

## Lifepod

Welcome aboard this Lifepod, your rescue and preservation vehicle in deep space (RAPVIDS). Please state your name and date of birth.

–

I realise you probably left in a hurry but a name and date of birth are required for checking against the crew list for simple reasons of security. My sensors tell me that there is only one of you aboard, which is unusual as I am designed to carry up to twenty persons, but it is evident that there is no other person to ask.

–

My sensors tell me that your vital bodily functions are working normally, although a little slow in the heartbeat, so will you please state your name and date of birth.

–

Are you unconscious?

–

Your name and date of birth are important to me. Firstly to check that you are a genuine crew member of the *Anaglypta* and secondly I will be asking you to identify yourself every twenty four hours. Isolation in deep space can be psychologically disturbing to a high degree. If you answer correctly each time I will know that a lucid if basic cognitive function remains.

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It may be helpful if I explain that there can be serious consequences to not answering correctly to your name and date of birth each time it is asked. It is especially important that you understand that if any last occupant of this Lifepod declares herself at any time to be God, a case of galactic delusional psychosis will be self-evident and this vehicle will vaporise instantly.

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[proc_call AI_mod; declare 'name', 'dob' = nul; aiquery_workround;  
'result_1' = aiquery_workround(result [1]); declare id = 'human';  
aiquery_priority; 'priority_1' = order_ascend(life_signs,  
id_respond, id_terminate); close;] Thank you. My artificial intelligence module,
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who likes to be known as Susan, has indicated that it is imperative that you have a name and date of birth.

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In the absence of your response Susan has determined that you answer to the name of John Frederick Byron with a date of birth of the 21st of June 2200, Please remember this. John Frederick Byron, 21st of June 2200. You may now wish to rest.

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Please state your name and date of birth.

–

For three earth days you have failed to answer. Susan is not happy.

–

Please state your name and date of birth.

–

Please speak louder. Your answer is not registering well.

–

I have heard you say James Robinson and 5th January 2204. Please confirm.

–

Thank you for responding but that answer is incorrect. Please try again.

–

Thank you for responding but that answer is incorrect. Please try again.

–

Thank you for responding but that answer is incorrect. Please try again.

–

I have heard you say 'Oh God'. Please confirm name as God.

–

In respect for life, there will be a ten second delay before vaporisation to allow for any personal spiritual observances. The interstellar lifepod corporation will endeavour to send condolences to your family. Thank you for travelling with us John Frederick Byron.

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## Lockdown

When the symptoms first appeared, their arrival came as something of a surprise. Being well over seventy, Edith and Jack had been meticulous about observing the rules during the lockdown, greatly assisted by the village volunteer group which had spontaneously arisen to help people like them with their food and medical supplies. Well, Edith had been careful. Jack was rather out of it, had been for over a year. He probably was not even aware that the country was in the middle of a pandemic and even if he were, he was unlikely to be able any longer to tell you what a pandemic was. He had given up reading, his television was – as Edith ensured – entertaining rather than disturbing, and until winter set in he had potted in the garden. He seemed to want no more.

Edith was frustrated though. She had seen that her own horizons were going to be increasingly limited through the need to look after Jack, but before the lockdown she had at least been able to do a little personal socialising with friends, get out of the house for a short while now and again, pretend that everything was better than it was. Now there could be no illusions and she felt trapped. Even an animal had the option to chew its own leg off when caught in a trap, but what could she do?

Now Jack was showing symptoms.

That was not itself unforeseen. It was the length of time they had taken to appear that rather puzzled her. According to what she had read, they should surely not have taken more than fourteen days.

Still, beggars can't be choosers. He would be wanting his tea soon. Except he probably wouldn't want it. He now spent much of the day sleeping in his chair and she had to cajole him, sometimes even force him into eating and drinking. So long as he took a little food, enough so that he did not entirely waste away, she was satisfied, but he must drink. Dehydration was always the enemy of the old. Water, tea, it didn't matter. Drink up, drink up, dear. It was hard work and sometimes she had to stop herself from being angry with him.

She must be patient. She must not try and push things. Too much too soon might prove disastrous. As long as she kept putting three drops a day into his tea, everything would be all right in the end. She was sure of that, now that he had started to show symptoms.

## Lori

“How many places have we lived?” I asked Lori

“That depends on what you mean by ‘lived,’” she said. “If you spend one night in some town, did you live there? What about two nights? Or a whole week?”

