

SHORT STORIES

by

CHRIS VILLARS

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A SUICIDE

I first noticed him one evening as I was crossing the river on my way home from the shop. The footbridge was crowded as usual. Trains passing on the adjacent railway bridge made the path shake violently and every now and then brilliant electric discharges lit up the crowd.

As I approached the far end of the bridge the crowd slowed and bunched together. Then I saw him: He was leaning on the railing, staring out over the water. It was unusual for anyone to be there at this time of the evening. During the day it was a favourite spot for tourists and young lovers to stop and admire the view but in the evening the constant throng of commuters discouraged anyone from stopping. He was ignoring the frequent requests that he move on to allow people to pass more easily. He seemed oblivious to all around him.

I shuffled past some people walking in the opposite direction and then regained a faster pace. An older man pushing past me said in a loud voice that some people never showed any consideration and then hurried on. I was wondering just who was showing least consideration when a train loomed out of the darkness beside me and the sudden noise drowned my thoughts.

I would have thought no more about him had I not run into him again two days later. It was Sunday and I was returning from the morning fish-market where I bought supplies for the coming week. It was cold and overcast and he was alone on the bridge. When I got closer I recognised him and straight away the idea came into my head that he was contemplating suicide.

He took no notice of me but just went on staring out over the water. He was wearing a heavy black coat with the collar turned up against the wind. I guessed he was about twenty. I felt uneasy as I was going down the steps at the end of the bridge and glanced back. He hadn't moved. That reassured me. After all, I had no grounds for my suspicions. Maybe he was waiting for someone.

The following Sunday the weather was even worse. When I stepped out onto the bridge the wind tore into me. I clenched my teeth and walked on. Squinting along the footpath I noticed him there again. I thought he must be mad to stand there in weather like this! The wind carried a fine rain which penetrated my coat. He was gazing out into the distance as usual, maybe watching the pigeons that were swooping around the bridge.

When I was close to him, he suddenly turned and looked straight at me. In that glance I felt such bitterness and despair it seemed as if he was already in the water, fighting for his life, and with that glance he flung up an arm towards me. His eyes were black. His hair was black too and hung in damp curls over his pale forehead. He seemed lost to the world. He quickly cast his eyes down and turned back to the river. He had forgotten me already. I hurried on, feeling angry, as if with that glance he had struck me in the face.

I felt he was so unhappy he might have jumped into the river soon after I left him, and when, for several days after that, I didn't see him, I began to fear the worst. A week

passed, then a month, and I still hadn't seen him. Then I saw him again quite by chance one Saturday afternoon.

I had just left the shop and was walking along the embankment. Though it was cold, the sun was shining. I was sick of the smell of fish and fish-oil and the bright, fresh air cheered me up. As I emerged from the shadow of Waterloo Bridge I caught sight of him walking towards me arm in arm with a beautiful girl. She had long blonde hair and was wearing a bright green coat. He was still wearing his heavy black overcoat but he seemed totally transformed. He was laughing and chatting with his new friend as they came towards me. Just as we drew level they turned aside and went over to the embankment parapet. I sat down on one of the raised benches that look out over the river at that point and watched them from a distance.

I could hear him describing various landmarks on the other side of the river, the same sites I had seen him looking at from the bridge with a very different gaze not so long ago! He didn't notice me sitting there watching him. He was completely absorbed by the beautiful girl who had brought joy back into his life.

I jumped at the idea that this new girlfriend had saved him. He had someone to love and to love him now and all would be well. They seemed happy together. I felt happy too and relieved that I didn't have to worry about him any more. I watched them discreetly from a distance as they strolled along until they disappeared under the bridge.

We were very busy at the shop now and I had to go to the fish-market twice a week. It was the Christmas period and I very soon forgot all about him. We made a good profit that Christmas and afterwards I spent a week with some friends who lived in the country. Though it was much colder in the country than the city, I loved to get up early each morning and walk around the country lanes. To watch the sun rise over the frosty fields was a wonderful experience and, by the end of the week, I was feeling calm and relaxed. But all too soon Christmas was over and I was back at work again.

It was a dull Sunday in early February. I was tired after a morning of fierce argument over prices at the fish-market. The air was damp and cold and the sky overcast. When I stepped out onto the bridge I saw with a shock that he was there again, standing in the same place as before, staring out over the water. In front of me a young couple, arm in arm, were walking towards him. I felt straight away that something awful was going to happen and I decided to turn back and cross the river another way. But before I could turn away he turned suddenly and confronted the approaching couple.

Making wild gestures with his hands, he started shouting at them, his face contorted in an ugly mocking smile: "It seems wonderful to you now! You're in love! But that won't last! Then you'll see: Life's nothing! Worse than nothing! Emptiness and pain!" Suddenly he pulled a knife from his coat pocket. The girl started screaming. He threw off his coat, revealing himself naked to the waist. Then, holding the knife out menacingly towards them, he used his free hand to slip off his shoes and trousers.

For a moment he stood there, completely naked, eyeing them with that look of total despair that had struck me so deeply once before. Then he climbed over the railing, his white limbs moving swiftly in the grey air. The girl's companion rushed forward and

grabbed his arm but he struck out with the knife and forced him back. Then, leaning back against the railing, he lifted the blade and cut his throat.

It was just like slitting the belly of a fish: One clean stroke from side to side. The girl screamed again and went on screaming. A jet of blood shot out horizontally and fell with a slap across his stomach and thighs. Then he lurched forward and plunged downward.

I heard shouts from the embankment below. A few black figures started running towards the boats. On the bridge the girl was screaming and shaking violently. Her friend embraced her and his coat muffled her cries. I could see blood running from a gash on the back of his hand.

I suddenly felt sick. I steadied myself by grasping the railing and stared out over the water. I thought I could see a trail of blood on the waves. The body had disappeared. A dinghy pushed off from the landing. The city was black and grey and I longed to get away.

LIFEWOR

1.

On the yellow wall of the living room of Apartment 37, Module 9, Lunar Colony 1, hung a group of colour photographs in rectangular silver frames. Two showed artists of the twentieth century; Jackson Pollock, the Abstract Expressionist, photographed from a low angle through a sheet of glass on which he was creating one of his characteristic action paintings, and Christo, the Environmental Artist, shown striding across his "Ocean Front" project, for which he had wrapped a bay on the North American coastline in white polythene sheeting.

Alongside these two photographs, three others showed works by the Apartment's artist tenant, Marcus Clifford. In the first, "Blue Trees" of 2065, two small trees on the escarpment of the Grand Canyon, Arizona, had been painted a vivid sky blue. The blue, twisted branches of the trees contrasted sharply with the red walls of the canyon. "Space Rainbow", of 2074, in the second frame, was a work from a period when the artist worked as a Maintenance Officer on the Earth Orbiter III space station. Against a black sky, a set of multicoloured cables, red, orange, yellow, green and blue, splayed out from a fixture on the outer wall of the Orbiter. Under the rainbow of cables, the white crescent of the distant moon could be seen.

"Space Rainbow" had been rigged-up and photographed secretly, without the authorities knowing. The artist kept the record of this work secret until after his next major work. This was "Painted Shuttle", of 2075, shown in the last photograph on his apartment wall. For this, after using his position as a Maintenance Officer to gain access to the reserve shuttle-craft, he had sprayed the shuttle all over with irregular blotches and streaks in brilliant red, yellow and green paint. The photograph showed the painted shuttle in the maintenance hangar, shining under a glare of arc lights.

The painted shuttle never flew. Marcus was dismissed and returned to Earth. Soon after, he published a manifesto entitled "Space Art" and simultaneously announced that "Painted Shuttle" would be his last work. The negative attitude of the authorities, he declared, made it impossible for him to realise any further projects.

Each of the other walls of the room in Apartment 37 was painted a different primary colour; blue, red and green, respectively. The floor was white and the ceiling black. The only furniture in the room was a low, rectangular, glass-topped table in the centre, and, scattered around the walls, large cushions each of a contrasting bright colour; purple, yellow, green, red and orange. Two books lay open on the table. "Who's Who in the Arts, 2081" lay open at the entry for Marcus Clifford. The entry ended with the sentence: "2075: Gave up artistic activity after failure of project, Painted Shuttle." The other book, a textbook on rocket propulsion, open at a chapter on coolant injection systems, revealed something of the artist's current preoccupations.

2.

It was the last day of lunar night in the Mare Crisium. In the blackness that still covered the surface, a craft of the Lunar Refuse Service sped to and fro. Keeping close to the surface, the large transporter moved with unusual speed. The usual two small rockets at the back had been replaced on this craft by four much larger rockets. As it sped through the darkness, the two outer rockets flashed on and off frequently, giving it an erratic, whirling trajectory. At the controls was Marcus Clifford, now a pilot with the Lunar Refuse Service. Months of preparation, during which he had studied rocket mechanics and worked long hours alone in the maintenance hangar converting a refuse transporter to suit his purpose, were over. What had begun as a scheduled flight to take refuse from Colony 1 to the dump site in the North East of Mare Crisium, had turned into the realisation of his most ambitious Space Art project to date. He called this project, "Painted Moon".

For a whole day and into the lunar dawn the refuse transporter criss-crossed the surface of the Mare at great speed, whirling in great arches and loops from one side to the other, covering in time almost the entire surface. In the imagination of Marcus Clifford, the transporter was the tip of a gigantic paintbrush with which he was splashing and spilling paint onto the lunar canvas. In his mind's eye, the transporter moved across the surface with the same rhythmic urgency as the paintbrush of his childhood hero, Jackson Pollock.

Only two of the transporter's four rockets were controlling its motion. The inner two were releasing vast quantities of chemical crystals onto the lunar surface. Each of the coolant ducts to these inner rockets had connections to eight huge storage chambers which Marcus had constructed in the transporter's main hold. Each chamber contained a different, specially selected, chemical. By pressing appropriate buttons on the coolant control panel, Marcus could control which chemical was being released and also the rate of flow, which ultimately determined the width of line on the surface. The whirling dance of the refuse transporter left, on the surface of the Mare, an invisible painting, composed of lines and splashes of as yet colourless compounds of Cobalt, Bismuth, Arsenic, Sodium and Chromium.

The Sun suddenly rising above the rim of a distant crater filled the control room with brilliant white light and roused Marcus as if from a dream. He switched in all four rockets and put the transporter into a steep climb, to achieve lunar orbit a few minutes later. Six hours later, his orbit brought him once again over the Mare Crisium and he saw the realisation of "Painted Moon" dominating the lunar landscape below. The Sun's heat had quickly raised the surface temperature from deep frozen levels to over the temperature of boiling water. This, coupled with the unfiltered ultra-violet radiation from the Sun, had caused the previously colourless crystals to melt and react with the surface layer of lunar dust to produce deposits of brightly coloured metal compounds. In the bright sunlight, the Mare Crisium was now covered by a vast abstract painting.

The composition was dominated by three broad red lines, running North-South. Around and across these, an intricate web of lines and loops in red, black, green, blue and yellow had been laid down. Red and black were the predominant colours, with the green, yellow and blue forming a skein of finer, contrasting lines. Scattered amongst the lines, isolated patches of brilliant yellow and green shone like drips and splashes on the vast canvas. The painting quickly slipped from view beneath the transporter, giving way to the familiar, barren lunar terrain. Marcus would have liked to complete another orbit, and

pass over the transformed Mare once again, but the constant flicker of lights on the communications console told him that the authorities were trying to contact him. He lay back and fastened himself securely in his seat. A few seconds later, all four rockets fired together at full power.

3.

The inside of the transporter's control room was covered with photographs of "Painted Moon". Amongst these, Marcus Clifford was working to install a new instrument panel, part of the preparation for his next project. By now, the Earth and Moon were no more than bright stars. Ahead, the grey, cloud-covered disc of Venus grew larger and larger.

