking the question of him.

Content?

The gunman dropped his weapon. The other man did the same.

“How did this happen?” asked the man at the door. A simple question: a child’s question.

“He asked,” said Jacqueline. “It was all I could give him.”

meeting, choreographing my victories

and my defeats, escorting me, blindly, towards this last encounter.

I found her without knowing I'd found her, that was the irony of it. I'd traced her first to a house in

Surrey, a house that had a year previous seen the murder of one Titus Pettifer, a billionaire shot by one of

his own bodyguards. In the upstairs room, where the murder had taken place, all was serenity. If she had

been there, they had removed any sign. But the house, now in virtual ruin, was prey to all manner of

graffiti; and on the stained plaster wall of that room someone had scrawled a woman. She was obscenely

over-endowed, her gaping sex blazing with what looked like lightning. And at her feet there was a

creature of indeterminate species. Perhaps a crab, perhaps a dog, perhaps even a man. Whatever it was it

had no power over itself. It sat in the light of her agonizing presence and counted itself amongst the

fortunate. Looking at that wizened creature, with its eyes turned up to gaze on the burning Madonna, I

knew the picture was a portrait of Jacqueline.

believe that. His desperation, his hunger, his confusion were all marks of a man who had seen Jacqueline.

If I was rough in my interrogation of him I'm sure he forgave me. It was an unburdening for him, to

tell everything he'd seen the day that Pettifer had been killed, and know that I believed it all. He told me

his fellow bodyguard, the man who had fired the shots that had killed Pettifer, had committed suicide in prison.

His life, he said, was meaningless. She had destroyed it. I gave him what reassurances I could; that she

meant no harm, and that he needn't fear that she would come for him. When I told him that, he cried,

more, I think, out of loss than relief.

Finally I asked him if he knew where Jacqueline was now. I'd left that question to the end, though it

had been the most pressing enquiry, because I suppose I didn't dare hope he'd know. But my God, he did.

She had not left the house immediately after the shooting of Pettifer. She had sat down with this man, and

gone to Amsterdam. This he

knew for a fact, from a man called Koos. And so the circle begins to close, yes?

I was in Amsterdam seven weeks, without finding a single clue to her whereabouts, until yesterday

evening. Seven weeks of celibacy, which is unusual for me. Listless with frustration I went down to the

red-light district, to find a woman. They sit there you know, in the windows, like mannequins, beside

pink-fringed lamps. Some have miniature dogs on their laps; some read. Most just stare out at the street, as if mesmerized.

There were no faces there that interested me. They all seemed joyless, lightless, too much unlike her.

Yet I couldn't leave. I was like a fat boy in a sweet shop, too nauseous to buy, too gluttonous to go.

Towards the middle of the night, I was spoken to out of the crowd by a young man who, on closer

inspection, was not young at all, but heavily made up. He had no eyebrows, just pencil marks drawn on to

My first thought, absurdly, was that he intended to kill me. I tried to pull away; his grip on my cuff was relentless.

You want a woman, he said. Did I hesitate enough for him to know I meant yes, though I said no? I

have a woman like no other, he went on, She's a miracle. I know you'll want to meet her in the flesh.

What made me know it was Jacqueline he was talking about? Perhaps the fact that he had known me

from out of the crowd, as though she was up at a window somewhere, ordering her admirers to be brought

to her like a diner ordering lobster from a tank. Perhaps too the way his eyes shone at me, meeting mine

without fear because fear, like rapture, he felt only in the presence of one creature on God's cruel earth.

Could I not also see myself reflected in his perilous look? He knew Jacqueline, I had no doubt of it.

He knew I was hooked, because once I hesitated he turned away from me with a mincing shrug, as if

to say: you missed your chance. Where is she? I said, seizing his twig-thin arm. He cocked his head down

Versailles.

Up two flights in the otherwise empty house there was a room with a black door. He pressed me to it.

It was locked.

“See,” he invited, “She’s inside.”

“It’s locked,” I replied. My heart was fit to burst: she was near, for certain, I knew she was near.

“See,” he said again, and pointed to a tiny hole in the panel of the door. I devoured the light through it,
pushing my eye towards her through the tiny hole.

The squalid interior was empty, except for a mattress and Jacqueline. She lay spread-eagled, her wrists
and ankles bound to rough posts set in the bare floor at the four corners of the mattress.

“Who did this?” I demanded, not taking my eye from her nakedness.

“She asks,” he replied. “It is her desire. She asks.” She had heard my voice; she cranked up her head
with some difficulty and stared directly at the door. When she looked at me all the hairs rose on my head,

I swear it, in welcome, and swayed at her command.

“Oliver,” she said.

“How much do you want?”

“Everything you have. The shirt off your back, your money, your jewelry; then she is yours.”

I wanted to beat the door down, or break his nicotine stained fingers one by one until he gave me the key. He knew what I was thinking.

“The key is hidden,” he said, “And the door is strong. You must pay, Mr Vassi. You want to pay.”

It was true. I wanted to pay.

“You want to give me all you have ever owned, all you have ever been. You want to go to her with

nothing to claim you back. I know this. It’s how they all go to her.”

“All? Are there many?”

“She is insatiable,” he said, without relish. It wasn’t a pimp’s boast: it was his pain, I saw that clearly.

“I am always finding more for her, and burying them.”

Burying them.

That, I suppose, is Koos’ function; he disposes of the dead. And he will get his lacquered hands on me

after tonight; he will fetch me off her when I am dry and useless to her, and find some pit, some canal,

do business with me because she

demands it and he is in thrall to her, every bit as much as I am. Oh, he will come. Of course he will come.

Well, I think that is sufficient.

This is my testimony. I have no time to re-read it now. His footsteps are on the stairs (he limps) and I

must go with him. This I leave to whoever finds it, to use as they think fit.

By morning I shall be dead,

and happy. Believe it.”

My God, she thought, Koos has cheated me.

Vassi had been outside the door, she'd felt his flesh with her mind and she'd embraced it. But Koos

hadn't let him in, despite her explicit orders. Of all men, Vassi was to be allowed free access, Koos knew

that. But he'd cheated her, the way they'd all cheated her except Vassi.

With him (perhaps) it had been

love.

She lay on the bed through the night, never sleeping. She seldom slept now for more than a few

minutes: and only then with Koos watching her. She'd done herself harm in her sleep, mutilating herself

times dozing for a while, sometimes

eating from Koos' hand, being washed, being toileted, being used.

A key turned in the lock. She strained from the mattress to see who it was. The door was opening. . .

opening. . . opened.

Vassi. Oh God, it was Vassi at last, she could see him crossing the room towards her.

Let this not be another memory, she prayed, please let it be him this time: true and real.

“Jacqueline.”

He said the name of her flesh, the whole name.

“Jacqueline.” It was him.

Behind him, Koos stared between her legs, fascinated by the dance of her labia.

“Koo. . .” she said, trying to smile.

“I brought him,” he grinned at her, not looking away from her sex.

“A day,” she whispered. “I waited a day, Koos. You made me wait —”

“What’s a day to you?” he said, still grinning.

She didn’t need the pimp any longer, not that he knew that. In his innocence he thought Vassi was just

him pant sometimes. But this time, let him stay forever.

Carefully, he took the key from the outside of the door, closed it, slipped the key into the inside and

locked it. Even as the lock clicked she killed him, before he could even turn round and look at her again.

Nothing spectacular in the execution; she just reached into his pigeon chest and crushed his lungs. He

slumped against the door and slid down, smearing his face across the wood.

Vassi didn't even turn round to see him die; she was all he ever wanted to look at again.

He approached the mattress, crouched, and began to untie her ankles. The skin was chafed, the rope

scabby with old blood. He worked at the knots systematically, finding a calm he thought he'd lost, a

simple contentment in being here at the end, unable to go back, and knowing that the path ahead was deep

in her..When her ankles were free, he began on her wrists, interrupting her view of the ceiling as he bent over

her. His voice was soft.

"Why did you let him do this to you?"

stretched beyond its tolerance and was
permanently criss-crossed.

He lay down beside her, and the feel of his body against hers was not unpleasant.

She touched his head. Her joints were stiff, the movements painful, but she wanted to draw his face up

to hers. He came, smiling, into her sight, and they exchanged kisses.

My God, she thought, we are together.

And thinking they were together, her will was made flesh. Under his lips her features dissolved,

becoming the red sea he'd dreamt of, and washing up over his face, that was itself dissolving; common
waters made of thought and bone.

Her keen breasts pricked him like arrows; his erection, sharpened by her thought, killed her in return

with his only thrust. Tangled in a wash of love they thought themselves extinguished, and were.

Outside, the hard world mourned on, the chatter of buyers and sellers continuing through the night.

Eventually indifference and fatigue claimed even the eagerest merchant. Inside and out there was a

direction, hot air, hot rock, hot sand. This was Arizona.

He opened the door and stepped out on to the baking dust highway. In front and behind it stretched

unswervingly to the pale horizon. If he narrowed his eyes he could just make out the mountains, but as

soon as he attempted to fix his focus they were eaten up by the heat-haze. Already the sun was corroding

the top of his head, where his blond hair was thinning. He threw up the hood of the car and peered

hopelessly into the engine, regretting his lack of mechanical know-how. Jesus, he thought, why don't they

make the damn things foolproof? Then he heard the music.

It was so far off it sounded like a whistling in his ears at first: but it became louder.

It was music, of a sort.

How did it sound? Like the wind through telephone lines, a sourceless, rhythmless, heartless air-wave

plucking at the hairs on the back of his neck and telling them to stand. He tried to ignore it, but it

wouldn't go away.

Their paths would not cross.

Davidson glanced down once more into the cooling entrails of his vehicle and then up again at the distant line of dancers.

He needed help: no doubt of it.

He started off across the desert towards them.

Once off the highway the dust, not impacted by the passage of cars, was loose: it flung itself up at his

face with every step. Progress was slow: he broke into a trot: but they were receding from him. He began to run.

Over the thunder of his blood, he could hear the music more loudly now. There was no melody

apparent, but a constant rising and falling of many instruments; howls and hummings, whistlings, drummings and roarings.

The head of the procession had now disappeared, received into distance, but the celebrants (if that they

were) still paraded past. He changed direction a little, to head them off, glancing over his shoulder briefly

the parade were definitely costumed,

however. They wore headdresses and masks that tottered well above human height — there was the

flutter of brightly-coloured feathers, and streamers coiling in the air behind them. Whatever the reason for

the celebration they reeled like drunkards, loping one moment, leaping the next, squirming, some of them,

on the ground, bellies to the hot sand.

Davidson's lungs were torn with exhaustion, and it was clear he was losing the pursuit. Having gained

on the procession, it was now moving off faster than he had strength or willpower to follow.

He stopped, bracing his arms on his knees to support his aching torso, and looked under his sweat-sodden

brow at his disappearing salvation. Then, summoning up all the energy he could muster, he yelled:

Stop!

At first there was no response. Then, through the slits of his eyes, he thought he saw one or two of the

revelers halt. He straightened up. Yes, one or two were looking at him. He felt, rather than saw, their eyes

— My Jesus, he said, and for the first time in his thirty-six godless years the words were a true prayer.

