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Trickster Writer's Writing Tricksters / Succeeding William

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Doctorate in Creative and Critical Writing

University of Sussex

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Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX
MATTHEW JOHN READ
CALIFORNICATION AND THE TRICKSTER BRAIN / SUCCEEDING WILLIAM
SUMMARY

In the essay section of the thesis, I explore the role of trickster in the TV show *Californication* (2007-2014). In *The Trickster Brain* (2012), David Williams applies evolutionary psychology to conceptualise the trickster as a phenomenon linked to the biological development of the human brain. I follow in this approach, conceiving of the trickster as a symbol of humanity's evolution. I refer to propositions from neurology, and in various fields of psychology, including cognitive, evolutionary, and clinical. Luminaries include Steven Pinker, Antonio Damasio, Michael Tomasello, David M. Buss, Sarah Hrdy, Donald Symons, and David J. Linden.

In Part One of the essay, I briefly outline how evolutionary psychology inserted itself into the field of the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century. I then go on to demonstrate through an analysis (mostly of the pilot episode) how Hank Moody (David Duchovny) is portrayed as a trickster character thematically entwined in the battle of the sexes in noughties California. I do this by referring to the scientists listed above, as well as various trickster scholars, such as William J. Hynes, William G. Doty, Helena Bassil-Morozow, Barbara Babcock Abrahams, Paul Radin, Lewis Hyde, Gerald Vizenor, and Robert D. Pelton. As I conceive of trickster from an evolutionary point-of-view, so I see the figure as universal. I therefore juxtapose a reading of *Californication* with traditional trickster tales from around the world, and across cultures and times. Beyond comic entertainment, I conceive of trickster as a symbol of the tension between nature and culture, and explore how trickster's role is linked to his liminality, shamelessness, and authenticity. Through these characteristics, trickster opens up discourses to others, acting as a mediator who transgresses between worlds.

In Part Two, I conceptualise *Californication* as a product of the counterculture. I refer to ideas by a wide range of scholars, including Noam Chomsky, David Harvey, Paul Fisher, Paul Verhaeghe, Jordan Peterson, Christina Hoff Sommers, Andrew Dworkin, Kate Millet, Christopher Booker, Daniel Kahneman, Mary V. Wrenn, Peter Knight, Timothy Melley, Rob Brotherton, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and the poet Robert Bly. I contribute to the field of trickster scholarship by conceptualising *Californication* as a trickster text to explore cultural, societal and economic changes in the post-War period, with specific regard to feminism, the rise of the mythopoetic men's movement, neoliberal economics, and the precipitous rise of paranoid narratives. By existing in a moral vacuum, trickster highlights questions of morality and ethics in the minds of the audience. In showing how things should not be done, trickster both outlines normative codes, and at the same time suggests alternatives.

In conclusion, I see trickster as symbolic of the human condition. Always internally riven, trickster is a metaphor for human potentiality, in all its destructiveness and its creativity.

The second part of the thesis is my novel *Succeeding William*. It follows the adventures of four characters, the trickster William Motion, his protégé, Hamish Tush, and local pillars of the community, pub landlord, Dempster Shadaws, and timber yard owner, Arnold Charger. Each chapter is told from the point-of-view of one of the these four characters. William Motion's fortunes take a decided turn for the worse when he falls in love and has his mullet stolen. Hamish Tush rises in his shadow as a boy of principled violence. Meanwhile, Dempster Shadaws finds himself empowered by celibacy and able to control the weather. While the sun shines, Arnold Charger, seeking to make meaning in his life, attempts to start as many affairs as possible.

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Trickster Writers Writing Tricksters

Introduction

In this essay, I argue that the trickster motif in literature invokes an unresolvable tension in a narrative, and that this is always manifested as an ultimately creative force. That is, the trickster principle is an imaginative symbiosis that articulates the fusion of the critical and the creative. The trickster position is to be in a default liminality. Babcock-Abrahams described the trickster as embodying “all possibilities” and as “paradox personified” permanently “betwixt and between” (148). That is, the trickster is pure potential, neither this nor that, and permanently located neither here nor there, but rather in a nowhere zone, the trickster becomes tricky, by nature, to disinter. As William J. Hynes points out, the trickster can seem to be ultimately “indefinable.” However, that Hynes has listed what he sees as the common characteristics of the trickster character is, in and of itself, telling. He defines the trickster as a character, and that certainly seems to be a logical and common sense way of approaching the subject, and his list of trickster characteristics is a useful way of identifying trickster behaviour in narratives. However, viewing trickster as primarily as a definable character is not the only way of looking at the trickster. For example, the scholar Helena Bassil-Morozow, writing in *The Trickster and the System: Identity and Agency in Contemporary Society* (2015), sees the trickster as primarily a phenomenon, and specifically as such, as “a metaphor for change” (31). This renders the trickster’s value less in terms of characteristics or definable qualities, and more in viewing the trickster and tricksterish behaviour as being coded in a purely symbolic manner, as a motif for dynamic forces. Agapi Stassinopoulos writes that the ancient Greeks would say “‘Hermes has entered our midst,’ when a sudden silence entered the room,...” (qtd. in Labouvie-Vief 257). In modern parlance, we might describe such a lull in conversation befalling upon a group of people in a social setting as an awkward silence. It is a moment in which an unexplainable tension has enveloped the social setting. Lewis Hyde, in his discussion of Hermes as a trickster, writes how such signifies that the trickster is at play: “there is a moment of silence, and he enlivens each with mischief,...” (6). There are unresolved and unresolvable tensions to hand, and the current conversation has exhausted itself and a new discourse is either needed or desirable; whenever and wherever this happens, I argue, we find the motif of the trickster.

Over the following pages of this essay, I will develop this argument that trickster captures unresolved and unresolvable tensions encapsulated within the thematics of dramatic narratives. I will do this by looking at the trickster metaphor in a variety of literary works, ranging from epic poetry through drama to the short story and the hoax.

First, I will explore John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674)¹ in its function as a creation myth, and consider how through revealing the tensions between body and soul, master and slave, and static obedience and unfettered creative freedom, the character of Satan as revealed by Milton becomes a tragi-comic trickster figure. Though not ostensibly humorous, which is a key limitation of Satan as a trickster, the character does serve a creative role related to renewal through the revelation of identity and the forming of consciousness, and therefore in a structural, plot-defined sense of analysis, serves a dark though ultimately comic function.

My exploration will continue through an analysis of two very different plays of Shakespeare's: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595/6)² and *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice* (1603). *Midsummer* features the trickster Puck, a fantastical fairy sprite and an essentially comic character, the foremost, I argue, of three trickster coded characters set in a hierarchy. With multiple tricksters and a variety of densely textured trickster motifs and imagery, the play can be read as an ostensibly trickster narrative with Shakespeare, as controller in chief, playing the role of trickster as playwright. By creating a hierarchical structure and riffing with the theme of romantic love coded as madness, and setting it in tension against love as duty and filial obedience, *Midsummer* captures the tensions between dream and reality, truth and illusion, and the irresolvable tensions inherent to relationships: between higher and lower orders; between males and females; and internally, between men and women competing with their own sex. *Othello* features Iago, a malevolent force of brooding human evil, who tricks his boss into murder and suicide. I'll explain that while Iago shares certain characteristics with tricksters, in my argument, only Puck and the other tricksters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* truly fulfill the role of trickster, and indeed, why even a character as dark as Milton's Satan better qualifies for the label of a trickster figure than does Shakespeare's Iago.

¹ All references to *Paradise Lost* come from *The Milton Reading Room*, edited by Thomas H. Luxon.

² All references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* come from *Open Source Shakespeare*.

After this, three works of Edgar Allen Poe will be considered. I look at how the concept of the “hoax” is central to Poe’s work. Through humour that ranged from the farcical to the satirical, he often poked holes in the unresolved tensions of the cultural and social fabric of his time, both epistemological and ontological, and whether psychic, spiritual, scientific or rational. He certainly delighted in tricking his contemporaries via journalism. I first consider Poe’s most ostensibly successful hoax, “The Balloon-Hoax” (1844), as a trickster story that blurred the lines between fact and fiction, journalism and manipulation, and how through humour Poe jested with the reader as both a private and public person. Yet whether ostensibly writing a piece of fiction sold as journalism, or fiction sold at face value, Poe’s trickster spirit permeated his works. He skipped between genres seemingly effortlessly, producing a torrent of highly original work that mixed previously incongruent styles into an original melange of literature. He even invented new genres. I will therefore then look at how Poe’s fiction took this trickster play into more multifaceted nuances through analyses of “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) and “Ligeia” (1838). His fictions are trickster-infused in their sensibilities and technical execution. He bended literary conventions to his will, mixing them in novel ways, overlapping classical with contemporary references. As an author, he resonated all six of what Hynes’ detonates as central to the trickster personality. His “fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality” made him a storytelling “shapeshifter” and a “deceiver/trick-player” to his audience; he was a “situation-invertor” in his manipulation of genre, and nowhere more so than in his mixing of high spirituality with mechanical horror in which he performed the role of both “messenger/imitator of the gods” and “sacred/lewd bricoleur.”

Finally, in conclusion, I will briefly explore how my novel *Succeeding William* connects with the critical part of this project.

Part One: The Devil as Trickster

The devil has long been conceptualised as a dark trickster figure. In *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (1987), Jeffrey Burton Russell writes that it was the trickster Hermes' winged legs that inspired "the medieval tradition of portraying the Devil with leg wings..." (126). In "The Bushman Trickster" Mathais Gunther labels the devil eponymously (13). David Williams equates this trickster role to Satan's "silver-tongued" deceits (183). Culturally, Melita Schaum interprets a "Lucifer-Trickster" figure in the works of Flannery O'Connor, and Ayana Smith writes how in blues music "the trickster figure is often represented as the devil" (184). Politically, economically and philosophically, Angus Cameron argues that the complexity of money and monetary systems have been partially generated through their symbolic correlation to the mythical figures of "Trickster, Devil and Fool" (4). Like Michael Lieb, I see within *Paradise Lost* a creation myth, though, in analysing the embedded trickster myth, I disagree with his dialectical approach that conceptualises the devil as a force of pure "uncreation" (81-204). As I will endeavour to demonstrate, in conceiving *Paradise Lost* as a creation myth, I read into it all the most potent structural precepts of a formal comedy.

Reading John Milton's Paradise Lost through William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell

In English literature, the biblical story of the Fall of Man about how Adam and Eve become cast out of the Garden of Eden is most famously retold by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. In this epic, narrative poem, Milton relates two parallel and eventually interwoven stories: those of the interconnected falls of Satan, from one of God's highest and most esteemed angels to ruler of Hell; and of Adam and Eve living in the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, and from there cast out into a world of sin and death. The interrelated nature of these narratives is drawn from the fact that it is Satan, disguised as a snake, who deceives and tricks Eve into eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and Adam, in devotion to her, following suit. Despite the story's tragic

elements, it is my contention that by using an interpretation of the poem that follows in the romantic tradition of William Blake and followed through in some ways by Camille Paglia, the tale can be insightfully read as an ur-myth dealing with the creation of the consciousness of erotic sexuality. As a creation myth, it tells of the tragicomic liminality of human existence. Within it lies a romantically conceived trickster narrative about recognition. At its centre exists the fallibly angelic-demonic humanesque anti-hero, Satan. He plays the trickster role to Adam's patsy. Joining them together is Eve, the biological and cultural mother of human life. Within the ontological time-line of this mythic creationism, the story of existence as we understand it is symbolically rendered. Lucifer's internal tensions, his essential humanity, pollutes Heaven. Life on earth as a phenomenon marked by differentiation, limitation, change and death, is brought about by his desire to individuate. This first casts him out of Heaven, then forces the creation of a Hell, then casts humans from Eden, and finally results in the creation of a recognizably earthly existence.

Reading Paradise Lost Through a Romantic Tragi-Comic Lens

In Blake's ideation of Milton, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), he called him "of the Devil's party without knowing it." This was entirely congruous with what Martin Nurmi considers Blake's conception of the human condition as a dualistic amalgamation of competing and contrary impulses within each individual soul: that of the angelic and the demonic (558-562). In a congruent fashion, in *Sexual Personae* (1990) Camille Paglia would later frame the entire progression of western art, including the works of William Blake, as encapsulating the struggle between the ancient Greek ideals of the Appolonian and the Dionysian. Though the angelic Appolonian spirit brings order to the world, fashions reason out of chaos, it always risks stagnation. The demonic Dionysian, with its basis in earthly urge and desire, invokes the chaos needed to keep the cultural well-springs of renewal spouting. Blake famously invokes this idea in one of his "Proverbs of Hell" from *Marriage* where he writes: "The cistern contains, the fountain overflows." Cultural evolution, for Blake, is founded in contrariness, in the tension between the status quo and the potential of the new. He writes: "Without contraries is no progression." It is my argument, that the devil, in *Paradise Lost*, is both

the mythical ur-figure of progress as well as the progenitor of the battle of the sexes. This connection between devilry, or what I am framing here as trickster creativity with its lack of solemn devotion towards any status quo or tradition, is a constant theme in trickster texts.

Indeed, in *Paradise Lost*, Satan, an “Artificer of fraud;” (4.121), is shown to have a trickster element very early in the poem. In Book 1, it is described:

How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn
On Man by him seduc't, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd (1.217-220).

His trickery is doomed not only to failure in its apportioned ends, but to furthermore backfire, so that - in a classic trickster motif - the trickster ends up tricked (see Erdoes and Ortiz 94-99). All the chaos and confusion he tries to spread throughout humanity is primarily embodied within himself. God, in describing his efforts, captures Satan's trickster nature: “so bent he seems / On desperate reveng, that shall redound / Upon his own rebellious head” (3.84-86). Like all tricksters, he is a symbiotic creature, an amalgamation of protagonist and antagonist. He is his own worst enemy, an anti-hero narrative curve-ball whose worst machinations most devastatingly befall himself.

In *Paradise Lost*, it is the tensions Satan feels between his body and his soul that brings about both his downfall, and the creation of life. As a celestial being, one of God's angels, his position is described in the Bible; he was “full of wisdom and perfect of beauty” (Ezekiel 28.12) and “perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created” (Ezekiel 28.15)³. It is an exalted description befitting a perfect being living in perfect order in a perfected celestial paradise. It is interesting how this is a world in which there is a place for everything, and everything is very much in its place. Heaven is imagined as having a hierarchical structure, symbolised as a mountainside, with God at the summit, and the angels in rank descending the sides of the mountain. Certainly, Lucifer is framed as being well-situated within the heavenly order, his place - even by heavenly standards - is elevated. Therefore, it would seem that before transgressing Satan is depicted as one of God's more favoured angels, in Milton's description: “If not the first Arch-Angel, great in Power,/In favour and præminence,...” (Bk. 5. 660-661).

³ All Bible quotes are from *King James Bible Online*.

The body as a metaphor here has a twofold connotation. In the first sense, Lucifer is pictured as an angel amongst other angels, as one in a collective “body” of angels whose job is to worship God without question. He is part of a collectivist state, as what Reith Thomas Funston points out can be read in contemporary terms via the philosophy of Jose P. Miranda in *Communism in the Bible* (1982), as a quasi-communist community in which God is depicted as an ideological munificence, the transcendental signifier around which the various angels - in structured and hierarchical order - give worship. Their job is to acquiesce their individual wills for the transcendental will of God, as evinced in (Psalm 95.6; 2 Chronicles 7.3-29). It against this that Lucifer rebels. The Bible describes Lucifer as having been created perfect; akin to the Greek myth of Narcissus, his fall is precipitated by the realization of his own beauty - and as I’ll attempt to demonstrate below his narcissistic fantasies are directly indicated in the actions of the poem; though rather than become entranced by himself to the point of self-destruction, as in the Greek myth where Narcissus finds himself incapable of fulfilling his own desire for himself, and literally drowns in the medium (water) of that which reflects the mirage of his self-destructive love for himself, Lucifer’s narcissistic urges are visionary and expansive. Though they have their roots within his own sense of self, they extend beyond the concerns of his immediate situation, and become social, political and cultural in scope. He is filled with self-exaltation, pride, and an overweening sense of entitlement. Thus, he is seduced by his vision of himself, but rather than being led to instant destruction, his exalted sense of self-worth, his sheer wonder at the wonder of himself, leads him to celebrate not only his own pristine individuality, but also for such to stir within him the desire to break order from the pre-conditioned abstract structures of Heaven - at all their levels. “The trickster is the raw energy of the new,” writes Bassil-Morozow, “struggling to break through the surface of old structures” (31). Therefore, Lucifer asks himself why he and his fellow angels - exalted creations all - should worship, obey, follow and genuflect, when through rebellion and uprising, revolution and dynamic change, they could potentially rule. Lucifer, as the instigator in chief, imagines himself as the new ruler of a new heavenly order. In this conception of the idea of the “body,” the tension is between the individual identity Lucifer perceives within himself, and the identity of his role within a collective “body” of angels - all devout in worship to their one true master.

The other connotation of the body that is highlighted within the story of Lucifer's fall is found within the complex trickster relationship that the devil has with man and God. What is most clear about the fate of the devil in the Bible is that nothing is clear at all. In some chapters, the devil has been condemned to hell, in others he flits between hell and earth, and in others stands before God and the angels before being driven from paradise again. In Karl Kerenyi's words, the trickster is "the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries" (qtd. in Radin). Therefore, this is all indicative of his trickster role, a creature that knows no boundaries, that transgresses worlds, but it is also symptomatic of his creative function. As the title of Lewis Hyde's book states: *Trickster Makes This World* (2008), that is, "a world of constant need, work, limitation, and death" (27). And this is precisely the devil's role in the Biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve. While God might have created man in his own image, God's body is not a body at all - not in the sense of a finite, material body - subject to imperfections, change, metabolic processes, unruly sexual drives, and ultimate destruction and decay; and these were not the bodies of Adam and Eve in the prelapsarian Eden. With the eating of the tree of knowledge comes man's ultimate knowledge, and within the cosmology and ontology of the Bible it is this epistemological realisation that brings about the reality: this is the knowledge of their nakedness, and the recognition of, in Jordan Peterson's words, their "eternal vulnerability," which in turn leads to their sense of ultimate disconnectedness from the celestial order manifest in the material world that creates the conditions of ontological death. God's creation was perfect and unchanging, a reflection of Heaven itself; the devil's creation is this world of pain, sin, limitation and death. It is a world of individual bodies subject to change, and to the laws of nature. It is a trickster's world.

Being a trickster's world, it is a world forged in contradictions and tensions, of liminality, constant change, individuation, rooted in the spontaneity and practicality of evolutionary processes, temporal, subject to alteration and improvement but also irredeemably imperfect. Neither a Heaven nor a Hell, life on earth is tempered in both, a liminal place of joy, hope, trust, and nobility, and at the same time of suffering, despair, treachery, and debauchery. The story of the fall of Lucifer is predicated upon the angel's desire to individuate, separate, and self-define. In escaping the mass of Heaven, the undifferentiated bliss of being part of the Heavenly body, Lucifer becomes the first individual, the creator of man and life as we know it in the postlapsarian days of

existence. The Man created by God, the one created in perfection, is the Man we've never known; the trickster's version of man is the man of culture, politics, and society, the man of history: the imperfect being striving for independence. In this way, humanity is the Devil's critique of God's creation.

Sex in Paradise Lost

The story of Adam and Eve is the second creation myth in Genesis. As a creation myth, it is apropos that it deals with sexual themes. I will now therefore attempt to show that sex is central to *Paradise Lost*. The falls of Satan, Adam, and Eve are all predicated upon sexualized tensions - reflected in sexual motifs at key moments throughout the text. That these moments are fabricated in carnal terms is entirely congruent with the trickster paradigm. Erdoes and Ortiz observe that the trickster "at times seems completely driven by sex" (xiv), and David Williams concurs that "trickster stories revolve around sex" (54), according to Hyde "tricksters are ridden by lust,..." (8) while Radin states unequivocally that "all his [trickster's] adventures reek with sex."

To demonstrate the intensely sexualised thematics of *Paradise Lost*, I will first look at and compare the poem's three sex scenes. Prelapsarian sex, which occurs in Book 4, is described in terms of obedience to God and devotion to duty. Sexual desire is kept out of the description. The lovers: "Strait side by side were laid, nor turned I weene / Adam from his fair Spouse, nor Eve the Rites / Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd:" (Bk. 4. 741-743). Adam does not "turn" and Eve does not "refuse." The "duty" is performed without tumult or tempestuous storm. There is neither tension nor excitement. Moreover, the whole process is shrouded in "mystery." In the parlance of seduction, words such as "mystery," "romance," and "erotic," as Carol Dyhouse makes clear in her exploration of male sex symbols, are consociated terms. Here, in Milton's vision of prelapsarian Eden, however, it seems the words have an altogether different connotation. By coding their love-making in mystery, Milton is signifying it with a two-fold meaning, the first is primary and explicit, the second a foreshadowing that resonates only later. At this stage in the narrative, the "mystery" is imbued not with eroticism, but with spirituality. The heavenly, the spiritual, and the esoteric are coded

within *Paradise Lost* in terms of invisibility, and as such, that which cannot be known. In Book 3, Milton beseeches God for insight of purely spiritual affairs: “Of things invisible to mortal sight” (Bk. 3. 55). In Book 5, Adam speaks of God in parallel terms: “Unspeakable, who sitst above these Heavens/To us invisible or dimly seen” (Bk. 5. 156-157). The second inference of the “mysterious” reference is only fully unraveled after Adam and Eve’s fall. Here their coupling is a spiritually evocative Utopian fantasy of pure and ethereal mating that enshrouds the revelation of the more sinister mysteries - first erotic, then shameful - that are revealed only through spiritual disobedience.

Compare this vision of Heavenly ordained sexuality with Satan’s sexual encounter with his daughter, Sin, in Book 2. When Satan sees his daughter, he is enraptured by how much alike to him she looks, and in narcissistic lust, he rapes and impregnates her. For the trickster, as Hynes notes, there is “no taboo too sacred,....”

The episode is related by Sin thus:

Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam’st enamour’d, and such joy thou took’st
With me in secret, that my womb conceiv’d
A growing burden (2.764-767).

Satan refers to this unholy coupling as a “dalliance” (2.819), a word that will echo later, in Adam and Eve’s post Fall sex scene. In the meantime, Sin gives birth to Death, from whom she flees. But her child, Death, pursues “Inflam’d with lust” (2.791) and also rapes and impregnates her. Next a hellish image is created that is entirely congruous with the repeat breaking of a taboo that seems to be genetically encoded. As Matt Ridley writes in *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (2003): “Sex is about disease” (30). That is, sexual variety and not committing incest increases disease immunity and decreases the chance of disastrously inherited genetic mutations forming. Therefore, within the poem the double violation of this sex taboo results in a grotesquely tortured image of pain and suffering. Sohana Manzoor notes, the trickster “Prometheus is not just a symbol of aspiring humanity but suffering humanity as well.” In *Paradise Lost*, Sin is guarded by Death in a hellishly Promethean torment, as their offspring gnaw at her insides - fixing her to the spot whilst regenerating her - in a process of everlasting torment; she is punished by the twisted genetic mutations she has spawned. Just as the coupling has its earthly echo, so too does the punishment: the birth of the children of Sin and Death cause Sin endless pain and torture, just as Eve, albeit in a dramatically less extreme form, is fated to pain in childbirth.

Such lustful sex is later depicted in the sex scene after Adam and Eve have fallen. No sooner has she eaten the fruit, than she conceives of Adam in romantic language: “So dear I love him, that with all deaths / I could endure, without him live no life” (9.832-3). Adam feels likewise; upon learning of her actions, he asks himself: “How could I live without thee” (9.908). Then when Adam joins Eve in eating the fruit, their once latent now “awoken” romance becomes immediately sexualised. Eve weeps, “much won that he his Love / Had so enobl’d, as of choice to incurr / Divine displeasure for her sake, or Death” (9.991-3). This is a robustly romantic image of male sacrifice, and no sooner has it been made than romance - and consummation no longer as duty but as joy - is born. Their lovemaking is no longer coded in the language of divine mystery, obedience before God, or judicious chore; it is romantic and passionate, carnal and lustful, and mutually kindled:

Carnal desire enflaming, hee on Eve
 Began to cast lascivious Eyes, she him
 As wantonly repaid; in Lust they burne:
 Till Adam thus ’gan Eve to dalliance move,” (9.1013-16).

The word “dalliance” and the symbolism of heat, “desire enflaming” and “in Lust they burne” explicitly connects the nature of their sexual congress with that of the incestuous rape of Sin by her son, Death. There is a sense of uncontrollable rage to the word “enflame,” and with the other metaphor of heat “burn” the connections to Hell are sealed. The they are sexually “othering” one another, and the desire is bodily: “carnal,” “lascivious” and “wanton.” The sexual tension between them is palpable and mutual before Adam takes the initiative. To further reinforce the nature of their newly acquired somatic sense of selves, the pair eat - feeding their bodies - before sleeping off “wearied with thir amorous play” (9.1045). The devil’s trickery, as well as creating sin and death, has created the delights of earthly lust.

However, more striking is that sexual imagery is not confined to these explicitly sexual scenes. Satan, Sin and Death’s sexual congresses are depicted early, in Book 2. In Book 4, Adam and Eve make dutiful love before the angels. In Book 9, they are in lust. Tellingly, between Adam and Eve’s two sexual episodes, in Book 6, Satan and his armies battle the forces of Heaven, led by Michael and Gabriel. This episode tells of Satan’s fall, the key moment that foreshadows Adam’s own fall. In it Satan is depicted in a highly sexualized language appropriate to a trickster. When Satan fights the Heavenly host, his most potent weapon is “his devilish Enginrie,...” (6.550). It is a

cannon. It is concealed: “On every side with shadding Squadrons Deep, / To hide the fraud” (6.554-5). Phallic imagery abounds in its description. Satan rallies his troops, no sooner boasting how they will “discharge” (9.564) their duty, than the cannons appear: “A triple mounted row of Pillars laid / On Wheels...” (6.572-3). The bore of the cannons are made of wood “Oak or Firr” (6.574) and the muzzle of hard metals or rock: “Brass, Iron, Stonie mould” (6.576). From the “hideous orifice” (6.578) shoots the payload: “disgorging foule / Thir devilish glut,...” (6.588-9). Just as Adam makes loin cloths for he and Eve to hide their now shameful genitalia, so Satan hides his metaphorical phallus - his most devastating weapon - from Heaven’s sight. During the second day of the three day fight, these cannons rally Satan’s troops efforts and give them advantage, and put the Heavenly host to some disarray. Ultimately, however, Satan’s most potent weapon is defeated after the angels “Thir Arms away they threw, ...” (6.639), and buried the cannons under the hills - effectively returning the raw materials from whence they came - to mother nature.

Ludwig Levy, read within the psychoanalytical symbolism of Eve’s body an analogy to land (see Kille 61). By paralleling that interpretation here, the symbolism of earth and the female body means the hills resonate with connotations of the nourishing female breast. This is further amplified by the laying down of arms - of things hard and clashing. Heaven’s forces don’t defeat the cannon through firepower or by destroying them with like though greater weaponry, they defeat them by burying them back in the land from where they came, and arguably, back to where they belong. They are returned to the mineral state. Adam’s eventual fall from grace symbolically resonates with the defeat of Satan’s cannons, and his casting down to Hell. He, too, is punished for symbolically violating the “land” of Eve, and when he covers his and Eve’s genitalia he is covering the source of the raw materials from which life is made, their “mineral” essence.

Each of these sex scenes reveals hidden tensions. The prelapsarian Adam doesn’t turn from Eve, but neither is he filled with ardour. Eve doesn’t refuse him, but neither she does she welcome him. Neither of them embraces their union. Sex is neither forbidden nor desired, merely a duty fulfilled with the sole aim of population growth. It is sex as utility shorn of messiness or passion. As a dramatic episode, it is marked by its very lack of drama, its totally void of sexual tension; and it is this very lack of dramatic possibility, the epicene interrelatedness of the characters, the complete lack of

“othering” that imbues a sense of narrative atrophy, and that portends the tensions yet to come.

On the contrary, Satan, as a trickster, instantly breaks taboos. His lust is narcissistic and selfish. He ravishes Sin, his daughter, to temporarily satiate his perverted desires. To complete the taboo breaking cycle, no sooner has father laid with daughter, than son, Death, lays with mother. Incestuous sex with its terrible genetic consequences is symbolic of embodied desire out of all control. This is grotesquely rendered in Death’s imprisonment of Sin where the offspring cannibalize the mother in a regenerative cycle.

The moderated, humanised form of this is dramatized in Adam and Eve post-Fall; the trickster having woven his seductive magic, the humans are cast into a helical relationship of sympathy-antipathy, of powerful bodily urges and overwhelming desire, and then afterwards, of a sense of shame that marks them as spiritual creatures, as ones who should know better. When they awake after their post-coital nap, they feel guilty and ashamed and the lovers quarrel - the sexual flame turning to bickering. They immediately begin to “other” one another in the most negative way. Satan, in his role as trickster, has created the battle of the sexes.

Thus they in mutual accusation spent
The fruitless hours, but nether self-condemning,
And of thir vain contest appeer’d no end (9.1187-9).

That there is “no end” to their “vain” quarrel is directly indicative of the findings of evolutionary psychology on the question of the battle of the sexes. David M. Buss puts this in terms of an endlessly helical dilemma: “Because the mating goals of the sexes interfere with each other within evolutionarily delimited domains, there is no evolutionary end to the spiral.” The rivalling sexual priorities of males and females make lover’s quarrels almost inevitable. Here they argue about who is at fault for their newly found consciousness.

Having taken their pleasure, the lovers are now faced with the pains of their awareness. Adam labels their genitals, which were once imbued with holy mystery, as “obnoxious, and unseemliest...” (9.1094). They cover themselves, and weep in shame. They discover a whole array of negative emotions: “high Passions, Anger, Hate, / Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord,...” (9.1123-4). Their intellects are “in subjection now / To sensual Appetite,...” (9.1128-9). They have been cast from an undifferentiated world of heavenly peace and harmony, and having become conscious, they now have knowledge

of good and evil, and are subject to to bodily urges and desires, and ultimately death. The trickster's creation is complete; the human of history is born as an earthbound creatures with celestial dreams.

Satan's Trickster Sexuality

I have tried to show how the plot trajectory of *Paradise Lost* forms a trickster narrative depicting the creation of a limited and flawed world, and how this was predicated upon sexual tensions. I will now look more closely at the key event and central trickster motif in the poem, namely, Satan's "seduction" of Eve. I call it a "seduction" because Satan's trickery is based upon heavy doses of flattery and flirtation. Furthermore, I'd like to consider how Satan's sexually manipulative predation extends through Eve psychologically into Adam, and how the devil conceptualizes a devious psychological trick based on the formative tensions he sees developing in the order of paradise. In his role as trickster, he acts as a psychological wedge, inserting himself in the infinitesimal crack he perceives "betwixt and between" the humans, and through his seductive ways becomes a pseudo-Adam, and the lover that Eve desires. In so much, he plays Adam's hand for him. Satan seems to perceive that having already "fallen" for Eve on an emotional level, Adam will condemn himself spiritually to sustain their physical bond.

Before embarking, it is important to note that preceding Eve's fall, she and Adam find themselves in disagreement. When Eve proposes a division of labour, whereby they work alone to more efficiently care for their garden, Adam disagrees. Forewarned by Raphael about Satan's presence, he advises they stay together lest one of them fall into temptation. Eve is offended by the implication that she might fall for Satan's tricks, and convinces Adam to allow her to go alone. This mild lover's quarrel, conducted in loving language, "Sole Eve, Associate sole, to me beyond / Compare above all living Creatures deare" (9.227-8), nonetheless frames the psychological backdrop to Satan's wily approach. When the serpent says, "What thou commandst and right thou shouldst be obeyed..." (9.570), he is directly and flatteringly contrasting himself with Adam's sense of doubt. He offers transformative knowledge, and by implication an independent individuality (precisely what she was calling for from Adam). After lover's quarrel,

sexual intercourse is the symbolic behaviour associated with healing the wound and affirming the relationship, so that Satan should come to Eve as a phallic symbol only accentuates the resonance of this psychological ploy.

To carry out his plan, Satan first possesses a snake. The first thing to note is the trickster transformation. In possessing the snake, Satan effectively acts as “shapeshifter,” one of Hynes’ key characteristics of the trickster. However, the Biblical choice of snake as animal of choice is notable for two further reasons, which taken together become illustrative of the trickster tensions revealed throughout the story.

The first is that as a primate species, the genus homo and its hominid ancestors co-evolved along with snakes. As Lynne A. Isbell argues in *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent* (2009), the human ability to detect motion is directly attributable to the need of early primates to detect the danger of snakes - first in the trees - where our chimpanzee ancestors remained, then in the grass - as the homo genus took to living on the ground. Eve makes it clear that before eating the fruit, (fruit eating is also biologically connected to evolving brain capacity (see Than)), her senses were dulled. Humans are predominantly visual creatures; according to Haupt and Huber “up to 80% of the information received from the outside world is processed by the visual pathway” (3136), and approximately half of the cerebral cortex “is devoted exclusively to visual processing” (Nakayama); it is our primary sense input (see Hagen 35). According to Isbell’s theory, humans co-evolution with snakes even led to the development of language. Less contentious is that the strong connection between the evolution of human intelligence and the development of vision, snakes and fresh fruit correlates tightly. Such evidence also adds to the story’s strong trickster motif.

The snake embodies the predator/prey tensions that drove the development of human intelligence. As Lewis Hyde points out, the trickster is a creature predicated by hunger “whose main concern is getting fed...” (17), and is motivated to fulfill that appetites. As a hunter, the trickster represents the ultimate in flexibility as to approaches; the trickster has “no way” specific to its species, but with imagination can mimic “many ways” (45). That Satan should approach Eve as a snake is remarkably resonant. Snakes are incredibly adaptable creatures; dwelling on land - from valleys to mountains, as well as in water - from river to sea; the earliest snakes were constrictors; they later evolved poison transmitted through bite and sometimes spit; some are hunters that pursue, some

that wait; and they cross boundaries with impunity. Moreover, they have incredible somatic flexibility. The serpent is therefore an apropos symbol for trickster wiliness and cunning. Satan, in guise of snake, “hunts” Eve intellectually - stimulating her vanity and reason. In J.B. Broadbent’s analysis of the serpent’s discursive approach in tricking Eve, he demonstrates how Satan uses a variety of classical rhetorical devices, twisting and winding his linguistic way into Eve’s consciousness. As I’ll demonstrate Satan’s seduction demonstrates, in Hyde’s words, “the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (7). Moreover, the narrator is a co-conspirator in the trick, explicitly mirroring Satan’s linguistic trickery in his description of how Eve is lead to the Tree of Knowledge: “He leading swiftly rowld / In tangles, and made intricate seem strait, / To mischief swift” (631-3). In further reinforcing the series of trickster motif’s, Satan’s actions offer Eve a sense of satiation - of the kind associated with food - to Eve’s appetite for knowledge.

The second reason the snake is significant is, as touched upon above, in its phallic symbolism. According to Levy, the serpent’s “role as tempter arises from its function as a phallic symbol” (Kille 61). Freudian analysts have broadly read within “the symbolism” of the Fall “issues of sexuality” (60). Given that Eve’s eating of the apple is coded as an awakening moment - and as Levy points out “a common euphemism for intercourse...” (61), her meeting with the snake can be read as a quasi-dream sequence - and this is congruous with the way Freud interpreted the myth (see Kille 59). He makes a sexually predatory approach:

Hee boulder now, uncall’d before her stood;
But as in gaze admiring: Oft he bowd
His turret Crest, and sleek enamel’d Neck,
Fawning, and lick’d the ground whereon she trod (9.523-6).

This is a classic display of a central tenet of what Betsy PrioLeau in *Swoon: Great Seducers and Why Women Love Them* (2013) identifies as central to male seduction and more generally charisma, and what psychologist Leon F. Seltzer calls “The Paradox of Seduction” namely that it “is laden with ambiguities and apparent contradictions.” Satan is “bold” and approaches her unbidden, brazenly admiring her, the hunting male making the initial move. Elsewhere, when he speaks of sensuous pleasures, he uses plain and direct language “food” (9.573) and “Sex” (9.574); and makes erogenous mention of “Teats” (9.581) that are “Unsuckt” (9.583), and thus doubly suggestive. But here and in direct contrast with such direct masculinity, he “fawns” and is rendered epicene, with

the emphasis put on his “neck,” a traditionally feminine zone of attractiveness. Finally, in a foreshadowing of his divinely authorized punishment, he “licks” the ground where she had “trod;” and the use of the word “trod” as opposed to “stood” emphasizes the trope of predator and prey; Satan is pursuing and where Eve *should* flee, she now stands.

Sexual language in the form of mysterious insinuations, endearments, flattery, and compliments then permeate the serpent’s seductive trickery of Eve. She is “sovrn Mistress” (9.532); “sole Wonder” (9.533); “Empress of this fair World” (9.568); of “Divine / Semblance” (9.606-7); and there is “no Fair to thine / Equivalent or second” (9.608-9); she is “Sovran of Creatures, universal Dame” (9.612); who “shouldst be seen / A Goddess among Gods, ador’d and serv’d / By angels numberless” (9.546-7); for hers is a “Celestial Beautie” (9.540). He immediately tells her she is “Displeas’d that I approach (9.535), and so signifies the psychological ploy he is about to use against her; just as she will eat the fruit she is not to eat, so she will be pleased by what should “displease” her. In his role as trickster, Satan is indicating how he will subtly “invert” the situation. He insinuates universal wealth, intellectual, material, and spiritual: “all things thine / By Gift” (9.539-40). He also peppers his speech with sexually provocative words and phrases: he stares at her “Insatiate” (9.536); she is “With ravishment beheld” (9.541). She, in turn, is “Not unamaz’d” (9.552) by his ability to speak, and indicates her willingness to parlay with this “Tongue of Brute” (9.554), and calls him “suttlest beast” (9.560). The “sleek” snake, as phallic symbol, has “grown” and risen its “fawning head.” This is correlated as flirtation; the serpent has come “to mark his play” (9.528) and she indicates that he has succeeded, saying he has become to her “so friendly grown above the rest / Of brutal kind” (9.564-5). Then when he lies about having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, he again uses an eroticized lexicon: “To satisfie the sharp desire I had / Of tasting those fair Apples,…” (9.584-5). As Levy points out, the apple is “an erotic symbol corresponding to the female breast” (Kille 61). Having flattered Eve, Satan then shifts the narrative into active mode.

He instantly eroticizes his language. Satan “quick’nd at the scent / Of that alluring fruit” (9.587-8). He winds around “the mossie Trunk” (9.589). The other beasts “with like desire / Longing and envying stood” (9.592-3). To eat was “such pleasure” (9.596). The imagery is unmistakably sexual, and even pornographic: the bystanders watching “envious” with unfulfilled “desire” and “longing,” the hard, upright “trunk” covered in

“moss” that only grows in “dark” and “wet” places; around this winds the serpent in search of the juicy fruit. Yet, having led Eve to the tree, she stalls and objects. At this key moment, the serpent in persuading her is described: “So standing, moving, or to highth upgrown / The Tempter all impassiond thus began” (9.677-8) to speak. The “impassioned” and “tempting” phallus is now “upright” and ready to “move.” He makes his argument, and she becomes “impregn’d / With Reason” (9.737-8). She first rationalizes Satan’s argument for herself, and then “she pluck’d, she eat” (9.781). William Blake’s 1808 illustration of these final lines before she falls offers a distinctly sexualised interpretation; the snake winds sensuously around her body; she caresses him in both hands, and holds the head up to her face with her palm under the creature’s chin and takes the fruit directly from the tip of the his smiling mouth. Satan intellectually “impregnates” Eve.

It is from this action that the world as we know it, the world of sin and death and limitation, is born. In the Biblical version of the story of the Fall, Eve is “the mother of all living” (Genesis 4.20). In *Paradise Lost*, the narrator refers to Eve as “our credulous Mother” (9.644), while Satan refers to the tree as “Mother of Science” (9.680). Taken together, Eve becomes not only the “mother” ur-symbol biologically, but culturally too. Eve’s connection to both biology and culture is made clear by her final words before eating the fruit: “what hinders then, / To reach, and feed at once both Bodie and Mind?” (9.778-9). Hers is a creative urge, and resonant of progress. She “reaches” (with all that implies - extension, penetration, grasping) feeding not just “body” but also “mind,” and giving birth to erotic joy - manifested in hers and Adam’s intense sexual congress, and then following that shame.

Now that they are naked and ashamed in a hostile world, and in Peterson’s interpretation, thus aware of their vulnerability, they are compelled into their second creative act, after sexual intercourse, which is to dress themselves, that is, to start to overcome their vulnerability. Brene Brown is unequivocal about the meaning of vulnerability: to be vulnerable is tantamount to the need to act. “Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change.” In so much, Eve’s violation, her willingness to make herself vulnerable, to open herself to shame, and to risk death in pursuit of “intellectual food” (9.768), makes her the symbolic mother of human culture. Likewise, Satan’s raping of his daughter Sin, their offspring creation Death, and his leading of Eve through his sexually charged temptation - make him the creator of the

flawed world, as the Bible has it - “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4.4), “the prince of this world” (John 12.31) - of imperfection, hunger, limitation, and, ultimately, death; but also of differentiation, freedom, choice, and meaning - all of which relate to the development of consciousness.

In this regard, Satan’s behaviour reveals his understanding of the tensions inherent in being human, most pertinently, the tensions between the body and the spirit, and how the mind as interface, is the most fertile ground for manipulation. Between lines 679-732, he teases Eve with fifteen rhetorical questions, including: “Shall that be shut to Man, which to the Beast / Is open?” (9.691-2). “[O]f evil, if what is evil / Be real, why not known, since easier shunnd” (9.698-9). And “[W]herein lies / Th’ offence, that Man should thus attain to know?” (9.725-6). Then in conclusion, he implores her: “these, these and many more / Causes import your need of this fair Fruit” (9.730-1). Satan is devious enough to label his list of rhetorical questions as “causes” and “needs.” Having wooed and flattered, he abruptly frames his statements and questions not in terms of insinuation or suggestiveness, but in terms of ontological necessity. Eve must create the first cause to start history. In my reading, Eve is tricked not because she is intellectually limited, but because Satan taps into her latent desire, as revealed to Adam in their discussion before she is tempted: for differentiation, freedom, and choice. Satan offers her the independence she had sought from Adam, and which he had only begrudgingly given her; yet Adam did ultimately trust Eve. Satan, in the guise of phallic snake seducer, that is, as a transmogrified Adam, comes to Eve with the certitude that Adam lacked. This play between doubt and desire is eloquently summarised by Eve; speaking of the apple, she says: God’s “forbidding / Commends thee more” (9.753-4). Though the fruit in and of itself is tempting, the injunction not to eat is even more so despite the knowledge something terrible will happen. The intrinsic humanity of such desire would be explicitly explored around 170 years later by Edgar Allan Poe in “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), and scientifically reaffirmed after a further 170 years by neuroscience (see Bruneau). Furthermore, Truong et al’s recent paper entitled: “An Unforgettable Apple: Memory and Attention for Forbidden Objects” demonstrated that “the presentation of a forbidden object increases rather than decreases attention to said object” (811). The trickster principle of self-destructive behaviour and violating taboos seems to be inscribed into the human brain. Adding to this potent mix, Satan’s trickster discourse, in the psychological terms of Daniel Kahneman, “primes” Eve to desire the

apple over all the other fruits (53). In his archetypal structural analysis of storytelling in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2005), Christopher Booker sees this as inevitable: “Of course whenever such a prohibition is issued in a story...we know it will be disobeyed” (313).

In eating, Eve creates meaning. The poem mentions “free will” in multiple places throughout the poem, in Books 2, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10. In Book 5, Raphael specifically warns Adam of Satan’s approach, and emphasizes that he has free will. But the injunction is largely meaningless. Adam and Eve have free will, so long as they obey one command: not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve expresses this idea in the formulation of a conundrum: “For good unknown, sure is not had, or had / And yet unknown, is as not had at all” (9.756-7). As there is only one injunction, so there is only a single way to enact free will, and through action to give the term meaning: to eat from the tree of knowledge. By doing so, Eve creates free will as a meaningful term. She puts, so to speak, verbs into the world. Previously, Adam had merely named things, that is, they had lived in a symbolic world of nouns, of objects; that is, a world of infantile simplicity. By doing the one thing she is trespassing from doing, Eve creates meaning in terms of actions having consequences, of cause and effect, of science and knowledge. It is through the trickster Satan’s seduction of Eve that Eden as the reflection of a stagnant Heaven is shaken by its foundations, and unchanging security is opened to chaos; that is, the trickster’s world of differentiation, change, tension, and open-ended creativity. In the Adam and Eve myth as rendered in *Paradise Lost*, trickster as Satan, becomes the trickster ur-symbol of progress.

There are two further things to note in conclusion. At the beginning of this essay, I made the claim that Satan, at the deep structural level of the story, plays both a creative and a comedic role. As a creation myth, I argue, the story hits all the deep structural necessities of a comedy. Although Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots* explicitly places the Creation Myth as a separate category outside that of comedy, within the epistemology of his focus on the “archetypal rules” (6) of storytelling, there are essential parallels. Comedy, for Booker, at its deepest level is about identity and consciousness. Essential to the thematic purpose of comedy is that “true identity or natures are revealed” (117). Moreover, “the real preoccupation of comedy is consciousness: what people are aware of” (151). The ending is predicated upon “an exhilarating sense of life renewed” (128).

As I have argued, *Paradise Lost* is about humankind's liminal identity on earth, strung between God on high and the Devil below. It is about the forming of consciousness, and how humans are cut off from "that state of nature where every animal lives in unthinking obedience to instinct" (547). And as the symbolic parents of history, and Eve the mother of culture, the story tells of renewal. As a creation myth, the story still functions, for all its moralising and tragic sensibility, as an ontological comedy: the story of the birth of humankind, that is, in Hyde's sense, the "time-haunted" (14) trickster's world: "the world as it is" (121).

Saying this, however, Satan as trickster, has his limitations. It has been well noted that in *Paradise Lost*, Satan receives, as is the Devil's wont, "all the best tunes" or in the case of an epic poem "lines." Milton's Satan is not ostensibly funny, and as a trickster this seems like a serious limitation. Yet he is an outsider, and as Fred Parker notes in *The Devil as Muse: Blake, Byron, and the Adversary* (2011), he is "an aesthetic agent, not an ethical dilemma" (29-30), and within the western imagination has become the ur-inspiration and the symbolic precursor of creativity and art. As such, it might be said, he is the very spirit of the cognitive playfulness that Brian Boyd theorises as the central tenet of creativity. As a literary work, the Bible lacks humour. Milton's Devil might not be funny, but in tricking Eve he puts wit into the mouths of men.

Part Two: Shakespearian Tricks

The scholars Jan Kott, Richard Hillman, and Kirby Farrell have all analyzed the trickster qualities of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to various degrees. However, it is Robert C. Evans who has written most extensively on the subject and who offers an insightful consideration of the multiplicity of ways in which Puck meets many of the trickster criteria theorized by a variety of scholars. However, there seems to be no scholarship that reads the trickster motif into two other characters. As the sociologist Robert Nisbet points out, Shakespeare “yielded to no one in respect for, almost reverence for, authority in society” (3). Authority implies the structure of hierarchies. In my analysis, Shakespeare employs the trickster principle, to lesser degrees and thus hierarchically, to two other of the plays characters, namely, Lysander and Bottom. Moreover, trickster motifs and imagery permeate the very structure and language of the play lending the narrative a richly textured trickster thematic that runs throughout.

First of all I will briefly recap and extend from Evan’s analysis of Puck demonstrating that character’s trickster credentials. I will then consider, in turn, how though less markedly and powerfully by degrees, both Lysander and Bottom are also coded as trickster figures - echoing Puck’s mischief in the mortal realm. Finally, I will show how trickster imagery and motifs are patterned into the textual fabric of the narrative at both the linguistic and structural levels.

In his essay analyzing Puck, Evans considers how the character “fits the various criteria that scholars have proposed as the common characteristics of tricksters.” To do this he mostly uses a variety of the scholarship from Doty and Hynes’ *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (1993). As Evans notes, when Puck first appears, he is immediately referenced in trickster terms, Titania’s fairy describing him as “shrewd and knavish” (2.1.400). As Evans surmises: “Puck, then, is no sooner identified in the play than he begins to be associated with some of the most common features of an archetypal trickster.” Here I’d like to extend from Evans’ analysis, and show how there are also perhaps more subtle and secondary trickster codings at work.

Puck – A Metaphysical Trickster

Puck, in a line of some irony, and even more immediately than Evans notes, gently introduces himself as trickster. He opens his account by asking Titania's fairy "whither wander you?" (2.1.368). As Doty and Hynes, citing Radin, Kerényi, and Jung, point out about tricksters of the North American tradition, and Ellwood indicates about the Japanese trickster Susa-no-o, trickster is frequently characterised as a perpetually "wandering" figure. This is very quickly reinforced when Puck, having been identified by the fairy, labels himself a "merry wanderer of the night" (2.1.411). Moreover, as Hyde contends, the trickster doesn't just wander, but does so "aimlessly" (12). Titania's fairy is working. It is Puck, who in the same speech and having given examples of his trickery, concludes: "A merrier hour was never wasted there" (2.1.425). It is Puck who is without seeming purpose, and, indeed, his reason for being in the forest is left unresolved. That Puck's master, Oberon, and his wife, Titania, next come on scene suggests, perhaps, that Puck is awaiting their arrival, but it is left ambiguous; as Hynes points out, the trickster is "fundamentally ambiguous" and so this only sharpens Puck's rendering as a trickster figure.

There is another subtle glossing of Puck as trickster. The fairy calls Puck "thou lob of spirits" (2.1.383). The fairy's suggestion is that Puck is in some ways dull, or slow-witted. This gives him an immediate connection to earthly matters, which fits his role as trickster; he is the connector between the spiritual realm of the fairies' magic, and the material realm of the play's protagonists. Throughout the play, there are numerous references to the speed of the fairies; this physical speed is resonant with their speed of thought, their wit, and their willful teasing of the play's human protagonists - all of which is reinforced by the condensed time line of the action. Puck will later denounce the humans: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (3.2.1152). By referencing him as a "lob" the fairy immediately connects him with the humans, and this suits his trickster role. Both Hyde and Doty have both written extensively on the Greek mythological figure of Hermes as trickster; like Hermes, Puck is a messenger - connecting the will of his master, Oberon, with more earthly matters.

Another facet that Evans skirts around but can be explored more fully is Puck's relation to another aspect that Doty sees as central to Hermes' trickster sensibility, those

pertaining to “erotic and relational” matters. Puck, as already mentioned, calls himself “that merry wanderer of the night.” That is, he is active at the time of the romantically symbolic moon, and the traditional period of sexual activity. There is also an element of farcical, trickster humour to his acts. As he watches the muddled lovers, Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena confuse themselves, he declares: “And those things do best please me, / That befall preposterously” (3.1.1158). In pursuit of such ends, he “frights the maidens of the villagery;” (2.1.402). He “bootless make the breathless housewife churn;” (2.1.404). Hynes describes being a “shapeshifter” as a key characteristic of tricksters; and Doty notes trickster’s association with “gender multiplicity.” In the third act, when Puck tricks the common players rehearsing their play, he references how effortlessly he transforms between horse, hound, hog, headless bear, and fire (3.1.924-5). Puck sexualises this ability when he imaginatively changes gender and tricks a horse by pretending to be “a filly foal” (2.1.414). Moreover, “sometime lurk I in a gossip’s bowl, / In very likeness of a roasted crab, / And when she drinks, against her lips I bob” (2.1.416-8). As Evans points out, “Puck here makes literal physical contact with a woman near the very bottom of the Elizabethan social structure,” That he touches her lips is an erotic gesture. He is also the purveyor of Oberon’s “love-juice” (3.2.1069) that, merely by being touched upon the eyes of one who sleeps, induces them to love whomsoever they first see upon awakening; that the “sap” of the plant is symbolised as “juice” only further sexualises the metaphor.

The structural indicators of sexualised trickery and the direct connection to Puck, however, go beyond even this. In various places in the play, Shakespeare uses juxtaposed transitions to subtly reinforce the power of the imagery. For example, no sooner has Puck introduced himself, than Titania’s fairy introduces herself as flying “Over hill, over dale” (2.1.369) and throughout the land “Swifter than the moon’s sphere; / And I serve the fairy queen, / To dew her orbs upon the green” (2.1.376-7). As with *Paradise Lost*, this is imagery linking the feminine to the land. The romantic theme of the play is fortified by the symbolism of the “moon.” That the fairy’s job is to moisten the land only increases the sexual connotations. This is doubly bolstered when Titania meets Oberon and they declare:

Titania: What, jealous Oberon! Fairies, skip hence:
I have forsworn his bed and company.
Oberon: Tarry, rash wanton: am I not thy lord? (2.1.429-31).

They immediately start arguing about romantic deceits played on one another. Titania accuses Oberon of “versing love / To amorous Phillida” (2.1.436-7). Oberon counters, asking if she doesn’t realise “I know thy love to Theseus?” (2.1.445). No sooner has Puck laid out his own sexually charged escapades with the common women, than his superiors lay out their own amongst their own class. In shades of Lysistrata, Titania is withholding sex as punishment for a warring - “with thy brawls thou hast disturb’d our sport” (2.1.456) - husband. There is a sense of promiscuity, with Oberon and Titania both using seemingly charmed humans for their own sexual escapades. Moreover, immediately Titania leaves Oberon, he conceives the central conceit of the play, the trick, rendered romantic and therefore sexual, to be executed by Puck: the use of the aforementioned “love-juice” to trick the play’s lovers into - from Oberon’s point-of-view - correctly realigned actions.

Oberon, in explaining this central tenet of the play, extends the earlier references made by Lysander (1.1.176) and Helena (1.1.246) to Cupid. Again the imagery is erotically suggestive. “At a fair vestal” (2.1.530) Cupid “loosed his love-shaft” (2.1.531). Yet “young Cupid’s fiery shaft / Quench’d in the chaste beams of the watery moon” (2.1.534-5) misses its target, and instead hits a flower: “Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound, / And maidens call it love-in-idleness” (2.1.539-40). The virgin ends up “fancy-free” (2.1.536). The imagery is directly sexualised. Cupid’s target is a beautiful virgin. In masculine imagery, he “looses” his passionate “fiery” arrow, a “love-shaft”, at her. Then the imagery turns feminine, yet no less eroticised, with wetness being central: Cupid’s arrow is “quenched” by a “watery” moon. Then the imagery is finally united, as the “milk-white” flower instead of the maiden is “deflowered,” and becomes “purple with love’s wound.” That the love it leaves should be “idle” only opens it to trickster meddling. Indeed, in the same way that Puck is coded as a “knaveish” trickster, so he, in turn, equates such a characteristic with Cupid: “a knaveish lad” (3.1.1514). In these ways, the play codes not only Puck, but the whole ontology of the narrative structure within a trickster realm of romanticism and eroticism, and codes within that themes of deceit, multiplicity, pluralism, and transgression.

These structural indicators work trickster motifs and principles into the very fabric of the play. To explore how this operates at a secondary level, I will now show how Lysander, the principle male character, is rendered as a trickster.

