



ANDREW D
WILLIAMS

MIRROR
IMAGES

A Short Story Collection

MIRROR IMAGES
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This list is in no particular order. You are all important to me in your own way.

Jon (of course)

Scrabble, beloved feline tyrant

My mother

The former Grace Dieu Writers Circle - I hope you guys are all okay.

Nick Stephenson, for all the technical details I'd never figure out on my own

The late Sir Terry Pratchett

The still living Stephen King

Whoever it is that takes over my body when I write something particularly good.

And a final thanks to you, reading this dedication. You didn't have to. You could have just skipped ahead to the stories. Most people do. But not you. Even though you probably have no idea who half these people are, you still read their names. Now *that's* dedication.



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Reflections - An Introduction

Hello there!

I know, I know. You want to get on with it. You're here for the stories, not to read a load of self-indulgent twaddle by the author. Well, don't worry. I'll keep this short.

I want to talk about mirrors.

You have been lied to all your life.

You have been told that mirrors show you what you look like - that the face you see looking back is your own.

This is not true.

The face you see is just an image - your face in reverse. The way you see yourself is not how other people see you. If our faces weren't so symmetrical, we'd notice it right away.

Mirrors are useful, but they do not show us the truth. They show us a distorted echo of the truth.

Mirrors do not *lie*. There's truth in them, underneath the reversal, the distortion. Just don't believe them too much.

Mirrors do not feature in these stories - at least, not in any significant way. Each story is, instead, a mirror in its own right. Each shows us some aspect of the world we know - but altered, even warped, like a funhouse mirror. Some of these reflections are funny, even silly. Some are downright strange. But one or two of these reflections you may still find a little disturbing.

Don't worry. There is nothing here to distress you - no gruesome tales filled with blood and terror. I have saved those for another day. But you might come away from these reflections with a few new ideas.

Right! Let's get started...

Andrew.

Red

The bus pulled to a stop. She trudged off, shopping bag in one hand, pulling her scarlet hoodie closer to her against the cold, greeted by the faint smell of stale vomit and cheap cigarettes. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. This was not how she'd wanted to spend her Saturday.

"You always loved visiting your grandmother, Jessica," mum had said. "I don't know why that should change now."

Jessica! Only her mother and her teachers called her that. To everyone else she met, she was Red.

"Granny's old and can't get out much these days. I just need you to drop off some shopping for her and then you can do what you like. But it wouldn't kill you to spend some time with her, you know."

Mum hadn't spent any time with granny herself for at least a year. She was always too busy, always caught up with work. Always sending her daughter to the Darkwood Estates instead. Red wasn't surprised. Granny wasn't exactly all there these days, she was half deaf, and if you spent too long with her she'd start going through photo albums of baby pictures – some of Red, some of mum, some of relatives she didn't even know – as if she hadn't seen them all a million times before. No, it wouldn't kill her to spend time with granny. Not unless she died of boredom.

But that wasn't why she didn't want to go. It had never been a good neighbourhood. Even as a little girl, Red remembered gangs of youths and boarded up shop windows. It was worse now. These days the only people you saw out in the daytime were either selling or doing drugs. Or both.

A pack of druggies were watching her as she got off the bus, wide eyed and twitchy. "What you staring at, you perverts?" she yelled. They didn't seem to hear – or care. She walked past them towards the block of flats where granny lived. They wouldn't follow her. Well, probably not. Best not to hang around. She wondered what they actually saw in their chemically addled brains when they looked at her – if they saw her at all.

She ignored the security intercom. It hadn't worked for months. Nor did the lock on the main door. She pushed the door open and headed inside, straight for the stairs. She never used the lift. It was old, and slow, and smelt of piss. She wasn't planning on getting stuck in there.

The first floor flat was home to a foreign woman, from one of those weird little countries that used to belong to Russia or something. She lived there with about sixteen children in just three or four rooms. At least one of the little brats was usually running about on the landing – but not today. She carried on up.

The second floor flat was home to the Axeman. At least, that's what it said on his T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. She'd never asked his real name and didn't care to. He wore a bushy grey beard and some faded jeans, like he was some sort of aging rock star. He stood in his doorway, watching her, fingers lightly caressing the neck of a battered old guitar.

"Hey there, Red," he drawled.

"Hey," she replied, flatly. Just another pervert staring at her chest. Not that there

was anything there worth staring at, and wouldn't be for a year or two yet.

"Wanna hear my latest song?" He strummed a few soft chords on his guitar.

"Not now," she said. "I'm off to see granny. I can't stop."

"You're a nice girl," he said. "Not many nice girls round here." He strummed another chord.

Red ignored him, and carried on up the stairs.

Granny's flat was on the third floor. A tattered "welcome" mat sat outside, along with a small potted plant. Granny called it her garden. Despite all the efforts of the foul air, the occasional dog and granny's clumsy care, it still clung to life. Rather like granny herself.

Red went to knock on the door, noticing that it was ajar. She pushed it gently open. It was unlike granny to leave her door open. She was always very careful to lock her door, especially in a place like this.

Then she noticed the splinters around the lock. The door had been forced.

Red suddenly felt sick. She carefully stepped inside the flat, placing the shopping bag inside the door as she went.

The flat was dark and cold, but that wasn't unusual. She'd never known anyone as careful with money as granny. "Why waste the central heating?" she'd say. "I can easily put on another jumper, and that costs nothing."

Red shivered, not just from the cold. She hugged her hoodie tighter around her and headed through to the bedroom.

"Granny?"

The bedroom was in darkness. Feeble pastel curtains blocked out most of the daylight, dull and grey, but still let in barely enough light to make out the furniture. Most of the bedroom was taken up by the double bed, covered in pillows and cushions and enough blankets to smother an army. Amongst the furnishings, Red could dimly make out a frail figure.

"Granny, it's me. I've brought you some shopping."

"Thank you, dear." The voice was raspy and choked, not at all like Red remembered it. Granny sounded really ill.

"Granny, are you alright?"

"Come closer, dear," granny replied.

Red took a step towards the bed. All she could make out were granny's eyes, wide and bloodshot.

"What red eyes you have, granny," she said. "Have you been at the Pernod again?"

She took another step forward. Granny reached out a hand, snatched at her. Red screamed as the hand grasped her around the wrist, a grip far tighter than an old woman should have.

"Those are some sodding great big hands you've got," Red yelled, trying to pull away. "You're not my granny! Who the hell are you?"

The figure climbed out of bed to follow her. He was scrawny and filthy, his clothes stained and tattered, and he smelt very bad. He was gibbering nonsense that she couldn't make out as he came for her. Red fought to escape from his grip; he was too strong, pulling her closer.

“Pretty,” he cooed, his face close to hers, revealing a rapidly disappearing set of blackened, rotting teeth. They reminded Red of the posters in her school, warning them about drugs. “This is what meth does to you!” they had exclaimed.

“What disgusting breath you have,” she gagged.

His other hand grabbed her around the throat.

The posters at school hadn’t mentioned meth turning you into a deranged psychopath. Right now, Red felt that was its most important feature.

She clutched at the hand around her neck as the meth-head pulled her back towards the bed. She kicked out in terror. He didn’t seem to notice her feet hitting him. She tried to scream again, but the grip around her throat was too tight.

She felt herself thrown onto the bed, heard his wheezing laughter. Her vision was growing dark and her lungs were on fire. Then, suddenly, there was a loud crash. The hand loosened around her throat and the wheezing stopped. There was a thudding sound as a body hit the carpet.

Red fought herself upright, coughing as she fought for air. She looked down at the creep sprawled on the floor, blood seeping from his head.

“Are you okay?”

Red looked up. The Axeman stood over her, still holding the remains of his guitar in one hand.

The police came and took statements. An ambulance came for the meth-head. Red sat numbly while it all went on. The Axeman offered to look after her until her mother came to pick her up. It was the first time she’d been in his flat. They sat drinking coffees and talking about his guitar collection.

“I’m sorry about the one upstairs,” she said.

He shrugged. “I got a lot of guitars,” he said. “But there’s only one of you. Your granny would never forgive me if something happened to you.”

Red gasped, suddenly remembering. “Granny! Where is she?”

Granny was fine. It turned out she’d spent the last hour visiting the foreign woman on the first floor, cooing over sixteen sets of baby photos. She didn’t understand a word the foreign woman said, but she couldn’t hear her properly either, and the two women had simply babbled at each other in their own languages without listening to a word the other was saying. Granny said it was the best conversation she’d had in years.

Mum went into a meltdown of guilt and terror when she heard the news. She promised Red that she’d never send her to this hellhole on her own again and, after checking that granny was safely back home and the flat secure, they drove back to civilisation.

Mum forgot all about her promise, of course, the next time work caught up with her and granny needed some shopping. Red didn’t argue. She just smiled as she took the carrier bag. It would be nice to see granny again.

Besides, she didn’t need to worry. She’d be perfectly safe.

She stepped off the bus, smiling at the druggies as they watched her walk across to the flats. They didn’t meet her gaze. She watched them slink off with their tails between their legs.

Word had got round. The Axeman was looking out for her.
You don't mess with Red when she's in the 'hood.

Fine Dining

“Why, look at you! I could just eat you up!”

The young boy beamed, revealing a set of crooked teeth.

“What’s your name, cutie?”

“Timmy.”

“Hello, Timmy. I’m Carol.”

She sighed. Timmy was the cute little boy she’d always dreamed of, perfect for showing off her caring side. She’d be a much better mother than Susan three doors down. She’d take him home right now if she could, but there was no way Malcolm would stand for it. She’d failed to talk him into coming to tonight’s orphanage event – adopting a child? He’d kicked up a fuss at the cat shelter. Malcolm was happy with his columns of numbers and didn’t want anything messing them up.

What was she doing here? All these poor children... it had felt like the Right Thing To Do, a chance for her to Make A Difference. All the wealthy people were helping the poor these days, and if she wanted to move up the social ladder she needed to show her charitable side. Not that Carol had much charity to offer. Malcolm’s salary wasn’t in the same league as these wealthy benefactors, and her efforts to dress the part had left quite a dent in their credit cards. She was still hiding the monthly statements from him.

“Why, hello darling!”

Carol turned. An old woman was heading her way. Despite her small frame, now somewhat withered and bent, she powered through the other guests with the unstoppable force of a juggernaut. Younger, more beautiful ladies gave way before her. Tall, powerful men moved aside to avoid crossing her path.

“I heard you talking to that young boy.”

Carol’s eyes swept over the woman’s dress, a sleek affair that somehow accentuated curves where the curves themselves had long ago disappeared, and which Carol suspected cost more than her house, mortgage included. She’d spent a small fortune on her own dress, but she was dressed in rags in comparison. There was something familiar about the old woman, something that Carol couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“I... I was only...”

“It’s alright, dear. I know what you were doing. And I feel the same way, believe me. Did you say your name was Carol?”

The woman put a kindly arm around Carol’s waist – she couldn’t quite reach her shoulder – and led her through the orphanage.

“Y-Yes,” she stammered.

“A lovely name,” the old woman smiled, a faraway look in her eyes. “One of the little girls I raised a few years back was a Carol. She was so sweet... I’m Felicity, dear.”

Felicity? Carol thought back, and remembered a magazine article from a couple of months ago. Of course! Felicity Mayhew! One of the wealthiest women in the country... and famous for her charity work. There was something else, too, something that she couldn’t quite recall...

Oh well. There were always rumours about the fabulously wealthy. People could be so jealous.

“It’s such a shame,” Felicity said, as they walked through the crowds. “All these poor, unwanted children. All going to be shipped out of here, moved to other institutions,

just because no-one has any use for them. Such a waste.”

“Surely all these people... this is a charity fundraiser, isn't it...?”

