

Abdul

Abdul-Aziz, whose name he had been told as a boy meant 'Servant of the Almighty', was worried. He might be on the brink of fame, fortune, power and the respect he felt he had always been denied, or he might be half a step away from a cliff edge that would ensure not only his own probably quite painful and prolonged demise but also the obliteration of his family – quite possibly from any record of existence as well as disappearance in the flesh.

There was a problem. It was so rare as to be within a whisker of being unique.

He had seen Allah.

And the nub of the problem was not that he thought he had seen Allah, which could be explained away later as a delusion arising from a fevered brain; nor that he had experienced a vision of Allah, which could be explained away later as an illusion arising from a similarly fevered brain or an attack on his integrity by the forces of Satan. The nub of the problem was that he *knew* he had seen Allah. And he knew he knew. There was absolutely no question about it.

Complete and unarguable certainty was a major component of what bound him and his fellow Taliban together, but on the matter of his having seen Allah face to face, he was equally convinced that his word would not be accepted by all the mullahs who mattered.

Abdul was quite ready to be a martyr for his faith, albeit not with such life-despising fervour as he had from time to time instilled into others, but he was not ready to be a martyr condemned as a heretic, a sacrifice stripped of the adulation that should accompany such a glorious act of self-denial.

The choice was stark. Stop swimming and let the current carry him downstream along with everyone else in the river of faith or struggle against the flow and declare what his heart, mind and body now knew to be true. That was fraught with a complexity greater than the simple question of whether such as he could convince friends and enemies, superiors and inferiors, the truly faithful and lip-serving believers that he had genuinely seen Allah.

Because what he had seen was a revelation beyond imagining.

That Allah was all good, all wise, all powerful and all merciful was a knowledge that had coursed through him immediately he saw the godhead, but had in most ways been but a

confirmation of what he already held in his heart. What had stunned him was the beauty of her form. There was no mistake.

She.

And the music that had lifted his soul!

Abdul-Aziz was worried beyond belief.

Going Legit

It was a sunrise to make you yearn for home, if you had one. The edge of the yellow-blue orb was just starting to break past the rounded horizon of Arbroath 2 as Captain Piédeux manoeuvred the ageing Triconium Spaceshark to face away from the intensifying glow and raised the fastcharge panels to replenish the plasmachaotic drive storage cells.

It would take most of an Arbroath day, given how far he had to travel, but he had time on his side. They were on schedule and even if there had been no need to recharge the drive, there would have been little point in arriving at Vogonaria earlier than expected and have to park up until his delivery could be accepted.

Not like the old days, when he had crept in to all kind of planets via the byways and backways to avoid government sensors and patrols, before unloading his goods as fast as possible before running out at high speed. He was clean now. The cargo was legitimate. That's what happened to old pirates and smugglers if they lived long enough. Life forms who had themselves grown strangely honest after amassing sufficient wealth but still appreciated your skills, or perhaps owed you one, put you on the straight and narrow with an official order from apparently approved sources. There were the usual kickbacks, but what's a commission here and there between temporary friends?

Piédeux got out of the pilot's chair and started to head towards his cabin suite, resting his hand for a moment on the shoulder of the third arm of his longstanding partner in both nefarious and honourable trade.

'Call me in three hours,' he said.

The Gimbal grunted assent.

Piédeux was getting out of the shower when the message came from Kirvan, the only other human on the ship. Kirvan dealt with the money, now it was all tied up with order numbers, invoices, inter-galactic bank transfers and things Piédeux quite frankly could not get excited about – certainly not in the way that Kirvan did. In common with all experienced traders of his kind, Piédeux had worked alongside a wide variety of species throughout the galaxies, but he only ever let humans handle the money: himself alone if it was cash in hand; a trusted human lieutenant if credit was involved. He understood how human minds worked, which levers to pull, how to keep someone indebted to him. He could trust his knowledge of them, if not always the people themselves.

Kirvan's call left him standing uncertainly, half in and out of the body dryer.

'Say again.'

Kirvan spoke slowly. 'Vogonaria has gone into liquidation, Captain.'

'You mean destroyed? Gone supernova? Or someone really has invented a death star at last?'

'No. Financial liquidation. Gone bust. No money. Everything frozen. Nothing in or out.'

Piédeux still could not quite grasp what he was hearing. 'I know about going bust, but a whole planet?'

'It's happened once before, a long time ago. Epsilon 3B, but that was a lot smaller and really just a series of colonies, though a lot of them. Pretty devastating though. No credit given anywhere in the universe. Mass starvation, mass migration, a lot of looting and killing over what was left. There's a book about it which we had to read for our accountancy exams.'

Piédeux was once more struck by the curiosity of the fact that someone who had passed exams in what he presumed was the correct way to do things – passed with flying colours, he believed – had in the end proved to be so... so... pliable. Perhaps learning what you should do gave insight into all the things you shouldn't do but might get away with. He himself had learned most things by trial and error, from some notable successes and several narrow escapes. Maybe an education would have saved him some greying hair, though it would have been far less fun.