Lysander and Hermia are in love. Unfortunately, Egeus, Hermia's father, has promised his daughter to Demetrius, whom the father prefers as a suitor over Lysander. As is made clear, Lysander, like the trickster Hermes, is a social climber. At two different places in the play, Lysander is portrayed as such. Hermia says of her situation: "O cross! too high to be enthrall'd to low" (1.1.142). And Lysander says of himself: "My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd, / If not with vantage, as Demetrius':" (1.1.106-7). As Hyde points out, a refusal to accept the status quo, to allow the current situation to define the future, "to slip the trap of culture" is central to the Hermes' trickster sensibility (204). Again this also resonates with Bassil-Morozow's formula of the trickster as "a metaphor for change." Change is precisely what Lysander is looking to instigate.

That he should look to create change in a way that is represented through a lens of mischievous, trouble making deceit only compounds his trickster credentials. Right at the play's beginning, Egeus directly accuses Lysander of behaving in one of the key ways that Hynes outlines as key characteristics of the trickster: as "deceiver/trick-player" in his seduction of his daughter.

This man hath bewitch'd the bosom of my child;
 Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
 And interchanged love-tokens with my child:
 Thou has by moonlight at her window sung,
 With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
 And stolen the impression of her fantasy
 With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits,
 Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats, messengers
 Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth:
 With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart,
 Turn'd her obedience, which is due to me,
 To stubborn harshness: (1.1.31-43).

The imagery and vocabulary are unmistakably coded in similar terms to the pranks attributed to Puck. Lysander has "bewitched" the girl. Within the ontology of the play, such implies the magic and sorcery of the fairies, and specifically Puck, as the chief

purveyor of fairy magic at the human level. There is a relational aspect with the “interchange” of “love-tokens” suggesting a boundary crossed. He has created a forbidden relationship, and as becomes clear a few lines later, breached what should have been a secure border protected by Athenian law. Again, this directly correlates Lysander with Puck who acts as Oberon’s mischievous interface with the material world, the transgressor between earthly and spiritual boundaries. Lysander, the accusation runs, “feigns,” that is, he pretends and thus tricks Hermia into believing that which is not real, merely an “impression” of her “fantasy;” this parallels Puck’s trickery and transformations as he changes shapes and pretends to be various animals, or even the force of fire. That he has “stolen” or “filched” her “fantasy” echoes the trickster as thief motif, which as Hynes notes is reminiscent of Hermes, and moreover, as Manzoor notes, of Prometheus as a trickster. He has employed “cunning” to create this “impression” and used “conceits” and “knacks” and “trifles” for his gain. Again this links Lysander to Puck. Just as Puck is a “shrewd and knavish sprite” (2.1.400) who loves “sport” (3.1.1409-10) and all things “That befall preposterously” (3.1.1158), so in turn Egeus sees Lysander as living up to the first syllable of his name: a “cunning” liar who “steals” female affections through his innate talent or “knack” for using unimportant or inconsequential “trifles” to his advantage. Egeus sees his daughter as naive - “unhardened.” Thus her reasoned “obedience” to him has been sullied and rendered “stubborn” and “harsh.” As prey to such unsound or unreasonable stratagems that fail to carry proper authority or weight, she is open to a cunning manipulator. Such she finds in Lysander. Egeus sketches her suitor in trickster terms: as an unscrupulous player - wily, artful, mischievous and dishonest.

Moreover, the whole tenet of Egeus complaint against Lysander and Hermia revolves around the alleged dismantling of proper authority and structure. Egeus makes it plain: “she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius” (1.1.102-3). Theseus, as ultimate authority of Athens, agrees: “your eyes must with his [her father’s] judgment look” (1.1.62). Lysander therefore behaves in a second of the key ways that Hynes outlines as key characteristics of the trickster: not only as “deceiver/trick-player” as outlined above, but through his trickery, he has also upended the status quo, and in so much behaved as a “situation-invertor.” Egeus, as authority, has promised his daughter’s hand in marriage to Demetrius. Lysander’s actions have flipped this plan on its head. The father being as stubborn as the daughter calls upon the law that she should

either marry Demetrius or be put to death. Theseus lays out her options, which are either to “die the death or abjure / For ever the society of men” (1.1.70-1), and become a nun. If she refuses to marry the unloved Demetrius, and create in dramatic terms, a traditional comic ending to the narrative, one signalling birth and cultural renewal, she must either face the tragic consequences of death, or in living, put herself into a convent. Either way, it is Lysander who has inverted the situation. She is no longer obedient and dutiful. The “natural” situation has been flipped on its head. Filial obedience is in rebellion.

There is another element, symbolically and comically rendered in the play, that furthermore demonstrates Lysander’s trickster inversions. It is Puck, as the play’s most powerful trickster who inadvertently tricks his fellow trickster. When the fairy mistakenly applies the “love-juice” to Lysander’s eyes, he tricks him into swapping the allegiance of his love from Hermia to Helena. Once this is done and Lysander attempts to woo Helena, she accuses him in much the same way Egeus had: of being dishonest and for purposes of entertainment and sport of trying to trick her. It becomes a comedy of pain; Helena’s suffering for the audience’s amusement and laughter. The contrary nature of this only adds to its trickster relevance.

Indeed, part of the “trick” of the play as a whole is to make the audience root for the lovers to find a way to be together, and to see Lysander not as a deceitful malcontent who in Hermia’s words, “riddles very prettily” (2.2.707), but rather as an ardent lover, and one equal to his beloved, one who we wish to see, as Hynes puts it, “overturn any person, place, or belief, no matter how prestigious.” Of course, to fully reverse this situation, Lysander will need help. This help will be forthcoming from the character who Evans concludes is in the final analysis a “comrade and kindly benefactor” and “a well-intentioned messenger.” It is the character I am equating to Lysander in the above regards, his trickster superior: Puck.

If Lysander is a trickster who receives benevolent help from his trickster superior, even if only for “sport” and even if mocked - “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (3.1.1152) - there is another character who falls into a more common trickster theme, as Erdoes and Ortiz label it: that of “Tricking the Trickster” (94). That character is Bottom.

Bottom – the Trickster as Fool

Bottom's trickster credentials, just like Puck's and Lysander's, are outlined immediately. What first becomes apparent is that he is a fool. He says to Quince's enquiry as to whether everyone is present (a party of six which could be easily reviewed by eye): "You were best to call them generally, man by man," (1.2.266). He makes the first of many linguistic mistakes, using the word "generally" when he means "individually." He then renames the play in which they are to appear as "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby" (1.2.276). This second mistake is an absolute inversion of the comedy/tragedy genre expectation of the audience, but not only does it cue Bottom as the most buffoonish of the play's characters, it also indicates the primary of Hynes' key characteristics: "the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster." Bottom introduces their play (and as a play within a play - a reflection of the greater whole) that here - in *Midsummer* - is something incongruous and contrary. This is thematised within the play by the male lover's switching between devotions to their "true" loves, and likewise between Titania and her engineered obsession with Bottom.

Bottom's anomalous ambiguity is next signified by his comments on the play's characters. He is due to play the male lead: Pyramus. He asks: "What is Pyramus? a lover, or a tyrant?" (1.2.283). He then waxes about his ability to play a lover, but preference to be a tyrant. Then, incongruously, he wishes to also take the female lead: "let me play Thisby too" (1.2.310). As well as being logistically impossible, it signals a desire that Doty and Hynes note prevalent amongst tricksters: to shift gender. As Hynes notes, "the trickster is always more than can be glimpsed at any one place or in any one embodiment." This is further reinforced when Bottom states his wish to "play the lion too" (1.2.327). In this way Bottom is characterised as Puck-lite: capable (even if only in his own mind) of playing male, female and animal. Adding to the anomalous qualities is his boast that he will "roar you as gently as any sucking dove" (1.2.338-9). He then contemplates in what coloured beard he should play Pyramus: "in either your straw-colour / beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain / beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your / perfect yellow" (1.2.348-51). He not only demonstrates some genuine trickster speed in the linguistic vision he paints of quick-fire

transformations, but it is also parlayed through a lens that Laura Makarius associates with trickster behaviour: “acting inconsistently and absurdly.” Given what Allison Protas et al. call the beard’s association with “manhood, virility and sovereignty... and...male dignity...,” such connotations are here lampooned and turned into what Doty terms “symbolic inversion, multiplicity of representation and transformation,...” Bottom is no sooner introduced than he reveals himself, at least within his own imagination, as a harmless master of absurdity and transformation: that is, as an overtly comic and buffoonish trickster.

As already mentioned, Shakespeare uses juxtaposition to frame themes and structurally indicate variation upon those themes. Bottom, in this manner, introduces Puck. The final lines of Act 1 are Bottom’s, and are seemingly, in terms of plot mechanics or character development, unnecessary. Quince having arranged for the players to meet later, Bottom declares: “Enough; hold or cut bow-strings” (1.2.365). Edward Capell’s explanation of the line that it was an standardized assurance to “keep promise” while historically significant lacks any kind of poetic or dramatic reasoning. In as much, I read this line as serving several functions. It gives Bottom the last word, and it does disperse the men. But it also creates an image of a bow string being cut, which while a threat to a bowman, here becomes an absurd image of a bow being misused; bows are mentioned in four other places in the play, three times romantically - the first of which is in the opening scene by Hippolyta and relates to her upcoming wedding night, and twice to specifically indicate Cupid. The other time is to represent the speed of Puck. Such resonances create a compounding effect; the love of the play’s “highest” characters; Puck as speedy trickster; Puck/Cupid as bestower’s of love; all these associations now reduced to a cliché that takes on a new and entirely “low” resonance: the hapless Bottom as love’s swift commissary. All of these signifiers are compounded by purposely giving the final line of Act 1 to Bottom, and the first line of Act 2 to Puck; it acts as a dramatic device of compare and contrast correlation. This reinforces Bottom’s trickster credentials, as the audience moves from the lowest rung of this trickster ladder to the highest - defying boundaries - in one quick trickster maneuverer by Shakespeare.

For Bottom, as his name implies, resides at the bottom of this trickster hierarchy. He is the most earthly not only of the tricksters, but of all the common players, as Puck makes clear when transforming him into an ass, denouncing him as amongst his peerage of “rude mechanicals” as “The shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort” (3.2.1043). That

he should become the adored of the “highest” of the female leads reveals the ability of a transformative trickster to pass seamlessly across social boundaries. That he is “Nick Bottom, the weaver” (1.2.280) also seems significant in this regard. His plot role is intrinsically “woven” into the fabric of the tale, and as “Nick” he unwittingly steals - completely transgressing proper boundaries - a Queen’s heart. As a boundary crosser, it is also interesting to note that it is his idea that “Some man or other must present Wall:” (3.1.878). The wall in the play that Bottom and his cohorts present is the boundary that separates the lovers of their play: Pyramus and Thisby. As presumably the players have no props at their disposal, Bottom decides that this Wall should be capitalized into Wall and personified as such. This is a brilliant transformative gesture, transmogrifying the symbolic resonance of the wall with humanity, a demonstration of the human will to define and delineate, and at the same time, to transgress such boundaries: it is the “highest” and contrarily - in trickster fashion - deepest symbolic resonance of the play’s trickster motifs. That it should go to Bottom, the lowest of the trickster characters, is the second most subtle of trickster devices employed by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare – Trickster as Architect

The most subtle lies in the symbolic structuring of the plot. Fred Nour, in *True Love: How to Use Science to Understand Love* (2017), argues love is a brain process that unfolds across four stages. These stages are divided by the brain’s chemical response, and stimulate varying biochemical and thus emotional reactions. The first stage is mate selection in which lover’s select the person they desire. Stage two is the romantic phase, in which love is blind and lovers are so besotted with one another that they cannot see faults in their chosen mates. The third stage is the most interesting; it is the process of falling out of love, and it is the key stage; it allows a more objective analysis of the relationship; faults are now seen; flaws are analysed, and the previously perfect paragon inevitably comes up short. It is an essential phase, as without it, a devoted lover would never be able to move on. For example, if a man were in stage two and a woman in stage three, and she decided to end the relationship, the man needs to be able to pass through stage three before he can return to stage one. However, if a relationship survives this phase, then true love, the final phase can be entered. In the parlance of love

songs, the four stages take us through the “Boys Boys Boys”/“Walk This Way” phase of pursuit to the “The Best - Edit”/“Just the Way You Are” phase of devotion to the “You’re So Vain”/“The Thrill Is Gone” phase of disillusion to the “How Do I Live”/“When I’m Sixty-Four” phase of happily ever after. In its predation, irrationality, boredom, waywardness and reversals, love itself can be read as emotion’s very own trickster metaphor.

Read in such a way, the trickster narrative of *Midsummer*, in its complex interweaving of events, means that the whole play can be conceived as an aesthetic rendering of this entire process. At the play’s beginning, Helena and Demetrius are both in stage two, but in being shunned are held in a phase one position. Lysander and Hermia are devotedly in a mutual phase two. Oberon and Titania are in phase three. Of course by plays end, the two pairs of young lovers are happily besotted in phase two - or perhaps Lysander is now in the fourth phase - the same as Oberon and Titania. The trickster element to the structure of the play, the drama of the whole piece, lies in its playful manipulation of the second and third stages in particular, but the first also: Egeus rejects his daughter’s mate selection; Titania considers her options with the hapless Bottom; Lysander falls out of love only to realise he was mistaken all along; Demetrius falls out of love so that he might be able to fall in love again. By the workings of Nour’s theory, it would seem that through the joys and sorrows of a single night, Shakespeare creates a vision of the entire process of love, from conception to maturation, conceived as a convoluted trickster process.

In this section I have attempted to show how it is not only Puck who is written as a trickster in *Midsummer*, but in a hierarchical fashion, so too, are Lysander and Bottom both formulated as trickster characters. This gives the play an overall trickster theme that is interwoven across levels. It goes as far as to even make the “highest” of the characters, Oberon, play trickster when he touches Titania’s eyes with “love-juice”, and this permeates down, via his trickster-in-chief servant, Puck, who takes such tricks to the mortal world. Moreover, Shakespeare’s, the master trickster, weaves into the narrative structure of the story a thematic exposition of love as the ultimate trickster emotion.

In the next section, I would like to outline why Iago, though a trick player, should not be considered a trickster figure.

Iago as Trickster

Various scholars have perceived Iago as a trickster character. Irving Ribner reads Iago's role in the play as being that of a "morality Vice" (94). In this way, he can be read as a trickster, as what William R. Dynes calls "a conflation of the *dolosus servus*, the crafty servant of Roman New Comedy, and the Vice of the English morality play" (366). Robert Bell conceives of Iago as "an abusive trickster, juggler of words, punster, riddler, and scourge, shrewd, vulgar, and cogent" (111). He can also be read through Rene Girard's conception of the parallels between the trickster and *The Scapegoat* (1986). Iago doesn't directly destroy Othello. His trick, arguably, "only becomes truly wicked because of the stupid brutality of" Othello and his "blind tendency to react antagonistically" (85-6). Such an interpretation is only reinforced by Othello's stranding as a soldier, as a man professionally conditioned towards violence. It is certain that it is possible to read Iago as a trickster figure. Yet the question is a contentious one. Below I'd like to consider some other ways in which trickster suggestiveness is woven into the thematic structure of Iago's character; how he is coded in many ways as a trickster. Having done that, I will conclude by demonstrating how the only trickster at work in Othello is Shakespeare, for in the final analysis Iago is a pure villain. He lacks the ambivalence and ambiguity, the chaotic curve ball randomness, and the ultimately creative function of the trickster.

The question of Iago's motivation is imbued with a tricksterish essence. He is connected to Satan by both his wife, Emilia, and Lodovico who directly calls him a "viper" (5.1.3644); this associates him directly to *Paradise Lost*, and certainly with what amounts within that story to a revenge plot. As I have already documented, the trickster is highly motivated by sex. In Radin's rendition of the traditional trickster cycle of Wakdjunkaga, the theme of vengeance is also highly apparent. A father seeks revenge on the trickster; and the trickster takes revenge on a hawk, a mink, and a coyote. In his revenge on the coyote, he even mixes these two motivations with grotesque affect: his payback consists of tricking the mink post-coitus into defecating on a chief's daughter. This mix of sexual tension and revenge (minus the grotesquerie) is neatly encapsulated in Iago's professed motivation in seeking to destroy Othello. "And it is thought abroad,

that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office: I know not if't be true;" (1.3.744-5). Iago requires no more than a rumour to seek vengeance, with Ribner calling him "a personification of jealousy;..." (94). This motivational combination of revenge and sexual suspicion, whilst not in itself directly indicative of a trickster narrative, is certainly thematically suggestive and congruent with classic trickster motifs, both in traditional trickster narratives, as well as in the canon of English literature.

More concretely, there are various ways in which Iago reveals trickster characteristics. At the beginning of the play, he makes it clear that there is a difference between what he "seems" and what he "is." He says of himself: "I am not what I am" (1.1.67). This immediately links his self-image to Hynes' conception of the trickster as a "deceiver/trick player." Compounding this sense of trickery is the fact that whilst the audience is in on the deception, the other characters in the play remain largely unaware until either the end of the play, or their deaths. For example, shortly before Iago murders him, Roderigo has started to suspect his supposed friend's motives: "your words and / performances are no kin together" (4.2.2955-6). Beyond such misgivings, however, Iago pulls off the deception of seeming entirely honest whilst being altogether dishonest. As A. C. Bradley notes, that Iago was honest "was the opinion of practically everyone who knew him." Indeed, of the forty-six mentions of the word honest, eleven of them refer directly to Iago - across ten different incidents. He uses the word twelve times himself; combined these numbers mean that half of the usages of the word "honest" are directly connected to Iago. There is a resonance here with *Paradise Lost*, and Satan's appearing to Eve as a serpent; Satan remarks on his choice of disguise: "Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark, / As from his wit and native suttletie / Proceeding, which in other beasts observ'd / Doubt might beget of Diabolic pow'r" (9.92-4). Eve concurs that the seeming miracle of the serpent's ability to reason and speak makes him: "so friendly grown" (9.564-5). Satan chooses to disguise himself as a snake as he sees it as being above suspicion. That malignant Iago should disguise himself, in Othello's words, as "honest, honest Iago" (5.1.3489) is his most devious trick, and that he is the least honest of the play's characters only reinforces the ingenuity of his duping all those around him.

There is also an element of Hynes' "shape-shifter" to this. Even as he deceives through his continually referenced guise of straightforward honesty, to each character to whom he brings disaster, he shows a deliberately different face: to Othello he is a trusted

friend; to Cassio, a common yet noble soldier; to Roderigo he is an ally against Othello; to Desdemona, her protector on the sea voyage between the first and second acts, a clown to amuse her upon landing in the first scene of the second act, and in the second scene of the fourth act a friend to beseech for help with Othello's turn of mood against her. It is only his wife, and this unwittingly, who sees him clearly for what he is. In his manipulation, he seamlessly morphs, adjusting his actions, his speech, and his manner, to become the trusted confidante of those whom he seeks to most damage; reinforcing his trickery is that the more he changes between roles, adjusting himself to the desires, needs and weaknesses of those he dupes, the more he is perceived to remain constant and true: it is everyone's seeming conviction in his staidness that makes his slippery mutability all the more devastatingly effective.

He is also a master of reverse psychology. He employs it in parallel with the power of suggestion when he says to Othello: "Good heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend / From jealousy!" (3.3.1826-7). He plants ideas that he immediately disavows. This strategic employment of reverse psychology certainly seems like a trickster trope, for it is a subtle means with which to act as Hynes' "situation-inverter." Othello "is of a free and open nature," (1.3.756). Bradley points out that this made him "trustful, and thorough in his trust." Iago acts as trickster in using Othello's trust in him to upend his otherwise natural facility to trust Desdemona. As Hynes captures it: "what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside,..." Iago captures something of this essence when he describes his design to Roderigo: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him:" (1.1.43). It is only after murdering Roderigo that the malevolent irony of the line becomes fully abundant: for as Iago fakes friendship in "following" Othello to "serve" his "turn" upon him, so the duped Roderigo believes in Iago's friendship and "follows" him "serving" his purpose whilst awaiting the machinations of its dark "turn." As a "situation-inverting" trickster, all is reversed within Iago's world.

Moreover, Iago is certainly witty and cunning, and this seems to be of a piece with the trickster; as David Williams points out, a key weapon in the trickster's armoury is "a razor wit" (239). The most extended example of his masterful verbal acuity occurs in the first scene of the second act. As they await Othello's arrival from sea, Iago, for Desdemona's amusement, riddles about his opinions on women; whilst playful and witty, his riddles reveal a low opinion, overall, of women, perhaps best summarised with the line: "You rise to play and go to bed to work" (2.1.902). Desdemona

encourages him to riddle on the virtues of different types of women. His words are taken in jest. The trickster element is most clearly rendered when he, in Desdemona's words, "praisest the worst best" (2.1.932); in doing so, he reveals himself to embody another of Hynes' trickster traits, that of being "ambiguous and anomalous." In deviating from the norm, he inspires Desdemona to ask him to riddle on the topic of "a deserving / woman indeed" (2.1.933-4). Having built his rhyme to a point of resolution, he again deviates from the norm, ending on what Desdemona describes as a "most lame and impotent conclusion!" (2.1.949). Iago, in his role as a trickster, is expert at building an expectation and then completely undermining it, flipping it, or leaving it unresolved. In Gerald Vizenor's view, a lack of resolution is fundamental to trickster stories; they are narratives "that almost never end" (11). The trickster's narrative role is to open discourse rather than resolve it. Such use of Iago's wits - the lack of a definitive conclusion - is of a piece with his trickery of Othello, whom he teases with suggestions and innuendos, and then leaves at the edge of the abyss to make the final jump himself.

Why Iago Isn't Ultimately a Trickster

I have tried to lay out a case for why Iago might be considered a trickster. However, it is my conclusion that though Iago can be seen to personify certain trickster characteristics, he is not, in the final analysis, a trickster character. In this section, I would like to explore why.

First of all, I'd like to look at the ways in which Iago is simply too much of a master strategist. He acts with a purely selfish and cold certainty. As I said in the previous section, he is a master of reverse psychology, and whilst such a ploy inverts expectations in the manner that might be expected of a trickster, Iago's employment of it is done with such a cold and singular purpose that it undermines the "plurality, plurivocity, and ambiguity" that Hynes and Doty see as "essential to the trickster Gestalt." To Othello, he says: "Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it, / That he

would steal away so guilty - like, / Seeing you coming" (3.3.1668-70). The aim of his ire here is so accurately hit that it takes away from any of the "mess" that Babcock-Abrahams cites as essential to the trickster principle. Though the end result is "messy", it is at the level of unrelenting carnage. His strategic purpose is pure destruction; by play's end he is directly or indirectly responsible for a triple murder and suicide, as well as having ensured his own torture and likely death. This isn't the "dissolution" of the trickster as outlined by Bassil-Morozow in *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (24); he isn't returning having healed anything. Likewise, there is nothing of Hynes and Doty's "culture-hero" about Iago. His trickery brings none of the "boons" as described by Ricketts (335). The only trickster element resides in the fact of his partial failure, that he ends up caught, and in so much as Hynes puts it the "trickster-tricked," and yet such are his crimes, their consequences on others, and the price that he pays that the trickster element is usurped by the tragic consequences. His strategy, aiming at the downfall of Othello, and accepting whatever collateral damage might go along with that, is purely destructive and lacking any of the "ambiguity" that Hynes identifies as central to the trickster's conceits.

Warped Stoicism

Part of his ability as a cold, hard master strategist stems from his twisted take on his anti-trickster purely rational adherence to pseudo-stoic philosophy. He shows this when, having tricked Cassio into drunken impetuosity, he consoles him about his worries viz his compromised reputation: "you have lost no reputation at all, / unless you repute yourself such a loser" (2.3.1425-6). Later he encourages Othello to be "patient" even as he rushes him to his doom (3.3.2300). But even more forcefully, and at greater length, he reveals his perverted take on stoicism when talking to Roderigo, where he outlines a stoic's sense of belief in reason and will. "Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus / or thus" (1.3.677-8). He makes it plain that he believes in the individual's sovereignty to guide action: "the / power and corrigible authority of this lies in our / wills" (1.1.683-5). Iago's ethos is that "we have / reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal / stings, our unbitted lusts," (1.3.688-91). Love, to Iago, "is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of / the will" (1.3.693-4). It is a soldierly argument that he makes; feelings are under the jurisdiction of reason, of secondary import to the disciplined mind; he

rallies Roderigo to act with good, reasoned sense, “put money in thy purse” (1.3.701), as being key to wooing Desdemona away from Othello. It is this sense of discipline and order at the heart of his machinations that undermine Iago’s credentials as a trickster. Puck, by contrast, is ill-disciplined; he mistakes Demetrius for Lysander and then laughs about it; in turning Bottom into an ass, he acts on random chance; this is of a match with traditional tricksters from Wakdjunkaga in Radin’s cycle to the Chinese Monkey King from *Journey to the West* (1592). The trickster is all tactics and little to no strategy. Iago is a battlefield master, a strategist to the core. There is no “fool” in Iago; he is simply too rational and disciplined to be a trickster.

Too unrelentingly dark

He is also too unrelentingly dark. This tallies in with his destructiveness. Fanny Ragland describes him as “[t]he perfect villain.” He is “the personification of all evil, the superlative degree of evil.” When at the end of the first act, Iago describes his own plan, it is in such terms: “Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3.761-2). Then in the second act he outlines the strategic aims of his plans: “Divinity of hell! / When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows” (2.3.1502-4). He goes on to describe how he will “pour this pestilence into his [Othello’s] ear” (2.3.1508). Thus of Desdemona, he “will turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (2.3.1512-14). The imagery itself is a stream of dark allusions: of “hell,” “devils,” “blackest sins,” “pestilence” and “pitch;” contrasting and thus reinforcing them through inversion are the juxtaposed words: “divinity,” “heavenly” and “virtue.” There would be a trickster element to the inversions, except that the affect of the imagery is to create a relentlessly one-sided vision of destructive evil. Again, there is none of the trickster’s ambiguity, and none of the creative element.

That he talks about “pouring pestilence into Othello’s ear” does create a direct allusion with *Paradise Lost*. There is the same concept of inverting good into bad via words and the imagination; however, as ever with Iago, the tension he creates is entirely noxious. Whereas Satan plays on Eve’s curiosity and vanity, Iago plays on Othello’s naiveté and paranoia. This is a crucial difference; because Satan fell, humans awoke. In Christian mythology, Satan’s play on Eve’s emotions have a creative function that can be

superimposed with recent theories; for example, research by Matthew Keiren suggests a direct correlation between vanity and creative productivity; and John V. Wylie argues that vanity - the desire to be admired - is central to human sexual selection as well as the cultural and technological success of the species as a whole. On the other hand, Iago's play on Othello's emotions has no such creative outcome; his trickery is directed towards pure malevolence, towards the mutual destruction of Desdemona and Othello, the downfall of Cassio, the utilization and disposal of Roderigo, and ultimately, a risk he decides is worth taking, his own torture and death.

Cold Certainty

But his essential lack of trickster essence is nowhere better illustrated than through the pairing of the opening and the final lines of the play. That everything with Iago is a jump into the abyss is also perhaps his least tricksterish characteristic. Iago is ruin. Iago is destruction. Iago is a symbol of death. Such is anathema to the trickster spirit. This is evidenced at the beginning of the play. He appears in the middle of a conversation with Roderigo. His opening lines are: "'Sblood, but you will not hear me: / If ever I did dream of such a matter, Abhor me" (1.1.5-6). Brainerd Kellog writes that "'Sblood" unabbreviated means: "God's blood" and that such an expression, in Elizabethan England, was swearing. While profanity, the breaking of a linguistic taboo, and specifically one relating to a deity, seems like appropriate behaviour for a trickster, one for whom there is, in Hynes' words, "no taboo too sacred, no god too high", it is (if it is taken on faith that Shakespeare wasn't dealing in cliches) the use of the word "blood" that informs the audience that here walks a very dark character indeed. This reference to blood points to a tragic rather than comic character. In this way, immediately, the image of Iago as a trickster is undermined.

Moreover, his next injunction, that Roderigo will be mistaken, "you will not hear me" sends the audience a coded, double-pronged message, that not only will Roderigo be fooled by Iago, but that none of the characters will ultimately "hear" him for what he is. Again, this superficially points to a trickster characters at play, one who is going to be mistaken by his peers, one who is going to speak with one motive but act with another; however, the line, when taken in conjunction with Iago's final line, creates an altogether more sinister picture and one not at all in harmony with the picture of a trickster figure.

At the end of the play, Iago concludes with the following couplet: “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.3666-7). It is these words, ultimately, that differentiate Iago from a trickster. Taken together, the precept that “you will not hear me” because “I will not speak” is the antithesis of trickster’s function. Iago, seemingly opens discourse but in actuality, he closes it. His reverse psychology and his suggestiveness are used for purely destructive ends. Iago has none of the devil’s redeeming features. The devil is out to deal, but with Iago there’s no deal to be struck: he’s no trickster.

Part Three: Dr. Trickster and Mr. Poe

According to Stephen L. Mooney in “The Comic in Poe’s Fiction,” Edgar Allan Poe’s friend, the novelist and politician John Pendleton Kennedy, was the first to note the comedic flavour of Poe’s works, and suggested to him that he might write farces. In terms of scholarship, however, according to Donald Barlow Stauffer in *The Merry Mood: Poe’s Uses of Humor* (1982), it was Thomas Olive Mabbot in 1928 who was the first to note critically how the narrators of Poe’s *Tales of the Folio Club* (1832-6) had names that were “humorous and satirical” (174), and thus engender the debate on Poe’s humorous intentions. Following this, scholars of that period started noting more and more comedy evident in Poe’s canon: Walter Fuller Taylor remarked how Poe “did on occasion wear the jester’s motley” (330); while James Southall Wilson was convinced that Poe’s early stories “were meant as deliberate burlesques and satires” (215). In the intervening decades more scholars have registered the comic sway of Poe’s fiction. William Whipple, Edmund Reiss, and Eugene Kanjo all wrote about Poe’s use of humour. David Galloway writes that “comedies, satires and hoaxes account for more than half his total output of short stories,…” (qtd. in Tally Jr. 85). In “Comic Intent in Poe’s Tales: Five Criteria,” Mooney is in general agreement with this assessment, while expanding the reach of possible genres to include “farce, burlesque, or extravaganza” and moreover meditating upon the radical speculation that perhaps “Poe was never serious,…” (432). More recently, in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (2002), Daniel Royot dedicates a whole chapter to the exploration of Poe’s humour. In the same compendium, other scholars explore different aspects of Poe’s humour: in the “Editorial Matter,” Kevin J. Hayes writes: “Polonsky shows how two of Poe’s humorous tales reflect his aesthetic theory. Fisher and Goddu show how Poe combined horror with humor. Tresch shows how Poe’s sense of humor helped lead him to science fiction.” The slow critical acknowledgment of Poe’s humour is perhaps partially down to its trickster nature: its originality in veering between farce and satire, its frequency as a liminal presence in narrative genres that are, or were in Poe’s time, seemingly otherwise entirely incongruous with comedic purpose, all of which I’ll be exploring in my analysis.

Previous studies that have looked at the trickster principal as it applies to Poe have theorised various ways in which it manifests. Alexandra Lauren Correa Gabbard argues that Fortunato and Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado” (1841) are both trickster figures, as is the eponymous “Hop Frog” (1849). A study by Perry F. Hoberg proposes that Poe’s metaphysical contemplations in “Eureka: A Prose Poem” (1848) reveal him as a trickster-shaman expressing the mediation between “the rational (intellectual) and the irrational (physical)” in perceptions of the world (30). In “The Gold-Bug” (1843), Norman Stafford argues that through humour, ambiguity and structural inversions “Poe the author assumes the role of trickster” (74). David Leverenz meditates upon Poe as playing the trickster in various tales, yet perhaps most surprisingly in “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), reading it as an ironic take on the decaying culture of the deep south, and of its courtly vanities, a burlesque narrative in which Poe takes on “a trickster’s role at the alienated margin of gentry culture,…” (qtd. in Wright 14). Interestingly, while the plots of the “Gold-Bug” and “House of Usher” are on the surface similar, as Stafford points out, in their treatment they are vastly different, so much so that Stafford sees no trickster play in the latter story, reading it as a story of unmitigated horror. That Leverenz should read trickster humour and parodic mischief into the tale only demonstrates Poe’s success as a poly-semiotic trickster whose discourse generates a multiplicity of interpretations.

I’ll be adding to this general body of work on Poe as humorous trickster, taking my lead from Leverenz in showing the workings of Poe’s trickster subtleties in perhaps unexpected places, and by investigating three of his tales that haven’t been analysed through the trickster optic. To appreciate Poe’s play of the trickster as author, it is essential to read him through a comedic lens, for as Doty and Hynes note in their essay on Hermes, and Pelton on the West African trickster, comedy and humour is central to the trickster motif. Therefore, in this section, in exploring these comedic trickster aspects in Poe’s works, I’m going to first briefly consider Poe’s most successful ostensibly written “hoax.” Then I will see more specifically how such a prism of analysis operates in ways both subtle and stark, through technical and artistic flourishes, and genre bending inversions of perversity and grotesque phantasmagoria in two of Poe’s more gruesome works.

It is important to start with the “hoax” in Poe’s work, and as a general principle it should be noted that the “hoax” concept is central to this investigation. In “Richard

Adams Locke,” Poe refers to his age as “the epoch of the hoax.” Rachel Polonsky, in her consideration of his aesthetic sensibility, notes how “Poe was interested in intellectual games and hoaxes.” Expanding upon the theme, Royot writes: “Problematic views of his comic spirit should therefore consider the comedies and satires as a palimpsest with popular and classical material engraved in an elaborate literary creation transcending crude hoaxes and trivial yarnspinning.” I agree with Polonsky and Royot, and argue that Poe’s hoaxes went beyond works such as the “Unparalleled Adventures of Hans Pfall” (1835), “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” (1837), “The Journal of Julius Rodman” (1840), “The Great Balloon Hoax” (1844), “Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845), and “Von Kempelen’s Discovery” (1849). These were all stories delivered in the guise of fact, reportage or journalism, concerning happenings of more or less fantastical natures, and that were met with varying levels of success in the business of hoodwinking readers into credulity. “The Great Balloon Hoax,” according to *The Museum of Hoaxes*, “was, by far, Poe’s most successful hoax.” In his biography of Poe, James A. Harrison describes it as “a prodigious sensation” (195) and in “Richard Adams Locke” Poe himself described it as “a triumph.” Indeed, writing in 2017, Jeffrey A. Savoye states that although “probably not one of the great historical pranks, Poe’s “Balloon Hoax” still has the power to mislead and confound readers up to the current day” (257). Published in the hugely-successful penny daily tabloid the *New York Sun*, it tells of the story of real-life balloonist Monck Mason’s misadventures in a hot-air balloon: he sets off from England on a trip to Paris, the balloon’s propeller malfunctions due to an accident, and the balloonist is subsequently blown across the Atlantic to arrive in South Carolina - inadvertently making the first such transatlantic crossing.

In “Richard Adams Locke,” Poe makes it clear what he saw as being essential to the success of a good hoax: first comes originality or “novelty...;” the second that it should be sensational, that is, “fancy-exciting and reason-repressing...;” the third is the “consummate tact...” employed in the deception; and the fourth is stylistic, “the exquisite *vraisemblance* of the narration” (*italics* in original). All of these factors are apparent in the “Balloon-Hoax.” It is the first such transatlantic crossing; it causes a sensation in the public mind. The “consummate tact” of the deception is partially found through the medium of publishing; although this wasn’t *The Sun*’s first such hoax, which was the “Great Moon Hoax” (1835) dating from almost a decade earlier, the credence and authority of being a purported piece of journalism, and thus a reportage of

historical events faithfully reproduced create the tacit epistemological trust that is implied in the form and function of newspapers. As for the appearance of truth, Poe was apparently careful and meticulous in his research and use of resources. Harold H. Scudder and Walter B. Norris show how the story relied in large part on Monck Mason's own accounts of his real balloon voyages in *Account of the Late Aeronautical Expedition from London to Weilburg*, (1837). Moreover, in creating verisimilitude in the description of the balloon, Ronald Sterne Wilkinson demonstrates how Poe also gleaned a lot of information from "an anonymous 1843 pamphlet (probably written by Mason himself)" entitled "Remarks on the Ellipsoidal Balloon." Wilkinson reckons more than a quarter of the "Balloon Hoax," including the accompanying illustration, is directly attributable to Mason's accounts of balloon technology and his voyages. Although a complete fabrication, it was close enough to real-life events that the public knew had happened, which gave it credibility. Reinforcing this was the insertion of Mason, an acclaimed figure who had accomplished impressive balloon feats; moreover, the "authentic and accurate" conceit, as Poe writes in "The Balloon-Hoax" of using journal entries, "the joint diaries of Mr. Monck Mason and Mr. Harrison Ainsworth,..." in which to relate the narrative only added to the sense of reality.

So Poe's hoax here relied on all the factors he saw as essential in creating a potent hoax. As a trickster, Poe played on the tensions between fact and fiction, between belief and the desire to believe, and created a liminal text based upon pure possibility; he takes a trickster's contradictory position in regard to his story, mixing real historical personages and happenings with completely fabricated ones; and scientific and engineering achievements with sensationalised events. This blending of the real and the imaginary created a blurred image between the boundaries of possibility and probability, and the insertion of complete fiction into a source of factual news to create a giant public joke - all point to a trickster essence at the heart of the comedy: fact is inverted; boundaries of trust are broken; and while the butt of the joke might be the gullible public, the effect of it was to act as a gigantic advertisement for, in Woodberry's words, Poe himself: in the wake of its publication "Poe rode, Triton-like, on the crest of a wave of popularity,..." (195). He becomes, like his tribal trickster forebears, what John Greenway refers to as the "Culture Hero" (87).

But it is in his ostensibly fictive stories, the ones in which his imagination is entirely unleashed from the boundaries and borders of material physicality that Poe reveals

himself as playing the literary trickster in his most sophisticated and subtle guises of “hoaxing.”

The Tell-Tale Trickster

In this regard, the first story I’d like to analyse is perhaps a surprising one to investigate with regards to its revelation of humour. It is one of Poe’s most celebrated short stories, “The Tell Tale Heart” (1843). As a story of cold-blooded murder, it is not, technically speaking, a comic tale. However, I argue, in confounding expectation, by making what is ostensibly a Gothic horror tale, and compounding it with a satirical edge, the “The Tell Tale Heart” demonstrates Poe’s trickster ability to sabotage classification, creating a burlesque parody of the Gothic genre.

In the tale, an unnamed narrator attempts to pull off the diabolical scheme of perpetuating the perfect crime: an undetectable murder. It is written in the style of a confession, with the narrator telling the tale of his crime. As Christopher Benfey summarises: “We seem to be overhearing a conversation - one that began before our arrival on the scene - between a murderer and his interlocutor” (30).

Whilst acting as a confession of the narrator’s crime, the story also serves as a disavowal of a presumed accusation or diagnosis of insanity. The first thing to note is that the narrator simultaneously conflates the state of madness with that of “disease.” This connection between madness and “disease” is a reoccurring theme in Poe. Indeed, a variety of states of non-normative conditions of mind are linked to disease. This occurs in “Berenice” (1835) with the narrator’s description of his “monomania;” in “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” (1841) in which the unfortunate Dammit is humorously speculated by the narrator to have been “affected with the transcendental;” the description of alcoholism in “The Black Cat” (1843); and of hyperchondria in “The Journal of Julius Rodman” (1840); and in both “Eleonora” (1841) and in number twenty-three of “Fifty Suggestions” (1849), Poe directly and explicitly interweaves the states of disease, genius and madness: “What the world calls “genius” is the state of mental disease arising from the undue predominance of some one of the faculties. The works of such genius are never sound in themselves, and, in especial, always betray the

general mental insanity.” Poe’s whole oeuvre shows a preoccupation with characters, events, experiences, and feelings that are marginal, liminal, and of the edge, happenings that are in Hynes’ words of the trickster element, all that which is “outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order.”

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the end of the opening sentence is a rhetorical question: “why will you say that I am mad?” Yet in the very next sentence, he says: “The disease had sharpened my senses - not destroyed - not dulled them.” This short, introductory paragraph concludes with the narrator saying: “observe how healthily - how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (29). In these opening lines, the narrator manifests definite elements of what Bassil-Morozow describes as “the trickster impulse” with his discursive logics that “destabilise” the reader (9). In her analysis of the discursive elements of trickster stories, Anne Doueihi writes: “The features commonly ascribed to the trickster—contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery—are the features of the language of the story itself. If the trickster breaks all the rules, so does the story’s language; it breaks the rules of storytelling in the very telling of the story. If the trickster is a practical joker and a deceiver, so is the language of the story.” Contrary to the core (noted as essential to the trickster character by both Makarius and Robert D. Pelton), the narrator declares himself sane, and then in the next line whilst simultaneously conflating insanity and disease, both admits to having it, and yet insists that it doesn’t impair him physically, a logical non-sequitur. Insanity and “dulled senses” are not inextricably linked. He then, having declared himself “diseased,” insists upon how “healthily” and “calmly” he can relate the “whole story.” It is an extraordinary opening, in which the narrator insists upon his sanity, admits to madness, conflates insanity with disease, and announces himself both inflicted and entirely healthy of said disease. The language itself destabilises and disorients the reader. It also creates what Chuck Palahniuk would later call in his own fictions, a chorus, a repetitive refrain that chimes throughout the story. I argue that in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, this chorus is the avowal of sanity; the more the narrator insists upon his sanity, the more insane he appears to be, and indeed, the more insane becomes his behaviour. Moreover, each disavowal of madness is followed by a detail that serves only to reinforce the image of the character’s insanity. Such contrary deflating of expectation is essentially comic in affect.

He declares: “Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me.” He then celebrates his ability to deceive the old man, to essentially trick him. “I was never

kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.” Not only is this a trick, but in parsing is humorous by dint of its incongruity. On the subject of humour, Simon Critchley writes: “Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest, or blague:...” (3). The humour in Poe’s line lies in the incongruous juxtaposition of the concepts of “kindness” and “killing,” as well as being rhetorically manifested via the word “whole” in the exaggerated sense of the murderer’s patience in waiting a “whole week” before killing the old man. Later in the same paragraph, the narrator dapples the audience in ambiguity; he creates a suggestion of burlesque comedy that merges into the serious madness he disavows: “I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this?” The narrator baits the audience with his joke; he tells us we “would have laughed” and exclaims that laughter for us “Ha!” He uses exaggeration, in a repeated choral motif that again follows throughout the story, in repeating an adverb or adjective, artistically imbuing it with both comic and manic affects: “slowly—very, very slowly.” Then he gives us the joke: that he is not mad because it took him an hour to put his head through the door - as if only by such slow movement might he remain undetectable. He laughs for us and then calls his caution wisdom. Poe is playing trickster with his audience in such moments; simultaneously creating serious dramatic tension, and then undermining it with humour and absurdity. At the same time, he is creating a portrait of madness, and while the joke is on the madman narrator (which as I have discussed is a classic trickster motif) as he relates the details of the perfect crime for which he has been caught, it is, perhaps, even more so on the audience: Poe deals with serious themes of crime, punishment, guilt, madness and paranoia, and paints on the one hand an uncanny and eerie vision, and on the other a mockery and a travesty. His fiction, in this way, opens an ambiguous and ambivalent space for itself, both Gothic and simultaneously a parody of the Gothic genre. In so much, the reader who approaches it with po-faced gravitas becomes the butt of its satire.

An even more complex ambiguity as to intent is at play in “Ligeia” (1838). In 1846 letters to Evert A. Duyckinck and Philip P. Cooke, Poe referred to this story as respectively “undoubtedly the best story I have written” and “my best tale.” Poe creates a text of greatly multifaceted equivocality. The story is told by an unnamed narrator lamenting his dead wife, the eponymous Ligeia, who is depicted as extremely beautiful, deeply unusual, brilliantly intelligent, and devotedly loving. She dies young. The narrator, mortified, travels aimlessly for a period before settling in England, and remarrying unhappily to Lady Rowena Travanion. A ghostly presence seems to haunt their married life, described as “a palpable though invisible object” that “might be fancied as the shadow of a shade.” Lady Rowena falls ill and recovers twice, but on the third time of falling sick, dies. Over the course of the night, Lady Rowena’s corpse, in fits and starts, then revivifies as Ligeia.

The story is preceded by a quote attributed to Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680). Though a seventeenth century English clergyman, Glanvill was a leading proponent of natural philosophy, the principle school of thought out of which developed the natural sciences, and in turn, according to Stephen Gaukroger, the philosophical precepts of empiricism. He was, at the same time, the author of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), a book about the existence of witchcraft and malign supernatural forces. Glanvill appears to be a complex character, and a contradictory thinker. On the one hand, he is deeply mystical, believing in witchcraft, spirits and demons, and on the other, as a Latitudinarian, he is an open-minded proponent of a more liberal church, whilst as a proponent of English natural philosophy, he is an intellectual forerunner of empiricist thinking. This is important, as it demonstrates a potential set of affinities between two thinkers separated by geography and periods, between Glanvill of the early enlightenment, and Poe born into the Second Great Awakening and the Industrial Revolution. Both had a composite and complex philosophical understanding of the world that mixed scientific rationality with, in the case of Glanvill, an ardent belief in the supernatural, and in Poe - whether or not he was religious - an imaginative manifestation of esoteric mystery expressed in Gothic horror and phantasmagoria.

Further adding to the complexity of interpretative possibilities is that the epigraph, according to Edward Davidson “has so far escaped detection” in Glanvill’s extant work

(qtd. in Hoffman 247). This suggests that the epigraph itself is a fake, a hoax (and this notion is perhaps reinforced by the Americanised spelling of the word “vigor”). This would suggest that the author of the quote is Poe; in turn it would suggest Poe in trickster role as hoaxer; and therefore indicate a sense of humour at play within the narrative. Poe’s fake epigraph reads: “And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.” Given that the notion that “God pervades all things” resonates both with Poe’s convictions as evidenced in “Eureka” and the transcendentalist New England writers he lampoons as “Frogpondians,” there is certainly a question as to Poe’s intent in “Ligeia.” It could be that the whole story, as Clark Griffith suggests, “compounds terror with satire” (25). This, of course, also opens the question as to whether “Eureka,” too, was written satirically. However, given Poe’s laudatory avowal of “Eureka,” its acute strangeness, the curious resonances it makes beyond, seemingly, the satirical, in his work (in the ways that it chimes with his conceptions of poetry and mystery, for example), it seems strange to read “Eureka” as an entirely satirical piece. What does seem more likely is that the fake Glanvill epigraph, being repeated in the body of the story thrice carries both rhetorical and semantic significance. It seems to serve both a liturgical purpose, choral in effect, almost musical in its chorusing throughout the first section of the text, which narratively tells the story up to the point of Ligeia’s death. It starts the story in the form of the epigraph, is repeated in the middle, and then in partial form twice again at the end of the first section forming Ligeia’s final words. As Ligeia (until revived at the end) doesn’t explicitly appear in the narrative again, except in ghostly forms, of sounds, of footfalls, and feelings of presence, and in the mournful memories of the narrator’s fevered and drug induced imaginings, it perhaps serves a philosophical clue as to the story’s thematic underlying intentions. However, the intention is hardly clear. Indeed, this “fake” quote seems to deliberately provoke a multiplicity of interpretations.

The notion of “God” being “but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness” and “death” being something that is succumbed to only through a “weakness” of “will” certainly suggests a transcendental orientation. This is reinforced textually when the narrator writes of his wife: “Her presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we

were immersed.” Ligeia seems to represent a transcendent principle by which ontological and epistemological mysteries are brought into alignment. Her “presence,” her very “being” illuminates the mysterious relationship between the individual and the universe, which is at the heart of transcendental concerns; writes: “the Universe is composed of Nature and the Soul.” In this supposed quote of Glanvill’s nature is rendered as “death,” which is the ontological end necessity of life, and the “soul” is called “will.” So, given Poe’s general antipathy towards transcendentalism, and the story’s obvious references to it, how is the story to be interpreted? As a moral tale? About the dangers of living inauthentically, as the narrator does when he marries Lady Rowena? Such an interpretation is suggested by a line in “Morella” (1835), which has many thematic parallels with “Ligeia.” Narrated by a widower, it is a tale of the premature death of a brilliant but unloved beautiful woman who revivifies (but as her own daughter who subsequently dies young, too,) and in which before dying Morella tells her husband of his future unhappiness: “joy is not gathered twice in a life.” Or is “Ligeia” to be read as a pure joke? That the “will” alone might deny death seems absurd, a comic riff on the Biblical notion that “bread alone” cannot sustain life. Or is it a macabre take on a romantic vision in which only love can transcend death? In “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), Poe writes “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” As the narrator lives in an opium induced purgatory after Ligeia’s death, there is certainly scope for a *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) interpretation, and thus through the lens of an incurable romanticism centered upon the precept of love’s inevitable destruction by a world too corrupt to sustain its purity. And yet seriousness and levity never seem far apart in Poe.

This is why reading Poe through the lens of a trickster hermeneutic might be illuminating. Griffith notes that “More than any of his major American contemporaries, Edgar Allan Poe shifted facilely and readily from one vein of prose fiction directly into another” (8). Sliding effortlessly between milieu, the very spirit of multi-vocality and plurality, is resonant of the trickster at work. Moreover, if the Glanvill epigraph is a hoax, which seems likely, then that directly connects the whole thrust of the story with humour disguised as mournfulness. Fake quotes attributed to historical figures, humour disguised as grief, such inversions of expectations represent fertile trickster ground. Therefore, I argue that “Ligeia” can be meaningfully interpreted as more than a horror

story with a satirical edge, but as a dark and twisted amalgamated tensile burlesque of Gothic fiction, the fairy tale, and - perhaps most shockingly - Shakespearean romantic comedy.

For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the lover's tricked by Puck's knavery, fall in and out of love with one another, they are not merely indifferent to the scorned objects of their affections, they hate each other. Hermia declares her hatred of Demetrius; Lysander declares his hatred for Hermia. In a similar vein, in "Ligeia" the narrator speaks of his second marriage to Lady Rowena as taking place "in a moment of mental alienation" and declares of his wife: "I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man." As I'll discuss below, she is an entirely blameless character, except via the logic of romantic comedy in which she is guilty of not being the narrator's adored object. Such exaggerated passions, especially when completely unjustified, as in *Midsummer*, or utterly unexplained as in "Ligeia", only increase the comic turns that unfold. Such intensity of feeling increases the thematic play that unites the trope of "madness as love" conceived in an algebraic formula seeking resolve, whether that be through the elegantly cadenced trickery embodied by Puck in Shakespeare's comedy, or the entirely discordant, dark, uncanny, eerie and macabre resolution dreamed up by Poe. Shakespeare's lovers, like the narrator of "Ligeia," are thrown from ecstasy to despair; in both instances the great heights of the highs and the despondency of the lows only serve to increase the incongruity of the comedy.

That Lady Rowena is left as flat a character as possible not only adds to this comic affect, because for the reader the narrator hates seemingly senselessly, and thus absurdly, but simultaneously substantiates the formal power of the folkloric elements of the story, as well as its parodic power as Gothic fiction. Kate Bernheimer details "four elements of traditional fairy tales: flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic" (64). All the reader learns of Rowena is that she is "fair-haired and blue-eyed." She is "flattened" and "abstracted" almost entirely. The "fair-hair" and "blue-eyes" tell the reader through the "intuitive logic" of fairy tales that she is physically beautiful and correspondingly good, and indeed, throughout the story, she remains entirely innocent of any crime. Yet by leaving her character undeveloped, Poe can kill her without any awkward pathos involved; indeed, she takes on a hammy, melodramatic role, and this befits the folk tale motif. As Bernheimer points out, all characters in fairy tales are "flat," but what is also a feature of fairy-tale structure is the entirely unemotional death

of tertiary characters for reasons of pure plot advancement; such characters, though entirely blameless, can be killed off with impunity, for example, Red Riding Hood's grandmother, the children in *The Pide Piper of Hamelin*, and the wedding guests in *Fitcher's Bird*. Furthermore, it is a common trickster motif in traditional trickster tales. In the cycle of Radin, examples of the gruesome deaths of innocents abound; in part 8 Wakdjunkaga accidentally kills a man's two children through neglect; in part 27 he kills two women's children and cooks and eats them leaving their heads on display for their mothers to find; in part 29 he tricks their mothers and burns them alive. In creating a trickster palimpsest of burlesque comedic/romantic horror, Poe can revivify his entirely flattened Rowena (the horror) to create, as I'll discuss later, a standard romantic comedy ending featuring lover's reunited after a sustained parting of ways.

Before looking at Poe's unique twist on a romantic ending, the flattened character portrait of Rowena, it should be noted, also contrasts sharply with that of the exulted Ligeia, who is described physically, spiritually and intellectually as unsurpassed. Almost half the story is an extended eulogy to her and the language used to describe her is Platonic in its conceptions. She is depicted as a "more than mortal" goddess, who carries with her "the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth." She has a "lofty and pale forehead" that is "faultless" and exudes "a majesty so divine!" Her intellect and learning are of "infinite supremacy." Whilst married to Rowena he still pines for Ligeia and thinks often "of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love." She is "perfection." Ligeia is rendered in a magniloquent and overflowing rhetoric that chimes with Enobarbus' description of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Like Ligeia, Cleopatra's "infinite variety" (2.3.277) has a supernatural affect that makes "a gap in nature" (2.2.256), so that "the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish" (2.3.280-1). Both have otherworldly, celestial, quasi-goddess qualities, and yet an earthly sense of passion and lust; this gives both women a trickster quality as they, in Hynes' formulation slip between "the sacred and the profane" with ease. I also raise the comparison because whereas Shakespeare puts his laudation of Cleopatra's beauty and power in the mouth of the unsentimental and relatively laconic Enobarbus, Poe's Ligeia is eulogised by his prolix narrator. Again Poe seems to be playing the trickster, as the effect of the description, forming half the narrative, in its sheer voluminosity, whilst making an affectation of loftiness and seriousness, over time, morphs into comedy, and becomes a satire not of

transcendentalism, but of Romanticism, Sentimentalism and the Gothic genre. Such an interpretation is made credible by Poe's description of Ligeia's double, Morella, and her obsession with German romanticism, which is "her favorite and constant study...." The narrator of "Morella" name drops figures of the German romantic movement, Fichte and Schelling, and describes their works as "those mystical writings which are usually considered the mere dross of the early German literature."

In "Ligeia," the best example of this comic power is in the two long paragraphs that are devoted to the description of Ligeia's eyes. The description starts: they have "expression. Ah, word of no meaning!" In a decisive trickster twist, Poe has his narrator immediately undermine his own declaration by attempting to fully explicate the meaning he found within their expression, creating a comic incongruence that splatters out into streams of metaphor - that jiggle in the romantic musical style of blended discord and harmony - whereby he locates within the memory of the expression of her eyes "a rapidly-growing vine," "a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water." It is felt in "the ocean" and "the falling of a meteor" and, most comically and poignantly, "in the glances of unusually aged people." He then, in another discordant twist, gives a mechanical scientific description that meticulously unpicks a romantic cliché, saying how he has also found the feeling in the surveying of specific stars through a telescope, and in honing the comic melodrama selects "one especially, a star of the sixth magnitude, double and changeable, to be found near the large star in Lyra." It can also be located in "string instruments" and "not infrequently by passages from books." Such description, ranging from the smallest "chrysalis" and "stream" to the largest "ocean" and "stars," and moreover from works of culture, ranging from "books" to "music" creates an impressionistic verbosity of merging images that, seemingly spinning out of formal control, blur the sentiment of the story into melodrama at the risk of bathos, except for the mirthless current of trickster humour that underpins the passage, affirmed again, by ending it with the fake epigraph by Glanvill. This wistful laughter is echoed in the first hint of the uncanny located in Ligeia's eyes that "delighted and appalled...." Ligeia's eyes are themselves a trickster motif of contradistinction - Hynes' anomalous ambiguity. The narrator then goes to great pains to explain how within them lay an unfathomable mystery: the comically indecipherable "strangest mystery of all!" Finally, for all her celestial wonder, it is perhaps telling to note that the narrator never mentions her goodness, but only that under her tutelage, he

might obtain in shades of *Paradise Lost*, “a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!”