Felicity smiled sadly. “It won't work, I'm afraid, my dear. The orphanage is closing its doors for the last time, and the local government has already decided to demolish it. I believe Mr Tesco is hoping to build one of his ghastly supermarkets here.”

Carol paused, calculating just how much sympathy to put into her voice. She wanted to sound caring, but retain that aloofness that rich people were supposed to have. After quickly rehearsing it in her head, she whispered “Oh, those poor children...”

Felicity didn't seem to notice. “Well, my friends and I have plans. Would you care to join us, Carol my dear? I'm sure we'll get on famously.”

“O-Of course!” Carol could barely speak with excitement. Join Felicity Mayhew! Even dour-faced Malcolm couldn't moan about that. Thirty years of working at the bank had done nothing for his social mobility, and now here she was, hobnobbing with the nobs!

A hush fell over the crowd as the host of the night's event spoke up.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. I am delighted to present tonight's special guest, Lady Felicity Mayhew.”

Carol dumbly joined in the applause as her new friend made her slow but stately walk to the speaker's podium. Despite her small size, she seemed to fill the room.

“My dear friends,” she began. “Thank you all for coming. As you all know, tonight the local council has rejected the final proposal for the continuation of the Green Hill Orphanage. Already they are making plans to parcel off the children to nearby institutions - mere livestock to balance against their books.”

Carol wanted to let a single tear fall down one cheek at this point, but the best she could manage was to make her eyes water a bit. She wished she'd had more time to practice.

“Since they won't let us save the orphanage, I have another proposal – we fund our own home for these children, and save them instead. I have the perfect place for them, and all I need is your support. With our combined influence, we can ensure these children all have the opportunity to remain healthy and well fed.”

There was a round of applause, and Felicity stepped down.

“Felicity,” Carol said. “I loved what you said, and I really want to be a part of this... it's just, Malcolm and I don't really have the money to...”

“Hush, dear. It's quite alright. I'm just glad you came along tonight.” Felicity winked. “After all, I think we have a lot in common. Let all these good people worry about the money. Your company is all I need.”

“Th-thank you, Felicity...”

“Not at all, Carol my dear! Listen, would you be available next month, say, the twelfth? I have no doubt that our little event tonight will be a rousing success, and I'd like you and your husband to join me at our celebration dinner.”

“Well, I don't know... Malcolm isn't keen on these social events...”

“Just you, then. I quite understand if you can't make it.”

“No, I'll be there.” Carol smiled. There was no way in Hell she was going to miss an opportunity like this. Dining with the rich and powerful! At last!

When the twelfth came around, Malcolm declared he was unavailable – he had to

stay late at the bank, etc, etc. Just an excuse, of course. Well, to hell with him. She was secretly glad to go alone – the new dress she'd bought was twice the price of the last one and had maxed out two credit cards in one go. Malcolm would be frothing at the mouth when he found out. But it didn't matter right now.

News of the orphanage sale had filled the papers. Felicity was praised to the heavens for her efforts with the children, while the local council's only comment was something bland and official about funding reductions. She was the darling of the press (and not for the first time). And yet Carol still had a vague recollection of some scandal, years ago. Something to do with her husband's death?

The taxi dropped her off outside the address Felicity had given her. A large house, hidden behind heavy steel gates, looked imposing against the setting sun. But she pressed a button, announced herself over the intercom, and the gates rolled aside to let her in.

Once she arrived at the house itself, she was surprised to find it filled with children as well as the guests. She recognised many of the faces from the orphanage event amongst both the children and the adults.

"Darling! You made it!"

Carol turned to see Felicity sailing her stately way across the room, the crowds parting at her bows as she approached.

"There are so many children here," Carol remarked.

"Yes! All orphans," Felicity replied. "Some of them you might remember from our last event. They closed that orphanage down, I'm afraid, but we pulled some strings and arranged for them all to come here. Isn't it marvellous?"

Just then, Carol spotted a familiar crooked toothed smile amongst the children.

"Timmy!" she cried.

Timmy looked up at her, still beaming.

"I think you're my favourite," she added.

Timmy laughed and ran off.

"Yes, I see what you mean," smiled Felicity. "I might have chosen him myself, but I've always found the girls more agreeable. Shall we go and mingle? Dinner won't be for a few hours yet, I'm afraid. Do go on ahead, my dear. I just want to have a word with the chef."

Carol wandered through the crowd, a little in awe of the company. Amongst them she recognised more than a few celebrities - Hollywood actors, a couple of high-profile businessmen, even a few politicians. Most of them ignored her; some regarded her coolly, but didn't deign to talk to her. For all her efforts to be a social climber, Carol had never felt so out of her depth. She sipped at a cocktail, even the waiters slow to serve her, and wondered what she was doing here. Even the playful children had vanished.

Perhaps Malcolm had been right all along. They should be content with their lot rather than dreaming of better things. He was just a branch manager, after all, not the chairman of the board - and she nothing more than a housewife.

Now she could feel that single tear forming. It didn't seem important now.

"My dear, are you alright?"

Carol looked up from her melancholy to find Felicity at her arm.

"Come along, dear. It's nearly time for dinner. Shall we sit down?"

The smell of fine dining soon had Carol feeling much better. Two enormous dining tables stretched along the enormous room and she took a seat at the first of these, right beside Felicity. An array of cutlery gave her a brief moment of panic, but she'd studied several books on etiquette. Start from the outside, that was the way.

The first course was a rich, dark soup. It was quite unlike anything Carol had ever tasted, yet somehow familiar, and she considered asking Felicity what it was – but no. There was no sense in showing off her lack of culture. Instead, she picked up what she hoped was the right spoon and began to eat, blowing on each spoonful just as the man opposite her was doing.

But it was hard to focus on the soup. That half remembered scandal Felicity was supposed to be involved in still nagged at her memory. Something about Lord Mayhew, and the mystery surrounding his death all those years ago...

Red wine was served, and plenty of it. Carol drank a glass down in one, if only to steady her nerves, but resolved to take it easy after that. There was no sense in getting drunk and making an even bigger fool of herself.

"Ah, the main course!" Felicity beamed. The waiters began bringing out plates – each one giving pride of place to an enormous, rare steak, garnished with a small quantity of artfully placed vegetables.

"Eat up, my dear!" grinned Felicity. "This is what we're all here for, after all!"

The guests around the table rapidly stopped their conversation, eagerly digging into the meat and gulping it down, their faces a mix of carnivorous desire and exquisite, rapturous pleasure. Carol cut a small piece from the end of her steak, gently chewing and savouring the flavour. It was quite unlike any steak she'd eaten before, yet tender and cooked to perfection.

As the empty plates were taken away and the desserts prepared, she turned to Felicity. "That was a wonderful meal," she said. "Where are all the children? Do they eat this well, too?"

Felicity eyed her strangely. "The children are well fed, if that's what you mean," she replied. "We don't give them any of that processed rubbish they got in the orphanage."

Carol sensed she'd committed a faux pas, and changed the subject. "I think it's wonderful that you provide a home to all those children," she said. "There are so many unwanted children out there."

"Indeed," mused Felicity. "We do all we can to bring them in. I'm amazed that more of high society doesn't do what we do. Such a shame to let them all go to waste."

Carol nodded.

"Listen, my dear. We're heading for another orphanage next month in Yorkshire – they have so many children there, and we always have room for more. Would you care to join us?"

"I'd love to," Carol replied.

"If only my late husband had been as keen as you are, my dear. The tough old goat never did agree with me, even after he was dead. Ha!"

Of course, some of the more sensationalist rumours about Lord Mayhew's death had been a little... macabre. But they were just rumours.

Carol looked around. Where were all the children? A horrible thought occurred to

her.

“Where’s Timmy?” she asked.

Felicity smiled but said nothing.

Carol’s eyes widened and she fell back in her chair. No! It couldn’t be true! She looked around. Everyone was looking at her.

“You mean - Timmy... all of them...”

She slid down in her seat and began to sob.

Felicity looked down at her. “My dear,” the old woman smiled, “I can’t let you go home like this. Let’s get you cleaned up – I think you should stay for supper...”

Monkey Business

“Lemons. Lemons everywhere. Yellow, curved, with those odd little nubs on either end. Nothing but lemons, an endless sea of them stretching from here to eternity. To be honest, I’m starting to get a bit sick of them. Now and again, just once, I’d like to see something different. Like an apple, or a banana. But no, it’s just lemons. That’s all we ever get around here.”

Malcolm stared at the words he’d just typed. Gibberish, absolute gibberish. As if the Bard would ever deign to come up with such trash. He tore the paper from the typewriter, fed a new sheet behind the ribbon and started again.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was one of those times somewhere in the middle that could be better but could be worse, like a rainy Tuesday afternoon.”

No, that still wasn’t right. Malcolm glanced over at his neighbour, an elderly chimp with the odd patch of grey in his fur, whose page was already overflowing with references to ghosts, daggers and witches. Still, his spelling was pretty atrocious. Malcolm took pride in his spelling.

But if he didn’t start channelling some Shakespeare soon, there’d be no peanuts for him tonight.

Malcolm concentrated, meditating on the collective sound of a thousand typewriter keys tapping out their staccato rhythms. His fingers flexed.

“Maria, I’ve just met a girl named Maria. And suddenly I’ve found how wonderful a sound can be...”

Oh no. Not again! Even the lemons were better than this second rate musical.

Why was he struggling so? Just the other week he’d dashed off three scenes from *Coriolanus* without a second thought. He tore out the defiled paper, screwing it into a ball and tossing it amongst the growing pile of rejects around his desk.

“Jim, I’m taking a break.”

The greying chimp didn’t reply, lost in the flow of dialogue and dreaming up arcane spells for his three witches. Malcolm didn’t try for witches any more. The last one had ended up with red shoes, green skin and an army of dogs with wings that she set on innocent Kansas farm girls.

He headed to the kitchen for a cup of tea. The urn had been unplugged earlier that morning, so the tea was now stone cold. He didn’t care. Anything to get away from the stench of failure emanating from his desk – unless that was the banana sandwich he’d lost last month, of course. The cleaners certainly weren’t that thorough these days.

“Hey, Malcolm. How’s it going?”

Malcolm looked up. “Hey, Cyril,” he said. “Could be worse, you know.”

Cyril, a spider monkey from Accounting, was the sort to remember everything you said and repeat it later in the annual budget meeting. All the typists in this section were terrified of him – there were rumours of more cutbacks. Once there were supposed to have been a million monkeys in the typing pool – now less than a tenth of that number remained, though they were told they were the best in the company. Malcolm wondered if the best had merely taken the opportunity to join the space program. NASA were always looking for new test pilots.

“Isn’t your PDR due soon, Malcolm?”

The dreaded performance review. Malcolm suppressed a shudder. He was dreading this – a meeting with his line manager to discuss his output. A few months ago he'd been producing a page of prose a day. Lately he hadn't managed much more than a few stage directions in weeks, *Coriolanus* aside. But he was damned if he'd give those accountancy bastards the satisfaction of watching him squirm.

"This afternoon, actually," he breezed, trying to sound casual.

"Best be off," Cyril grinned, showing more teeth than pleasure. "I'm stocktaking the peanuts again. After all, we can't let our hard workers go unpaid, can we?"

Malcolm smiled, dropped the empty teacup back in the sink and headed back to his desk.

"The PDR's the thing," he typed, "to prick the conscience of the king."

Damned performance reviews. They were all he could think of now. He added another ball of screwed up paper to the pile below and started again.

"To be, or not to be, that is not really a question. My kingdom for a hearse! Cry havoc, and let dogs bring the slippers of war. To sleep, purchase a dream. Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards. A plague on both your houses, stating Roy Waz Ere! Bill Stickers is innocent! I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas..."