He stood off half a mile from them, but there was no mistaking what he saw. His aching eyes knew

papier-mâché from flesh, illusion from misshapen reality.

The creatures at the end of the procession, the least of the least, the hangers-on, were monsters whose

appearance beggared the nightmares of insanity.

One was perhaps eighteen or twenty feet tall. Its skin, that hung in folds on its muscle, was a sheath of

spikes, its head a cone of exposed teeth, set in scarlet gums. Another was three-winged, its triple ended

tail thrashing the dust with reptilian enthusiasm. A third and fourth were married together in a union of

monstrosities the result of which was more disgusting than the sum of its parts. Through its length and

breadth this symbiotic horror was locked in seeping marriage, its limbs thrust in and through wounds in

its partner's flesh. Though the tongues of its heads were wound together it managed a cacophonous howl.

vidson, and he felt his trousers fill as
his bowels failed him.

The thing was rushing towards him with the speed of a cheetah, growing
with every second, so he

could see more detail of its alien anatomy with every step. The thumbless hands with their toothed palms,

the head that bore only a tri-coloured eye, the sinew of its shoulder and chest, even its genitals, erect with

anger, or (God help me) lust, two-pronged and beating against its abdomen.

Davidson shrieked a shriek that was almost the equal of the monster's noise, and fled back the way he
had come.

The car was a mile, two miles away, and he knew it offered no protection were he to reach it before

the monster overcame him. In that moment he realized how close death was, how close it had always

been, and he longed for a moment's comprehension of this idiot honor.

It was already close behind him as his shit-slimed legs buckled, and he fell, and crawled, and dragged

be snapped from his neck at any
moment, he peered through his fingers.

The creature had overtaken him.

Perhaps contemptuous of his frailty it had run on past him towards the
highway.

Davidson smelt his excrement, and his fear. He felt curiously ignored.
Behind him the parade had
moved on. Only one or two inquisitive monsters still looked over their
shoulders in his direction, as they
receded into the dust.

The whistling now changed pitch. Davidson cautiously raised his head
from ground level. The noise
was all but outside his hearing-range, just a shrill whine at the back of
his aching head.

He stood up.

The creature had leapt on to the top of his car. Its head was thrown
back in a kind of ecstasy, its
erection plainer than ever, the eye in its huge head glinting. With a final
swoop to its voice, which took
the whistle out of human hearing, it bent upon the car, smashing the
windshield and curling its mouthed

wrenched off the axles.

To Davidson's nostrils there drifted the unmistakable stench of gasoline.
No sooner had he registered

the smell than a shard of metal glanced against another and the creature and the car were sheathed in a

billowing column of fire, blackening into smoke as it balled over the highway.

The thing did not call out: or if it did its agonies were beyond hearing. It staggered out of the inferno

with its flesh on fire, every inch of its body alight; its arms flailed wildly in a vain attempt to douse the

fire, and it began to run off down the highway, fleeing from the source of its agony towards the

mountains. Flames sprouted off its back and the air was tinged with the smell of its cooking flesh.

It didn't fall, however, though the fire must have been devouring it. The run went on and on, until the

heat dissolved the highway into the blue distance, and it was gone.

Davidson sank down on to his knees. The shit on his legs was already dry in the heat. The car

continued to burn. The music had gone entirely, as had the procession.

breath, and died in a writhing ball

three trucks' length from the bank. The normal business of Welcome, the trading, the debating, the how

do you do's, had halted. One or two nauseous individuals had been received into the lobby of the Hotel

while the smell of fricasseed flesh thickened the good desert air of the town.

The stench was something between over-cooked fish and an exhumation, and it offended Packard.

This was his town, overlooked by him, protected by him. The intrusion of this fireball was not looked upon kindly.

Packard took out his gun and began to walk towards the corpse. The flames were all but out now,

having eaten the best of their meal. Even so destroyed by fire, it was a sizeable bulk. What might once

have been its limbs were gathered around what might have been its head. The rest was beyond

recognition. All in all, Packard was glad of that small mercy. But even in the charnel-house confusion of

Packard had never believed the

shit his father talked but was this not such a demon?

Whatever mischance had brought this burning monstrosity into his town to die, there was pleasure for

Packard in the proof of their vulnerability. His father had never mentioned that possibility.

Half-smiling at the thought of mastering such foulness, Packard stepped up to the smoking corpse and

kicked it. The crowd, still lingering in the safety of the doorways, cooed with admiration at his bravery.

The half-smile spread across his face. That kick alone would be worth a night of drinks, perhaps even a woman.

The thing was belly up. With the dispassionate gaze of a professional demon-kicker, Packard

scrutinized the tangle of limbs across the head. It was quite dead, that was obvious. He sheathed his gun

and bent towards the corpse.

“Get a camera out here, Jebediah,” he said, impressing even himself.

His deputy ran off towards the office.

“What we need,” he said, “is a picture of this here beauty.”

sound, revealing the heat-withered eye on the face beneath.

He dropped the limb back where it had come with a look of disgust.

A beat.

Then the demon's arm was snaking up — suddenly — too suddenly for Packard to move, and in a

moment sublime with terror the Sheriff saw the mouth open in the palm of its forefoot and close again

around his own hand.

Whimpering he lost balance and sat in the fat, pulling away from the mouth, as his glove was chewed

through, and the teeth connected with his hand, clipping off his fingers as the rasping maw drew digits,

blood and stumps further into its gut.

Packard's bottom slid in the mess under him and he squirmed, howling now, to loose himself. It still

had life in it, this thing from the underworld. Packard bellowed for mercy as he staggered to his feet,

dragging the sordid bulk of the thing up off the ground as he did so.

A shot sounded, close to Packard's ear. Fluids, blood and pus spattered him as the limb was blown to

and grunted with satisfaction.

“Your hand’s gone,” she said, with brutal simplicity.

Monsters, Packard remembered his father telling him, never die. He’d remembered too late, and now

he’d sacrificed his hand, his drinking, sexing hand. A wave of nostalgia for lost years with those fingers

washed over him, while dots burst into darkness before his eyes. The last thing he saw as a dead faint

carried him to the ground was his dutiful deputy raising a camera to record the whole scene.

The shack at the back of the house was Lucy’s refuge and always had been. When Eugene came back

drunk from Welcome, or a sudden fury took him because the stew was cold, Lucy retired into the shack

where she could weep in peace. There was no pity to be had in Lucy’s life. None from Eugene certainly, and precious little time to pity herself.

Today, the old source of irritation had got Eugene into a rage: The child.

The nurtured and carefully cultivated child of their love; named after the brother of Moses, Aaron,

That was Eugene's objection.

"That flicking child's no more a boy than you are," he said to Lucy. "He's not even a half-boy. He's

only fit for putting in fancy shoes and selling perfume. Or a preacher, he's fit for a preacher."

He pointed a nail-bitten, crook-thumbed hand at the boy.

"You're a shame to your father."

Aaron met his father's stare.

"You hear me, boy?"

Eugene looked away. The boy's big eyes made him sick to his stomach, more like a dog's eyes than

anything human.

"I want him out of this house."

"What's he done?"

"He doesn't need to do a thing. It's sufficient he's the way he is. They laugh at me, you know that?

They laugh at me because of him." "Nobody laughs at you, Eugene."

"Oh yes —"

"Not for the boy's sake."

"Huh?"

"If they laugh, they don't laugh at the boy. They laugh at you."

but though she reeled, her first thoughts were for the boy.

“Aaron,” she said through the tears the pain had brought. “Come with me.”

“You let the bastard alone.” Eugene was trembling.

“Aaron.”

The child stood between father and mother, not knowing which to obey. The look of confusion on his face brought Lucy’s tears more copiously.

“Mama,” said the child, very quietly. There was a grave look in his eyes, that went beyond confusion.

Before Lucy could find a way to cool the situation, Eugene had hold of the boy by his hair and was dragging him closer.

“You listen to your father, boy.”

“Yes —”

“Yes, sir, we say to our father, don’t we? We say, yes, sir.”

Aaron’s face was thrust into the stinking crotch of his father’s jeans.

“Yes, sir.”

“He stays with me, woman. You’re not taking him out into that fucking shack one more time. He stays with his father.”

knew her husband: and he was close to an outburst that would be uncontrollable. She no longer cared for

herself— she'd had her joys — but the boy was so vulnerable.

“Get out of our sight, woman, why don't you? The boy and I want to be alone, don't we?”

Eugene dragged Aaron's face from his crotch and sneered down at his pale face.

“Don't we?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Yes, Papa. Oh yes indeed, Papa.”

Lucy left the house and retired into the cool darkness of the shack, where she prayed for Aaron, named

after the brother of Moses. Aaron, whose name meant “exalted one”; she wondered how long he could

survive the brutalities the future would provide.

The boy was stripped now. He stood white in front of his father. He wasn't afraid. The whipping that

would be meted out to him would pain him, but this was not true fear.

“You're sickly, lad,” said Eugene, running a huge hand over his son's abdomen. “Weak and sickly like

likes better to eat, than hog-meat.

How'd you like that?" "No, Papa."

"You wouldn't like that?"

"No thank you, Papa."

Eugene's face hardened.

"Well I'd like to see that, Aaron. I'd like to see what you'd do if I was to open you up and have a look inside you."

There was a new violence in his father's games, which Aaron couldn't understand: new threats, new intimacy. Uncomfortable as he was the boy knew the real fear was felt not by him but by his father; fear

was Eugene's birthright, just as it was Aaron's to watch, and wait, and suffer, until the moment came. He

knew (without understanding how or why), that he would be an instrument in the destruction of his father.

Maybe more than an instrument.

Anger erupted in Eugene. He stared at the boy, his brown fists clenched so tight that the knuckles

burned white. The boy was his ruin, somehow; he'd killed the good life they'd lived before he was born,

“You should say thank you, sir.”

“Why?”

“Why, boy? ‘Cause this life’s not worth what a hog can shit, and I’d be doing you a loving service, as a father should a son.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the shack behind the house Lucy had stopped crying. There was no purpose in it; and besides,

something in the sky she could see through the holes in the roof had brought memories to her that wiped

the tears away. A certain sky: pure blue, sheeny-clear. Eugene wouldn’t harm the boy. He wouldn’t dare,

ever dare, harm that child. He knew what the boy was, though he’d never admit to it.

She remembered the day, six years ago now, when the sky had been sheened like today, and the air

had been livid with the heat. Eugene and she had been just about as hot as the air, they hadn’t taken their

eyes off each other all day. He was stronger then: in his prime. A soaring, splendid man, his body made

made a fine bed, and they could lie uninterrupted beneath the wide sky.

That day six years ago the sky had darkened too soon; long before night was due. It had seemed to

blacken in a moment, and the lovers were suddenly cold in their hurried nakedness. She had seen, over his

shoulder, the shapes the sky had taken: the vast and monumental creatures that were watching them. He,

in his passion, still worked at her, thrust to his root and out the length again as he knew she delighted in,

'til a hand the colour of beets and the size of a man pinched his neck, and plucked him out of his wife's

lap. She watched him lifted into the sky like a squirming jack-rabbit, spitting from two mouths, North and

South, as he finished his thrusts on the air. Then his eyes opened for a moment, and he saw his wife

twenty feet below him, still bare, still spread butterfly wide, with monsters on every side. Casually,

without malice, they threw him away, out of their ring of admiration, and out of her sight.