Marcus had gambled on not being pursued. The message he had left explaining the purpose of his flight would have been discovered long ago. The authorities knew that the transporter was unarmed and could see that its trajectory presented no threat. He had calculated that the high cost and possible fruitlessness of pursuit would deter them. However, the continual flicker of lights on the main console showed that the authorities, possibly from Earth as well as the lunar colonies, had not yet given up hope of contacting him.

The grey disc of Venus suddenly eclipsed the Sun as the refuse transporter entered the planet's shadow. Marcus programmed the craft for a slow descent. The transporter had not been designed for use on planets with atmospheres and excessive frictional heating had to be avoided. After five revolutions, spiralling slowly towards the planet, the transporter entered an orbit just above the cloud layer. Here, the drag from the swirling, grey acid clouds below caused the underside of the transporter to glow dull red.

This orbit could not be maintained for long. After one more revolution, as the transporter was just emerging from the night side of the planet, Marcus pressed a button on the new instrument panel. One by one a series of massive silver canisters were released from the main hold of the ship and fell into the clouds below. Each canister exploded violently just below the surface of the clouds, spreading its chemical load over a wide area. As soon as the last canister was gone, Marcus put the transporter into a steep climb on a trajectory away from Venus towards the Sun. As the sunlit disc of the planet receded, he watched the gradual realisation of the project he entitled "Venusian Swirl".

The chemical catalysts released by the exploding canisters rapidly diffused through the upper cloud layers radically altering their chemical composition. This changed the light reflecting properties of the clouds. Their formerly greyish-white colour was transformed into deep shades of blue, green and purple. A fine wisp of blue appeared first, emerging from the South-Western limb of the planet. This was quickly followed by two other trails; one green, emerging slightly above the blue, and the other purple, appearing just below it. Carried by the natural currents of the Venusian atmosphere, the colours broadened into three wide parallel bands which slowly spread across the cloud surface, rising slightly towards the North, and disappearing near the Eastern equator. Eventually, the swirling colours completely encircled the planet. "Venusian Swirl" persisted for several hours, its

deep blue, green and purple bands shining in the sunlight in brilliant contrast to the grey and white of the surrounding clouds. Marcus watched and photographed until the colours began to fade and mingle, and the composition slowly dispersed.

4.

Three days later, Marcus was awakened from a rest period by the harsh sound of the emergency klaxon. At first the viewscreen showed only the heavily filtered image of the sun, towards which the transporter was now heading. Then, suddenly, the Sun was eclipsed by another spacecraft. It was one of the enormous Mercury to Earth mineral transporters. These huge unmanned craft, twenty times the size of a refuse transporter, ferried mineral-rich ore from the inhospitable environment of Mercury to processing plants on Earth. The refuse transporter lacked any automatic avoidance mechanism and Marcus switched immediately to manual control. He chose a direction at random and fired all four engines. The force of the impulse reaction flung him violently from the console. He sprawled on the floor at the back of the control room, amid photographs of "Painted Moon" and "Venusian Swirl" and stray components from the makeshift control panel he had installed.

Thirty seconds later, the rockets cut out. There was complete silence. The danger had passed. Marcus got up and returned to the console. Fuel levels were now critically low. He would have to rely on the gravitational pull of the Sun to provide the extra momentum required to return to Earth. He used the on-board computer to calculate a new trajectory. The flight-path lay ahead, towards the Sun, passing round the Western limb near the equator, and then back out towards the Earth.

As the temperature inside the transporter steadily rose, Marcus alternately slept and worked on the preparations for the final project of the flight. In the control room, the new instrument panel needed to be repaired and adapted, and, in the main hold, the large silver sphere had to be manoeuvred into position. Marcus also spent time studying the photographs of "Painted Moon" and "Venusian Swirl". He felt that both projects had been entirely successful. Both were perfect examples of "Space Art" as he had defined it in his manifesto of 2076: "Art on an astronomical scale, which by its sheer audacity of conception commands the attention of all mankind."

The refuse transporter could not approach any closer to the Sun than the orbit of Mercury. When this limit was reached, Marcus released the silver sphere into the solar atmosphere. The sphere, eight metres in diameter, was packed with thermite, the heat resistant material which also provided the outer protective layer of the transporter itself. At the centre of the sphere was lodged a small thermonuclear device, which Marcus had constructed himself from components gradually assembled over the years. His hope was that the thermite would protect the device long enough for it to fall close to an active region of the Sun. Then the thermonuclear explosion would stand a chance of triggering abnormal flare activity. This was to be his project, "Solar Flare".

Marcus watched through the filtered viewscreen as the sphere descended, a black dot moving slowly across the fiery solar background. Suddenly the black dot turned white, and momentarily shone like a brilliant star. Seconds later, shock waves shook the transporter violently. Marcus's elation at the successful explosion turned to horror. The unexpected shock waves caused the transporter to start spinning. When he tried to use the

main engines to regain control, they only added to the effect, increasing the rate of spin. Then the fuel ran out, and the helplessly spinning transporter fell in towards the Sun.

Minutes later, the transporter disintegrated and the charred body of Marcus Clifford burned up in the solar atmosphere. At about the same time, a massive solar flare, triggered by his device, erupted in that region of the Sun. The effect was more spectacular than he had dared to hope. The flare was the brightest ever recorded. On Earth, towards sunset, it was even visible to the naked eye as a bright yellow spot on the Western limb of the reddened solar disc.

For several days following the realisation of "Solar flare" and the disintegration of the refuse transporter, the polar regions of Earth experienced unusually bright and spectacular auroras. Streams of charged particles, brought by the solar wind, produced a marvellous display of colours over both poles of the Earth. Amongst these streams of particles, there must have been some that had once belonged to the body of Marcus Clifford, Space Artist. Marcus Clifford, as they say in artistic circles, had arrived.

GODS AND MEN

A solitary, silver spacecraft sped through the black void. Only a handful of stars pierced the oppressive blackness. Commander Clifford knew that, in fact, these were not stars but galaxies though he preferred not to think about it. Even now, after flying these missions for many years, the thought of being out here so far from the home galaxy still frightened him. Alone in his tiny craft, he preferred not to look around and wonder at the immensity of the universe.

Two squares flashing green on the orange and black chessboard in front of him indicated that the onboard computer had made its move. Recognising the strategy, he keyed in his reply, then turned and lay on his back. Sleep, drug-induced, swallowed him instantly.

When he awoke, the spacecraft was stationary. Another pair of green squares flashed monotonously on the chessboard. Turning to the viewscreen he noticed that, as expected, the image of an orange star, slightly blurred by a surrounding veil of gas and dust, had appeared. He moved to the main console. Docking with the Outstation had been completed successfully while he slept.

It seemed likely that there would be no power supply on the Outstation. Its failure to return with the others was considered to be most probably due to power failure, a problem which had dogged this whole project. Failure of the early central reactor units out here, where regular contact was so difficult to maintain, had almost caused the project to be abandoned. The Commander tested a portable arc-lamp before going aboard. The brilliance of its white glare drowned the softer colours of the cabin lights, throwing everything into harsh relief and emphasising the velvet blackness of the viewscreen.

The Outstation was an immense torus 2km in diameter. Long ago, when it was operational, vast quantities of hydrogen and helium had poured through it every day into the assembly site, funnelled from the surrounding regions by an elaborate network of electromagnetic pathways. The Outstations were the key components of the collection mechanism, the apex of the collection pyramid, and still valuable enough to be worth retrieving for use on new projects. The Commander worked for two hours in the small control room deep inside the cylindrical shell of the Station. He replaced the reactor control unit and re-programmed the homing device. He wished that he too could head back to the home galaxy when this job was completed, but he had other tasks to perform.

When he switched off the arc-lamp the rigid white brilliance of the room dissolved into luminous purple patches, slipping and sliding with his gaze and slowly fading. While he waited for his vision to clear a small green form appeared, drifting slowly through the space nearby. He had difficulty dissociating it from the vague forms which clouded his vision but it seemed hard and clear, though now more bluish than before. Soon there was nothing in the surrounding darkness but this small bluish-violet ring drifting slowly by. Instinctively he put up his gloved hand and caught it. It felt hard, like a large washer. Perhaps something, escaped from his tool box, had been induced to fluoresce by the lamp. He slipped it back into the box and went back to the spacecraft.

Back at the main console, he entered the instructions that would start the Outstation on its long journey home. Then he returned control of his own craft to the onboard computer. The glowing ring preoccupied him. When he opened the tool box the violet glow of the ring lit up the other contents. When he touched it, it felt metallic, yet it looked translucent, like glass filled with fluorescent liquid. It was about 8cm in diameter, a perfectly smooth torus, the central hole being about 6cm across. He put it down on the chessboard.

After a while it seemed to be fading. He got out the arc-lamp again and shone it over the ring at close range for several minutes. If anything it appeared even fainter afterwards. Then, recalling its greenish appearance when he first saw it, he wondered whether it was really fading or whether its colour was merely shifting into the ultraviolet. Some hastily rigged-up equipment proved this to be the case. As the ring slowly faded its radiation at invisible, ultraviolet frequencies steadily increased. The Commander watched with satisfaction as the radiation from the now non-luminous, and completely transparent, ring shifted to higher and higher frequencies. Then, quite suddenly, it stopped transmitting.

A minute later the ring started to glow again, this time a very dull red. This quickly brightened, turned orange, and passed through all the shades of the visible spectrum and on into the ultraviolet in what must have been less than a minute. This time when it disappeared in the ultraviolet, the Commander quickly selected infrared frequencies, and, sure enough, found the ring to be still radiating at frequencies slowly shifting towards the visible region. This time its progress through the whole spectrum took about four minutes, then the process began again even more slowly than before. The ring's cycle time seemed to follow a square law, taking successively 1, 4, 9, 16, 25, and 36 minutes. After this discovery the Commander paid less attention to the times. The ring seemed to grow more deeply beautiful. He was fascinated by its subtly changing colours.

By the time his next sleep period arrived the Commander was convinced that the ring was some kind of timing device. Its period grew steadily longer, the last so far having been 81 minutes. He speculated that, after reaching a maximum, it would revert to the short period and the whole cycle would begin again. What was the function of this device on the Outstation? And what technology had produced it? These questions revolved in his mind as he gazed at the ring, glowing yellow on the chessboard, before he lay back and fell asleep.

By coincidence it was glowing yellow again when he awoke, but his attention was immediately distracted by the brilliant orange star which now dominated the viewscreen. Just below the star the small, cloud-covered planet that was his destination could be seen. The young star still held an equatorial disc of gas and dust, like an umbilical cord still linking it with the gas cloud from which it had condensed. This was visible as a dark band across its orange disc.

This star had taken only a fraction of the time other stars take to form, for it was man-made. Gases from nearby intergalactic clouds had been electromagnetically funnelled into the collection site and there artificially compressed and made to rotate more rapidly. Later, artificial centres of mass had been introduced into the cloud to provide nuclei for the planets, in this case, seven in number, and for the central proto-star itself. In this way the evolution period for the star had been reduced to about one ten thousandth of the normal period. Nevertheless many millennia had passed since the project began. The

Outstations and other apparatus had returned to the home galaxy and had been used to start other similar projects. As the human race slowly spread through the galaxies wars had been fought around them, and even over them, yet most had survived. Today three of these Star Projects possessed planets on which chemical evolution was well advanced. Those who created them, reflected the Commander, must have imagined themselves as Gods, creating on such a grand scale whole new worlds from which they hoped new intelligent races would eventually emerge. If they could have stood with him now, bathed in the warm orange light of this star, they might indeed have felt themselves to be Gods, basking in the glory of their creation.