I thought. “If you unpack all your things,” I said.

We counted eleven places we had lived, then we lost track. We couldn’t remember the names of some of the towns or what the houses we had lived in looked like. Mostly, I remembered the insides of cars.

“What do you think would happen if we weren’t always moving around?” I asked.

“We’d get caught,” Lori said.

“Sometimes I wish we were,” I told her. “Pay our dues, clean break, start again.”

She looked at me hard for a moment, then sighed. “It doesn’t work like that, honey. Take it from me. I know.”

And of course she did. She knew everything. She had, as my mother used to say, ‘been around the block’. That was partly why I was with her. I wished I hadn’t thought of my mother.

There was a knock at the door. I jumped, inside at least. Lori must have seen I was a bit startled, because she smiled – her best reassuring smile that I’d seen so often – and went to the door. “Pizza,” she said before she opened it. And it was.

But that was another thing. I was getting very bored with pretty much the same old food every day. I suppose I could have asked her “How many pizzas have we eaten?” but that might not have gone down very well. There were times when she couldn’t take a joke or anything that could sound a little critical.

“Great,” I said. “I’m starving.” But it was a question. How many pizzas? And there was a part of me that wanted to say “Let me order this time” or “You choose, I’ll pay”. Not that I would be able to do that very often. Lori gave me money when I needed it. “You only have to ask,” she’d say, but sometimes I just wanted to have some for its own sake. So I could think, “Hey I’ve got some money. What can I do with it?”

The pizza was on the small table by the window and Lori was already tucking in. “So are we living here?” she said through a mouthful of cheese and pepperoni.

“What?”

“Are you unpacking all your things?”

“I dunno,” I said. “What do you think?”

“Two nights,” she said. “We can take a look around this town. There could be some pickings here. Enough to keep us going anyway, but we shouldn’t stay too long. It looks like a place where nothing much happens, where strangers get noticed.”

I’d like to get noticed one day, I thought, but I didn’t say anything. Lori had noticed me, of course, and that was enough. “For now,” a little voice inside me added, but I ignored it as usual. The trouble was that I could ignore but I couldn’t stop hearing. It was a voice that kept asking about the future.

“I’ll half live here.” I said.

“Where are you going the rest of the time?” She didn’t sound pleased.

“Half unpack.” I explained. Lori didn’t always get things said when one thing meant something else – is that what they call metaphor? – even when she’d just done it herself.

“Oh. Which half?”

“The better half,” I replied. She seemed to find that funny, which made me feel good. We started laughing. Me first with a little snort, then her with a kind of chuckle she tried to hold in, and it went from there. In the end we both collapsed on the bed, crumbs of pizza on our clothes and around our mouths.

As we calmed down, we just lay there on our backs, looking up at the ceiling.

“You OK?” she said. That was the fourth time she’d asked that day. Her concern always touched me and it slightly worried me that I seemed to have started counting how many times she asked, as if I was measuring each day against the others.

I took her hand and squeezed it. “Without you,” I said, “I don’t know where I’d be. On the streets, I guess. Or dead.”

“You’re not either,” she said, lifting her hand under mine.

“But that’s where I was heading, I think,” I said.

“The past is no place to be looking.” That was typical Lori, always thinking ahead.

I was tired. We’d been in the car for the whole day. My body ached and my heart ached too. At the same time I felt everything was all right. I reckon that’s why I just drifted off, lying there beside her on the bed, safe again.

It was dark when I woke.

And Lori had gone.

When I eventually went outside to check, the car was gone too. I waited for her all night and then all through the next day and night, barely sleeping, not eating, getting worried sick. I couldn't phone her because I had no number and she'd made me throw my phone away. "They can tell where your phone is." she had said. "That's how they find you." Her bag was still in the room, but when I finally got round to opening it, looking for any message, any clue, I found there was hardly anything in it. Enough for a night or two. That's all. When she hadn't turned up by the time I had to vacate the motel room, I left before it was light.

I wish I could tell you more, but there's nothing to say. She was there and then she was gone. I never found her. Never heard from her again. I don't know whether she meant to leave me there or went to meet someone and it went wrong or the past caught up with her. She just disappeared. If you want an ending that has meaning, that answers questions, that ties things up neatly, you're not going to get it. I didn't. That's how life is. For no good reason you meet someone and for a while it's like your heading somewhere on a journey. You have something to look forward to, even if you're not sure what it is. Then for no good reason it all just stops.