She remembered so well the hour that followed, the embraces of the monsters. Not foul in any way,

shameful, a loss; as though the zenith

of her life was passed, and the rest of her days would be a cold ride down to death.

She had got up at last, and walked over to where Eugene was lying unconscious on the sand, one of his

legs broken by the fall. She had kissed him, and then squatted to pass water. She hoped, and hope it was,

that there would be fruit from the seed of that day's love, and it would be a keepsake of her joy.

In the house Eugene struck the boy. Aaron's nose bled, but he made no sound.

"Speak, boy."

"What shall I say?"

"Am I your father or not?"

"Yes, father."

"Liar!"

He struck again, without warning; this time the blow carried Aaron to the floor. As his small,

uncalloused palms flattened against the kitchen tiles to raise himself he felt something through the floor.

There was a music in the ground.

peared to be empty, until his eye

alighted on the dark, smoking mound in the middle of the street, a hundred yards from where he stood.

If such a thing had been possible, his blood would have run cold at the sight.

He recognized what that bundle of burned flesh had been, despite the distance, and his head spun with

horror. It had all been real after all. He stumbled on a couple more steps, fighting the dizziness and losing,

until he felt himself supported by strong arms, and heard, through a fuzz of head-noises, reassuring words

being spoken to him. They made no sense, but at least they were soft and human: he could give up any

pretence to consciousness. He fainted, but it seemed there was only a moment of respite before the world

came back into view again, as odious as ever.

He had been carried inside and was lying on an uncomfortable sofa, a woman's face, that of Eleanor

Kooker, staring down at him. She beamed as he came round.

"The man'll survive," she said, her voice like cabbage going through a grater.

He drank the second glass more
slowly, and began to feel better.

The room was filled with people: it was as though all of Welcome was
pressing into the Kooker front

parlour. Quite an audience: but then it was quite a tale. Loosened by the
whisky, he began to tell it as best

he could, without embellishment, just letting the words come. In return
Eleanor described the

circumstances of Sheriff Packard's "accident" with the body of the car-
wrecker. Packard was in the room,

looking the worse for consoling whiskies and pain killers, his mutilated
hand bound up so well it looked

more like a club than a limb.

"It's not the only devil out there," said Packard when the stories were
out.

"So's you say," said Eleanor, her quick eyes less than convinced.

"My Papa said so," Packard returned, staring down at his bandaged
hand. "And I believe it, sure as

Hell I believe it." "Then we'd best do something about it."

"Like what?" posed a sour looking individual leaning against the mantel-
piece. "What's to be done

even dig you the hole.”

General laughter. The cynic, discomforted, fell silent and picked at his nails.

“We can’t sit here and let them come running through,” said Packard’s deputy, between blowing bubbles with his gum.

“They were going towards the mountains,” Davidson said. “Away from Welcome.”

“So what’s to stop them changing their goddam minds?” Eleanor countered. “Well?”

No answer. A few nods, a few head shakings. “Jebediah,” she said, “you’re deputy — what do you think about this?”

The young man with the badge and the gum flushed a little, and plucked at his thin moustache. He obviously hadn’t a clue.

“I see the picture,” the woman snapped back before he could answer. “Clear as a bell. You’re all too

shit scared to go poking them devils out of their holes, that it?”

Murmurs of self-justification around the room, more head-shaking.

difficulty. He swayed on his feet as he addressed the room.

“We’re going to have them shit-eaters and lynch ‘em.” This rousing battle-cry left the males in the

room unroused; the sheriff was low on credibility since his encounter in Main Street.

“Discretion’s the better part of valour,” Davidson murmured under his breath.

“That’s so much horse-shit,” said Eleanor.

Davidson shrugged, and finished off the whisky in his glass. It was not refilled. He reflected ruefully

that he should be thankful he was still alive. But his work-schedule was in ruins. He had to get to a

telephone and hire a car; if necessary have someone drive out to pick him up. The “divils”, whatever they

were, were not his problem. Perhaps he’d be interested to read a few column-inches on the subject in

Newsweek, when he was back East and relaxing with Barbara; but now all he wanted to do was finish his

business in Arizona and get home as soon as possible.

Packard, however, had other ideas.

The man was scoring points off him, Davidson knew, bolstering his shattered reputation by taking pot-shots

at the Easterner. Still, Packard was the law: there was nothing to be done about it. He nodded his

assent with as much good grace as he could muster. There'd be time to lodge a formal complaint against

this hick-town Mussolini when he was home, safe and sound. For now, better to send a cable, and let

business go hang.

"So what's the plan?" Eleanor demanded of Packard.

The Sheriff puffed out his booze-brightened cheeks.

"We deal with the divils," he said.

"How?". "Guns, woman."

"You'll need more than guns, if they're as big as he says they are —"

"They are —" said Davidson, "believe me, they are."

Packard sneered.

"We'll take the whole fucking arsenal," he said jerking his remaining thumb at Jebediah. "Go break

out the heavy-duty weapons, boy. Anti-tank stuff. Bazookas."

General amazement.

"You got bazookas?" said Lou, the mantelpiece cynic.

show of bravado, “but

you’re the only man in this room, Josh Packard.”

Packard beamed and rubbed his crotch absent mindedly. Davidson couldn’t take the atmosphere of

hand-me-down machismo in the room any longer.

“Look,” he piped up, “I’ve told you all I know. Why don’t I just let you folks get on with it.”

“You ain’t leaving,” said Packard, “if that’s what you’re rooting after.”

“I’m just saying —”

“We know what you’re saying son, and I ain’t listening. If I see you hitch up your britches to leave I’ll

string you up by your balls. If you’ve got any.”

The bastard would try it too, thought Davidson, even if he only had one hand to do it with. Just go

with the flow, he told himself, trying to stop his lip curling. If Packard went out to find the monsters and

his damn bazooka backfired, that was his business. Let it be.

“There’s a whole tribe of them,” Lou was quietly pointing out. “According to this man. So how do we

take out so many of them?”

“Strategy,” said Packard.

“Suppose they just disappeared? Suppose we can’t find them no more?”

Lou was arguing. “Couldn’t

we just let ‘em go to ground?”

“Sure,” said Packard. “And then we’re left waiting around for them to come out again and devour the

women folk.”

“Maybe they mean no harm —” Lou replied.

Packard’s reply was to raise his bandaged hand.

“They done me harm.”

That was incontestable.

Packard continued, his voice hoarse with feeling.

“Shit, I want them come-bags so bad I’m going out there with or without help. But we’ve got to out-think

them, out manoeuvre them, so we don’t get anybody hurt.”

The man talks some sense, thought Davidson. Indeed, the whole room seemed impressed. Murmurs of

approval all round; even from the mantelpiece.

Packard rounded on the deputy again.

“You get your ass moving, son. I want you to call up that bastard Crumb out of Caution and get his

For a moment the rhetoric seemed to work its magic on Davidson, and he half-believed it might be possible; then he remembered the details of the procession, tails, teeth and all, and his bravado sank without trace.

They came up to the house so quietly, not intending to creep, just so gentle with their tread nobody heard them.

Inside, Eugene's anger had subsided. He was sitting with his legs up on the table, an empty bottle of whisky in front of him. The silence in the room was so heavy it suffocated.

Aaron, his face puffed up with his father's blows, was sitting beside the window. He didn't need to

look up to see them coming across the sand towards the house, their approach sounded in his veins. His

bruised face wanted to light up with a smile of welcome, but he repressed the instinct and simply waited,

slumped in beaten resignation, until they were almost upon the house. Only when their massive bodies

his excitement.

“What’s wrong with the window, boy?”

Aaron heard one of his true father’s voices eclipse Eugene’s mumblings.

Like a dog eager to greet his

master after a long separation, the boy ran to the door and tried to claw it open. It was locked and bolted.

“What’s that noise, boy?”

Eugene pushed his son aside and fumbled with the key in the lock, while Aaron’s father called to his

child through the door. His voice sounded like a rush of water, counterpointed by soft, piping sighs. It

was an eager voice, a loving voice.

All at once, Eugene seemed to understand. He took hold of the boy’s hair and hauled him away from

the door.

Aaron squealed with pain.

“Papa!” he yelled.

Eugene took the cry as addressed to himself, but Aaron’s true father also heard the boy’s voice. His

answering call was threaded with piercing notes of concern.

Pyramidal heads on rose coloured, classically proportioned torsos, that
umbrellaed into shifting skirts of
lace flesh. A headless silver beauty whose six mother of pearl arms
sprouted in a circle from around its
purring, pulsating mouth. A creature like a ripple on a fast-running
stream, constant but moving, giving
out a sweet and even tone. Creatures too fantastic to be real, too real to
be disbelieved; angels of the
hearth and threshold. One had a head, moving back and forth on a gos-
samer neck, like some preposterous
weather-vane, blue as the early night sky and shot with a dozen eyes
like so many suns. Another father,
with a body like a fan, opening and closing in his excitement, his orange
flesh flushing deeper as the
boy's voice was heard again.
"Papa!"
At the door of the house stood the creature Lucy remembered with
greatest affection; the one who had
first touched her, first soothed her fears, first entered her, infinitely gen-
tle. It was perhaps twenty feet tall

“Papa!”

Jubilation was in Aaron’s voice. The waiting was over.

The front of the house was smashed inwards. A limb like a flesh hook curled under the lintel and

hauled the door from its hinges. Bricks flew up and showered down again; wood-splinters and dust filled

the air. Where there had once been safe darkness, cataracts of sunlight now poured onto the dwarfed

human figures in the ruins.

Eugene peered up through the veil of dust. The roof was being peeled back by giant hands, and there

was sky where there had been beams. Towering on every side he saw the limbs, bodies and faces of

impossible beasts. They were teasing the remaining walls down, destroying his house as casually as he

would break a bottle. He let the boy slip from his grasp without realizing what he’d done.

Aaron ran towards the creature on the threshold.

“Papa!”

It scooped him up like a father meeting a child out of school, and its head was thrown back in a wave

ignored this eventuality for six years, and now, with their mystery and their glory in front of him, he
sobbed not to have had the courage to face them and know them. Now it was too late. They'd taken the
boy by force, and reduced his house, and his life, to ruins. Indifferent to his agonies, they were leaving,
singing their jubilation, his boy in their arms forever.

In the township of Welcome organization was the by-word of the day. Davidson could only watch
with admiration the way these foolish, hardy people were attempting to confront impossible odds. He was
strangely enervated by the spectacle; like watching settlers, in some movie, preparing to muster paltry
weaponry and simple faith to meet the pagan violence of the savage. But, unlike the movie, Davidson
knew defeat was pre-ordained. He'd seen these monsters: awe-inspiring. Whatever the rightness of the
cause, the purity of the faith, the savages trampled the settlers under-foot fairly often. The defeats just
make it into the movies.

tortured imaginings he could not
grasp the whole truth.