Lights on the console flashed to indicate that the spacecraft had begun its approach to the planet. The Commander prepared for the descent. He put on the special protective suit and strapped himself into the seat facing the viewscreen. The surface of the planet was completely invisible, being covered by thick, agitated clouds. The topmost clouds glowed bright orange and yellow, darkening through amber to dark red and black at lower levels. It was over five hundred years since this planet, the third of the seven in this system, had been visited. The report of the last visit emphasised that violent electric storms raged continuously in the atmosphere. Already the spacecraft's sensors were monitoring frequent sudden bursts of radiation at radio frequencies. As the craft drew closer, lightning flashes could be seen, lighting up large areas of the cloud with brilliant purple light.

The descent through the atmosphere was unsteady. Once the spacecraft's speed had slowed sufficiently the Commander released himself and took over control manually. On entering the cloud layer the light faded rapidly until the viewscreen showed only darkness, a darkness punctuated every few seconds by a brilliant flash of lightning. The first site that had been selected for landing proved to be too soft to land on safely. The Commander suspected it to be part of some kind of shoreline, for there were certainly seas on the planet. Using the spacecraft's remote sensors as his means of guidance he moved the craft in the direction in which the firmness of the terrain increased until it was over solid ground, then he set it gently down. Almost at once it was struck by lightning. Streams of brilliant white light, like rivulets of white hot metal, poured down the conduction lines in the viewscreen. The spacecraft lurched to one side, then slowly recovered. It had been designed to withstand extreme conditions like these.

The surface temperature was 65 degrees. Because of the thick cloud cover it was in almost continual darkness. Only the presence of a fluctuating, faint red patch in the sky, where the sun was, indicated the difference between night and day. The hot, dark surface of this planet, continuously raked by terrifying flashes of lightning, seemed to the Commander more like a realisation of Hell than a cradle from which the first signs of life might soon emerge.

Search lights on the spacecraft could illuminate the immediate vicinity and the lightning flashes provided some degree of wider visibility, but it was impossible to see as far as the horizon or even to gain a general view of the nearby surroundings. A steady fall of hot rain and volcanic ash further restricted visibility. The immediate terrain consisted of hard rock, volcanic magma which had solidified long ago. This gave way to a softer, sponge-like material which slowly sloped down towards the sea. The Commander had to collect samples of both types of material and of the seawater. He was pleased to have found

straight away a site with such varied terrain. Later he would have to visit sites at other, widely spaced, points on the planet's surface, so that an accurate overall picture could be built up.

The intervals between his next two sleep periods were spent exclusively in the arduous routine of collecting, classifying and storing samples from the site. Never had he felt more tired of this mission than now. This was his third assignment within the last two years, and now, as he struggled in the hot rain and ash on the surface of this most inhospitable planet, he dearly hoped it would be his last.

When he awoke from the second sleep period he decided to pack up and move to another site. He sat before the viewscreen waiting for the pre-flight system checks to be completed. The spacecraft's search lights were still on, illuminating a circle of rock about 20m in diameter. When they went off the Commander noticed something glowing in the darkness. It looked like the ring he had found on the Outstation. A sudden flash of lightning momentarily obscured everything, but when his vision cleared he saw that it was the ring, glowing bright yellow. He must have dropped it as he was bringing in the last batch of samples. He entered an instruction to cancel the pre-flight sequence and prepared to go outside again. The ring was an important find which he had to take with him.

As he passed the chessboard he noticed the ring lying there, just as he had left it. From where he stood the glowing patch on the viewscreen was still clearly visible. There were two rings! Hurriedly he went outside again and collected the second ring. Back inside, when he put it on the chessboard beside the first, both were glowing an identical shade of orange. Slowly their colours shifted, in perfect unison, into the green.

Two things now seemed clear. Firstly, the rings were not man-made. They were not like any known human artefact. Indeed, even the material they were made of could not be identified by the onboard computer. Secondly, finding them both on this flight, in such unlikely places, could not be a coincidence. They must have been put there in order that he find them. It seemed as if an alien race were trying to make its existence known to him. This thought seemed so strange that he checked his reasoning with the onboard computer, something he rarely did, being used to trusting his own judgement. It confirmed his reasoning, but added a comment that the existence of an alien race was, a priori, an extremely improbable event.

Despite its rapid expansion through the universe, the human race had never yet encountered any other form of intelligent life. Indeed, it was now the scientific orthodoxy to consider humankind to be unique in the universe. The conditions necessary for the evolution of intelligent life were, it was believed, so improbable as to defy even the vast number of sites available. It was this ever increasing sense of solitude which had driven humankind eventually to initiate the Star Projects. Feeling like ageing Gods alone in the universe, they had sought to create other races in their own image by artificially reproducing the initial conditions considered most favourable. Ironically, it was precisely here, at the site of one of these projects, that the Commander had now discovered indisputable evidence of the existence of alien life.

Because of the importance of his discoveries the Commander decided to abandon his surveillance of the planet and return home immediately. As he gazed at the two rings,

glowing bright red on the orange and black chessboard, a sense of foreboding, almost of fear, gripped him.

When he awoke from his next sleep period the dusty orange star was already far away, just a tiny, blurred speck on the viewscreen, only its colour distinguishing it from the remote galaxies. The Commander was anxious to enter the hibernation period he had to go through whilst the spacecraft traversed the space-warp which would return it to the vicinity of the home galaxy as soon as possible, and set about making his preparations.

While he had been asleep, the onboard computer had begun its analysis of the water and rock samples he had collected. Now a light flashing on the main console attracted his attention. In the midst of the other thoughts that preoccupied him he found it hard to take in this new information. The console message read: "Primitive organisms detected in seawater sample SB100/2". Was it possible? The Commander read it again, then entered the instructions to have a drop of water from the sample transferred to the viewscope.

At first there was no sign of anything animate. The water seemed remarkably clear. As the scanner traversed the sample only tiny bubbles and particles of grit were visible. Then suddenly, at the lower right of the screen, a group of tiny organisms appeared. The Commander stared at the screen, fascinated. More of the organisms came into view. Each had a small, oval body and a filament-like tail. They resembled human sperm. His recent fears were forgotten in excited contemplation of these first living organisms created by humankind. In a sudden rush of enthusiasm he felt that humankind had indeed become Gods, creating for themselves new life-forms from inanimate matter.

Suddenly the remote sensors detected another spacecraft nearby. The image of a large, oval spacecraft flashed onto the viewscreen, to be replaced almost immediately by the head and shoulders of an alien being. It was a humanoid creature with bright red, almost scarlet, skin and deep blue, pupil-less eyes. It spoke in a slow, gentle voice:

"Commander Clifford."

The Commander stared in horror at the screen. Then, instinctively, he shut it off. His heart beat savagely in his ears and he was breathing heavily. But the voice came again, this time from behind him:

"Do not be afraid, Commander. You have been prepared, I think, for my arrival."

He whirled round and saw the creature standing near him. It wore a long, dark-blue robe draped loosely around its red body. The Commander staggered to the seat beside the chessboard and sat staring at the creature. As the creature slowly approached him he lost consciousness.

When he came round the creature was sitting near him, on the opposite side of the chessboard. Becoming aware that he had regained consciousness it picked up one of the glowing rings and slipped it onto its wrist.

"They are clocks, Commander," the creature said. "We do not divide time into equal periods as you do, but, as you have discovered, into periods of varying length, though in a regular sequence. We tell which period we are in by observing the rate at which the

colours are changing and the time within the period by which colour is showing." He paused, and then added, "The orbit of our planet about its sun is highly irregular."

Had the creature attempted a joke? The Commander smiled feebly and the creature seemed to smile too, wrinkling its red, leathery skin. This kinship of feeling between them seemed to soften the Commander's reaction, and suddenly, he understood why the creature was there. Overcoming his emotion he asked quietly:

"Did your race create us?"

"Yes," the creature replied, "Just as the human race initiated this Star Project and nurtured it to its fulfilment, so my ancestors, many millennia ago, created your Solar System, seeded it with planets at the appropriate time and watched over the development of the race that has become humankind today. Now the time is right to reveal our presence. You must take me back to your home galaxy. On the way we must consider how best to reveal this secret to the rest of humankind."

The Commander looked away from the creature, down at the chessboard and the solitary alien ring, glowing with a vivid violet glare. Only a short time ago, in his excitement at the success of the project, he had compared humankind to Gods. Now, it seemed, the true Gods had appeared.

SICK

We were drinking in "The Stars"; that was our name for the place, on account of the tiny fairy lights strung across the ceiling. I was feeling pretty low. I'd split with Veronica a few days before. Naturally I was feeling cut up about it. On the way home I began to feel ill. Tom had to hold me up. I must have been a dead weight. I just wanted to lie down right there in the street. I had this pain, somewhere down below my stomach. Then it seemed like a great black curtain came down over me. I passed out. When I woke up I was here. The doctors were conferring. They decided to operate.

Disposition of the ward, brief description: Eight beds, four along each side of a short rectangle; nurses table at one end, my left, entrance doors behind; toilets and examination room at the other end, my right; single-storied building, flat roof, interior painted pale yellow. Joe wants to know what I'm writing. "What's that you're writing?" he calls out from his bed opposite. What shall I tell him? That I'm writing down the events in this hospital, setting it all down just as it happened? He's in here; I'll make him famous! On reflection I tell him I'm writing a letter to my girlfriend Veronica. After all he may not like what I've written. He may not want his secrets disclosed.

They've given me a chemise to wear. It's much too short; it stops well above my knees. I'm sure I heard the others sniggering just now as I went to the loo. Suddenly a nurse arrives and draws the curtain round my bed. She's come to shave me. At first I misunderstand, then I realise; it's my penis she's come to shave! She lifts my chemise. There it is, sad little thing. Christ! Look at the size of those scissors! I hope she knows what she's doing. Carefully she snips the hair away. Gently she lifts the testicles to get the hair underneath. She's very thorough. And very gentle. She's wearing plastic gloves, but still her touch feels gentle. It was OK until she started to use the shaver, that soft vibration. It started to grow. I just couldn't help it. When she saw what was happening she speeded up. She nicked me once or twice but got finished really quick. In the end it was fully erect. I don't know who was redder; she, or me, or it! Surely you'd think they'd get a male nurse to do these things.

I was conscious during the operation. Honestly it's true! They put me out in the usual way. I was asleep before I could count to, well, I can't remember what number. But somehow I was conscious of the operation itself. I could see the surgeon. He was all the time explaining what he did to someone I couldn't see. It wasn't an out-of-body experience. I wasn't up on the ceiling, taking a bird's eye view of it all. I was right in here, where I usually am. I could just make out the surgeon working away down there and not much else. I could feel the cuts. They weren't painful. It was like I'd had some local anaesthetic. I could feel the knife cutting, the blood running out, then another cut, and another, but no pain. Neutral sensations of cutting, smooth and painless, and the trickle of blood. That's all. At one point the surgeon held up something he'd cut away, an ugly little mass, dripping blood. I saw it again later. Pickled, in a little glass jar! The doctor showed it to me. They'd preserved it! Apparently it was a perfect specimen.

Tom brought me a note from Veronica. She says she's sorry to hear what's happened. She wants to know if she can visit me. I told him to tell her no. I couldn't face her. This

enforced separation should do us good, give us time to make up our minds whether we want to go on or not. Just what is going on between her and Peter anyway? Why does he keep cropping up if it's me she wants? That night I found them together in our flat was more than a little suspicious. OK I admit it, I'm jealous. But I seem to have reason to be.