'So what exactly does that mean for us?' he asked.

'No point in going on to Vogonia. They'll not be paying us now or ever. Once the liquidators move in, there are only three sets of people who see any return. Tax collectors, secured creditors – that's people who already hold assets against the debts, assets that are wanted back – and the liquidators themselves. They set their own fees, so of course they mop up nearly everything that's left.'

Piédeux continued to drip onto the carpet. 'But don't we have assets? I've got a hold full of ionised, deep-fried Venusian cabbages. What about them?'

Kirvan appeared to laugh, which was rather unusual. 'They're still yours. Be thankful we hadn't just delivered them.'

Piédeux considered his assets. 'So we need another buyer. Soon. They won't last for ever and if we just dump them, it might be traced back to us.' Once a passenger

spaceship, with enough kids on board to raise public interest and moral grandstanding, had disintegrated after colliding with a meteor shower of flytipped deep-fried cabbages, he added mentally. Traceability was the curse of going legit.

‘Yes. But you’ll have to be careful. There’s going to be knock-on effect.’

‘Such as?’

‘Other people, planets, markets who are owed money by Vogonia and won’t see it are going to be caught short. Some’ll go bust themselves. Others will become very cautious. They’ll hide their difficulties of course.’

Piédeux did not know much about accountancy but he knew a lot about hiding difficulties. ‘So be careful who we trust,’ he said, thinking that legitimate business was all very well but in the end did not seem very far away from the type of business he had grown up with.

‘Precisely.’

‘Shit!’ Except that it wasn’t necessarily that bad, not for a man with the history of Piédeux. He stepped back into the body dryer, turned it to full, and once ready, got dressed. Going over to the 3D safe in his bedroom, he activated the body and brainwave scanner. As it revealed the door to view, he opened it and reached deep inside, removing a small crypto-crystal from the back.

Back on the bridge he put the crystal in the reader on the main console. ‘Now Gimbo,’ he said cheerily, ‘I’m going to need all your brains as well. Tell me what you know, if anything, about these guys.’ The Gimbal waved her arms to indicate she was ready.

The profiles began to appear on screen. Some of them would be dead, some no doubt still in prison. They were old, old contacts, both friends and enemies, but then it was as possible in the right circumstances and with the right incentives to make a friend of an enemy as it was to make an enemy of a friend. The past rolled before them, but in that past – in all plasmachaotic probability – lay the future.

Consequitur

In the multiverse, you are already dead. Or six hundred years old. Or a child again. One of you has the secret of eternal youth. Another of you is famous and happy, while another is lonely, depressed and isolated. A different gender, even. One of you is an artist. One of you is an accountant.

At that point Brian stopped musing on the concept of multiple universes. It could be too bleak. On previous occasions when he had faced an operation under general anaesthetic, he had not really been nervous until he was on the trolley in the operating theatre's ante-room, the anaesthetist gently reassuring him while administering the non-fatal (or so one hoped) dose. He had found it useful then to count the ceramic tiles on the wall. Like being operated on in a bathroom. One, two, three, four, five, six, se—.

Brilliant stuff. Can I take some home with me? There are days when I could do with switching the lights out like that.

It had been count the tiles, because he'd already done the praying. Dear God, Jesus, Allah, Jehovah, Force or whatever you want to be called, please see me through to the other side. Intact. Not a vegetable. You know what I mean, or if you're really God (insert alternative name here...), you must know what I mean, because if you don't, you can't be... but I'm not out to irritate you, so whatever you want, just as you please, but all the same, intact, not a vegetable. Please.

And once you've done the praying, what else is there? It seems importunate to repeat one's prayers, a case of protesting too much, nuisance calls.

This time Brian was nervous much sooner than before, despite the fact that the operation was more routine, more straightforward, tiddly in fact, compared with what he had undergone as a young man – as it was always likely to be in the absence of a motorbike. Back then, tight corner with wet road and inexperienced rider and unfortunately placed traffic bollard had combined to test some of the skills of a thoracic surgeon. Of course if the bollard had not been there... But apportioning some of the blame to the highways department of the local council didn't really get you anywhere. Blame rarely does. It certainly doesn't mend bones.

Brian knew exactly why he was worrying now, not yet even on his way to theatre. Age. Simple as that. Young men are so often brimming with confidence, or perhaps in a more truthful phrase, he thought, just full of themselves. But the ego usually shrinks over time

and it gets battered into strange shapes by worldly experience. Certainties fade. The obituaries in the newspaper begin to feature people younger than you, dying of natural causes rather than unfortunate accident. What was firm ground beneath your feet begins to feel like the gentle rocking of a boat.