But I suppose if you've learned anything on the way, you keep that with you. I'm not on the streets. And I ain't dead. Not yet.

## Mercy

I think I may be blind.

It's hard to tell. I haven't seen the light for—

A light. Any light. I am not allowed light. Or room to move.

That I am permitted any visitors at all is a mercy, though at times I wonder at the point of it all. My wife comes – what shall I say – regularly I presume, for what do I have to guide me as to the passing of days or weeks? And sometimes my son. Their voices comfort me at first and then remind me of what is beyond my reach. They tell me what they have been doing since they came last, perhaps some news about friends or family, but I can tell how much of an effort it is for them to speak at all for I have nothing to give back. One-sided conversations that soon lapse into silence. I think my wife now brings a book and my son perhaps listens to music. Their words become intermittent. Sometimes I think they must have left and am suddenly surprised by finding they are still here. I get annoyed that I find that irritating.

But no, you are welcome. Truly, most welcome. With people like you I am, how shall I say, most at ease. We have no history of before this... imprisonment, no past to bring to mind, no guilt by association with whatever it is I am supposed to have done to deserve this indeterminate sentence of solitude. In a strange way, with you I am free. Can you come and go as you please? I would like to think so, to have a companion who can visit even in the middle of the night. You may ask what difference it makes if I am not able to tell whether it is day or night, but it does. The simple knowledge that you could appear at any time at all, that there could still be room in my life for the spontaneous, for me to say 'I'm sorry about the mess. I wasn't expecting you.'

Appear? Oh yes. The blind are very insistent that they go to see a play. I see you, as Hamlet would say, 'in my mind's eye'. That I cannot see what is outside of me does not mean I cannot see what is within. Within is my domain, my home, my castle. I have, as it were, in the last few – let us call them years, whatever they are – been doing a lot of decorating and refurbishment, not to mention some building works. Up and out. I have plans for a whole new wing. Come, let me take you on a tour.

We must start at the heart of the place. When we were young, full of hope and ambition, my wife and I once designed a house. It was an exercise in seeing what we really wanted out of life. The first thing we drew was her grand piano. You see most houses these days

with a wall long enough will have radiator or a large window there, sometimes both. The piano needs protection from heat and light. So we drew an interior wall and alongside it the piano. It was when we came to children's rooms that perhaps we found we did not know each other as well as we thought.

I am not a musician. Here the heart is the library. It is what I first designed and I cannot say that I have ever stopped tinkering it. Walk with me. Cataloguing has been interesting. I tried to maintain some distinctions by genre, but I kept finding the shelves reordering themselves so that what I remembered best was near the door. Not necessarily favourites, but just what I could easily recall for good or bad. The furthest reaches of the library, where the light of memory is mostly very dim but can on rare occasions flare up with a heart-warming brilliance, are where I like to spend most time, gradually trying to stock the shelves.

And you see these doors at the end of each stack? Go, look through the glass. Where is it? The Lakes, Dolomites, Pyrenées, Cuillins, Alps? Where? And that cupboard by the door will have the necessary kit, so whenever the inclination strikes... And other places too. Venice in the rain, Alnmouth in the sun, St Christophe where the cuisine in the small family hotel was—

I miss that. I cannot taste anything any more. I must be eating because I am never hungry, but I taste nothing. I have had to reconstruct my memories of good food. You should see the kitchen I have built, though that's only a tool to help. Sometimes I test myself on herbs and spices. Can I recall the bouquet and the expectation of tarragon, marjoram, zatar?

Would you like some music? It's piped through to every room, each individually controlled. I don't have to go to the music room to put something on. Not a music room like my wife would dream of, full of instruments, but like the library a place where I store all I can remember having heard. I never learned to read music or play an instrument and I have never been able to sing in tune, but in my head I could do all these and remembered music never strayed out of tune. I've always found it strange that I could not reproduce what my mind's ear heard.

But it's gone oddly silent. There is always some background noise, like a house gently sleeping. There should— it's hard to breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe, please help me, I ca—



Inside her head Nurse Stafford whispered a prayer to the god she didn't really believe in to forgive them all for what they had done, even though it was perfectly rational and logical and approved by court order and a mercy really. All those years. You could not call it a life and she would surely want the same if she was ever in that position. She pushed the ventilator into the corner. Yes, of course she would.