Reg is in the bed on my left. I never found out what he was in for. One thing I did find out; he talks to himself. It's a bit disconcerting until you get used to it, him suddenly starting up out of nowhere, top of his voice, any old subject. It's worst at night. Take last night for example. I was asleep. Suddenly "Fire! Fire!" It was Reg shouting at the top of his voice. "Everybody out! Everybody out! Fire!" I vaguely remember him trying to get up out of bed, to lead us all to safety I suppose. A nurse was struggling to restrain him. Then I must have fallen asleep again. In the morning I heard him telling the doctor all about it, how there was this fire up on the roof, flames lighting up all the sky. How did he know? The doctor wanted to know. He'd been up there, that's how. Last night. He'd seen it. The doctor said he must have been dreaming. But no, he was adamant. He'd been there. He'd seen it. The flames had scorched his pyjamas. Look! He showed some brown marks on his trousers and top. I know it seems incredible but they certainly looked like scorch marks.

Joe. Poor Joe. It's 3 o'clock Joe. The nurse is coming for you. Look at him over there, lying on his side, pretending to sleep. Joe. It's 3 o'clock Joe. The nurse is here. She helps him off the bed. Slowly they make their way to the examination room. It takes several minutes, several slow minutes, their shuffling journey. Total silence descends on the ward. It's always the same at 3 o'clock, total silence as Joe is lead away. Today I watch the sunlight streaking in through the windows, a million specks of dust drifting in each silent beam. Then it comes. The scream. Joe's scream. It flies through the ward like a knife! They're changing the dressing of the wound on his bottom. For some reason it has to be left open that wound. Each day at 3 they remove the light dressing to reveal the curious wound. Five cuts they made, a five-pointed star. For some reason they haven't sewn it up yet. It has to be left open that horrid five-pointed star, its red edges livid with pain. They put some ointment on it. They touch it. Joe screams. It hurts! His scream flies through the ward like a knife, cutting us all as it passes. Poor Joe. Here he comes shuffling back again. The nurse lays him on his side. He's trembling all over. Poor Joe. You can rest now Joe. The agony's over. Until tomorrow.

Tom came again last night. He says there's nothing going on between Veronica and Peter. He says I've no reason to be jealous. Maybe he's right. Then just why am I so jealous? I only have to see Veronica talking to someone else and straight away I get suspicious. Pretty soon I'm hopping mad. It happens every time. What's the matter with me?

An old guy's just come in. They've put him in the bed on the far left opposite me. He's asleep propped up on his pillows. He's got a drip. Just back from an operation I suppose. There's someone with him, a dark form huddled in the shadows by his bed. A woman I think, holding his hand on the counterpane.

Until now the bed on my right has been unoccupied, a pure white sacrificial slab waiting for a victim. That victim was to be Len. Len arrived with a problem; he was having trouble pissing. Sometimes he could and sometimes he couldn't. When he couldn't the pressure built up inside causing much pain until (blessed relief!) he pissed again. The trouble was Len's problem was getting worse. The times when he could were getting

shorter and the times when he couldn't longer. Some kind of growth or blockage was interfering with his tubes. Soon after his arrival the crisis came; he stopped altogether. He suffered dreadfully that first time. We all felt for him. Though the doctors certainly had a point; a few more minutes they said and it might break through again. When, after many an earnest conference, even they were convinced this was not to be they inserted a tube, a narrow polythene tube, up his penis. I don't know how far they had to push it before it broke through but when it did Len's piss came trickling out into a pot at the side of his bed. After that they were forever experimenting, carting him off for endless tests, trying one drug after another. I lost count of the number of times that tube was removed to see if he was cured then re-inserted when he could stand the agony no more. They always let him have the tube at night so he could sleep peacefully. Many nights I lay awake listening, in the quiet periods when Reg wasn't raving, to the irregular drips and trickles that fell into the pot from Len's tube.

Just suppose Veronica does fancy Peter; how does that affect her relationship to me? Does it mean she doesn't love me? Is that what I want then, above all, that she should love me? It seems I need to believe in her love yet the slightest thing makes me doubt it. Tom says she does love me. He says it's me that's uncommitted and changeable. He says if she loves me is it likely her feelings will change every time she meets another man? Perhaps I should put my trust in Tom's judgement, give up my own. He seems to understand these things much better than me.

It's meal time. This happened in more or less the same way three times a day. We weren't allowed to eat in our beds. The nurses set up a long table in the middle of the ward. Everyone who was able, i.e. all of us except that old guy at the end, had to get to that table to eat. Picture the scene. The table is set up. The food trolley has arrived. The exodus begins. The slow painful exodus. In one place or another we all have our wounds. To one degree or another we're all in pain. We all have to get to that table. Unaided. It's part of the physiotherapy. No excuses allowed! Our movements were excruciatingly slow as if filmed in slow motion, with every now and then a sudden jerk, a lurch, a scream. We all tried our best but accidents couldn't be avoided. Your leg suddenly slips over the side of the bed tearing at your wound. Trying to stand up you lose control and topple over clutching at the blankets to check your fall. Once you're down there's no way you can get up. It's all-fours from then on, doggie-fashion! Thus did we all hobble and limp and crawl to our places at the table.

It took a good fifteen minutes for us all to assemble. Len came trailing his plastic tube which in turn trailed a thin trickle of urine marking out his meandering course. Usually a nurse brought over his pot too but sometimes she forgot. When this happened a pool of urine would slowly expand under his chair as we ate. Reg came chattering incessantly. And Joe came, slowly, quietly, slowest of us all, always last to arrive. Then the meal could begin. If there was soup I kept my eyes on Reg. I think he was allergic to soup. Watch him now. He's got a large spoonful. He's raising it carefully to his lips. Watch its slow ascent. It's just reached his lower lip. It's almost there. Suddenly he sneezes. Soup flies everywhere! This occurred, on average, one spoonful in three. You could get pretty messy some days when there was soup! Hey I've just realised, we're all sitting down at this table, all seven of us, including Joe. I look over at him. Yes he's sitting too. How does he do it with that wound of his? Then I notice his elbows propped up on the table each side of his plate. I take a peek under the table. He hasn't got a chair at all! He's just

crouching there, resting on his elbows. Poor Joe. How he managed to keep that up through all those painfully slow meals I'll never know.

Len hasn't been making much progress. That tube of his has been in and out a dozen times but still he's got his blockage. Now one of the doctors has had a bright idea. I overheard him giving Len instructions. On the cupboard by his bed is a jug of water and a glass. Every half hour, the doctor says, he's to drink half a glass of water. Until when? Until the blockage is cleared. Of course! Why didn't somebody think of it before! I think that doctor must have been a plumber before. Your drain's blocked, what do you do? Turn on all your taps, build up a head of water, try to force it through. Sometimes it works. With drains! It looked to me like the same principles were being applied here. Len's tubes are blocked, build up the pressure, something must give. Something! I was amazed at the trusting way Len accepted this regime. It sounded like kill or cure to me. A desperate remedy! The tube was removed. It was 9 o'clock. He took his first drink. It's midday now. He's been religiously taking his half glass every half hour. He says he feels uncomfortable. That's all. He's confident this new idea of the doctor's will do the trick.

Absence, they say, makes the heart grow fonder. I always thought that was wrong. Absence, I thought, inclines you to forget. I see now there can be exceptions, special cases, where absence does intensify your feelings. Like with Veronica for instance. It's been a week now since I walked out on her. I can't get her out of my mind. I'm thinking about her all the time. Why hasn't she come to see me? Oh I know I told her not to but if she loved me she'd come anyway! I've decided to tell her I love her; I don't think I ever told her before. I'll tell her I won't be jealous in future. I'll tell her my love for her is not diminished if she has other friends, other lovers even. I'm getting ready to make up with her; I've got my speech prepared.

Six o'clock. Tea-time. Six of us at table. Len's suffering. He can't make it to the table. I look back at him sat up in his bed. He's paler, much paler. The pain he must be suffering! I see him reach out for his six o'clock drink. It's heroic! Or stupid! While I'm turned around looking back at Len a sudden urgent shout, "Nurse!", rings out from the other end of the ward, the old guy's bed. His companion has jumped to her feet. "Nurse! Nurse!" She's frantic. It seems there's something wrong with his drip. We all turn and look. Hey! She's right! That can't be right! Instead of the usual clear liquid in the bottle and tube it's red, dark red, creeping up the tube into the bottom of the bottle. It must be his blood flowing back up the tube. "Nurse! Nurse!" We all join in, make as much noise as we can. It can't be right, his blood flowing back up the tube like that. The nurse comes. The curtain is drawn round his bed. The doctor comes. Everyone falls silent, except Reg. He starts chattering away to himself, about that fire up on the roof, about how he'd told them, about how they wouldn't listen, about how he knew there'd be casualties, he'd warned them, now perhaps they'd take him seriously. All the rest of us were silent but we were thinking the same thing. That the old guy was dead I mean. They wheeled him out half an hour later. The woman, his dark companion, followed him out.

"Hey Joe!" It's me calling out across the ward. It's midnight. Even Reg is asleep. The only sound, apart from me calling out, is coming from Len. He's in agony. Only instead of screaming as he ought to he's moaning. A low moan; his suppressed agony! He's trying so hard to make this experiment succeed. Too hard! Joe agrees with me. We've got to do something about him or he'll be dead by morning. Slowly, painfully, I get out of bed. I

hobble over to Len's bed. Christ, he's green! In the faint night light of the ward he's green. He's trembling all over. And moaning. A low moan that seems to come from somewhere deep inside him. But it's his face that's worst of all. That horrible green! He seems to see me. He's still semi-conscious. His hand goes out, trembling wildly, reaching for his glass. He's still trying to keep up those half-hour drinks!

I take the glass and jug away. Then I set off to find a nurse. Before I reach the door Len gives up. He can't suppress his agony any more. He lets it out. He screams. He screams and screams. I'll never forget it. I look back at his contorted green face, the mouth wide open, screaming. Shriek after shriek. A nurse rushes past me. She tries to pacify him but he won't be pacified. He can't be pacified. He screams and screams. The problem is there's no doctor available until the morning to authorise stopping the experiment. Until the morning! He'll be dead by then! There's a little conference amongst the nurses, an urgent telephone call, while Len's screams pierce the air. Just hold up the receiver, let whoever's there listen to Len direct! Finally they get their authority. They draw the curtain round. We all wait, breathless, while the tube is inserted. The screaming stops. The moaning dies down. It's so quiet. Then we hear the urine trickling out into the pot. Ethereal music! We can breathe again. Len's going to be alright. I picture him slowly changing colour as his pain subsides. Green first, then orange, yellow, white, and finally pink, his normal healthy pink. When they draw back the curtain there he is. Len! His normal healthy pink! He smiles. Yes! Straight away a smile! It's incredible. He'll be alright now. Only I'm afraid it's back to the drawing-board for Len. Smile while you can Len. Even now that plumber-doctor of yours is dreaming up some new scheme to clear that blockage.

Hey! It's Veronica! She's come to visit me. She's wearing a very short skirt revealing her long bare legs. Straight away I start to tell her how lying here I've realised how much I love her, how I've always loved her only I didn't realise it until now, how I'm going to stop being jealous, etc. You know, my speech! Veronica smiled. She drew her chair nearer while I was speaking. Then she leant close to me across the bed. I thought she was going to kiss me, you know, out of gratitude. But she whispered in my ear "Oh Chris do shut up! If anyone overhears they'll have you locked up. You're raving! You've been lying here too long, all on your own. I know what you need." She stood up, drew the curtain round the bed, threw back the blankets and lifted my chemise. From somewhere beyond the cotton wool and plasters my penis slowly rose up. Veronica slipped off her knickers and jumped up onto me. It hurt. Christ it hurt! But I loved it! When it was over she tossed back her hair, smiling down at me, her eyes flashing. I drew her down onto me and kissed her. Then we heard Joe calling out from beyond the curtain. "Hey Chris, what's going on?" Veronica started to giggle. Suddenly I felt a pain somewhere down there. What's happening! Veronica gets off. There's blood everywhere! On her skirt. On me. All over me! The dressing's been torn off. The stitches have come undone. There's blood pouring from the open wound! Veronica snatches up her knickers and presses them firmly against the wound, squeezing the edges together to stop the bleeding. She's laughing so much tears are streaming down her face. I'm laughing too, even though it hurts. My eyes are streaming too. Everything looks red through my tears. There's blood everywhere. It's no use. We can't stop it. We'll have to call for help. "Nurse! Nurse!"