Aaron was mad, he knew that much. And somehow his wife, his ripe-bodied Lucy, who had been such
a beauty and such a comfort, was instrumental in both the boy's insanity
and his own grief.

She'd sold the boy: that was his half-formed belief. In some unspeakable way she had bargained with
these things from the underworld, and had exchanged the life and sanity
of his only son for some kind of
gift. What had she gained, for this payment? Some trinket or other that
she kept buried in her shack? My

God, she would suffer for it. But before he made her suffer, before he
wrenched her hair from its holes,
and tarred her flashing breasts with pitch, she would confess. He'd
make her confess; not to him but to the
people of Welcome — the men and women who scoffed at his drunken
ramblings, laughed when he wept
into his beer. They would hear, from Lucy's own lips, the truth behind
the nightmares he had endured,

“My Christ!”

He loosed his wife. Were they coming to fetch her too? Yes, that was probably another part of the bargain she'd made.

“They've taken the town,” he said. The air was full of their voices; it was too much to bear.

They were coming at him down the road in a whining horde, driving straight at him — Eugene turned to run, letting the slut go. They could have her, as long as they left him alone; Lucy was smiling into the dust.

“It's Packard,” she said.

Eugene glanced back along the road and narrowed his eyes. The cloud of divils was resolving itself.

The eyes at its heart were headlights, the voices were sirens; there was an army of cars and motorcycles, led by Packard's howling vehicle, careering down the road from Welcome.

Eugene was confounded. What was this, a mass exodus? Lucy, for the first time that glorious day, felt a twinge of doubt.

Packard leant out of his car, spat, and spoke.

“Got problems, Eugene?” he asked.

“I’m no fool, Packard,” said Eugene.

“Not saying you are.”

“I seen these things. Lucy’ll tell you.”

“I know you have, Eugene; I know you have. There’s no denying that there’s divils in them hills, sure

as shit. What’d you think I’ve got this posse together for, if it ain’t divils?”

Packard grinned across to Jebediah at the wheel. “Sure as shit,” he said again. “We’re going to blow them all to Kingdom Come.”

From the back of the car, Miss Kooker leaned out the window; she was smoking a cigar.

“Seems we owe you an apology, Gene,” she said, offering an apology for a smile. He’s still a sot, she

thought; marrying that fat-bottomed whore was the death of him. What a waste of a man.

Eugene’s face tightened with satisfaction.

“Seems you do.”

“Get in one of them cars behind,” said Packard, “you and Lucy both; and we’ll fetch them out of their

hot for them bastards, eh?”

Eugene turned to where Lucy had been standing.

“And I want her tried —” he said.

But Lucy was gone, running off across the desert: doll-sized already.

“She’s headed off the road,” said Eleanor. “She’ll kill herself.” “Killing’s too good for her,” said Eugene, as he climbed into the car. “That woman’s meaner than the

Devil himself.”

“How’s that, Gene?”

“Sold my only son to Hell, that woman —” Lucy was erased by the heat-haze.

“— to Hell.”

“Then let her be,” said Packard. “Hell’ll take her back, sooner or later.”

Lucy had known they wouldn’t bother to follow her. From the moment she’d seen the car lights in the

dust-cloud, seen the guns, and the helmets, she knew she had little place in the events ahead. At best, she

would be a spectator. At worst, she’d die of heatstroke crossing the desert, and never know the upshot of

the oncoming battle. She’d often mused about the existence of the creatures who were collectively

the other. Now it seemed to be here, without warning, and against the background of such a reckoning her life was as nothing.

Once the cars and bikes had disappeared out of sight, she doubled back, tracing her footmarks in the

sand, 'til she met the road again. There was no way of regaining Aaron, she realized that. She had, in a

sense, merely been a guardian of the child, though she'd borne him. He belonged, in some strange way, to

the creatures that had married their seeds in her body to make him. Maybe she'd been a vessel for some

experiment in fertility, and now the doctors had returned to examine the resulting child. Maybe they had

simply taken him out of love. Whatever the reasons she only hoped she would see the outcome of the

battle. Deep in her, in a place touched only by monsters, she hoped for their victory, even though many of

the species she called her own would perish as a result.

In the foothills there hung a great silence. Aaron had been set down amongst the rocks, and they

were appearing. He was not happier at his mother's nipple than in that ring of demons.

At the toe of the foothills Packard brought the convoy to a halt. Had he known who Napoleon

Bonaparte was, no doubt he would have felt like that conqueror. Had he known that conqueror's life-story,

he might have sensed that this was his Waterloo: but Josh Packard lived and died bereft of heroes.

He summoned his men from their cars and went amongst them, his mutilated hand tucked in his shirt

for support. It was not the most encouraging parade in military history. There were more than a few white

and sickly-pale faces amongst his soldiers, more than a few eyes that avoided his stare as he gave his

orders.

"Men," he bawled.

(It occurred to both Kooker and Davidson that as sneak-attacks went this would not be amongst the

quietest.)

"Men — we've arrived, We're organized, and we've got God on our side. We've got the best of the

Eugene's boy Aaron not four hours past. Took him fairly off his mother's tit, while she was rocking him to sleep. They ain't nothing but savages, whatever they may look like. They don't give a mind to a

mother, or a child, or nothing. So when you get up close to one you just think how you'd have felt if

you'd been taken from your mother's tit—" —"

He liked the phrase 'mother's tit'. It said so much, so simply. Momma's tit had a good deal more

power to move these men than her apple pie.

"You've nothing to fear but seeming less than men, men."

Good line to finish on.

"Get on with it."

He got back into the car. Someone down the line began to applaud, and the clapping was taken up by

the rest of them. Packard's wide red face was cleft with a hard, yellow smile.

"Wagons roll!" he grinned, and the convoy moved off into the hills.

Aaron felt the air change. It wasn't that he was cold: the breaths that warmed him remained as

embracing as ever. But there was nevertheless an alteration in the atmosphere: some kind of intrusion.

Was it not inevitable that the heroes of Welcome would come after the boy? Didn't the men believe, in their pitiable way, that their species was born out of earth's necessity to know itself, nurtured from mammal to mammal until it blossomed as humanity? Natural then to treat the fathers as the enemy, to root them out and try to destroy them. A tragedy really: when the only thought the fathers had was of unity through marriage, that their children should blunder in and spoil the celebration. Still, men would be men. Maybe Aaron would be different, though perhaps he too would go back in time into the human world and forget what he was learning here. The creatures who were his fathers were also men's fathers: and the marriage of semen in Lucy's body was the same mix that made the first males. Women had always existed: they had lived, a species to themselves, with the demons. But they had wanted playmates: and together they had made men. What an error, what a cataclysmic miscalculation. Within mere eons, the worst rooted out the best; the

with guns.

Aaron scented Packard and his stepfather, and smelling them, knew them to be alien. After tonight

they would be known dispassionately, like animals of a different species. It was the gorgeous array of

demons around him he felt closest to, and he knew he would protect them, if necessary, with his life.

Packard's car led the attack. The wave of vehicles appeared out of the darkness, their sirens blaring,

their headlights on, and drove straight towards the knot of celebrants. From one or two of the cars terrified

cops let out spontaneous howls of terror when the full spectacle came into view, but by that time the

attack force was committed. Shots were fired. Aaron felt his fathers close around him protectively, their

flesh now darkening with anger and fear.

Packard knew instinctively that these things were capable of fear, he could smell it off them. It was

part of his job to recognize fear, to play on it, to use it against the miscreant. He screeched his orders into

caught sight of one of the

creatures wrapping its purple -black arm around Packard's car and lifting it into the air. One of the back doors flung open and a figure he recognized as Eleanor Kooker fell the few feet to the ground followed

closely by Eugene. Leaderless, the cars were in a frenzy of collisions — the whole scene partially

eclipsed by smoke and dust. There was the sound of breaking wind-screens as cops took the quick way out

of their cars; the shrieks of crumpling hoods and sheered off doors. The dying howl of a crushed siren; the dying plea of a crushed cop.

Packard's voice was clear enough, however, howling orders from his car even as it was lifted higher

into the air, its engine revving, its wheels spinning foolishly in space. The demon was shaking the car as a

child might a toy until the driver's door opened and Jebediah fell to the ground at the creature's skirt of

skin. Davidson saw the skirt envelop the broken-backed deputy and appear to suck him into its folds. He

could see too how Eleanor was standing up to the towering demon as it devoured her son.

Davidson offered up a prayer of

thanks to any passing deity. The devils were disappearing. There's be no pitched battle: no hand-to-tentacle

fight. The boy would be simply eaten alive, or whatever they planned for the poor little bastard.

Indeed, couldn't he see Aaron from where he stood? Wasn't that his frail form the retreating demons were

holding so high, like a trophy?

With Eleanor's curses and accusations in their ears the sheltering cops began to emerge from their

hiding-places to surround the remaining demon. There was, after all, only one left to face, and it had their

Napoleon in its slimy grip. They let off volley upon volley into its creases and tucks, and against the

impartial geometry of its head, but the devil seemed unconcerned. Only when it had shaken Packard's car

until the Sheriff rattled like a dead frog in a tin can did it lose interest and drop the vehicle. A smell of

gasoline filled the air, and turned Davidson's stomach.

Then a cry: "Heads down!"

burning; one of its limbs had

been blown off by the blast, another partially destroyed; thick, colourless blood splashed from the wounds

and the stump. There was a smell in the air like burnt candy: the creature was clearly in an agony of

cremation. Its body reeled and shuddered as the flames licked up to ignite its empty face, and it stumbled

away from its tormentors, not sounding its pain. Davidson got a kick out of seeing it burn: like the simple

pleasure he had from putting the heel of his boot in the centre of a jellyfish. Favourite summer-time

occupation of his childhood. In Maine: hot afternoons: spiking men-o'-war.

Packard was being dragged out of the wreckage of his car. My God, that man was made of steel: he

was standing upright and calling his men to advance on the enemy. Even in his finest hour, a flake of fire

dropped from the flowering demon, and touched the lake of gasoline Packard was standing in. A moment

later he, the car, and two of his saviours were enveloped in a billowing cloud of white fire. They stood no

The accusation was greeted by feral howls from the cops. "Waste them!" Eugene was screaming.

"Waste them!"

Lucy could hear the noise of the battle, but she made no attempt to go in the direction of the foothills..Something about the way the moon was suspended in the sky, and the smell on the breeze, had taken all

desire to move out of her. Exhausted, and enchanted, she stood in the open desert, and watched the sky.

When, after an age, she brought her gaze back down to fix on the horizon, she saw two things that

were of mild interest. Out of the hills, a dirty smudge of smoke, and the edge of her vision in the gentle

night light, a line of creatures, hurrying away from the hills. She suddenly began to run.

It occurred to her, as she ran, that her gait was sprightly as a young girl's, and that she had a young

girl's motive: that is, she was in pursuit of her lover.