Thinking about multiple universes had for a short while seemed like a comfort. There's always one in which everyone lives happily ever after. And even if that is not the one you think you inhabit now, somewhere there's a you who is enjoying all the benefits. So if you could only connect, slip quietly from one of the bad outcome universes to one of the good outcome universes through some discreet side door or tradesman's entrance without abandoning your original consciousness, there would be nothing to worry about. Ever.

But doors have traffic both ways, Brian conceded, the frame opening out also onto the land where everyone lives utterly miserably – still ever after of course as that's worse than finally expiring in despair.

And, he wondered, if time is like a road, does it also have potholes, waiting to throw the traveller off course or break his suspension? So that what seems to be a sudden escape from the inevitable consequences of the relentless, grinding motion of cause and effect and cause and effect is simply the result of a cause we cannot see. We give it the name of *chance* or *fortuitousness*, if we want to show off, but it's just a defect that somewhere a department in the Multiverse Council has noted down in a log book for repair. Some time or other. When it can be afforded. When there's staff to do it. Meanwhile it causes accidents.

Brian had been so wrapped up in his thoughts, that he had only vaguely noticed that his trolley had been on the move. After all, since he was unable to influence what was going on immediately around him other than by leaping off and making a run for it, he just let it happen. As you do, sliding quietly and selflessly into other people's action sequences.

Here he was again. A comforting voice, green tiles on the wall. The voice could try to reassure him till the end of time, but he knew that in one universe there was a chain of events during which the operating theatre would witness what a medical student friend had once told him – he had presumed as a joke but he had never been really sure – were the two most common words heard in the middle of an operation:

'Whoops! Shit.'

Please God, Yahweh, Buddha, whoever. One, two, three, four, five, s—.

Home

By the time Kate got herself and her walking frame into the car, they would probably all be dead, David thought. Everything takes so long when you're old, even simple things like getting out of bed. That's not good when the odds against having sufficient time at your disposal are getting distinctly shorter. Or should that be longer?

He'd been sitting there for what seemed like hours and was beginning to need a pee again. He would have helped, of course, but the taxi driver seemed to have it all in hand. Kind of her really.

He would have preferred to be in the front seat, but the driver had insisted he got in the back. Perhaps those were the rules now: all passengers must be in the back. Probably right.

It couldn't be much fun for Kate. It wasn't much fun for anybody, although everyone always said that dementia was worse for those who didn't have it, watching a loved one slowly disintegrate in front of you. He was certain that Kate had no idea she wouldn't be coming back, but how do you explain? A home. How was she supposed to understand that it wasn't her home? Except it would be. A home for people like her.

Better for everyone though. It had all become impossible, what with Kate never seeming to be able to follow what he was saying. It wasn't just that she did not remember the events he described; it was as though she could no longer make the thought connections needed to piece everything together. No logic. No inference. She could not get from A to C, because she could no longer imagine B in the middle and even when he spelt it out, she appeared confused, as if each thought existed only in isolation.

Always asking him what he meant. No wonder he sometimes lost his temper, although he never intended to.

Still not settled in the car and belted up. It was so exasperating.

Yet hardly surprising. Her mother had been the same – no, worse. At least he hadn't found Kate wandering up the road in her nightie and Kate did at least remember who he was, knew his name. But after fifty-something years of marriage, you can't help feeling that you deserve more.

At last she was getting in. The driver leaned over to fasten her seatbelt and then, quite unnecessarily, as he showed by tugging on his own belt, checked that he too was fastened in. There was no need to treat him like her. Yet perhaps she had to, so he said nothing.

A draught of cool air from behind told him the boot had been opened and he looked round to see the driver trying this way and that to get the walking frame in. David grunted. He'd done that enough times. It wasn't much helped by his suitcase being there, but they had had to use his.

He had never understood why suitcases aimed at women were always so markedly smaller, given how many more clothes than a man they always seemed to take on holiday, not to mention all the other stuff. What stuff! And then Kate brought back so many presents, not just small items for family and thank yous for anyone who had looked after the house, but purchases in the middle for summer to be stored in a cupboard until they could be Christmas gifts. Madness. If weight were the issue, whose fault was that?

'Are you all right?'

"What?" Then he realised what Kate had said. 'Shouldn't I be?' He instantly regretted his rather petulant tone, as she was actually being quite reasonable, quite lucid for a change.

The boot was shut. A solution must have been found. He looked round again to be reassured that the suitcase was still there. Leaving it behind would be even more of a disaster than the packing had been.

Even now he could feel his anger about that, for it had rapidly grown beyond mere irritation. He had been trying to pack what she needed, at least for the next week, with some level of involvement and consent from Kate about the choice of clothes. Yet every time he put something into the case, she took it out again and whenever he picked something out of the wardrobe, she would say something like 'Don't be silly' or 'What have you got that out for?' Meanwhile their daughter Jane had just looked on with a pained expression – well, nearly in tears if truth were told.