WAY TO WORK

1. At the station

I'm on my way to work. Here I am on the platform waiting for the train. It's 7.30. The sun's just coming up over there behind the church. The sky, vivid orange, is suddenly filled with a flock of small birds. They wheel overhead and then head off northwards towards the airport. I watch a jet come in to land, slipping down behind the distant houses. Ten years I've been starting my days like this. Ten years! Always the same train, the 7.32. The other people around me on the platform are regulars too. Here we stand every day at this time, about fifty of us scattered the length of the platform. We don't speak to each other. Even after ten years, we don't acknowledge one another. We each have our special place on the platform where we wait each day. Mine is next to the lamp-post close to where a little stream passes under the platform.

I'm standing in my special place gazing across the track at the spire of the church opposite. It stands out jet black against the luminous dawn sky. I look down at the four parallel rails between the platforms. Their polished surfaces reflect the brilliance of the sky. Off they go in both directions, never meeting until up there at Waterloo they suddenly end, just as suddenly as they begin down there at Windsor. Hey, thinking of Windsor, where's the train? The 7.32, Windsor to Waterloo, it's late!

When you follow a rigid routine, even minor disturbances seem irksome. So this morning, even though as yet the train is only two minutes late, all of us here on the platform are getting pretty agitated. We shuffle in little circles around our special places, sigh deeply, hang our heads in despair. We take it in turns, as if by mutual agreement, to walk to the platform edge to peer up the line. It's my turn. I step forward. You can see a long way down the line from here, two miles or more I guess. It's a long straight track. There's no train in sight. My blank look as I turn back conveys its message. The agitation increases. Briefcases are impatiently set down on the platform, picked up again, set down again. Loud tut-tuts and sighs fill the air. The delay is becoming intolerable. Six minutes late!

Then an amazing thing happens; the sky turns red! Instead of the usual early morning progression from orange through yellow to blue, the orange sky darkens and a great wave of deep red spreads across from east to west. A layer of cloud at just the right altitude catches the light of the rising sun and covers the sky with a veil of glowing red. The agitation on the platform dies down. We all gaze upward in amazement. We've never seen anything like it. For a moment the train is forgotten. We gaze in wonder at the sky. We're bathed in red light. Everything around us is transformed by the red glow. At any moment I expect a voice to break from the sky and announce the end of time! Then I hear a voice on the station tannoy nervously announce the late running 7.32. Here it comes, gliding in through the glowing red light. But even before it stops the glow has begun to fade. The spell is broken. Things are returning to normal. The light fades, the train stops, the carriage doors slide open, I get on.

2. On the train

Soon after the train leaves the station it turns northwards and passes through some disused railway marshalling yards. The old track and sleepers were torn up long ago and now the whole place is overgrown with trees and bushes. Magpies stir in the branches of silver birch trees. Today a thick mist covers the ground between the trees. I'm sitting by a window, briefcase on my lap, looking east. Over there behind the trees the round disc of the sun has just risen above the horizon. I watch the brilliant orange disc glide amongst the trees. But soon factories and houses close in and surround the train on both sides. I get out the book I'm reading. Soon I'm absorbed in the story again, oblivious to everything around me. The next time I look up we're arriving at Clapham Junction. "The Busiest Railway Station in Great Britain", the sign says.

As the train stops the doors slide open and a young woman dressed in white steps in. Her brilliant white suit seems to shine amongst the drab greyness of the other commuters. Straight away she starts to talk. "Ladies and Gentlemen," she says, "while your train is stopped here for a few moments I have some good news I'd like to share with you." She smiles bravely back at the hostile faces turned towards her. But our train is not stopping long enough. The doors are closing already. Before she can say any more she has to step off again without giving us her good news. As our train moves off I watch her go across to another train that's just arrived on the other side of the platform. The doors open and she steps in. Giving them the good news I suppose. What was it, her good news? A fall in the rate of inflation? The Prime Minister assassinated? God? God seems most likely. Perhaps she was an angel sent to redeem us. Unfortunately she forgot about the timetable. We commuters have to keep moving along. We're already late this morning. We've no time to save our souls!

By now the carriage is full. People are standing in the aisles and are packed together by the doors. We're approaching Vauxhall station. Suddenly there's a commotion in the carriage. The train brakes sharply, sending the standing passengers sprawling against each other. Everyone strains towards the windows trying to see out. Hey, what's this! The platform at Vauxhall is crowded. Overcrowded! Normally scarcely anybody gets on the train here, it's the last stop before Waterloo. But today the platform is jam-packed with people, right up to the edge. There must be a thousand people out there, all crushed onto the platform. The train slows down some more and sounds its horn, but keeps on moving. Slowly we slide past the crowd. They literally brush against the carriage as we pass, pushed forward by those behind them. Hundreds of frightened faces peer in at us. Then someone out there screams! Christ! What would happen if they panic? The train starts to pick up speed again. We're past. Another scream! And shouts! Did someone fall on the track behind us? I try to look back but I can't see anything. The carriage is completely silent. Nobody says a thing. What's going on?

3. Waterloo

Down the steps out of Waterloo, down and down again, down into the underpass. Slowly the vista of the cardboard city unfolds. There are hundreds of person-sized cardboard boxes arranged in rows between the pillars that support the roadway above. The pillars resemble giant concrete trees towering over a squalid jungle encampment. A man with no legs is hauling himself laboriously across a clearing between the rows of boxes. An old woman, standing with her back against one of the pillars, is singing a song with unintelligible lyrics in a high-pitched voice that echoes all around. Here and there

amongst the boxes there's a larger structure made of corrugated iron, bits of wood and blankets; a communal home. The communal toilet, an enormous pool of urine, festers in one corner.

I'm part of the stream of affluence that passes through this scene of poverty twice a day; out in the morning, back again at night. Sad figures huddled in blankets hold out their hands for coins. We pass by, holding our breath against the stench, eyes directed straight ahead, ears closed. Today I'm almost through; I'm on the long concrete ramp that leads up onto Waterloo Bridge. I'm halfway up the ramp when two figures emerge from behind a pillar. One of them steps towards me: "Can you spare a few pence?" he asks. I don't react. I try to ignore him and keep on walking up the ramp. He steps in my way. I have to stop. He holds out his hand. I tell him I've got no change; the usual lie. I always lie if pressed. He doesn't move. I tell him again: No change! But I can see he doesn't believe me. His friend is trying to pull him away but he's obstinate, he's not going to move. It's an awkward moment! Then suddenly a shout distracts us. A scream more like! Over the cardboard roofs to our right, in a sort of clearing between the boxes, a scuffle has broken out. Two men are fighting. One's on the ground. The other jumps onto him, right onto his chest, and starts pummeling him in a mad frenzy. Awful blows! Right, left! Right, left! The screams echo all around. It's hell! Still, it's none of my business. I take my chance to slip away. My friends are more interested in what's going on over there. Maybe it's someone they know. They move aside to get a better look and I slip by and hurry on up the ramp. Still those hellish screams echoing everywhere! I'm almost running up that ramp, desperate to get away!

The ramp leads from darkness and squalor into light. As I ascend, the sky opens all around me. It's clear and bright, a clear blue sky filled with early morning sunlight. I slow down. I take a deep breath. I drink in the light and fresh air. As I emerge onto Waterloo Bridge the London skyline appears. It's a wonderful panorama. Ahead of me, near the middle of the bridge, a small crowd has formed. At its centre I see a man making wild gestures. Perhaps it's another preacher announcing the good news!

4. Waterloo Bridge

The bridge is choked with cars as usual, all bumper to bumper, barely crawling along. Right now I'm passing two cars, both an identical shade of red. The one in front is a Porsche, the one behind a BMW. As I pass the BMW I glance at the driver. He doesn't like that. It makes him angry. He gestures that I should look away. But he should be watching the road, not worrying about me. Hey, watch out! I call out to him, but it's too late. The BMW runs into the back of the Porsche. A rear light shatters and the Porsche's rear bumper falls off into the road. Quick as a flash out jumps the driver of the Porsche! He's angry! He looks at the little pieces of plastic in the road. And the big piece! Then he rushes at the BMW and kicks it. He pulls open the door and drags out the driver. Straight away they're at it, a vicious punch-up, kicks, punches, right there in the roadway. But the Porsche driver has made a big mistake! The BMW driver is much bigger than he is! And he's angrier! The fight doesn't last long. A terrible final punch knocks the Porsche driver out and sends him sprawling across the back of his car. Dark red blood, streaming from his nose, trickles down the bright red paintwork. Now that BMW driver is looking at me again. It looks like he thinks I'm responsible. He thinks that look I gave him was the start

of all this. He takes a step towards me. I'm not going to hang about. Excuse me! I push my way through the crowd. I'm off!

That other crowd, up ahead near the middle of the bridge, is still there. As I get closer I see that they're all standing in a semicircle. In the centre, with his back to the parapet, there's a man swinging his briefcase back and forth at arms length. He seems to be trying to keep the crowd at bay. From the effort he's having to make to swing that briefcase I guess its really heavy. As he swings it to and fro he's yelling at the crowd: "Don't try to stop me! I'm going to jump! I can't bear it any longer! Out in the morning, back again at night, endless, meaningless routine! I've had enough! I'm going to jump! Don't try to stop me!" Well, nobody is trying to stop him! Everyone is very quiet and still. I begin to feel uneasy. The crowd don't seem very sympathetic. Then I notice the strap tied round his wrist and attached to the case. I get it; he's filled the case with something heavy to make sure it sinks quickly and tied himself to it so there's no going back. But now he seems to be having his doubts. He certainly seems to be delaying things. "Get on with it!" That's someone in the crowd. Then another shouts: "Do it now!" They don't like him hanging about; he's spoiling their fun. He's not yelling any more. He looks frightened. Someone shouts: "Coward! Get on with it!" He may be having his doubts but the crowd have certainly made their mind up. "Coward! Chuck him over!" With that, two men rush forward and push him over the parapet. I see his legs suddenly up in the air then shoot straight down. I don't hear a scream or a splash.

It's dead quiet now up here on the bridge. Nobody's moved. Those two who pushed him over are looking around, searching our faces. They grab some other guy. He starts screaming and shouting. His case is not filled with lead! Over he goes! I hear him scream. I hear the splash, the screaming and splashing. And those two are still looking around, looking for another victim, someone they believe is not quite content, not thoroughly happy, with this routine of theirs. I start to move off. Slowly, so as not to arouse suspicion. When I'm ten, twenty yards away I hear another scream, another splash. I don't look back. I rush on towards the shelter of the buildings on the north side of the river.

5. The Strand (1)

At the end of the Strand five roads meet. As I approach the junction I can see something unusual is going on. I can hear cheers. And screams! When I get there I find the path blocked by a solid wall of people. I squeeze in and push close to the front. Over the heads and shoulders I see hundreds of people crammed onto the pavements all round the junction. Each of the approach roads is jammed with cars. The cars at the front have their headlights on and engines revving. It seems that the traffic lights have failed and, quite spontaneously, the pedestrians and motorists have invented a new game. It's called: Get across if you can!

A man from the Strand southside decides to have a go. He launches himself into the road. Straight away the leading cars are after him. They hurtle in from two, three ways at once. He makes it to the central island. The crowd cheers. In the approach roads the next cars are revving noisily; they're ready for him! He makes his move. A Volvo's nearly on him. He makes a last desperate lunge. He flings himself into the crowd. They haul him in. He's made it! The Volvo roars by. The crowd are ecstatic, cheering and whistling! He must be

the first one to make it for some time, judging by the number of injured people I can see lying by the roadside and on the central islands.