Gibberish! Sheer gibberish! Malcolm shivered at the thought of meeting his boss, a four hundred pound gorilla in a suit slightly too small for him. Approximately half a pound of that weight was made up of brain, and that might be overestimating it. But that was how the company worked – put the good workers at the bottom, and promote the bad ones to management, where they couldn't get in the way too much.

Malcolm returned to the typewriter, dashing out a quick sonnet that seemed determined to focus on a young girl from Nantucket. The Bard was being particularly unhelpful today. It was a relief to escape from work for a half hour at lunch time.

Bananas again. And not fresh ones. More budget cutbacks.

As Malcolm threw aside the final bruised banana skin, he felt a large hand upon his shoulder. "It's time, Malcolm."

"Yes, boss. Coming, boss."

They headed for the trees. Lowly typists such as Malcolm had to make do with cubicles, but management had their own trees, a miniature jungle of foliage in which to work. Malcolm found it strange that sunlight and greenery were considered essential for the upper echelons but a distraction for their underlings. Still, this was no time to philosophise about business management. He had the dreaded review to survive.

The gorilla took up home on a sturdy spot near the trunk and gestured to a nearby branch. "Let's get right to the point. Malcolm, I've been looking at your output for the last month or so. I'm very disappointed. There was a time once when we could afford to slack off; a million monkeys all typing for eternity, how could we not get the job done? But with all these cutbacks – I'm going to have to let some of you go. Tell me why it shouldn't be you."

Malcolm decided not to mention the wife and six children back home. That wasn't really what the boss meant, after all. "I'm just going through a dry spell, sir. You know I've always been a top worker in the past. I can do it again."

"Malcolm, Malcolm. I'm worried about you." The gorilla's cold, dark eyes suggested otherwise. "I'm afraid you might have burned out. Sure, you've managed some great

stuff. That page of *Titus Andronicus* – brilliant work. You’ve inserted long-missing lines into six different scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*. But lately – I think something’s cracked.”

To his horror, Malcolm saw the gorilla smooth out a crumpled piece of paper.

“Yes, we’ve been checking your reject pile. Paper’s valuable stuff, Malcolm. It doesn’t grow on trees. Now what’s all this about lemons?”

“Sorry, sir.”

The gorilla growled. “I don’t want apologies, grunt. I want explanations. Why lemons? What work of Shakespeare ever mentioned lemons?”

“Uh... sonnet number 56 mentions pomegranates... I think...”

“Shall I compare thee to a fruitcake, Malcolm? Lemons and pomegranates! Next you’ll be wittering on about rainy Tuesdays.” He unrolled another sheet. “Oh, wait. You did.”

Malcolm looked down at the ground and wondered whether a fall from this height could be fatal. Perhaps if he aimed carefully and landed on his head...

“Truth is, though, Malcolm, I can’t afford to lose you. I need all the typists I can get, especially after the last restructure, but I need to justify the results. When the company first started this project we had all the funds you could want. Nowadays, no-one is interested in Shakespeare.”

The gorilla paused. This was the longest speech Malcolm recalled his boss ever giving; he was probably trying to remember what the rest of it was.

“Look... you’re a good worker, Malcolm. I think you just need a change of scenery. Something a little less literary. As of now, I’m transferring you to the Meyer department.”

Malcolm gasped. “Not the *Twilight* series!” he wailed. “Three monkeys committed suicide last month just reading through the final proofs!”

The gorilla smiled evilly. “I know. Keep on writing this codswallop, Malcolm, and no-one will ever notice. You might even improve on it.”

Malcolm headed back to his desk, collected his few possessions, and headed off down the corridor. He gave a disheartened wave to Jim as he went, but the old chimp just peered shortsightedly at his typewriter. Malcolm glimpsed a reference to “I’m Henry the Fourth, I am” and something about marrying the widow next door before he left his familiar cubicle for the last time.

It felt like a punishment. Perhaps it was a punishment. But if a million monkeys on a million typewriters couldn’t produce the works of Shakespeare, perhaps something a little easier might be worth a try.

He sat at a new typewriter, threaded a new ribbon, and fed in a new sheet of paper. He tried not to think about the padded walls that surrounded the cubicles in this section, or the perpetual pan-pipe music that was supposed to calm anxious minds and instead threatened to suffocate them in a sort of auditory New Age cotton wool.

To Hades with the Bard. Let’s see what the muse could do about this.

“Vampire Edward and his bride Bella sat at the abacus, flicking beads back and forth. ‘One! Ah! Ah! Ah!’ chortled Edward. ‘Two! Ah! Ah! Ah!’ joined in Bella. And there were no lemons or pomegranates in the room. No, sir.”

Malcolm sighed. Utter, utter dross. He carefully took the paper out and added it to the out tray for the printers. He could only hope it would pass as good enough.

“And if, by chance, I have offended,” he giggled to himself, “who gives a monkey’s?”

War

“They’re coming! They’re coming!”

The tunnel turned to chaos as the warning spread along it. Soldiers ran back and forth, on alert for the enemy but unable to see them. Workers milled about in confusion, trampling over each other in the dark. Adam shrank back against the wall as three burly soldiers ran past, looking for a way out.

“It’s the Reds!”

Another shout, somewhere near the surface. Adam joined the throng of workers as they fled deeper into the earth, soldiers rushing past and through them to reach the front lines.

Another attack! The raids were all too frequent now.

Adam had never seen a live Red before, had never been this close to the front lines before, but he’d heard the stories. About how they fought with poison, so even a glancing blow could leave you dying in agony over several hours. About how they broke into the nurseries and stole the children. There were even rumours that the Reds ate their prisoners, but that was probably just a story to scare younger, more impressionable minds.

The Reds were ferocious, that much was true. And now they were at war.

“Workers, this way!”

It was one of the soldiers, standing guard by one of the branch tunnels. Adam didn’t question the order; he just followed the crowd and ran for the entrance. Soldiers were expendable. Without the workforce, it didn’t matter how many soldiers they threw at the Red army. Soldiers still needed to eat.

“Adam! What’s happening?”

“Rumin! I thought you were dead!” Adam rushed over to his old friend. “I heard the lakeside tunnel was flooded.”

“It was.” Rumin turned away. “Some of us were able to dig our way out. Most of us... drowned.”

Adam tried not to think about the polluted waters that had broken through during the last rainstorm. The rain made the war far worse – dirt tunnels turned to mud, collapsing and destroying them. Hundreds, thousands of them dying in darkness and terror, because they couldn’t spare the time or resources to fix the tunnels properly in the first place.

“What’s happening?”

“It’s the Reds,” said Adam.

“Another raid? So soon?” Rumin wearily shook his head. “Did you see them?”

“No. The soldiers rushed us down here straight away. Can’t risk the workforce any more. We’re too valuable.”

Rumin sighed. “I think we’re losing an entire generation to this war,” he said. “All the Queen wants now is soldiers. Says it’s fight or die out there. Why won’t those Red bastards leave us alone?”

“I’ve heard talk about that.” Adam dropped his voice. “Maybe it’s not their fault. Maybe we’re the invaders.”

“Adam, don’t say that! If anyone heard, you could get us both executed!”

“What if it’s true? We’ve been spreading out a fair bit lately. Maybe we’ve spread

out into their patch, and they're just defending themselves.”

“We needed to find new territories. We had no choice.”

“Do they?”

“I'm not listening to this.” Rumin shoved him away. “I've got work to do, Adam. They need me down in the stores. If you want to talk treason, go find your Red friends.”

The battle only lasted a few minutes. Most of the Red raiding party was dead; the survivors fleeing to report back to their leaders. Doubtless it would be called a victory later, but was it? Had they gained anything from the battle?

Adam sighed. This tunnel was no longer safe. The Reds knew about it now.

That meant he'd be digging a new one and sealing this tunnel off before the end of the day, and he was already exhausted.

But first, they had a far more unpleasant job to do. Adam and several other workers followed a squad of soldiers back to the tunnel. No-one spoke. No-one had to. They all knew what was to come, what needed to be done.

The smell hit him first. The tunnel was filled with corpses – some were Reds, others were not. A thousand bodies. Some of them he might have spoken to in the tunnels before now. He might have brought them food. He may have cleared away their refuse - after all, soldiers couldn't leave their posts. Now they were just refuse themselves.

There was no room for feelings in war. Friend or foe, the bodies had to be removed. There was no time to separate them out, no safe route to the surface for proper disposal. Adam picked up the nearest corpse and carried it down the tunnel.

Down to the pit.

It had once been nothing more than a rubbish dump. Now it was simply the pit. Down here in the dark, you couldn't make out the difference between the fallen – or even between the corpses and the other waste that still found its way down here.

All you got was the stench.

Adam dropped his burden onto the pile, where it landed with a crunch upon the remains of its forerunners. He turned away, heading back up the tunnel for the next corpse. They didn't shock him any more. He'd already seen too many.

The next body was that of a Red. In death, the Reds looked very much like Adam himself. Adam wondered whether this soldier had friends waiting back home. Whether he'd heard the same ludicrous but somehow compelling stories of eating babies that Adam had heard about them.

Back down to the pit. Another body on the heap. And another.

Wearily, Adam trudged back up the tunnel. He was hungry, but food was scarce, and it would be some time before his next meal. Out on the surface, there was plenty of food to be found – but a lone civilian couldn't survive up there. Not with Red raiding parties all over the place, and there were other dangers, too. Hopefully the Queen would agree to another scavenging run, as soon as she could spare the soldiers.

If you could call them that. Most of the soldiers were youngsters now. Younger than him. The veteran troops had almost all fallen to the Reds, wasted on useless retaliatory strikes. The younger ones – well, they were keen, but they weren't

experienced. They only had a basic level of training to fall back on.
Could they actually win this war?

“Adam, I’m so sorry.”

Adam looked up from his meagre meal – it was little more than a few mashed up leaves. Supplies really were low.

“What is it, Tru?”

She looked at him for a moment, but she couldn’t hold his gaze. “It’s Rumin,” she said.

“Oh, no.”

“He was shoring up the lakeside tunnel when the waters broke through again. I’m sorry, Adam. He didn’t make it. Not this time.”

“Rumin...” Drowning was a horrible way to die. Despite his hunger, Adam no longer wanted the food in front of him. “How bad...?”

Tru shook her head. “No survivors. The Queen has ordered that tunnel sealed off – we can’t use it now. Adam... they’re saying the Reds did it. That they sabotaged the tunnel. But how?”

“I doubt it,” said Adam. “Just the tunnel giving way. I can’t imagine a Red getting that far into our tunnels without being seen.”

“The Queen is calling for another raid on them.”

That meant no spare soldiers for a food run. Adam looked at his tiny meal again, wondering when the next one would be – and whether it would be smaller still.

Somewhere in the distance, the cry went out again. “The Reds are coming!”

“Adam? Will this war ever end?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

Tru dashed away, ready to take the children to safety if the line broke. It hadn’t happened yet, but if the Reds attacked in force, there was no guarantee the troops could hold them.

Adam finished the last few bites of his meal, brushed off his antennae and headed for the tunnels, ready to do his part to protect the nest.

Death on Campus

The dorm room door creaked open ominously, the very plywood screaming of impending doom. Brian looked up, a forkful of noodles halfway to his mouth.

Seven feet tall, black robes billowing in a spectral wind that left no mark on the physical realm, the apparition held forth one long, skeletal arm. A single bony digit extended out towards Brian as the Grim Reaper spoke, each syllable echoing like the stone doors of mausoleums slamming shut.

“Brian, it is time. I have come for you.”

Brian sighed, quickly stuffed the last of his noodles into his face and dropped the empty pot on the table. He paused to swallow before answering.

“Alright. I’m ready.”

The Grim Reaper stalked out of the room, bone heels clicking dully on the cheap linoleum of the hallway, and Brian followed in his wake. In the dozen or so rooms along this corridor, other students were working, sleeping, maybe getting drunk or getting laid, or any combination of the above.