True, he was no expert on women's clothing needs. He had a theory that women lacked an efficient temperature regulator, as they always seemed to be too hot or too cold – or that's what they said, Kate anyway. She had all these different thicknesses of garment, summer wear, spring and autumn wear, winter wear, simply because her body could not adjust in the way that a man's could. He had no need of seasonal clothes; everything was pretty much the same thickness and he simply added or removed layers. He fingered each layer he was wearing now. See, perfect.

But she hadn't needed to tell him he was being utterly stupid. That had hurt, even though he knew she could not control the words. He had walked out of the bedroom barely able to contain his rage and had left Jane to sort out what Kate needed. When Jane had found him and said it was done, he had felt redundant, which was no better.

'Heave anchor. All aboard and off we sail.' The engine had started.

David's thoughts returned to the present. Oh God, she thinks she's going on a bloody cruise again. Burst the bubble or play the game?

'We could see one of their shows,' he said. 'Perhaps not on the first night, but they have some good acts. Usually.'

Kate just looked at him, no comprehension at all in her eyes. As the car turned off the drive onto the road, she reached for his hand.

David's first impulse was to take it away. She had developed a dreadful habit of stroking the back of his hand. Did that make her feel better? It didn't do anything for him except cause vexation, which wasn't fair. She couldn't help it and getting annoyed with her wouldn't make things any better. It was all quite hopeless really, a sad end to what had been, through its ups and downs, a good marriage. He would never say that, looking back, he wouldn't change a thing. There were some things, quite a few in fact, but he had no regrets about spending his life with her. None that mattered.

And now that life was going to be one of visits punctuating unknown periods alone. He would have to rely a lot on Jane, since he had been made to give up driving last year or whenever. Thank heaven she now lived quite close. Imagine if she were still in Newcastle. Or Newquay. That far away.

He felt the tears well up and looked away from Kate, out of the window. The older he got, the easier it seemed to be to start crying and the harder to stop.

'There, there. It's not the end of the world.' She had seen the tears.

'Isn't it?' he burst out, resentful of the tone that treated him like a child, but also wondering at the face that still reminded him of the young woman he had first encountered when he narrowly avoided mowing her down with his motorbike on a bleak December morning in Selly Oak. 'Isn't it, Kate?'

'Cathy.'

'Oh for God's sake.' David turned away again. Cathy, Cathy, Cathy. How had she got it into her head that her name was Cathy? And with a 'C' too, or so she said. She was Kate, with a 'K', and always had been. Katherine Dover, Kate to her friends, Kate to her husband, and sometimes Kitty to her husband, but there was little point in looking back down that road.

Heartbreak, whichever way he turned.

He closed his eyes. It didn't take much for him to fall asleep these days. A kind of heaviness in the brain would overtake him, perhaps several times a day, and he would just blank out. Most times it was a blessed relief, some respite from the anguish that stabbed repeatedly at his waking hours.

When he woke, he was for a moment disorientated. Where were they going? The back of the driver's head looked a bit like their youngest daughter June, but if they were all going on holiday together, he would surely be in the front, if not actually driving. Except it could be a taxi. To the airport?

Taxi? Taxi. Kate. Suitcase. Or back from the airport? Home. It all came back. Some kind of home. Nursing home – no, 'residential', that's what they called them now. Same thing if you're bonkers.

Kate. His lovely Kate. What was left of her.

'Are we nearly there?' he asked the driver.

'Not long,' she replied without turning her head.

'Not long,' echoed Kate, but to David's ears with that same tone of slight puzzlement she now often had when she repeated what he had said, as if she could not quite make out what the words meant or how they should be applied.

They had pulled up at traffic lights behind a large van. Through his window David could see a new housing development site with its large advertising board boasting of luxury three and four bedroom homes – did anyone now advertise new houses that weren't 'luxury', or 'homes'? – and underneath, the enticement to enjoy *Bright Fields for Easy Living*.

Kate was staring at him, apparently perplexed. Had he spoken out loud? He pointed out of the window, but they were off again and it was past explaining. He thought about telling her that it was all right, not to worry, but what difference would that make? Concern seemed permanently etched on her face these days and she seemed to be so easily

frightened by mundane things. She'd only pick up on the word 'worry' and be even more lost.

Not that David knew where they were. None of the roads and buildings seemed familiar. No doubt the driver knew what she was doing. Taxis never seemed to take you by the routes you were familiar with.

The car turned left, up a short drive and stopped by the sheltered entrance to a large red brick building with a wide frontage. It looked like a rather soulless hotel, David thought, the kind of place he had stayed in far too often during his working life. Functional, but little else. No joy.

The driver opened David's door and then went behind to unload the walking frame and place it ready for Kate. Such a tedious business. He decided he would wait in the car until he could see that Kate had reached the entrance door. There was no point in hanging about in the cold outside while she inched her way forward. He folded his arms and let his head relax forward. Such a weight on his shoulders.

'Had he?'