Someone else decides to try his luck following the same route. He's not so lucky. Just before he reaches the central island an Escort clips his right leg. He spins round and slams into a lamp-post on the island. The post hits him full in the face, a terrific smash. It seems to knock him out. Slowly he sinks to the ground, his face covered in blood. But the crowd are not interested in him any more. He failed and that's that. Now they're cheering on the next to have a go.

A group of three people together are trying a different route; Wellington Street to Waterloo Bridge Road. It seems like a good idea to go together in a group. There must be a greater chance of success that way. But the route they've chosen is longer and there are no central islands. As soon as they set off the cars dart out. A Citroen picks off the girl from the back of the group. It scoops her up. She hits the windscreen, bounces right over the roof and falls off the back into the roadway. Then a taxi roaring out from Fleet Street smashes into the other two, sending them flying. Fragile human skittles! The taxi driver waves two fingers defiantly at the crowd as he zooms by and off up the Strand. But the fun is about to end. The crowd are tired of playing by the rules. The cars seem to be having it all their own way. From all round the junction people run out into the road at the same time. Cars roar in from all directions at once. Collisions are inevitable. Two cars crash into each other right in the middle of the junction. A third smashes into them. Then a fourth and a fifth! One of the cars explodes. Windows all round the junction shatter in smithereens. In the centre the cars are burning. A huge column of flame and black smoke rises high into the air. All around is pandemonium, people shouting, screaming. I must get away. Hey! Someone grabs my arm and tugs me from behind, trying to get my attention. I turn round to see what's going on and there he is, standing right behind me. I'm amazed! It's Ferdie!

6. The Strand (2)

It's over twenty years since I met Ferdie, yet I recognise him straight away. He hasn't changed a bit! He's wearing the same outfit as he was that day I visited him at his home in Paris; an old-fashioned engine driver's canvas cap, multiple lumber jackets, one on top of the other, all ragged and filthy, and baggy brown corduroy trousers. I remember him clearly dressed just like this as we went out for a walk from his house up the hill to admire the view out over the city. It's not surprising then that I recognise him straight away. But that he should recognise me, here at the end of the Strand, in this crowd and confusion, after just that one short visit, I'm amazed! Even more amazing, he says he's been waiting for me! He complains that I'm late. Christ, can't he see what's going on! I've been doing my best to get along, but with all these bizarre events to detain me, how can he expect me to be on time?

Now Ferdie wants to detain me too. He wants me to go with him to a club he knows nearby. He says he has something important to discuss with me. "Sorry Ferdie," I tell him, "I'm on my way to work. I can't stop now. I'm late already." But that's not the answer he wants to hear. He won't take no for an answer. He still has hold of my arm. He starts pulling me away. He drags me out of the crowd. "I can't stop now," I repeat, "I really can't. I'll give you my phone number. Ring me later. We'll fix something up." That won't do. He tugs even harder. He insists I go with him now. I slip over between a couple

of cars. He pulls me up and on into the Strand. I really can't go with him. I'm late already. I fight back. I wedge my heels against the curb. We come to a stop. Quick as a flash he grabs my briefcase. He takes me by surprise and snatches it easily. He lets go of me and rushes away. I don't hesitate, I rush after him. I can't go to work without my briefcase. I have to go after him. There he goes, racing up the Strand towards Trafalgar Square, my briefcase under his arm.

As I chase after him it starts to get dark. I know the day's only just beginning but it's definitely getting dark again! Up towards Trafalgar Square Nelson's Column stands out black against a yellow sky. Incredible as it sounds, somewhere over that way the sun is going down! By the time we're halfway along the Strand it's completely dark. All the street lights, shop lights and car headlights have come on. It's night-time again!

We're on the southside of the Strand. The roadway here is completely empty. There's not a single car in sight all the way up to Trafalgar Square. They're all held up by that pile-up back there at the junction. On the other hand, the northside roadway is one long traffic jam from end to end. There's Ferdie, up ahead of me, hurrying along. Suddenly he turns north, across the open stretch of road and then in amongst the cars on the northside. He weaves between the bumpers, left, right, left, right. I lose sight of him. Where's he going? Is he trying to give me the slip? I struggle after him between the cars.

When I reach the northside Ferdie's nowhere to be seen. Then I spot him again, standing at the corner of Bedford Street. He's waiting for me. He doesn't want to lose me, he wants me to follow him. When he sees I've noticed him he turns the corner and disappears. I chase after him. As I turn the corner I see him again. He's stopped just twenty yards ahead of me. I pull up sharp. Ferdie gives me a quick glance then looks over at a car parked on the other side of the road. Suddenly the car bursts into flames! Great swathes of flame burst through the windscreen and all the other windows. Six jets of flame. They curve in the air and come together over the roof. They're like giant petals, the calyx of a great luminous flower. Red, dark red, tinged with orange and violet, a beautiful flower transfiguring the car. The other commuters and I gaze in awe at that transfigured car. Shop windows are smashed all around. Some people are injured. But while the flames last, nobody moves. We all gaze silently at the beautiful glowing flower Ferdie has made out of a car.

He did it. I don't know how. Something in his expression as he glanced at me just before it happened told me it was no accident. He did it. It was his little trick, his party piece! As the flames die down, the spell is broken. People start to panic, screaming and rushing about. I see Ferdie making off into the darkness up Bedford Street. I go after him. I have to get my briefcase back.

It's much darker up here away from the main road. I have trouble keeping up. Sometimes there's no more than a faint glint (my briefcase?) or an indistinct blur in the darkness to follow. But I don't lose him. I imagine he's hanging back occasionally to give me a chance to catch up. After all, he wants me to follow, he's leading me somewhere. So I follow him through the darkness, this way, that, one dark side road after another. Then suddenly we turn a corner and up ahead, between the tall dark walls on either side of the road, like a pillar of golden light, the bright lights of another main street appear and I see Ferdie, clearly silhouetted against the light, hurrying on towards it.

7. Oxford Street

It's Oxford Street. We turn left heading west up towards Marble Arch. We're passing the big department stores. Their brilliantly lit windows are full of shining objects; hi-fi equipment, kitchen utensils, toys, dummies wearing the latest fashions. When we reach Selfridges, Ferdie stops. He turns and gives me a sly grin from under his peaked cap. Then he looks across the road at two cars parked there. Hey, I know what he's up to! It's his little trick again! I shout, "No Ferdie! No!" The cars burst into flames; huge red and purple flames curling high in the air; two luminous flame flowers lighting up the street. The force of the explosions cracks the windows all along the front of the store. I watch it happen to the window right beside me. The huge pane cracks right across. Inside, the mannequins in their fashionable clothes suddenly twirl around. Their clothes fly off. They spin and crash into each other. Horrible dismemberments occur! Heads, naked torsos, torn-off limbs fly through the air, smash into the walls and collapse together in a contorted heap on the floor. A severed head hits the cracked window pane. A large V-shaped piece of glass, stretching from the top of the window to the bottom, swings forward. It hangs precariously for a few seconds like a giant icicle then falls away and shatters on the pavement. Hey, what's this! Where that V-shaped piece has fallen out I can't see inside. There's no light showing like in the rest of the window. It's just black where the glass has fallen out. I go over to the gap and peer inside. It's not the same through there! It's not the bright window with its pile of broken mannequins, it's dark, it's not the same place. I can hear a noise coming from inside, an agonised wailing. I see a face in the shadows, a woman's face crying out. I'm going in! I can step through the gap. I don't stop to think about it, I just step right in!

Christ, the noise! That wailing I heard from outside is magnified a hundred times in here! Women shrieking and wailing in piercing high tones. It's almost pitch black in here. The only light is that coming through the gap from the street lights outside. It takes some time before I can make anything out. I'm in a small room about the same size as the window space seen from the street. There are six women, all dressed in black, with black shawls over their heads. They're all standing facing the walls shrieking in high-pitched voices. In this confined space the noise is deafening. The women are beating themselves with clenched fists while they shriek and scream. It's awful! It's making me dizzy! I lean back against the wall behind me. Hey! Part of the wall swings open; it's a door! As it swings open, I'm blinded by brilliant white light!

I fall through into another room about the same size as the first. In here everything is white; white floor and ceiling, white walls, brilliant white light. At first I'm dazzled by the brightness, I can't see anything but light. The door swings shut behind me and the shrieking stops. Total silence! There's not a sound in here. I can't even hear the shrieking from next door. Slowly I make out some shapes in the whiteness. There are some white bundles like cocoons floating about four feet above the floor. There seem to be six altogether, six white bundles about the size of small children. They're wrapped in white bandages like mummies. They're lying horizontally and floating. I can't see anything holding them up. What's this all about? First those women in black shrieking in despair, then these silent floating corpses. Are these the bodies of children? Are the women mothers lamenting the death of their children? What's the meaning of this mystery Ferdie has brought me to see? Suddenly a large chunk of the wall falls away. There's the street again! A large piece of glass, cracked by the explosions, has fallen out into the street, just

like that other piece back there in the first window. I step out through the gap into the street again.

Where's Ferdie? Maybe he can give me an explanation, interpret this mystery for me. Hey, look at this! All along the street, eastwards, back the way we came, every fifty yards or so, there's a car in flames! A line of red and violet flames flowering in the night. No need to ask which way Ferdie went. All along the street there's a chain of bonfires; he's showing me the way!

8. Soho

Oxford Street, Berwick Street, Brewer Street, Wardour Street; Ferdie's leading me a merry dance. We're in Soho now, hurrying past the dark alleys and gaudy entrances to strip clubs. At each turning he hangs back to make sure I keep up. Old Compton Street, Greek Street, then across Shaftesbury Avenue. Newport Street, Lisle Street, Leicester Street. Leicester Street! Is that where he's headed? It's one of his old haunts. He lived somewhere round here once. Sure enough he's stopped at last. He's waiting for me in the doorway of a club. A red neon sign over the entrance flashes the name: The Leicester Revue Bar. As I approach Ferdie turns and goes inside. The cashier makes no attempt to stop him. He goes straight in and down the stairs to the basement. I follow him down.

Downstairs the club is in total darkness. I stumble against some chairs. Then, in the distance, a spotlight comes on picking out a small raised stage. Some tables around the stage become faintly visible in the darkness. A woman steps out from behind a dark red curtain and walks to the centre of the stage. There's no time to find a seat. I stumble back and stand against the wall. It seems a show's about to begin!

From the moment the music starts I'm captivated. That woman's so beautiful, I can't take my eyes off her! The music is not what you'd expect; not loud or brash but soft and gentle. It's a piano piece with a gently rocking rhythm and a slow, poignant melody. Slowly, as the melody revolves, the woman undresses. She's wearing ordinary everyday clothes; a black leather jacket, short black leather skirt, black tights, a white blouse and black high-heeled shoes. She takes off the jacket and unbuttons the blouse. There's nothing theatrical about the way she undresses; it's as if she's undressing at home in her own room, in front of her mirror. The skirt unzips down the side. She casts it aside, steps out of her shoes, unbuttons and slowly removes her tights. She's naked except for her black bra. The piano piece slows, drawing to a close, and as the last chords sound she reaches behind, loosens her bra and lets it slip away revealing the voluptuous whiteness of her breasts. For a few moments, as the music dies away, she stands there naked, perfectly still. She seems to be looking straight at me! She's so beautiful! Who is she? I must ask Ferdie. He seems to be a regular here; he must know who she is. The lights go out. I see her turn away in the shadows and disappear behind the curtain again. Then the lights in the room come on. The show's over.