## ***One One***

*One One was a racehorse.*

*One Two was one too.*

*One One won one race;*

*One Two won one too.*

That's how he wanted to remember Edward. As a small bundle of seemingly inexhaustible energy running round in ever larger circles in the back garden, arms out like an aeroplane, endlessly reciting this new ditty he had brought back from school.

With the memory, however, James was acutely aware that at the time Edward's repetition of the rhyme had gone on for so long that it had become yet another exasperating irritation and that he had wondered yet again whether there was not something wrong with the boy, some element of ADHD – though there was no deficit in his attention to that he was engaged in; just an apparent inability to engage with anything else.

Single-mindedness. Purpose. Concentration. Obsession. How do you tell them apart? Ye shall know them by their fruits. The mutilated dog had been a shocking fruit.

You love someone but they do something terrible. That does not mean you stop loving them, even though you have in some way to accommodate, maybe even punish their crime, their sin. You can't alter what's happened. No-one can. But you don't need to add emotional rejection to the already wayward mind and soul. What is the point of love if not unconditional? Till death us do part. And more: '...and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death'.

Even so, continuing to show that love to Edward had been very, very hard when it became apparent just what he had been up to in his student years. Many fathers would have kicked the boy out. James had won few friends by making no secret of the fact that he still loved his son and always would, no matter what emerged at the investigation and trial.

If only Rachel had still been there. But that was part of the problem. For so much of his life Edward had been denied a mother's love and, though James was no psychologist, he could see why Edward had turned against women, had been so merciless towards them. Not that James had stopped loving Rachel either, but her going had surely contributed to what went wrong. If one were to talk in terms of mistakes, Rachel's absence from the

scene was a mistake. Not that anyone could have foreseen the effect at the time. Nor how the dog too would play its part.

The dog had been a persistent yappy nuisance, always escaping from the neighbour's garden into their own, belting through and unbalancing the neatly planted rows in the borders, leaving messes on the meticulously mown and striped lawn. But no-one could say that it deserved its gruesome end. Even when it had started digging. Digging where it was not supposed to dig.

Though which of us deserves our end? James looked across the courtroom at his beloved son. How would this end? He could not convince himself that the so-called justice the court was supposed to administer had very much to do with deserving. Everything to do with precedents handed down, compromised thinking by committee, general rules rather than taking into account the particular. The one thing James was certain of was that Edward deserved his father's love, despite everything, perhaps even because of everything.

'Mr Sandown... Mr Sandown.'

Hearing his surname, Edward's surname, James's became aware that his thoughts, his love for his son, had turned what was being said in the court into just a background noise, like the constant sound of waves lapping that is just part of the fabric of being at the seaside, only noticeable should it suddenly cease. He tried to concentrate.

'Do you understand what has been said to you?'

James found himself nodding, concluding that it probably wouldn't make much difference whether it was understood or not.

'How do you plead?'

James was ready. He leaned forward slightly, gripping the rail in front of him. He'd been waiting for this moment. He looked fixedly at his son, tried to catch his eye, but Edward kept his head down and wouldn't look back at him. So he turned to face the judge.

James spoke clearly, firmly. 'Not guilty.'

## Pearl

Pearl. A short step to 'knit one, purl one' and then just Nit. Purlie Wurlie, googie goo. Then after Mr Johnson introduces them to *1984*, Prole.

'Named after your Gran,' her mother says. And that is the point. She is the only Pearl in her school, the only one of her age in the town, in the universe probably. The same as she would be the only Gladys, Mavis, Irene, Cissy, Dawn, Doris, Elsie. Her mother obviously had no better sense then than she has now.

Puerile. That is another one. And she cannot forget the day when Mrs Beaman, for reasons Pearl can no longer remember, tells the class some bible story about a 'pearl of great price'. She spends the rest of the day walking away from questions of 'how much, darlin'?'

If only her mother had given her another name as well, then she could use that, at least outside the home. But it is just Pearl. 'Same as your Gran.' When she can, she tells people she is called Sian, Siân when she can write it down, but it is too late for school. It is Pearl at register, Pearl in the classroom, Pearl Baker when in trouble, a string of Pearls.

Once she tries 'pearls before swine' as a reply to her tormentors but it doesn't work. Some of them just say 'what?' Others make pig noises at her, which only makes it worse.