In an empty stretch of desert, the convocation of demons simply disappeared from sight. From where

Lucy was standing, panting in the middle of nowhere, they seemed to have been swallowed up by the

questions later; his orders to the straggling army that followed him were two parts incoherent obscenities

to one part sense. His eyes gleamed with hysteria: his mouth dribbled a little. He was a wild man, and he

terrified Davidson. But it was too late now to turn back: he was in cahoots with the man for this last,

apocalyptic pursuit.

“See, them black-eyed sons of bitches don’t have no fucking heads,” Eugene was screaming over the

tortured roar of the engine. “Why you taking this track so slow, boy?”

He jabbed the rifle in Davidson’s crotch.

“Drive, or I’ll blow your brains out.”

“I don’t know which way they’ve gone,” Davidson yelled back at Eugene.

“What you mean? Show me!”

“I can’t show you if they’ve disappeared.”

Eugene just about appreciated the sense of the response. “Slow down, boy.” He waved out of the car

window to slow the rest of the army.

“Stop the car — stop the car!”

Packard brought the car to a halt.

gleam of the moonlight. Eugene

got out of the car, rifle still at the ready, and stared at the sand, willing it to explain.

“Fuckers,” he said, very softly.

Lucy had stopped running. Now she was walking towards the line of cars. It was all over by now.

They had all been tricked: the disappearing act was a trump card no-one could have anticipated.

Then, she heard Aaron.

She couldn't see him, but his voice was as clear as a bell; and like a bell, it summoned. Like a bell, it

rang out: this is a time of festival: celebrate with us.

Eugene heard it too; he smiled. They were near after all.

“Hey!” the boy's voice said. “Where is he? You see him, Davidson?” Davidson shook his head. Then

—“Wait! Wait! I see a light — look, straight ahead awhile.”

“I see it.”

With exaggerated caution, Eugene motioned Davidson back into the driver's seat.

“Drive, boy. But slowly. And no lights.”

There was no need to wait any longer, they were following for certain.
His naked feet made scarcely a
mark in the soft-sanded incline that led away from the idiocies of the
world. In the shadows of the earth at
the end of that slope, fluttering and smiling at him, he could see his family.

“He’s going in,” said Davidson.

“Then follow the little bastard,” said Eugene. “Maybe the kid doesn’t
know what he’s doing. And get
some light on him.”

The headlights illuminated Aaron. His clothes were in tatters, and his
body was slumped with
exhaustion as he walked.

A few yards off to the right of the slope Lucy watched as the lead car
drove over the lip of the earth

and followed the boy down, into—“No,” she said to herself, “don’t.”

Davidson was suddenly scared. He began to slow the car.

“Get on with it, boy.” Eugene jabbed the rifle into his crotch again.
“We’ve got them cornered. We’ve
got a whole nest of them here. The boy’s leading us right to them.”

clippers.

Eugene brought the convoy to a halt, got out of the car and began to walk towards Aaron.

“Thank you boy,” he said. “Come here — we’ll look after you now. We’ve got them. You’re safe.”

Aaron stared at his father, uncomprehending.

The army was disgorging from the cars behind Eugene, readying their weapons. A bazooka was being

hurriedly assembled; a cocking of rifles, a weighing-up of grenades.

“Come to Papa, boy,” Eugene coaxed.

Aaron didn’t move, so Eugene followed him a few yards deeper into the ground. Davidson was out of

the car now, shaking from head to foot.

“Maybe you should put down the rifle. Maybe he’s scared,” he suggested.

Eugene grunted, and let the muzzle of the rifle drop a few inches.

“You’re safe,” said Davidson. “It’s all right.”

“Walk towards us, boy. Slowly.”

Aaron’s face began to flush. Even in the deceptive light of the head-lamps it was clearly changing

vidson felt it first: a slight shift in

the texture of the sand, as though an order had passed through it, subtle but all-pervasive.

Eugene could only gape as Aaron's transformation continued, his entire body now overtaken by the

tremors of change. His belly had become distended and a harvest of cones budded from it, which even

now flowered into dozens of coiled legs; the change was marvellous in its complexity, as out of the cradle

of the boy's substance came new glories.

Without warning Eugene raised his rifle and fired at his son.

The bullet struck the boy-demon in the middle of his face. Aaron fell back, his transformation still

taking its course even as his blood, a stream part scarlet, part silver, ran from his wound into the

liquefying earth.

The geometries in the darkness moved out of hiding to help the child.

The intricacy of their forms was

simplified in the glare of the headlamps but they seemed, even as they appeared, to be changing again: bodies becoming thin in their grief, a whine of mourning like a solid wall of sound from their hearts.

were similarly trapped, as the

desert liquefied beneath them, and glutinous mud began to creep up the slope.

The demons had gone: retreated into the dark, their lament sunk away.

Eugene, flat on his back in the sinking sand, fired off two useless, vehement shots into the darkness

beyond Aaron's corpse. He was kicking like a hog with its throat cut, and with every kick his body sunk

deeper. As his face disappeared beneath the mud, he just glimpsed Lucy, standing at the edge of the slope,

staring down towards Aaron's body. Then the mire covered his face, and blotted him out.

The desert was upon them with lightning speed.

One or two of the cars were already entirely submerged, and the tide of sand climbing the slope was

relentlessly catching up with the escapees. Feeble cries for assistance ended with choking silences as

mouths were filled with desert; somebody was shooting at the ground in an hysterical attempt to dam the

flow, but it reached up swiftly to snatch every last one of them. Even Eleanor Kooker wasn't to be let

curiously inviting. The intimacy of its pressure had given him an erection. A few yards behind him a cop

was screaming blue murder as the desert ate him up. Further still from him he could see a face peering out

from the seething ground like a living mask thrown on the earth. There was an arm close by, still waving,

as it sank; a pair of fat buttocks was poking up from the silt sea like two watermelons, a policeman's

farewell.

Lucy took one step backwards as the mud slightly overran the lip of the gully, but it didn't reach her

feet. Nor, curiously, did it dissipate itself, as a water-wave might have done.

Like concrete, it hardened, fixing its living trophies like flies in amber. From the lips of every face that

still took air came a fresh cry of terror, as they felt the desert floor stiffen around their struggling limbs.

Davidson saw Eleanor Kooker, buried to breast-level. Tears were pouring down her cheeks; she was

sobbing like a little girl. He scarcely thought of himself. Of the East, of Barbara, of the children, he

held from his hips down. And most

horribly, one pathetic victim was seen only by his nose and mouth. His head was tipped back into the

ground, blinded by rock. Still he breathed, still he screamed.

Eleanor Kooker was scrabbling at the ground with torn nails, but this was not loose sand. It was

immovable.

“Get help,” she demanded of Lucy, hands bleeding.

The two women stared at each other.

“Jesus God!” screamed the Mouth.

The Head was silent: by his glazed look it was apparent that he’d lost his mind.

“Please help us . . .” pleaded Davidson’s Torso. “Fetch help.”

Lucy nodded.

“Go!” demanded Eleanor Kooker. “Go!”

Numbly, Lucy obeyed. Already there was a glimmer of dawn in the east. The air would soon be

blistering. In Welcome, three hours walk away, she would find only old men, hysterical women and children. She would have to summon help from perhaps fifty miles distance. Even assuming she found

She glanced round once more at their trivial forms, dwarfed by the bloody sweep of the dawn sky.

Little dots and commas of human pain on a blank sheet of sand; she didn't care to think of the pen that wrote them there. That was for tomorrow.

After a while, she began to run..**NEW MURDER IN THE RUE MORGUE**
WINTER, LEWIS DECIDED, was no season for old men. The snow that lay five inches thick on the

streets of Paris froze him to the marrow. What had been a joy to him as a child was now a curse. He hated

it with all his heart; hated the snowballing children (squeals, howls, tears); hated, too, the young lovers,

eager to be caught in a flurry together (squeals, kisses, tears). It was uncomfortable and tiresome, and he

wished he was in Fort Lauderdale, where the sun would be shining.

But Catherine's telegram, though not explicit, had been urgent, and the ties of friendship between

them had been unbroken for the best part of fifty years. He was here for her, and for her brother Phillipe.

However thin his blood felt in this ice land, it was foolish to complain. He'd come at a summons from the

in Europe made governments less eager with their bulldozers. But still,
year after year, more fine houses
found themselves rubble. Whole streets sometimes, gone to ground.
Even the Rue Morgue.

There was, of course, some doubt as to whether that infamous street
had ever existed in the first place,
but as his years advanced Lewis had seen less and less purpose in dis-
tinguishing between fact and fiction.

That great divide was for young men, who still had to deal with life. For
the old (Lewis was 73), the
distinction was academic. What did it matter what was true and what
was false, what real and what
invented? In his head all of it, the half-lies and the truths, were one con-
tinuum of personal history.

Maybe the Rue Morgue had existed, as it had been described in Edgar
Allan Poe's immortal story;
maybe it was pure invention. Whichever, the notorious street was no
longer to be found on a map of Paris.

Perhaps Lewis was a little disappointed not to have found the Rue
Morgue. After all, it was part of his

Virginia. It was a bitter winter, perhaps not unlike the one Lewis was presently suffering, and one night the grandfather had taken refuge in a bar in Richmond. There, with a blizzard raging outside, he had met a small, dark, melancholy young man called Eddie. He was something of a local celebrity apparently, having written a tale that had won a competition in the Baltimore Saturday Visitor. The tale was MS found in a bottle and the haunted young man was Edgar Allan Poe. The two had spent the evening together, drinking, and (this is how the story went, anyway) Poe had gently pumped Lewis's grandfather for stories of the bizarre, of the occult and of the morbid. The worldly-wise traveler was glad to oblige, pouring out believe-it-or-not fragments that the writer later turned into The Mystery of Marie Roget and The Murders in the Rue Morgue. In both those stories, peering out from between the atrocities, was the peculiar genius of C. Auguste Dupin.

C. Auguste Dupin. Poe's vision of the perfect detective: calm, rational and brilliantly perceptive. The

that occurred in the story had actually taken place. Two women had indeed been brutally killed in the Rue

Morgue. They were, as Poe had written, Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter Mademoiselle Camille

L'Espanaye. Both women of good reputation, who lived quiet and unsensational lives. So much more

horrible then to find those lives so brutally cut short. The daughter's body had been thrust up the

chimney; the body of the mother was discovered in the yard at the back of the house, her throat cut with

such savagery that her head was all but sawn off. No apparent motive could be found for the murders, and

the mystery further deepened when all the occupants of the house claimed to have heard the voice of the murderer speaking in a different language. The Frenchman was certain the voice had spoken Spanish, the

Englishman had heard German, the Dutchman thought it was French. Dupin, in his investigations, noted

that none of the witnesses actually spoke the language they claimed to have heard from the lips of the

unseen murderer. He concluded that the language was no language at all, but the wordless voice of a wild

That was the bones of the story.

Whether true or not the tale held a great romantic appeal for Lewis. He liked to think of his great uncle

logically pacing his way through the mystery, undistressed by the hysteria and horror around him. He

thought of that calm as essentially European; belonging to a lost age in which the light of reason was still

valued, and the worst horror that could be conceived of was a beast with a cut-throat razor.