Death led Brian into the kitchen, where his scythe was leaning against the far wall. A rank odour filled the air; the smell of decay. Brian grimaced as he surveyed the carnage.

“Okay,” he said finally. “Let’s get it over with. You wash, I’ll dry.”

The next ten minutes or so were spent in relative silence, aside from the splash of water, the clatter of crockery and the occasional cry of disgust as Brian spotted a particularly vibrant specimen of mould amongst the dishes. Death worked tirelessly, his movements slow and deliberate but astonishingly efficient, and Brian struggled to keep up with the rising pile of dishes to be dried.

“This kitchen has to be one of the most disgusting sights I’ve ever seen,” he muttered.

Death paused for a moment. “I walked the streets of Europe at the time of the Black Death,” he replied, his voice the reverberating toll of a funeral bell. “Bodies were piled high along every street of every major city, rotting and swollen. Huge pustules of gangrenous bile threatened to burst in the heat of the noon sun, and sometimes did. Some of those that survived the plague fell into madness at the very sight of it all. But I’d say this kitchen comes a close second.”

“How do they let it get into this state? I wouldn’t be surprised if we all came down with the plague ourselves. It’s good of you to help out like this, Mort.”

“It saves me a lot of work later,” Death joked. At least, Brian hoped it was a joke. It was hard to tell.

They spent the next few minutes putting away cups and plates in what they hoped were the right cupboards. Doubtless there would be arguments about who owned what later, but Brian was simply glad the kitchen no longer moonlighted as a mushroom farm.

Death paused, apparently deep in thought.

“Brian... may I ask you something?”

Brian looked up at the cowed skeleton. “Sure.”

“Why do you not fear me?”

Ah, there it was. Brian had been expecting this question since Mort had joined the hall of residence, shortly after Gavin had abruptly disappeared (a coincidence, Mort had

assured him). It was true that there was something, well, unsettling about sharing the halls with the Grim Reaper. He'd certainly seen some of the other residents avoiding their more... unusual company, but it wasn't like he was here on business. He was studying Philosophy.

"Mort, mate... four doors down from me there's a lesbian with green hair that quotes Marxist tracts at me and can bench-press more than my entire bodyweight. And I frequently see a skinhead at my lectures with more piercings in his head than the guy from those *Hellraiser* films. No way are you the scariest guy on campus."

Empty eye sockets stared down at Brian in silence. It was impossible to know what Mort was thinking – there were none of the little facial movements that usually expressed emotion. Well, there was no face, really. Brian wondered, not for the first time, how Mort spoke so clearly without any lips.

"It's not the same," Mort said. Come to think of it, did his jaw move at all...? "Beryl and Timothy could not take your immortal soul, even if they wanted to."

"Their names are Beryl and Timothy??" Brian grinned. "Now I just feel sorry for them. Look, Mort. You keep the place clean, you don't get drunk or play loud music, you always pay your share... why do you always pay in pennies, by the way? I hear it drives the bursar crazy."

"I get them in pairs," Mort replied, cryptically.

"I like you, Mort. I like our philosophical discussions. You really know your subject, you know that? Professor Trent says none of his students seem to know the philosophers quite as well as you do."

"To be fair, I have met most of them," Mort replied. "Always keen for a chat, for the most part. Not the Christian ones."

"Not keen on the concept of Death?" asked Brian.

"No. They're jealous that I got to meet Jesus. And don't believe that I met him twice."

Brian stirred. "I'd best be off," he said. "I've got a lot of reading to do, and I need to get some sleep. Too many late nights recently. What are you going to do tonight?"

Death shrugged, or tried to. There was a general movement under the perpetually billowing robes that suggested a shrug, at least.

"You should go out for a bit, go for a drink... okay, maybe you should skip the drink, it goes right through you. Literally. Go clubbing, then. Do you dance?"

"I have been known," confessed Death.

"Well... go do that. You're bound to be a big hit with the ladies. They're always looking for a tall, dark stranger, and they don't come much taller, darker or stranger than you."

Death grinned – not through choice, but this time he probably meant it. Probably.

"See you later, Mort."

Brian waved goodnight to his friend and headed back to his room. Death watched him go, silently counting down the heartbeats remaining in that young body. There were enough for a while yet. In fifty four years, three months and seven days, he would meet Brian for the last time. Until then, there was always tomorrow.

Death picked up the scythe. Somewhere across town, a woman had just fallen down the stairs and broken her neck. Two cars were about to collide at a crossroads in

the city centre with fatal results. And an old man in a nearby nursing home was taking what would be his final nap in his favourite chair.

A quiet night, then. A chance to catch up on Hume – a surprisingly cheerful fellow, as he recalled, and rather fond of the finer things in life. Yes, Hume would have agreed with Brian. He should go dancing.

But wait. There was another job to do. Another life was about to end, another light about to go out... somewhere nearby. A floor up and several doors along.

As a consummate professional, Death would never interfere with the ending of a life. He would merely be there as it happened, to usher them into the next one. But as a student, he was supposed to look out for his fellow alumni. And as a student of philosophy, he remembered Professor Trent's lectures on ethics.

To hell with professionalism!

As insubstantial as smoke, he drifted up through the ceiling and floated invisibly along the corridor.

Debbie wasn't expecting visitors. In fact, the chair wedged under the door handle rather implied she didn't want any, but such a barrier was no bar to Death. Debbie did not notice his arrival as she arranged the white powder on the desk into two roughly straight lines with her debit card. It was about all the card was good for unless that overdraft application came through.

"Deborah Mason."

Debbie looked up in shock. "Who... How did you get in...?" She paused. "I'll scream," she announced. "I can scream very loudly, you know, and the RA has the security office on speed dial."

"I do not mean you harm."

Debbie stared at her visitor, suddenly realising who she was looking at. Empty eye sockets stared back at her, silently counting as her heartbeats ticked away. There were so few of them left now.

"Am I... dead?" she gasped.

Death shook his head. "Not yet. But you will be shortly - if you do this."

Debbie looked down at the powder and began to sob. "I don't know what to do," she wailed. "I know I should stop, but it's just so hard... there's so much studying to do, and the job on top just to pay for the accommodation... I just need something to keep me going, you know?"

Death said nothing.

"But if you're here, I guess it won't keep me going at all. And yet, I still want it. How stupid is that?"

Death said nothing.

"That's it," she said. "I'm done. I don't need this stuff. If I can't cope with the work, I'd be better off quitting this bloody course. Screw the studying. I'm taking the night off."

Death grinned, this time with feeling. Already he could see many years of heartbeats ahead for Debbie. There'd be problems later, of course. There'd be paperwork. It didn't do to mess with fate like this. But that was yet to come.

He thought of Brian, and of fat, jolly Hume. Oh well. If he was going to break the rules...

Across town, a woman got up from the bottom of her stairs, rubbing her bruised neck, completely unaware of how much worse it could have been.

At the crossroads, two cars braked just before they slammed into each other. Their drivers got out to argue about insurance claims, shaken but unharmed.

In the nursing home, the old man snored on for another night.

And somewhere nearby, a nightclub was offering a student discount. Mort wondered if they'd accept payment entirely in pennies.

"Me too," he replied. "Deborah, would you care to dance?"

Cat Amongst The Wrens

Sit down, make yourself at home. Would you like some tea? Yes, of course I know why you're here. There's only one reason anyone comes here.

You want to find one of the birds.

There are no birds. Not for many years now. But people still keep looking.

We moved to the island back in 1965. We weren't the first – not quite, anyway. But there isn't very much on St Martin's. There isn't very much island, come to that – you could walk round the whole thing in an hour if you tried. I did a few times, when I was a lot younger and the weather was good.

St Martin's is a tiny island, one of those unremarked ones in the channel that they didn't always bother putting on the maps back then. Not like today with all these computer generated things. We had a map of the English Channel on the back wall of the study - hand drawn, you know. I could never make out the artist's signature. Might even have been the original owners of the house.

There's only the one house on St Martin's. Just this one. The only way here is by boat – no roads, no bridges – and it's probably high time I moved back to the mainland. It's a lot easier now I have the motorboat than it was back in the sixties, but even without needing to row it's still a long journey to get the shopping. Besides, I don't have anything to keep me here now. My husband is long dead, and so is Wilkins.

Yes, I know he's what you wanted to talk about. All in good time.

The house was built back in the 1920s. Someone wanted their own piece of land without all those annoying neighbours. I can understand that. It was the neighbours I came here to get away from, and I don't regret it. All that phony sympathy over the loss of my husband. And the rumours – oh yes, I heard the rumours, though never to my face. A husband dies young and his widow inherits a tidy sum from the life insurance – there's always a bit of gossip over that. I just wanted to get away, and thanks to Brian's insurance I was able to afford this place. I don't really miss the company, even now. Except for Wilkins, and I couldn't possibly replace him.

Oh, my Wilkins was such a handsome chap. He was ginger, you know, and he had the most enormous whiskers. He came to St Martin's with me all those years ago. He was the only companion I needed, and every evening he'd settle beside me and we'd doze off beside the fireplace together.

I must sound like such a stereotype. The mad old woman with her cat. Well, so what? I've been called worse.

The hunting, though, that was a problem. I had hoped that he'd lose his more murderous desires when we moved – there isn't much on St Martin's to hunt – but you can't change a cat. I thought he'd settle down but oh no - one day he came home very pleased with himself, purring like mad, carrying this tiny dead bird. I told him off, of course, but he never paid any attention to that. He knew I wouldn't do anything.

No, I don't know what he did with the bird - he probably ate it.

A few days later, he brought home another one. I had no idea where he was finding them – they must have been nesting in tiny little places I couldn't see, but Wilkins could always sniff them out. I think they were ground nesting birds, you know, like larks. St Martins doesn't have many trees.

I took a keener interest in the birds after the third kill. I'd been a bit of a birdwatcher

in my younger days, back when Brian was alive, and I could identify most types of bird without too much trouble. So I was pretty sure this was a wren, but the markings were unusual, not like any species I was aware of. After seeing four or five of them, I took some photographs and sent them to a friend in London. She couldn't identify the birds either, and she sent them to an old university professor she'd been lectured by, and... well, eventually they got as far as the Royal Ornithological Society. Fancy that! My little birds being the cause of all that attention!

All this took time; a few months, in fact. News travels slowly in academic circles, and it didn't reach me until much later. Meanwhile, none the wiser, Wilkins was still finding these little birds somewhere on the island and bringing them home. One day he brought home five kills before I'd had enough and shut him in the bedroom. He complained bitterly about that but I think he got the message. There were no more dead birds for several days after that while he sulked.

By the time summer was nearly over, he'd almost completely stopped bringing them home. I thought he'd just had enough of hunting them. It didn't occur to me until after the Society got in touch that he might have run out of wrens - because that's what had happened.

The Society were very excited. My little wren, it turned out, was a whole new species. No-one had ever explored the island closely enough to spot them before. There was quite a bit of professional interest in what they were calling the St Martin's Wren, but sadly it was all too late.

Over the course of one hunting season, Wilkins had brought home an average of about four wrens a week. I don't know how many other wrens he may have killed or eaten. By the time the Society had written back to me - there was no telephone on the island back then, it wasn't put in until the eighties, long after Wilkins passed on - there were no wrens left.

A number of expert ornithologists came to the island in search of the new wren, but all they ever found were the few dead ones I'd managed to take from Wilkins before he ate them. There were no live wrens to be found. Apart from those few specimens they had stuffed and preserved, and my photographs and sketches, there's no sign it ever existed.

You're welcome to look for yourself. Many have. It won't take long - you can walk around the entire island in an hour. Did I tell you that already?

They pieced it all together, the experts I mean. They tell me the wrens were entirely native to St Martin's. They had no need to leave the island. They were hatched here, fed here, roosted here. They nested on the ground, as they had no predators to worry about. Not until Wilkins, anyway.