So, within the divine Ligeia resides the hints of a spiritual darkness, something “appalling” and “mysterious,” which is, of course, also physically manifested in her “raven-black” hair. This fits with fairy tale morphology; according to Vladimir Propp through the “second marriage the villain is introduced into the tale” (86). This is apropos; as there are also distinct textual clues that the exulted Ligeia effectively murders Lady Rowena, making her what Makarius terms central to the trickster character, a propensity to be both “benefactor” and “fiend.” As Lady Rowena falls ill, she speaks “of sounds, and of motions,” and sees “unusual motions among the tapestries,” until she starts hearing and seeing things the narrator cannot perceive. Just before she dies, she drinks from a goblet of wine given to her by the narrator to give her strength; he states: “I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid.” Just as in *Midsummer*, a potion is apportioned by a “spirit.” The flat Lady Rowena is killed off, that is, sent to what amounts - within the coherent ontology of the story - to sleep - and thus again resonating the fairy tale mythology.

As she has been rendered such a palpably stock character from the beginning, in some ways, she has never really been awake, certainly not in the vitally rendered sense of Ligeia. Therefore, whatever pathos the reader feels over the death of Ligeia is entirely missing from the death of Rowena, who, after all, is no more than an extra in the story, a mechanical plot function. Again, Poe is tricking the reader into a mirthless joke; the pattern of the prematurely dying wife has been set; with its fairy tale rhythm, the story goads the reader into knowing that by the third illness, Rowena will succumb. Just as the narrator of “Morella” longs “with an earnest and consuming desire” for the death of his wife, so the reader of “Ligeia” is encouraged to cheer for the demise of the entirely innocent Rowena. As mentioned above, this is a classic trickster motif, and an apt one; for whatever the moral compromises of the narrator and Ligeia, the reader’s own are also revealed. It is clear that the only satisfactory denouement of the story must involve the destruction of the only innocent party in it. It is a macabre joke, and one about to lurch into the gruesome.

For now that Rowena has been killed off, the revivification can begin. It is here that the story takes its most decisively comic and fairy tale turn. It begins with a scene that almost anticipates Samuel Beckett: the dark, incongruous comedy of the narrator keeping vigil over Lady Rowena's corpse and all the while grieving for Ligeia. Then he hears a sob coming from "the bed of death." Next, the sensationalism of the scene is emphasised through a tripling of adjectives: "a slight, a very feeble, and barely noticeable tinge of color had flushed up within the cheeks,..." At first he believes that Rowena still lives. However, then "the color disappeared from both eyelid and cheek, ..." Again Rowena appears to be dead. An interminable amount of time later, there is a second stirring of animation and retreat to death. Many times that night the process repeats, and "each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death;..." This reads as dark, deadpan comedy: a corpse struggles towards life, and in each return to death becomes increasingly dead, as if death is a matter of degrees. It is a jester's riff on a fairy tale motif, through which, as Koutsompou Violetta-Irene and Kotsopoulou Anastasia explain, death "lacks the terminal quality of a fait accompli,..." (154). As if affirming this comic intent, Poe then teases the audience with a trickster's question: "But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night?" He asks this rhetorical question with a mirthless irony, for it is posed only after having "minutely detailed unspeakable horrors" not once but twice. Yet there is another sense in which Poe plays the trickster rhetorician here: he inverts the comedic structure employed when detailing Ligeia's eyes; there he pre-empted his description with a declaration of meaninglessness; here he details minutely only to question his reasons for doing so after the fact. The affect in both cases is to cast the laughter back upon the audience: in the description of Ligeia's eyes, he mocks our incomprehension then drags us along into complicity; in the description of Rowena's revivifying transmogrification into Ligeia he teases us into understanding through scientifically minute detail then questions his own reasons for doing so. So who's the butt of this sickly jest? Are we laughing with or at the narrator, or is Poe the meta-narrator laughing at us?

In bringing the story to a climax, Poe sets it up with the same tripartite structure as anteceded by the hoax Glanvill epigraph, the pattern of Rowena's illness, and in an echoing pattern the very meta-structure of the narrative itself. Propp states that such a "trebling" of narrative architecture is a common motif in folktales (75). Pablo Gervás

writes that “trebling” is when “three instances of a particular event occur in sequence” with a variation occurring the third time (108). Moreover, according to Mark Shatz and Mel Helitzer “the rules of three” are commonly employed in comic writing. They state: “The triple formula uses hostility, exaggeration, a buildup of tension, and a surprise ending that inflates the payoff.” Thus, in “Ligeia,” the slowly reanimating corpse - as recorded for the third and final time in “minute detail” - finally succeeds in its horrific struggle with the limitations of death to successfully revivify itself, and “the thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably into the middle of the apartment.” The narrator muses that his wife has grown taller. Seized with madness he leaps: “One bound, and I had reached her feet!” There is a suggestion here that he genuflects, as if in worship, or perhaps into a position of marriage proposal. The corpse finally relieves itself of its cerement (or marriage veil?) and reveals - through its raven black hair and unmistakable eyes - Ligeia reanimated in Rowena’s body. As in the classic Shakespearean romantic comedy as detailed by Booker, the mistaken identities between the lovers have been erased, and the power of love, albeit in a grim and macabre image, has won out. The play on identity is born out in the rhetoric used: “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never—can I never be *mistaken*—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the Lady Ligeia!” (*italics mine*). Again, the last words of the story - Ligeia’s name - acts as an ontological affirmation of the presence of his lover, of their reunification, the classic motif of the romantic comedy.

In this trickster reading of the tale, Poe the trickster finds his narrative tension in the mixing of genres, playing with the gore of Gothic horror, and imbuing it with a triumphant love story through the morphological familiarity of the fairy tale, in which the power of the “will” or the “soul” when fueled by love strong enough can defy biological limitations and empirical certitudes. Hyde’s words seem apropos of Poe’s technique: “The trickster in the narrative is the narrative itself. It creates and inhabits ambivalent space” (267).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I noted how the trickster serves to indicate an unresolved and unresolvable tension in a narrative. My contribution to trickster scholarship has been to explore the ways in which such ambiguous and ambivalent tension can offer original readings to the literary texts I have explored.

My analysis of the trickster as the devil in *Paradise Lost* augments the romantic tradition of reading the poem, as pioneered by William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The biblical story of Adam and Eve is a creation myth. The devil has long been conceptualised as a trickster figure. However, in conceptualising the devil of *Paradise Lost* as a creative force, and as a sexually charged trickster, my reading gives a name to the creative spirit that Blake saw imbued in Lucifer's devilry. In reading the devil's role as commensurate with that of a trickster character in an archetypal creation myth, it accounts for the Biblical story in terms of its narrative function as a creation myth *per se*, and not just as a force of didactic moralisation. The devil's role as the trickster in chief and creator of a flawed world reveals his position as a mediator between unresolved and unresolvable tensions: co-evolutionary competition; the discord between the individual and the group; and the mating conflicts central to the battle of the sexes, that is, as the originator of unresolved and unresolvable tensions. Moreover, by reading into the heart of the narrative a trickster creation myth, it initiates the more radical interpretive possibilities of the story. A trickster reading inverts the binary clichés of good and evil, of the female temptress, of the fallen man; it also places the human aspect of the poem centre stage. Rather than reading into the character of Eve weakness, naïveté, and moral laxity, it opens the way to interpretations of her as independent, opportunistic, inquisitive, daring, courageous, decisive, and innovative: the mother of invention. She creates vitality in Adam, who rather than falling, becomes emboldened. In so much, it refocuses the narrative, offering a perceptive lens through which the story becomes less a lamentation of that which has been lost, and more of a celebration of awakening and of difference and differentiation, an ur-myth of the dangers and exhilarations of creativity.

In terms of my work on Shakespeare, I have contributed to the understanding of both *Midsummer* and *Othello*. Though Hillman calls Puck Shakespeare's "most obvious trickster-figure of all" (7), and Evans has extensively analysed Puck as a trickster, the

play has never before been analysed as a trickster construct in and of itself. In reading the text as a trickster narrative, my analysis includes an exploration of the trickster qualities of both Lysander and Bottom; moreover, in my view, Shakespeare not only creates a hierarchy of trickster figures that structurally propel the plot across its various levels, but also incorporates trickster elements in the imagery and thematic exposition of the story. In this way, the trickster's ambivalence and ambiguity permeates the narrative's entire texture. Such a reading of the play makes the romantic theme more cogent and coherent, as it sees the story as theorising love as, in essence, an emotional trick. This offers a new understanding to the structural turnarounds of the play's plot, the sliding transfers of emotion, the transitory and ephemeral nature of affections, as they become conceptually interwoven within the narrative structure. Love in its insanity and creativity becomes a symbol of the trickster's potency. The characters' inconsistencies, misunderstandings, foolishness, impetuosity, and differences are mirrored by a vision of romantic love as mutable, ephemeral, and illusionary. The eternal battle of the sexes is dramatized in all its creative potentiality, and the stages of romantic love are encapsulated and intensified through the vision of a single night. Puck, Lysander and Bottom, as love's commissaries, and trickster agents of change, bring heroic boons to their separate worlds, in the gift of love renewed.

This contrasts sharply with the case of Iago. Whilst scholars have argued that Iago is a trickster, no one has done a careful refutation of this claim. I believe it is important to make the case against Iago as a trickster in order to clarify the trickster's role as a culture hero. This is because the trickster principle, in essence, is grounded in ontological creativity. Iago is not a life-affirming force, that is, he does not create an unresolved and unresolvable tension. On the contrary, he brings only carnage and death. It is in insisting upon this creative, life affirming function of the trickster that makes the character a hero, albeit one flawed in multifaceted ways. So though Iago is tricky, he is not, in the final analysis, a trickster. For all the trickster's potential destructiveness and apocalyptic potentialities, the character is ultimately revelatory. Iago is a psychopath with a purely destructive essence. He offers all of the carnage and none of the boon or sense of renewal of a culture hero. The only trickster in *Othello* is Shakespeare himself.

Poe's trickster essence extends beyond the satirical elements of *The Folio Club*, and the hoaxes, which are inherently designed to epistemologically deceive the reader. And though several of Poe's horror stories have been read through the trickster hermeneutic,

no one has considered the works of either “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “Ligeia” in the trickster terms I employ in analysing them. By using the trickster lens, the stories can be read in novel and revealing ways: the former as simultaneously a horror story and a mockery of the horror genre, and at the same time a serious exploration of madness, crime, paranoia, guilt, and punishment; the latter as an amalgamated genre defying poetic rhapsody that blends elements of Sentimentalism and Romanticism with Gothic horror, and, as I conceptualise, a twisted and mirthless take on the romantic-comedy genre - to create a unique burlesque of trickster infused fiction. It is in this way, I argue, that his greatest achievements in playing the role of the trickster as author lie: in his genre bending and blending, his creation of new genres, and the sheer playfulness and productivity of his output. Even more so than Milton or Shakespeare, Poe’s fictions in their transgenic border defying inceptions, capture the trickster spirit. He was a storytelling shape-shifter who revelled in deceiving and tricking his audience. He created new genres and inverted the expectations of established ones. He ranged, often in a single work, from visions of earthly horror to elevated spirituality. The texture of his work is trickster signified in its essence, in its ambiguity and ambivalences, and its incorrigible laughter.

Succeeding William

Having explored the genres of epic poetry, drama and short stories in my essay, I have extended out the project into the modern era by writing a novel. With a tip of the hat to Poe, I have attempted to blend high and low humour, from the farcical and fantastical to the satirical. I have also tried to play with the idea of the hoax, creating an unreliable narrator who trusts no one except the least trustworthy of her contemporaries, and who claims to tell in different sections of the book, marked by changes in font, the different epistemological levels of verity that mark her narrative. As, within the fiction of the story, she has become a somewhat successful online presence as a writer, this has brought her to the attention of mainstream publishers. Her story reads as part hoax played on her Internet fans, whom she loathes; part a spoof of investigative journalism in which she secretly records the subjects of her story but often doubts the verity of their testimonies; and part confession/biography, in which she records that which she swears

to know to be true. That the whole plot is motivated by her desire for revenge only enhances the trickster motif.

In acknowledging the trickster forebears that I have analysed above, I also attempt to pay homage. *Succeeding William* is supposed to be a micro-focused parody that reads in part as a creation myth, a sort of ignoble *Paradise Lost*. The eponymous William Motion is brought to a fall not by his hubris, but by his lack of it. The rising angel who takes his place, in a parody of Poe, as his double finds himself uplifted not through noble purpose or spiritual elevation, but through a discovery of debauchery and decadence. The romantic comedy of *Midsummer* is re-scripted; rather than a search for true love and the symbolic bliss of connubial consummation, the exaggerated passions of the characters play out in one night stands, physically crude lust at first sight assessments, and the desire for pornography inspired sexual encounters. Also, viz. *Midsummer*, part of the humour of *Succeeding William* is supposed to lie in the disconnect between the characters' seriousness per regards their predicaments, and the audience's perceptions of the reality. There is also a play in this sense of reality and fantasy; the characters of *Succeeding William* are as changeable and malleable as those of *Midsummer*; moreover, the sense of reality and unreality is ciphered into the unreliable narrator's narrative. The play on the idea of fact and fiction, of fantasy and reality, of humorous horror, and of unraveling mystery all owe a debt to Poe.

In its style, *Succeeding William* was originally conceived as a trickster parody of the thriller genre, and such authors as John Grisham, James Patterson, and Dan Brown. On the one hand, in channelling the formal conventions of the thriller, it was written with copious dialogue, swift pace, limited and changing points-of-view per chapter, chapters with cliff-hanger endings, and a protagonist on a chase to unravel an abiding mystery. On the other, and in parodying these influences, *Succeeding William* is also an attempt to undermine the genre by revealing some of its formal structural tropes: through a dialogue that is supposed to be both more literary and humorous in its revelation of character, and through the micro-lens focus of the plot - rather than being about brilliant people and big events, it was and still is about ordinary and even stupid people and small events blown up out of proportion. In rewriting the novel, whilst trying to keep the flavour I originally conceived, I found myself also trying to channel not only the literary figures as analysed above, but also the spirits of some more contemporary

writers in which I see the trickster at play, such as Gerald Vizenor, George MacDonald Fraser, and Ishmael Reed.

Succeeding William has always been influenced by P.G. Wodehouse's lightness of touch, but refocused on the lower echelons of society. I also always conceived of it being a thematic exploration of what is often mistaken for stupidity, but is equally often that which Kahneman refers to as those systems that operate "automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control" (20); in literature, it is invoked by John Kennedy Toole in *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980). In its latest manifestation, I see it as a meditation on the vagaries of memory, the meddling trickster of consciousness, and the human tendency to, in the words of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "fool ourselves with stories and anecdotes" a phenomena he calls "the narrative fallacy." The creation of memory is a selective, narrative process; it is formed out of versions of truths that can be out of congruence with one another. In the current political climate, it seems like an appropriate situation to satirise. Now is a time in which the simplest news stories can be so heavily imbued with politics and the politics so fervently bipartisan that just as the firmest fact can become fake news so fake news can become the firmest of facts.

As it stands now, *Succeeding William* is my tribute to the brilliance of the dunce that is Trickster.

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Succeeding William

3rd update edition (in light of new facts)

Declaration of Independence

Garamond is the stately font that I use to indicate the real facts, the truth as I saw it with mine own eyes and ears and touch and taste and smell, and so am direct witness to, so help us all. In here lies my opinion and my soul, and that which I collected and know is accurate. It is published for the first time here. It is profound. It is news. Garamond is the font of higher truth.

Courier is the cheap looking font I use to indicate reportage from others or things heard only via my trusty Casio. Where pertaining, the only alterations made are to situate the real people involved as described by witnesses and/or to translate their indirect speech into direct speech. It is published for the first time here. Courier is the font of gossip.

Verdana is the fun font what got me where I am today in a big house. Some of it is no doubt fact, but that's no fault of mine. And some of it is undoubted fiction for which I take all the credit. But it is still fiction based on the fact of me talking about them characters of my neighbourhood what do dastardly deeds. Everything in Verdana has been previously published on my blog for my fans, the perverts, who revel in me calling them such, and who put me where I am today, in this big house. I despise them all, and yet revel in pleasing them, because I now have a big house. Verdana is the font of fiction.

Verdana brought me fame by allowing me to make up stories about my neighbours based on what I'd heard and what I knew. Here I only keep those bits what ended up right. Courier made me a pro. I did research. Added that to the narrative. Garamond is the voice of reason, and insight, and sparkling intelligence. It's the first hand exp. While Verdana is genius, and Courier is endeavour, Garamond is all teeth and no kissing.

The flowers pulled at their roots in the dirt

Turned their heads up high

Like girls in a disco

They looked for the star

To shine only on me

Like a girl in a disco

She failed miserably

Yet happily took the shit thrown at her feet

A girl in a disco

Called it sweat and sticky and sweet

An organic chemistry

A photosynthesis she called you and me

Love it bee

All about my honey

But ain't no king

Where Queen sovereign see

SkroTum MaJesDik "ManPower"

1 The Return of the Mullet

William Motion took a pair of lime green panties from the pocket of his blue jeans.

‘Ah,’ said Nigel Tush, who spoke Scottish. ‘But they may be from anywhere. You may’ve just bought them for all I ken. You better let me –’

‘Have a sniff?’ said William, laying a hand on the Tush shoulder.

It were Sunday. And so that about sums that pair up. They didn’t know I were sitting in the corner watching, being ignored. I barely existed.

Tush hunched up like a stonefish. He has these small, shifty eyes that appear all round and no almond because the colour of his flesh and the colour of the whites blend into the same mottled yellow. He has bulbous, downturned lips.

Yet he still exists.

He glanced about himself, and hunched over as if ready to spring forth poisonous spikes.

William dropped the panties into his hand.

Arranging the crotch over his palm, Tush clutched it to his face like a surgical mask. He inhaled deeply and rose blinking watery eyes.

I were inaudibly disgusted. Now I’m talking.

The panties fell off Tush’s nose and he caught them. ‘But how do I ken these are genuine London knickers? And nay the tumblers of some Motson skank.’

‘Quality. Lingerie of this pedigree, I know you’ve no experience, but it’s quite the rarity in Motson.’

‘Nay experience? You cheeky –’

‘Come, come. The musty scent of the faithful clings to you like an unwashed dog to an old shoe.’

‘Eh?’

I’ve never got what it is with Motion. Even as he were making me anonymously famous, I were plotting his downfall.

So he whipped out a phone from the inside pocket of his bomber jacket. ‘Should give you satisfaction.’

Tush “ooh’d”, “ahh’d” and “och’d” his way through the photographic evidence. ‘Where *is* she from? She looks –’

‘Exotic?’

Tush turned the phone upside down. ‘That’s a bloody meat cleaver at your throat.’

William shrugged like his pathetic little excretion of a body made for a James Bond in blue trunks. What were worse were that the pub reacted. Pathetic bandits weighing up the latest with the rumours. One week before William and Nigel had disappeared into the snug, nicknamed the Tardis, where Nigel had laid down a dare. In *The Dog and Biscuit* the Tardis is sacrosanct and windowless. So nothing had been revealed. Except it had now. London panties.

Something like this is too much for our regulars.

They all gathered round, peeking over Nigel’s shoulder, all eager to see William’s pictures of London.

‘Is that legal?’ said a voice.

‘Who’s that?’ said another.

‘My landlady, lovely girl, nearly got me killed.’

‘More’s the pity,’ said Tush, finishing his *Purgatory* and ordering another. ‘But is that it? Just the one? And your landlady, to boot. It’s hardly conquering –’

And I’ll admit it, even I was surprised.

William failed to suppress a smile, then conjured a black g-string from the tummy pocket of his bomber jacket.

The morons went delirious.

Tush sagged.

‘Keep scrolling,’ said William.

Tush did, blinking as he turned the phone this way and that.

They looked like a duo now. There I were drinking fizzy water wondering if it’d burn their skin if I threw it over them. Two pairs of sin.

‘Big Ben Nevis! That’s nay her house?’

‘Nope,’ said William. ‘The mansion belongs to the owner of these.’ And from his other tummy pocket, he pulled out a pair of scarlet knickers.

His sheeple roared.

‘Three?’ said Nigel, blinking at the green panties in his hand.

William raised the red and black ones above his head and twirled them in circles. ‘For the glory of Motson.’

It were only then that a man who doesn’t know his own job, wouldn’t know his own job if it bit him in the balls and swung like a pendulum between his legs, the infamous “Landlord” Dempster Shadaws, poked his head round the archway connecting the two bars. He’s as English as tea, but hates himself, and so speaks with an American accent, and a really crap American accent, like he’s trying to sound like he comes from a nondescript Cleveland or something. ‘What’s happenin’ here?’ He looked at William. ‘Dubya, you’re back.’

‘As in watch it?’ said William, popping open a tube of almonds, and tapping one out. He flicked it in the air. ‘You miss me, Shadaws?’

The nut arched and plummeted.

William’s tongue flashed out, lizard-like.

Is that the appeal? I disgust myself thinking about it.

The almond disappeared.

‘Are you two comparing panties?’ said Dempster. ‘You degraded island dwelling perverts.’

William saluted. A rabble swarmed around Tush, trying to peek at the phone.

A chant materialised out of nothing: ‘Mullet! Mullet! Mullet!’

William arranged the red and black panties, one on each shoulder, like epaulets.

Fists thumped the air.

I saw it then, all crystal clear and sparkling like, how I could use them for the work of the Lord.

William sipped his tea. Tush, chin in sternum, passed the phone over his shoulder. He pulled out a tenner. William raised an eyebrow.

I knew then I’d have nothing to feel bad about.

Tush finished his *Purgatory*, and counting out five twenties, laid them on the bar, then scrabbled around in his wallet again. ‘Lend us a quid?’

William fished in his trouser pocket.

‘And can I keep these?’ Tush’s eyebrows leapt as he opened his fist and stared at the green panties.

William looked hurt, sincere.

Is that it?

‘Certainly not,’ he said, snatching them back.

‘You’re so English, I should run you through. You wouldnae have them if it wasnae for me.’ Tush waggled his glass. ‘More *Purgatory* here, barkeep.’

I'm not ashamed to say that I bought a silently activated *Casio* voice recorder, and that I had to disguise myself to find this out and time it all to perfection.

William were in the public lavatory from where he ran his florists. This were the infamous male home of rectifying mistakes through cut flower strategies.

I know. It were unbelievable. How were he allowed?

Yet he'd come to an unofficial arrangement with the council, whereby if he cleaned the place twice daily from Mondays to Fridays and once a day at the weekend, they'd ignore his foldaway chair and picnic table.

Arnold Charger would stop this nonsense. Arnold Charger were a proper man. I were going to vote for him.

How can I say what happened there? Below is an example of what I wrote for the internet brigade, the anti-Mills and Boon crowd of teenagers and twenty-something perverts who populate forums in their millions, the ones who unknowingly got me this deal:

William loved his work. His secret was that he understood. Florists contained unhelpful women with helpful ideas. But real mean didn't want help. They wanted things sorting. They wanted a discreet exit from a public convenience, their woes transformed into petals and carried homewards to soothe, amend and wither into forgiveness.

I'd seen as I'd walked in, and observed in a second as I grunted a fake hangover at William's salutation: on the table were a leather briefcase, on top of it were a mobile phone, a notepad and a pencil, a sandwich box, a giant flask of tea and an immaculate bone china cup and saucer that even I never jealous found inspiring. William were munching on a beef and pickle on white when Peter Sodom slopped in. For legal reasons, even now, I can't say how I knew this were about to happen. Or how I also know Peter's a regular buyer of guilt flowers. I

were in the stall, but my intel were good. I'd seen him coming down the street magnolia to the gills, and sweating off last night. I activated the recorder.

William said: 'Oops-a-daisy. What crime now, dear boy?'

'I was drunk,' said Peter. He said it like it were normal, like his stories always started with a vindicating confession of drunkenness. 'And I wakes up in the middle of the night and I'm looking for the loo and I thinks I find it and it was an accident like, but I only goes and pisses in Susie's lingerie drawer.'

I'm a master at silent disgust. I saw it all through that little hole in the wall I'd drilled the night before on recce. William were evidently calculating, waggling his snub little pencil between his teeth. He studied Peter. Were he also thinking about Susie? Felony or misdemeanour? Did it divide or multiply against his past crimes? He drummed his fingers across the leather of his briefcase. Then he delivered verdict.

'Hysteria.'

'No.'

'Two dozen roses. Even then it'll be touch and go. If I know Susie, and I do,' but this were old news, 'her lingerie's sacred.'

'Can you choose me a card?' said Peter. 'Something personal, from me, you know.'

'This one, I think.'

'Teddy bears?'

'More to the point, two. Sketched along the lines of a pair of grizzlies – one girl, one boy – you can tell by the pink and blue bows around their necks. See how it works?' said William. 'Teddy bear versions of one of nature's most ferocious beasts tamed into domesticated children's toys. On a psychological level, with the sympathy already elicited by the flowers, this viewing of two wild things – one girl, one boy – you see?'

'One Susie, one me –'

‘Tamed and in harmony. They should help chime the pacifying note in Susie’s childish soul. No?’

‘She is a bit, in’t she? William knows best.’

‘Take the card.’

‘Deepest regrets?’ said Peter.

‘I fear not,’ said William. ‘I’d go with, “I think – comma – deep down – comma – I was marking my territory – full stop. Stupid – comma – I know – full stop. But it’s – don’t forget the apostrophe – just that I love you too – two O’s – much – full stop. Always your – comma – new line – Peter.”’

‘Genius.’

William left soon after. End of shift. I followed him home at a discreet distance. In those days, I was still self-conscious of my disguise, so I listened to the radio as I walked. The most important news were this: pop diva Jemima Delicious were marrying rap magnate Pandemonium EarthShake. The radio played a ditty in their honour, mixing “Here Comes the Bride” with “We Are The Champions”. William got home as it finished. I took off the headphones. My source reveals he made a chicken and bacon burger. Then a black VW Transporter pulled up outside his house. A man made out of cuboids stepped out of the driver’s side door. He walked through the gate, and looked about the garden from the path. Next thing a tall bleached blonde woman came out of the passenger side door. Then the slide door of the van opened and two teenagers appeared, a ginger girl and a brown haired boy. I could tell they were a family. They shared a demeanour. It was one that makes me glad to say I don’t judge. They were talking. There was some agitation. The man knelt down outside the front door. I couldn’t see what he did. But next thing he stood up, and rang the bell. When William answered he punched him on the nose making William disappear into the cottage. The man followed him in.

William fell in love. For the romance of the perverts I wrote:

The cuboid father of two jammed his fists into his hips, making two triangular frames. Into one shook a milky cleavage,

then a milkier face. A pair of laughing green eyes. Ringlets of ginger hair. It were as if they were already intimate, and were slurping together on a gin-spiked cherry milkshake. William knew he were doomed. Drunk on pain and loving the bleeding, he tumbled noodle over knob into love's unbearable crisis.

3 The Only Right Honourable Gentleman

I didn't see where he'd come from so I can't comment on cheap rumours, but it were Arnold Charger who actually turned up and DID SOMETHING. Whilst not commenting on the rumours, I'd only like to say that I don't believe for a minute that he'd been around Maureen Appleyard's house. I call it very circumstantial that she happens to live across the road from William, but if one were to believe every rumour emanating from that direction, one would not only believe – and I do believe this - that she lives in a house with a plastic, red “therapy couch” chaise longue situated in a living room/office space that also has pink striped walls and a fluffy green carpet and for some reason a projector screen instead of a TV, but also that she – and I do believe this too - is a practitioner of what I once heard described as “unbridled, unregulated, uninhibited counselling,” and that she likes doing colouring books, and if you were the type of gullible who believed everything – and this I do not believe – that Arnold Charger were going round there at that time for some counselling and colouring practice.

But rest were guff. Arnold Charger is an inheritor. A man like that has a father. A man with a father who owned a timber yard business does not entertain salaciousness with the likes of a Maureen Appleyard. I'd never seen Arnold drink whisky. That says a lot. All he ever drank were clear drinks. Could have been fizzy water. There's a certain dignity to that. So the idea that he'd have an affair, that I could understand, as no man is perfect except the One Perfect Man, and no man should ever resist the temptations of True Love, but that was the only affair I

ever imagined Arnold Charger having. Not a ding-dong with a welterweight like Maureen Appleyard. She's all cleavage diplomacy and hippy waffle. I've heard Arnold Charger talk about the importance of listening when a woman speaks. How could he listen to that? I've seen him reading the articles from the glossy magazines, the tasteful ones, round Snips'. And that he even has his hair cut at Snips', a man like that, shows how of the people he is. Arnold Charger has the lovely eyes of a cow about to be slaughtered. So no, I don't believe the rumours about him.

I watched as he strolled across into the garden, pausing at the gate to turn and look up at the sky, no doubt seeking spiritual guidance. Then he looked back, and as if remembering the shallow power of appearances, he pulled down the hem of a cashmere jumper I'd never seen him wearing before. It was black, with a low-cut V-neck and a giant golden *G* on the front. He wore it without anything underneath. It showed off the streak of dyed hair that runs down the centre of his chest. I must admit, it did make him look like he had a Brazilian waxed vagina running from his gullet downwards. But I don't think he meant it like that. I think he meant it classy. I blame *Loose Women* for even putting that thought in my head. Besides, if it was a groomed vagina, it was very neatly groomed, and there's something to be said for that. I still wonder how much a jumper like that must cost. Arnold is so witty and worldly, he always quotes prices in obscure foreign exchange rates. Goodness knows how he knows. How much was this? 3.8 million Guinean francs? For some reason that sticks in my head. I know he never buys anything in the sale. You don't get the same quality.

He knocked hard enough for me to hear from a safe distance.

He was letting them know what they were in for.

He held his elbows wide, then he opened his mouth, I suppose, so they'd be able to see his perfect white teeth.

I couldn't blame him for that.

The door opened.

4 Dr. Rathbone

There's this rumour about William and Dr. Rathbone, but I don't put any stock in it. Yes, his doctor's office, like all doctor's offices, is terrifying. It's pale as death. It's pristine as a coffin. It's clean and organised meticulously. It's covered in posters of diagrams of bisected humans. It altogether insinuates that a terrible crime has been committed and vanished. But the rumour, and this town is full of rumours, were disgusting. Dr. Rathbone, the filth merchants at the pub said, is obsessed, and when I say obsessed, I mean like in the adverts for those perfumes, as in spray on the pheromones and hang about the bathrooms obsessed, with William's knob. I know, of all the things. A doctor, a real medical doctor, obsessing about another man's penis. It simply doesn't make sense. Rumours rarely do. That's why I don't deal in them. But still, they need to be addressed. So, let me address them good. No, Dr. Rathbone is not obsessed with William Motion's penis. No, Dr. Rathbone isn't trying to kill him by giving him unnecessary medication, addictive medication what keeps William mellow and compliant, that's slowly but rather more quickly than nature, killing him, just so he can get him to sign some papers before he shuffles off into mortality whilst his penis, and get this, is sent to be pickled in a jar in the Icelandic Phallological Museum, exhibited for perverts to marvel at, an example of the most excellent penile specimen humanity ever produced. Now, I've never seen William's penis, but I doubt if I do that I'll gasp and say, to the museum with it! Dr. Rathbone is way too old school for any of this nonsense. He smokes, for goodness sake!

Anyway, I bring this up because that's where I followed William to next. First, two fine gentlemen of the police force arrived. They left shortly after. Next Arnold left William's, and then he did go to Maureen's but only because the nosy cow was signalling to him from an upstairs window. She was no doubt looking for gossip. Then, William left his house looking woozy and stoned and dizzy in a daze: like a saint.

To the perverts I described it thus:

Saffron Giggs, a ripe fruit on the tree of intimate

knowledge, looked like an inflatable porno doll. Yes! Viewed from afar, she was a wild and dangerous landscape of hills, valleys and breath-taking vistas. He had no choice. He had to mine deep down into her minerals and pollute every inch of her seed. Then he could die.

It was love.

His nose were broken by the chap made of cuboids. Dr. Rathbone, a man eminent in common sense, undoubtedly told him not to get it punched again whilst it healed. He probably warned William on the dangers of philandering, on the jealousy of husbands over their wives. He probably quoted Shakespeare. Jealousy is a cyclops with a cyanide pill, or something like that. That's Rathbone's style.

What certainly landed on the grapevine was this: William Motion had drunkenly arranged a house swap with a Welsh family from an internet cafe in London. That was what responsible Dr. Rathbone let known on the local network. He's not the type to gossip. He deals strictly in straight facts, and he does it for the local good. That's the calibre of the man. Of course, once the word gets out and ground through the rumour mill, all sorts of things happen to it.

Dr. Rathbone is an outstanding pillar of our little community. Yes, he never blinks, and yes, he's probably a psychopath, but then all the best doctors are. However, he does not, NOT, trade in knob pics.

5 Birthday Boy

Old Father Tush took his son to the pub.

I related it to the internet degenerates thus:

Celebrating his fifteenth birthday in the pub were the most exciting thing ever to happen to Hamish Tush. He came in through the back door. *The Dog and Biscuit* smelled of a

combustible mixture of wet dog, stale shoes and slices of fried liver. Only the bar were bright. Translucent windows and low-watt lights infused the rest of the brown and burgundy interior with a suggestion of soft intimidation, of violent intimacy, an atmos that caressed his balls as it threw darts at his toes. It were an ambiance enhanced by the decor. Tatty chesterfields sat in the bay windows before velvet curtains. The ceiling sagged. On yellowing magnolia walls hung decades of decayed cigarettes, and dusty black and white prints of old Motson. The doors squeaked. The tables and chairs were mismatched, the paisley carpet gum-stained and colour bled like an old tattoo. Hamish loved it all.

This is where the story really begins. This were the inspiration. Because I weren't there. If I had have been, they'd never have got away with it. Because what they did to PC Ludlow were a disgrace. PC Ludlow just that week had given a talk at Motson High. A Pillar of the Community.

This amused my fans, and shows you why I despise them:

PC Ludlow necked the last of his pint and drooled on himself. His head wobbled. He snorted. His chin hit the bar.

'Out,' said Jamie Shadaws, thrusting aside her arms like a boxing referee.

Jamie Shadaws is the landlady of *The Dog and Biscuit*. It were obvious what the motive were. Shaming an outstanding police officer. Giving his wife nightmares when he never returned until the next morning. Causing a proper argument. It cost me actual money to find out the truth. I even then had to wheedle it out from a foreign. That's what kind of cover up it caused. To Jamie Shadaws, no doubt, it were justified logic.

She pointed at Hamish. 'Well, we couldn't have you in here with Plod on the warpath. So I assisted him with one of me specials.'

Fancy giving a boy an anaesthetised policeman for his birthday. Mind you, with an alcoholic for a father, it were no wonder. I imagine his father did a variation of the speech I'd heard countless times before.

'It's a fact: beer makes you smarter, son. It's like working out at the gym – except it's fun. See? Killing the old brain cells stimulates the growth of new brain cells.'

I heard he were forced to drink the Purgatory.

It's a Belgian beer brewed in Luton. It is the colour of chocolate. It has the texture of wee. On the top, instead of head, float white, circular growths suggestive of fungal activity. It's typically served warm, but in *The Dog and Biscuit* from an inevitably hot glass: 'Straight out of the dishwasher. Clean.' It's 8% ABV. It's always, by contract, tapped direct from the keg, and always the most expensive beer in any pub. It's marketed on its exclusive working man's authenticity. It tastes like goat pickled in sorghum.

He tasted it.

'How is it then, son?'

He poked out his tongue and wafted it in the air to clean it.
'Arse and armpit.'

'Nay bad, right?'

'And vinegar.'

'Doesn't get better than this, does it?' said Mrs. Shadaws.

'Doesn't it?' said Hamish.

'No,' she said, shaking her head.

William Motion turned up. I know what will have happened then. They'd have all crooned over him. Is that it? The desire to mother? Is that what lock he has on the female soul? But then why Jamie Shadaws? Childless Jamie Shadaws... It weren't that she couldn't neither, it were that she didn't, and that were that. But

again that's a rumour. So who knows? It were that sinning Irishman O'Wilde what said: Women Fall In Love Orally. How dirty! I only mention because I suppose there's William's gravelly baritone. It's certainly not his face. Because whatever voice he's got, and however much he sounds like a charming cartoon lion, them words slip sideways out of a goblin's face. His chin recedes to the left. He has a sliver of dry lips. He looks like a miffed off shark. I suppose he does have big eyes. But bloodshot and yellow, and though he has half-shut crescent lids, they're less George Clooney than tumbled off the death bed for one last hoorah. Is that it? An undead thing. Women want to nurse him? Whatever, he were in love, but that inconvenience didn't stop him. I got this from the horses' mouths.

He met Olive Montgomery and Doreen Slater, hadn't seen them, they said, since just after school.

Olive's a tall, pretty girl who looks like Bugs Bunny. Doreen's pretty in a determined sort of way, square jawed, sturdy kneed, and packing cantaloupes under her sweater.

They're old school mates of William's. And no, he never did with them. They giggled about that.

You know the type, think of themselves as chicks, but won't let that get in their way. I'd seen them drinking *Purgatory* before, but always out of oversize wineglasses. That type.

Well, story goes that the three of them went into the saloon, or as these yobos call it, the back bar.

Nigel famously calls the saloon, the lounge, and he claims that it's not in a workingman's interest to go in there. He calls it elitist, etc., like it's still the seventeenth century, and there's higher charges for funny men and table service. Well anyway, fact is for whatever reason, probably teenage curiosity, Hamish went in there. The following is Doreen from my off the record interview the next day:

'We're sitting in the corner with William. He's got his tea. Hamish is gawping at us. Then Olive here

says, 'What you looking at?' He opens and closes his mouth like a fish. 'You,' she says. 'Schoolboy. What you gawping at?' 'You,' he says. 'Then come on,' she says. The punters were proper staring. So Olive bellows: 'Naff off you lot.' Hamish sits down opposite William, who does the introductions. And he's such a tart, offers his hand. 'And I,' he says, 'am William Motion, bearer of the handsomest ginger mullet in all England.'

The girls found Hamish cute. I didn't understand that. To me, he looked like a teddy bear. I suppose that is cute, but in a weird way. Babies are cute. But oversize babies? Personally, I've always found children's figurines of dinosaurs far more frightening than the real thing. Anyway, because they found him cute they remembered everything, more or less, verbatim. Olive took over.

'I ken who you are,' says Hamish. 'Drinking Purgatory?' says me. 'Aye.' I tell him it'll sort him out. He nods. She offers a fag, but he doesn't smoke. I'm like, 'It's gotta be done.' And I have a Royale. 'Life's too boring not to smoke, know what I mean?' He says he likes the Purgatory, which is cute, because no one *likes* the Purgatory.' But I say, 'Yeah, you're a good lad.' 'Ston,' says Olive. And then it comes out: 'It's my birthday.' 'What you get?' I ask him. He says it's complicated. He takes a deep breath. 'My da doesnae believe in birthdays. He thinks they're sentimental. So, to wind him up, every year my ma buys him a present for my birthday.' I'm like, 'Eh?'

Obviously that confused the girls because they'd never done the knitting morning at the library with his mother, Maureen. No one admitted it, but except for the real elderlies, the rest of us just went for the free bourbons and Nescafe, and the fact is was perfectly timed between market and lunch. I make baby stuff out of spare reels of wool that go missing from the carpet factory. But it's OK, because I give it all away to the charity. Anyway, every year Hamish's mother

gives Hamish's father a present for Hamish's birthday. Of course, like everyone, first time I heard this I gasped and gawped, and looked at her like she was mental in her own right and even more mental for marrying a man as mental as Nigel. But there's a logic to it. She always gets him something that will irritate him and "delight" Hamish. I say "delight" because the presents, so far as I can make out, are always crap no matter who she give them to a baby. Anyway, he accepts it like he's magnanimous, saying he's indulging her womanly instinct. Then before he opens it, he asks her what it is, so he's not disappointed. On this particular day, it's a sweater. He grunts. But when he takes it out, it's a red sweater.

In Maureen's words, secretly recorded on the *Casio*:

'That's when the shit hits the fan. Red's the colour of imperialism, the colour of England. According to my husband, Marx was an invention of the English aristocracy, he was encouraged to invent socialism in London in a grand conspiracy. When the English inevitably rejected it as shite, the Scots, these aristos knew, would take it to spite them, and imprison ourselves in our own collective misery. He told me to take it back, and when I told him I bought it in the sale, you should have seen his face. So he gave it to Hamish and barred him from wearing it. And you know what that means?'

Well, of course I did. Hamish being a teenager forbidden to wear something would inevitably wear it whenever he could. She's a champion at the psychological twist is Maureen.

Meanwhile Nigel's so angry, says Maureen, that he nearly chokes to death on his Clan Dew, which is a Scottish drink. She describes it thus: 'A mix of wine and whisky. Nigel says it was so popular in the 80's, it sold out forever. It was particularly popular with the homeless, which is a real sign of quality.'

We all look at her half-baked, bourbons suspended between mouths and tea. Even she gets that she has to explain that one:

‘For homeless folk alcohol’s a question of life and death.’

I have to hand it to her, there’s always a logic to Maureen. Anyway, apparently this is one of the last bottles in existence. Must be worth tens of pounds. Her husband’s saved it especially for the occasion.

Olive recounted Hamish’s exact words on the recording:

‘What’s it like?’ I says. And he says, ‘Like bitter lemon cough mixture served through a flame thrower.’ ‘Sounds alright,’ I says. And he says he couldn’t swallow, and that was real Purgatory, which is a laugh, i’n’t it, and he felt like a Samurai warrior who has to kill himself in order to prove his manhood.’

‘But he swallowed it. And then Olive took his hand, and he blushed, and then he...’

‘Shut up.’

It turned out that Hamish’s father nearly choked to death on his wife’s potatoes. Allegedly, Maureen has a rare talent for creating dangerous potatoes. Her unique method of boiling them reconstitutes the starch in such a way that she creates floury lumps that are impossible to swallow. Eating them one at a time is touch and go. Eating two at once is suicidal. Hamish had to do the Heimlich Manoeuvre on his father again, and Nigel dutifully coughed the potato up and over the table right into his wife’s dinner.

She reckons:

‘He did it on purpose. And then he lit a Regal.’

Doreen told me:

'And then she flirted with him. No wonder he...'

'Shut up.'

"I like your stories. You go to Motson High? You lot still shag in the ditch?" And then William goes: "He does, too, the randy monster." But I'm not sure. And then his dad came in. He went double red. "Hamish Tush, who youse talking to?" But that didn't stop him asking...'

'Shut up.'

6 Hunting

"Landlord" Dempster Shadaws had the prey in his sniper's sights.

He knew how to shoot because he were American. He'd learned the correct technique from reading the children's section of the NRA website. Take one deep breath. Hold it. Then squeeze, don't pull, the trigger. He was squeezing gently, softly, caressingly - when Jamie, his wife, who was lying down next to him in the bushes by the kitchen window - leaned towards his ear and whispered:

'We're going to have to kill her.'

You see I didn't exactly see that bit above. They were much too buried in the bushes. But I put it together after the fact, because I was going to go out and have it out with them, well, with her specifically, though him, too, as his name were on the bloody deeds. I'd heard what had happened the previous. I can't talk about it here direct, but I had business there, and someone had left the door open. But then I heard and saw the following, and meanwhile they didn't notice me shuffle and squat and get me a voyeur's vision of

everything.

There was a muted *Pock!*

A squirrel dashed up the trunk and across a branch of the sycamore at the rear of the beer garden then disappeared with a hop and a bounce over the fence and into the copse behind.

‘Piss shit and green veg.’ Dempster slammed his fist into the ground. ‘I told you - silence. I was on the verge of greatness. Do you understand what the guys would’ve... I was about to go down for decades –’

‘Well, I just wanted to say –’

‘Shooting him –’

‘He *were* a whopper.’

‘Fifty inches – nose to tail. I’ve seen him out there, been baiting him for months. He won’t be back again... Wise old man of the forest like that... That was a once in a lifetime...’

Every Monday afternoon when *The Dog and Biscuit* closed between two and five, Dempster would go hunting in the beer garden. It were that one time of the week when he felt proper Septic.

I got that from, and the following, from Steven Little:

“Hunting’s his alone time. Man’s complex. Synapse. I heard Jamie went with him to chat about something. Must’ve been important.”

Little did Little know. I wasn’t about to share with him. He’s a waster. Can’t be trusted, not a word he says, except when he knows stuff like this and you’ve no one else to turn to. It’s the nature of police work:

“Anyway, what he said, he’d tried to make it boring as poss. With rules about silence and stillness. But you know, how could she chat with him in silence and stillness. He

didn't like me pointing that out. She made him miss. He said that. Reckons he never misses. But he never lets anyone else along, so that's gotta be bollocks."

I saw Jamie whispering at him, proper para.

He pushed the rifle away and turned to her. 'We gotta what what?'

She whispered something again.

His head dropped. He said, 'Do you need a cup of tea?'

They carried on in whispers. Given what I'd come for, I felt strange, like morally uncertain. Which weren't fair. But I didn't dare move. Something told me something were afoot. So I squatted and tried not to breathe. I listened, but their voices rustled like broken leaves being trodden on and whirled about in vortices like in *American Beauty*. Then came a straight shooter, a word in a woman's voice all liberated: 'Evil,' and it were said Capital E, too. I couldn't resist. They were too involved in each other to know I were there, so I inched forward and heard another clue: 'the future.' It were all her voice now. The words: 'my position in society,' and wondered if I were hallucinating, because that didn't make sense. Jamie's pure part-time. She works on the kill floor in the slaughterhouse, and pulls pints in the pub. She kills animals quick and people slow. Then more words: 'Spiritual' with a Capital S. Then it got really sinister and I got scared: 'bury' and 'schools' and 'a dream come true.'

Then Dempster emphatic and louder than I suspect she wanted him to be: 'But that ain't hunting.'

And then nothing except the rustling leaves, until: 'In the simplest, kindest way possible.' Then suddenly she sat up on her heels, and spoke with that pretentious French authority she reserved for talking about her "abattoir," as she calls it, work: 'Hang her upside down – well, you know how it's done, how humane it is – bolt in the brains, one across the throat, bleed her to death gently... What could be kinder?'

Then Dempster sat up like he were getting serious now. I had to move backwards to get out of their line of sight. Part of me just wanted to escape, but I were in too deep. I had to know more.

Dempster's voice: 'What plans?'

Hands clapped. There were a squeal. A rush of words, then: 'a business in the... Wonderful... Perfect concept.'

I heard one word from Dempster: 'Impossible.'

Then it got weird. Jamie sounded like she were mocking him, but she were dirty talking about sex and dope and storms. And the leaves rustled, and I had a romantic moment myself and remembered what I'd come to do. Then Jamie were talking about cows again. 'She sleeps. She shits. She eats.' I made my way towards the door, and Jamie was slopping it on thick. She said: 'Till death does us part.'

When I got back in the pub, my reason for coming had gone. I found that charming. Then I heard the voice of the Dodo at the back door: 'Someone was here,' she shouted. She often shouted. 'I heard them from the loo. It wasn't you two, and it wasn't him. Too light-footed, like the cleaner.'

I bolted out and headed for the bus stop. Watching from across the road, I saw Dempster came to play look out, but he, like everyone else, never noticed me standing in the background, blending in, like no one and nothing in the midst of nowhere, finally being someone.

7 The Indignities of Nigel Tush

If Hamish Tush wanted his father to confess, it would require baby steps. First, he had to induce reason. Which meant sailing against a strong wind. Yet necessary. If harshly confronted with bare facts, Tush Senior would bluster and dally and attempt to change tack. The trick was to create a rhetorical whirlpool that dragged his father into its gyre.

Were were knitting. I don't know if you've ever knit owt, but it's rather like juggling, a form of meditation, except more productive, and it's a bit like

cooking, in that the more love and passion you put into it, the better the end result. However, the delicious fashion in which Doreen related the following to me put me right off me cross-stitches, and as she went on and as I wondered if it could all be true, the slower and slower I knit, until jaw like a slabbed fish I were staring at her in wonder. In so much, I call this gossip, because Doreen is not, not, a font of higher truth.

'So his father's only gone and told everyone he's gay, and what does Hamish say? He starts going on about Godzilla. Talk about protesting too much. But he's like that. Full of fantasy. If Godzilla plucked him oot of bed and swallowed him whole that'd be proper bad. Silly sod. It'd be a bloody miracle. Godzilla doesnae exist, I say, but they do they listen to me? "Worse things happen at sea," says his father. I tell him, gossip and rumour, that's the currency of our days. Besides, it'll be character building. Don't look at me like that."

I didn't look at her like anything, and least not anything she should have disapproved of.

'My hairdresser's a gay, and it's no joke.

Hamish mourned. If creating meaningful communication with his father was improbable, then having mother join the fray?

Life was unjust.

Last night, he'd been living the dream, hanging out with William Motion and his lady friends. Then his father had come in.

I got this from Steven Little:

Nigel called William "a slut." William called Nigel "a dipper."

Maureen said the following happened, and though it's sort of true, it's gotta be a lie, too.

'His father said we were proud that Hamish was gay, which was putting words in my mouth, but I could hardly disagree. Not that I was ashamed.'

Once again she gave me her Don't Look At Me Like That Face, so I deadpanned her like I was hearing a confession I wasn't relishing.

'But it's a strange thing to be proud about. I felt like a football fan.'

'So, what did you say?' I said.

'"That's nice." But Hamish wasn't having it. So I said that was nice, too. But he still wasn't going for it.'

Hamish read the old man's face. Some new oafishness had occurred. His father's ability to unravel one befuddlement only to immediately wrap himself up in another was limitless.

'And then Nigel almost gave us both a heart attack. 'Have mercy. No!' he shouts. 'What?' says I. It only turns out his father decided he's bisexual. I thought that was presumptuous. But there you go, I'm a modern.' But Nigel's losing his mind about his son's inability to make up his mind. 'In this, in that,' he says. Then he asks Hamish if he's thinking about fucking dogs. Well, that's more than I can take. 'Hamish,' I says, and I mean it, 'You'll do yourself a mischief.' I tell him I'm disappointed in him. Well, he's crestfallen at that.'

Hamish was a pacifist. This didn't stop him of daydreaming about the rhetorical power of a 12-gauge shotgun.

'Then he says, would you get this, that no, actually, he's never so much as thought about doing it with dogs, and he hoped it was OK with me.'

She put her hand on her chest.

'I was very reassuring.' Well, then he drops the bomb. Tell us he's only gone and arranged a date for Friday night with Olive Montgomery - as if we know her from Eve. But turns out she's only one of Willy Motion's birds. "Fancy that," says I. But Nigel didn't take it at all well. He was gutted his son wasnae gay. Then it got even worse.'

As I put it to my savage hoard of anonymous fans:

Nigel sank face into hands and emitted a groan. 'In the pub. With a bird. On Friday-bloody-night. Everyone there.'

'It was then that Nigel asked Hamish to pretend to be gay. Then he started pleading with him. It was undignified. He looks like he's just had rectal surgery. So that's when I start on him. That did it. He jumped up, just wet falling out of his face. Beads on his upper lip, moist eyes, drippy nose, and blurts out: "I just wanted him to ken how proud I am of him." Well, that was us gulping. That got him going on about sex with animals again, so it wasn't a moment that lasted long, but it was a moment. A moment.'

She stopped at the wonder of it.

'I thought we'd done with them.'

She looked across the room all wistful and wondering.

'Anyway, then Hamish ruined it. Wanted to know why his father had ever thought him gay.'

'And what did Nigel say?' I asked.

'He lit up a Regal and said something about him being a pacifist. That's how ignorant Nigel is. He

thinks gays are pansies. He thinks it's all peace and love in the gay world.'

She peeled into laughter. But I didn't get it.

'Well, Nigel was so pained, worried he'd snog her in the middle of the pub and show him up that I had to wind him up. I told Hamish to get her in the Tardis and ravage her until she screamed. Nigel nearly sucked down his fag in one go.'

8 Business is Business, Part 1

It was lunchtime in *The Dog and Biscuit*, so it was just the hardcore pros and me at the end of the bar propping up a *Perrier*.

Dempster and Arnold was chatting. I didn't like the way Dempster spoke to Arnold, even if it were just banter.

'You getting the drink on ready for a shout down? People appreciate an alcoholic at the top. Especially in politics. It's reassuring to know a degenerate's in charge. He won't be fazed by anything.'

It were so disrespectful. But Arnold's a good sport and played along.

'It's that time of the month,' he said.

Arnold drinks vodka and lemonade. That should give you an idea of how sophisticated he is. But again, Dempster's gotta be rude.

'It's so dumb, it's ingenious. But people like fear. You're your own horror movie, man. Underpay a competent and unambitious general manager to take care of the day-to-day running of the place. Become overwhelmed as to your own redundancy. Show purpose. How? By getting hammered down the pub at lunch time. Then go back and shout at everybody... It must be inspirational to have a drunk man shout at you. You been prepping?'

‘Oh, aye, cutting stuff. Proper witty. But actually, I don’t do it when I’m jolly. That’s the trick. Otherwise it’s sloppy, unprofessional. I wait in my office until the booze wears off. Then, when I’m good and irritated, I go out and stomp ’em. And you know what gets ’em? It’s not the insults. It’s the accusations. They run around like little bees. I’m an inspirational leader of men.’

He is.

‘Politics, business –’

He’s not even exaggerating.

Then Dempster lowered his voice. Something about Jamie and business, and I figured it must have something to do with what they were on about the day before.

With Arnold there’s no skulduggery. He said: ‘What about death?’

Very philosophical.

Dempster gave him dagger eyes, mumbled.

Arnold chortled, manly, humorous. ‘Stick another double in there,’ and slid his glass across the bar.

Dempster couldn’t help himself. He were at the optic. To be heard he had to speak up. ‘This is Jamie talking, right? What the women of Motson want.’

Arnold nodded.

Dempster looked back from the optic. ‘Is more org....’

The door opened with a rush of damp air, and a sweary, cheery gang of three lads, so that’s all I heard.

Arnold’s eyes widened. ‘There’s money in that.’

I’m thinking organic fruit and vegetables.

Dempster slid Arnold’s glass across the counter.

I miss the next few lines as the gang of three make their way to the saloon.

But when I hear Dempster say, ‘parlour’ I know I’m on to the right idea. Next I heard the words, ‘revenue streams’ and I knew I were on to something. It were confirmed when he said how it were ‘a woman’s thing.’

‘Sounds brilliant,’ said Arnold.