David looked up. It was the driver. What did she mean?

'Will you come? Please?'

Kate had stopped half-way to the door and the driver glanced towards her, taking a pace back, as if she were unsure whether to go to her assistance or stay with him. He shook his head and gestured towards Kate.

'Don't move. I'll be back in a second.' The driver closed the car door. Did she think he was going to leap out of the car and run away? Why did people make everything appear so difficult? It was all quite simple. When Kate had got to the door, he would get out and join them.

He watched Kate's slow progress. He couldn't really imagine what life was like for her. The frailty was probably a worse burden than her mind being all over the place. She

must be aware of how weak she was, unless somehow she had come to think that's how she had always been. He closed his eyes again. It was too painful.

When David next looked up, the driver and Kate had disappeared. He wondered what the time was. To be honest, he wasn't really sure what day it was. That's retirement for you. It ceases to matter which day it is. Each one looks like every other, unless there's something in the diary. His most important book now, the diary. He looked around the car, but it was nowhere to be seen. He must have left it behind. He would have to check in it for anything coming up, when he got back, whenever that would be. Who knows how long all this would take? At least he didn't seem to need a pee anymore.

The driver was back and opening his door. She said something but he couldn't quite make out what it was, although it was clear they were now to go in. As he got out, the driver put a hand close to each of his ears in turn and spoke again. He shrugged.

'You need new batteries,' she said, at last speaking clearly. 'Your hearing aids.'

Oh yes. Something else to sort out later.

The driver picked up the suitcase and they walked towards the front door. It didn't look too bad from the outside. Anyway, it had all been sorted out by June, so he hadn't needed to worry at all, or so she had said.

June? What was he thinking of? Jane.

They were met by a lady who appeared to be a cleaner in a light blue dress of unflattering design. At least it suggested the place was cleaned. You heard such dreadful stories on television.

Sandwiched between the cleaner and the driver with the suitcase, he found himself walking down a short corridor that opened out into a broader area where some half dozen ancients – good word that, 'ancient' – sat untidily around a table, two in wheelchairs. Perhaps Kate would need one soon. A television shouted from an adjoining room. The

ancients observed silently. Poor things. Then they were in another corridor, soon turning right into a small room.

It really was just like some of those hotels: bed, chair, wardrobe, chest of drawers, television. Oh, and an en suite. That was an improvement. Kate was sitting on the bed.

For reasons he couldn't quite fathom, for surely all this had been discussed, planned, and resolved to its only logical conclusion, David felt himself overwhelmed by a sense of remorse. He wept without restraint.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm sorry.' And he kept repeating that as the driver helped him to sit down in the chair by the bed. He felt so tired. What was it he had learned off by heart at school, something about sleep? Knitting? Sleep, yes, 'sleep that knits up the something sleeve of care.' He'd always liked that line. He gave way to it.

Perhaps he dreamed, but half-waking, as he thought, through his sleep and tears, he could swear their daughter Joan was there, for some of the time at least, busbodying as ever, opening drawers. Putting things away or taking them out or just looking? He could not summon the energy to feel that it mattered. Kate would be safe here. That was the thought he clung onto. Kate would be safe.

He felt Joan wrapping her arms around him and giving him a kiss. Or was that yesterday? Then Kate tried to do the same, but how could she? She'd fall over. He pushed her away, not as gently as he would have wanted. But then you do things in dreams you would never do in life.

When he woke, he was alone. He looked around. Something was wrong. It took a while to identify just what it was. The bed. There was only one, a single. Had something gone wrong with the booking, or had they just been too late and had to take what was available? Kate and Joan must have another room. Like not being able to get seats together at the theatre and catching up with each other in the interval. You made the best of it.

Balm of hurt minds. That was another line. Nothing wrong with his memory! He'd sat next to Jimbo Richards. It would be good to see him again. And Mr Stringer. Strange man, but a good teacher. And what about Jimbo's stunning sister, Kate? Though he'd had fat chance there.

Did they serve meals here or did you have to go out? He rather fancied bacon and eggs.

How many eggs? Sunnyside up, as the Yanks said. Or scrambled.

Scrambled. Like Spitfires, Hurricanes, Typhoons, Tempests. He could tell them all by their outline against the sky. There should be a Scout badge for that. Which arm would it go on? Was it a service or a proficiency badge? He would have to ask Skip. If he did his day's good turn for Ma, she would help him sew it on, when he got home.

[2,869 words]

When the Money Runs Out

‘Dad?’

The face in the mirror frowned and looked even more like his father. It’s as though every time I shave, Steve thought, I am stripping away my face bit by bit to reveal another small part of him. Look, the same liver spot on the hairline, which is receding in exact imitation of his. The same deep crease from the nose down past the the mouth to the jaw, so like a scar because it isn’t matched on the other side.

‘Well, you bastard,’ he said quietly to the face that regarded him with disdain, ‘We’ll see who has the last laugh.’