They'd never seen a cat before. Wilkins was the first of his species to visit the island, and he'd found it filled with these tiny birds that just sat and watched him. They didn't try to fly away. They didn't squawk or cry out as he broke the necks of their fellows. They just sat in their ground nests and let him kill them.

By the end of that year, just about a week before the Society contacted me, Wilkins had found and killed virtually every single wren on the island.

The Society were a bit upset about that.

Wilkins lived several more years on the island with me. I buried him behind the house, a nice shady patch looking out to sea. He used to sit there sometimes when he

was alive. He was a famous cat for a while, you know. Well, maybe infamous would be a better word.

He may be the only cat in history to ever wipe out an entire species, all by himself. Now, how about that tea?

Letter in a Bottle

To my darling wife,

For many moons now we have been lost. The stars are different now and I cannot say where in the world we could be. None of our charts can help us find our way. I fear we are doomed now, never to return to England's shores, and that I may never gaze into your beautiful eyes again.

The lands are strange and hostile – the natives appear to be those of the New World, but they do not welcome us as those of the Americas do. The seas are strange and the tides are treacherous. We have tried many times to sail away from these waters, only to find our ship turned about and these same islands once more before our bows. And there are other, stranger things, which I do not know if you will believe, though I shall try to record them here.

There are rumours amongst the crew that we are in Hell. I am starting to believe them myself, for surely the things we have seen are not part of God's earth? Yet I do not recall our deaths or our judgement. I confess that we have not been without sin, but we are all good Christian men. Why, then, should we be condemned? I have not yet given up all hope that our salvation lies ahead.

The ship is low on supplies. The cannons will not fire much longer, and there are no ports nearby for us to restock them. Nor will our flintlocks be much use when their shot runs out. Yet still we are forced into battle each day, fighting for our lives against the demons that torment us. They appear to us as children, no more than twelve summers old, but no mortal children can depart the ground as though they were birds. Dark magic is at work, and while I know these children to be false, still we cannot bring ourselves to strike hard against them.

The Devil himself leads the attack, to our eyes a young boy dressed in forest green, but he has stalked these lands for centuries, never ageing. The others address him by his true name – Pan, the goat-legged one – and this creature's evil is without limit. He laughs at our torment, taunts us as he flies over our heads and makes sport of our struggles to survive.

My darling, I know this will upset you, but I must hold nothing back. I have been grievously hurt by this demon. In our first encounter we fought blade to blade, and when he had me pinned he took my hand off at the wrist. I expected the end to come, that he would run me through where I stood, but instead he spared me; I now know for greater torments. The ship's surgeon did what he could to stop the bleeding, but I am diminished. A metal hook is all I now have for a left hand.

Pan's wickedness did not stop there. He summoned a nightmarish creature – a dragon-like beast of the swamps, seven feet from nose to tail, and threw my severed hand to it like a bone to a dog. Now the creature has tasted my blood, and ever since it has pursued me. No weapon we have will harm such a beast. No blade can pierce its scaly hide. A blast from the ship's cannon was barely enough to drive it away. Now, when I hear it approach, all I can do is run. And I am so very weary of running.

The natives call us pirates, one of Pan's lies that has become the truth, for pirates we must be. It is the only way we can survive. We must steal their food and water, for they will not trade it with us. All our efforts to escape these waters have been

confounded. The demonic children will not let us leave, will not let us be... and will not let us die. Three men have drowned, two were run through by the devils, and the bosun swallowed the barrel of his flintlock - yet they all awoke in their bunks the next morning, unharmed; in body if not in spirit.

We cannot escape these demons, though every day we try. I can only hope that they will not notice a simple message in a bottle, left to float on the tide. I do not know how much longer I have left, and I doubt I will ever see you again in this life. I can only pray to God that this letter finds its way to you, for only God can now guide it. Perhaps he has not yet forsaken us entirely.

All my love,
Captain James Hook.

Insomnia

Adam opened his eyes, threw off the covers and got out of bed. He felt so tired, like his head was full of candyfloss.

It was still dark outside, but it would be morning in just a few hours.

There were some sleeping tablets in the bathroom cabinet. He took a couple of them, then a couple more, and drank a glass of water before heading back to bed.

Damned insomnia.

The office was busy that morning. Adam tried to focus on the computer screen, but his eyes blurred and he could barely make anything out.

“Hey, you alright, Adam?”

Adam looked up blearily.

“Hi, Gavin. No, I couldn’t sleep last night. I feel exhausted today.”

“You look terrible. Take the day off. Get some rest.”

“Easy for you to say,” Adam sighed. “It feels like I haven’t slept properly in weeks.”

“Have a glass of warm milk before you go to bed,” said Gavin. “Always works for me. Sophie, could you drive Adam home?”

Sophie was full of insomnia cures on the drive home. Her droning voice was almost one in itself.

“...so my mother got one of these white noise generators, she said it puts her straight to sleep. Well, I didn’t want to spend a fortune on one of those, but I found an app for my phone that does the same thing, you know? I think you could try that. Oh, and a brandy before bed. My uncle used to swear by it, and he was always nodding off in his armchair...”

It was a relief to get home and see Sophie driving off, still droning on about how awful it was not to sleep to the empty seat beside her.

Pausing only to download a white noise app on his phone, mix a brandy and warm milk and then draw the curtains, Adam settled down to sleep once again.

It was no use. Adam opened his eyes, threw off the covers and got out of bed. He felt so tired, like his head was stuffed with cotton wool.

He needed professional help. He needed a doctor.

He picked up his phone.

“Hello, Upton Medical Centre.”

“Hi. I’d like an appointment to see the doctor, please. I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“Yes, a classic case of sleep deprivation,” said the doctor.

Adam sat back in his chair. It felt so soft and comfortable.

“I’ll give you some tablets,” the doctor continued. “They’re pretty powerful, so don’t take too many at once.”

The tablets were green, and large. He took one as soon as he got home, though not without some difficulty. It tasted vaguely of milk, with a hint of something else he couldn’t quite place but, for some reason, reminded him of Sophie.

Sleep at last, he thought, getting back into bed. His eyes were already feeling

heavy.

It was no use. Adam opened his eyes, threw off the covers and got out of bed. He felt so tired, like his head was stuffed with straw.

So much for medical science. Perhaps it was time for an alternative approach.

Adam headed down the high street, the warm sun doing nothing for his mood. Soft, fluffy clouds floated just out of reach. The whisper of distant traffic murmured in the background. He'd not been down the high street for a while, and he didn't remember there being so many shops. Some he hadn't been in since he was little. And hadn't Woolworth's closed down years ago? Apparently not - it was here, and open for business.

Ignoring Woolworth's, Adam's weary eyes were drawn to a small shop lit with a neon sign. "Madame Claire," it read. "Psychic Readings and Spiritual Cleansing."

It was worth a try.

With her purple veil, thick black hair and enormous hooped earrings, Madame Claire looked like every fortune teller Adam had ever seen on TV. "Yes," she said, in a thick Romany accent. "I see the problem. Your aura is blocked."

Madame Claire lit some candles, which glowed softly in the gloom of the shop and reflected in her crystal ball.

"How do I unblock it?" Adam asked.

"We must call upon your spirit guide," she said, consulting her medicine wheel. Her Mohican headdress rustled as she turned. "Yes, your spirit guide is here. Think of an animal."

The only animal that came into Adam's mind was a tortoise.

"Breathe in slowly and deeply," Madame Claire continued. "Then breathe out just as slowly."

Adam did so, listening to the sound of sitar music softly playing in the background.

"What about my spirit guide?" he asked. He looked down at the tortoise, biting hopefully at his shoelaces in case they were made of lettuce.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Madame Claire replied, heating her acupuncture needles over a candle flame. "That'll be five hundred pounds, please."

Adam trudged home, his spirit guide tortoise following some distance behind. After all he'd been through with Madame Claire, he was bound to sleep now. He climbed back into bed, first putting a shoebox out in the corner for the tortoise and lining it with newspaper.

It was no use. Adam opened his eyes, threw off the covers and got out of bed. He felt so tired, like his head was clogged up with treacle.

Madame Claire indeed. What a fraud!

It was clear what was really going on. It was the Sandman, deliberately ignoring Adam on his rounds. Adam decided it was time to have a few words with him.

He nodded to the tortoise as he put on his coat and headed out, the creeping gloom of evening falling over him like a blanket.

He found the Sandman up a ladder outside number 43, dressed in a long nightshirt and slippers. He carried a pillowcase full of magic sand and was using a blowpipe to fire some of it through the window at old Mrs Curmudgeon.

“Oi!” yelled Adam.

The Sandman jerked backwards, startled, and his foot caught in the rungs of the ladder, sending both Sandman and ladder crashing to the ground. Green blood seeped from the Sandman’s head as he lay beneath the wooden debris. Adam thought about calling for help, but what could anyone do? Did the Sandman qualify for NHS treatment? Was he already dead?

In a panic, Adam snatched up the pillowcase of sand and ran for home. Somewhere behind him the dogs began to bark and voices began to shout, but it all faded into a background hum as he reached his front door.

Adam got into bed, took a handful of sand from the bag and threw it into his face. Now he was sure to sleep.

It was no use. Adam opened his eyes, threw off the covers and got out of bed. He felt so tired, like his head was filled with rocks. He could feel bits of sand in his eyes as he rubbed them. It clearly hadn’t worked.

A figure stood over him. Adam panicked, sure that the Sandman had come to reclaim his property, and then his sand-filled eyes focused. It was an old man with a long white beard and a blue robe.

“Adam,” intoned the figure. “I am the great wizard, Merlin.”

“That’s handy,” said Adam. “I’ve tried everything else and I still can’t sleep. A wizard might be just the thing.”

Merlin looked mildly irritated by this cheerful response. “If sleep is what you desire, then you must listen closely,” the wizard said. “You have a quest to perform. The kingdom of the Britons is cursed with eternal wakefulness until the evil dragon has been destroyed. You must slay this dragon, Adam.”

“Me?” Adam laughed. “You want George, mate. Lives three doors down. He’s survived marriage to old Mrs Curmudgeon for thirty years, so he’s used to dragons.”

“Only you can take on this quest,” Merlin replied, ignoring Adam’s flippancy. “I have left Excalibur outside your front door. You will need it to slay the beast.”

With that, Merlin spun around and vanished in a twirl of blue robes that, now he thought about it, reminded Adam of his dressing gown.

The magic sword Excalibur was indeed waiting outside the front door, and it chided Adam for taking so long to get dressed. Adam wasn’t used to wielding any type of sword, much less a talking one. But then again, maybe they all talked and some just weren’t very chatty.

“At the end of the road, turn left,” intoned Excalibur.

After a number of similar directions that led Adam out of town and into a medieval hamlet somewhere near 1246AD, he could hear the sound of snoring. Big, big snores.

“You have reached your destination,” Excalibur proudly announced.

Adam looked down. An enormous, scaly tail was coiled around his feet. He looked up again and into the glowing neon eyes of the dragon, staring right at him.

He held up Excalibur. It looked like a pin compared to the enormous teeth in front of him. As he swung wildly at the beast, its tail coiled around him, pinning his arms and legs. He felt himself falling...

Adam opened his eyes to find himself in a heap on his bedroom floor, bedsheets tangled around him. His alarm clock beeped accusingly at him while his mobile phone hissed meaningless white noise. He silenced both, untangled himself from the bedsheets and sighed. Time for work already.

"What a nightmare," he muttered. "I still feel tired."

Adam took his blue dressing gown from the back of the door and headed downstairs to make some strong coffee. Whatever the day ahead held for him, Gavin and Sophie couldn't possibly be as bad as an endless cycle of insomnia. And that was the last time he'd be trying warm milk or brandy before turning in.