It’s true. Just like women buy books, they buy organic. And it can take a man of Arnold Charger’s class and sensitivity to appreciate that.

9 Business is Business, Part 2

Well, it were all quiet again. And again, Dempster were acting all furtive and weird and untrustworthy.

I knew he were talking about Steven Little and Nigel Tush. I heard the words ‘private’ and ‘gentleman’, and when I saw Arnold laugh, I concluded he were being rude and ironic. He pretended to deal cards, spin a wheel, twiddled his fingers and thumbs. Then loud he said: ‘wasabi’ like that meant something, and then ‘a projector screen’ and ‘ties only.’ Sounded pornographic to me. The dirty bastard.

Men being men, Arnold were laughing. And at the next moment, they were out the door.

I panicked. I couldn’t just follow them. Even with me being unseen, it’d be obvious. Then inspiration struck, and them poets are right, it’s like brain lightning. I went to the loo. The lid weren’t closed, which tells you a lot about this place. I covered my hand in tissue, gently lowered it to minimise suspicion, and clambered aboard. The windows were always open that time of year. It’s a top opener, and thankfully, from the angle, I could see them. Dempster shooed off some youths who were fagging on wacky backy on one of the pub’s all-in-one table benches, but just sent them to the back of the garden to break the law. Proper irresponsible. Well, there’s someone’s going to hear about that, I thought.

Then it got weird. Dempster stepped on to the table. With his dirty feet. In

his own pub. No class. He gestured for Arnold to join him. Arnold shrugged, stepped up. Well, you know what garden's are like in the spring. All bloody birds singing their crapper's off. So, I couldn't hear a damn thing. But he were pointing to a row of small windows across the top of the back wall of that little granny flat they've got, the one where, bless her, old Oda Dody lives. Then he turned towards where the youths were smoking, at the bottom of the garden, and talking, talking, talking all the while, he started pretending, like a nine year old, that he'd got a rifle, and he were shooting them.

Arnold were wearing an expression on his face I couldn't read. I guess he felt Dempster were mental, because that were way I felt, but it were hard to tell. Perhaps he were just being polite. But then I got my big break. They stepped down from the table and walked direct under my little window and paused.

Arnold's voice came into hearing. 'Paradise,' he said.

'Right,' said Dempster. 'That's why you gotta help me talk Jamie round.'

10 Perfection and Pain

The plots were thickening. But I needed to know more. And judging from the initial reactions of the decadents on the vile corners of the internet where I were beginning to make my name, I knew that what I needed were more filth on the filth merchant himself, William Motion. That's what led me, at my age, to be shod head to toe in surplus Army camo gear in that boggy field out the back of William's cottage, binoculars in hand, burglar's beanie on head in grim army green. Thankfully, from where I live, it were out the back of mine across the fields to the back of his. You leave early enough and not a soul will see you by the time you're in situ and got the binocs trained on the zone, in your thicket, scolding hot thermos tea steaming up the lenses, wondering if you're not the crazy cow in all this madness.

So, in summary, for the gravely immorally unfortunates I count as my base, this is how I captured the moment, and as it happens, I've since found,

because men what have been in love are prone to confess, were, more or less with my own poetry notwithstanding, an accurate portrait:

The family Giggs, nudists every one, were in the garden. Mr. Giggs, the man fashioned out of cuboids, was burning meat over charcoal. William Motion's remorseless erection ached. His balls throbbed. For Saffron, sitting cross-legged, was before him in the open doorway of the shed. To hide his pain, he was folded up in a duvet, clutching his knees. Saffron had a pretty, psychopathic cat stare. Her nipples erect in the cold, her breasts flushed and taut, the skin glistening where it had been exposed to the faint drizzle falling in the garden. It was perfect. It was torture.

I got this from the man himself, in one of those drunken episodes he took to like a duck to plum sauce after things went awry:

'It were her who fixed it so's I could shower. That Welsh throtter with a lawyer weren't gonna let me in at all. Women like a man who's on his back bleeding but smiling. Wanna wash him up. She even asked if the summerhouse were comfortable, though like most birds she called it a shed. She didn't have a poetic gob. I wouldn't mind, I even lied in the proper way. Told her I slept in it in dead of winter to prepare for endurance running. Told her I went in mountains yonder. "You mean the hills?" she said, cheeky cow. I like that.'

'They are hills,' I said.

'Stop flirting.'

I gave him a look then that got him back on track.

'We threw sweets in each other's mouths. I mean that has to mean something, doesn't it? Little Red

Riding Hood. Big Bad Wolf. Open your mouth and let me put something sweet in.'

What a disgusting take on a perfectly innocent story, I thought. But as a reporter I didn't say anything. I simply recorded the truth as he saw it. But it made my stomach churn. As if millions, perhaps billions of mothers and fathers since time sacred would have told their children that story if it signified such perversions. But that's William Motion for you.

'She said it were lovely in the shed. And she meant it. I mean I'd done it up as best time, imagination and chance would allow. And it were some work. Before Saffron came into my life, I hadn't been in the summerhouse for...'

He pressed his finger into his cheek. His eyes were beginning to work independently of each other. I knew I didn't have long. 'Before Saffron came into your life it was still a shed, wa'n't it?'

He smiled at that like we were soul mates, and with his stray eyes and the drool working out the corner of his mouth, well, for less than a moment, I had a moment, sort of tender and motherly. I put a stop to that. I'm not so easily duped.

'It'd been like years... I have Pete do the garden for discounts. So as a shed, it were proper stale. Dusty, but suggestive. Like volcanic ash. Like it were waiting to explode...'

He laughed, dark, dirty and bitter.

'And cobwebs. Streams of silk covering all the garden tools. I'd totally forgotten I had a petrol lawnmower. There were garden shears, pruning clips, a rake, a spade, a hoe... It were all signs, I... thought. I dumped them out the back. I made art. Left a few straggles of cobweb in the corners. Make it safe, but dangerous... Women are really contrary.'

'I heard you'd domesticated it.'

He nodded. I can confirm the crime scene were neatly arranged. The shed were what I like to call a classically proportioned cuboid facing long side forward with windows in the front opposite the rear of the cottage and the door set on the right. T-shirts and underwear were stacked up across five shelves. Clothes on hangers were lined up on a pole that were suspended between the spikes of two pitchforks that leaned against the walls. On a small table next to an electrical socket stood the kettle and teapot, his lunch box, some cups, cutlery and plates. There were, as they say in Paris, romantic accouterments, too. On a battered chest of drawers were joss sticks and fat candles, and volumes of poetry. The sleeping area looked surprisingly comfortable. I guess Nateby must've had quite the collection of blankets and duvets and pillows and cushions. Nateby, no blood relative, were who William inherited the cottage from. And that were a disgusting story that I, even for the benefits of the internet degenerates what have made me who I am today, will not relate. Needless to say, Nateby were the oldest woman who ever lived, and had, it seemed, plenty of time to collect bedding.

'I suppose, looking back, she always viewed me with just pity and amusement. She were Welsh, but she had an air of London about her. But that first day seeing her in the buff, I actually started drooling.'

He were slobbering on himself now telling me about it.

She pawed a chubby hip and lolled her head. 'I know it's slobber, smart arse. What you slobbering about?'

'Dinner.'

'She was such a flirt. And not at all subtle. "Can you smell those meaty sausages?" she said. "I can't wait to nosh one."'

I knew this was just fantasy and lies. Women, even Welsh women, even ones from villages, even ones whose male siblings sniff glue for a hobby and themselves have multiple abortions in high school, and then celebrate leaving by

immediately getting up the duff as a career prospect, even them women don't talk like that.

'She went on about how English mountains are just hills. I told her how hard the rock is. She was labouring under the misapprehension that the difference between hills and mountains has to do with height, but of course it doesn't. It's a geo...'

He poured some more beer into and over his face. I knew we were running out of time. I pressed him with the hard questions.

'Her father offered us both sausage. She had one. She was so beautiful, so innocent, so knowing, so dazzlingly corrupt, so...'

I couldn't get another word out of him. He was like that Ian character from the Shakespeare play who having killed everything he loves vows never to speak again.

She leapt to her feet and turned to go.

He gazed up at her, framed by a glistening, grey sky that was a perfect counterpoint to the green of her eyes, as if the sky was some almighty headpiece she wore, and her eyes were two holes boring through her head to connect the two of them to outer space and the forever beyond. He told her she made him feel like an astronaut then hit her with his proposition, asking her if she'd like to spend the night with him in his garden shed.

That was the rumour that came out of everywhere, that he asked her there and then just like that. And she said, "No."

And that had never happened before.

That were what made what happened next so meaningful.

11 Friendship and Violence

Phillip Rutter is a degenerate, so I know all about him. That's how I pieced together the early parts of this narrative via you don't know who.... Let's just say that when someone is very, very naughty, I have access to knowledge of their deeds. Phil the Pill. Rutter the Nutter. Underage smoking. Underage drinking. Underage sex. Public masturbation. Glue sniffing and marijuana puffing. Temazepam and alcohol. Acid tabs. Ecstasy pills. Shoplifting. Public disorder. Vandalism and hooliganism. Extortion. Illegal gambling. Car stealing and suspected burglary. And that's what were known for sure. These illegals, they're like icebergs, and always have far more going on under the surface than ever meets the air.

The rest I pieced together from interviews, the first were with Nigel who were enjoying his daily after work "refreshers" as he called them, and who, in relating his son's miseries, were as jolly as a children's party clown.

'So's Hamish tells me about it one of them nights after he got his revenge, when he could be all proud of how hard he'd been, how manly and whatnot, and had stopped being ashamed of himself. I think he'd been squelching.'

He interlocked his fingers and thumped his palms together whilst making clicking sounds at the backs of his teeth. I looked at him as if I didn't know what he meant. He did that thing where he opens his mouth and inhales sharply, and his eyes close as if for the last time, and then resumed his story.

'He needed to shit. But Walter Jamieson, who's a pansy, a proper pansy, from London, and no mistake, wouldn't let him. See how far my son's come? Nay Walter Jamieson would make him skip a shit now. Do you ken Walter? He's always got his hands in his pockets and his shirt untucked, and he always seems cold. If he thinks you're nay looking he likes to do a little bow

and spit between his front teeth. He wears the knot of his tie so tight and low that he looks like a failed suicide, because he's a chinless sod and it appears like the whole noose just stretched and slipped off over his face. And now wears it for shame. He's that type. I mean suicide's manly unless you get it wrong, and then it's just humiliating. And that's Walter, a humiliation unto himself.

'So, they were sitting on the woodpile behind the caretaker's sheds at school. Hamish felt Walter was acting weird. He said he had a late birthday surprise for him, yet they'd never exchanged birthday gifts before - and quite rightly.'

He said this with quiet gravitas and a nod of acknowledgment to himself.

'And he was pissed off that Hamish had gone drinking with me down here. Anyway, Walter's ragging him about being gay. Then Walter's talking about masturbation and his mother and the doctor. I didn't quite understand it, because Hamish was drunk, and the humour was very...."

Nigel wagged his fingers. But I understood. The likes of Hamish Tush and, by the sounds of it, Phillip Rutter, are my bread and butter.

'Apparently Walter has all these euphemisms for masturbation: getting cavalier on the roundhead, saucing the sausage, pumping the piston, bursting the bivalve, garroting the gargoyle. And he comes up with all this, mind, and claims he never masturbates. Can you imagine? A fourteen year old boy. No, no, sir. I've never touched it.'

I understood that Nigel were insinuating that the young man were lying, but it seemed to me that this Walter had a certain decorum, a patina of decency

about him, and an implicit understanding that certain lies are the very bedrock of civilised living.

'Walter's intelligent. But he acts stupid to try and fit in. So he's asking Hamish if he has PE today and who he'd like to educate in the showers. And then, from round the side of the woodpile appears Phillip Rutter, David Langley and Simon Napopili.

Phil Rutter was the "Cock" of Motson High, though so far as anyone knew, no one had ever seen him fight. His hardness was an established fact. Occasionally he'd hit people. But usually he preferred to give orders and watch. Dave and Si were his "soldiers."

Their arrival was the last thing Hamish needed on a full bowel. He prayed for a short burst of verbal abuse without extras, then watched in mute horror as Walter turned on his "charm," stepping off the woodpile, his head bobbing back and forth, a high five hanging in the air, spit flying from between his teeth.

'Alright, Phil. My man.'

He was ignored.

The story is picked up by Walter Jamieson. Everything Nigel Tush related about him turned out to be true, except that he forgot to add that he was a furtive character who wore his untrustworthiness on his sleeve. As such, I found him movingly honest.

'Phil's well cool. Plays it smooth as a washed up pebble. 'Surprise,' he says. You can see Hamish, who's thick in every useful way possible, is wondering what's going on? 'Cos this was back before me and Si were tight. Dave's grinning, he loves punching Hamish. And then Phil drops it, boom, nuclear. "Do you reckon," he

says, "that you can have me?" 'Cos that's how he says it 'cos he's from round here. Down in London, we say "do."'

He were only a child, so I nodded as if he'd enlightened me. He pulled a cartoon grin and spat between his teeth. I found him quite charming.

'Hamish didn't get it at all. I'm like, 'Yeah, deffo Phil. That's what he said. But deffo balls, mate, innit? You gonna do him now? Then Phil says, "I'm not gonna do him." You know what I'm saying? He started talking like me. Then he says, "You are." And that's when I joined the army.'

12 Gone to Pot

Well, talking of rumours, the worst are always about the best, aren't they? That's why those horrible rumours about Dr. Rathbone's obsession are so repulsive. It's the same with Arnold Charger. It were all part of a political smear campaign. As an historian, I feel it is my duty to set the record most decidedly straight. So, MP, that's what everyone calls him, and for all anyone knows is the whole of his name, because he doesn't come from round here, he's a gatecrasher, and so no one round here knew him before he were MP - if he were anything before he were MP. So, bear in mind, that's what we're dealing with here. Some young scrote in his thirties who everyone knows as MP and that's it. Now, I'm assuming Arnold knows his real name as he works for Arnold, but I am far too discreet to go asking around about sensitive things like that regarding a personage of Arnold Charger's standing. I'm sure there's good reasons, probably charitable, about why our Arnold takes this young man on.

Now Steven Little insisted he weren't the perpetrator of this rumour, and given that everyone hates Steven Little and no one has said he is the orifice of it, for once, I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

'MPs been scoring him weed. Spaceman.'

Whilst that's obviously not true, it's a fair summary of the rumour.

'He didn't know what to do with it. Ignorance.'

Well, I could have told him that. Why would Arnold Charger know what to do with weed. I remember a respectable gentleman saying that Zammo from *Grange Hill* taught a whole generation of kids how to smoke heroin. In joining the fashionable Mrs. Reagan in the act of encouraging children to "Just Say No" to Drugs, the BBC simultaneously contrived to offer lessons for the more curious.

'He's eating beans, it goes, straight from the can. He has them cold. Original. Uses one of them long-handled spoons.'

You see, it's details like this that make sense. That's how a titan would eat beans, isn't it? More efficient. Less waste. It's visionary.

'He's like, "Is that it, is it?" It's an eighth. He can't believe how small it is. Believe! He calls it Goodness. Good name. Kudos. Insists it's not for him. But for his back. Temple. Cutting edge. Medical, heard here first. Big rage. Calif. Wait and see. Future haze. Any direction, he's got this great conspiracy. Truth. Psycho docs in America murder their patients with prescription painkillers. Pop control. That's on the Bilderbergers' orders. I've got a mate who's got a DVD. Laser eye. It's from a tape and everything.'

I asked Steven to get to the point, which flummoxed him momentarily.

'Golf. Wankers. He started by walking. Training like. Then driving range. Lunar landings. Never happened. He drinks Bloody Marys. Off with her head. No celery. Person without a head is a vegetable. Dig deeper. He pretends he knows everything. All head. No shaft. On a fat man? Gets ripped off. Triple tax and a

Winston on top.'

I smile patiently.

'Fifty cabbage.'

I continue to smile patiently.

'He says it's a bargain. A cabbage with cabbage. But fair enough, MP got him the Houdini. Plastic spastic. CIA smuggled. Afghan Stargazer. Weedkiller prices. Arnold put his finger on it and it sticks in place. Asks if it should. Youngsters.'

He looked at me, and somewhere in his derangement, he saw that I were lost. I were, of course, secretly recording him. A part of me were wondering who I knew who were so dim as to be safe enough to translate it for me without disturbing my plans.

'Pure THC!'

He ejaculated the words. Then he repeated them quietly, imbuing them with a holy reverence and a mystical awe.

'Pure THC. It were me, see? Me who turned him on. Switched the dial. Tweaked his ribbon trip. Freaky giraffe. Top feeder. There were this chick. All politics and profound tits. Scowler. Gestapo coat. So I was a college grad. Seemed wise. Subordinate. The only time I ever read a poem were when I were high. And it were so deep and so meaningful. And so deep. Like the ocean. But all about a tree. I were explaining to her. This prof. Real specs chewer. Tweed and double jointed knees. The lot. Said I were a genius. She were so impressed she went home. Never came back. Blew her mind. And I saw it on Arnold's face. He ran out straight after she did. Next thing is, he's toking dope. Well, actually...'

He clutched himself laughing. The gall of the man! He might not have started the rumour, but he certainly knew how to claim credit for its dirty discreditation of one of our community's most upright citizens. Steven Little is Motson's most useless man. To hear him aggrandize himself over such immoral and spurious claims! Yet even worse were what William Motion had to say about it, and this time when William talked he were sober and in sunglasses, and it were just before he went on that journey of self-discovery, that so far as I saw, simply brought him back round to where he began. Now, truth be told, he gave no quarter. He spoke with such certainty and authority that it made me, I'm ashamed to say it except in poetry, weep acid into my throat.

'He was trying to bang Maureen. This is all before the scandal erupted. Maureen had been stringing him along. The money was nice, and there were always drinks down *The Dog*. But she couldn't believe he kept coming when it was obvious what he was after was what he wasn't gonna get. Everyone knows the rule. If she thinks your a suitable candidate for "sensual therapy" tricks, you'll know about it, and if not she'll just chit-chat-chat for her dollar, thank you. She said he turned up off his gourde. She has no idea why. What he was thinking. In the end, she had him searching for something she called "the with the without of yourself."''

'What's that?' I said.

'I don't know. Maureen certainly doesn't know. But he was into the intrigue. It was like the more she talked the less he understood, and the more he needed to be confused. And she, clever girl, just throttled his snake. It's human nature. The less interest she shows, the more he's into it. So I get it from her point-of-view. It was just business. Easy money.'

William prides himself on being the centre of scandals, so I suppose he

thinks it's clever to create them around innocent people. But here's something I know for a fact. Arnold Charger is a gentleman knight. I was at his business one afternoon, collecting wood in the back of the estate for our shed. He invited me into his office, offered me a drink, and out of great courtesy and respect, I suppose for my position and to reassure me in some ways, he showed me his replica medieval war crossbow. He told me he had more at home. And if he says so, it's a fact. What impressed me most, however, were that he were absolutely certain to let me know it were a replica.

'Oh, aye, it's proper functioning. Not some...'

He's not one to pretend to have antiques he doesn't own. That's the caliber of the man. Before the annual whole hog summer BBQ, he likes to demonstrate his prowess, firing into the pig from range. He explained to me, he had it in his office as protection from rough elements in town. I appreciated that. It takes a certain pressure off. Thus, he always speaks like a gentleman about such matters. He explained how a King Bee (I like that phrase), such as himself, needs to occasionally "skewer" enemies. I must admit, I had a moment when he said the word, "skewer." He shows how a man might be both menacing and gentle. I imagine that were what the "incident" had been like. It had happened many years before. I saw that day how rumour must have diluted and cheapened it. It were obviously his wife's fault. If only folk were more sensitive.

For example, why did Arnold end up in hospital? Personally, I believe the man. Give me a reason not to. He were taken out by political rivals looking to cause a scandal. Yet to the Steven Little's of this world, and that lad having a gob on him, that which falls out of his hole fills many the ear:

'He didn't know how to smoke it. School. So he ate it. All of it. In one go. Out.'

13 Suicide at *The Dog and Biscuit*

Hamish Tush would commit suicide for love. As his stomach

gurgled and his bowel creaked, he checked out his reflection in the window of *The Dog and Biscuit*, and recalled the advice of Super Speeches. Erect posture and controlled breathing conceal the appearance of nerves. It was reassuring nonsense, so in through the nose and out through the mouth, he sucked in the cool spring placebo.

‘‘It was Walter Jamieson that betrayed Hamish. We’ve had Walter in here,’’ said Dempster Shadaws.’

It weren’t me what interviewed him about this. For all his fake American honesty, he’s a sneaky devil is Dempster. He’d never talk to me about such things. He knows better than that. The thing were business were going so well with the internet ads that I’d made my first thousand. I invested it all back into the business, and I now I saw it all clearly. What I were, what I’d become: a freelance journalist fiction writer without scruples. That isn’t to say, unscrupulous. It’s just to say without any of the usual boring stuff what holds ordinary journos back. So, I invested in a wireless sound recorder. State-of-the-art stuff. Cost me the full grand and was barely the size of a kitchen matchbox. I’ve never spent so much on something so small. But it is fancy. Back then I only had one so I had to be careful where I put it. Luckily it were light enough that I could stick it places using sticky back Velcro. So, I’m sneaky. I didn’t go to my knit shop, but down the coast, to Glansdown, to buy a roll. With the Velcro, I could set the recorder up anywhere I thought it wouldn’t be discovered. In *The Dog and Biscuit* this weren’t hard. It’s a dingy place full of nooks and crannies. And, of course, it’s a shit hole. No one ever cleans. Dempster doesn’t clean his pipes. Rosemary, the cleaner, runs a never emptied, asthmatic vacuum over the carpets, runs a watery cloth along the bar and in quick circles over the tables, mops the bog, drops in the bleach cubes and is done in half an hour, then spend the next hour and a half sitting on the tank of the crapper and fagging it out the window while pouring over *Take a Break* and *OK!* I figured that so long as I could keep the thing concealed for a limited time, and work out when to retrieve it, I could leave it more or less wherever. A certain respectable gentleman long informed me that folks don’t see what they’re not looking for. However, I didn’t reach my age without being cautious. SO I tended

to stick it under the table rather than on the walls. Yes, from beneath the table, the sound were densely muffled, but the nephew of a certain respectable gentleman, one who followed gallantly in the line of family business, has what he calls software that can reduce the background noise, cut through the muffle, and exaggerate the targeted content. Even then it were a struggle. But I'm a trier me. I untangled and decoded and transcribed them recordings. It were a deliberate and exhaustive search for the truth of the gossip and the truth in the gossip. Even if it were all lies.

'You noticed how he pretends to be from London. What an asshole! I like the kid. You know his old man got him a job last summer cleaning the DSS offices.'

I couldn't make out who Dempster were talking to. It were mainly grunts, and "Uhs" and "Ahhs." This is from one of my first recordings. I'd been learning how to set the thing up. And transcribing it, I was sitting by my typewriter when what Dempster said made my blood evaporate.

'Those guys have all signed the Official Secrets Act. Doesn't stop 'em gossiping about Paul McCartney's dad's war time pension. So you see, it turns out that you open a few drawers, and the next thing is he has handfuls of official government IDs for teens. You know, those who are over 18 but might not be. Well, William's gone, so it's open market. First he sets himself up, and then he starts to make some friends. The he starts making money. Me? I'm a fan of underage drinking. They'll return here for years to come to relive the days when they were full of hope. A pub's like a bank, you wanna catch the investment young.'

From what I knew of this Walter Jamieson character, I didn't believe a word of it. Walter Jamieson were no doubt a prodigious masturbator, but that he refused to talk about it said an awful lot about his character. He simply weren't the type to sneak IDs from top secret unlocked governmental drawers. That someone were only added to the mystery. I was disgusted, however, with Dempster. Even

by his standards of moral turpitude, this bit the biscuit. Moreover, I had no doubt he knew who it were who were selling the IDs, too, and were just using poor Walter as a reputational patsy. So who were he protecting?

'I had to bar his friend Steven Rutter though. He's a nut job. I didn't like his skinny pal, either. I didn't mind the fat guy. He was harmless enough. But anyway, Walter, the sneaky little bastard, only goes tells this Phil Nutter bastard that Hamish reckons he can do the biz on him in a fight.'

Maureen reckons Phil's mum's sent him over to her for counselling before now. This is something you wouldn't believe, except, well, it's Phil's mother, and any woman capable of producing one of them, might be capable of seeing the good in such a move. I asked Maureen straight if she knew Phillip Rutter at all. She raised a tattooed eyebrow.

'He can be charming, but underneath it you can see it's all silk stocking and steel toecap.'

I got the following from a recording of, I think, David Langley. It was in a side room of *The Dog and Biscuit*. I'd hidden the recorder under the protruding lip of the windowsill. He were talking to an unknown female.

'Phil, he says, "I know you didn't tell Fuck Knuckle," that's what he called Walter, Fuck Knuckle, good, right? "He," Walter, he means, says, says Phil, "that you," Hamish he means, "you reckon you can have me." Huh-huh-huh. Funny, right? "You're not an idiot," he says, Phil. "We both know that," he says. "But what if he starts telling everyone? I've got a rep to protect. So I can have him for lying. Or I can have you for saying what you never said. Or I can have you both for being bum chums." Brilliant, right? "Or I can have you both," he says, Phil, "just for the fun of it," he says. "I've got a lot of options, see? But I'm a human," he says. "I'm a human." I don't know why he

said that. And then he asks Hamish if he knows what a human is. And then he tells him in case he doesn't know. Do you know what a human is? A human is someone who's interested in turning a tidy profit.'

Phillip Rutter was a boy with a vision.

Hamish explained it to me in interview.

'It all started,' said Hamish, 'last February. The rain fell like a bog flush, so even Armsway, who's a vindictive bastard who loves to see boys legs turn purple with cold, had to cancel games. Anyway, Armsways one of those subnormal people who fancy themselves intellectual. He asked us all what our plans for the future were. Everyone said the usual shit, "I wanna be a suspension bridge," "I wanna be a T-Rex," "I wanna be a cloud." All that usual crap. But when he asked Phil Rutter, what does rebel-in-chief say? "I'm gonna be a bigger boxing promoter than Frank Warren." He's deranged. But sometimes in a good way. So simply saying it made it happen.'

Henceforth, whenever word of an after-school fight got out, Phillip Rutter would open a book and take bets on who'd win. It proved profitable. It transpired that Simon Napopili, otherwise intellectually negligible, had an uncanny talent for predicting fight outcomes and coming up with odds.

'Phil tried to bribe me into it. I'd get revenge on Walter for betraying me. He and his savages would stop beating me.'

Dave takes up the story:

'"This," says Phil, "is something else again." And he says, "I'm a little bit ashamed I didn't think of it

myself." Huh-huh-huh. And then he turns to all of us, and Phil says, he says: "This is our opportunity to take the operation to the next level. I choose the fighters, the location, the time. Si makes the odds. And you," he says to me, "you show up." Huh-huh-huh. Well, I did. I did show up. "This," says Phil, he says, "is gonna be the biggest book in Motson High's history. I've even got my marketing strategy." "What is it, Phil?" I says. "Dork Fight," says Phil. And he runs his hand like this through the air as he says it. He says, "A Phil Rutter Promotion. Fight Night Presents, in association with Green After Shock, "The Battle of the Geeks." This Friday."

Hamish protested. He was busy. Had a date. Was due to meet Olive Montgomery down *The Dog and Biscuit*.

Much guffawing ensued. Gay jokes abounded. Two dead arms were delivered.

Friday it was.

Hamish said:

'It was a terrible week for me thinking about it. I could go to the fight, let Walter win and turn up to see Olive looking warrior like. I could spin her a story about seeing the other fellow. But I didn't fancy letting Walter do that and have everyone know about it. So, I could fight Walter, but back then I was a pacifist. It meant the only option would be to not go. Which also made sense. Who wants a fight before the biggest night of his life?

'But I also knew that'd come with ramifications. The hype at school was insane. Big money was being laid. Tenners. Twenties. Plus, if I ruined Phil's

"Battle of the Geeks," that'd mean torture for the rest of my life. The fire was in my pants and I was Prometheus.'

I asked him, and he confirmed.

That Friday was the beginning of the Easter Holidays, meaning that seventeen days of a parody of spring were going to idle by before he had to face school again.

This was his first chance to experience life in all its glory. It might be the only one he ever got. He had to take it. Had to meet the girl. Even if it meant certain pain.

'I remember checking out my reflection in the window of the pub before I went in. I inflated my chest and entered the pub doing my new walk, the Gait of Belonging I called it. I'd practised it over and over, refining it in my parent's bedroom. They have these kinky mirrored wardrobes. So, I leaned back, puffed up my chest and cocked my elbows out to the sides. I swung my forearms, and held my knuckles face forward - just like I'd seen George Dubya do. I lifted my chin, and thinking about, must have made everyone look up my nose. But I felt powerful.'

I watched this. I was wearing headphones, big clunky conspicuous ones. In was nodding along to an imaginary marching band. My recorder was suspended under the table with the microphone pointing directly at the bar:

Jamie Shadaws and Julie Sandwidth were staring at him, mouths agape.

He supposed they were in awe.

He pulled up at the bar opposite Julie and ordered a pint of *Purgatory*.

'Oh my,' said Mr. Shadaws, stepping out from the doorway of the cellar, 'if it ain't the boy Tush. Your daddy bring you back? That's just swell. What ya

say, Jamie? Plod won't be in tonight. He's down the Social, right?'

'Hmm,' said Jamie, nodding at me.

'Have a nice day,' said Dempster.

But he didn't see me.

He turned to Hamish. 'Where's your pa?'

'At home.'

'I don't see him.'

'He's at home.'

'Son, this is your daddy's real home. Just as it can be yours, too. Think of the pub as a second mortgage.'

'I doesnae have a first mortgage.'

'Perfect. Then you can spend everything you got here. You see, the more dollar you spend, the more of a home this is to you. Beautiful, ain't it? Jules, honey, serve this guy a *Purgatory*. You got moolah, right?'

'Aye.'

'That's all you need. And if your daddy's not here to blame, a good quality fake ID as well. I know you got one of those.'

'Oh, aye. Of course.'

'Will ya look at this kid? Come on, then. Just for form's sake. Let's take a peek.'

'Oh, I just remembered, I don't have it with me.'

'Don't have it?'

'No. I left it at home.'

'What good's it gonna do you there?'

‘I forgot it,’ said Hamish.

‘You don’t have one, do you?’

‘No.’

Julie flicked the lager tap off.

Hamish looked mournfully at the half-filled pint gleaming in her hand. He was wondering if he was going to have to pay for it and not get to drink it.

‘Now, now,’ said Mr. Shadaws, patting Julie on the shoulder. ‘No need for that. We’ll let it slide tonight, but you’re going to have to go and see Dubya before next time.’

‘Dubya?’

‘William Motion. You know Dubya. You met him here, right?’

‘It’s nay true, by the way. I’m no gay. I can prove it. I’m meeting a girl.’

‘Oh, perfect. That’s even more hilarious. Wait ‘til I –’

‘Don’t tell anyone, least of all my da. He’s so proud of his reaction to his thinking me being gay that I don’t want to let him down. He’s a wee bit embarrassed and thinks everyone’ll laugh at him for coming out of the closet on my behalf.’

‘Mum’s the word,’ said Mr. Shadaws, tapping the side of his nose. ‘This chick you’re seeing. Does she have an ID?’

‘She doesnae need one.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that.’

‘She’s an older woman. In her twenties.’

‘Yum-yum.’

‘She’s gorgeous,’ said Hamish. ‘Looks like Bugs Bunny.’

‘You’re a strange one,’ said Mr. Shadaws, handing Hamish a card.

I got a copy of one of these from Hamish. I can't guarantee it was the same card as that which Mr. Shadaws gave him, but I know it was:

William Motion's Floral Restoration Services

Available exclusively from

Sound Street Public Lavatory, Motson Central

"For when the floater won't flush..."

Mon-Fri: 07:00-08:30, 12:00-13:00, 17:00-19:00

Sat & Sun: 11:00-13:00

'I never knew he did fake IDs,' said Hamish.

Dempster tapped his nose. 'You never needed to know.'

'How much will it cost?'

'Say I sent you and it'll cost you nothing but a passport sized photo. Getting a new identity, it'll change your life, kid.'

14 All Together Now, Part 1

Hamish checked his watch, and he checked the clock behind the bar, then he asked Mrs. Shadaws to check her watch: but the verdict was unanimous, it was eight pm.

And Olive hadn't shown up.

'Chin up, kid,' said Dempster. 'Women are half the planet.'

The better half,' said Jamie.

Hamish necked the rest of the *Purgatory*, grimaced and nodded at the bar. He wobbled on the spot. Then he Gait of Belonged out of *The Dog and Biscuit*.

Dempster shouted after him. 'Here's wisdom: If you can't catch a fish, catch an octopus. An octopus is eight tentacles of pure squidgy joy. Welcome to the pleasure beach. It's always free to free dive!'

I nipped out after him. I watched him Gait of Belong across the car park before slumping in defeat.

I speculated for the animals on the internet, and the feedback were they wanted less of this:

There was nothing worse than having raised hopes dashed against the rocks. Over the years, he'd learned to immunise himself from such foolishness. An ID from William Motion – what was the point? Pubs and cruel women weren't for the likes of him. Being killed by Phil and Co. were the best he could hope for. He looked out across the vista of Vauxhalls and Fords, Citroens and Toyotas, and dappled between the clichés of black Mercedes and white Transit vans. From the fish and chippy, neon illuminated in the middle of the terraced row, came a gush of steam, marking the chips being dropped into the fat. He thought about getting some, or maybe a bit of cod – except he felt sorry for cod, it was overfished, being bullied and harassed to extinction, like his soul's appetite for life. Aching inside he stared across the car park half drunk on the vile lager. Fresh chips didn't match his mood. He felt more soggy cheese and onion pie. Such was his self-loathing when across the shop front strolled a vision of hope. Only hope had changed: it had itself a smooth and polished lustre that was operating, if he wasn't mistaken, from the vantage point of William Motion's skull.

I had taken to wearing Nikes. Softly I trod. It were my shadow he'd have seen, had he turned to look, silhouetting out from behind the van by which he

stood. I heard him clearly:

‘Turn up the sound of the spheres,’ he whispered, ‘a new epoch has begun.’

I watched him go. The internet enjoyed this:

His mood swung in an instant, abruptly and inexplicably chipper, he no longer needed fish and chips or cheese and onion. The Gait of Belonging zipped him into posture and home he strolled, having lost but one battle in a giant and noble war. Tomorrow he’d he’d swindle a new identity. He surged with urge.

To relate this from the POV of someone like Arnold Charger is not easy. I couldn’t bring myself to ask someone of Arnold’s cosmopolitan sophistication and social standing a question as crude as: “Do you remember what you were doing the moment you found out William Motion had been separated from his mullet?” I needed someone who wouldn’t look foolish asking such a thing. That’s how I ended up employing, on an intern basis, my little helper. I bought him a crude voice recorder. To have trusted him with my state-of-the-art sound recorder would have created unnecessary suspicion. So I sourced a cheap, secondhand tape device. By that point in my machinations, I had found it essential to start covering my tracks and my real purpose with a cover story. As an investigative journalist delving deep into the heart of modernity’s soul sickness, it were only moral that I lie and cheat and deceive the moral delinquents that were my subjects. To have fought fire with water would have been to extinguish them, when what I wanted most of all were to see them ablaze.

Arnold said: ‘I was on the chesterfield in the front bay nook having a pint of *Purgatory*.’

My little helper hadn’t yet mastered the art of the directed interview and immediately went off on a tangent:

‘What did you think of it?’

‘I’d never had it before. But I’d never realised it was so expensive. And imported.’

'From Luton.'

'Right.'

'How would you described the flavour?"

Arnold said: 'There's a very metallic note, and yet clean, sort of oxygenated.'

'Like rust?'

'Aye, that's a good description. An iron oxide tang, along with a back note of sulphur and, frankly, a touch of softened organic green leaf. You can taste the photosynthesis, and how it's been heat processed.'

'Like boiled cabbage?'

'Yes.'

'So,' said my little helper, 'like rusty metal and fart.'

'Yes,' said Arnold, 'but sophisticated. I like it.'

'So, you were drinking *Purgatory*...'

'Yes, and it was so delicious, I felt I should have some food with it. So, I leaned over the back of the chesterfield and pulled open the curtain to see if there was a big queue at the chippy. And then my attention was diverted by some ugly, pasty skinhead that I immediately turned away from in disgust, before, don't ask me why, doing a double take. Everyone knows what happened next. No point in hiding it. The cat jumped up and knocked the pint out of my hand.'

'That's nay what everyone says. They say you dropped it. That the cat were nowhere to be seen.'

I have to admit, his methods did achieve results, but his cheek, at times, made me want to clout him round the head with a scimitar. But Arnold knew how to handle scandal and rumour, and so had no trouble with him.

'Cats are quick.'

'And the glass?'

'Didn't break. But beer flooded out. Good riddance.'

'I thought you liked it.'

'Yeah, but there was a massive queue at the chippy, so I fancied a voddie-lemonade instead.'

'Do you think that had something to do with William's missing mullet?'

'That's deep,' said Arnold. 'Could do. Some things just go together. Vodka and lemonade - a classic. Like bacon and eggs. Beans on toast. A Ford Capri 2.8i with Pirellis on the back. For as long as any of us could remember, William and his mullet had been inseparable. They were. And then, they weren't.'

It were when my little helper pushed his interviewee past the point of fair temper, especially as distinguished a guest as Arnold, that I most could've found myself being less than merely strict with the disciplinary scimitar. I glowed over my keyboard, and not in a good way, as I transcribed him saying:

'Do you regret anything that happened in the interim?'

'Regret?' said Arnold.

There were an anguish to his voice that I wanted to mother away, a pain and anger that I wanted to soothe.

'I would,' said Arnold, 'that I regret.'

A hush descended upon the pub.

William Motion strode to the bar. 'Earl Grey with a slice of lemon, if you please.'

Jamie gawped at him. 'Okay,' she said, robotically taking a cup from the shelf above the bar and dropping a teabag into it. She flicked on the kettle. 'What happened?'

'What happened to what?'

'Is it? I cant' say it. Is it an undesirable personal growth out of control? Does it happen that quick? Oh William, I am sorry, love.' Jamie's chin wobbled.

'About what?'

She wailed. 'Are you dying?'

'Or living?' said William.

'What happened to your head?'

'What this old thing?' said William, pointing to his nose. 'Just broken – again.'

'No, not your face. Your head. Your –'

'This?' He pointed to his skull. 'Nothing. It's fine –' Then he patted the top of his naked skull.

It took a beat. Then his face froze into a mask of confused, paranoid horror while his other hand rose and touched the side of his face and slowly crawled north towards his bare cranium. He tried, evidently, to clutch at what wasn't there. He tried to speak, his mouth worked up and down and left and right and circles in between, yet no words came.

There were murmurs in distant corners. There were grunts of dissent. Somebody got slapped. It all quietened down.

William ran towards the toilet, his hands rubbing his scalp, turning he slammed backside first into the door.

Moment passed in which everyone had a moment. There was a collective intake of breath as the toilet door reopened.

William said, 'My mullet,' and he looked about the room, 'it's been stolen.'

15 Strike

It took me an age to put this together. The main reason for that were because my main sources of information were what television says in literary circles they call unreliable narrators. An unreliable narrator is hardly a reliable term at all, by the way.

What it means is anything from the conman to the inveterate liar via the thicko and the amnesiac all the way to the megalomaniac. While what the conman wants you to believe is for his own gains, the inveterate liar just wants you to understand how bored he is with you, as bored as you are with the thicko for whom nothing ever happens except comes out bent, which is as different from the drunk or clinical amnesiac as it is the same as the conman is a twist on the megalomaniac who secretly doesn't believe you exist at all.

My sources were: 1) Steven Little: Motson's Most Useless Man (and that's saying something). 2) Julie Sandwidth: the intellectually single-celled bar stewardess at *The Dog and Biscuit*. 3) Oda Dodie, AKA, The Dodo: part zombie, part human - part demon, part hyena.

First we have Steven Little: conman, inveterate liar, and drunken amnesiac (mostly harmless).

'Jamie Shadaws is a nymphomaniac. Righteous.'

I'd always suspected as much. Then we have Julie Sandwidth: thicko and

clinical amnesiac (ontologically negligible).

'She's a slag. She's got AIDS and crabs. She did it in the Tardis with a man what's not Dempster. I know because I know what he sounds like. I've heard. Because I've worked here so long. There's not nothing I've never not heard before.'

The Dodo: inveterate liar and megalomaniac (highly dangerous).

'They think there's things they can keep from me. If I were her, I'd be contemplating my murder, so that's undoubtedly true. I have sources, political sources, indirectly, through people who know people who know the people who know.'

Then Julie again:

'They deffo stopped doing it. I didn't hear not nothing one day and then it just went on. Dempster went round with a sore head for days. That means a man's not doing it. Then he went mental. Started wearing dark glasses everywhere. He was proper not doing it. And there had to be a bet or Jamie wouldn't never have not done it in the Tardis. Dempster's funny like that. It's quantum theory.'

My degenerate web following, I am assured from a particularly specific fan what knows computers and something he calls algorithms, which he assures me are not a form of virus or any other disease, enjoyed this specific passage relating to the physics of Dempster:

Dempster's one of them men that has biceps like a horny gorilla taking monkey gland supplements. He has a back like Atlas. His thighs bulge like they're pregnant with baby dinosaurs. He's hairy across his extremities, his neck, his knuckles, his toes, like his pubic region sometime around the age of eleven must

have started colonising his entire body and never let up.

Then there were Arnold Charger, one of the few honest and discreet men in this town. It were probably the stress of being so great, but he were a little worse, not a lot worse like some of them get, but just a little pendular in the head when he told my *Casio* via a stranger sitting next to him at the bar:

'Jamie's always horny after being down the abattoir. Don't ask me how I know, but don't doubt it. And that's when she and Demps did the deal. It's like the U.S. and Russia, and Alaska. That were an annex. Oh, no, that were a sale. Well, it were like that, too. A deal. They made a deal. For the annexation of...'

He started laughing. The other day, I was watching Richard Attenborough, what talks animal, watching hyenas and filming them talking. It sounded just like supernatural laughter. But Richard understood what the hyenas meant. Arnold's very clever. Because that's what he sounded like now. He must have watched the same show. Because he started talking hyena. Like I say, he'd been under tremendous pressure. I sidled on to a bar stool where I could see him. He were a bit shiny plastic around the eyes when he started speaking English again.

'So, that's why they stopped doing it. I don't feel bad about that. Not that it was my fault. But still...'

That's just like Arnold. Taking the weight of the world on his shoulders. Now, it's not that you can trust a word of what Steven Little says, but I'm sure he were incidentally spot on when he put it like this:

'Murder or sex. That were the question. To do it or to do that. Not that they ever made be doing it. Crunchless grapes? Maybe? But you don't have to nowadays, do you? Replicate. Pills. Condoms. Scissors! Ouch! Exterminate!'

You see Arnold Charger, paragon, said this:

'Well, you know how Americans are all self-invented types? That's Demps, too. He's got this thing about JFK. I think JFK was a bloody idiot getting shot in the head like that. But Demps reckons he was great. Anyway, JFK was a right randy sod. He used to do it every day. So that's Demps and Jamie, right? Demps reckons it's all Jamie. That's she's hornier than a rhino. Like a triceratops. But I reckon that's just his fantasy. Playing himself up like he's irresistible.'

Arnold is such a sweet character, such an upstanding and moral man, that he can't bear to think of Jamie as being the slut what she is. I think this is what poet's call a flaw in a great man. What makes Arnold as close to male perfection as you can come is that he isn't perfect.

Compare his explanation with the tawdry words of Steven Little:

'For D, all is exercise. Got a chore? Exercise. Swap it up! Do the back, chest, arms, legs! Two full body! Submit. Dominate. Dig the mood. Sensitize! The challenge? Calculate! Experiment. Furniture time. Mix it up to stir it up. Variate. Pull in in increments. Muscle make. Body build and romance with bone. Density for immensity!'

The final word must go to Dempster himself. Yet the word of any man chiefly celebrated for the distribution of sin must always be taken with a bucket. From the seeping wound that is his mouth oozed the following:

'It was Quantum, man. When she came up with the five part plan, I didn't have no choice.'

The search for the Five-Part Plan would take me deep into that seminal tale of the Fall of Civilisations: into the wandering world of Little Red Riding Hood.

16 Miscellaneous Meat Cleaver Lover

The first piece of incriminating evidence:

The notice I found pinned to the door of the public convenience:

In mourning. Soul sick. Won't be back to work until

Monday. So be good this weekend, chaps.

William

From this I gleaned one of my less popular passages with the fools on the WWW:

It had been the worst weekend of William Motion's life. The family Giggs had disappeared without word on the Friday, and there'd still been no sign of their VW Transporter in the driveway on Sunday evening. He'd spent the entire time awaiting his Beloved's return, pining in his shed, mooching around the back garden – and even though he didn't drink – sipping straight gin. When they hadn't turned up on the Monday, he fell into a full Jimi Hendrix of Manic Depression.

The second piece of evidence came a long time later, from an eavesdrop on what William called his series of "Confessions", and his "Postmortem Discourses on the Ravages of Fulfilling Existence". Despite following him about untraced for weeks, I only caught intermittent samples, such as the following:

'I thought they'd just upped and left, stolen my key and gone back to Wales. The only evidence left was my mutilated head and mangled heart. My

mullet had died in vain. I was in nihilism. And there's not much style to that.'

You see how that fits with my suppositions? I'll admit it though, I was aided by my covert detective work. It took some meticulous calendar scrutiny to substantiate these dates, but I can confirm they are accurate. Knowing that no one would be at the pub on a Monday, I'd donned my masculine disguise, the latest version of the inconspicuous Motson male: I strapped my tits in and put on *Kappa* tracksuit bottoms in polyester sheen white; an XXXL buttercup yellow with deep green pinstripe *Ralph Lauren* shirt worn untucked and rolled up the forearms; a cherry red *Kangol* fishing hat; and a pair of classic brown brogues; to accessorize tastefully I chose fake *Rayban Aviators* with mirrored lenses, a striped scarf in six shades of grey, and - most importantly - an oversize set of headphones - and this is key - in gunmetal pink. A man with gunmetal pink headphones dissuades questions. For verisimilitude I taped the wire of the headphones to a large empty box of *Bryant and May's* which I kept in the right pocket of the *Kappa's*. In order to be ready at any time to go into disguise, I hadn't washed my hair for a week, and so now wore it in a lank pony tail, put tape over one earlobe, which gave me an intimidating air, and put a stud in the other. Thus donned, I strolled, casual and violent, into William's toilet, grunted at his salutation like a Neanderthal tourist, and entered the cubicle nearest his work station. There were something immediate and determined about his greeting that grated. It were cheery, but that forced sort of cheery what people do when they're down. I worked swiftly, grunting occasionally like a protein addict forcing his business, and went to work. It were a risk, but what isn't I reasoned, and wiping down the underside of the cubicle wall at the far right corner by the door, I then waited for a silent count of ten for the alcohol to evaporate before switching on the recording function on the *Casio* and using my *Velcro* attachment strat., suspending it speaker facing out - and fitted with brand new *Duracells* - to the underside of the wall.

Hamish Tush (panting like a hunted fox): 'You're back.'

William Motion: 'So it would appear.'

Hamish, hyperventilating, says: 'You okay?'

'Fabulous. Marvellous. Couldn't be better. Been exercising, Tush?'

'Something like that.'

'Good, good. Anything to circulate, eh?'

'Aye.'

'Well, what can I do for you? Woman troubles, I suppose.'

'Not exactly. I heard you can get me an ID.'

'You know, I just had Snips here.'

'The barber?'

'Exactly. He had to put a cricket bat through his wife's rabbit's head this morning in front of his children.'

'Blimey. Had they been that naughty?'

'They had, but that's not the point. It wasn't a punishment. He had to do it for the higher good. But it's not the kind of thing you do without buying your wife flowers. So, you want an ID?'

'Aye, why did Snips have to -'

'Hush, hush. Ask Snips if you must. Only give him time. Life and death matters, Tush. Manly stuff. See, if I was to obtain you a fake ID that'd make you a man before you're a man, which would make you more of a man than a mere man, a kind of Hermes figure, dragged from his cave and raised to the level of the gods... So it's important, you understand?

'I loved her - the woman whose panties your father sniffed. She was a first. A lot of firsts: my first

non-Motson woman, my first non-white woman, and, most intriguingly, the only woman's marmalade I ever got stuck into the bitter sweet tang of without making so much as a move. She was a lot of firsts. And she came to me. Fact is, she forced herself upon me. I know, indelicate thing to say of a lady. Not that I minded.'

'Eh?'

William said, 'Pics.'

'The ones my father saw?'

'Yes. I was staying at a pub. She was the landlady. Her husband was mute. Bloody intimidating muteness. And this one could speak, too. As I found out the next day when he chased me down the street wielding the same meat cleaver she'd used to seduce me.'

'Blimey.'

'Your father would never forgive me telling you, so I suppose I must. One understands the youthful desire to know. As Dempster might say, I'll give you the LD if you keep it on the DL.'

'What?'

'Good. It was after my first night out in London. Now, I'm ashamed to say this, but I'd failed to pick up a woman to have casual sex with. I know. The shame. But there you have it. I'd tried, by day and by night, I'd scoured the streets, the cafes, the coffee shops, the pubs and the nightclubs, but all in vain. I made moves that to a Motson woman would be irresistible. Yet, to cold-hearted, London ladies, my moves moved them not. Obviously, I sank into depression. A suicidal melancholy enveloped me. I sought oblivion. Ended up

drunk and confused in an Internet café, where, well... that's another story.'

'Is that how the Welsh family took over your house?'

'You know about that?'

'Aye. Everybody does.'

'Everybody? Things only get better. Anyway, so there I am, down and out, alone and lost, I trudge back to my lonely room in the loneliest pub in Old London Lonesomeness. And I'm just settling down to a miserable, drunken sleep when the door inches open. It's the smell that stops me leaping out of bed and into an attacking frenzy. I'm dangerous, you know?

'But it was the perfume. See? A man of my instincts goes soft in all but one of his extremities when he scents a woman on the prowl. Especially when she's wearing a short nightie. It takes me a moment or so to recognise her as the petite, miscellaneous, Oriental wife of the petit, miscellaneous, Oriental landlord.'

'Miscellaneous -'

'Indeed. Asian mongrels, old chap. Just as I am a European mongrel of in ascending order of degrees precisely Spanish, Irish, French, Swedish, Portuguese, Polish, Italian, Lithuanian, Greek, Norwegian, Albanian, Welsh, Catalan, Finnish, Scottish, Russian, Czech, Bavarian, Icelandic, and English descent, so were both of them some kind of east-Asian conglomerate of genes. She's got a Mekon skull, round eyes, pale skin, looks like a cat with bruised lips, a lady with sturdy knees and tits to match. Quite beautiful.'

'I can see that.'

'Over she comes, the Asian street bitch emitting heat, I her European stray wondering what's what? The bed's nothing more than a double-mattress abandoned on the floor. She's sneaking up on me. Something's in her hand. I'm thinking something kinky, some toy. Little do I know. Next thing, she's pounced. I'm trapped. Jolly good show, says I, until through the moonlight slanting down between the crack in the curtains, I see the kinky toy's a meat cleaver. I'm startled. I start wiggling. But she has my arms pinned with her knees. And before I can do anything, the blade's at my throat. She's smiling at me, and something in that smile tells me murder's not on the agenda. She starts whispering, marvellous, incomprehensible gibberish that becomes perfect cockney. She insists on satisfaction, nibbles my ear, else she's going to cut my head off. How sweet, thinks I.'

'You didnae shit yourself?'

'I don't think she wanted me to. She was a serious lover. With little green panties that laced up at the sides, presumably so that she doesn't catch her pubes in them as she ties them up. Practical people mongrel Asians. She slips these over my eyes. But I can see through. The boob slipping out of the nightie. It was a question of life or death. I tucked into life. Even managed, as you can see, to get the camera from the top of my trousers next to the mattress.'

'Jings. I cannae believe you took pictures?'

'Of course. She loved that.'

'Is that how the husband caught you?'

'No. That was the next day. I thought it politic if I changed accommodation. I went down to the bar. My little honey trap was behind the counter, smiling sweetly until she clocks my bag and I confirm that I'm off. That's when she went Satan eyed. Next thing, she's gabbling. I'm not catching on. Her beloved ducks out the back. I'm wondering what's happening when he reappears brandishing the meat cleaver above his head. He flips over the countertop like a gymnast, and starts shouting. Now, I can take a hint. I bolt for the door, one push and I'm out breathing London air, all arse and elbows down the paving slabs. Him in hot pursuit. I never knew I was so fast. Bag under arm. Nipples to the horizon. Still, he's catching up. I'm about to die. Meat cleaver in the back of my head. Nasty business. Then it happened. I was on the verge of losing all dignity when I'm saved by a No Parking sign. I glance behind. He's running so hard he's gone face down. I almost warn him. Stupid, huh? But fair play's built into William Motion's soul - well, almost... I say nothing. Up he looks. And whollop, face plants into it. No parking here. But park there he did. And while he was otherwise incommunicado, I leap head first into a black cab.'

'Wow! No wonder they wanted to put you on the TV.'

'Now that's a different story.'

17 The Suicide Zone

Groggy and confused, Arnold Charger woke up surrounded by antiseptic, magnolia grubbiness. It took a beat to register - he

was in hell. And then it struck, no, this wasn't hell, this was its antechamber: the hospital.

Well, of course there were rumours, vicious rumours, nasty, vindictive rumours, small-minded, stupid, ill-thought out rumours created by vicious, nasty, vindictive, small-minded, stupid, ill-thought out brains. Some said he'd thought he'd had a heart attack, but that's clearly impossible. A stroke? Ridiculous. He's far too robust for anything of that sort. I've never actually seen him do press-ups, but I bet if he did he'd do more than ten, probably eleven or even twelve. I don't know if you've ever tried to do push-ups, but they're nearly impossible.

Arnold didn't remember feeling ill. He'd felt, as usual, humble and regal. He felt for his wallet. Doctors and nurses were notorious socialist scum. They believed in legalised theft in all its forms: in taxes, and national insurance and poor people having health care. He fished in his pockets. His wallet was still there. Still loaded with cash and cards. He'd have to go private. They were incompetent scum.

I admit I took some liberties, but the rumours were appalling and only got worse. The script, the one written by the great THEY went something like this:

THEY said he'd been at Maureen Appleyard's... THEY said he'd got stoned on marijuana hashish funny fags...

But I knew none of this were true. I'd seen him in the pub shortly before it all went down. He were drinking proper responsible, and of course, with originality and class. I saw him down three large vodka and coconuts. I suppose for the sake of the record, I should say what some of the little them what make up the big THEM said about it. Steven Little:

'Bitter spice, man. And not in a good way. He

tried chewing it. Disaster time.'

And I suppose I must also report what Maureen herself said about it, as nonsensical as it is. This is what she reported to Jamie Shadaws via *Casio*:

'He told me that he loved himself so much that it was only natural that I should...'

'Should what? Should love him?'

'I don't know. He didn't get past that bit. And that's how he kept talking. It wasn't so much that he was like he was when he's drunk as it was he was somehow brain damaged. You know when them people what have accidents and afterwards maybe they can paint or something. It was like that. Except he said a lot of drivel, but then couldn't finish it.'