‘Are you ready yet?’ The voice rushing up the stairs was, as ever, impatient and sharp-edged. He could never keep up with Susan. Physically, emotionally and – after the first few bruising encounters – willingly, he followed a few paces behind her. Still, he had one card left up his sleeve, didn’t he? We *will* see who has the last laugh.

Steve rinsed the razor, dried his face and ran his hand over his chin. Rituals, he thought. Habits. A man always shaves in the same way every day, starting in the same place each time, using downstrokes or upstrokes that have been repeated countless times with hardly any modification, pulling the lip or stretching the cheek an identical amount every morning. You could do it blind. And it’s all unique to the individual. God help him if his father had shaved in an identical fashion.

‘You’ll make us late if you don’t put your skates on.’

That was a favourite phrase of Susan’s. Probably from her mother, Steve thought. It always created a literal image in his mind, as if he should now be attempting to negotiate the stairs down to the hall in roller skates, or worse still, ice skates; as if he were some parka clad youth who would now do a triple somersault before landing at the bottom and whizzing away to some new urban obstacle.

Susan did not seem to have the widest of vocabularies. She had a stock of treasured phrases and most conversations would draw on two or three at some time or other. Her constant refrain for the last few weeks had been ‘What are we going to do when the money runs out?’ He knew why. For all their married life, they had barely scraped by financially, mainly (in his view) because Susan and economy were estranged sisters. Now his father had died, there were expectations and Susan wanted him to know how important it was that those expectations were met.

As if he had any control over the matter. The money whose rapid exit Susan repeatedly feared was a modest legacy she had received from her mother. It had been a considerable relief when it had turned out to be more than expected, but with their expenditure consistently exceeding income by a small but intractable amount every month for the last few years, they had been mining the legacy towards extinction. Now that Steve's father had died, things would improve, not because he had been a wealthy man but his house was large and in a most desirable area. It had originally been built by Steve's great grandfather and each eldest son had inherited it and duly moved in. Steve had no siblings and so it would be his without competition. The will said so. He knew that. Oh yes, he had made sure of that.

So what happens when the money runs out is that we sell Dad's house, Steve had explained to Susan. Actually, there was no point in waiting until the money ran out. He'd sell for a handsome profit as soon as he could.

They completed the journey to the offices of Josiah Bagworth and Sons in silence. Susan drove while Steve lightly held the envelope containing the copy of the will that he had found in the top drawer of his father's desk. 'Just where one would expect to find it,' he had said to Susan. 'He was a tidy man. It was, well, just waiting for me in a way.' So the business of the day was Simon Brown – there wasn't a Bagworth left in the company these days – to explain his role as executor and what needed to be done to apply for probate.

Except that wasn't what he did at the beginning.

'There's just one thing I ought to draw to your attention before we go any further,' Simon said, glancing alternately in a rather nervous fashion at the faces of his two customers. 'Um, the estate, as I have previously indicated, is indeed willed to you Mr Roberts, but there is a codicil.'

'A codicil?' It was Susan who got in first. Steve felt as though he had suffered a sudden paralysis.

'Yes. It concerns the house. Your father expresses concern that you may only be interested in its monetary value – his words, I hasten to add, not mine – and he is quite adamant that he wishes it to remain in the family, as the Roberts' home. Rather than tie up its being inherited with legal conditions about occupation, he – um, well the codicil is quite clear that the estate goes to you in its entirety except for the house. That is bequeathed to his sister, Mrs Fleming.'

‘Auntie Phlegm!’ Steve had found his voice. ‘Auntie Phlegm!’ – but not his vocabulary. Still, there were good reasons why his childhood self had recast the spelling of his aunt’s married name.

On the way back home, Steve could not work out whether he was more angry than disappointed, or more gutted than enraged. Susan was tightlipped, until at the junction with Brick Lane, she reverted to her mantra.

‘What are we going to do when the money runs out?’

Steve looked out of the passenger window. Rain on the horizon broken by a few shafts of sunlight. ‘We?’ he thought. ‘You can forget about “we”.’ In a strange way he began to feel quite happy.

Helter Skelter

‘Why are you crying, Daddy?’

It was a fair but unwanted question. Until then he had contained everything to a familiar heartache he knew would pass and a slight welling up in the eyes he had hoped would subside before being noticed.

But she had caught him out. The tears fell, his elbows spread out on the dining table and his head dropped sharply to hide his face in his arms. A single, low sob betrayed that the captain was no longer on the bridge. He felt his wife’s hand on his left shoulder.

Her ‘Are you all right?’ was simultaneous with his daughter’s ‘What is it?’ A small part of him, unconscious of or wilfully separate from his emotion, recognised how each question was characteristic of the speaker.

How could he explain? He might claim to have something of a way with words, but this could never be communicated in its entirety, in all its conflicting dimensions. Any more than it is possible to describe, say, the full effect of a warm bath after a long and frustrating day, all the nuances and currents in that released and releasing ‘Ah...’