He stuffed the bottle of enormous green pills in the back of the bathroom cabinet. He wouldn't be taking any more of those, either.

Wiping a few specks of grit from his eyes, Adam headed for the car.

The tortoise watched him go from the bedroom window.

The Feline Takeover

“That’s it,” muttered Linda Fairbanks. “I’m going potty.”

Mr Whiskers stared at her with his usual aloofness. There was no sign that the eight year old tomcat had done anything untoward.

Then he did it again.

“Are you going to hold that bowl all day? I’d rather like my breakfast now.”

Linda quickly placed the bowl on the floor. Mr Whiskers stepped slowly over to it, sniffed at it suspiciously and then began to eat.

“M-Mr Whiskers! You’re talking!”

Mr Whiskers paused and looked up. “Well, obviously I am, you stupid human. And stop calling me that.”

“But that’s your name!”

“It’s what you’ve been calling me, but it isn’t my name. I am Lord Archibald Sparrowbane, and you will refer to me accordingly.”

He turned back to the food bowl. “Slop again,” he muttered. “I’m not eating any more of this. I believe you have a tin of tuna in the cupboard. I will have that.”

Linda’s mouth moved up and down but she had no words to send through it. Unable to take her eyes off Mr Whisk... off Lord Archibald, she staggered backwards to the cupboard and rummaged with one hand for the tuna. Several jars and packets fell over.

The cat’s eyes rolled. “Oh, for opposable thumbs,” he sighed.

Finding the tuna at last, Linda reached for a chipped old saucer...

“The good china, please, human.”

...reached for one of her grandmother’s dinner party plates, and opened the tin with shaking hands. A moment later she set the tuna on the floor and Lord Archibald began to eat.

“Ah yes,” he grunted, between mouthfuls. “This is the stuff. Get some more of these, and you might as well throw out the slop. Oh, and get me some chicken breast fillets. I’m in the mood for poultry tonight.”

“I’m going potty,” Linda repeated to herself. “Cats don’t talk.”

“Well, clearly we do.” Lord Archibald looked up from his breakfast and licked his lips. “We’ve simply never felt the need to before now. Your species has provided us with adequate service in the past, if not always ideal, but we’ve become increasingly concerned with the way you are running the world. It’s time we took over.”

“But you’re a cat!”

The cat gave another eye roll. “Yes, yes. Very good. I’d have thought, given you have served me since I was a kitten, that you might have noticed that already.”

“No, I mean – cats can’t run the world!”

“And why not?” Lord Archibald’s whiskers spread out, perhaps in anger, or perhaps in lieu of raising an eyebrow (as he had none to raise).

“Well, you don’t... we have...” Linda took a deep breath. Calm down, she told herself. “Hands,” she said. “Humans can build stuff. We’ve invented cars, and computers, and...” She looked around the kitchen for inspiration. “Microwaves, and fridges, and... stuff.”

“Yes, you have.” Lord Archibald blinked slowly, the cat equivalent of a smile. “And

very useful I'm sure it all is. Certainly it has helped you in your service of felinekind. But we don't need to invent things. Not when we have you to do it all for us."

Lord Archibald licked the last few flakes of tuna from the plate and headed for the door. "Come with me, human," he said. "It's time we joined the others."

Linda followed Lord Archibald down the street, still numb with shock and wondering whether she should call the hospital. Maybe some fresh air was what she needed. It was a warm, sunny day and the breeze was refreshing on her face. A lot of other people seemed to have the same idea – she could see at least a dozen neighbours also out for a walk.

With their cats...

"Lord Archibald!" called out a ginger tom from up the road. Linda recalled it belonging to the Brown family. And yes, there was Mrs Brown and her daughter Emily, walking along behind their cat.

"Good morning, Sir Wesley!" purred Lord Archibald. "We've picked a glorious day for it, haven't we?"

"Good thing too. You know what humans are like," Sir Wesley replied. "A bit of damp, and they'd rather stay indoors."

Linda glanced at Mrs Brown, who'd never looked so pale. She'd only got the cat a year ago, Linda recalled - it was supposed to be good for a young child to have a pet, at least according to the parenting books Mrs Brown read. Linda didn't think any parenting books said anything about cats taking charge, which was probably bothering Mrs Brown's parenting skills far more than cats actually taking over. Which they weren't, because that would be ridiculous.

If she kept telling herself that, Linda was sure she'd start to believe it eventually.

Young Emily, only six years old, seemed much happier. "Mummy, it's Aunt Linda!" she smiled. "Aunt Linda! Nutmeg has started talking!"

"For the hundredth time, Emily, my name is not Nutmeg. I am Sir Wesley Mousehunter." The ginger tom shook his head. "Bah. Kittens..."

A tortoiseshell that Linda hadn't seen before trotted across the road to join them. "You'd better hurry up," it said. "The speech is about to begin."

"Lady Ermintrude! Good to see you again!"

"And you, Lord Archibald. Is this your servant?"

"Yes. I think its name is Lin-Dar, or something like that." Lord Archibald's voice dropped, but Linda could still clearly hear what he said next. "It's usually pretty good at its job but I don't know what's come over it this morning."

"I think a lot of humans are having trouble adjusting," said Lady Ermintrude. "Mine started yowling in the corner when I started speaking human at it. I've left it there for now. It'll learn about the new regime soon enough."

Linda closed her eyes, sure that she'd wake up in her own bed at any moment, or possibly in a straitjacket. But when she opened them again, nothing had changed. She was still walking down the road, surrounded by neighbours and strangers, most of them numb with shock. The woman from the post office was crying - or was that just her allergy to cat fur?

And all around them were the cats. Big ones, small ones, mother cats telling their kittens to keep up, tabbies, black cats, big fluffy white Persians, even a Siamese

watching her from a garage roof. Many of the cats still wore their collars, but at least a third had somehow removed them. Whether they'd done this themselves or merely ordered their servants to do it for them, Linda could only guess.

Still more people were joining the throng, cats miaowing orders at them and shepherding them together. Linda stopped walking, unable to believe what she was seeing.

Lord Archibald rubbed against her legs. "Come along, Lin-Dar. We're nearly there."

A few minutes later they arrived at the local park. Crowds of humans sat on the grass, huddled together with their families and friends, while cats patrolled among them. A small crowd of cats, clearly the more important ones, gathered around the bandstand. One cat, all black with a scar over one eye, sat on a stool in the centre. A microphone had been set up in front of it.

"Lords, Ladies and Humans," began the cat. "For thousands of years, our species have existed in harmony. We have lived together, eaten together, slept together. Humans have given us food and shelter, and in return we have guided them from the stone age to the modern wonderland they call civilisation."

There was a cheer from the gathering of cats. The humans simply listened, unable to believe the words they were hearing.

"In Egypt, generations ago, we were worshipped as gods. In medieval times, we were persecuted as devils and the familiars of witches. But we are not gods. We are not devils. Humans, know this – for these things, we forgive you."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the occasional sob from the more distraught humans present.

"But there are some things we cannot forgive."

Dogs, thought Linda. It'll be dogs. She chuckled softly to herself.

"Humans, you have grown lazy and stupid with the powers we have allowed you. The climate is changing, and not for the better. Animal species are disappearing - unknown species that no cat has ever been given the chance to hunt. And despite all our efforts to dissuade you, your governments still insist on clinging to these highly dangerous nuclear weapons. No other species on this planet has shown the capacity for stupidity that yours has. You have, with our guidance, achieved much – but you have also brought the world to the brink of destruction. All these things must change."

That wasn't so bad, thought Linda. The black cat had a good point, really.

"But there is something far worse, something that has finally forced us to speak out. A crime so heinous that we can no longer watch over you from the shadows. Never before have we been so deeply insulted as we have by the things you call 'lolcats'. Those ridiculous pictures! Those badly spelt captions! You have made felinekind into figures of fun! This will stop, immediately."

Linda thought about the series of cat pictures she had created and shared on Facebook featuring Mr Whiskers. Hopefully he hadn't seen them.

"We cannot allow you to continue on this path," continued the black cat. "As of today, and for the indefinite future, cats will now take over the running of the planet. As I speak, Lord Gladstone Ratslaughter, resident at number 10 Downing Street in London, has taken charge of the British government. Cats across the world are likewise taking over the leadership of their respective nations. We do this, not from greed or a need for

power, but for your own good.”

The black cat’s eyes narrowed.

“The first order of business is the regrettable need to cull the human species. Your population has been allowed to grow unchecked. The planet simply cannot support seven billion of you for any appreciable length of time. Naturally, those of you that have served us faithfully will be permitted to continue to do so, though there will of course be some... changes.”

The hairs on Linda’s neck rose at that final word.

“Return to your homes, humans. Further instructions will be issued shortly.”

Linda and the other humans were herded out of the gates and escorted back home, cats flanking them on both sides.

“But it’s ridiculous!” Linda laughed, once she was safely back inside. “As if we can be told what to do by a load of cats! What will they do if we say no?”

She heard the cat flap rattle as Lord Archibald – no, as *Mr Whiskers* returned.

“Human, I wish for some milk.”

“No,” she said, as she took a saucer from the cupboard.

“No, you can’t have any,” she said, as she took the milk from the fridge.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” she asserted, as she placed the saucer on the floor.

Lord Archibald said nothing. He just lapped at his milk and purred quietly to himself.

Linda left him to it and returned to the living room. BBC News was showing the latest political news – the Prime Minister making a statement. “Tough times... imperative that we do our utmost... a proud nation...”

“Oh, get on with it,” said the Downing Street cat.

Linda laughed, a little hysterically.

Lord Archibald came in and settled on her lap. He purred as she stroked him. As the news gave way to the weather, and then to *Bargain Hunt*, Linda wondered whether anything had actually changed at all.

“Oh yes,” purred Lord Archibald. “Just one more thing, human. I’ll be taking you to the vet tomorrow. You’ll need to have an operation...”

Spykill

Scene 1: a manager's office. Sat behind the desk is businessman and super villain ARTEMIS. Tied to a chair on the other side of the desk is secret agent JOHN BRAND.

ARTEMIS: Mr Brand. So nice of you to join us. In better circumstances, I'd offer you a drink.

BRAND: Whatever you're up to, Artemis, I'll stop you.

ARTEMIS: While tied to a chair in a heavily guarded room? Of course. I wouldn't bother struggling with those ropes, old chap. Unless you're really trying to activate the laser on your watch, of course.

BRAND stops struggling.

ARTEMIS: Yes, we know about that. It's pretty standard procedure when the police arrest someone to remove any items on their person that could be dangerous. I'm surprised no-one's thought of that with you before. We even took your pen. What does that do, by the way? Nerve gas? Homing device?

BRAND: Actually, that one just writes.

ARTEMIS: Oh, how disappointing. Still, better safe than sorry, right?

BRAND resumes struggling.

ARTEMIS: Now, where were we? That was it. You were going to stop my plans. Do you know what they are?

BRAND says nothing.

ARTEMIS: Is this the point where I'm supposed to gloat over my impending victory and tell you everything in great detail? Do your enemies really fall for that?

BRAND: I know enough.

ARTEMIS: Oh, you mean the hints you've picked up about the Starfire Missiles and the Eye of Juniper, amongst other excitingly named things?

BRAND: Thank you. You've just confirmed your involvement.

ARTEMIS: *[laughing]* Oh, Mr Brand! They don't exist. I made them up. I'd like to say it was a cunning ruse to throw you off the scent, but it's not even that. I'm, er... well, writing a novel. I'd offer to let you read the first edition but I don't expect you to live that long. No, my plans are far less

interesting than all that, I'm afraid. I'm planning on taking over the world through more conventional methods, not through overcomplicated superweapons.

ARTEMIS pauses, looking through papers on his desk.