Steven Little again:

'Too much. He ate a whole eighth. Then come up. And dig deeper. The waves. The electric euphoria, man.'

Maureen's lies:

'He started giggling uncontrollably, like a child, and like a child he seemed to think this made him very clever and impressive. He was like, "With. Without. I don't plan on sticking round, that's too square. But that's the way I like it, baby. Rectangles and diamonds. Stars and stripes. Give me carbohydrates to jam on...." Like this. Then giggle. Then he told me, from what I could make out, that his vision was going soft around the edges. He said, very serious like, that I was pulsing with an eerie glow. I didn't like that. He said I looked weird and colourful.'

It's these kinds of details that give her little game away. Arnold would never speak to a woman like that. And what she said he said next absolutely seals

it:

'Next thing, he's telling me he wants to commit suicide for the good of his mental health. Said he was going to light himself up. Said he would arise from the ashes an Arnold anew. Well, I couldn't have him doing that on my carpet. So that's when I called for the ambulance.'

'Did you tell them he was a suicide risk.'

'Well, no. By the time they arrived he was out in la-la land. I figured he'd sleep it off.'

Steven Little, who's little black book must be a veritable Who's Who of degenerates, reported the following:

'Old Carrot. He's in bed next to Arnie. He woke up muttering. Wallet sniffing. Like you see him do in here sometimes. And talking to himself about going private, and rubbing himself and blinking like he was going to cry. He asked Carrot: "What am I doing here?" Carrot told him. He'd met Maureen. Been charmed. Old Carrot's such a dirty sod. Filth monkey! He tells him, "Harry Pothead, that's you." And Arnold, now dig this. He tells him he's never taken drugs. He's busy shagging Maureen. She's his mistress. Both lies! What a politician. Respect. Solid baloney. Turns out they were going to charge Maureen. Right? For taking Arnold away. But then the blood tests showed up. He was in space. Intergalactic. Maureen is right put out. By his saying he's having an affair with her. She said he was her client. Counselling. Old Carrot called him a Lollipop. That's Carrot's most grievous insult, man. When Carrot says Lollipop, he means it. Then Arnold does one. Rips out his I.V. Walks out the ward. Pedestrian!'

From there the rumours of THEM came in a torrent thick and fast. THEY swirled around the pub, took on life and shapes and form of their own. THEY became to the average moron creeds of truth. To do them full justice would require a telephone book of allegations, incriminations, falsehoods, and somewhere deep inside, perhaps some scintilla of truth. To cut the long short, THEY said:

1. Maureen and Arnold were having an affair.
2. She was in love with him.
3. She hated him.
4. He'd been drugged by a political rival in a sabotage attempt on his credibility.
5. Arnold was a drug addict.
6. He was a shoe in for mayor.

18 The Power of Celibacy

Motson's a grey town. From dawn to dusk – grey. Spring and summer - grey with a tinge of blue. Autumn and winter - grey with a hint of yellow. Its skies are a floating collage of marble. Its clouds are pale grey and the cracks between them the colour of granite. And so when dawn in its grey stretch and yawn elongates across the sky, its greyness never entirely forfeits its reign until twilight seeps into the blackness of night.

'Men what don't do it turn into pervy priests.'

Well, I don't know what kinds of priests Julie Sandwidth knows, but they're certainly not the type that I associate with on the precipice of the weekend.

'That's what happened to Dempster.'

I can certainly believe that. Except I think he always were a pervert. He just grew into his perversions more eloquently, and started to express them with greater variance.

'I asked Chavvie about it. He reckons Dempster must have had aching balls for days. That'd explain that bloody mood of his.'

For two days, this omnipresent greyness depressed Dempster Shadaws as he battled insatiable urges. Going cold turkey after twenty years of daily ejaculation was causing him severe discomfort. From testicles to tubes, he throbbed. There was an obvious way out. But he refused to contemplate it. He didn't, hadn't in decades. So, for two days, he wandered about in angry pain.

I know that bits true, because Arnold said.

Then on the third day, a miracle happened.

His libido relaxed and the constant bleating of his groin was silenced. From a brooding beast filled with pent up aggression, he became – overnight – a bouncing ball of elastic energy.

If this was celibacy, it was for keeps.

'He became veterinarian overnight,' said Jamie. 'And teetotal, not that he'd been much of a drinker. And he invented this weird philosophy where besides being veterinarian, he could still shoot and eat squirrels 'cos they're vermin and vermin are lower than plants in the spiritual kingdom. He said in his higher law that he also had the right to shoot bums, you know, homeless people, but that he didn't want to. And, of course, as everyone noticed, he started wearing

Aviators everywhere.'

I recently asked him about his new philosophy. He said:

'It was called the Personal Excellence Theory of Everything. It came to me in a moment. I was delusion back then. I believed it was a message from the universe, that I was an Evocator, a conduit for the Seven Personal Integrities. They were, like Jamie said, all the best 'ity' words. Sincerity, Clarity, Opportunity, Magnanimity, Charity, Morality and then the big one – Chastity. Added together they equal Integrity. They give a man a titanium will. Do you know what that's like?'

'I don't.'

'Lightweight. Corrosion resistant. Portable and unbreakable.'

Despite his being vegetarian, Jamie cooked his squirrels for him. She decapitated, skinned and gutted them. It turned her on. The blood, gore and death...

'Back then,' said Dempster to me and my *Casio*, 'I had this profound belief in the emotional connectivity of the Quantum. Do you know about quantum physics?'

'I don't.'

'Forget about it. You don't wanna. Cosmic particles could be splitting your brain in two as we speak like death rays from the future and you'd never know, until the future catches up with the Quantum. That's what it is. Well, you apply that to a marriage, and you go crazy. Or you become an Oracle.'

As he scanned his Kingdom, the elongated beer garden of dreams – with its weathered picnic benches, unkempt lawn, scraggly trees, withered flowers and prickly bushes – a sense of unfulfilled Greatness came over him. It had been plaguing him these last three days. A Great Man, on the wagon in monk's clothes, needed a Mission. A man might overdose on a reality unchecked. He stared at the garden until the green and the grey

blended into one.

Meaty smells wafted out the door and sizzled. Traffic sighed.

He laid down in the hammock.

'I took him out his burgers. He mumbled something about drunken ejaculators.'

'What?' he said, realising what he'd taken as bushes were actually his feet. His mind was recreating the world.

'I give him his vege corpses. Well, I've got my ways. I was in the altogether. He was like, 'What you doing woman?' I did him a shuffle. Well, he was wearing sweatpants and I could see I was having an effect, if I'm not being too subtle. He called it biological warfare. He started talking about gastropods, whatever they are, and molluscs and tungsten carbide and crusty rolls and stuff like that.'

I asked why he were saying that.

'To turn himself off. Nasty, eh? I asked him if he was cloud bathing. And that's when he said it.'

'Said what?'

'That he was controlling the weather.'

'And what did you say to that?'

'I said he was doing a right shite job of it. He said he was insatiable. I said I should be so lucky. He said he was executing a plan. And I said I should be so lucky...'

She tittered, it seemed to me, meaningfully, secretly, deviously. It were one of them bikini titters what reveals as much as it hides, and what it hides is

disgusting and dirty. I asked what she meant by that, but she just crocodile grinned and changed the subject like she were too good for it. Apparently Dempster were very precise in describing his sunnies:

'Military spec. The truth.'

Jamie walked away shaking her head. Obviously, she couldn't handle the truth. Marriage was an institution built upon an unholy scale of white lies, outrageous porkers and out and out betrayals, but that didn't mean he shouldn't rebel and endeavour to lead a life of Purity. With this angelic thought, he tucked his pillow up behind his head and focused on the sky. Desire sped from his eyes, and though imperceptibly at first, began steaming the clouds of Motson's skyline.

19 Subtle Arts, Part 1

What's true is that I found this piece of paper. I found it on the carpet in *The Dog and Biscuit*. And yes, I found it in the little cove at the front where, admittedly, Arnold Charger had been recently sitting. Now, to a lot of folk that'd make him the #1 suspect for having been the man what wrote it. But it's simply gibberish. There's no chuffing way he wrote this. Look, if you will, at how it corresponds with the rumours. See how tightly it connects with all the nasty things folks was saying about him. It were a plant. It were all part of a deep political conspiracy. Nasty buggers was trying to take him down. They'd left this for someone to find. Little, I've no doubt, did they expect that person to be me.

The paper read:

Executive Summary

Hit List

Maureen Appleyard

Tactics

~~*Get stoned*~~

Hire spy

I'll admit I had no idea who might be behind the ruse, not in the sense of evidence gathered and causes induced. But I had my guts. I know what gut feelings look like in the criminal detection business, and mine told me William Motion.

20 Visions of Saffron

I'm not proud to say this, but only because pride is a sin. Like I'm not ashamed to say it neither, because shame would suggest that I did something wrong when I never. After William left to 'discover himself in the growth of a new mullet' or whatever it were he were doing, I sneaked into the back of his house in my camo gear one night and broke into his shed. Pinned on the wall there, I found the following handwritten note:

The Slut in my Guts

Oh delirious night of nightmares swirling between wakefulness and briefest pitch

into the netherworld of neither sleep nor consciousness except of

Saffron Gone.

And so the horror of the dawn walk

plonking out of the shed and goose pimping into the cold shadow of the

cottage

into light altered into eerie nylon softness

like Saffron Gone it seemed into a memory

*of a sky of purple and pink and orange and almost cloudless and coming
into blue*

*a spring miracle that even at dawn strolling under the sun's weak longing
gives gentle heat*

*so that as I saunter past The D&B and my lavatory I well up with optimism
and goodwill*

and smile at the freaks about

elderlies for papers and factory slaves on their way to drudgery.

None such for me

I sniff the air for the scent of the hunt

until outside The Crowned Virgin I espy My Saffron

disappear under the shadow of the archway

my heart choking in my throat

*I catch glimpse of her beloved arse precisely two sizes too big and
wiggling*

so I chase

and am about to call out her name when truth strikes me stricken

the enmity of her family might be present

so I pursue a silently silky stalker

until she turns at the steps to the library

where I take tactical position

leaning against the railing

casual

so that when she turns I'll be the first thing she sees

resplendent and bald.

Then we'll take the morning off to be rudely entwined in the shed

or in an undesirable motel

of magnolia and marigold and stained burgundy.

All is well

*when the proprietor of that epic arse having dropped a book through the
letterbox*

spins asunder on a dainty heel twisting the best of herself askew

and revealing no farmyard porn star.

In my agony I mooch off and trundle down by the canal

nearly leaping in the water when on the other side

above the deck of a barge moving at dinosaur pace

I see her lovely mop of curly madness

like no other would dare

*and I rise up on tiptoes trying to catch the attention calling out her name
recklessly*

but the men on the barge stare
as the owner of the hair turns and pierces the frontal lobes with the
ordinary
descent into a pasty freckled goblin.

In absolute despair I drag myself
a wandering minstrel
to the docks where the fishing fleets stink
where turning away from the sea
the monumental surprise of it being definitely absolutely 100% her strikes
me in the wretched.

There she was in heels so high and shorts so tight she squeaked as she
walked
while the sun blinded clashing off those milky white legs so skinny and
cellulited
and the exceeding bosom so pillowy sprung
that here was lust forever formatted
when a cloud passed across the sun and in its shadow strolled an aging
dockland whore.

I stared over the edge of the quay into an abyss of my bleached skull
staring back at me.

I think it's supposed to be a poem, but he couldn't be bothered finishing it.
 I suppose that's what they call love nowadays. So it is sad. Sadder than a poem,
 really.

21 Mission Improbable

My suspicions of William forced me into taking the most moral action possible: increased surveillance.

I'd noticed there were a man squatted outside the newsagents with a pair of binoculars trained on the public lavatory. He were in shadow and he were dressed all in black, but he were what my mother would have called less inconspicuous than bloody obvious. Moreover, unless he were chronically myopic, there didn't appear slightest advantage to using binoculars to spy across such a short distance. Anyway, his presence proved enough to raise my suspicions, and so, just as last time, I'd entered the lavatory where William Motion were sitting as described above, and done my little velcro trick with the *Casio* and set it to recording. Then I went outside and tucked myself into the corner of the bus stop shelter.

Hamish Tush was peering through a gap in the fence across the car park of *The Dog and Biscuit*. Nowadays, whenever he came into town, he made his way via the field behind his house in order to avoid the forces of evil. There was no sign of danger, no Phil and Co., nor any of the other kids from school. There was nothing between him and sin except a clear, blue sky. So this was spring, and the evidence matched the rumours. The sun was indeed yellow, and it blazed with holy belief. Inspired, Hamish leapt for the top of the fence, pained his hands on the unfinished wood, and scrambled over the top in a desperate scuffle. Using the cars as cover, he scampered across the car park to the toilet.

Inside, under the dingy lights, William Motion was sitting with his legs crossed and his hands wrapped around his knees rocking back and forward. His bald, white head glowed faintly – like a giant, dying light bulb. He had evidently neither heard nor noticed Hamish's entrance, and appeared to be deep in thought.

His baldness was the talk of Motson. Hamish wanted to induce him to talk, much like he had about the meat cleaver lover, and figured it best to act in a calm and manly manner – by ignoring the obvious – much as his father did his mother's new haircuts.

The trusty, beloved C., picked up as follows:

'Have you got it then?' said Hamish.

There was a pause.

'Tush. Absolutely.'

'You know Dempster sent me?'

'So you said.'

There was a pause.

'So, how much?'

'A pony,' said William.

There were indistinct, muffled noises.

Then William spoke again: 'Now, now, dear boy. Don't get all Bonnie Prince Charlie on me. This is top quality merchandise. It'll get you into any nightclub in the land.'

'Can I see it?'

'Outside. Into the light. To appreciate the quality.'

From my vantage point, they were right under my nose. I noted that the mysterious black figure kept his binoculars trained on them.

William looked around, and satisfied no one was about, as I've said before, no one ever notices me, handed the ID over to Hamish.

'Wow, it looks real.'

‘That’s because it is.’

They was so cocky, they was speaking at pride’s full volume.

‘How did you?’

‘Trade. Tricks of.’

‘I’m three years older,’ said Hamish, staring at the card.

It was better than Christmas, especially in his house. His father believed in Santa Claus even less than he believed in birthdays.

The rapture soon faded from his face, however, and he looked up as if he were thinking about something. Then he said: ‘There’s some radge over there staring at us through a pair of binoculars.’

‘Where?’

‘There.’ He pointed. ‘Guy dressed in black. Crouching down. Binoculars resting on the saddle of the bike. Looks foreign.’

‘Oh, Besnik,’ said William. ‘He’s spying on me.’

‘He’s what? You know him?’

‘Of course I do. He works for me. One of my runners. On the side, he’s an Albanian spy. A new kind of spy, apparently, a quadruple agent. Paid by a mysterious character going by the name of Culmeal, which sounds like a codename. I think Culmeal might be doing some industrial espionage.’

‘Spooky,’ said Hamish. ‘But what’s a quadruple agent?’

‘Well, Besnik pretends to Culmeal that he’s pretending to work for me when in fact he’s working for Culmeal, so Culmeal thinks he’s a classic triple-agent, but in fact, he’s working for me all along.’

Hamish weighed this up. He went to speak twice but paused to check he didn’t have his loops entangled and finally spoke at the third attempt. ‘Isn’t that a double-agent? Someone who works for you and pretends to work for him?’

‘Apparently it’s a way of getting paid more.’

‘So, why’s Culmeal spying on you?’

‘I’ve no idea, but I still feel compelled to feed him false information.’

‘Are you sure Besnik’s working for you and not for Culmeal?’

‘Like a quintuple agent? The mind boggles. It doesn’t matter. I’ve listed it under things I don’t care about.’

‘Are there a lot of those things?’

‘Nearly everything.’

‘Oh. In that case, do you really care about that twenty-five quid?’

William paused, looked him up and down. ‘Can you do this?’ he said. He removed the tube of almonds from his pocket, tapped one out, flicked it skywards and caught it in his mouth.

Hamish shrugged.

William tapped a nut into his palm.

‘Look at James Bond. He makes being an alcoholic look debonair. Shaken not stirred. Ironical really, given that Bond’s always stirred but never shaken. Now, with style.’ William gestured impatiently. ‘If you please.’

Hamish flicked the almond in the air and tipped back his head. It bounced off his cheekbone and landed on the pavement next to a smudge of discarded chewing gum.

William closed his eyes and stroked his eyebrows. ‘Ho-hum. Mouth eye coordination’s the first law of the jungle. Unfortunately, you have the coordination of a skydiving octopus. One must cultivate style, even if one never attains style. Why did you ask me how much for the ID?’

‘Because Mr. Shadaws said it’d be free.’

‘And so?’

‘I didn’t want to be rude.’

‘Well, you have a strange way of being polite. I tell you the ID will cost an extremely affordable pony, and you say you want it gratis. Not rude at all. I suppose you do that in other shops all the time.’

Hamish’s heels parted and he stared at his toes.

‘Mmm,’ said William, interlocking his fingers and drumming his thumbs against his sternum. ‘So what’s the lesson?’

‘Don’t ask how much something free is.’

‘Wrong.’

‘Oh.’

‘The lesson, my dear, little sack of testosterone, is to learn not to blag your way out of a blag for the sake of looking decent. It’s biting the hand that feeds. It makes Shadaws, kingpin of our community, look like a liar. And it reveals me for the fool I am. Nobody likes to be found out. That’s why people adopt personalities when they should be cultivating their inner snail.’

‘What?’

‘Never underestimate the gastropod, Hamish. The snail’s a violent vegetarian, a secret fiend. A deceptive traveller who flexible as a ballet dancer, hunts in the abyssal depths of the ocean, wanders the parched deserts, survives from the jungle to the Savannah, from the Pampas to the Tundra. Many of their number are hermaphroditic. Some are poisonous. Of course, I talk of the more exotic of the species. But even here in Motson, they’re diabolical. At home in any bed, the snail smooches about the garden uninvited and insatiable, eating the leaves of the prettiest flowers. In awe and envy of the birds swooping above him he snoops. Seek wetness, he implores. Love the dark. Slide don’t step. When alarmed, look within. Conquer the vertical axis. And call me,’ said William, ‘Master.’

‘Eh?’

‘Lesson one.’

‘What?’

‘In the art of being a seductive machine.’

‘Is?’

‘Cultivate your inner snail. You’re gifted. The way you spotted Besnik... I could use a man like you. It’s your Easter hols, no?’

‘Aye.’

‘So that gives me almost two weeks investigatory services. I want to hire you as a PI. Let’s get back inside. Besnik almost certainly lip reads. Albanian spies are the best trained in the world.’

The trusty C. Recorded as follows:

‘Last Friday afternoon, while I snoozed in my back garden, some dastardly fiend stole my mullet. Think Samson. Think Delilah. Think chloroform. Think King Kong. Think, boy, think. If you want to leave now, you can. You can take the ID, but I’ll give you no more lessons. You’ll have to find your inner snail by yourself. Plus, I’ll think the less of you for it. So, the question is: do you have the tomatoes for it? Are you willing to get mixed up in a most tawdry affair? Because I need to know: who stole my mullet?’

‘By jings,’ cried Hamish. ‘You bet I’ll do it.’

‘And I’ll get you...’

‘A free ID?’ said Hamish.

‘More than that. Your heart’s desire.’

‘How do you know my heart’s desire?’

‘Everybody knows a schoolboy’s heart’s desire.’

'Which is?'

'I'll get you more than your heart's desire.'

The man called Alban Besnik started making his way across the road. He didn't notice me. Some spy!

William said, 'But you must stop thinking ordinary. You need to think snail. There's something else I want to know. Who's this Culmeal that's paying Besnik to get the LD on me? And what does he want with it? It's redemption time for you, what? Becoming the good citizen you've always believed you are. You've got the ID. You're access all areas. You're good, as Shadaws would say, to go. Besnik, what news, dear chap.'

22 The Secret of the Cellar

The Dodo put it like this:

'Like I said, she's a killer, so I don't blame her wanting to finish me. It were Dempster's fault any road. He started giving himself these fantasies. That he could do things what others couldn't. So we have a sunny day. He thinks it's all on him. He started calling himself the Evocator, which is a sure sign that someone's become a bit of a twat. He reckons that Jamie drugged him with barbituates. But that's an easy excuse. Everyone knows she's got a massive supply of duck eggs down there. You know how she gets them? Because she's a right saucy cow. She tells old Rathbone that she needs 'em to sleep. She gets psychological disturbances down the slaughterhouse. Whether he gets

the financial absurdity of it, I don't know. Like why would you work down a slaughterhouse at a horrendous job what gives you nightmares when you could fire that useless Julie and take over her hours and replace the income that way, I'll never know. But he doesn't question nowt. Jamie swears that makes him a good doctor.

'Any road, I get this weird phone call from Demps saying stuff about moving me into a home. That's when I knew for sure something were icky. Why would they want to move me into a home? I pay my way. Well, at least it gives me something to do. I like the boxing. As it happens after the call I had my shower, which takes me a while, and then I had to watch the racing, and then after that it took me a bit to remember that I were fuming and that I wanted to know what were going on, so I went into the pub and heard these noises coming from down in the cellar.

'Now they weren't your usual cellar noises of metal clanging against metal and concrete. There weren't none of the usual industrial talk coming from down there when Dempster's struggling with them old attachments they never change. No, these noises were wrong. And there were two of them. A man's and a woman's. Well, I wasn't about to risk myself on the stairs. So I wait for my row. Then up they come. Him looking sheepish and grateful. Her looking like a raging cow. So that's when I laid in. It were ace.'

I watched Hamish Tush step out of William Motion's toilet and do a double-take across the road. There was a fat boy, and when I say fat I mean bloated like a frightened puffer fish without the spikes. He were stuffing his gizzard with chips and curry sauce between tugs on a cigarette. Hamish tremored like a dildo then froze like a fish finger. Then he started jiggling on the spot. What it were all about were lost on me as I couldn't see his face.

The fat lad, who I came to find out were called "Big" Dave Langley, smiled. With what happened next, it took me a while to work it all out. My deplorable fans enjoyed this line.

Dave was too stupid to know that he was too stupid to play a trick.

He waved.

Hamish waved back.

Dave was searching for a gap in the traffic.

He began wading across the road. He stepped on to the pavement and said, 'I've been looking for you.'

Dave was a boy of lard and cigarettes, not flair.

'Oh, aye?' said Hamish.

Dave approached: three yards and closing.

Hamish smiled.

Two and a half yards.

Dave stuffed his face with one last handful of chips and threw the wrappings into the corner of the bus shelter. I had to lift up my feet to avoid being hit.

Two yards.

Hamish's heart was at full sprint already. A momentary panic that he might exhaust himself before having moved a

muscle gripped him.

One yard.

He had to move. He was going to get caught. He stared at Dave, willing him to drop his mask of benevolence and reveal his true intentions.

Less than one half yard.

Dave's lips opened, revealing the fluffy white and the fried golden brown of the mashed up chips against the yellow background of his curiously small teeth. And the eyes gleamed in self-satisfaction. The hands were next, balling up into oversized fists. He was lurching into a strike when Hamish skipped back two steps straight into a tree.

Tits.

Dave's guffawed and coughed.

Hamish rolled round the trunk and at the next moment was hot footing it to oblivion.

Dave followed, wobbling in classic fat man fashion as he ran-stumbled in pursuit.

I stood up and followed the action.

Hamish was in the open ground of *The Dog and Biscuit's* largely vacant car park before he turned to check on his pursuer.

There were power if not coordination in the grizzly, and he stumble-tripped at pace and was soon just three metres behind and gaining.

The Fear that ignited Hamish was palpable from distance. He didn't turn again.

To look back was to decelerate and to give up the half yard Dave needed to launch his attack. He dreaded being flattened by a thumping tackle in the small of the spine, to have the skin on

his hands and knees shredded against the tarmac below, to be pounded from above by giant merciless fists. His heart thundered. His thighs burned with effort. His bowel compressed and shifted waste groundwards. He saw nothing but the world flash towards him in a promise of freedom, heard nothing except the life blood thumping past his ears, the rush of the air as he sucked it in and out, and somewhere in the distance, the scritch-scratch of his trainers against the ground. His legs had stopped burning. He was at the edge of the car park, no longer afraid, and there was a lamppost.

He swung out a hand and pivoted on it. Ten metres away, bent over between two cars, hands on knees, sweat soaked and panting was Dave. Reaching for a cigarette, he fumbled it into his mouth. He found his phone. Looked for a lighter.

Hamish loved it.

He winked, blew him a kiss and – it seemed to me without struggle – bunked over the fence towards home.

24 Royal Joust Purple Knight

They said he'd bought a bottle of *Royal Joust Purple Knight*. As if I didn't know better than that. Steven Little reckoned:

'Pretty label. Extortionate price. Liberation. Man can endure any sophistication. He practiced. Alone in his office. Growling at glasses. I have it from his PA. Don't wanna grimace. Don't wanna retch. Not when looking to unloose knickers.'

But I knew Arnold better than that. He was a real sophisticate of alcohol. Vodka and coconut water! And at home, I'd heard him talk about his cocktails.

Gin with pureed banana and white wine vinegar. And who else would drink rum with green tea and bitter lemon? I hate to second guess a man of Arnold Charger's standing, yet I feel I can surmise, feeling the same way, as I do:

(n) whisky: the stuff of necromancers. Start with the piss of the stag and mix with the lung fluid of the Highland cow. Hire ginger-haired dwarves to mulch in iodine and treacle. Then outsource Macbeth's witches to stir everything together in a boiling cauldron in which skinned wild cats wail. Store for a quarter century in deathly black warehouses perched on the edge of the arctic circle.

'He hates, hates,' said Dempster Shadaws, another inveterate liar, 'the idea of anyone knowing he can't stand whisky. It's like brandy, too fancy and expensive to hate. It's his dream to enjoy whisky.'

And in the only interview I had with his wife, and it were fully confidential as she still hasn't finalised her divorce, she admitted:

'If he did buy that whisky like everyone says then it was because of *Three Houses*. You know it? The American political show. It's all about power and glamour and corruption. Arnold would never admit it, but I knew when he was running for councillor, Augustine Rover became his role model and hero. He drank *Royal Joust Blue Blood*, and he gave some to his secretary, and she took off her glasses, and it was like Bogie and Bacall in *The Big Sleep*.'

Steven Little, twisted little pervert he is, said:

'Marijuana hadn't worked. Upset. So he did what everyone does when their relationships don't work. Instead of fixing yourself, fix someone else. What's the quickest fix? Alcohol. Everyone knows Maureen loves her whisky. Get girl squiffy. Lower inhibitions. No

creature is more romantically susceptible than a woman stewed to the gills. Passion brew.'

25 Hamish Tush PI, Part 1

Deep into the *Night of Revelations: Pentothal and MDMA*, the night Dempster was effortlessly talked into staging a lock-in through to the cruciate ligament hours that criss-cross the night with the early dawn, where everyone was buckled to the knee in supplication to the truth, I gleaned the reportages displayed below.

'The next day I regretted those shenanigans with Dave Langley. I didnae dare leave the house. I told myself I was planning. The plan only took ten minutes! The rest of the day, I spent in fantasy, imagining myself brave and selfless, a fearless hero, a man of decisive action. The problem was, as it always is with groundless fantasies, that every time I got myself lost in this fantasy self, the jaws of doubt would start biting, and I'd find myself sitting on my bed, sweating, and grounded in my quagmire: I was just a boy sitting alone in my room during the holidays because I didnae dare go out. I was a sad sack back then.'

Yet underneath, Hamish now found a thrilling edge to his existence. By Friday morning he was ready to embrace the New World Order. Enemy eyes were everywhere. He had to keep tabs on an Albanian spook. And to investigate the disappearance of William Motion's mullet, he'd have to ask awkward questions, stir waters, make trouble. Therefore his first move as a PI was to go shopping.

I saw this with my own eyes. I was supposed to be out shopping, but seeing

him, I'd followed him as far as poss..

Wearing his school trousers, shirt and trainers, he came out of Oxfam in a grey trench coat and a fedora, with a rucksack slung over his shoulder. To complete the disguise, he went to the costume shop and bought a false moustache and a packet of fake cigarettes.

His transformation into Philip Marlowe complete, he set off for the crime scene. The trip across town would be risky, and he'd be going deep into enemy territory as he approached the little kids park where Phil and Co. hung out. Yet it was the only way he could reach the field behind William's cottage to approach the back garden the same way he suspected the mullet thief had. To avoid passing the park directly, he'd have to cut through the grounds of his old school, Motson County Primary, and bunk over the fence at Dead Man's Valley. The problem was the cameras. To steal through the school, bunk the fence, bish down Dead Man's Valley and make it to the fields safely before the police arrived, and to prove undetectable in the aftermath, would mean temporarily abandoning his Philip Marlowe disguise for the SAS one he had stashed in his rucksack – all in black: sweatpants, a long-sleeved T-shirt and one of his father's balaclavas. He clenched the fake cigarette between his teeth, and strolled through the unseasonably hot weather undetected, reaching his old school unscathed.

'Motson County had been right. Though Phil and that have always been bullies, they were just kids. They were venomous, but Phil didnae have any sense of irony back then. His cool was just his big brother's hand me down Sergio Tacchini. Plus, they were easily distracted. Look, the ice-cream van.'

He crept under some bushes and behind an electrical box to change.

He came over sentimental.

'The last time I enjoyed PE was in primary school. I had friends back then, too, before all the betrayals. Even Walter. Poor excuse for a friend that he was. Reality's tolerable once you learn to accept it. Especially like this.'

He squeezed the shoulders of the sluts he perched himself between.

'Should I forgive Walter?'

'Never,' said the toothy slut.

'But I'm a man now, and men forgive. Even fakes ones, like me.'

Now he was a fake ninja.

He emerged crouching all in black, his detective gear stashed in the rucksack. He shuffled, arms out wide, like Bruce Lee, and scissor kicked – tripping – over the low fence. Picking himself up and staying crouched, he ran into the school grounds.

His stealth posture was pointless, but he felt safer doing it, and less guilty. He ran on memory, sneaking past his old classrooms, the ones he'd learned phonics and times tables in, and the ones at the back of the school where he'd written stories and learned long division.

At the edge of the playground, he peered round the corner. All clear. He looked up. A camera leered at him. Cursing, he legged it past the hopscotch, across the playground and into the wide open spaces of the playing fields.

When I told him I'd seen him in his ninja gear, now out of his face on Pentothal and MDMA, he regaled me, well, less me, more his 'women.'

'I was ghosting behind the goalposts at the far end of the football field when I sees Phil and fuckwits

in the distance, smoking on the top the playhouse in the kid's park. That was an anxious moment. It wouldnae be now, like. But back then I stopped dead in my tracks. Then I started looking for cover. I thought about lying on the ground and burying my face in the grass, like a bloody ostrich. Stupid, eh? But that's panic. Then I hid behind a goalpost. But that was equally absurd. Then I thought, you know, if I can see them, they can see me. Paranoia's a bitch. I'm worried they'll recognise me in my disguise. Then I did the only thing to do.'

'What was that?' asked the tits.

'I took off at a sprint. I didnae look. I ran so fast I was almost tumbling over my own legs as I skidded into the fence, shook myself down and bunked up. It took what seemed like an age to scramble my legs over the top. I took a last look as I plummeted to earth. They were paying nay attention. I was in Dead Man's Valley panting like a dog.'

The so called Dead Man's Valley is an alleyway that runs between two ten storey blocks of flats that lead from a road to a fence. The practical reason for its existence – beyond being a secluded spot for delinquents to 'bosh' crafty fags or unlucky saps – is entirely mysterious. I've asked someone who knows people who know, and he has no idea, despite my nagging. Some speculate that one day the council, if it deems the populace of Motson to have become sufficiently evolved, will tear down the fence, and put a little sty in its place, and so open the playing fields of the school to the general public. Let's see what happens when Arnold Charger is in power.

He looked about. The alley was clear. Still danger lurked. His enemies were close and had spies everywhere. He decided to keep the balaclava on, avoid the main road, and to disguise himself further, do the Gait of Belonging. He erected himself into

a perpendicular confidence. Self-possessed and unapproachable, he honed towards his goal, never crossing the road to avoid strangers, all the while feeling the heat of them staring at him. He imagined – as a master of hand-to-hand combat – the various elaborate ways in which he might kill them. The sun beat down. He became hotter and hotter. His neck itched and his cheeks were prickly. Desperate to get the balaclava off, he picked up the pace, and furiously swung his arms. If he could just make it to the long grasses of the fields behind William's house, he'd be safe – and able to move unseen. On he trundled, until he finally he came to Dingbit Crescent, the last road. It was a cul-de-sac, at the end of which was his refuge. He was coming round the curve of the road and into the home straight when he saw, sitting astride their BMXs, Walter Jamieson and Pansy Shuttles.

I'll leave the last words of Hamish's 'triumph' to him.

'They'd spotted me, and were staring. A glance was enough to tell me they wanted to point and laugh, but they weren't sure of themselves. That was emboldening. I avoided eye contact, mind.

'Then once I was past them, Walter called out: 'Hey mister, do you know the time?'

'I froze. Was I busted? My back was to them. I couldnae speak. If I gave myself away, Walter and Pansy would go and tell Phil. No doubt about that. The fucking idiots. Because they'd only get their bikes nicked. And I'd be hunted down like an animal. Even if I just ran into the field, into the long grasses, which I could see – just ten yards ahead of me – beckoning camouflage and freedom, it'd only have been a matter of time before Phil rounded up enough scallies to find me. My only two sanctuaries, home and here, were too far

away. But it was the thought of you two, the thought of here, that reminded me of my new identity. A man welcome in adult pleasure emporiums.

The awful sluts made a show of cooing and fawning over him.

'My hand rose entirely of its own accord. Up to the side of my head. And my middle finger uncurled.

'All I got in response was an intake of breath. I could smell their fear. A fucking ninja telling them to go fuck themselves. I disappeared into the wildness.'

'Yes, you did,' said the toothy slut, and stuffed her tongue into his ear.

26 Joy

Though I'm entirely drug free, and I do mean entirely, and I think that all drug pushers should be placed in the stocks and left to eat only that rotting matter what finds its way dripping down their heads and into their faces until death reduces them to their skeletal elements, and though I am unapologetic in these matters, I have to say, as a professional truth seeker, I find that judicious doses of Pentothal and MDMA, and where needs must due to certain vile alcoholics overconsumption of Ethanol, Methamphetamine for purposes of revival, have splendid combinatorial neurochemical-central nervous system effects when inserted into the bloodstreams of those from whom the honest reporter seeks confessions.

William Motion, thus adjusted, and in great clarity, entranced by his own narrative, told all:

'The loo flushes as Hamish Tush bursts in. He skids across the wet floor and bangs into my table, splashing tea from cup to saucer.

'Steady on,' says I, wiping my teary eyes.

'I'm in the middle of an emotional sandwich, you see, made with extra chunky slices of raw red onion. But Hamish is still panting, and is about to tell me something when Besnik steps out of the cubicle, and Hamish does a double-take, says: 'What're you doing here? You were supposed to be my lookout.' Then he turns to me, says: 'He was spying on your garden.'

'Well, I know all this. I'd sent Besnik to do it. So Hamish asks why he's back in my lav. And, you know, Besnik, pro to the last, stops chewing his gum, and staring at Hamish taps his notepad with his pen, and scribbles something down. I tell Hamish that Besnik is reporting back to me. 'And,' says I, 'perhaps spying on me, too. Never can tell with a quadruple agent.'

'Besnik smiles at that, says, 'Quadruple agent, quadruple pay from Culmeal. He is very stupid man.'

'Hamish is amazed that I'm letting Besnik spy on me in my own toilet, but I just shrug it off. I point out: 'It's a public convenience in a free country, old boy.' And I mention the size of Besnik's biceps. And Besnik, of course, flexes. 'Steroids for breakfast,' says I. And I don't think I'm joking.

'Hamish is in a rare fluster. 'If those muscles are for hire,' he says, 'you're going to need them. There's a gang of rades broke into your back garden.'

'And that was the moment. I sprang to my feet, the sandwich flew out of my hand as my arms turned to wings. Ham, cheese, chunks of onion and two slices of white lay scattered at my feet. 'People?' I said.

'And Besnik and Hamish squabble about who's going to tell me. I can't take the dilly-dally. I give the

job to Hamish.

'He says how he's in my back garden looking for evidence. Then he hears the intruders return. He bunks over the fence and ducks down in the long grasses out the back. Then he confirms all: 'I saw some slutty looking bird. Proper trashy.'

'That had me reeling. The lavatory spun. I stepped forward to balance myself, and crunched onion into cheese. Then I was into instant action. I folded up my chair. 'Excellent work, Tush,' I said. 'Outstanding.'

'And he's rabbiting: 'Do you ken them? Do you think they stole your mullet? Shouldn't we call the police?'

'Absolutely not,' says I. 'These folks are linked to something else entirely. But all news is good news. Search on, dear boy. Search on. And you.' I turned to Besnik. 'When do you next see Culmeal?' I was inspired, overcome by the desire to rattle out nonsense, a sort of warm up to seduction. I said, 'You have some new information for him.'

'Ten minutes later, and I'm heading down my street. As I don't consider it seemly to show up hot and sweaty, I force myself not to run. The Transporter's parked in the road. I slip down the side of the cottage and my heart nearly bursts in awe and fear and at the same time shrivels to a pea. There lies the huge, bloated, sunburned nakedness of Ryan Giggs prostrate in the garden. He pops his head up.

'You're all back?' says I.

'Yes, now,' says Giggs. 'Working on the tan. Got to go red first, eh? Get a little sunburn down the

crack of your arse. No pain, no gain.' And he rolls over, revealing that he's porn shaved himself: bald.

'I turn away, depressed.

'I'd been ready for Saffron. I was armed with pheromone scented words.

'A fuddy-duddy, eh?' says Giggs. 'I've been converted. Shaving the pubis is hygienic. She left a note for you then.'

'What?' I said, and I looked at the shed.

'There poking out under the crack at the bottom of the door was a little, white envelope.

'My stomach churned like a cement mixer, my knees quaked as I stepped over the grass, and bent down, and retrieved and opened it.

'I read:

Wanna go 4 drink?

Dad went to some shithole called *The Dog and Biscuit*.

Know it? He said it was sooooo bad I must go.

See U there 8:30? Don't be late I h8 waiting in pubs on my own

LOL

RU bald?

Saffron

XXX

'Giggs is speaking again. 'There's lovely, eh? I know what you're thinking. But it's just for a drink boyo. If I were you, I'd stand her up. She's my daughter. I love her to pieces. But I know what a cow she can be. She'll break your heart if you don't stand her up. If you do, she'll decide you've broken hers. See? If you don't go, she'll find it a turn on. Though I still doubt she'll sleep with you. But if you go, she definitely won't. You'll be too much round her little finger, like her dad, here, and she doesn't sleep with me.'

'Thanks,' I say, 'for the advice.'

'He says, 'So, you're not going then?'

'No,' I said. 'I'm going.'

27 Figs! (Jiminy Style)

I watched him that night. I was there, in the shadows, with a bitter lemon and a sardonic smile: the washed, the decent, the unnoticed.

William arrived, judging by the time she did, thirty minutes early.

He measured the room. It was the perfect atmos for romance, a convalescing kind of evening, with enough punters to decorate the place, but instant service at the bar.

'Urgh,' said Julie.

'Earl Gray.'

‘With lemon?’

‘Milk.’

‘You know,’ said Steven Little, ‘he popped it with “Lady” Nateby. Debut Rooster Run. Double-sided stroke sander! K-Y, he always said. Mingin’!’

This is what “they” said. His “sporting” attitude had so delighted Nateby that as she didn’t have any living family, she’d left her cottage to Motson’s most famous orphan. It’d come complete with William’s adopted wardrobe – her late brother’s collection of formal black clothing, collected over many years through his work as a funeral director.

A death-like fear gripped him now. Skinny-fingered nerves poked and prodded. Love is terror. The centre of the gyre never sustains. He’d be torn asunder, then spill out into a new universe with its own infinity and eternity and in which, when the spinning stopped, he’d be stuck, deep in the glue, bonded to something forever...

‘When I found out what he’d done,’ said Hamish, I could’ve kissed him and then killed him, and then kissed him again to bring him back alive.’

‘She made me a gentleman,’ said William.

‘Sugar?’

‘No sugar, Julie. Never any sugar.’

‘Oh, yeah, I know. But it’s just...with your hair and everything, I just thought...’

‘Don’t ever think, Julie. It ruins your charm.’

‘You might still be in shock. Sweet tea could...’

I *saw* him. Me. The one no one notices.

Would a lion feel as majestic shorn of his mane? He took a sip of tea and turned to face his arena – the interior of *The Dog and Biscuit* – the scene of so many triumphs.

There was the familiar whoosh as the front door opened, the interruption of outside noise, the cool breeze entering the pub and with it an unmistakable pungency, of lilies dipped in blood and musk.

He wasn't ready. He'd never be ready.

She stepped round the corner.

I watched the punters gasping her in, all bug's eyes and leaky salivation. I don't know anything about pornography, but she looked like the rim girl to me.

Then she spoke, with a fingernails across the blackboard squeak. 'William. Ooh. You did it. You naughty boy.'

He later confessed:

'Her smile destroyed me.'

'Gonna buy me a pint then? Let me have a touch.'

'Of?' He bent down.

She rubbed her hands all over his skull. '*Purgatory*, of course. Ooh, I love it.'

'I love having my bald bead rubbed.'

He looked up at her.

She withdrew her hands and clenched her fists under her chin. 'You're dangerous.'

He was in. Tonight, in his shed, he would shed her. He rose, filled with his own majesty.

'Are you sure about the *Purgatory*?'

When I witnessed her response, I nearly cackled.

‘Yeah, I don’t do girly drinks.’

Her mood, in a thrice, had rotated one hundred and eighty degrees.

‘It’s just that -’

‘What?’

It was awkward. He was just trying to save her from the Purgatory. But Julie was listening in.

He rose his eyebrows, faked a glance at Judy, and pouted.

It failed to register. ‘What?’ she said.

‘Wouldn’t you rather have a bottle?’

‘Why?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Because I’m a girl.’

And just like that, he wasn’t great anymore.

‘Pint it is then.’

‘In one of your wine glasses?’ said Julie.

‘Pint in a wine glass?’ said Saffron.

‘No,’ said William.

Julie shrugged.

Saffron tutted.

The drinks arrived in silence. He suggested they retreat to the lounge, but she didn’t like lounges.

‘In here, then.’ He pointed to the little alcove at the front of the pub, cut off from the main bar.

‘No. I want to sit over there.’

She pointed to one of the goldfish tables in the middle of the room where I had full view. Only thing were, they was a little far away. I knew I had to act, to

risk everything. Feeling for the *Casio* in my pocket, I surreptitiously switched it on. Then I rose from my seat, pen in the other hand, and crossed the pub. I dropped the pen by the table next to them, and as I bent down to pick it up, I secretly placed the recorder on the seat nearest our lovers. I then continued to the next table, picked up the copy of *The Daily Mail* sitting there, and returned to the shadow of my place.

They took their seats.

The pub perverts leered and glared.

‘I hate men who don’t like women drinking pints. That’s like my dad, that is.’

‘I don’t mind girls drinking pints.’

‘I’m not a girl. I’m a woman.’

‘Or women.’

‘Whatever. All that bollocks at the bar. You don’t think it’s lady like, do you? But I can drink a pint, same as a man. What are your wine glasses?’

‘Nothing. Julie’s nuts.’

‘So, you’re a sexist. I’m a feminist, see? And anyway, what are you drinking?’

‘Tea.’

‘In the pub? What’s that all about?’

‘I like tea. I’m not much of a drinker. But I don’t mind what you drink. I’m not a drink fascist -’

‘Of course you’re not a fascist. You’re not a German, are you? We learnt that in history. I’m not thick.’

‘I think you’re missing the point.’

‘So clever now, are we?’

‘Try the beer,’ he said. ‘Then you’ll understand.’

‘Oh, I see, so now I can’t think unless I’m drunk, can I?’

She started taking a swig.

‘It’s disgusting, isn’t it? All the tap beer here tastes like stiff socks. It’s the landlord’s pride and joy that he never cleans the pipes. I was trying to save you from it. Anybody who likes a good beer knows to only drink the bottles in *The Dog and Biscuit*.’

She kept swigging until two thirds was gone, then put it down and belched. ‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘You just don’t like women drinking pints.’

He was in a parallel universe.

‘Look. This really isn’t the best start. I’ve got no problem with you drinking as many pints as you like. This is all just a misunderstanding.’

‘You trying to get me drunk, William?’

‘I’m sure you’re capable of that yourself.’

With that came the smile – powering over him like a solar wind – and he was happy again.

‘I am,’ said Saffron. ‘And I get very naughty when I get drunk. I can finish this in one, you know?’

‘Feel free.’

She did so, and sat panting for a while, then emitted a galactic burp. ‘Gonna get me another?’

‘Same?’

‘Don’t even ask.’

He returned with another pint.

‘You know, William,’ she said, dreamily. She was slumped forward on her elbow, her chin in her hand, her curls spiralling around her cleavage. ‘I know you

don't like me drinking pints, but that's OK. I just think it's so sweet you shaved your head for me. I'd never shave, you know,' she glanced down, 'for a man, unless I was in love with him.'

And there it hung between them: the Truth.

'Well, if the lady loves a bald man, then a bald man I can be.'

'Yes, you're bald, alright.' She rubbed his head again, then downed half her second pint, belched, and finished it. 'Gonna get me another?'

'Don't even ask.'

She giggled.

He came back with the *Purgatory*.

She was leaning back in the chair now, with her feet tucked up under her bottom. 'I like you, William.'

'I like you, Saffron. I more than like you.'

'You shaved for me,' she said. 'And ordinarily, I'd sleep with you just for that.' She picked up her pint.

He watched her guzzle it, tortured by implication.

She lowered the pint, belched in three long rips, laughed, wiped her mouth and pointed at him: 'I do. I like you.'

'Jolly good.'

'You're like the idiot older brother I never had, instead of the idiot younger brother I do have.'

"Brother" was bad. Or maybe not. The Welsh liked to inbreed? "Idiot?" was neutral.

'But I thought if I shaved my head, I'd -'

'Lover?' She shrugged. 'Nah, you've got the wrong end of the stick. Or, as my father says to my brother when he comes home early from a date, you'll have

to play with the wrong end of your stick tonight, won't you?' She picked up her pint and wagged it at him. 'I'm more of a Bruce Willis girl. Now, if he wanted to get me drunk on *Purgatory* and seduce me in his garden shed, I'd polish his bald head all night long, if I'm not being too subtle. I'm really good at blow-jobs. Seriously, my last boyfriend, he couldn't get enough. And me, I love it. Gobble, gobble, like a turkey.'

The pub broke up into a thousand pieces and rearranged itself before William. He reeled in his chair, and clung to the table to stop from toppling over. It was Armageddon, and no escape, he was stuck in himself. If only he could float out of his body and coolly and objectively watch as William Motion's world came crashing down...

'You know, we're perfect for each other,' he said. 'You love giving blow-jobs and I love getting them.'

She burst out laughing and slapped his hand. 'Naughty,' she said, and downed the last of her *Purgatory* and swayed to her feet. 'No need to walk me home, bro. I know the way. Have another tea why don't you.'

28 Rooster Run

Nigel 'The Gog' Tush, they call him. He likes to talk, enjoys the sound of himself, believes unerringly in his own formulations, even though he never says anything of consequence or even sense. But between my *Casios* and my interviews, on the *Night of Revelations: Pentothal and MDMA*, albeit with a healthy dose of Methamphetamine included, as Nigel is nothing if not an inveterate drunk, he became eloquence itself. Though this scene is entirely imaginary, I believe it captures the 'essence' of the thing. William's hangover the day after Saffron dumped him, he captured in the following Ode (I have cut the preamble):

'The nightmare began anew as he awoke from it. William bolted upright, ungluing his eyes and kicking open the door. The light and the fresh air entered in a flood of blinding white terror. His head lolled about in search of shadow and water. There was an aching in the nape of his neck. His left arm flapped. And a meat cleaver, it seemed, was embedded in his forehead. Plus he needed to piss. Involuntarily, he burped, filling his mouth with battery acid that sent him gnawing on nothingness, except the death spirals: fragmented memory snapshots that flashed through his mind in slow motion. Something about drinking cocktails and brake fluid and... A pang of remembrance made him reel in his nausea. The dreaded unknowns faded into background radiation. Compared with the mushroom cloud event: the Welsh bird's rejection. She'd turned him into a vampire-zombie. Good for her! Yet he didn't burn up in the light. He was sentient. This wasn't just another banal day in the Apocalypse.'

William put the next stage like this:

'My misery was exquisite, rarefied, a thing of excellence. I was dead, yet awake, thirsty, and bursting at the bladder. I arose to my knees, like a knight of yore, and panicked that I didn't have a jousting lance on display. Manfully, I grabbed the empty two-litre carton of milk from the work bench, opened up the top into a square, and inserted my flaccidity and relieved myself for around ten minutes. I then scrambled around for water, but there was none to be found. There were, however, three cans of warm *Excalibur* sitting next to me. From where had they come? I did not know. I did not ask. I took them as a sign. I sat back against the shed wall, and cracked open a

tepid can. As I drank it, I realised that he was still bearably drunk. By the end of the first can, I was contemplating my bitter fame. I was the man who'd held London in the palm of my hand. As I drank the lagers, one after the other, I dug mentally into the depths of my own legend, with each sip quenching a thirst that simultaneously intensified, and I studied the carton of piss, the poetry books, the candles, and recalled my empty triumphs. And as I did so the plan came to me. Embrace the pain, I told myself, accept the suffering. There was no cure. I'd be forever thirsty for the rest of that day. The three lagers downed, I donned my Adidas tracksuit, put on my Nikes, and stumbled to my feet. I started bouncing on my toes. I was nodding.'

Steven Little is a reliable source for these kinds of local legends.

'Rooster Run. Two purposes: fit him and fit women. Sexercise. An exterior dance to an interior tune. His dance of being.'

William confessed:

'I emptied the carton of piss across the windowsills at the back of my house, and at the foot of the door, then went round the front and did likewise.'

Steven Little:

'It's a courtship display. Demands full commitment. Senseless optimism. The terror of hope.'

I picked him up from here, watching from the bus stop opposite his house.

He did a lap of the front garden, looking up at the windows of his cottage.

He loved her. She didn't love him. A simple tale of woe.

He tipped back his head and crowed to the sky.

'The plan,' he told me, off his face on my little cocktail, 'was that I'd woo a girl back to my garden shed. Her howls of delight would awaken Saffron's curiosity.'

I had a fair idea he were headed to *Shanghai Park*, (formerly known as *Stanley Park*, but renamed in the council's drive towards political correctness - Arnold would sort that - it weren't like you got a fortune cookie in your ice-cream cone). It were only one stop, so I could see him following us down the street. He did all his moves and noises. He puffed out his chest, curled his wrists up to his shoulders and flapped his elbows. He high-stepped his knees and flicked the heels of his feet to the cheeks of his backside.

I got off the bus and sat on a bench by the entrance to the park.

He entered, chin raised, and shaking his head, he cocked and crowed. Then he shuffled his feet and raising his arms flapped them as hard as he could and flat out sprinted. I were pursuing him when a couple of errant dogs chased him up a tree.

According to Steven Little, 'He told me all about it a year later. First Rooster Run. That poor, deluded bastard. Such hopes. But everyone just laughed. It was on his way home, see? Pretty cottage. Blessed demon. He turned. It was the Gingerbread Man. His pact. First offer, he had to take it. If you deal with the devil, you play your hand. Between the rose bushes. Old Nateby, tongue out, head cocked, winked. He stopped dead. Misty cataracts. Parchment skin. He pushed open the garden gate. She took him by the hand. Up the stairs. He didn't know. The future. They did it in his bed. Old Nateby Sir banging on the wall. William killed that man. One month later. Lady N pined for him. Like so many others since. He never returned. Legend.'

I got there just in time to see two women who were shooing off the dogs.

‘Olive Montgomery and Doreen Slater,’ he said.

‘I saw my chance. Fate had delivered. To sew Saffron Giggs, first I had to pay my penance. I’d have to till Olive and Doreen – both together. Then I’d cough them into a threesome with Hamish. They were game girls. The way they’d dealt with those dogs.’

‘The Rooster Run,’ said the girl with horse’s teeth. ‘After all these years. You still do that?’

And so William clambered down, and so went their second reunion ending with the girls demanding that he take them for drinks that very night.

William, more impressed than ever with the power of his fitness regime in attracting femmes du jour, arranged to meet them in *The Dog and Biscuit* at seven.

29 The Subtle Art of Seduction, Part 2

Of the lot of them, Dempster were the easiest with the Pentathol and MDMA solution. He didn’t require any sobering Methamphetamine.

‘You know how Arnie is. Slowly, softly, he witters, hoping that if he can talk subtly around a subject he might spiral in and arrive at it almost appearing accidentally – like snails on leaves. That’s what he was doing with me when we were sitting on the roof of Graunty’s annex. It was a beautiful day, thanks to me. The western sun was mellowing across the sky.’

I must admit, it weren’t my proudest moment dropping the medications of higher truth into the bloodstream of a great man like Arnold Charger. But he’s such a sweet, pure soul, and I could see he were perturbed as to why his vodka and coconut waters wasn’t functioning in the same ways as everyone else’s

Purgatories, etc. I didn't like to make him feel like he were missing out. He were just coming "up" when he heard Dempster talking, and he joined in with his own recollections.

'I tell you, despite the therapeutic benefits of two large lunchtime tumblers of *Royal Joust Purple Knight* - downed proper - and I mean that, without so much as a scrunch of the nose, I'd had to sink two more quadruple vodka and coconuts before climbing up that ladder. I'm not made for ladders. You need a new one, by the way. The bloody thing rattled murderously, and simply refused to sit square on the wall.'

I'd like it to be known that I'm not part of Arnold's campaign team, however, I think the character shown to overcome his fears says a tremendous amount about his fitness to serve our little community.

'I told him I was undoing,' said Dempster. 'And he, the degraded pervert, says 'Kinky.' Then he gets all weird. It's so strange how I can remember all this. He starts being all sober and serious, and deep and glum, coughs to attention. Then he says, 'What you undoing then?'

'So, I tell him, 'The trajectory of time.'

Steven Little, that worm of disinformation, reckoned he had a rumour on all this. It had come from speculation of course, workplace gossip.

'Arnold had wanted to get stoned. To suss out Maureen. Hadn't worked. So then he drinks whisky. He starts thinking. In clinical nonsense: Dempster plus Maureen equals soul mates. Inspiration. That's why a man climbs high. To get inspired.'

Arnold, of course, remembered everything.

'I showed you my new watch,' he said.

And he turned to me, 'Have you seen my watch? It's a *Casio*. From Japan,' he said, showing me.

I'll admit, I blushed. It were huge and plastic and shiny and very impressive.

'It's connected to the atomic clock. No one can argue with me about the time. I mean, fuck off. This shit is nuclear.'

Dempster was making circular motions with his hands, and breathing in deeply through his nose, and exhaling slowly through his mouth.

'That's what he were doing that day,' said Arnold.

'Yes,' said Dempster. 'I'm trying to show her.'

'You see,' said Arnold, 'I was educated at the University of Television.'