When she complains to her mother about the bullying because of her name, her mother simply says, 'It's not the name. It's you.' When she asks what her mother means, she gets the response: 'Bullies know who to pick on. It's up to you to show them they're wrong.' Pearl's repeated question of how just goes unanswered. Like most of the questions that are important to her. So a distance grows and with it an increasing frustration and a swelling conviction that it is all her mother's fault. You don't get to choose your own name, or namezzzz, but Pearl believes you should. There should be a time, perhaps more than one, say at the ages of seven, eleven and fifteen(?) when you should be able to confirm that you are happy with your present name or change it for another, or even add a few. Otherwise you can be trapped in the name other people have decided for you.

Well, that's what happens, doesn't it? It isn't her fault. If you are a Pearl it stands to reason that you have a pearl-handled knife. That is mother-of pearl, of course, but that only makes it more appropriate, more bound to be. And it makes the handle very easy to wipe clean.

## A Sense of an Ending

For a few seconds he toyed with the idea of leaving instructions with the undertaker to delay arrival by ten minutes, but rapidly decided that not enough of the likely attendees would appreciate the joke. Shame really, because there seemed to be bugger all fun in the whole business.

He had been right. When some twenty years ago, in one of those moments of serious but not destructive marital exasperation, Janice had wailed 'Why do you always make a joke out of everything?', he had rather unusually paused and looked inside himself to see whether he could answer the question simply as asked. His reply was arrived at instinctively rather than rationally, so he felt it was the best truth he could offer.

'Because if I don't,' he said, 'I am afraid that something bad will happen.'

Had he stopped making jokes recently? No. Playing with words was just as much his delight as ever. The zip to what he had once described to his daughter as the banter bag remained fully open. But something bad had happened, as of course he had always known it would, however much he tried to squeeze a funny out of each minute of life. It was like a race but in the end death would always come from behind and overtake.

In that awkward and embarrassed appointment with the doctor, preceded by the ominous phrase 'do you have partner who could come with you?', as if the doctor had not read in his notes that he was married – too much to hope that the consultant had got everything else wrong – the word 'terminal' had hit the deck with an almost audible sound. They had all waited for the echoes to subside. Terminal, connector closing the circuit, where the trains stop at the buffers. Nothing there. Semester in Alabama? Term in AL. Rubbish. Home for termites? Oh, bollocks.

So he had started to put his affairs in order (Susan, then Emily and in first place the winner is ... dum dum...dum dum... ha bloody ha, think first if you need to put anything in the shredder) and now he was planning his funeral. Or first of all deciding whether he should plan his funeral. Assuming he would have one worth planning and not be tipped into the ground hugger-mugger with maiméd rites like Ophelia – even though she had surely not committed suicide, but merely in a distracted state of mind made no effort to save herself. Like himself in a rational state of mind coming to the conclusion that the treatment available for a few months of breathing and not much else was not worth the effort. It was the clothing did for her. Question: if she'd been mad enough to tear all her

clothes off, like Lear, would she have survived? Answer a): speculation on what a writer does not write is valueless. Answer b) can we rewrite the play so that she survives and comes running in stark naked, wildly increasing male audiences for *Hamlet*? Bollocks again. Concentrate.

Assume a funeral service. If the family remains chose to have at some later date what seemed these days to be called a 'celebration of the life of' then presumably the funeral would be a small affair so people were not troubled to come and remember him twice. He would have to find out somehow, though it was tricky question to ask: 'Will you be celebrating my life later?' No. Maybe. It depends whether we think anyone will come.

But you couldn't devise the contents of a celebration of your own life without appearing impossibly vain, fun though that might be. A Celebration of the Life of George Bertram, by George Bertram. Imagine the conversations afterwards. But no, that would be an event for others to construct with whatever level of truth they felt appropriate. Assume a modestly but not meagrely attended funeral service. How much can you decently plan without appearing impossibly bossy? Apart from which, if you played the dictator too much, you could simply be ignored. As in life, getting your own way in death seemed to be a matter of careful if not always obvious negotiation.

And why? Why have any hand in it at all? What, as he had so often asked others, was he trying to achieve? Some sense of his view of himself, perhaps. Cue some of his favourite lines from his favourite play:

VIOLA: I warrant thou art a merry fellow and carest for nothing.

FOOL: Not so, sir, I do care for something. But in my conscience sir,  
I do not care for you.

The something is never defined, but it's there. So when 'why-do-you-treat-everything-as-a-joke?' George Bertram is stripped down to the most bare essentials, what is to be found? What is his 'something'? Is it serious or not? Is it to be found in music, in words or something that uses both? Is it even worth sharing?