Now, as the twentieth century ground through its last quarter, there were far greater atrocities to be

accounted for, all committed by human beings. The humble orang-outang had been investigated by

anthropologists and found to be a solitary herbivore; quiet and philosophical. The true monsters were far

less apparent, and far more powerful. Their weapons made razors look pitiful; their crimes were vast. In

some ways Lewis was almost glad to be old and close to leaving the century to its own devices. Yes, the

snow froze his marrow. Yes, to see a young girl with a face of a goddess uselessly stirred his desires. Yes,

senses of the word, living endless lives of perfect leisure.

It wasn't so of course. The lives had not been perfect, or endless. But for a time — a summer, a month,
a day — it had seemed nothing in the world would change.

In half a decade Paris would burn, and its playful guilt, which was true innocence, would be soiled

permanently. They had spent many days (and nights) in the apartment Lewis now occupied, wonderful

times; when he thought of them his stomach seemed to ache with the loss.

His thoughts turned to more recent events. To his New York exhibition, in which his series of

paintings chronicling the damnation of Europe had been a brilliant critical success. At the age of seventy-three

Lewis Fox was a feted man. Articles were being written in every art periodical. Admirers and

buyers had sprung up like mushrooms overnight, eager to purchase his work, to talk with him, to touch

his hand. All too late, of course. The agonies of creation were long over, and he'd put down his brushes

cars across the Pont Louis-Phillipe,

as tired Parisians began the trek home through the snow. Their horns blared; their engines

coughed and growled; their yellow fog lamps made a ribbon of light across the bridge.

Still Catherine didn't come.

The snow, which had held off for most of the day, was beginning to fall again, whispering against the

window. The traffic flowed across the Seine, the Seine flowed under the traffic. Night fell. At last, he

heard footsteps in the hail; exchanged whispers with the housekeeper.

It was Catherine. At last, it was Catherine.

He stood up and stared at the door, imagining it opening before it opened, imagining her in the

doorway.

"Lewis, my darling —". She smiled at him; a pale smile on a paler face. She looked older than he'd expected. How long was it

since he'd seen her? Four years or five? Her fragrance was the same as she always wore: and it reassured

Lewis with its permanence. He kissed her cold cheeks lightly.

"You look well," he lied.

Seine. Small grey ice-floes

floated under the bridge, rocking and revolving in the current. The water
looked deadly, as though its

bitterness could crush the breath out of you.

“What trouble is Phillipe in?”

“He’s accused of—”

A tiny hesitation. A flicker of an eyelid.

“— murder.”

Lewis wanted to laugh; the very thought was preposterous. Phillipe was
sixty-nine years old, and as
mild-mannered as a lamb.

“It’s true, Lewis. I couldn’t tell you by telegram, you understand. I had to
say it myself. Murder. He’s

accused of murder.”

“Who?”

“A girl, of course. One of his fancy women.”

“He still gets around, does he?”

“We used to joke he’d die on a woman, remember?”

Lewis half-nodded.

“She was nineteen. Natalie Perec. Quite an educated girl, apparently.
And lovely. Long red hair. You

“They locked him up. They say he’s dangerous. They say he could kill again.”

Lewis shook his head. There was a pain at his temples, which might go if he could only close his eyes.

“He needs to see you. Very badly.”

But maybe sleep was just an escape. Here was something even he couldn’t be a spectator to.

Phillipe Laborteaux stared at Lewis across the bare, scored table, his face weary and lost. They had

greeted each other only with handshakes; all other physical contact was strictly forbidden.

“I am in despair,” he said. “She’s dead. My Natalie is dead.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I have a little apartment in Montmartre. In the Rue des Martyrs. Just a room really, to entertain

friends. Catherine always keeps number 11 so neat, you know, a man can’t spread himself out. Natalie

used to spend a lot of time with me there: everyone in the house knew her. She was so good natured, so

beautiful. She was studying to go into Medical School. Bright. And she loved me.”

His eyes filled with tears of frustration. This was so difficult for him his mouth refused to make the necessary sounds.

“Don’t —” Lewis began.

“I want to tell you, Lewis. I want you to know, I want you to see her as I saw her — so you know what

there is. . . there is . . . what there is in the world.”

The tears ran down his face in two graceful rivulets. He gripped Lewis’ hand in his, so tightly it ached.

“She was covered in blood. In wounds. Skin torn off hair torn out. Her tongue was on the pillow,

Lewis.

Imagine that. She’d bitten it off in her terror. It was just lying on the pillow. And her eyes, all

swimming in blood, like she’d wept blood. She was the dearest thing in all creation, Lewis. She was

beautiful.”

“No more.”

“I want to die, Lewis.”

“No.”

“I don’t want to live now. There’s no point.”

“They won’t find you guilty.”

pers. An old man going with

young girls, you see, that doesn't make me very wholesome. They probably think I lost my temper

because I couldn't perform with her. That's what they think, I'm certain."

He lost his way, halted, began

again. "You must look after Catherine. She's got money, but no friends.

She's too cool, you see. Too hurt

inside; and that makes people wary of her. You have to stay with her."

"I shall."

"I know. I know. That's why I feel happy, really, to just..."

"No, Phillipe."

"Just die. There's nothing left for us, Lewis. The world's too hard."

Lewis thought of the snow, and the ice-floes, and saw the sense in dying.

The officer in charge of the investigation was less than helpful, though Lewis introduced himself as a

relative of the esteemed Detective Dupin. Lewis's contempt for the shoddily-dressed weasel, sitting in his

cluttered hole of an office, made the interview crackle with suppressed anger.

punished to the full extent of the law. This is my promise.”

“What evidence do you have against him?”

“Monsieur Fox; I am not beholden to you. What evidence we have is our business. Suffice it to say

that no other person was seen in the house during the time that the accused claims he was at some

fictional patisserie; and as access to the room in which the deceased was found is only possible by the stairs —”

“What about a window?”

“A plain wall: three flights up. Maybe an acrobat: an acrobat might do it.”

“And the state of the body?”

The Inspector made a face. Disgust.

“Horrible. Skin and muscle stripped from the bone. All the spine exposed. Blood; much blood.”

“Phillipe is seventy.”. “So?”

“An old man would not be capable —”

“In other respects,” the Inspector interrupted, “he seems to have been quite capable, oui? The lover,

yes? The passionate lover: he was capable of that.”

“And what motive would you claim he had?”

He saw the surprise on Lewis's face.

"Oh, I am not so uncivilized as not to know your reputation, Monsieur Fox. But I ask you, make your

fictions as best you can; that is your genius, oui? Mine; to investigate the truth."

Lewis couldn't bear the weasel's cant any longer.

"Truth?" he snapped back at the Inspector. "You wouldn't know the truth if you tripped over it."

The weasel looked as though he'd been slapped with a wet fish.

It was precious little satisfaction; but it made Lewis feel better for at least five minutes.

The house on the Rue des Martyrs was not in good condition, and Lewis could smell the damp as he

climbed to the little room on the third floor. Doors opened as he passed, and inquiring whispers ushered

him up the stairs, but nobody tried to stop him. The room where the atrocity had happened was locked.

Frustrated, but not knowing how or why it would help Phillipe's case to see the interior of the room, he

made his way back down the stairs and into the bitter air.

“I went to Phillippe’s apartment.”

“So did I. It was locked.”

“I have the key: Phillippe’s spare key. I just wanted to pick up a few clothes for him.”

Lewis nodded.

“And?”

“Somebody else was there.”

“Police?”

“No.”

“Who?”

“I couldn’t see. I don’t know exactly. He was dressed in a big coat, scarf over his face. Hat. Gloves.”

She paused. Then, “he had a razor, Lewis.”

“A razor?”

“An open razor, like a barber.”

Something jangled in the back of Lewis Fox’s mind.

An open razor; a man dressed so well he couldn’t be recognized.

“I was terrified.”

“Did he hurt you?” She shook her head. “I screamed and he ran away.”

“Didn’t say anything to you?”

“No.”

“Whoever it was, you scared them off. You just mustn’t go back there. If we have to fetch clothes for

Phillipe, I’ll gladly go.”

“Thank you. I feel a fool: he may have just stumbled in. Come to look at the murder-chamber. People

do that, don’t they? Out of some morbid fascination. . .”

“Tomorrow I’ll speak to the Weasel.”

“Weasel?”

“Inspector Marais. Have him search the place.”

“Did you see Phillipe?”

“Yes.”

“Is he well?”

Lewis said nothing for a long moment.

“He wants to die, Catherine. He’s given up fighting already, before he goes to trial.”

“But he didn’t do anything.”

“We can’t prove that.”

“You’re always boasting about your ancestors. Your blessed Dupin. You prove it. . .”

“Where do I start?”

coffee. Solal was as

uninformative as he was drunk; but unlikely as it seemed Catherine had described the runt across the table

as Phillipe's closest friend.

"Do you think Phillipe murdered her?"

Solal pursed his lips.

"Who knows?"

"What's your instinct?"

"Ah; he was my friend. If I knew who had killed her I would say so."

It seemed to be the truth. Maybe the little man was simply drowning his sorrows in cognac.

"He was a gentlemen," Solal said, his eyes drifting towards the street. Through the steamed glass of

the Brasserie window brave Parisians were struggling through the fury of another blizzard, vainly

attempting to keep their dignity and their posture in the teeth of a gale.

"A gentleman," he said again.

"And the girl?"

"She was beautiful, and he was in love with her. She had other admirers, of course. A woman like her

—"

in that room on the Rue des Martyrs. Not an approximation, not a fictionalized account, but the truth, the absolute, unquestionable truth.

“Do you remember if there were any particular men who fancied her?” he asked.

Solal grinned. He only had two teeth in his lower jaw.

“Oh yes. There was one.”. “Who?”

“I never knew his name. A big man: I saw him outside the house three or four times. Though to smell him you’d have thought —”

He made an unmistakable face that implied he thought the man was homosexual. The arched eyebrows and the pursed lips made him look doubly ridiculous behind the thick spectacles.

“He smelt?”

“Oh yes.”

“Of what?”

“Perfume, Lewis. Perfume.”

Somewhere in Paris there was a man who had known the girl Phillipe loved. Jealous rage had

cluster of newspaper clippings

pinned behind the bar.

Solal followed his gaze.

“Phillipe: he liked the pictures,” he said.

Lewis stood up.

“He came here, sometimes, to see them.”

The cuttings were old, stained and fading. Some were presumably of purely local interest. Accounts of

a fireball seen in a nearby street. Another about a boy of two burned to death in his cot. One concerned an

escaped puma; one, an unpublished manuscript by Rimbaud; a third (accompanied by a photograph)

detailed casualties in a plane crash at Orleans airport. But there were other cuttings too; some far older

than others. Atrocities, bizarre murders, ritual rapes, an advertisement for ‘Fantomas’, another for

Cocteau’s ‘La Belle et La Bete’. And almost buried under this embarrassment of bizarreries, was a sepia

photograph so absurd it could have come from the hand of Max Ernst. A half-ring of well-dressed

though shattered by a fearsome wound, was thinly bearded like that of a patrician, and its eyes, rolled

back in its head, seemed full of concern for this merciless world. They reminded Lewis, those rolling

eyes, of the Weasel in his hole, tapping his chest.