Hey, there's no-one else here except Ferdie! He's sitting alone over there at a table by the stage. There's no other audience, all the other tables are empty. The place must be closed. That performance just now must have been a rehearsal. Oh that performance! I haven't come down to earth yet, I'm still entranced by that incredibly beautiful woman and her melancholy erotic dance. Ferdie signals that I should come over and join him. "Sit down," he says, "I can see you enjoyed the show. C'est Celeste." "Yes," I nod, I agree

with him, "celestial, that's the word; it was celestial!" "No, no," he laughs, "Celeste! It's Celeste! My wife!"

His wife! Ferdie married! Since when? Is he kidding me? Just then Celeste reappears. She's dressed in the same black leather jacket and skirt as in her stage act but now with a plain white tee-shirt and sneakers. She comes over and joins us at the table. She's Ferdie's wife! When he introduces her she smiles and looks straight into my eyes. Suddenly I'm not here any more! Oh I'm sitting at this table while Ferdie introduces Celeste but I'm not here! I'm up in the air! I'm floating! Looking at her I'm swept away by something infinitely beautiful deep down in her eyes. I'm dazzled, fascinated, overwhelmed by her beauty; it's love at first sight! Ferdie's wife! Can it be true?

"We'd like you to join us." I'm floating in a dream, a mist, I'm not listening. I'm gazing at Celeste, enchanted by her smile. "We'd like you to join us." It's Ferdie speaking. He reaches across the table and shakes my arm. I snap out of it. I make an effort to pull myself together, to concentrate. Join them? Join them in what? I haven't been listening. I stare back blankly at him. "With the bomb," he says, "with the bomb. We need you to help us plant the bomb." Hey, what bomb? Is he joking? He's looking dead serious but it doesn't make sense to me. "He means it." Now it's Celeste joining in. She can see I don't believe him. "We're going to plant a bomb," she continues, "We're going to blow up the TV transmitter at South Norwood, in the Crystal Palace Park. When that goes down it will shut off TV to over a million people. Ferdie wants you to be a lookout. He wants you to go with him and keep lookout while he plants the bomb."

I'm not dreaming any more! I'm not floating! I've come down to earth all right! I look at their two faces staring at me from across the table. They're not joking. They're dead serious. They really want me to help them with their bomb. I must get out of here! This is not a dream, I'm wide awake! The spell is broken. They must be mad, that's my opinion! I'm not hanging about! Ferdie has my briefcase by the side of his chair. I jump up, grab the case and run! Across the room, up the stairs, out into the street, away from their lunacy. I want nothing to do with their bomb!

9. Cambridge Circus

Running. Running up Lisle Street. Running towards Charing Cross Road. I just want to get away. Ferdie and Celeste frightened me back there with their talk about bombs. I suddenly had to get out of that dive. Not even Celeste's beautiful gaze could detain me. I grabbed my briefcase and ran. So here I am running away. Now a strange thing is happening. As I run it's getting lighter! It's dark at first, then a little lighter, then lighter still. By the time I reach Charing Cross Road there's a clear blue sky overhead! Early morning sunshine floods the street. It's broad daylight again!

I turn left and head up towards Cambridge Circus. I slow down and merge once again with the crowd of commuters. I look at my watch. It's only ten to nine! I'm not late! And I've got my briefcase back! What a relief! Things are returning to normal. Maybe that whole business with Ferdie was just a dream. I do daydream sometimes as I'm hurrying along. I become oblivious to everything around me, absorbed in the dream. But hey what's this! Up ahead, around the Circus, another crowd is blocking all the approaches! Oh no! Surely it's not that game again!

As I approach the crowd I'm surprised to see the roof of a car start to rise above their heads! It rises higher and higher until the whole car is visible as if resting on their heads! I climb the steps in the doorway of a building on the corner to get a view over the crowd. Right in the middle of the Circus is a gigantic pile of cars! A pyramid, three cars high! About a dozen cars on the bottom layer, half a dozen on the next, then just one on the top, the one I saw rising above the heads. The people who have just pushed it up there are dancing around in jubilation, waving their arms in the air. The crowd all around are cheering and whistling.

There's one more car to come. Some others are pushing it in from Shaftesbury Avenue. When they reach the bottom of the pile they turn it right over onto its roof. I hear a muffled scream and see something thrown around inside. The driver's still in there! They drag and push the car up to the top of the pyramid. It's not easy! As they get it up each level the crowd roars with excitement. A great cheer for level one, another for level two, and then, after much straining and several anxious moments, a great wild cheering and whistling as it reaches the top. It looks pretty precarious up there, rocking around upside down on the top car. I can see the driver's face pressed against the windscreen. He must be unconscious. There are drivers in some of the other cars too. They're not trying to escape. They must be frightened of the crowd or injured by the buffeting they've had.

Suddenly a man runs out of the crowd and starts to climb the pyramid of cars. The crowd cheer him on. He climbs right to the top. There he is standing on the top car, his legs wide apart to help keep his balance as the car rocks on the one below. The crowd are cheering wildly like it's a daring feat he's accomplished, climbing right to the top like that. But he hasn't finished yet, he's got something else in mind. He unzips his flies, takes out his dick and starts pissing on the cars below him. He sends a stream of piss in great coiling loops splashing down onto the cars below. The crowd go mad with excitement, cheering, whistling, screaming. What a great idea! Now others climb up onto the cars and start pissing on them too. Soon there are dozens of people up there. Not just men, women too! Skirts hitched up, knickers down, pissing merrily.

At the front of the crowd a group of men in a row all take out their dicks together and piss up onto the pile. When they finish others from behind move forward to replace them. This is pissing military fashion! Hey, look over there! Two women held up horizontally are being passed forward over the heads of the crowd. Their skirts are hitched up, knickers off, legs wide apart. When they reach the front they let it go, squirting it up as high as they can. Two sparkling parabolas of piss go splashing down on the cars. Not just on the cars! It's splashing everywhere! Everyone's getting wet. The air is filled with a fine spray of piss. Everyone's getting their feet wet too! The urine streaming down off the cars is forming a great pool slowly expanding around the feet of the crowd. I step down from my vantage point and skirt round the edge of the crowd. I must be getting on. I'm on my way to work. I mustn't be late. I head north up Shaftesbury Avenue leaving the crowd behind me.

10. Russell Square

Nearly there now. Here's Russell Square. This is where I work. There's the building over there; a neat Georgian facade smothered in Victorian terracotta. Here's the door. I go in, up the stairs, into my office. I set my briefcase down by the desk. I sit down. I'm here! I'm at work! The phone rings. I pick it up. Someone has a query about their account. I

answer the query and put the phone down. Straight away it rings again! Another query; it's bliss! Phone call follows phone call. Work begins. The day starts to slip away.

About mid-morning the phone calls stop. I sit back and gaze out across the Square. I get a great view from my office here on the second floor. Russell Square is laid out in a mandala pattern. The outer footpath forms a square. Halfway to the centre there's another footpath, this time forming a circle. The centre is a circular open space. Straight paths radiate symmetrically from the centre to the four corners. In the central open space there are three large circular slabs of polished granite. Why three? Why not four? And over there in the south-west corner great slabs of rough-hewn rock stick out from beneath the ground. Why are they only found in that corner? Why not in every corner? These asymmetrical features worry me.

It's a perfectly calm day. There's a clear blue sky above the trees. All the trees are completely still, hardly a leaf is stirring. But suddenly a gust of wind rattles the windowpane. It blows through the opening and scatters some papers from my desk across the room. Following their flight I turn towards the door. There's someone standing there. It's Celeste! She must have followed me from Soho. She crosses the room towards me, picking her way amongst the scattered papers. Then she sits down in the chair by my desk and smiles at me.

Oh that smile! Right away I'm lost again! I've never seen anyone so beautiful. Why has she come? "Ferdie sent me," she says, "He wants me to persuade you to join us. He wants you to stand guard with me while he plants the bomb." Stand guard with her? The way I feel I'd do anything to be with her. Perhaps I'll help them after all, if all they want is that I should stand guard with Celeste. Another minute and I'll be persuaded. But Celeste has her own idea of how to convince me. She stands up and comes round behind the desk to where I'm sitting. She leans back against the desk. Her short skirt rises up. Hey, she's naked under there! She reaches down between my legs, unzips my flies and starts playing around with me. Pretty soon my penis is erect. There it is! In the office! In broad daylight! She steps across me and slips down onto it. Then she begins to move, up and down, up and down. She pulls up her tee-shirt and presses my face against her breasts. Oh I'm persuaded! I'll join them! What do I care if I get blown to bits by Ferdie's stupid bomb! This ecstasy is all that matters!

When it's over we become aware of shouting and whistling outside. Celeste goes over to the window and looks out. There's some kind of demonstration going on out there. I go over and stand beside her. A great mass of students are marching round the square. They're carrying placards saying "Student Power Now!", "Anarchy!", "Revolution!", "No to Order!". They're heading towards the university administration building chanting their slogans and blowing shrill whistles. As we watch they stream in through the university gates and up the steps to the main entrance. They must be planning to occupy the building. There seems to be thousands of them, coming from all directions. They meet no resistance. They must have taken the authorities by surprise. As they stream up the steps and into the building some windows on the first floor open and a large banner is unfurled over the entrance. In huge red letters it announces "The Free University of London".

"Come on," says Celeste, "We must find Ferdie. He'll explain everything to you. Let's go now." I don't argue. I'm ready. I'd follow her anywhere now. In the doorway she stops

suddenly and steps back into the room. "Don't forget your briefcase," she says, "We'll need something to put the bomb in."

11. Caledonian Road

Down the stairs, out the door. Hey, it's dark again! When we step outside it's night again. The sky is pitch black with just a few stars showing here and there. A full moon bathes the trees in silvery light. Celeste heads north, up towards Euston Road. Euston Road to King's Cross. Then north again, up the Caledonian Road. The road seems to go on and on. Where are we going? "We're nearly there," Celeste says. She can see I'm tiring. She slows down and takes my hand. "Come on, we're nearly there. Ferdie will be waiting for us."

We turn left off the main road. Three, four doors down we turn in at the gate of a big Victorian house. There's a large tree in the front garden. Sitting in the tree there's a naked man. I stop to look. He's just sitting there on a high branch, swinging his legs and gazing at the moon. What's he doing up there? No time to find out! Celeste yanks me away, up the path, up the steps and in through the large front door.

The house, a brief description: A large double-fronted Victorian terrace. Wide bay windows up both sides. Four or five steps up to a porch with two tall Doric columns. The front door is ajar. We go straight in. The hall light is on but there's no-one about. Celeste opens a door on the left. There's no-one there. The room's completely empty, no furniture whatsoever, just a large oriental rug on the floor. Similar rugs have been hung on the walls. A solitary bare light bulb hangs down on a cord in the centre. Next Celeste tries the door opposite, on the right of the hall. She's not showing me around, she's looking for Ferdie. He's not in there either. The room's almost identical to the one on the left, oriental rugs on the walls like tapestries, a bare light bulb hanging down, completely empty.

Where next? Upstairs! Celeste leads the way. Two more rooms to investigate, left and right off the landing. As she opens the door on the right I hear someone cough. Hey, the light in that room, it's weird! Coils of smoke in a bluish haze. We go in. People are sitting all over the floor. Like in the rooms downstairs there's no furniture. Only here a crowd of people are sitting cross-legged on the carpet or leaning back against the rugs on the walls. They're all smoking, passing joints around. No-one seems to notice that we've come in. They're not here really, they're all far away. Celeste walks amongst them looking for Ferdie. She's a moving shadow in that purple haze. Occasionally she stops to ask someone if they've seen him. No-one answers. They just grin or smile up at her before lapsing back into their dream. She comes back to me by the door. "He's not here," she says and we go out.