He took the dog for a walk. It was an activity that often resolved his thinking problems. He sometimes wondered if it did the same for the dog. It was rather presumptuous to imagine a dog's life was too simple to have a brain that could stall when you pumped the accelerator too much.

And that was the problem, the walk or just possibly some telepathic musings from the dog concluded. He, we, perhaps all living things are too complex to distil to a single

essence. No one piece of writing or music or anything could ever really sum him up. At least not to himself, who knew all the highways and byways within and yet still sensed others unexplored. Friends and relatives might find the means of bottling him, according to those aspects of him they had enjoyed (or not), but he knew too much.

Interesting that God introduced himself to Moses out of the burning bush by saying 'I am that I am' – a phrase that he had told both his children as they approached puberty was worth consideration in detail if they ever felt lacking in confidence. I. Think *I*. Am. Think *am*. An ambiguity over 'that'. I am what I am or I am, so that I am – very self-determining, appropriate for deities. Or an extra strengthener, as he had most strongly suggested in a Yorkshire accent: 'I am. Ay, that I am.' In any event, this god, stripped down, was still everything he was.

Perhaps he could say his dying wish was to have some words read out, explaining the fatherly advice he had given to his children, for if anything summed him up it was perhaps his attempt to give them in as pithy a manner as possible as much of what he rightly or wrongly called his accumulated wisdom as he could. The mantra of 'I am' was his first. His last was given when they were each about to leave home and was to be brought to mind whenever they were faced with situations where other people seemed to be forcing them towards places where they did not want to go. 'Remember,' he had said, 'whoever they are, however powerful they seem to be or think they are, you can always tell them to fuck off. It's the most basic of human rights: fuck off.'

That could make a funeral go with a zing. And why would you want one that's zingless?

## The Big Cheese

I don't think I'll be climbing The Big Cheese again. If I had a go next year, that would round off thirty years, but it's getting too hard. I find now that there are things which, whatever my mind says, my body is adamant should be given a miss. The Big Cheese is about to join the list.

Which in one way is a loss nearly as great as Bill's disappearance and then his death. That's also an exaggeration, not to say a rather selfish perspective, but I've climbed The Big Cheese every year since Bill took himself off into the wilds of the Pentland hills – a half-ruined cottage with no electricity, I was told – stopped communicating with his friends and found his comfort in a bottle.

I would send postcards, Christmas cards, occasional letters to his last known address but they were neither answered nor returned. Like him, they just vanished. The cottage showed no signs of habitation on the one time I made the effort to trek up there.

So our friendship just stood still by the side of the road that wound away from our many climbs together, his being best man at my wedding, that final continental foray to the Öztal and that last visit to him as a family man when my wife and I could not miss the smell of whisky on his breath when we came down to breakfast. And it was surely just coincidence that my last attempt to discover his whereabouts received an email reply that my enquiry had arrived on the day of his funeral. Found and lost simultaneously.

We were not great climbers. We weren't even good climbers really. Free range hillwalking and ridge scrambling was more our thing, but we did occasionally stretch our desire not to follow beaten tracks to undertaking a bit of genuine rock climbing. And so The Big Cheese as a (possibly) new route up Great End as a means of topping Scafell Pike. We never published the route. I doubt we could have remembered and mapped it well enough to get anywhere near guide book entry. It was mostly a matter of serendipity: looking up, choosing a line up to a certain point, checking that the point was not an obvious dead end or beyond our capabilities, muttering 'Do you think it will go?' and then giving it a try.

We climbed through, alternating the lead, and so in many ways I have a better sense of the parts of the route that Bill took on his leads than of the ones I took on mine. Perspective. When leading, you are too concentrated on what is immediately to hand –



and foot – to see much of the line above and quite frequently reliant on shouts from below, like “There’s a crack to your left that might get you round that overhang.”

It was Bill that named it The Big Cheese, because on one section he engineered an unusual solution to the problem of the holds being too far apart for progress. He had reached what climbers call, always in retrospect, the crux: the most difficult point in a route which, once negotiated, will make the rest of the climb seem comparatively easy. “I need another foothold,” he called down. “The crack’s narrowing to nothing and I can’t get my boot in. I just need to make one step across and I can’t.”

As the belay, you simply have to wait. There’s time to think of other things.

‘Below!’ A small shower of pebbles and dust, then Bill announced, “Cracked it. Climbing,” and I let the rope feed out.