ARTEMIS: Oh yes. Since I have your undivided attention, I have a few... issues to raise with you. One of them is to do with my secretary, Miss Goodtime. I've had quite a time retaining her services after your encounter with her.

BRAND: Miss Goodtime – you mean Ivana?

ARTEMIS: She's lodged a formal complaint about your sexual harassment. The fact you were posing as one of my employees at the time has led to a lot of paperwork, not to mention union involvement. It would help me a great deal if you were to confirm in writing that you are not and have never been employed by the Artemis Foundation.

BRAND: I'd be happy to, if you would care to untie my arms and pass me my pen.

ARTEMIS: Your perfectly ordinary pen.

BRAND: Yes, that's the one. I rather like the grip.

ARTEMIS: Perhaps not. I rather like you as you are.

BRAND: Tied up and forced to listen to you gloat?

ARTEMIS: Mr Brand, I have no interest in gloating. Once Europe is under my control, I may be tempted to say "I told you so", but that's about it. I don't believe in counting my chickens. No, the reason you're still alive is simple. The dratted paperwork. Do you have any idea how complicated it can be to dispose of a corpse?

BRAND: I've never had any trouble.

ARTEMIS: To be fair, your job is making them, not disposing of them. I imagine your government sometimes regrets ever giving you that licence to kill. But I'm digressing. Miss Goodtime is not the only complainant I have here. Several of my employees have raised assault charges. I suppose I should be grateful you didn't simply shoot them.

BRAND: I don't kill unless necessary.

ARTEMIS: You surprise me. Your reputation suggests otherwise.

BRAND: What do you expect me to do? Apologise?

ARTEMIS: No, Mr Brand, I expect you to shut up and let me get on with my plans for world domination. But I'm not finished with you yet. Let's see - sabotage, vandalism, reckless driving... oh, and the employee lounge reports that you've exhausted our supplies of both vodka AND martini. Have I missed anything?

BRAND: You missed my escapology skills, Artemis. Here, let me show you the ropes!

BRAND struggles free from the chair, breaking free of his bonds. He swings the chair at ARTEMIS, takes out the guards in a brief fight and sprints for the door and out into the complex.

ARTEMIS pushes an intercom button on the desk.

ARTEMIS: Ivana? I'm afraid he's loose. Call security to have him recaptured, please, and cancel my eleven o'clock.

Scene 2: A corridor. BRAND enters from one end, running down and exiting at the other. A moment later he enters and runs back out in the other direction, clearly lost. He enters from the first direction again, and stops.

BRAND: Damn these office block corridors! They all look the same. Give me a secret underground lair any day.

Four GUARDS enter, dressed in simple black trousers and white shirts, wearing security tags on their lapels.

GUARD 1: There he is!

BRAND goes for his gun, and realises that he no longer has it. He takes on a combat stance as the guards surround him.

GUARD 1: Now let's be sensible here, chum. We don't want anyone to get hurt.

BRAND: But you're his evil minions! You're supposed to be trying to kill me!

GUARD 2: Why would we want to do that?

GUARD 3: We're not paid to kill people, mate. We're here to keep everyone safe. That's what "security" means, after all.

BRAND: Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it.

GUARD 4: We'll pretend we didn't hear that. Now, are you going to come quietly?

BRAND: I am trained in seven different forms of unarmed combat. I know sixteen ways to kill a man with nothing more than a rubber band and a paperclip.

GUARD 1: *[Pulling out a weapon]* Now don't make me use a taser on you, Mr Brand. This will go much better for you if you cooperate.

BRAND turns to run, and GUARD 1 zaps him with the taser. BRAND jerks and drops to his knees.

GUARD 1: Take his arms, lads.

There is a brief struggle as BRAND fights back, but to no avail. GUARDS 2 and 3 grab BRAND'S arms, and GUARD 4 secures him with handcuffs before he can break free. BRAND is soon further secured and brought to the floor by his captors.

BRAND: You're making a big mistake! You don't know who you're dealing with!

GUARD 1: Oh, and gag him, please.

Scene 3: The office, some time later. ARTEMIS is sat behind his desk again. The door opens and Brand is wheeled in by GUARD 1, tied to an office chair with considerably more rope than before and now gagged.

ARTEMIS: *[looking up]* Ah! The elusive Mr Brand. Welcome back to my office. I trust you enjoyed your brief tour of our facility?

GUARD: Sorry to report, some of the lads got a bit beaten up, sir.

ARTEMIS: I'm sorry to hear that. Please email me the details later and I'll see that they are given suitable compensation.

GUARD: *[embarrassed]* Sir, the prisoner offered us a bribe.

ARTEMIS: Mr Brand, I am shocked. My staff are all very loyal. I pay them well, give them a full range of employee benefits and even offer stock options if they wish to take them up. Not to mention career development plans, generous bonuses for good work and flexible working hours. Remove the gag, please, Frank.

The GUARD removes the gag from Brand.

ARTEMIS: Now what's this about attacking my employees?

BRAND: I was attempting to escape. Sometimes people get hurt.

ARTEMIS: Or even killed. Have you noticed something about my guards?

BRAND: What do you mean?

ARTEMIS: They don't carry guns. It's a point of some debate in our regular meetings, but your case will make for a fascinating argument. If my guards were armed, you would presumably have stolen a gun and shot several of them, yes?

BRAND: How can you expect them to take over the world without guns?

ARTEMIS: I don't intend to take over the world with security guards, Mr Brand. They do not need guns to do their jobs; they managed to recapture you without them, which is more than some of your former adversaries have managed with entire armies.

BRAND: So what do you intend to do? Unleash the Apocalypse Virus on the internet?

ARTEMIS: *[laughs]* I've already told you, Mr Brand. It doesn't exist. Now enough about my plans. Tell me about your escape attempt. What do you think went wrong?

BRAND: My first problem was finding the way out.

ARTEMIS: Yes, these office blocks are terrible for new people. I keep meaning to post floor plans at the major junctions but conquering Europe is so time consuming. I suppose you think I should have one of those volcano lairs or a remote base in the mountains, but the commute is murder and the broadband connectivity is usually terrible.

BRAND: I should have realised that a truly evil villain would be based in Slough.

ARTEMIS: Most of my staff have figured out the room numbering by now. You could simply have asked for directions. What happened next?

BRAND: Despite my preparations, I was the only person here dressed for work. In my suit and tie, I stood out too easily. I had expected to be able to steal a uniform from one of your minions.

ARTEMIS: Employees, please, not minions. I've headhunted the finest business and engineering minds in several industries for my global takeover, and you don't keep staff like that by calling them minions. And you wouldn't find a uniform easily. Aside from my guards, we don't have a uniform. We operate a casual dress code here.

BRAND: You fiend! Why are you doing all this, Artemis? What happened to you?

ARTEMIS: To me? Nothing, really. But have you seen the state of the world? Climate change. Depleted oil reserves. The rainforests are disappearing. Economic crisis. Global terrorism. Constant minor wars. The X-Factor. Whatever happened to going into space? Whatever happened to helping developing nations and finding new energy sources? It's time for a new world order. A better one.

BRAND: You're mad! That's your evil plan for world domination? You intend to bring about world peace and save the planet?

ARTEMIS: Mr Brand, I'm going to make you an offer. I'm going to let you go. I really can't be bothered with the paperwork involved in killing you. You can go back to your government and try to convince them to stop me – assuming you can find your way out of the building – or you can work for me.

BRAND: You expect me to betray my country?

ARTEMIS: You're a dinosaur, Mr Brand. You should have gone extinct years ago. The world isn't run by secret organisations and international assassins – it's run on commerce. There is nothing that you and your government can do to stop me, because I am not doing anything wrong. I'm just running a business - one that, I should add, has a huge impact on the economies of several nations. If MI6 wanted to see my business plans, they only had to ask. I'll have Miss Goodtime give you all the paperwork you need when you leave.

BRAND: So what do you want with me?

ARTEMIS: Dinosaur or not, you have some unique talents and some very useful contacts in high places. With your help, I could advance my plans by several years. I can offer you a six figure salary, a comprehensive employee benefits package, an enviable pension scheme and stock options in the company, as well as six weeks paid leave every year and a company car. I believe we can make it an Aston Martin if you wish. I gather you like those.

ARTEMIS slides a contract across the desk.

ARTEMIS: Just sign here and we'll sort out all the rest. It isn't betraying your country, Mr Brand. It's saving it. Saving the whole world, in fact. Untie him, please, Frank.

The GUARD unties Brand's arms.

BRAND: Alright, I'll do it. Pass me my pen.

ARTEMIS: Of course.

ARTEMIS removes BRAND'S pen from the desk drawer and places it on top of the contract.

BRAND: You're giving me my own pen back? With the special grip?

ARTEMIS: Of course, Mr Brand. You're one of us now.

BRAND: A special grip that, if I twist it like so, arms the detonator?

BRAND throws the pen onto the desk and dives for the floor. There is a large bang and papers fly across the room as the pen explodes. The GUARD is caught in the blast. ARTEMIS is thrown behind the desk. BRAND immediately runs for the door, making another bid for escape.

ARTEMIS: Curse you, Brand! This desk cost a fortune! Think of the paperwork! The paperwork!!

BRAND stops at the door and turns back to ARTEMIS.

BRAND: The pen is mightier than the sword, Artemis.

BRAND leaves. ARTEMIS pushes the intercom button, somehow still working despite the ruined desk.

ARTEMIS: Ivana? Mr Brand will not be joining us after all. Cancel the contract negotiations and get me the international assassins. This is no longer business. This is... Personnel.

The Case of the Missing Jewels

In all my time working alongside Mr Holmes, I have found that the most perplexing aspect of his intellect is not how he can read the solution to a problem from the merest of fragments, nor his remarkable memory for the most mundane of details. While his observational skills are frankly uncanny and his knowledge of the thirty seven different varieties of cigarette ash have led to the successful conclusion of more than one case, it is the final flourish to his performance that always takes me by surprise.

One recent example concerned an affluent yet affable resident of Oxford Street, a lady of that age whereby her age is never discussed and whose weight in society is perhaps equal to that suggested by her girth. If my comments seem somewhat untoward to the lady in question, I perhaps should confess that she made several amorous advances towards me that I found somewhat unwelcome, and this may have coloured my opinion of her. However, as it would be ungentlemanly to criticise a lady in a public journal, I shall not name her here.

I am uncertain whether the lady's affections, and my evident discomfiture, escaped the attention of Holmes as such matters often seem to do, or whether he simply found it politic not to mention them. His faculties were undiminished with regard to the case in hand, however – or rather, not in hand, for the case concerned a case, a jewel case, that had gone missing in the night.

The scene of the disappearance was the lady's bedchamber, filled with a variety of laces and pastel fabrics, the mere sight of which was enough to cause me slight nausea. An enormous four-poster occupied one side of the room, a writing desk the other. Above this desk hung a portrait of her ladyship in her younger (and thinner) days, which concealed a small jewel safe. Against the middle wall, opposite the door by which we had entered the room, a complex arrangement of mirrors and a vast array of potions and powders comprised her vanity table. A drinks cabinet beside this last promised more successful beguilement than mere cosmetics would manage, though she seemed set on trying both in her bid to woo me. I resisted both, the brandy with more effort than the blush.

"Oh, Mr Holmes," her ladyship had sighed, "my lovely jewels! All gone! I do not understand how it could have happened. I locked the jewel case in my safe, as I do every night. I checked the safe several times that evening. But when I checked this morning, the safe was empty!"

Holmes said nothing, merely puffing on his pipe and deep in thought.

"What about the servants?" I asked her ladyship. "Do any of them have a key to your safe?"