On the landing Celeste takes a small silver box from her jacket pocket. It's elaborately engraved like an ornamental snuff box. Inside is a small pile of blotting paper squares. They're damp, impregnated with a dark liquid. She takes one, puts it in her mouth and swallows it. Then she takes a second one and puts that in her mouth too. She puts her arms round me and kisses me. As we kiss she pushes the paper with her tongue across into my mouth and down into my throat, forcing me to swallow it. Hey, she's choking me! I break away, coughing and spluttering. The paper leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. "Come on," says Celeste, and she opens the door to the room on the left.

12. Ferdie explains

Ferdie's sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, at the exact centre of a large circular rug. He's not wearing his usual outfit. The peaked cap is replaced by a yellow skull cap and instead of the lumber jackets and corduroys he's wearing a saffron-coloured silk robe elaborately embroidered with red dragons. What's he playing at? "Come in," he says, "I'm glad you decided to join us. Come and sit down." I go over and sit beside him. The door clicks shut behind me. Where's Celeste? I look all round the room but she's not there. Where's she gone?

Suddenly I'm not there in the room with Ferdie anymore! I'm in that tree in the front garden, gazing up through the branches at the moon. I'm sitting on a branch, naked, swinging my legs. The branches above me make a black web against the moonlit sky. I'm trying hard to catch the moon in that web. It's not easy! The moon's slippery, like a glob of mercury. It just wont stay put! I don't know why but I feel sad. I feel very sad! I'm starting to cry! Tears are streaming down my face and dripping onto my legs. It's making me so sad that I can't catch the moon in that web of branches!

"I once stopped the traffic at Piccadilly Circus by dancing in the middle of the road. It was one of the mantras from the Rig Veda." I'm back in the room with Ferdie. He's chattering away. I still feel sad. My face is wet with tears. Where's Celeste? I didn't come here to listen to Ferdie! I came to be with Celeste! Where is she? "That was when I first understood that the most important thing is to break the routine," Ferdie chatters on, "I was wearing a yellow robe like this one. I just dived into the middle of the road and started the dance. You should have heard the noise! The hooting, the shouting and swearing! But I ignored it all and got on with the dance. The traffic got so snarled up that no-one could go anywhere. In the end people just had to abandon their cars and find other ways to continue their journeys. That was the point! I broke their routine! They rediscovered what it was like to walk through the streets! Maybe some of them liked it and gave up their cars for good!"

"You should have seen his face!" It's Celeste! She's come back! I've been staring at the carpet all the while Ferdie was talking. I didn't see her come in. "The crowd beat him up! You should have seen his face when he came back from the hospital! There were rows of stitches all over it!" Celeste has come back. When she looks across at me I'm not sad anymore. I'm overjoyed. I'm as happy as can be. The idea of Ferdie's face all bruised and covered in stitches suddenly seems funny to me. I laugh out loud! Celeste laughs too! We laugh together until there are tears in our eyes! I'm crying again! With laughter this time! We think it's hilarious the crowd beating Ferdie up like that for dancing in the street!

Ferdie waits for our laughter to subside. He's trying to look dignified. He was trying to make a serious point. Now he wants to tell me about his plan, to explain about the bomb. Okay, I'm listening. I pull myself together and calm down. Then something amazing happens! As Ferdie speaks, the scene he's describing opens up before my eyes as if I'm really there! His words become the things themselves. And I'm right there in the middle of it!

I'm in this suburban street somewhere in Wandsworth or Clapham. Terraced houses line the street on both sides. All the roofs have TV aerials stuck up on poles rising eight or ten feet above the chimney pots. It must be because of poor reception; they have to stick their

aerials up high to get a decent signal because of the hill that stands between them and the transmitter in Crystal Palace Park. All the aerials on the poles are pointing in the same direction, all pointing towards the TV transmitter. Suddenly up there on the hill, way in the distance, there's a brilliant flash. Then comes a muffled roar. It's the transmitter, blown up by Ferdie's bomb. Nothing stirs in the street. No-one and nothing to be seen. Several minutes pass. Then a door opens. Someone totters out of one of the houses into the street and stands looking up into the sky. Another door opens. Someone else comes out. Then another. More and more people are coming out. All the doors are opening. All the TV prisoners, released by Ferdie's bomb, are staggering out. Pretty soon the street's crowded! Everyone's looking up, bewildered, into the sky. A hundred people milling about, bumping into each other. They start talking to each other! They meet each other for the first time! Who knows what this might lead to! Riots and civil disorder at first maybe, but then, who knows, a new style of communal living, a new social order! This was Ferdie's vision, his liberation of the TV prisoners. I saw it all as he was talking just as if I was there. I don't know how he did it.

13. Crystal Palace Park

We're standing at the top of the stairs, Ferdie, Celeste and I. Don't ask me how we got here, I've no idea. One minute I'm sitting listening to Ferdie explaining his idea and next thing we're here on the landing. Ferdie's got his regular clothes on again. He's also got my briefcase with him. He says he's put the bomb inside. He'll buy me a new one afterwards! So I guess we're off to plant the bomb! Down the stairs we go, out the front door and into the street. At the end of the road we catch a bus, a red double-decker. We go upstairs. There's no-one else there. We take the front seats. The bus sets off on its downhill run towards the city.

Ferdie and Celeste are sitting together on one side of the bus. I'm on the other side. Ferdie looks across and gives me that sly grin of his again. That gets me worried! What's he up to now? We seem to be going faster and faster. It's a long straight road down to King's Cross. The two rows of orange street lamps on either side of the road point far into the distance like an arrow. We shoot through two, three sets of red traffic lights! Are we out of control? Then I notice; the arrow of street lights is no longer pointing ahead of us, it's below us! We're rising up in the air! We've taken off! We're flying! Ferdie gives me a broad grin. "The bomb's ticking," he says, "We can't afford to get caught in a traffic jam!"

Here we are in this crazy red bus, me, Ferdie, Celeste, the bomb, arching high over the city. Below us is a sea of lights, golden orange. Through the lights the River Thames winds and coils like a black snake. It flashes green and blue. Silvery green, iridescent blue, impenetrable black; the river winds and coils through the sea of lights. We're soaring through the darkness, rising higher and higher. At the apex of our flight the bus turns right. South! We cross the river and start to descend. We're heading south towards the TV transmitter.

Crystal Palace Park in the dark. The Palace itself is not there anymore. It's long gone; burnt down in a furious blaze one night long ago. There's just a vacant lot now, with the TV transmitter at one end. We're sitting together on a bench facing the transmitter across the open ground. From here it's an impressive sight. I say it looks like a sort of miniature Eiffel Tower. Ferdie laughs scornfully at the suggestion. He says it's nothing like the

Eiffel, not the same shape at all, no resemblance! Oh well, he should know. Over there in Paris he gets a view of the real thing every time he steps outside his back door.

Ferdie takes my briefcase and sets out across the lot towards the transmitter to plant the bomb. Celeste and I stay put on the bench. We're keeping watch. We're supposed to shout a warning if anything suspicious happens, like a vanload of police suddenly showing up for instance. There goes Ferdie across the open ground, my briefcase in his hand. Off to realise his vision! He's halfway there now, maybe a little over. Suddenly, bang! One hell of an explosion! That's not right! Not yet! A terrific flash and blast! A whirlwind of dirt and dust fly past my face. For a minute I can't see anything. I'm blinded by the explosion. Celeste jumps up without a word and runs. Not out there after Ferdie! The other way, away from the scene! She's run for it! She must have panicked! I try to catch up with her but she's disappeared in the smoke and darkness.

I turn back towards the transmitter. It's still standing, looming defiantly against the night sky. Scarcely scratched I imagine by that premature blast. In the middle of the lot there's a wide crater with patches of grass burning round the edges. I walk over to the crater. What's this lying amongst the smoking stones? The handle of my briefcase! Of course, it was blown to bits by the explosion. What this sticking to it? Two of Ferdie's fingers! He must have been blown to bits too! What went wrong? Slowly I become aware of other bits and pieces lying around in the crater; several more fingers ... an eye ... part of a foot ... an ear. Ferdie in pieces ... literally separated ... by his famous three dots! It's awful! I feel dizzy. I notice the blue flashing lights of a police car approaching across the lot. I must get away.

14. Russell Square (2)

3am. Russell Square again. I've come here looking for refuge. My office seems the safest place. The Square is deserted at this time of night, no people, no traffic, perfectly quiet. Over the entrance to the University the students' banner is billowing gently in the slight breeze. There are two students standing guard on the steps. I suppose they're worried about a surprise raid by the police to throw them all out.

When I reach the entrance to the building where I work I find Celeste sitting on the doorstep waiting for me. I can see she's been crying, her face is still wet with tears. When she sees me she jumps up and hugs me tightly. Neither of us say anything about Ferdie or that disaster back there on the hill. There doesn't seem to be anything to say.

I use my pass-card to let us into the building and we climb the stairs in the darkness, feeling our way up. In my office the computer screen is shining brightly in the darkness. I must have left it on when we rushed off. We leave the office lights off so as not to alert the security guards. We're both exhausted. We sit together on the floor, leaning against the wall. Slowly I feel the pressure of Celeste leaning against me increasing until her regular breathing tells me she's fallen asleep. I stay awake, pretending to myself that I'm keeping a lookout. It's just possible the police might come looking for us here. I gaze out of the window at the sky over the Square and watch it slowly whiten as dawn breaks.

When the first slanting rays of morning sunlight enter the room, Celeste wakes up. We get up and stand by the window watching the sun slowly rise above the trees. A few students emerge from the University and hurry off in search of breakfast. Celeste says we

should go and join the sit-in. It would be perfect cover, and anyway, it's where she feels she should be. I say OK, I'll go with her. I'm committed now and I want to stay with her wherever it leads me. "Right," she says, "but first you must take the first step." "What's that?" I say, gazing into her eyes shining in the sunlight. "Well," she says walking over to my desk, "What can you do with this?" She means the computer terminal. Somebody's salary details are still showing on the screen. I tell her it's used to pay people, that I'm responsible for the company's payroll system. She tries hitting various keys at random. It beeps inanely back at her. "How about not paying people?" she says, "How about not paying everybody?" I laugh. Not pay everybody! That's 25,000 people! 25,000 people all expecting to be paid at the end of the month, all finding out there's nothing there! "Can you do it?" She's serious.

I think for a minute, then tell her, "Yes, I can do it. I can edit everyone's pay to zero pounds." She's delighted. Her eyes flash with excitement. "You see," she says, "it's the regular income that defines the routine. Cut off the income, break the routine, give people a chance to see their lives in a new light." It's Ferdie's philosophy all over again! I don't argue with her. I do what she asks. I'm carried away by the ecstatic feelings she arouses in me. She persuaded me to join in Ferdie's bomb plot. Now I'm going with her to join the student occupation. It seems like an appropriate parting shot to screw up the payroll! I edit the files. I make sure the control totals will appear to be OK. Nobody will know anything is wrong until pay day!

That's done, let's go! Just as we reach the door, she pulls me up. "You can't go dressed like that," she says, "They'll think you're a spy or something!" I see her point. Here I am, grey pin-stripe suit, white shirt, tie. I take off the jacket and tie. "Here," she says, "you wear this." She takes off her leather jacket. I assume we're going to swap jackets. But then she takes off her tee-shirt as well. "I'll wear your shirt," she says. I start to undo the buttons. I'm shaking with excitement. They won't come undone. I keep looking at the dark tips of her breasts, her smooth white skin. No wonder I'm having trouble with this shirt! Celeste thinks it's highly amusing! She's shaking with laughter! She helps me off with the shirt. One last tug and it's off! Celeste puts on my shirt, then my jacket. I put on her tee-shirt and leather jacket. We take a look at each other. We look fine! "Are you ready?" Celeste asks. "Yes," I reply, "I'm ready. Let's go!"