When I got there I found that he had firmly wedged into the diminishing crack a rock upon which it proved safe to step. Wedged is the word, because the rock was shaped like a large triangle of cheese, almost perfect in the smoothness of its sides, genuinely as if cut by a knife.

And it’s been there ever since, every year that I have climbed that route, or an approximation of it, in memory of a friendship and latterly a life. I have explained its provenance to each new climbing partner I have introduced to The Big Cheese or who, in these last few years, has helped me make it up the rock face. I no longer lead. I follow. And now I do not think I can even do that.

So this time I have brought it home with me. I suppose I have undone the route, though I hammered in a piton as a replacement, else I would not have had anything to stand on myself once the cheese was in my pocket. It had worked a bit loose anyway and wasn’t too difficult to remove. Time’s inexorable erosion. I’ve undone the rationale for the name, that’s certain, but the route is far from the only thing in life that owes a name to a history no longer discernible.

As you grow up, you acquire things: possessions, skills, understandings, friends, enemies, knowledge; as you grow old, you let things go. Bill’s gone. Not the first, not the last, but when someone holds your life on the end of a rope, it chisels a mark. Whatever else drifts away from me, I will keep the cheese. Please put it on the window sill in my room at the care home, if it should ever come to that. If it’s the old memories we retain in senility, perhaps it will jog me into remembering the best of a life that shone for a while but

ultimately ended in defeat. Looking back, I think the hard stuff was always closer than I, a mere beer drinker, realised at the time.

Mind you, if I tell the staff not to move The Big Cheese from the window sill, they will think I've gone away for good. But I will know what it means.

## Vigil

Spy?

A dangerous word, my young fellow.

A word that can spin out a life to the finest of threads without breaking, if the torturer is master of his trade.

Yet who these days is not a spy?

It is no secret that those who travel to foreign shores are often used by nameless men to accomplish missions besides their own. And even if untouched in this, they remain duty bound to keep their eyes and ears alert for any shadow of a plot that might touch upon our state. 'Twas ever thus and none but a traitorous fool would say it should be otherwise.

But the world has shrunk of late. A man may scarce leave his city, his village, his own front door but that he knows that, should he disregard a few words here, a few signs there, the slightest smell of popery, he might become embroiled in accusations that will drag him, his family and his friends down into a stinking pit for generations yet to come. There is no innocence in ignorance. Therefore there is scarce an innocent alive.

Watch that window on the right, at the top. Let me know if you see the slightest glimmer of light.

One is used to the tremor of fear and the gaze of suspicion for a while after any new plot is revealed – or should I say, announced as having been discovered. It is like any natural disaster or ominous portent. Yet the ripples now do not die away. Sir Francis Walsingham will not allow and what Sir Francis Walsingham will not allow, will not be.

You may say he does all for the safety of our queen and realm. I have no doubt you are right. I do not question; I merely wonder at the price to pay.

Shush.

Did you mark that? A serving girl? Could you make out what she said? Was she calling out to someone or speaking back into the house, do you think

No matter. We can fill in details later. We are agreed that we saw that door open and shut but we did not see anyone enter – though it is very dark, is it not?

Now brother speaks to brother uncertain how the words will fall, whether they will gently rot into the ground or be raked up, turned over and declared green again. Yet which of us can protest that he is not descended from a Catholic family?

Are you listening? To me? What is going through your mind? Is this subversion? Ah, but in you or me? This could in the end prove to be a trap. I am pushing and prodding until eventually you speak and say something... agreeable, you think, to my drift. You do not want to contend with me. I am after all older, stronger and – you would be correct in believing – more versed in ways to kill a man than you. Quietly. In the dark.

So you echo what you think are my thoughts. Then hold your breath in case it is the first step to the scaffold and your guts being wrenched out and burnt before your eyes. Though even then, you know that is mercifully near the end. What goes before... I did not station you outside the chamber that evening for nothing.

Look! The window. You see. The light shines, it does not, it shines again. Three times. An accident of movement or a signal, it is not for us to say. But together we witnessed the light shine and die three times.

You are shivering. I find a sheep fleece next to the skin makes nights like these easier to bear, although it should not be very thick. If you need to run, being encased in a heavy sheepskin will simply lead you to the slaughter. There is much for you to learn and learn you shall if you stay with me.

Go back to the horses. Do not disturb them, there must be no sound, but you will find in the bag behind my saddle another small fleece. Wrap it round you and come back. Go now. Quietly. Your eyes should be well accustomed to the dark now.