“Le coeur humain.”

Pitiful.

“What is that?” he asked the acne-ridden barman, pointing at the picture of the dead gorilla.

A shrug was the reply: indifferent to the fate of men and apes.

“Who knows?” said Solal at his back. “Who knows?”

It was not the ape of Poe’s story, that was certain. That tale had been told in 1835, and the photograph

was far more recent. Besides, the ape in the picture was a gorilla: clearly a gorilla.

Had history repeated itself? Had another ape, a different species but an ape nevertheless, been loosed

on the streets of Paris at the turn of the century?

And if so, if the story of the ape could repeat itself once why not twice?

As Lewis walked through the freezing night back to the apartment at the Quai de Bourbon, the

Sebastopol, west on to Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, then north again towards the Place Pigalle. It was a long, exhausting trudge, but he felt in need of the cold air, to keep his head clear of emotionalism. It took him an hour and a half to reach the Rue des Martyrs.

It was Saturday night, and there was still a lot of noise in a number of the rooms. Lewis made his way up the two flights as quietly as he could, his presence masked by the din. The key turned easily, and the door swung open.

Street lights illuminated the room. The bed, which dominated the space, was bare. Presumably sheets and blankets had been taken away for forensic tests. The eruption of blood onto the mattress was a mulberry colour in the gloom. Otherwise, there was no sign of the violence the room had witnessed.

Lewis reached for the light switch, and snapped it on. Nothing happened. He stepped deeply into the room and stared up at the light fixture. The bulb was shattered.

He half thought of retreating, of leaving the room to darkness, and returning in the morning when

The room was large, and had been left in chaos by the police. Lewis stumbled and cursed as he crossed to the chest of drawers, tripping over a fallen lamp, and a shattered vase. Downstairs the howls and shrieks of a well-advanced party drowned any noise he made. Was it an orgy or a fight? The noise could have been either.

He struggled with the top drawer of the teak chest, and eventually wrenched it open, ferreting in the depths for the bare essentials of Phillipe's comfort: a clean undershirt, a pair of socks, initialed handkerchiefs, beautifully pressed.

He sneezed. The chilly weather had thickened the catarrh on his chest and the mucus in his sinuses. A handkerchief was to hand, and he blew his nose, clearing his blocked nostrils. For the first time the smell of the room came to him.

One odour predominated, above the damp, and the stale vegetables. Perfume, the lingering scent of perfume.

the watery light from the street;

a broad, flat-featured, flayed face. His eyes were deep-set, but without malice; and he was smiling,

smiling generously, at Lewis.

“Who are you?” Lewis asked again.

The man shook his head; shook his body, in fact, his gloved hands gesturing around his mouth. Was

he dumb? The shaking of the head was more violent now, as though he was about to have a fit.

“Are you all right?”

Suddenly, the shaking stopped, and to his surprise Lewis saw tears, large, syrupy tears well up in the

stranger’s eyes and roll down his rough cheeks and into the bush of his beard.

As if ashamed of his display of feelings, the man turned away from the light, making a thick noise of

sobbing in his throat, and exited. Lewis followed, more curious about this stranger than nervous of his

intentions.

“Wait!”

mincing as Catherine had said.

Almost a waddle, ridiculous in a man so big.

The smell of his perfume was already snatched away by the north-east wind. Breathless, Lewis

climbed the stairs again, past the din of the party, to claim a set of clothes for Phillipe.

The next day Paris woke to a blizzard of unprecedented ferocity. The calls to Mass went unrequited,

the hot Sunday croissants went un-bought, the newspapers lay unread on the vendors' stalls. Few people

had either the nerve or the motive to step outside into the howling gale. They sat by their fires, hugging

their knees, and dreamt of spring.

Catherine wanted to go to the prison to visit Phillipe, but Lewis insisted that he go alone. It was not

simply the cold weather that made him cautious on her behalf; he had difficult words to say to Phillipe,

delicate questions to ask him. After the previous night's encounter in his room, he had no doubt that

Phillipe had a rival, probably a murderous rival. The only way to save Phillipe's life, it seemed, was to

“Oh.”

“There was somebody in the room already.” Phillipe’s jaw muscle began to churn, as he ground his

teeth together. He was avoiding Lewis’s eyes.

“A big man, with a beard. Do you know him, or of him?”

“No.”

“Phillipe - ”

“No!”

“The same man attacked Catherine,” Lewis said.

“What?” Phillipe had begun to tremble. “With a razor.”

“Attacked her?” Phillipe said. “Are you sure?”

“Or was going to.”

“No! He would never have touched her. Never!”

“Who is it Phillipe? Do you know?”

“Tell her not to go there again; please, Lewis —” His eyes implored.

“Please, for God’s sake tell her

never to go there again. Will you do that? Or you. Not you either.”

“Who is it?”

“Tell her.”

“I will. But you must tell me who this man is, Phillipe.” He shook his head, grinding his teeth together

nights of tears. But now it seemed

there were no more tears left in him; just an arid place where there had been an honest fear of death, a

love of love, and an appetite for life. What met Lewis's eyes was a universal indifference: to continuation,

to self-preservation, to feeling.

"She was a whore," he suddenly exclaimed. His hands were fists. Lewis had never seen Phillipe make

a fist in his life. Now his nails bit into the soft flesh of his palm until blood began to flow.

"Whore," he said again, his voice too loud in the little cell.

"Keep your row down," snapped the guard.. "A whore!" This time Phillipe hissed the accusation through teeth exposed like those of an angry baboon.

Lewis could make no sense of the transformation.

"You began all this -" Phillipe said, looking straight at Lewis, meeting his eyes fully for the first time.

It was a bitter accusation, though Lewis didn't understand its significance.

"Me?"

"With your stories. With your damn Dupin."

His voice trailed away, as though the next words were unsayable.

“The ape.”

Those were the words: the apparently unspeakable was spoken as though each syllable had been cut from his throat.

“The ape.”

“What about the ape?”

“There are beasts, Lewis. Some of them are pitiful; circus animals. They have no brains; they are born victims. Then there are others.”

“What others?”

“Natalie was a whore!” he screamed again, his eyes big as saucers. He took hold of Lewis’ lapels, and

began to shake him. Everybody else in the little room turned to look at the two old men as they wrestled

over the table. Convicts and their sweethearts grinned as Phillipe was dragged off his friend, his words

descending into incoherence and obscenity as he thrashed in the warder’s grip.

“Whore! Whore! Whore!” was all he could say as they hauled him back to his cell.

“He was here,” she said.

He didn’t need to ask who. The stranger, the tearful, razor-wielding stranger.

“What did he want?”

“He kept saying ‘Phillipe’ to me. Almost saying it; grunting it more than saying it: and when I didn’t

answer he just destroyed the furniture, the vases. He wasn’t even looking for anything: he just wanted to make a mess.”

It made her furious: the uselessness of the attack.

The apartment was in ruins. Lewis wandered through the fragments of porcelain and shredded fabric,

shaking his head. In his mind a confusion of tearful faces: Catherine, Phillipe, the stranger. Everyone in

his narrow world, it seemed, was hurt and broken. Everyone was suffering; and yet the source, the heart

of the suffering, was nowhere to be found.

Only Phillipe had pointed an accusing finger: at Lewis himself.

“You began all this.” Weren’t those his words? “you began all this.”

But how?

and the look on his face was of utter, utter despair, so pitiful

as to be almost tragic. Or rather, a performance of tragedy: an actor's pain. Even as Lewis stared down at

him the stranger raised his arms to the window in a gesture that seemed to beg either forgiveness or understanding, or both.

Lewis backed away from the appeal. It was too much; all too much. The next moment the stranger was

walking across the courtyard away from the apartment. The mincing walk had deteriorated into a rolling

lope. Lewis uttered a long, low moan of recognition as the ill-dressed bulk disappeared from view.

"Lewis?"

It wasn't a man's walk, that roll, that swagger. It was the gait of an upright beast who'd been taught to

walk, and now, without its master, was losing the trick of it.

It was an ape.

Oh God, oh God, it was an ape.

"I have to see Phillipe Laborteaux."

"I'm sorry, Monsieur; but prison visitors —"

"This is a matter of life and death, officer."

Lewis hated talking about Catherine in such a way, even for the purpose of this deception, but it was necessary; he had to see Phillipe. If his theory was correct, history might repeat itself before the night was out.

Phillipe had been woken from a sedated sleep. His eyes were circled with darkness.

“What do you want?”

Lewis didn't even attempt to proceed any further with his lie; Phillipe was drugged as it was, and probably confused. Best to confront him with the truth, and see what came of it.

“You kept an ape, didn't you?”

A look of terror crossed Phillipe's face, slowed by the drugs in his blood, but plain enough.

“Didn't you?”

“Lewis. . .” Phillipe looked so very old.

“Answer me, Phillipe, I beg you: before it's too late. Did you keep an ape?”

“It was an experiment, that's all it was. An experiment.”

“Why?”

“Seduced it?”

“Whore,” Phillipe said, with infinite regret.

“Where is this ape of yours?”

“You’ll kill it.”

“It broke into the apartment, while Catherine was there. Destroyed everything, Phillipe. It’s dangerous

now that it has no master. Don’t you understand?”

“Catherine?”. “No, She’s all right.”

“It’s trained: it wouldn’t harm her. It’s watched her, in hiding. Come and gone. Quiet as a mouse.”

“And the girl?”

“It was jealous.”

“So it murdered her?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it.”

“Why haven’t you told them; had the thing destroyed?”

“I don’t know if it’s true. It’s probably all a fiction, one of your damn fictions, just another story.”

A sour, wily smile crossed his exhausted face.

“You must know what I mean, Lewis. It could be a story, couldn’t it? Like your tales of Dupin. Except

The spittle hit his lip, like a
kiss.

“You don’t know what you did. You’ll never know.”

Lewis wiped his lip as the warders escorted the prisoner out of the room
and back to his happy

drugged oblivion. All he could think of now, left alone in the cold inter-
view room, was that Phillipe had it

easy. He’d taken refuge in pretended guilt, and locked himself away
where memory, and revenge, and the

truth, the wild, marauding truth, could never touch him again. He hated
Phillipe at that moment, with all

his heart. Hated him for the dilettante and the coward he’d always
known him to be. It wasn’t a more

gentle world Phillipe had created around him; it was a hiding place, as
much a lie as that summer of 1937

had been. No life could be lived the way he’d lived it without a reckoning
coming sooner or later; and

here it was.

That night, in the safety of his cell, Phillipe woke. It was warm, but he
was cold. In the utter dark he

the morning by her flat mate, her

body in a state so horrible as to “defy description”.