Oh, I giggled, I blushed. I felt like such a girl. But you know how people like to boast about going to the University of Life, there were no such clichés to Arnold.

'I'm serious. That fella on *Open Minds*, *Soul Winds* likes to talk about asking "intelligent questions." I always thought that sounded daft. If you ask questions, you don't know. That makes you thick. But I tried it that day. I dug deep. I found an intelligent question.'

Of course, just as Arnold was exposing his raw and vulnerable soul, the crass American interrupted.

'So he says, 'Undoing time? How's that then? Fun?' I was in my trance. Doing important things. Staring into the distance. I said, 'It's big and blue and over there there's some white cotton candy panties. Ain't no other explanation.' I said to him, 'You see this weather?' And the klutz says, 'Can't miss it. Too bloody hot.' How's that for gratitude? I said, 'You're welcome.'

Dempster slapped his belly with both hands.

‘‘He explained,’ said Arnold, ‘that he was responsible.’

Arnold made an expansive gesture towards the ceiling.

‘He was responsible for the weather we were having.’

Now, I don’t know what this next part were about, except that it were quite out of character for Arnold. I blame myself for the administrative dose. But he suddenly became excited, and spoke with the shock and awe of a remembrance long since forgotten.

‘Can you imagine,’ he said, ‘saying that to a woman? “I’ve reversed the trajectory of time, and come to grips with the without of myself, and without of myself I’ve reflected my inner self and created – for you – this lovely, sunshiny day.”

He looked at me. ‘Could you write that down?’ he said.

I did, and I gave it to him. He didn’t ask so I never said that I also had a *Casio* recording it all.

‘I just want to learn it by heart,’ said Arnold, ‘before I sober up and forget what to say and it starts raining again.

‘It is raining,’ said Dempster, ruining the moment.

I imagined Arnold saying that to his wife when her got home. What a lucky woman.

‘So, he asked me,’ said Dempster, ‘if I was lord of the sky.’ I said, ‘Well, unless somebody else is. And that’s quite the conspiracy theory. Do you seriously think it’s credible that somebody else is out there controlling Motson’s weather?’ He agreed that was improbable.’

'He said he was doing it through a supreme effort of his will,' said Arnold. 'And I asked him the method. And he said, 'This,' and fell off his elbows and on to his back.'

'It requires,' said Dempster, 'monumental effort to unthink the world.'

'He uncrossed his legs then,' said Arnold.

'And I made two finger-guns,' said Dempster, 'and aimed them at the sky. I rose the barrels of those babies to my fingertips, and blew. And then I hit him with it.'

'He told me,' said Arnold. 'There's something I wanna talk to you about. Being in control of Motson's weather's a great responsibility. Damn stressful.'

'Well, it was logical at the time,' said Dempster. 'Weather effects have planetary wide ramifications. You know? Chaos theory. Heavy shit. Weather changes here. That changes the weather in France, Scandinavia, Scotland, Ireland. You see what I'm saying? Each of those changes the weather in the countries next to them. And so on. And all around the globe it goes. So at that time, I turn on the TV and I'm worried that I've wreaked havoc with a tornado in Haiti.'

Arnold nodded. 'It must have been a great worry.'

'I remember what you said: 'To do something like this, to use the depths of the unmind to unthink the world... To uncreate the weather system in your own negative image... I'm frickin' mind blowing... I'm blowin' myself.'

Dempster pealed into mad laughter.

'What is it you created?' said Arnold.

'The Personal Excellence Theory of Everything.'

'The what?' I said.

'I said to him,' said Dempster, 'What it means, and I want you to concentrate on something other than your own chattering mindlessness. Can you do that now?' And I looked at him, and he nodded, agog.

'I thought it was money,' said Arnold.

Dempster scratched his hamstrings.

'Arnold said, 'He tells me he's gotta be chaste.' I said, 'Kinky. Chased by who?'

'I said,' said Dempster, 'Celibacy. The preserving of the seed.' I told him, 'I'm in a very dangerous situation. I need you to brace yourself: I ain't ejaculated for a week.'

30 Indecent Proposal

There's this awful genre of fiction out there nowadays called fan fiction, in which said fans create a derivative work about characters from an original work. Many are the brains what have said that blessings and curses often align in the same phenomena. Too true. My truthful and accurate depictions of Arnold Charger, unfortunately, have triggered in some of the delinquents that form the core of my fan base to read into his fine character tawdry and debased elements. Whereas my story attempts to reveal the noble aspects of his character, and how that is contrasted with the decadence of those who surround him, these fans of mine, these gibbering monkey double entendre wielding pink banana peeling perverts, only wish to create one of those types of fiction in which all the characters are flawed, all morally bankrupt in some way, a vision of a thoroughly modern type of dystopia in which even the finest are reduced to cartoon debauchery. I only give gallery of this epiphenomenon in these wise pages for

didactic purpose that the sensible reader may take heed to always remember that the lowest orders, the most satanic and bleak - like drinkers mocking with their poison the righteous abstainers - will only try and bring down to their own lowly level that which is decent, and honorable and true. It also shows how rumours, blackguards and villains of the real and the cyber equally, are equally mirrored in their imagery, despite the separations of time and space, how equally they appall in innuendo. May the righteous stand tall.

As these are purely fictional comments, I have decided to use the Verdana font to demarcate them. However, to distinguish them from my own, and to emphasize the hysterical and entirely debauched nature of them and the Internet in general, I have decided to also mark them in ALL CAPS.

EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE LOADS OF WOMEN GAGGING FOR HIM, (AND MORE THAN SHAGGING THE WIFE), ARNOLD PREFERRED THE QUIET CERTAINTIES OF DAILY MASTURBATION. THE CAVALIER IDEA OF NOT EJACULATING FOR THREE DAYS DISCOMBOBULATED HIM. IT WAS LIKE ELECTRIC CARS, OR FISH SWIMMING BACKWARDS, OR POSTCARDS FROM HULL - UNNATURAL AND HORRIBLE. GRIPPED BY MORBID CURIOSITY, HIS MOUTH OPENED AND CLOSED, AND OUT STUMBLERD GARGLED WORDS.

He calls himself Anonymous, and it's only ever him what writes. But witness how the above conjectures fit with the general theme of our good for nothing locals.

'I have this,' said Steven Little, 'from his cleaner. Arnold's habits. Picking his nose and eating it. Compulsory daily masturbation.'

I would like it to be known: these subhumans are projecting! Nothing more!

Witness Dempster Shadaws' lies. I recorded this in the aftermath of the blowout between him and Arnold (entirely Dempster's fault), when he was

'explaining' himself to William Motion.

'Arnold was all like, 'Not blown,' and he's shaking, 'for seven days,' and he's stammering 'beans,' and now he's hyperventilating. 'Seven straight days? Not shot -'

'Eighth day,' I say, clear as a bell.

'Load.' He takes a super inhale. 'But...' he pauses, just trying to wrap his head around it. Until he can't stand it anymore. 'Just...' He's overcome with emotion. 'Why?'

'I raise my hand to the sky. But my sky was making him sweat. He asks me what this has to do with him. I smile. I tell him I need him to do a very important job for me. I say to him: 'I need you to fuck my wife.'

I will not mention how Anonymous wrote a self-fantasy about Arnold 'LEVITATING' or the supposed stream-of-consciousness that had him 'ASHAMED' of having never cuckolded a husband. I won't mention how he said that 'TO BE ASKED TO GREASE THE AXLE, IT WAS IMMORAL.'

To return to Dempster's lies:

'Arnie said, 'You want me to slip Jamie one?'

'I told him: 'She needs it, man. And who does that come down on? Me. It was oppressive, Dubya. She called it her conjugal rights. But she didn't get it. I couldn't be donating precious seed when I was filled with the power that's controlling the weather. 'This ain't about me, anyway,' I said. 'It's about something greater than myself - my semen. I thought he might be able to appreciate that. But he refused. To my face.'

31 Summer House, Summer Loving?

So, I got this, for the sake of official form, from Olive Montgomery (of the teeth) and Doreen Slater (of the cantaloupes). Though I wouldn't trust either of them with so much as removing a teabag, I have to say they had no reason, and neither the wits so far as I could make out, to lie.

'It started out as exciting,' said Olive.

'There were this big van outside,' said Doreen.

'It became, what do they say, positively intrepid,' said Olive, 'as we ventured past the front door and along the side of the house.'

'The gate squeaked,' said Doreen, 'and spooked me. I don't like nasty things, I like nice things, see?'

'And we went into the back garden,' said Olive.

'And then William slipped,' said Doreen, 'and fell flat on his arse and bouncing across the garden landed in front of that bloody shed. Then, like we should be excited or something -'

'He said,' said Olive, 'in a hushed undertone: 'I was thinking, ladies, for the sake of daring-do and romantic variation, that we might enjoy our evening's pleasures in the summer house. I think you'll find it a suitable accommodation. It's what they call in the brochure "A Luxury, Spartan Summer Residence" - the best of both worlds really, luxury without all the fuss.'

'And I looked at you, didn't I?' said Doreen. 'And you knew what I were saying. I didn't even have to say it.'

I were about to ask what she said without saying it when Olive, who seemed to fancy herself theatrical, once again took over in the role of William.

'Da! Daa!' goes William, unlatching the padlock and swinging the door open. 'I have candles,' he says, 'adding an aura of extreme, mysterious exotica to the occasion, I'm sure you agree.'

Doreen started cackling. She said, 'I asked him about spiders.'

'What spiders?' said Olive as William.

'And woodlice,' said Olive.

'I promise you girls,' said Olive, mocking William's gruff baritone, 'it's just us three.'

Olive returned to herself. 'I suggested we just go inside, in his cottage, like normal people.'

I must say, and I'm sure you agree, that their idea of normal certainly isn't a sandwich as you or I know it, with or without the crusts sliced off.

'And then it got weird, didn't it?' said Doreen.

'Well,' said Olive, transformed once more. 'No. We can't go inside. Impossible.'

Doreen said, 'Why not?'

'Because -' said Olive-William.

'Because?' said Doreen.

'Because I'm just not in the mood. Hot summer nights.'

'It's freezing,' said Doreen.

'And it's May,' said Olive, returned to herself. 'And this is Motson.'

'And I said I wasn't going,' said Doreen.

'And I said if she's not, I'm not,' said Olive.

And so it went. With delirious misery. Neither would go with him. They disappeared into the darkness, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Months later, after I'd heard of William's return, I donned my disguise again. This testimony was nearly complete at that point, and I hadn't gleaned any new facts, any new rumours, any new stories in such a long time, that I found myself with a craving, to dress up once again in my disguise, and to hang around outside the infamous lavatory. On the third day of waiting, William returned. I saw him in the distance approaching. I clicked on my recorder and went in to the toilet, ignoring the chirpy boy Tush, and installed myself in the stall and waited for their reunion.

Hamish, I can only surmise, either got a freaky kick out of my being there doing he didn't know what, or in the excitement of seeing William again, completely forgot about my presence. They talked long and deep about the shallowest things. And they touched upon the events of this night that I relate in this chapter. William spoke of the moment the girls went.

'I thought about you. How whenever I looked into your eyes, I always got a feeling of peering into a distorted mirror and seeing my own past reflected back at me as the future. And then there I was, very not fucking. And they were, indeed, walking away from me and into you.'

This was news to Hamish, and he was offended at first, then amused, especially when William explained his overall strategy.

'So there was nay pair,' he said, accurately if ungallantly, 'of bedraggled and shagged out floozies staggering from your shed in the morning. Nothing to whet the sexual curiosity of Saffron?'

32 A Close Encounter

I watched Hamish Tush clamber on to the bus and whisper at the driver.

‘Err?’ grunted the driver.

It wasn’t clear to me at the time how clever he was being. That only occurred to me as he disembarked.

He whispered again.

‘Eh? Speak up.’

And again.

‘That’s one stop.’

Which meant it was *The Dog and Biscuit*.

‘Kids! Talk about lazy. It’s still £1.75. Minimum fair’s £1.75. It’s your money, lad.’

I knew what he were thinking about. His trousers couldn’t contain it. Imagine thinking that way on a public bus.

Swaying along gripping the handrail, Hamish’s stomach was all eels and octopuses. It writhed and reeled between the two extremes, the fear from above and the excitement of the pub. There were girls in the pub. Drunk girls. Loose women. Erotic scenes played in his mind. Smooth Hamish wooed with subtle charm. Mysterious Hamish lured with unknowable hurt. Soul of the party Hamish whisked them away with a flourish.

He subsided and paled when he heard the voice from upstairs. He neared the stairwell, where I was sitting, to listen.

‘And I was like, “Yeah, you know what I mean” an’ all that. And he’s like

giving it the hairy, so I pushes him, and –’

A shot of adrenaline boomed through Hamish’s heart.

Evidently, someone he didn’t want to see was upstairs.

‘Excuse me.’ A dishwater blonde ran into his ankle with a buggy.

‘Sorry,’ he said, moving out of the way.

‘Ooh, I’m sorry,’ she said, and pushed the trolley past him, an old lady with orange hair attached to her arm.

They positioned themselves at the exit.

He wasn’t so clever now.

The brakes squealed as we slowed for *The Dog and Biscuit*. The bus jittered to a stop in the mouth of the shelter. Feet were moving in the aisle upstairs. The young woman was repositioning the buggy.

‘Let me help you,’ said Hamish.

‘What?’

He swung on the handrail and peered round into her face. ‘You need a hand?’

‘Oh, no thanks, love. I’ll be right.’

The doors sighed open.

The old lady shunted forward. She descended like a toddler, stepping down into the foot well with both feet and pausing.

‘You right, mum?’

‘Aye, love,’ said the orange head, orbiting slowly. She rolled her eyes at Hamish and bent a smile. Then turned back to the doorway, looked at her feet, coughed on to the back of her hand and started to shuffle forward slowly.

The sound of half a dozen feet reached the top of the stairwell.

‘Hold up lads.’ It was another boy.

‘He might drive off,’ said the first one.

‘He won’t drive off.’

‘It happened to me once,’ said a third boy. ‘I had to walk miles.’

‘No, you never,’ said first one. ‘It’s not miles to the next stop.’

‘It is.’

‘Dignity, lads,’ said the second boy. ‘Have some style. Make ’em wait. People appreciate you inconveniencing them. It means they’ve done something for you.’

The old lady, perched on the lower step, contemplated the chasm between her and the pavement. Next to her, the mother, whilst cooing at her child who had just grumped awake in a noise, carefully positioned the buggy for its descent.

‘Better,’ said the second boy. ‘No rush as we go down.’

The infant bawled.

Hamish, evidently, was listening by the stairs. A slow, heavy tread was descending.

The old lady disembarked. She lumbered out of the way to clear a space for the buggy, which her daughter was slowly rolling down the upper step of the bus. The child thrashed its limbs and raged.

Hamish looked at the stairs.

A chubby paw clutched the rail.

I stood up.

Hamish turned back to the door.

The rear wheels of the buggy plopped onto the lower step.

Hamish’s head flashed back and forth.

I turned sideways on to take in all with subtle shifts of my head.

That same fat belly, I recognised it, the one that was owned by the sprinting cigarette boy, protruded from the stairwell.

The front wheels of the buggy reached down towards the kerb.

The scuffed suede toe end of a trainer appeared on the final step.

The front wheels of the buggy made touchdown.

The young mother stood by the door cooing. She started nattering with her mother. They were blocking the exit from the shelter.

Hamish was doomed, about to be trapped between three generations of happiness and the Blob.

He desperately needed a shit.

The Blob lurched forward.

Game over.

Except the Blob was looking the other way, my way, and down into the back of the bus.

Hamish leapt off, barged past the young mother and the bawling kid, grabbed the old lady by the shoulders and shoving her into the corner of the bus stop hot footed it.

I followed him behind the three boys who were pursuing him.

There was a furore at the bus stop.

The bus driver shouted: 'You scrote.'

The blonde: 'What the hell you think you're doing?'

Hamish ran straight to *The Dog and Biscuit*.

Well, if there's one rumour that's truly believable, it's that Jamie and Dempster was no longer degrading each other in their "routine": their ritualised somatic perversions. Why do I say this? Why were I not skeptical and sensible? I know the questions. Well, hear me this, I saw what Jamie Shadaws were up to.

I've never thought much of her, as a woman in a man's world, as a purveyor of addictive, carcinogenic neurotoxins, as a satanic nymphomaniac, as a rumour monger, as a snout in the air look at me in my pub type, but I'll say this for her: she'd always been one to publicly keep her tits to herself. But not anymore. She were manning the bar solo, kitted out in a Barbie pink pullie with a neck line so wide and low slung that it showed the defile of her cleavage running all the way to where the gorge split into its two separate spheres. To the imagination much it didn't leave.

Now Arnold's only a man. And I like the sun. I'm not one of those types what complains about it. But let's just say that what with their youthful exuberance Jamie's balloons floated high in the troposphere, and even more so did her attention. She were clearly flirting. Eyes like lost satellites. Sliding about everywhere. Overhead. Down across the bar. Into the middle distance. Straight up at the ceiling again. Don't look at me. Look at my tumblers. So that it were obvious whatever she were on about, it were coming from the ozone layer, way up high where two pert lips gibbered, and he didn't have a clue what she were saying, because it's hard for a man to intellectually respond when he's being forced into a squirrel suit and thrust at a gazillion miles an hour face first through a ravine.

I instantly knew I'd have to risk the final *Casio*. Upon entering the pub, I'd immediately inserted *CI* under the table in the front alcove where Hamish and William were peeking through the curtains towards the bus stop, and then, detective's hunch, I'd proceeded directly to the Tardis and planted *C3*. It were as I were returning that Hamish flashed past me down the Corridor of Secrets. I'd then gone to the bar, ordered my drink, and was about to spy on William when Arnold appeared at the bar and Jamie fluttered over. One doesn't usually just neck a bitter lemon and insist on another. But I could see, I'd have to, and what's more, make it look *au naturel*. But then I were worried that I'd need to pee and wouldn't be able

to observe. I shunted round to the front alcove and, observing William gazing out the window, and silently asking mother to forgive me for my waste, I tipped my drink into the potted plant. Then I switched on C2., and made my way to the bar. Now over the weeks, I'd stuck various pieces of brown sticky Velcro at even spaces across the fascia of the bar. I'd also been to the arts and crafts shop and painted C2, as best I could, a matching brown. I know how brave you must think I am. What if someone saw it? But this is the pub. Everyone walks round in a self-induced haze. No one notices reality. That's the whole point of the place. The only worry were that someone might accidentally knock it off its precarious perch.

Any road, I beelined to the most propitiously placed strip of Velcro viz. my targets and, without having to worry about Arnold's or Maureen's attentions, as his were you know where and hers were on where his were, I simply stuck the recorder in place. I then sidled closer hoping to get some first hand intel., when immediately Jamie stopped wittering and looked at me like she'd just squeezed me out from under a toenail.

I ordered my drink, and retreating to my spot, noticed William step outside. I'd bought my own *Casio* watch. I laid it on the table, and taking out my notepad, took down times to later cross reference with the recording. It takes hours to suss out, but I'm nothing if not dedicated to my dark art.

It should also be noted: the problem with the fascia of the bar is that it picks up all the background noise, and it's tricky to pick out the target voices at times. Because Jamie couldn't keep her head still, her voice was the most difficult to distinguish. Given that she were her doing the vast majority of the talking, this made my total surveillance op very difficult to execute. That's why the following transcriptions are partial.

They were talking about something to do with a business lesson. That made sense. Even an Ermintrude like Jamie has sense to talk business with a man like Arnold.

Anonymous, completely misconstruing my fictionalised version of this scene, wrote:

PRETENDING TO LISTEN TO JAMIE WAS SEXY. BEST NON-

INTERCOURSE EXPERIENCE HE'D EVER HAD WITH A WOMAN.
THEN SHE STOPPED TALKING. BUT HE KNEW HOW TO ANSWER.

'Tremendous,' he said, his eyes finding hers. 'But, as I always say, it all depends on the details.'

William came back in, ordered a pint of *Purgatory* and a pint of *Cavalier*, and disappeared down the Corridor of Secrets.

Jamie returned to Demspter, and this came through to C2 crystal clear: 'I've got details,' she said.

And off she went again, prattling, words firing into the air incomprehensibly.

Anonymous, once again, mirrors the rumours of Motson, and simply embarrasses himself.

ARNOLD WAS ASTONISHED. THIS WAS A NEW JAMIE. SHE WAS ACE. WAGGLING HER BREASTS ABOUT WHILE TELLING HIM WHAT HE ALREADY KNEW. IT WAS LIBERATING. WAS THIS LOVE? OGLING, NODDING, AND AGREEING?

She'd stopped talking again.

He looked askance, pinched his nose and whistled.

'Can you believe that?' said Jamie.

Arnold blew out his cheeks.

They had a quick discussion. I could distinguish the following of Jamie's words: 'vision,' 'bankrupt,' 'revenue streams.' And of what Arnold said: 'No multiples?'

Then she reached out, her fingertips touching his knuckles.

AND HE WAS GONE.

34 All Together Now, Part 2

CI picked up the following:

Hamish: 'I'm a wanted man, William. They're gonna kill me.'

William: 'That I were wanted.' (Hiccup). 'I'm dying to be wanted. To be wanted,' (pause) 'is the most beautiful thing in the world.'

'Looks like they're coming,' said Hamish.

It was the ultimate humiliation, to be turned over in his own pub.

'Are they schoolboys?' said William.

'My year at school.'

'I'll see you in the Tardis.'

'You're going to?'

'Save you, yes.'

Hamish flashed through the bar and down the Corridor of Secrets.

The Tardis smelled like it looked, faintly musty and devoid of sunshine. Yet strangely romantic. Dimly lit, it was small, octagonal and wood panelled. A bench seat ran all the way round the wall, except where the two doors led to the lounge and saloon. Purple, velvet curtains covered the small windows in the doors. In the middle was an octagonal shaped table. He felt part of some mysterious cult.

In the magical acoustics of the Tardis, the *C3* recording was flawless:

'Cavalier, right?'

'Aye. What happened to -'

'I'm on the Purgatory. Vile but effective.'

William put his pint to his lips and started pouring it into his mouth so fast that it dribbled down the sides of his face, which he wiped with the sleeve of his shirt.

'I stepped outside and played doorman.'

'So, they're gone?'

'Vamoosed. And eighty-sixed.'

Hamish shook his head.

'It's American for barred.'

'Thanks, William. You saved my arse.'

'Saved your arse? My-my. What were they going to do to you, old boy? You don't want to be mixed up with chaps like that. Or maybe you do. What do I know? Are they anything to do with the disappearance of my mullet?'

'Nah. I just ruined their nefarious money making scheme, and they want revenge. Just now though, they didn't even know it was me they were chasing.'

'To be chased,' said William. 'Sweet misery.'

He downed the rest of the Purgatory, toppled to his feet and tilted his glass at Hamish.

'Another?'

'It's my round,' said Hamish.

Rising his glass above his head, William waggled it.

'To the bar,' he shouted.

There I watched him, clearly drunk, order another *Purgatory* and pat Hamish on the backside. ‘My boy will pay.’

Hamish brushed William’s hand away and frowned at Dempster.

William downed half his pint. He was swaying, his mouth opening and closing in a way that suggested either profound speech or spontaneous sickness. He let off an enormous belch, then immediately started talking in a loud voice: ‘Easy? Easy, says he. But I know a ssshh-lut when I see one. Oh, yes. But no, Hamish. No! No matter how much you beg, I won’t. I refuse. Of course, one understands your desire. I’m a man of great empathy. I know how you feel and it’s normal, in its way, this magnetic attraction. One is, after all, irresistible. But I will not be part of your erotic awakening. You’re a man and I’m a man and no matter how much you beg, I won’t have sexual intercourse with you. It won’t happen. Categorically, I will not, shall not, under any circs, give you satisfaction, sir. Not tonight, indeed, not any night.’

‘Eh?’ said Hamish.

‘Lover’s tiff?’ said Dempster.

‘Hamish attempted to seduce me,’ said William, ‘in the Tardis. Tried to get his wicked way, because I rescued him, like the little princess he is, from some terrible dragons. And so now he wants to, you know how it is – man of the world – these grateful youngsters. You rescue them, then all they can think about is sex.’

‘You just touched my arse,’ said Hamish. He turned to Dempster. ‘He’s drunk.’

‘And who bought him that drink?’ said Dempster. ‘Lower his defences, I know the tactics. You can’t get one past the landlord. Your father warned us. And I ain’t talking about the homo. Gay, straight, bi. Whatever. A man’s business is his own. But hormones? Arrgh, a young man your age... Dangerous stuff.’

‘Here, here,’ said William. ‘And don’t think I don’t understand, old chap, because we do. There isn’t the creature that’s been born that doesn’t want to have sex with me.’

‘I don’t,’ said Dempster.

‘Neither do I,’ said Hamish.

‘You’re just not acknowledging your feelings,’ said William. ‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody wants to have sex with me. All of life wants to have sex with me. Reality is, everything in the universe - animal, mineral, vegetable - wants to do the naughty with William Motion.’ He downed the rest of his pint and belched again. ‘Give me another. Another another.’ A bubble popped on his lips and dribbled down his chin. His face was wet with beer.

‘I think you’ve had enough,’ said Dempster.

‘Is this a pub I see before me?’ said William, windmilling his arms to stay upright. ‘Where else am I supposed to get drunk? I have money, you know?’

Dempster leaned over the bar. ‘You make a compelling argument. But why you getting drunk, Dubya? You don’t get drunk.’

‘I think he’s lonely,’ said Hamish. ‘Loneliness is contagious. Perhaps he caught it from me. Is that why you’re angry with me, William, because I infected you?’

William waggled his glass. ‘It’s going to be quite a thing,’ he said, ‘to stroll out into the night through this invasion of fine weather, the balmy days and the star struck nights of continental Europe, and to walk home having escaped oneself, having fled from one’s self-hatred, the inevitable uselessness of one’s existence, only to find...’

‘To find?’

‘Oneself at home,’ he slumped over the bar, held the glass in the tips of his fingers and rotated it before his gaze. ‘Loneliness is an empty pint.’

‘Lonely no more,’ said Jamie, taking the glass and refilling it.

‘Sweet relief,’ said William. ‘Hamish, I’m not angry with you. You’re a chap who understands. And if I was going to have a boyfriend, it’d have to be you. But I can’t do it. It’d change everything between us. I’m sorry, old boy. Much as I

love you, I won't enter your dark abyss.'

'Chuffing fuck,' said Hamish. 'It's bad enough my father... How am I going to be a stud around town if everyone thinks —'

'You're right,' said William. 'I'm a bad person. That's why she doesn't love me.' He pointed at the ceiling. 'I think I'm going to kill myself. Surely, she'll be able to love me if I'm dead. Women always love a good corpse, don't they? Look at the movies. Always wailing over the dead man. It's so romantic, isn't it? Being dead.'

'Woman troubles?' said Jamie. 'You?'

'Keep it under your —' William patted the top of his head. 'Oh, you're not wearing a hat. Well,' he grabbed his chest, 'keep it between your tits, then. But yes. The great William Motion has ceased to be. I'm just a man. I know it's hard to believe, but I'm just flesh and blood and vulnerability. And bald, to boot.' He rounded on Hamish. 'Why don't you find out who stole my mullet? I made you eighteen. And this is how you pay me back.' He took his pint, guzzled more beer. 'You ungrateful hussy.'

Hamish edged away. He stammered as he spoke. 'I thought we were pals. It's not my fault some bird won't sleep with you.'

He wanted to say more, something stinging, but his rage was impotent. The truth bites. William Motion wasn't his friend.

He turned to go.

Yet it felt defeatist and devoid of hope.

So he turned back.

He was looking for a sign.

But all he saw was William Motion, back to him, his skinny shoulders shaking with laughter. Hamish mouthed silent gibberish and stormed into the lounge.

35 Peace and Love Nazis

Anonymous:

ARNOLD CHARGER LEFT *THE DOG AND BISCUIT* IN A PROPER DO ANYTHING MOOD. HE COULD BE THE FUNNIEST MAN ALIVE. OR GET TOPLESS AND THROTTLE A MEMBER OF STAFF WITH HIS BARE HANDS. THEN PASSING ROUND THE BACK OF GRAUNTY'S ANNEX HE SAW, WITH HEART BOOMING GUILT:

'Dempster.'

I watched. Things had moved so swiftly I hadn't had time to move any of my *Casios*. Yet it being just prior to the witching hour on a Sunday, the roads was quiet, there were a stillness to the air, so that faking deaf in my headphones I could effortlessly listen and shorthand my notes.

'She's still alive.' Dempster closed the door of Graunty's annex. 'Comatose – but alive. Still – look at that.' He pointed across the beer garden. 'I can't have Grout dying on the premises. Come.'

He led Arnold across the lawn.

Grout, a big, brown and straw mottled mare, was lying on her side.

Kneeling down next to her, Dempster rested both hands on the distended belly.

It was moving rhythmically in and out.

Dempster rose and sniffed. 'She stinks of beer. That's the daytime crowd for you. Alcoholic horses. Who you think won?'

'Graunty, as I understand.'

'Outstanding. She'd have put money on herself. She'll be able to pay off her tab now. Who ran the book?'

‘Steven Little.’

‘That bastard.’

‘I’m having him killed. Don’t worry, it’ll be done by a foreigner.’

‘Arnie?’

‘You can’t be a serious politician unless you’ve had someone bunked off. Steven deserves it. He’s a drug pusher who tells people marijuana raises their IQs.’

What a man! What a man, I thought, of moral purpose, of power and decisiveness. People laugh, but it’s true. Summary executions are like society’s enema. I have inside knowledge on these matters.

‘Speaking of Graunty,’ said Dempster, ‘there’s something else I’ve been wanting to talk to you about, I mean aside from you letting me down on the Jamie score—’

My ears pricked.

‘About that —’ said Arnold.

Dempster, as usual, interrupted: ‘You were right, Arnie. Bad idea. Mighty honest of you refusing me like that. My wife’s a fine piece of ass. You’re a degraded son-of-a-bitch. It couldn’t have been easy saying no.’

I had a moment of confusion. Then the implication of what Dempster had said rose up in my throat, and I had to gargle and cough like a midge had hit the back of my throat and I was attempting to expunge it. They turned and stared momentarily, and I was self-conscious under the glare of scrutiny, until once again they turned away and I disappeared.

‘As a man of principle —’ said Arnold.

Dempster rose a stopping palm. ‘I sure do appreciate it. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking... I’d only be jealous. I’m not proud of that. It’s so lame. But I gotta admit, I would. You know what I’m saying?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Arnold.

In a loud, dramatic whisper, Dempster said: 'But I'm sensitive to her needs. I'm gonna buy her a dildo.'

'Be careful of them things. They're addictive.'

'Eh?'

'This something else?'

Dempster nodded, scratched his beard. 'It's delicate. I need you to be discreet.'

'Good for my political career.'

'She got this plan, see?'

'I know,' said Arnold. 'She told me about it.'

'She did?' said Dempster. 'What she say?'

'Same as you. Lezza rub downs.'

Again, my innocence being as precious to me as nectar to a honey bee, the use of the argot, the meaning, it all took a moment to register. And then I found I'd got another midge stuck in my throat. They turned around again, and so I said the word, and made a show of dry spitting, and excused myself and took out a tissue and wiped my lips. I knew, the garden being midge free, they were looking at me as if I'd gone mad, but then when a lady reaches a certain age, her invisibility only further cloaks her deceptions. Still in the enacting the authenticity of my fit, I missed the next few things they said.

Still, the rumours wouldn't stop. Anonymous, deep in his fan fiction delusions, unwittingly summed up the imbecilities of the local gossip:

ARNOLD PICTURED HIMSELF THE SOLITARY LOVER OF
MOTSON'S ONLY PROPRIETOR OF A LESBIAN MASSAGE
PARLOUR. HE PICTURED HIMSELF SURROUNDED BY CHUNKY
WOMEN. NAKED EXCEPT FOR A FEDORA AND A STRING VEST.
CAMERA IN ONE HAND. GETTING NOSHED OFF AS HE
DIRECTED.

They strolled away from me, too. And so the next I heard were as they was approaching the pub again, Dempster saying:

‘Gonna make it look like an accident. Talks about an end marked by decency, sanitary conditions and the highest ideals of humanity.’

‘That’s mental.’

‘Aha.’

‘I so need a drink,’ said Arnold. ‘The Tardis?’

Dempster nodded.

It were a relief to hear they were going to the Tardis. I went back in to observe, but made my way round past the Dodo’s annex and in through the side door. Back in the pub, it were evident that Arnold had received a rude shock to the system. He were clutching the bar, and from my angle he downed what I presume were a double vodka and coconut. Ordered another. Took that to the meet.

C3 picked up the following:

Arnold said: ‘Alice, my missus. The second biggest gob in town after Jamie. Imagine, I, accidental like, let it slip over dinner what Mrs. Shadaws has done. What do you think’s gonna happen? It’ll be like wildfire round town, and then?’

‘What an idea,’ said Dempster. ‘Send out rumours ensuring a crazed mob descends upon my property. Pure genius. Every peace and love Nazi, every *Help the Aged* savage, all the second-hand clothing worshippers from the hills, the whole fetid heap of pill-popping, do-gooding cabbage washers descending on this place in hippy protest. You can fly decrepit people to Switzerland and inject them with formaldehyde, but you can’t do it in Motson. Here we have morals. I know how it goes. It’ll be hell round here for a time, but Jamie’ll have to back down. We announce that there’s

been a terrible mistake and Graunty won't be getting euthanized. She goes on and - if I may finish your vision?'

'Please do.'

'Before her heart gives out, which' - Dempster put his hands together in prayer - 'must be in the foreseeable, then we, no sooner is she floating across the River Styx, put the word out there that there's this club happening. We get a select few high-rollers, led by yourself, to put the word in Jamie's ear about just how much they'll spend. And then - boom! She sees dollars. And we have us Motson's first and only Gentleman's Club.'

36 Favour

By now William were toppling down drunk, and yet still they served *him*. I know God fearing, law upholding, true blue men of integrity, ones who only ever become mildly sozzled to the mere point of their eyes functioning independently of one another what have been unceremoniously drugged in this pit of sin, and yet WM, with impunity, is allowed to drink his liver through his socks.

He was soliloquising:

'Ordinary people can have friends, but the great playboys of this world stir too many passions.' William Motion necked the remains of his pint. 'I've thought about getting a dog before now, but he'd just hump my leg. I suppose that's it. Friendless, loveless.' He spiralled his hand aloft. 'Nothing left to live for. So, I'm off to the Tardis to kill myself.' He shouted. 'Don't try and stop me anyone. I can't be stopped. Not even with a blow job. I'm going to do myself in. Good-bye cruel world. Tally ho evil ladies.'

Heads bobbed up.

'Ta-da, William, lad.'

'Easy as you go there, mate.'

'Sweet dreams.'

He zigzagged into the Tardis.

From the noise recorded by C3, he collapsed onto the bench.

'Right. Let's to it. Kill myself. Should be easy. I just need to...' He wafted his hands in circles. 'A gun?'

Dempster disappeared down the Corridor of Secrets.

(There was a creaking noise, as of the door opening).

'You must have a gun,' said William. 'Americans always do. It's the law over there. As an American, you're constitutionally obliged to shoot at least one fellow citizen per year, or else they fry you for cowardice. Fact or fiction, Shadaws?'

'Fact.'

'Yes, strange country, but there you have it. So? Splendid idea. But a gun? Dangerous things, guns... There must be a safer way to kill myself. The vet? Get some narcotics... Injections though. Nasty business needles. Could jump off somewhere high... Gravity, the great healer. An easy accomplice, but I'd probably lose my bowel on the way down. Bit undignified that. And it can't be comfortable dying in your own poo. Murder, that's the gentleman's way. Put the responsibility on someone else. Excellent. But who can I trust to kill me? I need a Japanese best friend. They're always

willing to kill you. Very honourable the Japanese. Mind you, they go in for disembowelment. Not sure I'd enjoy that either.'

No one else went down the Corridor of Secrets, meaning that the door that opened must have been from the lounge.

Jamie Shadaws said: 'So, how are you getting on with killing yourself?'

'It's no good,' said William. 'I just can't do it. I don't have the cold-hearted, killer instinct. I need a professional. Ooh.'

He looked at Jamie and with a blink switched his eyes to a sozzled smoulder.

'I say, you're a professional killer, aren't you? Down the slaughterhouse. You know how to off living creatures with aplomb. You've always said how humane your work is. As a favour, and if it's not an imposition, might you consider killing me?'

37 A Gas

This were months after William returned, and before the Dodo went extinct and the futures of both the annex and the saga of the attic took place. It were the bitter beginnings of spring. The winter before, "to spite himself", Dempster had built a gazebo in the beer garden, and at that time, on Sunday afternoons, he liked to colonise it with his "disciples", a gang of self-styled "eternity junkies". The thing about addiction is the craving. My investigations had got me hooked. I told myself it were out of curiosity for the old days, but it were more just because I were an "info-wino", a "trash converter", and an old-fashioned "truth sleuth" and that I needed a fix.

The bushes are deep and thick out behind the gazebo, and I nestled myself amongst them. By this point, in looking to advance my career, I'd bought a new *Casio, C4*, what could record for up to twenty-four hours at a time. I'd arrived two and a half hours before opening. Having long since had a key cut for the side garden gate, (when it'd been left there negligently, an operation what had taken twenty minutes and of which no one were the wiser), I'd obtained painless entry, and checking the rear windows of the pub with a bendy mirror (as we call them in the trade), I'd set up my recorder in a flower plot, got myself comfortably in place within the shrubbery. I'd adjusted my deck chair for the best view available of the target area, and opening my *Tupperware* of breakfast sandwiches, and the first of my two flasks of tea, I settled down with the paper and awaited the arrivals.

They arrived some two hours later. The conversation meandered wearily enough through the shy, regretful stages of the hangover, and peaked, for want of a better word, around three pints in. Then began, in the early stages of mid-afternoon, the slow descent towards their goal: incoherence and oblivion. I can't say I were regretting my decision, *per se*, but around halfway down the mountain I were beginning to think it were going to be one of them days what are stock in trade for investigative reporter's like me, one in which our efforts go unrewarded, until Dempster seamed in on relevancy.

'That night,' said Demspter, 'when Dubya asked Jamie to kill him.'

By this point, amongst his intimates, both his and Jamie's follies was old news. In fact, it were the events of those evenings, *Revelations of Folly*, what had led to his collection of disciples and his guru status.

'I knew,' continued Dempster, 'when she said, coy as the trickle of ice that unleashes the avalanche, 'Ooh,' and put her hand on her heart, 'I'm honoured you'd ask,' that we were in deep dung and without a beetle to guide us out. He let loose a theatrical groan, thumped a palm into his forehead. 'I knew exactly what she was thinking.'

William Motion was a hit with the ladies because when the local method of seduction failed (unlimited alcohol), he was a maestro at coming up with psychologically tailored schemes. Lisa

Dirkle was a chubby lass. He cooked her ham, egg and chips with a parsnip garnish, broke into her house and presented her with breakfast in bed. For dreamy Eileen Murtle, he designed a fake plot in which only she could save him from psychopathic males intent on doing him mischief. Cara Tums, athletic and lithe, he took to the beach and showed how to feed seagulls without getting shat upon before shooing them away with an exploding bottle of Lambrusco. Despite being short, chunky thighed and melon breasted, Audrey Dunwoody wanted to be a model, so he took dozens of pictures of her got Snips' kids to create a giant collage, which he attached to a For Sale sign and stuck in her garden. And for Mary Chaucer, who was doing time in the local psychiatric unit, he pulled out all the stops, and rode a stolen unicycle in circles whilst reciting poetry and teaching her to catch almonds in her mouth. For each lady a different technique.

‘You know that old chestnut, so and so might just be crazy enough. Well, Jamie wanted to use that way of the bullshit of Dubya's to plot a foolproof murder. Because, you know, she was none the too keen on going to prison or nothing. Hell, she didn't even consider it'd be a crime. And William wound her up on that one, too. ‘So, you agree,’ she said, ‘that killing's not always murder.’ And he said, ‘Not if it's a mercy killing.’ You can laugh,’ he roared, but it's true.

‘Then the suggestions started. She wants to push him down the stairs. But then she remembers that the Dodo never takes the stairs, so she goes back on that one. And William doesn't like it anyway because he's worried about the pain involved. It was like there was some insanity pact between them, with William saying how “ideally” he was looking to be euthanised painlessly. So, she only goes and suggests ‘we have something heavy fall on your head?’

‘Like what?’ says William.

‘Like a breeze block,’ says Jamie.

‘But he's frightened he might just end up a vegetable. I pointed out that

making a breeze block fall on someone's head look like an accident might be a tall order. What's her answer to that? 'Some kids might have put it up a tree.' William says they'd do this 'for a laugh.' And she says they'd be 'hoping,' now get this, 'that a squirrel might push it out when someone's walking beneath.' But William objects again. It doesn't guarantee a kill, and if it fails, it'll be bloody painful.

'Then she suggests we make some kind of bio-potion from squirrel's gonads. Like I shoot them and she castrates them and we create a raging squirrel sex musk and spray it all over William. 'I heard about this thing,' she says, 'where this scientist got eaten to death by squirrels.' She tells William, 'You just have to go for a stroll in Motson Park.' She says that's how it happened to this scientist, a stroll in the local park, and the squirrels come out of the trees and eat him to death. She says it'll be kinky, and dramatic. 'Get you in the papers,' she says. 'Right up your street.' Being eaten alive?'

There were no laughter this time. A sombre hush, atmospherically induced by Dempster's strange charismatic hold over the group, descended. Their guru took a long swig of beer.

'Then came the *coup de grace*,' said Dempster. 'It was Newton under the apple tree. Anyways, you all know what he said there, and what Jamie did next. What you don't know is why he changed his mind. See, by this point, Hamish is hiding out in the Tardis from his father. William jumps up all pain and awe and inspiration. He looked like one of those Goya's nightmares paintings.' 'Jiminy figs!' he says. 'I'm an alcoholic.' 'The moment,' says Hamish, 'of clarity.' He should know. And that's when William shelves his suicide, and says he's found a reason to live.'

38 Eavesdropper

Spring, randy as a billy goat, had given birth to a relentless sun. Flowers bloomed. Farm animals readied themselves for the slaughter, breeding and eating and fattening themselves in and

out of existence.

'Yet, so far as I were concerned,' said Hamish, it was just another miserable day in my perilous existence.'

After William had returned, on the day he'd gone to see Hamish in the lavatory, after a while they started drinking beer. Thankfully, I didn't catch them on the descent, but still rising. I guess they were approaching summit when Hamish, inhibitions unleashed, displayed his age with a shameless unravelling of emotion.

'As the pints of Cavalier slipped down, the imaginary conversations in my head interlaced into one of those lager trances. Spellbound by the beauty of the fourth pint, I was almost overwhelmed by its golden body, its fluffy white head, its endless stream of bubbles rising to the surface like hope itself. Until I was allured out of my aesthetic reverie by curious noises coming from the Tardis.'

I were there that day, watching, observing. However, for once I had some nice music on the headphones, my own mix of Pat Boone and Perry Como. I were just keeping tabs on Hamish, and as he weren't talking to anyone, I didn't suppose I needed to listen. Expert what I am, that were still a learning curve. Always be ready in this game.

It were five o'clock. The lounge were empty except for Hamish, old Ralph Snapper with his mangy whippet, Calamity James, and myself, invisible in the corner. Ralph, on the other side of the lounge, were absorbed in the racing pages and his back were to Hamish. So only Calamity James and I witnessed him sidle over to the Tardis and press his ear against it. A forbidden move, as I'd witnessed his father tell him: 'The single sacrosanct law of the pub, Hamish, is never listen in at the Tardis. It's a sacred place where secrets are kept for all eternity. Or until such time as some gobshite gets pressed by his pals into saying what went down. There's nay cure for that, son.'

'I still wonder who was doing it that day. The noise was muted by the wood panelling, and all background noises of the pub, and the traffic outside.'

He cupped a hand around his ear and pressed it to the door.

'Now, at that time, admittedly, my expertise came solely from my extensive research via my da's hidden stash of *Betamax* porno. But said collection had irrefutably schooled me that it was protocol for sexual participants to vocalise mutual expressions of appreciation. Yet, I could only absolutely hear a male in attendance. Now, as a seasoned masturbator, I could safely say either he was having the wank of the century, or...'

'His partner wasn't having nearly such a good time,' said William.

He panicked that Ralph Snapper might turn around, but trapped by fascination, he couldn't move.

'I could hear him gasping for breath, the crescendo coming. But then, just as I'm expecting a howl, it was like the wolf suddenly remembering he's domesticated and he'll wake up the neighbours... There was a gasp and a cough, and a strangulated gargle and a grunt. I was semi-stimulated.'

He looked around the room. Ralph Snapper was still absorbed in the racing pages. And Calamity James, though observing him, was doing so with his muzzle flat against the carpet, suggesting disinterest. He didn't see me, blended into the upholstery and the wallpaper. Calamity James and I watched him tip-toe along the bar, and hide – just out of sight – round the corner, where he measured what my *Casio* calculated to be a precise five minutes on his watch. Then using the Conventional Door, he whistled *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* into the saloon.

No one seemed to have questioned how the Conventional Door, which always used to squeak on its axis as it swung to and fro, were now silent. Yours truly and a couple of discreet squirts of *WD40* was responsible for that upgrade. My foresight now allowed me to slip entirely unnoticed to the shadowy corner from where I liked to observe my quarry.

While Hamish and I observed them, I observed Hamish, too.

Julie was pouring a pint.

Arnold Charger was sipping a whisky.

Jamie Shadaws, purse-lipped, was doing her make-up in a mirror.

Maureen Appleyard was reading a magazine.

Nigel Tush was hunched over the bar.

Hamish did a double-take.

His father *was* hunched over the bar. Such was the devastating potential implications of this fact that Hamish's internal organs burst into multiple hemorrhages. It was like being at school, only amplified: the disbelief, the paranoia, the ultimate horror.

'Oh, it's you,' said his father. 'What you doing here, son?'

'Has anybody left?'

'What?'

'Has anybody left the pub in the last three minutes?'

'No. I believe everyone's present and correct. Why, you want to interview us?'

'I do,' said Hamish.

He rallied himself. Nothing was certain. He needed clues, clues that offered hope. Yet it was impossible to imagine Mr.

Charger having sex. He didn't look capable. And if he wasn't the grunting stag, then that meant only one thing. The only man on earth forbidden to have sex was having sex.

'What you doing here?' said his father.

'What you think? Having a beer. What *you* doing here?'

'*Purgatory.*'

'Off to the bog,' said Hamish, and he stole round the bar out of sight, and checking he wasn't seen, missed me following him.

He hot-footed past the toilets, down the Corridor of Secrets, beyond the cleaner's storeroom to the door of the Tardis. He put his ear against it, but there were no noises coming from within. Guessing he'd check again, I ducked out of sight, and only looked back round to see him tugging open the door, and stepping inside.

'There was a distinct whiff of lemons about the place. Whether it was lemony cologne or lemony perfume, I didnae know. But there was nothing except the smell. I searched for clues, and I didn't put my hand in anything sticky. There was no johnny. Nothing. I didnae wanna risk being caught in there. So I inched open the curtain. I don't know if it was my paranoia, but an apparition seemed to disappear from the bottom of the corridor as I looked.'

With great stealth, he exited, careful to close the door silently. He then tip-toed to the end of the Corridor of Secrets.

He pushed open the toilet door and letting it swing shut with a creak and a thud, rubbed his hands on the seat of his jeans as he went back to his pint.

He took a stool next to his father and tried to arrange his thoughts in a way that precluded any hideous possibility.

He turned to his father:

‘Look after my pint? Back in a min.’

I went out the side door and watched him scamper across the road to the paper shop. At one of the tables out the front of the pub, he took out a pen and pad and wrote in it.

39 School Project

‘Julie,’ said Hamish. ‘Could you help me? It won’t take a moment of your time. And I’d be extremely grateful for your contribution.’

‘Uh,’ said Julie.

He imagined himself cute, like an earnest basset hound, and sniffed the air.

‘I’ve got a project at school. It’s a science project about preferred human scents and evolution.’

‘Uh.’

‘And so we’re doing a little survey about scents people like. What I want to know is what kind of scents you prefer when choosing yourself a perfume.’

‘I dunno.’

‘You don’t know what smells you like?’

‘Uh. I like...’ She tapped her lips with her finger and her eyes rolled up and askance. ‘Nice smells,’ she said.

‘Intriguing. Do go on.’

‘And I don’t like nasty smells.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Hamish, ‘to be a wee bit more illuminating, you might mention what kinds of smells, specifically, would constitute nice smells?’

‘Nice smells?’ she said. ‘Specifically?’

Hamish nodded.

‘I told you. They’re the ones I like.’

Julie, being the youngest, was the chief suspect for the female lead. As such, it was essential to get a clear answer out of her.

‘Aye, I see that. You like nice smells. But, do you see what I’m saying, what are nice smells? For example, do you like peach or strawberry? Maybe floral scents? How about lily of the valley? Or sweet sugary smells, or perhaps, for example, shall we say, lemon?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘They’re nice smells.’

‘Right,’ said Hamish. ‘They’re all nice smells, but which would you prefer as a perfume?’

‘I love perfume,’ said Julie.

And with that she walked into the lounge.

‘At that time,’ said Hamish, ‘her lack of cooperation only further roused my suspicions. When she returned, all I could get out of her was that nice smells were never nasty and nasty smells were never nice. I thought she was a filibustering genius. Everyone else was straightforward. I sniffed them all. I asked the ladies what scents they preferred for themselves and what scents they preferred on their men, and the men vice-versa. Well, you know what I found?’

‘Mrs. Shadaws not only liked smelling of lemons, but she also smelled of lemons. Ms. Appleyard liked the smell of lemons, but she didn't herself smell of lemons. Add that to the grapevine about the massage parlour, and hey presto: suspects locked.’

40 Postman

DJ Smuuth were having trouble with his ratings. He were the host of *BeachSide*, a *West Rose Radio* program based in Fresh Point, the big town an hour south of Motson (and yes, like so many coastal places, it'd been renamed, or re-branded as they preferred, to make it sound more attractive). Anyway, *BeachSide* had a new segment called *Irresistible Hour*, in which self-styled love gurus from all over the county, whether male, female or trans, gay, bi or straight, were invited to share their "secrets" of seduction. The most popular interviews had proved to be those with gay males. Apparently young women in their droves tuned in to receive love tips about the male psyche. However, it didn't take long for the show to become repetitive. Though it were an adult program and after the watershed, sponsors would only allow a certain level of lewdness and graphic description. Moreover, whatever the orientation, it seemed there were only so many ways that people turned each other on. Therefore, when word somehow reached DJ Smuuth's ear that some fellow in little old Motson, backwater of the coast, had come up with an intriguingly novel seduction strategy, he invited him on to the show. At the time, William Motion had refused point blank. He'd then gone on his travels. News of his exploits had leaked to the local press, and only made his strategy and consequent disappearance all the more intriguing. By saying nothing, William had created a folk legend way beyond the limits of Motson. It were said that the rumours themselves kept *BeachSide* running, as DJ Smuuth would regularly bring up the subject of the eloped William and plead with him on air, if he were listening, to get in touch. By the time he returned, the producers were at their wits' ends as *BeachSide's* ratings couldn't sustain on the echo of hearsay any longer, and so when they got wind that William were back, they saw a final chance to create a spike in popularity, and approached him again, this time taking with them a couple of bald men with low level foreheads and shoulders up to their ears, goons of the local crime syndicate of security door men. They made William an offer it were inadvisable to refuse.

It weren't just the whole of Motson either, it were the whole of the county what tuned in to his interview:

'The idea,' said William, 'was pure simplicity. Women love a challenge, don't they? So, that's when it occurred to me. What if I told her I were gay? Then she could change me. She'd have a challenge, a sexual conversion of orientation. I thought it'd play to her insecurities. Is she feminine enough to straighten a gay man?

'But it seemed to me that it was important to be subtle about it. I'd need to maintain a straight edge. I had to give her hope that she could accomplish the mission. So, it was all about subtle changes. Nothing too obvious. I couldn't just mince up to her avoiding eye contact, holding a fifty pence piece between my butt cheeks, little teapot my wrist, and tell her she was fat. It'd be too obvious I was being alluring.'

'So, how did you start?' said DJ Smuth.

'I went to the jewellers, had my right ear pierced, and a diamante stud put in. I was instantly a little bit gayer.'

'You say a little bit gayer,' said DJ Smuth, 'by that, do you mean you were already a little bit gay, and that on the spectrum of sexuality, you simply gravitated further towards the homosexual end?'

'I don't know what that means,' said William. 'I just felt more comfortable being gay with an earring in.'

'Interesting,' said the DJ. 'Do go on.'

'I bought a pair of tight, white trousers, and a

fitting black and white shirt. Then I went to a lav and changed into them. My look was coming together. It was no easy task hunting down a faux leather man-bag in Motson. Once I'd got that, I felt like I had all my props. But that was the easy part. You see, real gayness has to come from within.'

'That's interesting you say that. Do you feel in this way that everyone's gay, at least to a degree, secretly?'

'No. It was just make-believe, but make-believe requires feelings.'

'So, you were trying to get in touch with your gay feelings?'

'I was imagining them. The key, to me, was always going to be the walk, you know, body language. I had to exude a sexy subconscious homosexuality.'

'How did you do that?'

'I practiced. I left the loo taking smaller steps than usual, but I felt self-conscious. Then I found out why. I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window. While I was carrying my new man bag in my left hand, my right forearm had taken on a life of its own.'

'What was it doing?'

'Sending the wrong message.'

'How?'

'You know how male team sports are really all just gigantic homo-erotic spectacles?'

'I've never really thought about it like that before.'

'And the more "butch" the sport, the more homo-erotic the context?'

'Go on.'

'Well, that makes American football the pinnacle of homo-erotic team sports. With that in mind, I felt, given my mission, it was essential that I stride the world as quarterback rather than wide-receiver. You understand?'

'I think we can all understand the nuance of that.'

'Well, to achieve that,' said William, 'I had to get the walk exactly right. Too much flounce and I'd look like I was due a prolapse. That's undesirable. So, I thought about my natural advantages. I'm light on my feet. I'm small-boned. I'm all fast-twitch. I felt I should be neat and tidy in my movements. But at the same time, look fun-loving. Understated butch with a skip and a jump in its stride, and a touch of charming vulnerability, like a footballer flicking a towel. It's not an easy combination. So, I needed somewhere to practice.'

'Where did you go?'

'Church.'

'Obviously.'

'Well, I didn't feel self-conscious striding back and forth between the gravestones. It's tricky transforming suave masculinity into manly mince. And I just wasn't feeling it in my loins. I lacked that testosterone conviction. To pull it off I had to make my previous walk look like the contrivance. My new walk

had to be a subtle adjustment, like it had happened naturally, and exuded out of my new found gayness. But I was too tense. The stakes were so high. I knew that to get into the part, I needed to relax. That got me thinking about what a gay man would do to relax. I figured, same as everyone else. He'd have a snifter. So, what do gays drink? Again, I had to be careful. I couldn't just start drinking Cosmopolitans. Then it came to me. I needed something happy and butch, something that said: topless, sweaty man chopping wood in the snow. It's obvious, right? I bought a bottle of vodka, and being gay, I also thought about calories, and so I drank it straight from the bottle without a mixer.'