This bath was warm and cold at the same time.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, raising his head and reaching in his pocket for his handkerchief. Was he sorry? He passed over that and looked at his daughter. ‘It was just when you said you used to be scared of helter skelters—’

‘Well I was. I don’t know why, but I just was.’

He and his wife had never taken her to a fair, so he supposed her experience came from being taken to one with a friend and her family. Was there one in Regent’s Park? She’d been to the zoo there with the Robinsons a few years ago.

‘It just took me back. I was suddenly sitting on a coconut mat – very small, I don’t know, age four or five perhaps, may be a bit older – and my Dad was sitting behind me, his legs wrapped round me before we set off down together, him holding me in. I could feel his legs against me, his arm round my waist. Just now. I could physically feel it.’

Except that it was more than that, all the layers that would need considerable time to identify and much too long to explain. The warmth of his father’s love and protection and, more poignantly now, the knowledge of them, revealed once more like a child’s longed-for present against the crumpled wrapping of his father’s slow dying; his own happiness and

grief now reformulated as some composite that might be stronger than the sum of its parts, or might not; the reverberating echoes of a similar time some years ago when he had been reading from the *Just So* stories to his daughter in bed and had been forced to pause for a moment, under attack by the memory of his own father doing the exactly same with him. He had found the present suddenly glowing with some patina of the past, his now and his then fighting to co-exist but never quite managing to coalesce, the edges too slippery to stick together. How he had been trying to capture and pass on his father's voice in the rhythms.

Still ran Dingo – Yellow-Dog Dingo – always hungry, grinning like a rat-trap, never getting nearer, never getting farther, – ran after Kangaroo. He had to!

And the wanting to go down the helter skelter again. 'Please, Daddy, please.' Though was it for the excitement of the spiral descent or wanting to have a second opportunity to be so closely enveloped by his father? For, kind, generous and witty though his father was, he had not been a man given to great shows of affection and could much of the time seem quite distant, his mind perhaps still on those of his patients most in danger or the cold lack of family life he himself had known, brought up by distant relatives following his mother's early death in India. Yet even while pleading, the child had wanted and known he wanted to dispense with his father and come down by himself, like his older brother.

He had needed his father there and not there, just as his daughter would – no doubt already did with himself; and just as his father was and was not there at this moment, preserved for a time in another's flesh and blood, in part but not entire, and by an existence in memories, which amounts to another slow dying, evaporating in two or at most three generations.

Unless.

He sat quietly looking out of the window into the gathering darkness. His family had accepted his explanation and moved on. He would too in a minute. But the image of the helter skelter, the sensation of the twisting ride remained in focus. A spiral. At every point in the journey the co-ordinates were different and yet at every point one of them was the same as it had been in each revolution. Passing through the same x or y but at a different height. At a different time. Here but not here.

Not just a handing of a baton from one generation to another, though that happened too. But look down or up, and if you could only see through matter and time, you would

recognise that from one aspect you had been here before and would be here again.
Moving, yet stationary. *Déjà vu et encore à voir.*

Some comfort. He had never been able to remember the principle behind Shrödinger's cat being alive and dead at the same time and had discreetly to look it up every time he came across it, which admittedly was not every day. But you choose what makes things bearable. 'Helter Skelter Theory' would do for now.

His mat was sliding to a halt, back into the world of clearing dishes, the brutal shoving away of *stuff* on the table to make room for homework, smelly dogs underneath.

'Sorry,' his daughter offered, opening one of the several ringbinders in front of her.

'No, no,' he replied. 'It's a good memory to have and I'd forgotten it. Memories of happiness aren't necessarily happy memories, but they're worth a few cuts and grazes. I suppose I also felt a bit ashamed to have forgotten.'

His daughter pulled a face. 'I'll forget *you* easily enough. What did you say your name was?'

'You,' he said slowly, 'can call me Sir.'

She gave an extravagant sigh. 'You always say that.'

'That's because you never do.'

'You always say that too.'

'No, that's not true.'

But it was. And if they didn't stop immediately, they'd fall into the rhyming game again.

Helter.

Skelter.

Island

(A travel piece)

We were about three quarters of the way around the curved sandy bay when Eleanor stopped. Being the sort of attentive husband whose attentiveness is usually directed elsewhere, in this case the range of pyramid mountain tops apparently chopped off and resting on a broad bank of cloud out to sea, I had walked on several paces before noticing she was no longer alongside. In turning round I glanced ahead and knew immediately why she had come to a halt.

There was someone else out for a walk. Our walk. As Eleanor stepped forward to stand beside me, it was obvious that the person at the far end of the bay was coming towards us on the same path above the shoreline. Thereafter it was a test of nerves. We reduced our pace to a dawdle and, while pretending that we were still interested in the flora beneath our feet and the land and seascape around us, we maintained discreet surveillance of the intruder, quietly calculating where, if things went wrong, we would pass each other and be forced into making some kind of acknowledgement.