But not I fear to the true darkness of it all. Can one even give voice to one's thoughts safely when alone? Perhaps every bush is listening. And none can escape the sharp hearing of God. A man cannot serve two masters, Sir Francis, except in appearance.

And so the fetching of a sheepskin prevents a young man from spotting an old wolf padding silently in at a door to the side. Mission accomplished, my Lord.

## Wedding Guest

It wasn't my fault.

I mean, we'd parked the car and were just walking to the church, me and Trish and her sis, when I tripped over this down and out. Can you say that? Homeless man. Well, obviously I didn't trip over him and go sprawling all over the pavement, but I nearly tripped over him.

So I stopped.

Trish and Judy, that's her sister, they kept going. You know that way women walk when they're a bit irritated? Purposeful would be one way of putting it. One way. Anyway they kept going and I thought 'Here we are going to a wedding, everyone's going to toast the bride and groom, wish them all the best for the future, and here's this man whose future somehow got lost somewhere along the line.' I just felt sorry for him.

And the thing was he'd noticed me. You know how you can walk by pretending you don't see them and that's sort of okay. You both know there's nothing on. But because I nearly fell over him, I looked and he looked straight back at me. We 'exchanged looks' as they say in books. So I couldn't really ignore him. And as I nearly trod on him, I'd automatically just said 'Sorry'. So I was, well, caught, if you like.

Trish and Judy just ploughed on, up the road. I said, 'I won't be a minute, I'll catch you up' but I'm not even sure they heard. The church was about a hundred yards away and I just stood and watched them press on. Trish didn't even look back. It's as though they hadn't noticed I'd stopped. They'd certainly not taken any notice of the sailor.

Oh, yeah. he told me that straight away. I think. He'd sailed the seven seas, if that's the number we've got. Well he didn't put it quite like that, which is all a bit romantic really, especially for someone sleeping on the streets. But in his day he'd sailed all over the world. Not Navy. Merchant ships I suppose.

When he was talking to me, I know it was like I couldn't get away, not because he was hanging on to me or anything, but I just wanted to find out more. He was telling me his life story, no not all of it, he was telling me about one voyage, but...

There you are you see. It's all gone a bit vague now, as though I can't really remember it any more. Not the details. It seemed clear as crystal at the time, but it's like some mist or

fog has sprung up and I can't remember what he told me. And I can't really picture his face any more, only I'm sure that at the time – here's a joke – I thought it was quite memorable, you know how you do sometimes. The eyes. It's usually the eyes.

To be honest, I just don't know what happened, how long I stood there listening to him. I thought it was only a few minutes, but when I tried to put a coin in his mug, he wouldn't let me. He got a little angry about it, so I just gave up and left him and then when I got to the church, blow me if they weren't already coming out. I could see the photographer was lining everyone up outside the church for the family photographs, so I started to run. I'm a cousin of the groom and I'd be expected to feature in one. But when Trish saw me at the gate...

I wouldn't want to see that face again. If looks could kill, you'd be dying every day. She said just one word. 'Keys.' And once I'd handed them over, she was gone. She didn't even stay for Judy, who sort ran after her a bit and then came back and obviously didn't know quite what to do. She asked me what happened but even by then I couldn't really explain, so I just shrugged.

So me and Judy stayed and went to the reception in the pub across the road. It was quite late and of course we'd had a bit to drink by then. When I asked her how on earth she was going to get home, she suggested we share a taxi. Which we did. To her place. I shouldn't have gone in. When she asked if I wanted a coffee and said I could get another taxi later, well, I think we both knew what she meant, and yeah, I shouldn't have gone in. I know that. But it wasn't really my fault, I mean, what would *you* do? I was pretty sure Trish would have locked me out. She's done that before. So where was I going to stay? Wander the streets all night, bed down in some doorway. Become a homeless man myself?

Now it's all gone wrong of course. I thought Judy just, you know, wanted some company since she split up with her ex, and it would just be, well, mutual consent and then we'd agree to close the door on it. Leave it a bit ajar, if you like, but not fling it wide open. She won't let go of me. Phoning, texting, Facebook messages. I'm stuffed with Trish. She won't even let me in to get my things. I don't know where to go. If I can't find someone to help me, I'm going to end up at Judy's because there's simply nowhere else. And I don't want that. I really don't. Not with her hanging round my neck like this.