41 Hamish Tush – Academic PI: Part 1

Hamish watched. I saw:

Julie manned the pumps. Maureen Appleyard were perched at the bar practically hanging off the side of Arnold Charger, who were too polite to move. To make her feel better, Arnold were drinking whisky with her. He looked like he had things on his mind. Nigel Tush were hunched defensively over and around a pint in his customary manner. Something were up with Jamie Shadaws. She looked like a constipated vegetarian: frustrated, pained, confused. Yet her expression were punctuated by a comma, a sly half-smile, like she were aware that if them thoughts she couldn't hide were written all over her face, she had successfully swallowed the other half. Then she started chatting to Nigel. This caused a jolt of horror in Hamish.

'You?' said his father. 'Like a Jack-in-the-box.'

'Pint,' said Hamish, catching Julie's eye.

‘*Cavalier?*’ said Julie.

‘No,’ said his father. ‘*Purgatory*. We’ll have nay more of that weak shite. On me, son. But you owe me.’

Hamish jangled with nerves. It was impossible to stay calm when the day had comprised a devastating sequence of taboo shattering events, the worst of which was learning that people over the age of forty had sex. It was depraved... Women old enough to be his mother...

Later, in the lavatory-clinic, as they drank more and more, Hamish would explain to William in Freudian detail:

‘The thought of my mother doing it sent my mind into a tailspin. You know, because that was only a parallel spiral away from the sickest notion of all: that my da was the one rutting in the Tardis. Then came a cascade of sexual horrors. My da having sex with my ma. Then my ma having sex with a man who isnae my da. It was wretched. I was glad it couldnae get worse. Except it did. Our minds are sick, tricky bastards. Through mine flashed the thought of me and my ma doing it. I was a jangling wreck at that bar.’

Hamish leapt from his stool and blurted out: ‘Stop!’

‘Och,’ said Nigel. ‘Ye nearly made me spill me pint.’

‘What is it, pet?’ said Jamie, feigning concern.

‘The demons of,’ said William, ‘your subconscious dancing around your head.’

I could see him trying to calm himself by slurping on the wretched *Purgatory*. Then he started silently observing his suspects.

The plot soon thickened.

Julie went home saying nothing. Dempster appeared in Raybans.

Arnold addressed him: 'It's another fine day in Motson, is it not?'

Dempster bowed.

'Don't encourage him,' said Jamie. And she put her hand over Arnold's and their eyes met.

Arnold removed his hand and coughed.

Maureen's eyebrows leapt.

Jamie giggled.

Dempster tugged at his beard. He said: 'I'm doing fine. Thanks for asking,' and stared at Jamie.

Maureen said: 'I heard this rumour, Jamie, that Dempster's planning on putting the Dodo in a care home.'

'No, I'm not,' said Dempster, exchanging furrowed brows with Arnold.

'Yes, he is,' said Jamie, perking up. 'He just doesn't want you lot to know about it, because he thinks that you'll think he's mean and stop coming here to drink. He wants to move her in, not tell anyone and say that it was all her own idea.'

'Shame on you,' said Nigel. 'Graunty's part of the furniture. Grubby and shabby it may be, but we wouldnae change it. Besides, it's a bit daft of you to think you could trick us into thinking she'd voluntarily want to move into an old people's home. She'd never do something that considerate. It's not in her nature.'

'Here, here,' said Jamie.

'Whatever,' said Dempster. 'The rumour's BS, Maureen. And as for you Nige, you only like the old blobfish because she's the one animal in the world more miserable than you.'

'Misery's underrated,' said Nigel. 'It keeps your hopes up. I'll miss her.'

‘No, you won’t,’ said Dempster. ‘Jamie, don’t encourage them with your stupid jokes.’

‘But it’s not funny,’ said Maureen.

‘It was a stupid joke.’

‘Stupid jokes are the funniest,’ said Maureen, ‘but that weren’t funny.’ She started laughing.

‘I ain’t even gonna dignify,’ said Dempster. ‘I’ll have me a bitter lemon.’ He served himself, shook his head at Arnold. ‘Problems.’

Maureen looked at Dempster, licked her lips, put down her magazine and hauled one blubbery thigh over the other. ‘What are you doing fine with that Jamie says you’re not?’

Jamie curled a lick of hair around her ear, put an elbow on the bar, her chin in her hand, and shoved her cleavage towards Arnold. ‘What’s he on about?’

‘He’s talking about Maureen,’ said Arnold.

‘He is?’ said Maureen, sucking on a piece of ice.

‘It’s complicated,’ said Arnold.

‘Complicated?’ Jamie turned to Dempster. ‘You wanna explain? Or you just gonna go outside?’ She turned away, thrust out her chin and peered down over her nose at her husband. ‘We wouldn’t want the weather to turn nasty.’ She smiled like a hyena over a corpse. ‘Come ten-ish?’

‘What’s that?’ said Dempster.

‘We’re going to discuss the possibility of having a pub quiz.’

‘That right?’

Jamie turned to face Dempster. ‘Problem?’ She then turned her back to Arnold and Maureen, so that Hamish could see her mouth moving, silently enunciating in Dempster’s direction: ‘Maureen?’

‘You need to see a doctor,’ said Dempster. ‘And maybe he does, too.’ He nodded towards Arnold.

‘No, thanks,’ said Jamie, turning in the direction of Arnold and Maureen. ‘Already seen Dr. Who today.’

Dempster shrugged.

‘It was a joke,’ said Jamie, slipping a brandy glass off the rack.

‘Wasn’t funny again,’ said Maureen.

‘Why do I need to see a doctor, any road?’ said Jamie. She put her glass up to the brandy optic and pushed out a shot. She turned to Maureen. ‘Maybe I need some healing hands.’

‘You need a head doctor,’ said Dempster.

‘If I remember correctly,’ said Jamie, ‘last time I suggested head...’ She started cackling.

Maureen smiled. ‘So, what were you saying about me, Dempster?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Dempster, disappearing.

Maureen adjusted the neckline of her stretch fabric top, winked at Jamie and ordered a whisky.

Arnold looked at Maureen, then at Jamie, adjusted his crotch and said: ‘Well, I’d better.’

Nigel patted Hamish on the shoulder. ‘Go on then, son. You can owe me. One more on your da. It’s your Easter hols. An appropriate time to learn how to get mortal without embarrassing yoursen. Get him another *Purgatory* on me. Put it on the tab, Jamie.’ He said, ‘I’m off home,’ and lurched out the door.

‘I hate to agree with him,’ said Arnold, ‘but me, too.’

He winced at Maureen, winced and smiled at Jamie, then with a theatrical flourish of his hand, took a bow and wished all: ‘Adieu.’

Hamish began processing what he'd witnessed. Coded messages, things cryptic and strange. And he was certain it was all linked, not only to the noises coming from the Tardis, but to the disappearance of William's mullet. He'd decipher the hidden meanings, and solve this riddle, but not as a service to William. Just for fun.

Jamie laid more *Purgatory* before him.

Hamish squinted at it philosophically.

As he necked the pint, I presume to lessen the torture, I went back over what we'd witnessed:

Dempster and Jamie was publicly having a private argument. Meanwhile, Arnold and Jamie had been having a conversation of which Dempster were not part. Conversely, Arnold and Dempster had been having a conversation of which Jamie were not part. Maureen had been curious as to the thing that Arnold had said Dempster were saying about her. Something were going on between Maureen and Arnold and Arnold and Jamie. Something else were going on between Arnold and Dempster and Dempster and Jamie. And most strangely of all, something were going on between Maureen and Dempster without Dempster even knowing about it.

In the lav-clinic, Hamish, by the power of lager logic, put it as follows to William:

'My detective's hunch told me I was still missing something. What I'd seen was just the things they were publically revealing. Just stuff they reckoned made them look worldly. But there were hidden levels to the whole exchange. There was at least one interaction, probably more, that had taken place so secretly I'd failed to recognise its significance. I tried to calmly run over the most loaded words and images, and I found details that kept reoccurring:

'It went like this... Mr. Shadaws' Raybans. Indirect references to fine weather. Mr. Charger's bow. The lemons and quiet love-making, and that's how I thought of it for some reason, nay as fucking, but as love-making. Then there was ladies' laughter. Something about not doing something. Something about doing something. Mrs. Shadaws' hand over Mr. Charger's. Ladies' laughter. The meeting of eyes. Mr. Charger's cough. Ten-ish. Dr. Who? And lemons and quiet love-making again. And ladies' laughter.

And it was then, gulping on *Purgatory*, that through the mists of his drunken haze, Hamish realised he was an alcoholic, for he had the moment of clarity. He started choking on his pint when the rude truth of it came to him. A secret meeting was going down at ten o'clock in the Tardis: a panting rendezvous between Mrs. Shadaws and somebody most unexpected.

42 A Mislead

'I'd been on the all egg diet,' said Steven Little. 'See? Figured I was wasting too much on food. Eggs are most nutritious. Literally, contain everything. So why not? Buy cheap eggs. Marry. Eat them and only them and nothing but them. Save money for important stuff. Drugs, alcohol. Believe.

'Only thing was, left me feeling icky. Hadn't shit in ten days. I go see Rathbone. Quack. Laughed like a duck. I mean it. Most of my consultation time. Wasted! What he give me to sort it? Nothing. Told me to eat ripe bananas. Then return to boring diet. Normal food! Right out of order. Rest of that day I eat fourteen

bananas. Nothing. I go to bed. I feel shit. Next morning, up and out early. On my way for daily swim in the duck pond. Strike me down. Out of nowhere. Cataclysm. The Big Bang. No exaggeration. I end up in William's lav. He's not there yet. Dropped me kecks. Creation. World's first tsunami in toilet bowl. Epic mudslide. Like half the Canary Islands falling into Atlantis. Thing was, after first deluge, I could feel. More bubbling under surface. Grumbling me. Rumbling me. Internal washing machine set to hot. Sweating like smoked salmon. Like I knew I was in for morning. Birthing time.

'Then I got my composure. Maturity. Did courtesy flush. R and R. Waiting for Round Two. William arrives. Sets up. I think he's washing his hands. Someone else arrives. 'Tush,' says William. Blow dryer starts. Hamish wants to give him money. 'Why?' says William. 'To pay for ID,' says Hamish. 'I'm off this case.' 'Why?' says William. And Hamish says they're no longer friends, then William says that's nothing to do with it. Love song. Tells Hamish to find who stole his mullet. Magnum shit.

'Then Hamish says, 'You washed your hands. Then you had a pee. Then you didnae wash your hands. Then you started your sandwich.' 'Deduce,' says William. Hamish can't. I don't bother. Says William: 'Hands go here. Hands go there. Hands go bloody everywhere. They're the dirty digits of the devil. I wouldn't put them anywhere near my cock without washing them first.' Good point, right?

'Then Hamish says he's alcoholic. Righteous. Says he got the moment of clarity. Says he knows who stole William's mullet. Two chief suspects. Working in

tandem. Then rutting in the Tardis. Celebration.

William was intrigued by Hamish's mixture of facts and speculation, impressed by the transparent nonsense of his conclusion, and moved by the blood, sweat and tears the lad had shed to create a logical coherence out of nothing.

'Hamish claims. Says they met again. At ten. William asks. Did he positive ID? But too busy. Darts night. Travesty. Checked all the pub. Both there. But neither round ten. Who? You wanna know who? Suspicion.

'Maureen Appleyard and Jamie Shadaws. Lesbian affair. The man become a lady. Lager and memory. Sensitise! Evidence stacks. It was all lemons. Jamie smells of lemons. I never knew. Maureen likes lemons. No clue. Both strange at the bar. Like they were hiding something. Logical! A married woman. A woman with a reputation. A lesbian affair. Motson. Hamish insists. Obsession. A woman's crime, stealing hair. Samson and Delilah. To strike takes one. To conceal two. Why? No idea. They had intimate of his territory. Maureen across the road. But she didn't execute. Dirty deed done by Jamie, the slaughterhouse lady.

'William gasps. 'Maureen the brains and Jamie the brawn?' 'Right,' says Hamish. 'Audacious crime. By audacious types. Audacious 'nough to sex the Tardis. Celebrate. Cut hair. Metaphor. Poet crims. Romantics. Sex in the scheme room. Tardis bonkers. So now Tardis sex addicts.

'William, truly, blown away. Except. One thing. 'Motive,' he says. It's like TV. Hamish asks him.'

William, moved by his own monstrous absurdity, found himself overwhelmed with altruism. He shook his head.

Tells Hamish: 'Find that motive.'

43 Elastic Sexuality

'You've had an earring put in,' she said.

Bolder and bolder grew I. Gay as a parade, he'd minced home from work, and found the family Giggs nude sunbathing in the garden again.

I followed him all the way to the edge of the shadow at the side of the cottage. I had my excuse worked out in the event of an emergency. It consisted of a rape alarm and a confiscated spray can of mace. Though I couldn't see them, I could listen, as they were just yards from me. The health freak and the addict, the firefighter and the fire starter, the tireless detective and the unscrupulous villain, they're all alike in one essential way, they're all buzz heads locked into the thrill. That were me standing in them shadows, ignored and powerful. The rest I merely imagined.

Saffron, naked and cross-legged, was perched in the doorway of William's shed and as she laughed she rocked back, her face swaying under the shade of the eaves. Her chest trembled and a splat of pink ice-cream landed on her breast. She squealed in delight, eyeballed William, and tugging her chin into her throat swiped the errant blot with a fingertip. Licking it clean off, she tilted her head, and whirling the ice-cream parallel to her shoulder, studied him implacably.

'And those trousers are very tight.'

'Yes.'

'And very white.'

'They are,' said William.

He leaned forward to whisper, unbeknown, to me:

‘I’m gay.’

‘Oh,’ said Saffron. ‘That explains a lot.’

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing.’

‘No, not nothing. What?’

‘Well, what I mean is, you know what I mean,’ she flapped a hand about, ‘you’re gay, so... Gays always know, don’t they? So, you know.’

William shook his head. He definitely didn’t know. She was supposed to accept that he was gay, but it was still supposed to be shocking. And disappointing. Then intriguing. Then she was supposed to tease him. Then they went shopping. Bonded. Built trust. He confessed his concern with Oscar. She took a look, turned delirious, and in her mania he manfully soothed and seduced her. But now...

‘What do you mean I know?’

‘You’re funny.’

Daddy Giggs’ voice boomed across the garden. ‘A cloud. That’s the first cloud we’ve had for more than a week. Do you often get clouds round here, Mr. Motion?’

Saffron smothered a giggle.

‘Sometimes.’

‘There’s lovely,’ said Mr. Giggs.

Saffron pouted. ‘What do you think of my brother?’

‘Eh?’

‘I know he’s young, and he’s not gay, but... Will he be hot when he’s older? A cutie? I think so.’

From one of William’s many confessions, during that period of sobriety where he were only drunk nightly:

‘I wanted to swallow my tongue. I wanted to choke. She’d jump on me to save me. My hand would clutch her, not me, just an involuntary spasm squeezing her arse and thrusting her forward until she felt it like the shanks of a tuna, all muscle and no flab. It’d fill her with the desire of the howling moon, draw her down in the middle of the night.’

‘You don’t think so?’ she said. ‘Maybe what gays and women see in men are two different things.’

‘We...gays –’ said William.

‘Oh, you can’t fool me. You’re just bisexual. I could tell when I saw your house. The layout’s so gay. The giant wet room. The pure sex bedroom. And yet the furniture and that, it’s all masculine. You’re a classic bi. Like me. We’re the same, see? So this last week, you’ve been straight and wanted a girl. And now, you’re gay again and want a boy. So, the other night, when you wanted to bang me, I was gay that night. I wanted a girl. I’d like a man today, a bald man, like I said, you’d be fine. What a shame, eh? You being gay today, when I’m all horny for a bloke.’

‘Eh?’

His balls were in his eyes and his brain was in his intestines and his intestines were in his head, and the whole lot was run through with his spiked penis.

Before he could say anything, she leapt to her feet, her red curls bouncing fiendishly. The ice-cream banged against her nipple making her yelp.

Then she announced she was off to the wet room for a shower and some special time with her clitoris.

44 The Great Entwining Serpent of the Car Park

If ever a story came together from bits and pieces, were painstakingly pieced from rumours and lies and heresy and hearsay and bitter jealousies until the truth shone through, then this were that story. What immoralities I had to put up with in piecing this murderous nonsense together, and most importantly, vindicating the actions of the innocent and condemning the corrupt. I wish to address once again them discreditable discourses surrounding the alleged affair between Jamie Shadaws and Arnold Charger.

Alban Besnik is our first witness. He claims to have witnessed the following from the bus stop where he were getting high on a funny fag. Given he is also an eastern European spy, that about sums up how reliable all this is. But hear me out. He had told William Motion who had told Hamish Tush who had written it down on a piece of paper I had seized *for investigative purposes* from his pocket having learned to pickpocket from an acquaintance of someone I know well.

Credit where it's due, Hamish were open-minded at least. His paper read:

The passenger door opened, and Jamie Shadaws slid in next to Culmeal. This neither proves nor disproves my theory. Though it certainly adds another layer of mystery.

After Dempster became a guru, Jamie started her own unofficial "Girls Only Confessions Box" in the gazebo, involving expensive ice-cream, cheap chocolate and cocktails mixed with dynamite. I went to a couple myself and made up impassioned stories about my husband what were so lame and tame they caused sighs of disappointment amongst the gossipers, and I were soon no longer asked to contribute. I used to sip the explosive cocktails judiciously, pouring most of it

away, regrettably killing - as I learned in spring - a whole line of daffodils in their beds. But by doing this, and behaving mildly sozzled and stupid so I were always welcome back, and being on point with my *Casios*, I learned a fair deal.

'His idea of being romantic?' said Jamie. 'His sweet nothings? 'Wank my willy, suck me silly.''

She should be so lucky. This is pure fantasy. Despite calling her fabulations confessions, she were still lying. There are people like that. Someone I know very well and what knows about these things assures me there are criminals what fabricate their own sins.

Take Motson's biggest dealer in innuendo and rumour, Steven Little, he claimed his source were MP:

'Next day. Office. AC gets shit-faced. She blindfolded him. Arnie gibbers. Her freaky? Too chatty, too boring.'

Jamie, frankly, sums up herself in the first line:

'It were stupid, really. But he insisted he were a better driver drunk than sober. And given that it wasn't our first time, I could believe that. And I wasn't really thinking, just a car, the countryside, it sounded.. Anyway, you get in, and you have to wear a harness. A harness isn't sexy, and I appreciated that once we hit the lanes. He drove like he was possessed. I think he was trying to turn me on.'

To demonstrate how far off the mark this is, let me regale you with the fan fiction fantasy, written after it had been gleaned that Arnold, successful as he is, drives a very expensive sports car:

IT WAS HIS THING, GETTING A FEW DRINKS WEST OF SAFE AND A *MITSUBISHI* TO PROVE IT. LIKED TO TAKE THE LADIES OUT OF MOTSON. INTO THE COUNTRY LANES WHERE HE'D OPEN UP THE TURBO AND PUNISH THE FOUR-WHEEL

DRIVE ROUND THE CURVES. COMMUNICATE DESIRE IN A
MACHO LANGUAGE WOMEN UNDERSTOOD.

See? Pure fantasy. Like this from Steven:

'He was just doing it to have one over on
Dempster.'

Yet it is certain that an incident happened, and that it involved Jamie
Shadows. For example, again according to Steven, who again claims the source is
MP, but has simply forgotten again, in his drug addled state, where he found this
out:

'She had Dempster on a Mickey Finn.'

Then we're back with Jamie's fantasy. I imagine she projects on to Arnold
a mix of what Dempster is and what she wishes he were:

'He's really preoccupied with alibis. He wants
them before the fact. It's not exactly sexy. And his
alibis aren't exactly watertight. He planned to blame
Dempster for having a mid-week lock in. I suppose he
was drunk though.'

Steven Little:

'He's into anal beads. Whatever they are. They
were playing hookers and johns.'

SHE TIED HIS HANDS TO THE HEADREST WITH A
STOCKING, UNZIPPED HIS FLY, AND PULLED HIS *FARAH'S* AND
HIS *CALVIN KLEIN'S* DOWN TO HIS KNEES. HE FELT
SOPHISTICATED.

Hamish, in recounting from Alban and trying to get into the mind of
Culmeal, writes:

The door clicked. The car wobbled. There was a
rush of cool air. The door slammed shut.

IT WAS FRUSTRATING. AT LEAST HE WAS PICKLED. HE RESIGNED HIMSELF TO THE WEIRDNESS.

Steven Little claimed Arnold had taken up golf and yoga to impress Maureen.

As if.

SEDUCING MAUREEN WAS LIKE DRINKING KETCHUP.

I call it golf course thinking: all artificial links, sand pits, and pond life.

According to Hamish, our only vaguely reliable narrator, who's reporting on other reporter's reports of reports:

Alban fed Culmeal some news: William bedded two television producers in London. They wanted him to appear on reality TV. The whole arrangement went south when they discovered that he was playing substitutes. William said he wasn't interested anyway.

'Jamie,' said Steven Little, relaying MP's report: 'Like sexing a log. He's a beast. Lasts days. Nearly heart attacks himself. She? Rigid. Silent. Like death. But convenient. So, OK. Two girlfriends. One wife. Complex showdown.'

Hamish:

The door clicked. The car wobbled. There was a rush of cool air. The door slammed shut.

'TIME FOR TRICKS,' SAID ARNOLD.

'Talking, talking, talking,' said Steven. 'She just: talking, talking, talking. And Arnold calls his penis Maximilian.'

BECAUSE MAXIMILIAN WAS SENSITIVE TO HER WOMANLY NEEDS, SHE NEEDED TO TALK TO HIM. MAX SALUTED RIGID

AND RAPT. YET... THERE COMES A TIME WHEN DIRTY TALK NEEDS DIRTY ACTIONS, BUT WHEN THE DIRTY TALK WAS FOLLOWED BY DIRTIER TALK AND THE DIRTIEST TALK BY MORE DIRTY TALK, HE FOUND HIMSELF WALLOWING IN THAT PIT OF DESPAIR THAT MAUREEN USUALLY SPECIALISED IN DROPPING HIM.

'She had the goat,' said Steven. 'Cloven. Horned. It was his belief. Conviction. Lacy knicks have needs. Sensitivity.'

'He's not subtle,' said Jamie, speaking via C1 to someone I don't know. 'He told me straight: 'I can speak on behalf of Maximilian when I say that he likes orifices.''

Yet the gist of what folks said is perhaps best summarised by these lines I found scrawled on the wall of William Motion's lavatory. Unless I'd missed them, and let's face it, I did have things on my mind every time I sneaked in there, however, I have a feeling that William wrote them after that ginger slut went back home. But who knows?

Time passes. We ignore it. Happy bliss.

We focus on that which we can erect.

Time stops. Eternity marches into meaninglessness.

A voice drones. The words blur.

This is love.

'He fell asleep,' said Steven Little.

Hamish wrote:

Alban said, 'I was really high. Smoking. Drinking cider. That K9 shit, it taste like sweet petrol. I hear

shout. It sound like old lady. She crazy. She think there is snake. It hiss. I want to help. But I don't really want to run. So, I go over. Everywhere there are little flower. I'm try not to break them. A shadow move.'

The door clicked. The car wobbled. There was a rush of cool air. The door slammed shut.

'This crazy old lady, she think there is snake come through her window. She has bad dream. She think this is India. Then she say the name. Jamie, Jamie. And Jamie say something I do not hear. Then I stop. I know someone is there. The flowers I do not want to break. I hear the word 'ho', you know? Like the rap song. And 'pipe'. I think old lady catch Jamie with husband. I think. I don't know. Then I hear about 'water' and 'wet' and 'clinic'. I think is crazy prostitute argue. Disease. This, I don't want to know. I start, I go backward, through the flower.'

45 Entrapment

I'll leave it to his women to describe:

Hamish's mother told me over cross-stitches:

'He spent that Wednesday moping about the house.'

Olive said:

'He's part poet, part pervert. Sensitive but mental.'

Doreen put it like this:

'He's like a cute husky that craps on the carpet for fun, but then feels bad about it. So he eats it. But it makes him feel sick. So, he vomits it back up. And when you come home to find a semi-digested shit in a pool of puke on your brand new carpet, he looks at you all sad like look what you made me do. So, you tell him off, and he shrivels, but then you try and clean up after him and he growls at you.'

Olive disagreed:

'He was all worried that he might have got a semi-on listening to a man have sex. And if that was right, what that meant. So, he went back to the pub to try and find the answer. He got talking to Steven Little in the pool room. Steven started telling him all about the history of William. That's how he found out Willy, years ago, had slept with Maureen.'

Hamish's imagination had gone into overdrive.

'He had it in his head,' said Doreen. 'Maureen lived across the street. She finds out William's all la-la for the gate-crashing girl, and she gets jealous. She butchers William's mullet in revenge.'

I was hanging round the bus stop at *The Dog and Biscuit* that Friday morning. Dempster was pacing up and down on top of Graunty's annex, and looking at the sky. Hamish bunked over the fence into the car park and went to the lavatory, but William had left a note on the door saying he'd taken the week off work. I followed Hamish back home.

'He went home to revise,' said Olive. 'He figured he was dead on Monday, so he may as well pass his exams. Because school was back, right?'

Hamish's mother takes up the narrative here:

'I tell him to revise in his bedroom, but he says he can't. As soon as he gets in bed and smells all his mess, he's fast asleep. So, he comes downstairs. I'm doing the ironing. Well, as soon as you have company, you dinnae just have the TV to talk to, but he never gets it right. He answers when I'm talking to the TV, and he never answers when I'm talking to him. It gets on my tits.'

According to Olive:

'All he really wanted was to see us, and for William to say sorry. He was in bits.'

Hamish decided to go to the pub to study.

That evening, he regaled the girls. 'Walter Jamieson called.' He did his impression: 'I was thinking, I could explain everything about what happened between us over some Green After Shock. In here. I nicked a bottle from the offy. We could do some revision, too. Exams soon. Bring your books?'

As I related it to my degenerate fan base, Hamish descended into a thriller:

Hamish had already decided to forgive William, on condition of an apology, so he supposed it was only cordial to do the same for Walter. Especially now he was his only friend. They strode through the long, wet grasses of the backfield in awkward silence.

Hamish pointed. 'Clouds,' he said.

'Back to normal weather,' said Walter.

'Well, it drizzled early this morning.'

'It'll piss it down later.'

A cloud moved beyond the sun and they were bathed in light again.

'You think?' said Hamish, looking across the field. In the far distance was another cloud casting a shadow. Under it was a figure dressed all in black.

On second inspection, it was Alban Besnik.

Hamish waved.

Alban waved back, but didn't move.

'Who's that?' said Walter.

'An Albanian spy,' said Hamish.

'Oh.'

Hamish waited until the strangeness of the situation became disquieting. Then he waved once more.

Alban waved again.

Hamish and Walter turned and walked off. At the far end of the field, to one side of the sty, there was a little pond sometimes used by ducks to bathe. With all the recent hot weather, it was almost dried out – just a small, muddy puddle in the middle of a golden brown pit. Hamish had an uneasy feeling crossing the sty and was overcome by an urge to look behind him.

And there again, in the distance, he saw Alban Besnik.

By Hamish's calculation, he'd moved an equal distance to Hamish and Walter since the last time they'd seen him.

But when Hamish stopped and turned, Alban stopped and waited.

Hamish waved.

Alban waved back.

It could mean only one thing: he was following them. Why? Had William Motion sent Alban to spy on him?

They bunked over the sty and followed the path where bushes and brambles blocked them from sight.

'We're best running,' said Hamish.

'Why?' said Walter.

'The spy.'

'He's really a spy?'

'I'm involved in something. And you being with me,' Hamish wide-eyed Walter and, mentally speaking, patted him on the head, 'makes you involved, too. Come on. Quick.'

They started running. Hamish knew Walter was spooked and he was enjoying the revenge, but still, a nameless paranoia gripped him.

Why was Alban following them?

The pathway turned ninety degrees and they were hurtling towards the end of it when the enormous figure of Dave Langley filled the single track. He grinned.

Hamish turned and began to run back.

Round the corner stepped Si Napopili. He separated his lips and spat through the gap between his front teeth.

Hamish scrambled back and forward, looking for a gap in the prickly hedge, but the early spring was green and cruel. It

was then that he noticed Walter wasn't running around heedlessly. He was standing in the pathway with his arms folded looking amused.

'What's up, mate? I think they just want a word.'

46 The Dump

Ralph Snapper claimed to have seen everything. Now, I like Ralph. He has pleasant taste in music, and can hold a tune like a piss poor man's Dickie Valentine. But the thing you've got to understand about Ralph is that he played for Manchester United, and he was in the SAS, and he's a part-time brain surgeon, and he's had fourteen wives, and he once played poker with Lemme from Motorhead, etc. That's Ralph. He last ate some time in the mid-nineties, and has since lived in *The Dog and Biscuit*. He gets money from his boy who plays footie in the lower divisions. His liver, it's said, will be *The Wizard of Oz* to the cockroaches come nuclear attack. He regularly talks to aliens.

'I could hear them in the Tardis. I wasn't listening, God's to honest. But she was screaming and he was ranting. He was so mad he was talking about himself talking about himself. 'Arnold Charger's not the type of man to take being humiliated lying down,' and all this. Then they both shouted: 'It's over.' And they argued about that. About who was dumping who.'

'From what I understand,' said William, with a cackle in his eyes, 'there was more than a little disdain on behalf of both parties by the end of the least loving love affair ever.'

'Arnold blamed me. Of course. Was gonna kill me,' said Steven Little. 'Until I brought up his affair. Stopped him. Confession time.'

I wrote Steven's words on the Internet. Anonymous captures the same nonsensical sentiment, but more eloquently:

TIED-UP SUPINE, ARNOLD LOOKED FORWARD TO LAZY PLEASURE. THAT WAS WHAT HE WAS A MAN TO TAKE LYING DOWN. FELLATIO WAS PERSONAL. WHICH WAS NICE. YET REASSURINGLY IMPERSONAL, TOO. IT REQUIRED NONE OF THE AWKWARD EYE-TO-EYE INTIMACY OF INTERCOURSE, NOR THE ATHLETICISM OF DOGGY STYLE. IT TRANSFORMED A MAN INTO AN EFFORTLESS SEX OBJECT, AND CAPTURED, FROM A SATISFYINGLY SINGULAR POINT-OF-VIEW, THE ESSENCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP IN A MICROCOSM: THE IMPLICIT TRUST, THE DISPLACED BALANCE OF GIVE AND TAKE, AND THE VAIN SEARCH FOR MEANING. SUCH ELEMENTS IT IMBIBED WITH A FEINT WHIFF OF THE RIDICULOUS AND THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ONE SHOULDN'T FART. TO BE SERVICED WAS TO BE SPIRITUAL. IT WAS THE SUBSTANCE OF LIFE.

Ralph said: 'He was shouting about how he nearly shit himself.'

There were only two possible, equally probably, conclusions: either Ralph was hallucinating again, or the man in the Tardis was someone other than Arnold.

'He called it a completely inappropriate use of a Mitsubishi.'

I asked him what.

'He said Jamie was trying to use his car to kill the Dodo. She didn't like that. Mind you, neither did he. Said it'd make his car an accessory? Get it impounded. That it was an import. She said he had a tiny...'

Ralph wiggled his finger, and winked at it.

'And that he didn't know how to use it. That shut them both up. Then Arnold stammered. 'I-I,' he said. 'What?' said Jamie. 'I'm offended,' he said. 'Good,' she said. And then she really let rip. She was gonna sue for defamation. She was gonna let everyone know about his inadequacies. She was gonna bar him from *The Dog and Biscuit*, and put him on *PubWatch*. She was gonna accuse him of smacking her around. She was gonna finish him in Motson in every way: sexually, politically, financially, because by the time she was done a divorce was gonna be inevitable.

'I could hear him gibbering. He was really frightened. Which was fair enough. He had a lot to be scared of. But she needn't have laid it on so thick. He blurted it out, his greatest fear. '*PubWatch?*' he said. '*PubWatch?*'

47 Mob-handed

Windswept and topless, Dempster were standing on the roof of the annex at a sky what loomed low. Greys on greys, it darkened and swirled. He turned away looking angry, and saw me. That was a first. I guess he wanted someone to talk to.

'I'll wager,' he said, 'that this is about the most depressing thing anyone's ever seen.'

The sky were filling with clouds. They merged, and subsumed one another. Continuously moving, they created ever-changing patterns of super clouds between the patches of blue. It were impossible to distinguish where one mass

ended and another began.

‘This is an insurrection. The push back. To be expected.’

He started pacing the roof, waving his fist and shouting.

‘Well, ain’t you fixing for a fight? I know. Start off with a few cirrus. Then bring on the alto-cumulus. Threaten me with nimbo-stratus, uh? Then launch the big guns.’ He punched the air. ‘I see you, cumulonimbus. You’re all over this shit. Well, the sun won’t be denied. We still got belief. Don’t we?’ He flung his arms about wildly. ‘The people of Motson have seen the blue and we’re keeping it. ’Cos I control the weather in this town. Me! Not you.’

A drop of rain hit his nose.

‘No.’ He swung wild punches. ‘No tears for me. If you think an American can’t control a thing as prissy as the English weather, think again suckers. Eleven days.’ He held up ten fingers. ‘Under my thumb. And I command thee: be gone or be zapped.’

He threw more aimless punches at the rain.

It were the smell what struck me first, an intense musk that as I about faced to nip under an umbrella manifested as an array of primary colours shaped out of cotton, hemp and wool. It were a small crowd of people what had joined me with more congregating. This were a gang of hill hippies. They must have arrived from the bleak and desolate countryside what surrounds Motson. *The Dog and Biscuit*, when they come down from the hills, is their watering hole of choice. These are the type of people what call villages towns, and consider nylon and polyester aberrations against nature, and speak preternaturally quietly so as not to disrupt cosmic harmonies. Until they scream at all the injustice in the world of which they are no part. They was staring up at Dempster with doe-eyed intolerance.

Dempster hadn’t noticed them. There was about fifty of them. They watched him fall to his knees and beseech the heavens with outstretched arms.

The rain intensified.

He thrust his crotch forward and tilted his face back in surrender. ‘Eleven

days of perfection, and now this. Lightning,' he raised his arms to the heavens, 'strike me! What's —'

I can only surmise that a drop of rain fell into his nostril, because next thing he snorted, choked, and came upright coughing. Finally he cleared his nose. Shaking his head and blinking away the sting, he found himself staring down at the mob in which I were now submerged. We stood, many mouths agape, and more falling open.

'I'm sorry,' he said, closing his eyes. He reached in his pocket and put on his Aviators. 'I truly am.' He looked woefully at his hands and shook his head. 'I'll do everything in my considerable power to get normal service resumed as from tomorrow.'

There was some chattering amongst the mob.

'Why? What you wanna know? It's raining. It sucks.' He crossed his arms and shrugged. 'I succeeded. I failed. Now, go inside. Have a drink. God knows, we need the money.'

A voice piped up from the crowd: 'Where's the Dodo?'

C3 recorded Dempster speaking to William Motion:

'I remembered. Arnie's half-baked plan. It had seemed so smart at the time. It had come to fruition. Talk about bad timing. I loathe those aggro-mellow motherfuckers. I'd forgotten how much. Their superior attitude, loaded up on "truth-seeking" hedonism. They're so spiritual. Each one uniquely buying into the same collective vision of justice.'

'Save the Dodo!' shouted a voice.

'Dempster,' said Jamie, 'considers slaughterhouse working, beer serving and weather control to be the only authentic hippy activities.'

'Save our Dodo!'

More joined in. It turned into a chant.

‘Save our Dodo! Save our Dodo!’

‘I’m here,’ said the Dodo, appearing like the angel of misfortune at the side door of the pub, standing under a bright red brolly with yellow spots. ‘What are you doing up there, Dempster?’

He said: ‘I been controlling me the weather. Least,’ he waved a hand about, ‘I was doing. But as you can see, things got somewhat out of hand.’ He smiled at the crowd. ‘Temporary infraction, folks.’

Another voice piped up. ‘Why you want to kill the Dodo?’

‘The what what?’ said Dempster.

Jeez. So Arnold had gotten the story wrong. What a shit bucket. All he could do was play dumb. The crowd’s anger, now they were here, was righteous frightening. He couldn’t land Jamie in this steaming puddle of fly piss soup.

‘Trying to kill me?’ said the Dodo.

‘Exactly,’ said Dempster. ‘Have I been trying to kill you?’

‘You most certainly have not. You’ve gone out of your mind, that’s all. And so’s your wife. The pair of you, mad as mercury. But homicidal? He’s not homicidal. Look at him. Safely deranged –’

‘He’s trying to kill you so’s can get your home.’

More voices piped up:

‘He wants to film porno in there.’

‘He’s addicted to lesbians.’

Dempster raged to the edge of the annex. ‘Slander,’ he said, yet he wondered why he bothered. ‘I’ll sue. Porno? Me?’

‘What about the lesbians,’ said another voice. ‘Everybody loves lesbians.’

There were some grumbling in the mob about this.

Dempster rallied. 'You should get inside and catch yourselves a drink before you catch yourselves pneumonia.'

And with that, knowing the moment ripe for a dramatic exit, Dempster leapt down from the roof into the annex's garden.

'There I was confronted by a rifle-wielding figure dressed all in black. The face was covered by nylon tights and oversize sunglasses. And the hat, it was crocheted, and all interwoven with shrubbery clippings. I was about to disarm the intruder when Jamie spoke.'

48 Noah

At The Dog and Biscuit that night, C2 recorded William:

'A deluge had opened up, and I was sitting there cross-legged in my shed, looking out the open door, smoking a J and sipping Ceylon tea. It really was the Apocalypse, and that seemed appropriate.

'All I had left were memories: of ginger pubes, of pornographic eyes, of wobbling, milky white plumpness. And her departure. The clouds were sparse yesterday evening, so a meandering drizzle cast a faint rainbow across my most desolate moment. Saffron's arse were nearly bursting out of her elasticated jeans. Her father was driving her off into the shadows of the street, and then beyond into imagination, the purest mysteries of darkest Wales. They were leaving early, said Ryan, because the weather forecast was predicting a wet weekend. Expected I was delighted. And by the way, there's a couple of cans of Heinz beans in the cupboard. I can keep them. I wore funeral garb to wave

them goodbye. The *Transporter* moved in slow motion. Do you know how many houses down my street are pebble dashed? It lurched over the lumps in the potholed road, but the wheels never fell off. She didn't turn to wave once. No tears in her eyes. No apple in her throat. And this old town was reverting back to grey. And not grey with a silver lining. Grey fading to black.

'I haven't smoked weed in years. I thought it might... It didn't. Plus I needed a deuce. I couldn't face going inside. So I came here. And now here we are. At *The Dog and Biscuit*.

'So I dressed up.'

He paired the immaculate black suit with a bold red tie and a light grey fedora with a black band.

He dressed not as he was, but as he wanted to be: an elegant gentleman of experience. Once again he would harbour the Real to its moorings and launch himself into the seas of moon skewed romance to conquer Unrequited Love in the only way he knew – through meaningless sex with a female of bohemian morals – a lady mirror of himself. He picked out the pale grey raincoat and a black umbrella, and so armed stepped out into the deluge.

'Then I came here and had a shit.'

49 All Together Now, Part 3

Hamish Tush was sitting on the crack between the two cushions of a chesterfield, flanked by Olive Montgomery and Doreen Slater. Alban Besnik was perched opposite.

Hamish had just bought a round of drinks using stolen money.

I prefer Walter Jamieson's objective view to Hamish's queasy rendition of what happened.

'It was well funny. First they biffed him. Then they pinned him down. I never realised they were so prepared, but out comes the gaffer tape. Over his mouth and all the way round his head it goes. Then Dave comes, like a fucking brontosaurus. Stands right over Hamish, and drops his trackie bottoms and his undies. He's got a well spotty arse. He sits on Hamish's chest. How Hamish kept breathing I'll never know. Then he gets his feet, and sort of locks Hamish's head in place between them. Then he starts moving his arse backwards towards Hamish's face. Phil's doing commentary. The night before Dave had only gone and had his mum's vinda for dinner. From where I was, all I could see was the top of Hamish's head and looming over it, Dave's arse. I imagine that unless Dave has the tiniest cock on the planet that his dick must have been poking Hamish in the eyes. Which is a bit traumatic, innit?'

Doreen patted Hamish's knee. 'Bet I've had worse.'

'Dave's got like really massive hands with mega short fingers. They come reaching round the side of his arse cheeks and pull them apart. I've gotta admit, I was struggling to be a witness to history by this point. But can you imagine looking up and seeing grubby fingers clutching two spotty planets, and this black hole, well brown, all spiky with sea urchin pubes poking out at you, and the brown hole twitching and releasing its death miasma? Fuck. It does my head in just thinking about it. Not that Hamish didn't deserve

it. And Phil was well hilarious. He starts lecturing. Going on about the meaning of sharing. Then I hear it, like my neighbour working on his XR3i, boom-boom-boom, and it pops into life. Then a rasp, and a gargle as it fucking loses power again. From Hamish's reaction, I'll wager Dave's mum's vindaloo was made with paint stripper and cat shit. Even I'm thinking this is a bit much. Then comes the what do you call it? The finale. Dave sat on his face, I swear, sphincter to nose. And he sits up, raises his arms, and you see his back go all tense, then pop-pop-pop, trills of fart just squeaking and bubbling. I don't know how Hamish survived.'

Thus began the Torture of Hamish Tush.

When William Motion arrived at *The Dog and Biscuit*, it was jammed with hippy chicks. The thunder cracked and echoed. Lightning flashed at the windows. The rain would keep the herd indoors, and the booze make them happy. So would hash.

William told Hamish:

'You know *The Dog and Biscuit*, I figured that in one of its nooks and crannies I'd roll a spliff for a bird called Dolphin Angel. We'd sneak out to the garden, and smoke it under the awning on the way to my bedroom.'

Hippies, as ardent individuals, live for consensual agreement.

'I was going to do the old, you say, I say. What could be better? Harmony with the hippies. I was dressed nice. You know how people who hate money are

always hypocritical about it. They can't stand it until they get a sniff of it. I made sure I was smelling of money. You know how it is, when the worst thing about you is the best thing – women love that stuff...'

He slipped out of his raincoat and hat, stashing them with his umbrella on a spare hook by the door, and slid up to a dreamy chick. I ghosted in behind, interested in how this strange little man had developed such a legend in the way of wooing hearts.

'Weather control. Pretty far out, huh?'

He was about to tell her he'd spent the last week sitting on Motson beach trying to wilfully form a tidal wave that would rip across the ocean and take out the capitalist swine of New York City.

But she said: 'He's a fascist. Clouds have as much right to be here as we do.'

'Absolutely.'

'I hate all forms of control.'

'Wild,' said William, with an approving nod.

'You're a control freak, aren't you?'

'I am?'

'Control freaks never know they're doing it. See how you're asking me questions now? See how you've shaved your head? Trying to control the conversation. Trying to control your mind space. Trying to force me into a' – she finger quoted – "'box" of your choosing.'

'A what?'

'And again, another question. What's your name?'

'William.'

'The name of kings. Typical patrician control freak. You can't help it though. It's written in your name. Change your name, change your life, man. Come and see me then. I could help you.'

To be fair to William, she were no Dolphin Angel.

After a little trial and error, you learn just how to tilt the recorder to pick up the clearest sound. *C3* recorded Hamish boasting to the girls.

Hamish said, 'They called the next one Si's Surprise. It's a joke. See, Phil organises Fight Night, and Si runs the book. He learnt from his da, who's in the game, and though Si's nay the brightest, the business switches click. The gist is: I ruined their book, so they're gonna ruin my books. Remember Walter said about revising? Cute, eh? When they'd first got hold of me, and given me a shooing, I hadnae really noticed them taking my rucksack. But next thing I know, Si's tipping all my books into that muddy pond and stirring them about with a stick.'

'And?' said Doreen.

'Just 'cos you're thick,' said Olive.

'You can talk,' said Doreen.

'Ladies, please,' said Hamish.

He'd stared in horror at the countless hours of ruined work. The only thing that might help him escape Motson and shape a life for himself, the pages that lay tattered and torn, the ink bleeding and blotted, were in as many pieces as his mind.

'They saved the best 'til last,' he said. 'You know when you do something really wrong and you say, "So and so'll kill me." Well, when I say, Phil Rutter

nearly killed me, I mean, I'd have died this afternoon, except for one thing: the power of disgust.'

I've been asked via the email why I didn't keep a closer eye on Arnold Charger that day. What a daft question. It were because there were nothing going on with Arnold. Why would I be keeping dibs on an innocent man when creating a testimony of sin. However, just to show the contrast between truth and jealousy, I present to you what they said.

First, Steven Little:

'I saw him. Wounded puppy. At the bar. Next to Maureen. Soul brother.'

Then Dempster Shadaws:

'He was banging Maureen, end of.'

It's true that he were already in the pub and so were Maureen before the invasion of the hippies.

Steven said:

'Big act. Look authoritative yet relaxed. Tormented yet strong.'

Dempster had it:

'When Maureen had buggered off to confab with Jamie in the bathroom, he got lonely. He gets lonely real quick.'

That was their explanation for him approaching Hamish, Alban, Olive and Doreen.

Alban said:

'I give him the wink. Like I am spy. I know silence. He tell us joke. Not funny. About a lady lion

tamer and her pussy and Tuesdays.'

Walter said:

'It was well funny. Bit over the top. But brilliant. Dave and Si, right, pin Hamish down. And Phil's waggling this bottle of washing up liquid in Hamish's face. He's going on about how it's double strength. Really builds it up. It's as close to glue as soap can get. Then he pops the top, turns it upside down, and points it at Hamish's head. At the same time, the cruel fucker, Phil's just gently kicking right in the middle of Hamish's skull, that soft spot right at the top. I thought that was a nice touch that. It must have been well annoying. The soap then starts pouring into Hamish's hair. And Phil's moving the bottle about a bit. I couldn't help it. I had to get closer. No one noticed me.

'I sneak up and am hiding behind that little, it looks like a turfed over ant hill or something. And there I can see Phil's getting it over Hamish's forehead now. I'm thinking fuck that's gonna sting his eyes. But I guess Hamish must have closed them. And I can see Phil's working methodically. He's moving south, down over his face, into his eyes and ears and then over his nose. It was a really grim facial. All over his lips, dribbling down his chin. Phil's a bit of an artist about it. He's really careful, making sure he's pouring it over Hamish's throat, so it's gonna run across his body as soon as he stands up. I mean, it's brutal, but it's funny. The three of them are giggling. And I couldn't help it.

'But then it got a bit weird. Phil bent down, you

know, on one knee and he leans over and whispers in Hamish's ear. I didn't know what he said. But it must have been good because Hamish went bat shit. He starts bucking and twitching like he's on the electric. Then I had to duck because Phil goes round the front of Hamish, and he's facing me now. Next time I take a peek over the little mound, I can see Phil sitting astride Hamish with his knees right on his shoulders. Then he puts the nozzle of the bottle right up Hamish's nose, and he starts squeezing hard.'

Hamish described the feeling to his floozies:

'I'm losing consciousness. But I need to breathe, so I try and snort out, but I cannae. I have to inhale. And then the soap...'

Walter said: 'I felt a bit sorry for him when he breathed in.'

'A fiery pang shoots up into my brain, like an injection of acid. And when the soap touches the back of my throat, I start retching.'

'You should have seen his stomach,' said Walter, 'the spasms.'

'I vomited in my own mouth. It was so disgusting I vomited again. I know my rock star history. I know what's happening. I'm about to choke on my own vomit. It's about to run down into my oesophagus and drown me.'

'I felt a bit bad for his mum,' said Walter.

CI were in the Tardis. I asked someone I know very well whether this should go to prosecution. Unfortunately, as no crime had been committed, the idea

was scratched.

Steven said: 'Jamie grabs Dempster. She insists. Communicate now! Dempster in bits. Busiest day since New Year! She grabs me. I know the bar. Twenty minute contract. Four pints, man. And they go!'

'I've got a question, Demps. How do this lot know about our plans?'

'Your plans.'

'That's hurtful. You wanted to. It's just your weak stomach got in the way. She's a surplus requirement -'

'Karl Marx now?'

'Mr. Lee, actually. You're evading.'

'Don't got a clue.'

'Really?'

'I ain't even.'

'Then it's a mystery,' said Jamie. 'I've gotta tell you something.'

'Yeah, like why you were standing around the garden dressed as a tree holding my rifle.'

'Cos I was gonna shoot Graunty.'

Pause.

'With an air rifle? With my -'

'I was gonna throw it away afterwards -'

'Throw away my beloved -'

'No evidence. Bosh out back. Take everything to

landfill. Proper gangland stuff.'

'It's a characteristic of paid hits,' said Dempster, 'using an air rifle.'

'I practised on the dartboard. I could hit the bull every time. I was gonna shoot her in the temple.'

'Do you not think,' said Dempster, 'that a cop or a coroner might notice she'd been shot by an air rifle?'

'But proof? If there's no weapon. They'd think someone had stolen yours.' She said, 'But then I couldn't do it, anyway. I couldn't bring myself to. I'm not the woman I thought I was.'

'It must be very disappointing to know you're not a psychopath.'

'Dempster, don't. But yes, perhaps I don't have the killer instinct of a successful business woman. That's not all. Demps, love...'

As if her confession of the heinous truth weren't enough, she now confounded that with more sickening slander.

SHE LAID HER HANDS OVER HIS, SQUEEZED THEM AT THE KNUCKLES.

'I've got a confession to make.'

I knew C3 were taking care of business for me, so I weren't too worried about getting close, but in passing I noticed Arnold were now sitting down amongst the group. He looks so sweet when he's concerned. His head tilts like that of a faithful dog.

'I was puking out of my nose when the idea came to

me,' said Hamish. 'A vision.'

'Well, they're laughing so much,' said Walter, 'that they've left Hamish's head a bit free, and he lifts it up.'

'I squeezed my cheeks in, compressed my lips, and aimed straight ahead.'

'It was well out of order,' said Walter.

'Twin parabolas of puke,' said Hamish, 'shoot out of my nose, and hit Phil in his chest.'

'It was proper Gizmo. Hamish is well grim. But he doesn't stop. He turns his head towards Dave. Si's pointing and laughing at him. Dave gets it on his arms. He rolls over like a bear. And Hamish starts punching Si. He's quick. He doesn't get puked on. Next thing Hamish's up and tearing the gaffer tape off his mouth. Then it all comes out. He was a proper mess. Coughing and gasping and retching, like some disgusting old geezer living under a bridge.'

'Good stuff,' said Arnold. 'Gotta shoot.'

The next woman William approached was a pretty redhead. She was sunburnt and ripe, with lips embalmed in red glue. She was telling her friend how Buddhism was helping her see through appearances.

'All this is just an illusion.'

'So, what's real?' said her friend.

'Nothing's real.'

'And all's temporary,' said William, doffing the hat he remembered he wasn't wearing.

The pretty redhead looked at him, meaning in her eyes.

He swelled.

'Too right,' she said. 'See ya.'

He deflated.

Walter recalled: 'Phil's like well-miffed, because it was out of order. It's all over his Sergio - two lines of puke. Hamish is a mess. He's retching and puking and gasping. Si offers him a fag. And Phil think that's double-funny, that's what he says, and it was funny. 'Do you want a fag, mate?' Hamish's like clawing at his eyes with his fingertips, and puking, then flicking his hands down trying to throw off the soap, and spitting and trying to breathe and making these noises - fuck. He's trying to clear out his nose. Then he's tucking his hands inside his T-shirt, and using that to rub at his eyes. Then he has to stop because he's puking again. And at the same time, he's staggering across the field towards the pond. He looked like a zombie in pain. And you know how as the ground goes down into the pond, he just collapses there and crawls on his hands and knees into the dirty water. He cups his hands in that water, and it looks rank, and he's splashing it on his face. Then I guess he opened his eyes.'

Hamish described the pain to his girls: 'It stung, and it burnt, and it ached to the back of my skull.'

'And we can see him blinking. The lads know I'm there by now. My cover's blown, but none of us care, we're all laughing too much by this point. Hamish is blinking, his eyelids going like butterfly's wings, and

he's just spraying tears - just pump-pump-pumping them out. Jets. And he looks such a mess. Dirty water and soap and bubbles.'

'Everything's a blur,' said Hamish.

'He's splashing water like a mad man. On his knees in the middle of the pond. We were pissing ourselves.'

'The mud and grit kills,' said Hamish. 'I can feel it scratching against my eyeballs, and I think that I'm blinding myself permanently even as I'm trying to get my eyesight back, trying to wash.'

'And this was brilliant. He starts finding his books, and throwing them out of the pond, like he thinks that gonna help.'

'Even Dave tried to say something funny. He said that Hamish looked like a baby in a bubble bath. It was quite funny, 'cos he did. But I think that's what got him in trouble, that that pissed Hamish off.'

William told Hamish:

'I don't think Arnold was banging Maureen, just trying to.'

Hamish said: 'I saw him leaning against the wall and tilting his glass at her. I think he was trying to look cool. She chinked it.'

'He had one eye on William,' said Steven. 'He loved seeing him strike out.'

C2 stuck by the bar picked up the following snatches:

Arnold: 'So, then, here we are. Kind of the place

to be today.'

Maureen: 'You're getting right into your whisky, aren't you?'

'I am. Actually, I've got a bottle of *Royal Joust Purple Knight* in the *Mitsubishi*. Cost 17,000 Liberian dollars.'

'A bottle of PK,' said Maureen.

This polite, informative type of chat is what gets turned into salacious gossip by the rumour mill of his dirty town. Witness:

'He suggested,' said Steven, 'that they take it back to her place.'

Now, admittedly C2 picked up one of the hippies ordering a drink, but there were no suggestion any such exchange as Steven suggests took place.

Didn't stop Anonymous:

ARNOLD TUMESCED. THIS WAS *IT*. HE WAS GOING TO GET WHAT HE WAS OWED.

It's true she were flirting. But Arnold can't help that.

She bit her bottom lip and undid yet another button on her low cut cardie. She cocked her head, batted her lashes, and sly smiled as she ran her fingers through her frizzy hair. Then she swirled the last of her whisky in the bottom of the tumbler, downed it and demanded more.

Hamish would later recall to William in the public convenience:

'For the first time in my life, I really felt like I got it. Like I knew that night I could just up and away from the girls, excuse myself, have something to do, and they'd dig it. And they did. See, even as I was

entertaining, I was seeing it all. Mr. Charger's expansive way of talking with Ms. Appleyard, he was flirting. And when Ms. Appleyard moves, Lady Shadaws following her. I see them head down the Corridor of Secrets. And Lady Shadaws doesnae give a fuck. Customers complaining. Mr. Shadaws going nuts. I figured it had to be sex. But when I finally open the door of the Tardis: nothing. Well, except Olive and Doreen waiting at the end of the corridor for me!'

William removed his tie, and put it in the pocket of his coat. Then he leaned against the bar and observed Olive and Doreen's intrigue as Hamish rejoined them from the Corridor of Secrets. Thrusting back his shoulders, Hamish crotch humped the bar. Drinks arrived. William sidled up next to him.

'Well, well, well,' said Hamish. 'Look what the rat dragged in. Just don't come gaying me out now. I'm nay in the mood. And I just took out the three most dangerous boys in Motson. Stay away.'

'I will once you've finished your work.'

Hamish eyeballed him.

William said, 'Don't forget to hand out the cards.'