Despite the alleged impossibility of the task, the media set about describing the indescribable with a

morbid will. Every last scratch, tear and gouging on Monique’s partially nude body — tattooed, drooled

Le Monde, with a map of France — was chronicled in detail. As indeed was the appearance of her well-dressed,

over-perfumed murderer, who had apparently watched her at her toilet through a small back

window, then broken in and attacked Mademoiselle Zevaco in her bathroom. The murderer had then fled

down the stairs, bumping into the flat mate who would minutes after discover Mademoiselle Zevaco’s

mutilated corpse. Only one commentator made any connection between the murder at the Rue des

Martyrs and the slaughter of Mme Zevaco; and he failed to pick up on the curious coincidence that the

accused Phillipe Laborteaux had that same night taken his own life.

The funeral took place in a storm, the cortege edging its pitiful way through the abandoned streets

stood at the graveside, the cold

cutting into them, Solal sidled up to Lewis and nudged him.

“What?” “Over there. Under the tree.” Solal nodded beyond the praying priest.

The stranger was standing at a distance, almost hidden by the marble mausoleums. A heavy black

scarf was wrapped across his face, and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his brow, but his bulk was

unmistakable. Catherine had seen him too. She was shaking as she stood, wrapped round by Lewis’s

embrace, not just with cold, but with fear. It was as though the creature was some morbid angel, come to

hover a while, and enjoy the grief. It was grotesque, and eerie, that this thing should come to see Phillipe

consigned to the frozen earth. What did it feel? Anguish? Guilt? Yes, did it feel guilt?

It knew it had been seen, and it turned its back, shambling away. Without a word to Lewis, Jacques

Solal slipped away from the grave in pursuit. In a short while both the stranger and his pursuer were

erased by the snow.

without the pleasure being spoilt. Phillipe had died horribly, devouring his own flesh and blood, perhaps driven mad by a knowledge he possessed of his own guilt and depravity. No innocence, no history of joy could remain unstained by that fact. Silently they mourned the loss, not only of Phillipe, but of their own past. Lewis understood now Phillipe's reluctance to live when there was such loss in the world.

Solal rang. Breathless after his chase, but elated, he spoke in whispers to Lewis, clearly enjoying the excitement.

"I'm at the Gare du Nord, and I've found out where our friend lives. I've found him, Lewis!"

"Excellent. I'll come straight away. I'll meet you on the steps of the Gare du Nord. I'll take a cab: ten minutes."

"It's in the basement of number sixteen, Rue des Fleurs. I'll see you there —,

"Don't go in, Jacques. Wait for me. Don't —"The telephone clicked and Solal was gone. Lewis reached for his coat.

dance together on the black water.

When he arrived at the house on the Rue des Fleurs, Solal was not to be seen, but fresh footprints in

the powdery snow led to the front door of number sixteen and then, foiled, went around the back of the

house. Lewis followed them. As he stepped into the yard behind the house, through a rotted gate that had

been crudely forced by Solal, he realized he had come without a weapon. Best to go back, perhaps, find a

crowbar, a knife; something. Even as he was debating with himself, the back door opened, and the

stranger appeared, dressed in his now familiar overcoat. Lewis flattened himself against the wall of the

yard, where the shadows were deepest, certain that he would be seen. But the beast was about other

business. He stood in the doorway with his face fully exposed, and for the first time, in the reflected

moonlight off the snow, Lewis could see the creature's physiognomy plainly. Its face was freshly shaved;

and the scent of cologne was strong, even in the open air. Its skin was pink as a peach, though nicked in

the outside world; and the sight was touching as much as intimidating.
All this thing wanted was to be
human. It was aspiring, in its way, to the model Phillipe had given it, had
nurtured in it. Now, deprived of
its mentor , confused and unhappy, it was attempting to face the world
as it had been taught to do. There was no way back for it. Its days of innocence had gone: it could never be an unambitious beast again.
Trapped in its new persona, it had no choice but to continue in the life its master had awoken its taste for.
Without glancing in Lewis' direction, it gently closed the door behind it and crossed the yard, its walk
transforming in those few steps from a simian roll to the mincing waddle that it used to simulate
humanity.
Then it was gone.
Lewis waited a moment in the shadows, breathing shallowly. Every bone in his body ached with cold
now, and his feet were numb. The beast showed no sign of returning; so he ventured out of his hiding
place and tried the door. It was not locked. As he stepped inside a stench struck him: the sickly sweet

clothes; discarded fruit in

abundance, some trodden into the floor; a bucket, filled with straw and stinking of droppings. On the wall,

a large crucifix. On the mantelpiece a photograph of Catherine, Lewis and Phillipe together in a sunlit

past, smiling. At the sink, the creature's shaving kit. Soap, brush, razor. Fresh suds. On the dresser a pile

of money, left in careless abundance beside a pile of hypodermics and a collection of small bottles. It was

warm in the beast's garret; perhaps the furnace for the house roared in an adjacent cellar. Solal was not

there.

Suddenly, a noise.

Lewis turned to the door, expecting the ape to be filling it, teeth bared, eyes demonic. But he had lost

all orientation; the noise was not from the door but from the wardrobe. Behind the pile of clothes there

was a movement.

"Solal"

Jacques Solal half fell out of the wardrobe, and sprawled across the Persian carpet. His face was

But Jacques was already gone. These shudders and jerks were not signs of thought or personality, just the din of passing. Lewis knelt at Solal's side; his stomach was strong. During the war, being a conscientious objector, he had volunteered to serve in the Military Hospital, and there were few transformations of the human body he had not seen in one combination or another. Tenderly, he cradled the body, not noticing the blood. He hadn't loved this man, scarcely cared for him at all, but now all he wanted was to take him away, out of the ape's cage, and find him a human grave. He'd take the photograph too. That was too much, giving the beast a photograph of the three friends together. It made him hate Phillipe more than ever.

He hauled the body off the carpet. It required a gargantuan effort, and the sultry heat in the room, after the chill of the outside world, made him dizzy. He could feel a jittering nervousness in his limbs. His body was close to betraying him, he knew it; close to failing, to losing its coherence and collapsing.

unable to move him far, he stood

in the middle of the room and did nothing at all. That was best; yes.
Nothing at all. Too tired, too weak.

Nothing at all was best.

The reverie went on interminably; the old man fixed beyond movement
at the crux of his feelings,

unable to go forward into the future, or back into the soiled past. Unable
to remember. Unable to forget..Waiting, in a dreamy half-life, for the end of
the world.

It came home noisily like a drunken man, and the sound of its opening
the outer door stirred Lewis

into a slow response. With some difficulty he hauled Jacques into the
wardrobe, and hid there himself,

with the faceless head in his lap.

There was a voice in the room, a woman's voice. Maybe it wasn't the
beast, after all. But no: through

the crack of the wardrobe door Lewis could see the beast, and a red-
haired young woman with him. She

was talking incessantly, the perpetual trivia of a spaced-out mind.

"You've got more; oh you sweetie, oh you dear man, that's wonderful.
Look at all this stuff."

dating her, transporting her to a

private world. Lewis watched, entranced, as she began to undress.

“It’s so. . . hot. . .in here.”

The ape watched, his back to Lewis. What expression did that shaved face wear? Was there lust in its

eyes, or doubt?

The girl’s breasts were beautiful, though her body was rather too thin. The young skin was white, the

nipples flower-pink. She raised her arms over her head and as she stretched the perfect globes rose and

flattened slightly. The ape reached a wide hand to her body and tenderly plucked at one of her nipples,

rolling it between dark-meat fingers. The girl sighed.

“Shall I . . . take everything off?”

The monkey grunted.

“You don’t say much, do you?”

She shimmied out of her red skirt. Now she was naked but for a pair of knickers. She lay on the bed

stretching again, luxuriating in her body and the welcome heat of the room, not even bothering to look at

her admirer.

In his lap Solal's seeping body

seemed to become heavier with every moment. His spine was screaming, and the back of his neck pained

him as though pierced with hot knitting-needles. The agony was becoming unbearable; he began to think

he would die in this pathetic hiding place, while the ape made love.

The girl sighed, and Lewis looked again at the bed. The ape had its hand between her legs, and she

squirmed beneath its ministrations.

"Yes, oh yes," she said again and again, as her lover stripped her completely.

It was too much. The dizziness throbbed through Lewis' cortex. Was this death? The lights in the

head, and the whine in the ears?

He closed his eyes, blotting out the sight of the lovers, but unable to shut out the noise. It seemed to go

on forever, invading his head. Sighs, laughter, little shrieks.

At last, darkness.

Lewis woke on an invisible rack; his body had been wrenched out of shape by the limitations of his

The beast proffered a hand to Lewis, and he automatically took it. The coarse-palmed grip hauled him

from under Solal's body. He couldn't stand straight. His legs were rubbery, his ankles wouldn't support him. The beast took hold of him, and steadied him. His head spinning, Lewis looked down into the

wardrobe, where Solal was lying, tucked up like a baby in its womb, face to the wall.

The beast closed the door on the corpse, and helped Lewis to the sink, where he was sick.

"Phillipe?" He dimly realized that the woman was still here: in the bed: just woken after a night of

love.

"Phillipe: who's this?" She was scrabbling for pills on the table beside the bed. The beast sauntered

across and snatched them from her hands.

"Ah... Phillipe. . . please. Do you want me to go with this one as well? I will if you want. Just give me

back the pills."

She gestured towards Lewis.

"I don't usually go with old men."

years had drained so much life

from him.

“Lewis,” it said, finding the word quite easy to say.

The old man had nothing in his stomach to vomit, and no harm left to feel. This was the end of the

century, he should be ready for anything. Even to be greeted as a friend of a friend by the shaved beast

that loomed in front of him. It would not harm him, he knew that. Probably Phillipe had told the ape about

their lives together; made the creature love Catherine and himself as much as it had adored Phillipe.

“Lewis,” it said again, and gestured to the woman, (now sitting open-legged on the bed) offering her

for his pleasure.

Lewis shook his head.

In and out, in and out, part fiction, part fact.

It had come to this; offered a human woman by this naked ape. It was the last, God help him, the very

last chapter in the fiction his great uncle had begun. From love to murder back to love again. The love of

the punishment.

His legs had regained a little feeling, and he began to stagger to the door.

“Aren’t you staying?” said the red-haired woman.

“This thing. . .” he couldn’t bring himself to name the animal.

“You mean Phillipe?”

“He isn’t called Phillipe,” Lewis said. “He’s not even human.”

“Please yourself,” she said, and shrugged.

To his back, the ape spoke, saying his name. But this time, instead of it coming out as a sort of grunt-word,

its simian palate caught Phillipe’s inflexion with unnerving accuracy, better than the most skilful of

parrots. It was Phillipe’s voice, perfectly.

“Lewis,” it said.

Not pleading. Not demanding. Simply naming, for the pleasure of naming, an equal.

The passers-by who saw the old man clamber on to the parapet of the Pont du Carrousel stared, but

made no attempt to stop him jumping. He teetered a moment as he stood up straight, then pitched over

into the threshing, churning ice-water.

the thaw would begin by noon.

Birds, exulting in the sudden sun, swooped over the Sacré Coeur. Paris began to undress for spring, its

virgin white too spoiled to be worn for long.

In mid-morning, a young woman with red hair, her arm linked in that of a large ugly man, took a

leisurely stroll to the steps of the Sacre Coeur. The sun blessed them. Bells rang.

It was a new day.