The tension danced around us for some five minutes and then Eleanor spoke: 'Ah'. The walker had turned at right angles and was heading inland. Good man. One of ours. Possibly also staying at the farmhouse. In any event, contact had been avoided. Mission resumed.

We had arrived at the B&B farmhouse at the head of the bay late in the afternoon of the preceding day, having stepped precariously from the ferry onto a smaller boat just outside the island's harbour which was not deep enough to accommodate the ferry itself. Stepped is perhaps a generous description. Watched carefully as the swell brought the two boats close together and moments later created a ten foot drop, chose the moment carefully and then leaped hopefully would be more accurate. Strong hands in the smaller vessel made a semblance of assurance that all would be well, despite the incessant rain. Once disembarked we had looked for the taxi we had been told would be waiting for us, found none and so, congratulating ourselves on having chosen rucksacks rather than suitcases, walked the two and half miles to where the island's central road passed above the farmhouse. Then we cut down through the bracken. Tall, wet, tough bracken.

When we finally arrived, we were warmly welcomed into the cavernous kitchen, told to strip off our wet things immediately which would be hung up to dry and quizzed as to why we had not taken the taxi that had been sent.

“We couldn’t see one,” we replied.

“Hamish was waiting. In the Land Rover. Did you no see him? He’s got red hair. You can’t miss him.”

Well yes, but nothing had been said before about Land Rover equals taxi, we none of us had a description of each other, nor were any of us carrying clandestine symbols of our respective statuses. Eleanor had no red carnation; I was not carrying a copy of *The Times*. Inevitably the pick up was aborted.

We were advised that supper would be at seven and, once dry and refreshed, we investigated the way to the lounge, passing the dining room where we could see that all guests would be sat round one large table that filled most of the space. On one side, the back of the chairs pulled underneath the table were already up against the wall. Skinny malinkies ower there. When we opened the door to what might be the lounge, a dozen faces glanced up from their books, variously looked away, grunted softly or mouthed some kind of silent greeting and quickly returned to their reading, either brought with them or borrowed from the large bookcase that stretched from one corner of the room to the main window. The perilous journey is over. I have found my people.

The evening meal was nearly as silent, all words uttered being purely functional: water and salt were passed, a choice of fruit was expressed, I was mildly chastised for looking so worried when, as a non-eater of fish, my face clearly showed concern that my advance information had not been noted as I circulated no doubt to others sumptuous but personally repellent dish after dish around the company. Can you survive on an island if you don’t eat fish? Ah, chicken of course.

One picture on the wall constantly caught my gaze. It clearly showed our hostess in younger days, standing in the sunshine next to a smiling, well built man of early middle age in front of a horse drawn cart piled with cut hay. It was almost too idyllic to credit but this was the way of things here once, at least on the day of the year when the sun shone. It took little imagination to piece together the basics of a story as to why the farm was now a bed and breakfast, which she ran with her daughter.

The islands around are either significantly mountainous or low lying and unsheltered. We were staying on one that couldn’t make up its mind which it wanted to be, that looked like an abandoned effort or an unfortunate accident of creation. There is a mountain in the middle of the island but it is shaped like a wedge of cheese, so that one gets the impression that the summit is not so much the top as one of the bottom edges of a

mountain that was dropped from a great height, landed awkwardly and buried itself angled head downwards in the peat. The shape is a reflection of the island itself which has high cliffs on one side but slopes gently down inland to sandy shores on the other. It is a little like a sinking ship, slowly keeling over.

We managed a blustery walk around the island to take in the changing coastline, but our attempt on the mountain was frustrated by another skyful of rain, the unpleasantness that brought defeat stemming not so much from what was dropped on us but from the dense wetness of the tall vegetation through which we had to wade to make our approach. We were coming from the northern end. The only trodden path is on the southern side. At least there was no-one to nod to. That jittery experience of our first walk was not to be repeated.

We were there for only four days and the end came with a Taxi Rover ride with Hamish — beautifully taciturn — to the harbour where as the ferry approached its deep water holding place, we experienced again that curious magical appearance of humankind out of nothing that happens whenever a ferry is about to dock. For a long time you can see only a very small number of people waiting or going about their business and then, as if by some strange command or agreed signal, all of a sudden up they pop: people, here, there, and over there. They can't all have been hiding in the café or behind the rocks. Perhaps this phenomenon is the origin of the idea of fairies — faeries, ferry folk.

I know. I haven't said where it is. There are some clues and if you are willing to work them out, you'll get there. If you just *want to know*, then I'm sorry. If I tell you, I'll have to kill you. And my people, the people of the book and the solitary walk and the politeness of avoiding acknowledgement, they would have to kill me. It is a matter of the old faith, the tribe and simple self-preservation.