'Eh?'

William shrugged. 'You can lead a horse to water...'

Hamish shook his head. William and I watched him disappear in the direction of the chesterfields, and Olive and Doreen scamper after him.

'I liked it on the mound, so I sat there,' said Walter. By Phil, Dave and Si, they're sitting on the sty. Phil's filming Hamish.'

'There's a buzz in the air,' said Hamish. 'The wind's picking up. The clouds are going radge. I tell them I'm gonna make it rain. Give them something to laugh about while I got to grips with the pain. But at the same time I do feel connected with the storm.'

'Phil's calling him over,' said Walter, 'because, you know, Phil doesn't like to go to other people, he likes them to come to him. Like Hugh Hefner, it's cool, right? Then Hamish points at Si.'

Hamish said: 'He bowls up, looking ridiculous, making little circles with his shoulders, trying to swagger, and then he leers over me, gets right in my face.'

'We saw this,' said Olive.

'I loved this bit,' said Doreen. 'You grabbed him by the ears, and yanked his head -'

'Filled his face with your kneecap.'

'His nose. The pop,' said Alban. 'The scream. Beautiful.'

'It were justice,' said Olive.

Hamish told William:

'It all happened in slow mo. There was this time when I was a kid, when I'd deliberately crushed a snail under my foot. Slowly and deliberately. And then I'd felt sick afterwards. I really regretted it. Well, the sound and the feeling of Si's nose breaking against my kneecap, it was the same crunch and pop. But nay remorse.'

Hamish revelled in his super animal senses. Phil and Dave

popped upright. Hamish knew they wanted to run. He knew their fear. He was their fear.

I don't know what William were trying to do in his third attempted seduction, but I figure it must have been tailor-made for his audience of hippies. He seemed to be scanning the room. I were following his eyes, trying to ascertain who he were looking at. When he stopped and stared, I could see what girl he were after,

She were dancing. Lank-haired and wide across the cheekbones, looking like she'd fallen through a wormhole from Woodstock. Her body swayed gently from side to side, all wriggling arms and lively fingers. She had here eyes closed, and a faint half-smile like she were advertising the ultimate chill. She looked like a right soppy mare, a proper Dolphin Angel.

I didn't know what William were up to though. To me he looked like a robot analysing data. However, I got invites to speak at seminars for sad sacks, and a whole new following of online perverts by describing it as follows:

The magnetic stare worked by silently alluring the quarry's attention, so that she was caught in the predator's mystifying gaze, and with a shudder in her death glands, longed for the cure. Sex would fire through the synapses, forcing her to look away – shocked at herself and intrigued – as she flushed with oestrogen. At which point the dapper man-of-action approached and said something – not funny – but indelibly smooth.

Only thing were, Dolphin Angel were lost in the groove and motion of her own fantasy shoot for vaginal douches or whatever, and didn't open her eyes.

I could see him taking it all in. A cleavage you could launch a ship from. The exposed mid-riff. The exhibitionism.

On she danced.

On he stared.

She danced.

He stared.

The song ended.

She turned, and stretching to tiptoes, retrieved a half of cider from the top of the fruit machine.

He continued to stare as she downed it.

I was wondering why he didn't just go over and talk to her.

The a tall, old dude who looked like he'd been crying harrumphed over to her and went for a peck that she turned into a snog by hooking her hand round the back of his neck.

Women in love were immune to the magnetic stare.

'He only goes and calls out Dave,' said Walter.
'Ballsy move.'

'Si's still whimpering,' said Hamish. 'I'm feeling evil. I'm enjoying it. I'm not at all afraid of Dave. I know it's just a question of tricking him. I've done it before. I tell him, "Bet you can't do this, fat boy," and I do half a star-jump, so my feet are apart.'

'I saw this,' said Olive. 'He did the same.'

'Then you knacked him,' said Doreen. 'Like a footballer.'

'You got him in the big balls,' said Alban.

'He rolled onto his back,' said Doreen, and waggled his legs like a dog.

The cider burned in William's stomach and made him taller.
Between it and the THC, he felt complete.

Funky pop music played. I noted down the lyrics:

The flowers pulled at their roots in the dirt

Turned their heads up high

Like girls in a disco

They looked for the star

I trailed as he approached a dark brunette and struck up a casual conversation in which she expressed her disgust at material society. He nodded his agreement and explained that he lived in a garden shed out the back of an abandoned house because houses, in fact, bricks and mortar themselves, were just a fascist construct built upon the slavery system of a feudal society masquerading as capitalist democracy.

When she turned round rogue-eyed, he knew he had her.

'So true,' she said.

'Right on.'

'I just can't believe that someone who understands the system so well could be such a hypocrite.'

'I dropped out,' said William.

'You still live on land designated as a residential area. You're stuck in the system.'

'I'm way out.'

'Do you still get post?'

He shrugged.

'Sad,' she said. 'Just sad.'

If there's trouble to be had, you can be sure that William Motion will find it. I was following him, so until he arrived, as no *Casios* was within range, all we have are tawdry rumours.

Steven said: 'Me? Twenty minute extension to my contract. Eight pints! Demps and Jamie come back. Demps in rage. He pins Arnold to wall. Forearm to throat. Balls in hand. Arnold's face full of fury spit. Said he went behind back. Said he refused. Said he took it all back. Said Arnie done it anyway. Goddamn animal! She was vulnerable. You took advantage.'

Maureen produced the following account. 'Arnold had the audacity to claim it was for the greater good, like he'd know what that means. Jamie said he does it "as if the object of his affections repulses him." Her words. He pins her down, looms over her and pulls an Edvard Munch.'

Anonymous got in here, too:

IT WAS UNBEARABLE. MANY TIMES HAD DEMPSTER BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED BY HIS WIFE, BUT FOR HIS BEST FRIEND TO TAKE SO LITTLE PLEASURE IN THE ACT... HOW DARE ARNOLD HAVE AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS WHILE SCREWING JAMIE. HE ROTATED SIDEWAYS, READY TO IMPLANT ARNOLD'S HEAD THROUGH THE PLASTERBOARD WALL WHEN A VOICE WHISPERED IN HIS EAR.

I hid in the shadow of the toilet door and kept very still.

'Now, now, Lord Shadaws. You can't do that in your own pub, old boy.'

'Dubya?' Dempster turned. 'Why not? Give me one good reason...'

'Because you're the landlord. It doesn't do beating up the punters.'

‘This is different.’

‘You can drag him to the door and fling him thither,’ said William, ‘but you can’t physically mutilate him on the premises –’

‘Why not?’

‘And hope to keep your licence.’

‘But he –’

‘A duel,’ said William.

‘A duel?’ said Arnold, blanching.

‘‘I’m lightning,’ says Phil. ‘And I’m Thor,’ says I. Corny, eh?’

‘Cool,’ said Doreen. ‘Were you going for his chin?’

‘Nah,’ said Olive. ‘You were aiming for his throat, weren’t you?’

‘The way he staggered backwards, clutching the sides of his neck –’

‘Gargling,’ said Hamish.

‘Trying to pop his voice box back out,’ said Olive.

‘He was purple,’ said Doreen.

‘The kick in the balls,’ said Alban. ‘Beautiful.’

‘The knee in the face.’

‘Game over.’

‘And that’s when it really started pissing down,’

said Olive. 'And you threw your hands in the air. Looking down at the carnage.'

'Did you film them?' said Doreen.

Hamish nodded. 'I stole their phones. And all their money. We're drinking on them. A toast. To the defeated.'

'To the defeated,' they all said.

The world was still like a Monet painting.

'That's when I saw youse lot coming over.'

He waved.

Alban gave him a thumbs up.

Olive and Doreen were hand in hand.

The rain saturated them all in seconds.

Hamish sniffed the air, closed his eyes, and rubbed his face. The spring rain washed away the sweet, lemon tang of the soap, and left behind a hard, fresh scent. Yet on the breeze he'd detected another smell: the musky stench of mating. His cock tingled.

'Hamish Farquar Kentigern Tush, is that you?'

The dreaded voice thundered.

It seemed a switch had clicked in William's head. His next target were significantly less attractive. To my eye, she looked bored and tipsy and like she'd had an accident at the hairdresser's. She had pretty eyes, like a baby seal just before it gets clubbed. But she had a skeletal nose that offered a clear view up the nostrils and what must have been an enormous set of gums and teeth that stretched

her mouth out of all proportion to her jaw. She was leaning against the fag machine, one arm raised to display a hairy armpit.

He sauntered up. 'Now, you're one natural woman,' he said, tilting his head the opposite way to hers.

She said, 'You're cute.'

He said, 'I'm William Motion.'

'You're funny.'

'And I bet you're fun.'

'I'm Katie. I love storms.'

He told her he loved it when his whole world was wet, and everything was going off with a bang.

When that worked, my jaw dropped.

They flirted some more, started touching each other lightly, then decided to be alone. They went to the Tardis.

I hung out at the end of the Corridor of Secrets. He'd later report to Hamish:

'We were necking and fondling, when she broke away, telling me she was desperate to see my cottage, but had to go to the loo first. I waited, lost in fantasy. And I waited. And waited.'

He exited the Tardis. Waited outside the loo.

Ladies came and went.

He finally asked a pink-haired girl if she could check for a Katie.

A moment later, the pink hair flashed past him shouting: 'There's a girl died on the toilet.'

I'd sensed that events were building to a crescendo in Hamish's corner, so I perched myself by the coat rack and witnessed the finale:

Hamish pretended not to hear.

It was hopeless. His father lingered, pie-eyed immune to hints.

'Aye, da. It's me.'

'And what son, are ya doin'?''

'Just having a drink with some friends, da.'

'Ya look like ya've been in the wars.'

'Aye, da. I had a fight.'

'Ya got twatted again?'

'No,' said Hamish, straightening an invisible necktie. 'I was in a fight.'

'A proper fight?' said his father.

'Aye.'

'He beat up three lads,' said Olive. 'All by himself. We saw it.'

'There were three of them?'

'He beat the shit out of them,' said Doreen.

Nigel's face transmogrified. Dormant muscles awoke. His cheeks conspired against gravity and his mouth lifted in a smile. The nose wrinkled. The eyes creased. 'You beat up three Englishmen on your tod?' he said, pride dripping out of his eyes. 'Beat the shite –'

William Motion crashed out of the back bar and bumped into Nigel.

Hamish, Olive and Doreen all gave him the critical eye.

Nigel put his mouth in William's ear and shout-whispered so that everyone could hear: 'My son. He had a fight. He's straight now. Got it? And he's taking

your birds. Outside, there's an uplifting storm after endless days of depressing sunshine. This, Willy, is the most perfect day God ever created. Son,' he called out, 'I'll be seeing ya. Have a good time. There'll be drinks behind the bar.' His father let go of William and disappeared into the throng of the pub, shouting. 'My son's been fighting. He twatted the sperm out of three of youse lot. 'Cos youse all's shite.'

The degenerate Anonymous composes an improvised and atonal jam that typifies the mood music of Motson rumour:

ARNOLD STOOD UNDER THE AWNING OF *THE DOG AND BISCUIT*, AND IN A DAZE, PONDERED THE MEANING OF THE POURING RAIN. HE ASKED HIMSELF WHERE IT'D ALL GONE WRONG. HALF AN HOUR AGO, HE WAS ON A PROMISE. THEN MAUREEN HAD DISAPPEARED INTO THE LOO. WHEN SHE'D COME OUT FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, ALL WAS OFF. NO EXPLANATION. EXCEPT THE OBVIOUS. SHE'D HAD SUCH A HORRIFIC SHIT, IT'D PUT HER OFF SEX.

'I saw him out of the window,' said Steven. 'Flash of sheet lightning. Short pause. Thunderclap! Mother bounces on the spot.'

THINGS HAD GOT WORSE.

The rumour mill swirled. The general consenses lit upon the following: Jamie had told Dempster about everything.

TALK ABOUT SELFISH. TALK ABOUT EXAGGERATION.

All he'd got was two lousy shags and an extended penis eulogy. He'd almost got battered by Dempster, then by a mob of hippies when he'd tried to save himself by pointing out that Jamie had been planning on

killing the Dodo.

'I went outside,' said Steven. 'I said 'Hi'. No acknowledgment. Arnold muttering to himself. Then he turned. He looked at me. But not like I'm me. Like I could be anybody. Man wanted to say something. Man wanted an ear. You know what he say? 'Truth goes nowhere.'

'Then lightning! Dinner time! Fork. Tiny pause. And bang. I swear. Arnold's beer belly. Palpitate!'

TO CAP OFF A RECTUM OF AN AFTERNOON, WILLIAM MOTION HAD TAKEN A FLOOZY INTO THE TARDIS.

FUCK MUFFINS.

'I looked out. Car park vista. Streak of Z lightning flashes. Strikes Arnold's *Mitsubishi*. Thunder smacks like tidal wind. I was deaf. I look at Arnold. I swear he shit himself. He stares agog. Water vapour steaming from the roof of that car.'

THE RAIN SILVERED. ALL SILENT NOW. MESMERISED, ARNOLD COULDN'T BRING HIMSELF TO APPROACH HIS BEAUTIFUL *MITSUBISHI*. IT WAS FUCKED.

'I go in, and we all know what happened next.'

The rumour is clearly the product of a degenerate imagination. However, that Arnold was temporarily deaf, I ascertained that myself that same evening, and in so much, it make the following highly unlikely.

A woman smoking a roll-up stepped out next to him. So, she's desperate. She claims he said: 'If I give you enough money, will you suck me off?' She slapped him. She was outraged. She flung open the door, and bolted into the pub and told everyone.

What a disgusting woman. It had been all I could do not to give her a piece of my mind that night. But I were keeping cover.

Alban, the dope smoking spy in the employ of William Motion, fabricated the following eye witness account:

'I see him run. He go cash point. He look white, white-white. Looking behind. Looking behind. His money is wet before in pocket. He goes to bus stop.'

Then, of course, the Internet takes over with this gem from Anonymous (who claims to know someone who knows someone):

NEVER HAD A MAN MORE NEEDED A BLOW JOB. HE'D LEARNT HIS LESSON. THIS WAS NO TIME FOR UNGRATEFUL AMATEURS. HE WAS GOING PRO. WITH A TROUSER BULGE OF CASH AND NO CHANCE OF A TAXI, HE'D CATCH THE NEXT BUS TO THE DOCKS. HUDDLE DOWN BELOW THE RIM OF HIS COLLAR. KNOCK ON THE DOOR OF A BOARDED UP MASSAGE PARLOUR.

Hamish liked Alban but was relieved when he declined another pint and went home. In the lull of conversation, he remembered there was something in his inside pocket, a package that had been delivered to his house earlier that day.

He took out a metal case, but before he could open it, Doreen had snatched it off him.

'What's this then?' she said, opening it. 'Business cards? For a lad your age?'

'Internet entrepreneur,' said Olive. 'They get younger and younger.'

Hamish had no idea what the cards said. He was about to explain himself, and how he had no idea where they had come from, when Doreen started reading:

‘The Deep Probe Detective Agency.’

‘Satisfaction Division,’ said Olive.

Hamish, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks, quaffed at his *Purgatory*.

‘Privates Investigator. Hamish Tush.’

He couldn’t help himself. He snickered, and took a peek over his pint glass.

The girls were looking at each other, measuring their response.

He surveyed the suspects keenly.

Doreen was pouting, a glimmer of something Hamish couldn’t recognise lit her eyes. Olive gave the tiniest nod in answer. They smiled at each other.

They looked at Hamish and giggled.

William faced the seducer’s most dreaded dilemma: to go home alone or to take home a munter.

He scanned the main bar.

He was looking for a zero: fat, rough and fresh from the trough.

He approached her from behind. She were a broad broad, and wore a bun in her hair, a black open back top, and a pink miniskirt. She had a smudged tattoo on the back of her neck, a pinch of fat running down her spine, and legs filled with porridge.

William sauntered casually through the throng of activity as if drawn by an invisible thread.

He prayed she was young.

She turned and his heart swelled with angina.

She were middle-aged and drinking something purple and sucking on a fag. The boils across her chest glistened under the light.

He imagined their bellies together. This was America. She was vast, powerful, dangerous, a melting pot of acidic activity. He imagined her on the toilet, straining, her boils popping, still in high heels, eating a burger.

He were lost in the wonder of his ability to convince himself of anything when he noticed she were ogling him. He moved his eyes up her body, past the cavernous overbite of her mouth and found himself staring into goggling eyes that were gaping at him with hatred and violence and hope.

50 Redemption

It were a lock-in. Very exclusive. And the only reason I were still there were because no one had noticed me to kick me out. Of the regulars who'd ordinarily have been there, Maureen had gone home early and Arnold hadn't been informed and so had left of his own accord. I pieced the following confession of moral delinquency together through some lip reading, note taking, time checking and cross-referencing with the admittedly imperfect audio recording. Per usual, gaps filled in by the grapevine are the least reliable testimony of all.

From the punters' side of the bar, Dempster were wiping dregs from the countertop. The recording didn't pick up what he said beyond the name Maureen. Then Jamie pushed out a double Courvoisier from the optics, saluted him with the glass, and downed it.

Steven Little reckoned he had a theory:

'She wanted him to have an affair with Maureen. Nasty!'

Dempster thought about their triumphant night. Filled with irony and wonder. In their respective botches, he to control the weather, Jamie to kill Graunty, they'd created between them the perfect conditions for business success. As the storm had raged on outside, the excited punters had emptied their pockets in tribute to grand failure. But with Jamie having ideas again, the emptiness of the pub filled with claustrophobia.

'Call it even stevens,' said Steven.

She sipped the brandy.

'Her cheat plus his cheat. Equality.'

She twirled on an unsteady heel, an evangelical glow illuminating her eyes.

'Ying and yang, in't it?'

'Mr. Lee,' said Dempster.

Jamie smiled.

'Having a gin?'

'Why not?'

She fetched a glass, iced it, and went to the optic.

'Bitter lemon.'

He hung the bar towel over the neck of a tap.

JAMIE BENT OVER TO REACH INTO THE FRIDGE, FILLING HIM WITH FORGIVENESS.

'It's mental,' said Jamie. 'My "affair", which was more of an accident, will stay in your head, and do your head in, until you decide to get even. I can't live with you like that. I can't forgive you for forgiving me until you've had your own back.'

'Why do you have to forgive me for forgiving you?'

'Because my wrong was your fault.'

Dempster had already accepted he was to blame.

They moved away from C2 and chatted some more. When I picked them up again, Dempster were in the middle of a speech:

'Forgive me. Like I forgive you. And let's go to bed and make like husband and wife, and put all this behind us. Let's accept the weather the way it is, and each other the way we are. Let's accept and make sweet love and celebrate this glorious night of profit. We ran a real pub tonight. And it wasn't New Year. So, let's be happy.'

Dempster was impressed with himself. His sexual desire had activated oration. A clear message. Repeated key phrases. A thumping delivery. Roll over JFK.

She shook her finger at him, refilled the brandy.

'And anyway,' said Dempster, brightening, 'what makes you think Maureen's gonna go for an affair with me? It takes two to tango.'

'Women's intuition. I sewed a seed,' said Jamie.

She stroked the back of her head.

'Let's just say that a hippy guerrilla earth mother, me, attuned to the vibrations of the cosmic life cycle, knows when a man's influence, *his*, and his crap shagging, has had her entertaining things in an unseemly way. It wasn't right me trying to gas D to death. It wasn't fair. She deserved to be taken out proper. To step into the kill zone, and get shot. But, I couldn't do it. It was the right way to do things

though. Sounds daft, but I'd never have known that without dumping him. I had to dump him. I couldn't kill her.' Her eyes watered over. 'Because of you.' She stepped forward and patted her chest. 'Because my heart's too full of love.'

'I think,' said Dempster, 'I'm gonna need another.' He downed his bitter lemon and gin. Slid the glass across the bar.

They both said, 'You should have the annex.'

They laughed together, the first time in a while. That argument was going to be fun.

Dempster knew better than to have it now.

'Any road,' said Jamie. 'I've seen her looking at you.'

'She likes me?'

'Flattered, eh? I know she does. So, defend my honour. Redeem us both.' She leaned over the bar and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Poke her.'

'Now?'

'Tomorrow morning. She's likes it in the morning. It means we'll have to wait, too. Serve us right.'

'I'm just supposed to turn up...'

'Trust me.'

Dempster could see she was serious. Her logic baffled him. From the concept of heterosexual women indulging in alcohol fuelled lesbian beauty sessions through the theory of involuntary euthanasia to the idea of honour through adultery, it altogether took the cake, ate it, shitted it out, then remade it, and sold it in a gourmet restaurant. He asked himself if he really didn't want to

screw Maureen Appleyard. And no he didn't.

He pointed at his glass. Jamie made him another.

'No more than a minute. She's not to have fun. Wear a condom. But next time I see her, she'd better have pink-eye. And don't stick around. No cuddling. No chit-chat. You get straight back to me, thinking dirty all the way. Have a shower. Then bang me 'til I'm yelping like a puppy. And we'll be straight.' She lit another cigarette, the spiritual gleam back in her eyes. 'You'll feel better afterwards. Because you shag her and you reward us both. You take revenge on me and him for sleeping together. I get revenge on you, for you asking him to shag me, because you'll have to have shagged that minger. And it's revenge for both of us on that bastard because you'll have shagged his mistress when he couldn't. He'll be furious. Do his ego right in. It's a wicked plan.'

51 Maureen's Appleyard

Well, finally, some truth came out of the mouths of them inveterate liars. Of course, I were there from early the next morning. Dempster had been round to see Maureen. I'd hidden myself behind the wheelie bins, as I'd wanted to catch any departing chit-chat, but there were none of that. Instead there were another surprise. Just as Dempster were leaving, William arrived.

'Eh, Captain.'

Dempster gave a startled jump.

'What you doing at Maureen's?'

'I just came,' said Dempster, 'to give her something from Jamie.'

William nodded.

‘Gotta go,’ said Dempster, and did so.

William knocked on Maureen’s door.

William knew there was only one chance of avoiding prolonged despair. Inspired by Hamish’s transformation from hapless virgin to man of great experience, he decided to return to his early tutor of love. The way he’d squirted and solidified time after time, William had thought he’d never run out. Maureen’s cavities had given him confidence. He’d gone from débutante to world renowned playboy in a few hours... He supposed Hamish was now bathing in the youthful bliss of knowing everything.

Maureen answered with a pout, and one blinking bloodshot eye. ‘William. Always a pleasure. Come on in. Tea, I take it?’

‘No, not tea,’ said William, taking her by the hand and turning her round.

Her blouse was already halfway undone.

Good old Maureen, always moist and ready.

One of his hands slipped round the back of her skirt and fondled a buttock, the other cupped the back of her head and pulled her to him. This would do the job. Return the mojo. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth. The first he knew of an answer was a hand in the face and being pushed backwards.

‘What? It’s me.’

‘That’s not the old William charm.’

‘But... I don’t understand.’

‘No, you don’t,’ said Maureen, ‘and either do I. Until about ten minutes ago.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Well, five minutes, if that... Actually, make that two minutes ago, from door to in to in to out to gone. Mmm. Well, before that little

episode, I'd...'

Could it be possible she was being coy?

'But now...'

'Now?'

'You'll have to go.'

'Oh?'

'Here's Arnold.'

William was flabbergasted. Such was the shock that for the first time he wondered if he'd actually had anything to do with Olive and Doreen's fawning over Hamish. The boy could talk. Had talent.

William rallied himself, gave Arnold a smile and a wave.

In return he got a bulge-eyed, brow-furrowed face of fury mugging him out of the passenger window. The *Mitsubishi*, in parallel machismo, accelerated with a deep bass fart down the road.

I knew what William didn't: a new trouble had begun.

52 The Fastest Draw

I watched, privately, alongside Steven Little. Since his experiences the night before, he were taking payment in four pint increments. But I had to hand it to him, he were professional. We had deck chairs and field glasses and a fine view of proceedings. I'd insisted on arriving an hour early, and claiming I were inspecting the site, I'd left all three recorders hidden at tactical spots.

Back-to-back, Arnold's shoulder blades were lower than Dempster's. They were wearing underwear, socks and shoes.

Steven said that Arnold had tried insisting on vests, but had no cornerman.

He were in a tasteful pair of *Calvin Klein's*.

Dempster wore classic Y-fronts.

It was neutral ground. They were on the stretch of grass just beyond Wembley, hidden by a row of scraggly trees. It was high noon.

'Dempster? He wanted dawn duel. Lucky us: ruled out by Snips. He insists. Midnight to eight a.m. doesn't exist. Main supplier. Mr. Guns and Ammo. So dawn isn't real.'

William Motion were also present.

Steven said he was Dempster's corner man, and Snips was the adjudicator.

The sky were flat and gloomy.

C1: 'On my count,' said Snips, 'you'll take ten steps in a straight line. When I say draw, you'll turn and shoot. After the first ammo has been discharged, feel free to move and shoot. These weapons are manual loaders, meaning you'll have to pump and shoot after each volley. You have six bullets in each weapon.'

Arnold shivered with each step. In his right hand he held the air-pistol. In his left he held the paintball gun.

He hated the waiting.

'Two. Three. Four.'

HIS PLAN WAS SIMPLE. BUT RISKY. HE'D LET LOOSE WITH HIS FIRST SHOTS, AS PER THE RULES. THEN HE'D TAKE EVASIVE ACTIONS WHILE DEMPSTER, ENRAGED, WOULD CHASE

HIM ABOUT THE FIELD SHOOTING. HE WAS READY TO TAKE SOME HITS. BUT WAS WORRIED ABOUT STRAY AIR-GUN PELLETS. HE IMAGINED ONE IN THE CHEEKBONE. REBOUNDED INTO THE BACK OF HIS GLASSES. THEN INTO HIS EYEBALL. DEMPSTER'S BODY WAS INTIMIDATING, TOO. IT LACKED AN OVERABUNDANCE OF SOFT SPOTS. WHICH SEEMED LIKE CHEATING. HOWEVER, DEMPSTER HAD AGREED NOT TO BAR HIM FROM *THE DOG AND BISCUIT* IF HE TOOK PART. WHICH WAS EVERYTHING.

'Five. Six. Seven.'

Steven told me, and it were all I could do not to clout him:

'Arnold saw a prostitute last night. Refused! No blow. He was drunk. Bottle of vodka in hand. And dollop of poo in underwear. She could smell it. He called her a cheeky cow!'

'Eight. Nine. Ten.'

Arnold rotated, hollering a war cry whilst lining up his guns from the hip cowboy style, when a paintball hit him square in the front teeth.

Red paint, and perhaps blood – he didn't know – filled his mouth. Was up his nose, and in his eyes. He was still in shock when an airgun pellet struck him in the middle of the forehead. The last thing he remembered before falling down – firing he didn't know where – was the sight of Dempster sideways on, arm raised, grinning.

He wished he'd been less macho about the whole thing as he lay curled up in the grass pleading for mercy.

Dempster loomed over him.

He wouldn't shoot a man when he was down.

Arnold raised a fair play palm.

Dempster fired at his nipples.

ARNOLD CURSED. SEETHED. ROLLED. CHANGED PLAN. HE TRIED TO REMEMBER HOW TO RELOAD. FUMBLED WITH THE GUNS. BUT THEY DIDN'T WORK WHEN YOU HAD EXTREMELY SENSITIVE NIPPLES. HOW DEMPSTER KNEW HE'D NEVER KNOW. IT WAS THE WORST PLACE HE COULD HAVE BEEN HIT. EXCEPT THE GROIN.

The paintball cracked between his testicles. They clanged together like a Newton's cradle. Then a pellet twanged the shaft of his penis.

Dempster picked him off. Fired with brutal accuracy. Showed no compassion. At one point, he commanded Arnold to turn over and take it like a man. Then he nudged the paintball gun inside his Calvin's and shot him up the rectum. A manoeuvre that brought some chastisement from Snips.

At least it was all over. Things hadn't gone to plan. When he'd ceased twitching, Arnold remembered he still had guns. And they had shots in them. Against unarmed men. Dempster was never his target. Dempster owed him. Had got him. Now it was his turn.

When he eventually got up, Snips was stashing Dempster's guns in the bag.

Dempster stood, arms folded, hips thrust forward, the laughing champion in his dressing gown.

But the target of Arnold's wrath was William Motion.

From less than a yard away, he raised the paintball gun at William's head and pulled the trigger.

53 An Exposed Limb

'I can tell you exactly what happened,' said William.

I hate to take as my only source someone as emotionally malcontent as William Motion, but it has been made clear by Arnold Charger's office that he shall not be commenting on the matter. A fine, regal attitude to what even I, professional and roving to the core, find myself in obeisance.

'I walk in and immediately observe the uncorked three-quarters empty whisky bottle stood on the desk, and a heavily bruised and topless Arnold Charger sitting behind it licking the crook of his elbow and staring at me through one eye, a twitching finger on the trigger of a loaded crossbow.

'Don't move,' says he. 'The crossbow's aimed at your cock.'

'MP had got me there. Told me Charger wanted to clear the air about him trying to shoot me at the duel, and nothing coming out of his gun. And Snips cracking up. Snips is a married man and a believer in the sanctity of marriage. In the interests of justice, he'd loaded Charger's guns with a single shot each. That had saved me.

'Anyway, I'd wanted to know why he'd tried to shoot me. Which was now looking foolish. It's weird, right? Arnold had been an imbecile with a gun, but apparently he's deadly with a crossbow. It was rested on his desk, and I didn't have any doubt about it. I asked him why he was drinking whisky.

'Best in the world, that's what,' says he. 'But we're not here to talk about class.' He rocked back in

his chair, his finger still on the trigger, and he starts licking his arm again.

'I had to ask: 'Why are you licking yourself?'

'This stuff's wretched,' he says, 'unless you drink it like this. I spilt some on my arm. Lucky experiment, like champagne. Though different. Licked it up. Mixed with the salts on your skin, delicious. No, you can't try any. Know how much? One fifty a bottle. That's right. And I'm having it for breakfast. See what I'm saying?'

'I told him it was half three in the afternoon.

'Right you are,' he says.

'I told him he didn't know which way I dress. Not in my loose... He guessed left.

'Oh cripes,' says I.

'There's a woman,' says he.

'I thought that was a bit tight. 'No,' I says, 'there really isn't a woman.'

'He says, 'A woman that I love... And you come back from London, the Big... What does Nigel call you?'

'I tell him: 'The Big Cheese.'

'With your big cheesy knob,' he says.

'I protest: 'It's impeccably clean.'

'And screw my woman,' he says.

'I tell him: 'Impossible.'

'He accuses: 'I saw you.'

‘‘In flagrante delicto?’’ says I.

‘‘Flagrantly taking the piss,’’ he says.

‘‘This morning?’’ says I, seeing it all in all its ugliness.

‘He was squiffy as an octopus. Sitting there with bright red cheeks, a vein throbbing in his neck, he’d been slurping long and hard of the divine ethanol, and come to seeing compromised visions of Maureen.

‘‘Jiminy figs,’’ says I. ‘You’re in love with Farmer Appleyard.’

‘‘Eh,’’ he says. ‘Don’t be cheeky.’ He tells me I’ve been tuppung where I shouldn’t.

‘I didn’t tell him I’d been trying and failing. I lied, in an honest way: ‘I went to borrow a cup of milk,’’ says I, ‘for the old tea, but she only had skimmed. That’s all there was to it.’

‘‘And you told Snips not to load my weapon,’’ he says. ‘Acting all shitted when I levelled it at you.’

‘I tell him: ‘I wasn’t acting.’

‘But he’s not listening. He picked up the bottle, single-handed, in the ends of his fingers. Then he carefully poured a dram into his cupped palm. He slurped at it, all the while keeping a dubious eye on me. Then he raised his hand in the air, and slobbered at the whisky as it ran down his arm.

‘‘Why you come here?’’ he says. ‘If you’re not guilty.’

‘So I say: ‘Why would I come here if I were?’

‘‘Exactly,’ he says, confusing the shit out of me.
‘I want to see it.’

‘I ask him what he wants to see. He tells me he wants to see my cock. It wasn’t him talking, of course, it was the unswerving logic of whisky I was talking with.

‘‘Drop your kecks,’ he says. ‘I want to see what’s so great about it. Or I can split it in two. I once made a stick version of my wife with a piece of two by four. Hit that dead centre from thirty yards. I’m a man whose heart has been ripped open.’

‘I tell him he needs a doctor.

‘‘I’m gonna count to ten,’ he says.

‘‘But,’ says I, ‘since I got back from London...’ I didn’t like this. I dipped my head in shame. Of all the humiliations. ‘I haven’t had sex.’

‘He’s smiling when I look up. But it’s not a smile to warm the heart. Then there’s the crossbow. It’s as hard and fast and nasty a thing as I’ve ever seen. And it’s aimed at my Everything. So I’m trying not to let the room spin. Escape scenarios are flashing through my mind. I know his reaction times will be down. I’m thinking, if I bolt behind the filing cabinet, pick it up, use it as cover, then only my fingers will be at risk. Now, I’m as fond of my fingers as the next man, but compared to my Everything? But then I picture him coming round the side. Scenes of horror are flashing before me. Was it worth the risk? A filing cabinet, in close quarter combat, could be as lethal as a crossbow. That is, if the jelly that was currently connecting my hips to my knees and my knees to my ankles was able to

propel my feet fast enough... But, deep down, thing was, I knew he'd shoot, well, not him, but the whisky would. You've got to believe in danger. It's part of the Gentleman's Code. One must always believe in threats to one's life.

'Arnold, meanwhile, was down to six.

'You know, ole Doc Rathbone's a father figure for me, so I felt guilty about the idea of exposing his favourite thing in the world. I've got it here, look, what he wants to be written on the museum notes after I'm dead and buried and its preserved for all eternity:

'Platonic form, conceived in wonder, the most ergonomically perfect, aesthetically pleasing penis, probably, in history.

'That's nice, isn't it? He's always begging me to die young so that old age doesn't ruin it.

'In the end I figured, why not let Arnold see it? It might civilise him. Like a great work of art. I do enjoy exposing myself, it has to be said.

'Arnold was at two seconds. Then one.

'I was on the verge of panic. So I flipped his belt and dropped my kecks. I reasoned it took away his immediate reason to shoot.

'The weirdo opened a drawer, and pulled out a can of baked beans. He wagged it at me and put it on the desk. 'Beans,' he said. Like I didn't know.

'I tried empathy. 'I like them with cheese,' I says.

'Best cold,' says he. 'Straight from the tin.

Take off your jacket.'

'I tossed it over the filing cabinet. I was regretting wearing a small T-shirt though. It might have had a print of Animal from *The Muppets* on, but it gave my cock no cover.

'Come,' says he. 'I want a closer look at my pain.'

'What are the beans for?' I ask. Sixth sense, mate.

'Eleveneses,' he says. But we're well past eleveneses I'm thinking.

'With my jeans round his ankles and gulping, I shuffled forward on penguin feet. Then stopped halfway across the room.

'Closer,' says he.

'You can see it from there,' I tells him.

'Come on,' he says. 'Promise I won't touch.'

'I ask him to take his finger off the trigger.

'He uncurls it.

'That made me feel better.

'Just lay it on the desk,' he says, 'so's I can inspect it properly.'

'I edge up. 'It's too high,' I says.

'He tells me: 'Stand on tiptoes.'

'So I thrust my hips forward and picking up my cock, unfurl it on his desk.

‘‘Doesn’t look special to me,’ says the heathen.
‘Like it can play the ukulele or anything.’

‘‘It can’t,’ says I, trying to assure his
insecurities.

‘That’s when he picked up the can of beans.
‘Well,’ he said, slamming it down on my cock and
unloosing a crossbow bolt into my abdomen.’

54 Bleak House

I knew we were heading towards resolution, so I offered my services to William as a nurse. Of course, I bugged his bedroom as he slept, and I greeted Hamish’s arrival at the cottage with a mix of matronly concern and friendly welcome. I instantly knew what had happened. I could see the boy was transformed: his general sense of teenage confusion was now curious rather than anxious. At the same time, he was trying to act tough and manly and worldly, but under the surface bubbled unbridled energy, and he were jittery with brags and preening and the desire to perform the cock step rhythm of his own fandango.

I checked that William were fit to receive visitors first, then made a show of it. Opening the door with old world grace, I announced Hamish’s arrival. William was sitting upright, half-enclosed by a duvet, in the middle of his enormous bed.

C1 and C3, when properly synced, gave me a stereo transcription:

‘What happened to your stomach?’

‘I’m wearing a jockstrap. Martini?’

‘Why? What happened?’

William threw some ice into a tumbler, fixed them
drinks.

Hamish tried a sip. His eyes watered. 'It's pure booze.'

'Needs must when the devil ovulates,' said William. 'Gin's the queen of maudlin drinking, and maudlin drink I must. With bed rest. Today. Perhaps tomorrow. And I absolutely mustn't get a stiffy. There's pills. But I don't fancy the side effects. I prefer these side effects. Rathbone cried when he saw it. It was touching. He assures me there's no long term damage.'

When Hamish professed confusion, William explained.

'You told Plod you doesnae know who did it?'

This made me steam. The good woman I am I resisted, for he deserved a righteous poisoning.

'He wanted to know if Giggs had done it. He's still filing his teeth over that. I told him he was out of the country.'

'And youse nay pressing charges?'

'I have a plan for Charger. You'll find out what soon enough. Now, drink your drink.'

Pause.

'You found them, didn't you?' said William.

'So, it was you. That's what I wanted to ask. It was those cards that...'

'Tipped the scales?'

'Aye.'

William smiled, his eyes filled with sad triumph.

'With both.'

'Aye.'

It was with the grinning voice of sin he spoke.

'I knew it,' said William.

'How? I just left.'

'Later. Have a drink. Have you worked out who stole my mullet yet?'

'Well,' said Hamish.

He was always taken aback by how William controlled the direction of the conversation.

'I doesnae think it was stolen by Ms. Appleyard and Lady Shadaws.'

'Oh, now?'

'Friday night, after we... Anyway, I figured they were heading for the Tardis, so I went to check like I was just heading through, but they weren't there.'

'They went to the toilet,' said William.

'Birds do that?' said Hamish. 'I though that was just -'

'Not for sex,' said William. 'Lady Shadaws talked Farmer Appleyard out of shagging Dipshit Charger.'

'Eh?' said Hamish, dumbfounded. 'Why do you -'

'I'm a liar. When I said I didn't know why Charger pummelled in my knob, it was because he thought I'd been banging Farmer Appleyard. So, if it wasn't them, who was it?'

'Ah,' said Hamish.

This was the failure that left his inner legend incomplete, and kept his ego in check. Yes, he was an expert Privates Investigator, but a dud as a Private Investigator. He groped:

'The Welsh family?'

'Of course,' said William. 'You've got it.'

He downed the Martini, let the olive roll into his mouth, chewed it triumphantly.

'But...'

Hamish was suspicious now. It was all too easy.

'No,' he said. 'It couldnae have been the Welsh. The Welsh, like the Scots, revere ginger.'

William's nonsense. It was transparent and sparkling. Yet evasive. Like the truth. Hamish laughed at himself.

'The moment,' said William, 'of clarity.'

'You dirty liar, William Motion. You did it yourself. You cut your own mullet off. Because that bird didnae fancy it. But bald? And why did you send me on a wild goose chase?'

'It was the set up,' said William. 'Most ladies aren't impressed by violence. But, if three goons happen to go about a chap on his tod, their inherent sense of female justice kicks in. This is a good thing. Also, they automatically pity and wish to mother that single guy. This, too, is a good thing. So, at the very least, if it'd ended there, I reckoned you'd be evens on for a sympathy shag. And knowing those ladies the way I do, I figured they'd be unable to decide which

one of them should administer the soothing sexual medicine, and so they'd decide for both of them to do it. I'd already sewn a little threesome seed in their heads, you see? But then you went, as I predicted you would, one stage further. Your inherent Scottish lunacy came out. The genes that populate the British army marched to the forefront and you went out of your northern mind. You avenged yourself, and very splendidly, too, as I understand. Now, in doing that, my friend, you did yourself a very big favour. As I said, under normal circs women aren't impressed by violence and thuggery. But no lady can resist the spectacle of the baddies getting their just deserts ladled out to them by a dashing and brave goodie, the outnumbered underdog winning the day, it's just...'

'Are you saying you set Phil Rutter and the psychos on me?'

'Absolutely. What you hadn't told me about your little problem, I got from Snips, when I went to see him about my little problem.' William pointed to his head. 'You know, there's absolutely nothing a barber can do with a bald head. Extraordinary as that might seem in this age of science. Anyway, Snips is an ears to the ground type chap, knows all, and he tells me how you're in a touch of soup with the roughs at school. So, long and short of it, I go and meet the gang. I buy their trust with sweeties, and weigh them up as the triumvirate pillars of ineptitude. I gave them the plan. All I had to do then was exploit Besnik's floppy haired charms to make sure the girls saw the rough and tumble go down, and in their gentle, womanly way, take your virginity for you.'

Hamish blushed.

'You didnae -'

'Of course I told them you were a virgin. It all added to your mystique, see? At first I was going to tell them you were gay, but when it comes to females popping cherries, I've learned the hard way, they prefer the unblemished to the man-stained.'

'I cannae believe -'

'I figured you needed something to do. When a man sees a boy desperate to live, and no earthly idea... I suppose it's part of the Gentleman's Code to reveal life.'

Hamish didn't know if he should be angry, grateful or offended, or all three.

'You tricked me, filled my head with nonsense, sent me on a wild goose chase -'

'To train you.'

'Train me for what?'

'The pursuit.'

'You amused yourself as I filled my head with nonsense. You got me beaten up, tortured, drunk and laid and...'

I knocked on the door. William told me to come in. Hamish was sitting frozen to the spot at the foot of William's bed. I excused myself, and William acknowledged me with a smile, then they both ignored me. Hamish looked at his Martini, downed it. A flush of red wonder illuminated his face.

'Once again,' said William.

'The moment,' said Hamish, 'of clarity. A life and the best time of it. But how could you know it'd all work out?'

I busied myself slowly, moving like my back was playing up, as I collected dirty dinnerware and soiled garments.

‘Simple algebra,’ said William. ‘You’re now me. And I’m you. My mystique with the ladies has evaporated, and seemingly, condensed on your scalp. Which would be fine, except the love of my life has left me forever. Which would also be fine, had not the worst possible fate befallen me.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I didn’t get laid last night. I was desperate. I did what desperate men do. Yet she turned out to be a lady. Smoked menthols. Drank white wine spritzers. The cheek of it, she gave me her number., then cowboy strutted out the door. It was a relief. Yet the principle...’

‘I dinnae understand.’

‘Because I’ve hit the rock’s arse. With my hair has gone my mojo. I await the resurrection. Meanwhile, I’ve learned life’s greatest lesson.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Help people. The onion of life is tamed by cheese. The rest is ephemera. No satisfaction in ephemera. But it’s not half fun trying, eh? Speaking of trying. Have another martini, and listen to my proposition.’

55 Mashed Potatoes

When I heard the proposition, I immediately bugged the public lavatory. I followed Hamish from school disguised as man. I allowed him to settle before entering.

Straight after school, Hamish went round to William’s lavatory. One of William’s business cards was pinned to the door, with tippexed corrections.

Hamish Tush's Floral Restoration Services

Qualified Privates Investigator

Available exclusively from

Sound Street Public Lavatory, Motson Central

"For when the floater won't flush..."

Mon-Fri: 15:30-17:00

Sat & Sun: 11:00-13:00

When I entered Hamish were sitting, legs crossed in the psychiatric manner. He bobbed up, but I ignored him, just mumbling like a crazy person and went straight into the free stall. I noted that the stall with *CI* in it was occupied. I reassured myself - no one had so far spotted it. Yet sitting silently, I noted that the stall next door, too, were eerily silent. After a while, I rattled about about a bit with toilet paper and flushed. From the bus stop, I kept a beady eye. No ins and no outs. I were nervous about the fate of *CI*. I figured a junkie must have fallen asleep with it in there. It were near the end of Hamish' shift when Snips finally bowled up.

Snips said: 'Am I in a time warp?'

'Who knows?' said Hamish. 'What time do you make it?'

'Five.'

'Same here.'

'Then we're either both in a time warp,' said Snips, 'or William's been abducted by aliens.'

'Or,' said Hamish, 'he could be otherwise preoccupied.'

'Not cider again?'

'Martinis. Wow. I've never been able to spin the ball on my finger like that.'

'Really,' said Snips. 'Do you have to go to a special school because of that? Dangerous stuff, cider. You often find that people who get abducted by aliens have been drinking cider.'

'That a fact?'

'He's almost certainly brain damaged.'

There was a rhythmic thudding sound on the recording, probably Snips doing kick ups.

'Some fruits were never meant to be fermented. What you doing here, anyway? You need flowers?'

'No, but...'

Hamish considered the girls. The alien world of soft, undulating terra firma to which they'd introduced him. The land of wet caves and stiff flashes of lightning. The planet on which he'd transcended boyhood, and become a man. Men bought flowers.

'Or... Aye, perhaps. I'm the new William, actually. I'm running the florists.'

The thudding stopped.

'You don't know if you need flowers? What does that mean? You might need flowers? What does a man do to might need flowers?'

'To thank.'

'To what?'

'Why are you buying flowers?' said Hamish.

'Obvious. Monstrous cock up.'

'What you do?'

'Playing footie,' said Snips. 'In the house. With me nipper. It were four all, like. And you know how it is. First to five. You've gotta win. Teach these kids about life. But my lad's well tasty. Especially in goal. I'm thinking I've gotta belt it to beat him. Really frig it. So even if he saves it, I can get the rebound in.'

Snips stared into the middle distance. Relived the moment in his mind. Hope overcame his face. Faded to terror.

'And?' said Hamish.

'If there'd been a crossbar, it'd have been in off the bottom of it. Except there wasn't...'

'And so?'

'It went through the living room window. Which was bad enough. Because my wife lacks sensitivity about broken glass accidents. But see, the cat, her cat, it's thick, so he tried to stop it as it left the room. Went with the ball. And my wife, she completely lacks sensitivity when it comes to damaging her cat. Especially when she sees everything. Because she only come in to tell us to stop playing as I whacked it. Takes her slipper off. Chases me over the sofa. I know a hint. Least I got this.'

'The ball.'

'I found it outside in the neighbour's garden. It's my son's, really. Thought I'd better get it before she found it and popped it. She lacks sensitivity like that. The cat's right. Bit bloody. Bit traumatised. I

found him when I escaped. Ran away. Scared. Like it's my fault. Little bastard. Wife's fuming, like. She's a nightmare when she's angry. You know, she...'

'Lacks sensitivity like that. Aye. A gesture flower,' said Hamish. 'The window's gonna be an expensive fix, so you don't wanna get her expensive flowers. No roses. They'll just wind her up. What you need is something that says, "Sorry, sincerely, etc.," but at the same time, "Cheer up. It's only a window. And the cat's reet. And our son's gonna be a famous footballer."'

'Shit,' said Snips. 'Go on.'

'Sunflowers. Or tulips in mixed colours. Take your pick.'

Snips took offence.

'I dunno.'

Hamish saw his mistake.

'Tulips.'

'Okay,' said Snips. 'Half a dozen?'

'A dozen,' said Hamish. 'In mixed colours.'

'But...' said Snips.

'It must be a dozen.'

I walked in again, just as Hamish whipped out a phone. I went straight to the sink and washed my hands.

Snips sighed. 'Usual address.'

Hamish took out William's address book, then put it back in his pocket. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it right.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’ll get them delivered here, and you’ll take them home yourself.’

Snips goggled at him.

‘And on the way back, get some catnip in case the cat hasn’t returned, and some ready cooked prawns for a treat.’

‘I get it. It’s a joke. Like you said, you’re pretending to be William.’

‘Pretence,’ said Hamish. ‘Makes the world go round. A delivered flower’s no good here. You booted the cat out of the house. You must return with the soothing medicine in your own arms. Show her how you’ve changed. From hooligan to gentleman. It’ll impress her.’

‘Walk down the street with flowers? Bit Elton John, int’it?’

‘William does it all the time.’

‘He’s got a mullet. Or used to. Now he’s got a skinhead.’ Snips spun the ball into the air, started doing keepy ups. ‘I cut hair. It’s suspicious.’ He caught the ball on his foot. He flicked it in the air again, and on his next kick lost control, and skewed it into the urinal. It bounced back. He trapped it under his Umbro. He looked at Hamish. ‘Want this?’

‘The football?’

Snips nodded.

‘No. Thanks.’

‘But it’s covered in piss. I can’t take it home.’

‘Why,’ said Hamish, ‘did you have to kill your rabbit with a baseball bat?’

56 Neither a Whimper, Nor a Bang

Motson was a grey town. From dawn to dusk – grey. Spring

and summer – grey with a tinge of blue. Autumn and winter – grey with a hint of yellow. Its skies were made of a floating collage of marble. Its clouds were pale grey and the cracks between them were the colour of granite. And so when dawn in its grey stretch and yawn elongated across the sky, its greyness never entirely forfeited its reign until twilight seeped into the blackness of night. As twilight seeped now, inexorably, filling *The Dog and Biscuit* with new schemes.

From my shadow, I watched them over a bitter lemon.

‘Dodo,’ said Dempster, ‘has agreed to take the spare room upstairs.’

‘She cannae walk up the stairs,’ said Nigel.

Dempster flipped a catalogue across the countertop. ‘*Stannah*. I’m serious, man. She’s agreed. She can’t wait, the mad old coot, to whiz up the stairs. Not that they whiz. But if it gets her out of the annex... And me in.’

‘You willnae leave us, will you?’

‘If only...’

‘And what you gonna do with it?’

‘Gentlemen’s club.’

‘Sounds Scotch.’

‘It’s not for the likes of you.’

‘Eh?’

‘It’s gonna be a Gentlemen’s Club. Exclusive. For gentlemen only.’

‘You radge.’ Nigel necked his *Purgatory*. ‘I’ve got half a mind –’

‘That you have,’ said William, slapping Nigel on the back.

‘To go down the road,’ said Nigel, ‘and take me trade to the social.’

Dempster smiled. 'You? The social. A card? When you ever been crown green bowling?'

William shook his head. 'Never. He wouldn't know a crown green from a cottager's meadow.'

'Eh?' said Nigel.

'See?'

'Well, I'll go –'

'Where?' said Dempster.

'Aye, well. It's a dunt to be looked down upon, but I suppose –'

'Being barred from everywhere for loquacious unorthodoxy,' said William, 'gives you no choice.'

'Loquacious unorthodoxy?' Nigel grimaced. 'Are you saying I talk shite? He's saying I talk shite. My boy shagged both your birds, the dirty little twunt, and one of them with great, whapping diddies, too.'

'Below the belt,' said William.

'Where it hurts. If he's got one of them pregnant –'

'Don't suppose he let you sniff their panties?'

'Below the belt,' said Nigel.

'Tea?' said Dempster.

'No,' said William. 'A Cuba Libre for moi.'

'Do I look like I'm serving commie drinks?'

'You could take your trade elsewhere?' said Nigel.

'Rum and coke,' said William. 'With a lime wedge.'

'That's reason,' said Dempster, rubbing his palms. 'But rum?'

‘Doctor’s orders.’

‘Quack Rathbone?’ said Nigel.

‘I’m under orders not to get an erection.’

‘Awesome,’ said Dempster. ‘Wine dogging to the point of erectile dysfunction. Ingenious. Why didn’t I think of that?’

‘What?’ said Nigel.

‘It’d never have worked. All that booze messing with my energy channels.’

Arnold walked in. Nigel stepped between him and William.

‘Here he is,’ said Dempster. ‘My best exie, the wife screw.’

‘The mysterious Culmeal,’ said William.

He’d learned from Hamish, who’d learned from Besnik.

William said: ‘My idea. Compensation package for the charges I didn’t press.’

‘Sue him,’ said Nigel.

‘Mind your own business,’ said Arnold.

‘And nay just the physical ones,’ said Nigel. ‘It’s gotta damage ya head.’

William said, ‘Which is why he’s come to thrash out a deal.’

‘Sweet,’ said Dempster. ‘No court. No lawyers.’

‘How much are ya taking him for?’ said Nigel.

‘I’m thinking five large.’

‘Voddie and coco,’ said Arnold. ‘Make it a triple.’

Dempster scratched his chin and chewed the air. Tripled the glass. Stared at the optic.

‘We’ve stopped stocking coconut juice.’

‘I can see it there, in the fridge.’

‘We’ve stopped serving it with vodka. It’s just for rum from now on.’

‘Oh, like that, is it?’

‘It is.’

‘Then lemonade it.’

Dempster looked at William. ‘We in London or something. What’s five large?’

‘K,’ said William.

‘No way,’ said Dempster, pivoting, and spilling half the vodka onto the bar under Charger’s nose.

‘Chuffing ’eck,’ said Arnold.

‘Put up and shut up,’ said Dempster. He turned to William. ‘He clubbed your lightning rod. That’s six figures – min. In America –’

Arnold fell on to a high stool. Clung to the bar.

‘Five K’s enough to take me away for the summer,’ said William.

‘But what about business?’ said Nigel.

‘Hamish’s going to run it for me.’

Dempster and Nigel gawped.

‘Part-time until the holidays. Then full-time through to when I return.’

‘When?’ said Dempster.

‘I leave this Saturday. I return September-ish. We piloted yesterday. I sat in the crapper, unbeknownst to him. He’s patient, mature, took care of Snips like an old pro. A real natural, implicitly understands the floral costs of men’s crimes against the female species.’

‘I don’t want my son –’ Nigel stopped.

‘Oh, and there’s a spy in town,’ said William. ‘There was a recorder in my loo.’

My bitter lemon, halfway between table and lips, momentarily froze. But no one acknowledged William’s revelation. I knew then that Friday would be my last chance, that there would be a lock in again, a final hurrah for William’s journey. The pentothal and MDMA had arrived that morning. As William’s nurse and an almost invisible presence, I’d have privileged access to everyone I needed. An associate of someone very close to me would be able to give me all the tips and secrets for administering the doses. Then along with William Motion, Motson’s spy would disappear.

Nigel was staring over his shoulder.

William turned, noticed that Dempster, too, were staring.

For there were Arnold gathering vodka into his hand and slurping away at the bar.

‘Oh that,’ said William. ‘Yes, he’s gone a bit kinky with his drinking. I caught him drinking whisky straight out of his hand, sort of let it pour down his arm as well. Very weird.’

‘Six figures,’ said Arnold. ‘Six figures.’

‘Drinking whisky from his hand?’ said Nigel.

‘*Purple Knight*, too. Just five grand,’ said William, slapping Arnold on the back. ‘Stop gibbering.’ He turned to Dempster. ‘Fix his drink, please, Captain.’ He shook Arnold. ‘Get me cash.’

‘And where ya gonna go?’ said Dempster topping the vodka up with a dash of lemonade.

‘I’m going to be helpful. In a freewheeling way. Like a skinny, pale Hulk. Go where the adventure goes. I’ll be alone. Without purpose. An empty vessel. An uncarved block.’

Arnold looked up. 'Write that down. That's it. With the bloody without. Just five K?'

'S'right,' said William.

'Wait here,' said Arnold. 'I'm off to the bank. Dempster, get this man a pen. Five grand? What's five grand when? When life begins on Tuesday.'

William, Dempster and Nigel watched Arnold flee *The Dog and Biscuit*.

'You were saying?' said Dempster.

'I'm going with the spirit of William Motion.'

THE END