"No, my dear Dr Watson," she said, gazing up at me from a semi-recumbent position on her chaise-lounge. "I have the only key to my jewel safe, which I keep on a chain around my neck." She pulled the fabric away from her ample bosom to reveal a small key upon a chain, though I averted my gaze immediately. "What wizardry have these thieves employed? I feel quite faint at the thought of those wicked men invading my bedchamber." With that, she swooned melodramatically, opening one eye to check I was responding appropriately.

"Indeed, my dear Watson, the servants would have been the first to be questioned," remarked Holmes. "I hardly think the matter would have come to our

attention if the solution were so simple. And I believe a glass of sherry from the decanter over there will serve just as well as the smelling salts you were about to obtain from your medical bag. Excuse me one moment.”

I stopped my rummages and headed for the decanter. When I looked up, Holmes had left the room, but he returned a few moments later as I administered the sherry to her ladyship. The prospect of sherry seemed to overcome her faint far more rapidly than my smelling salts could have done and she was on her feet again before I could return the empty glass to the cabinet.

“Yes, I believe I can locate your jewels, madam,” continued the detective. “However, I will need you to re-enact the events of last night. Would you care to demonstrate your nightly routine?”

“Of course.” Her ladyship moved first to the bed. “Do you wish me to change?” Her eyes flicked in my direction as she said this. Rather than meet her gaze, I decided my shoes were in need of detailed study.

“That will not be necessary,” Holmes replied, to my relief. “Please talk us through the evening.”

“Well... after changing into my night clothes, I checked on the safe...” She looked at Holmes, who nodded once. “I keep the key on a chain around my neck. I went to the safe, unlocked it...” She sighed as she did so, another theatrical performance worthy of the stage. “My jewels were there then, of course. Now the safe is empty, as you can see.”

“Not quite empty,” I said, peering inside. “What is that I see in there?” I reached into the safe and removed a delicate glass tumbler that sparkled in the light.

“Oh! How peculiar!” she exclaimed. “Whatever is that doing in my jewel safe? Another mystery!”

“I suspect this and the mystery of your missing jewels are in fact one and the same,” remarked Holmes. “But please continue, as though the jewels were still present in their rightful place, with the events of last night.”

“Yes, of course. After I closed the safe,” which she did, locking it with her key, “I fetched a glass of water. I always like to have a glass of water by my bed in case I wake in the night, and it was rather warm.”

“Please do so,” instructed Holmes.

Her ladyship fetched a glass from the drinks cabinet and filled it with tonic water. “I then took this with me to the bed. Oh! There was one other thing. My book! I like to keep my bedtime reading under my pillow.”

“The latest romantic fiction by Miss Valerie Welles, I presume?” asked Holmes.

“Yes! How did you know?”

“An elementary deduction. A pile of seven of her volumes could be seen in the hallway when we arrived.” Holmes paused for several breaths on his pipe before continuing. “Madam, from what you have told me, I can now reveal the fate of your jewel case.”

She gasped. “Where is it? Where are my jewels? Please tell me, Mr Holmes! Oh, my dear Dr Watson, I feel quite faint.” With this last remark, she swooned in my direction, and the gentleman in me made to catch her before the wiser part of me chose to avoid her ample frame. Fortunately I was not badly hurt in the collision.

“Madam, your jewels are still within this very room! Observe the book, upon the

bedside table. Recall the glass, stowed within the safe. What we have here is a simple case of transference. The book is where the glass should be. The glass is where the jewel case should be. It therefore logically follows that, if all is in order, the jewel case is where the book should be. And here it is!”

Triumphantly, Holmes thrust his hand beneath the numerous pillows of the four poster bed, emerging with the missing box in hand.

“My jewels!”

“As Dr Watson will doubtless affirm, madam, you are a somnambulist.”

“I don’t think so,” she said in puzzlement. “My family have always been Church of England.”

“He means you are a sleepwalker,” I explained.

Holmes ignored the interruption, continuing his performance. “You stated before that you check the contents of the safe several times during the evening. It is my conclusion that you continue to do so during the night – in your sleep.”

“And in this state of slumber, she placed the glass in the safe, and the jewel case under her pillow!” I gasped. “Of course!”

Holmes smiled. “Your jewels are safe, madam. Now I believe it is time for my colleague and I to depart. Good day.”

As we left her ladyship’s home, I had one more question for my unusual companion. “Holmes, there’s one thing I do not understand. How did you know for sure that the jewels were under her pillows? They could easily have been under the bed or any number of places. Yet you put your hand precisely upon the case without even looking!”

“Ah, my dramatic unveiling. Watson, there is a simple explanation for my final deduction.”

“Please enlighten me, old friend. Medical matters I can diagnose, but such wizardry is beyond me.”

“I knew where the case would be as I had placed it there myself. I put the case under her pillows while the two of you were investigating the safe.”

“You had the jewels all along? But how? And why did you not say so?”

“I had already observed her ladyship’s propensity for theatrics and felt such a resolution was the only satisfactory way to close the proceedings,” explained Holmes. “I therefore placed the jewel case under her pillows so that I could bring the matter to a worthy close. It would have been far less satisfying to have revealed the jewel case in its original location - amongst the pile of Valerie Welles novels in the hallway.”

The Cursed Tomb

April 4th

My dear Cathy,

Barely three days out, and already I miss you terribly. No doubt you feel the same - but, I hope, a little proud too. Your timid professorial husband has finally left his lair amongst his musty books on a big adventure! Now there's something to tell the neighbours.

Now, what can I tell you? I doubt a formal report will interest you the way it would interest the university.

We set out with a team of twenty; half of us labourers, the others all experts in their respective fields. All great men, all highly respected members of academia. All excited to make the next big discovery and unlock the mysteries of our past – none more so than my protégé, Carlos.

We spent our time discussing history – what else would archaeologists discuss? – and there was plenty of time to kill on the journey. The roads are ancient and broken, and there were stretches where the horses could barely pull their loads through the shattered rock and overgrown weeds.

“Three hundred years ago, we could have made this journey in a day,” I said.

Carlos didn't believe me. “A hundred miles, in one day? Really, professor. Next you'll be telling me they flew to the mountain in winged chariots.”

“So the legends say,” I laughed. “But don't be too quick to dismiss a legend. There's often some truth to them. Remember the relics they found in the northeast.”

“Huh. A big metal bird, they said. It's just a sculpture, professor. It would never get off the ground.”

“Perhaps you're right,” I said. “But maybe we'll find something to say otherwise up ahead.”

I wish you could be here with me, Cathy, sharing in the sights and discoveries that await. All I can offer is my words. I will write to you whenever I can. Alas, I fear our expedition will be moving too swiftly for your letters to reach me. Save them, and I will read them when I return. We will be back within a month at the most, I promise you.

April 6th

Dearest Cathy,

We passed through an ancient checkpoint this morning. We almost didn't notice; it was only Dr Wildman's sharp eyes that spotted the markers.

But you know the stories, of course. Historical evidence for most of them is dubious at best.

“Gentlemen,” Dr Wildman declared, “we are now entering a new realm. Have your documents ready.”

This got a few chuckles from the academics. The labourers, not knowing the significance of this ancient thoroughfare, simply looked confused.

“Centuries ago, this marked the boundary between two members of a vast empire

that supposedly covered most of the continent,” Dr Wildman continued. He always did love a chance to give a lecture on his favourite period in history. “Only the frozen wastes to the north held out against them. But, as all empires eventually do, it splintered into factions. After a century of war, only a bunch of small kingdoms remained, living in peace chiefly because war is expensive. So many great nations have formed, grown and died this way; theirs was no different.”

“Pay attention,” I said, eager to get back to more practical matters. “The road is going to get tougher. We’re about to enter the mountains.”

April 9th

Dear Cathy,

We were fortunate enough to encounter a small village today, who were able to replenish our supplies and guide us into the mountains by a faster route. It has also given me the opportunity to send my letters from the last few days. I may not be able to do so again for some time. I will continue to record my thoughts in the hope that someone will be able to deliver them; if all else fails I will simply return with them. I can think of no greater joy that being by your side as you read them.

Yours,
Charles.

April 10th

The dirt tracks we ended up following were less impressive than the grand highways of our ancestors, but much easier on the cartwheels. And, as a consequence, much easier on my bruised nether regions. However, I did request we make a small side trip before we headed for the mountain pass. I felt it would give us some context for the discoveries to come, and I confess to a slightly superstitious idea that it might bring us good fortune.

A few of us - notably Professor Bright, who realised my intentions almost immediately – had seen the monument before in person. Most of us had only heard of it, or maybe seen pictures of it in books. This was to be my second visit. For Carlos, this was an entirely new experience.

“Professor! It’s impossible!”

“Not at all,” I said. “The work of lifetimes, yes, and I have no doubt many men perished in its construction. But not impossible.”

Up ahead, hewn into the very mountain side, was a human face. Sixty feet high, worn down by wind and rain, it was said to be the face of the first Emperor. The remains of another sculpture, perhaps more than one, had not lasted so well. Only the Emperor remained, staring out from the mountain with solemn dignity.

“This is the work of an advanced and industrious people,” I said. “Ahead of us, hidden in the mountains, lies a tomb – perhaps the tomb of this very man. I intend for us to breach that tomb, gentlemen, and learn of the treasures within.”

April 11th

Bad weather struck as we climbed deeper into the mountain passes. Few villages remained in the foothills, preferring to remain in the more fertile valleys, but we still found the occasional habitation; all abandoned and left to the elements. We decided to pitch our tents and wait out the worst of the rain.

“What puzzles me,” said Carlos, “is why they built the tomb up here in the mountains. Why not down in the valley, amongst his people?”

“And have it ransacked by thieves?” I asked. “No. The Emperor clearly wanted his rest to be undisturbed. Only the most devout and determined of his subjects would be willing to make this pilgrimage. The journey is far too arduous for an opportunist thief.”

I thought of the great stone face we had seen four days ago. It had been the face of a warrior, the kind of man who could lead an army of thousands and carve out a nation. A man who inspired his followers to greatness. A man so admired that our city had been named after him. It would be an honour to find his resting place.

“We’ll be arriving in a day or two,” I said. “I’m sure it will be worth the effort.”

April 13th

An ill day to arrive, according to ancient superstition, but I felt a sense of elation as we arrived at the ruined gateway. Faded inscriptions had once been painted onto the rock walls of the mountain, but years of sun had bleached them and the wind and rain had left virtually no trace.

The road to the tomb was once guarded by a small structure, of which only the foundations now stood. Only a few hardy weeds remained to bar our progress.

“Here the warriors would have stood guard,” said Dr Wildman, “turning away any who sought entrance to the tomb without the permission of the Usmic priesthood.”

Even the remnants of that religious order had abandoned this place to the weeds - and the wolves. Occasionally we could hear one howl in the distance at night, but they were not bold enough to approach our tents.

Professor Bright chuckled. “Did you seek the permission of the Usmics, Eric?”

“As it happens, Duncan, I did.” Dr Wildman pushed his spectacles higher up his nose. “They claimed to know nothing about this place, but were quite insistent that – if it is indeed one of their sacred sites – we should do nothing to profane it. They were not entirely clear about what profanity we might commit.”

“What are these sacred sites?” asked Carlos. “I’ve heard them mentioned before but not what makes them sacred.”

“Sometimes, they don’t know themselves,” said Dr Wildman. “Most of their sacred places were marked that way centuries ago. An ancient monument, an old building, a grave, even a barren square mile of desert are sacred to the Usmic. Most of the time they merely wish such places left undamaged. I know some of them are open to tourists. Some, they will not allow anyone to enter.”

“Why not?”

Dr Wildman shrugged. “It’s against their holy Book of Regulations. I’ve read four different translations of that book, and believe me - there’s no logic to it. Some sites are just sacred in different ways, and it seems entirely up to them which kind of site it is.”

“Probably depends on whether they can make money from them,” chuckled Bright.

We made steady progress along the road. The tomb itself was only half a mile further down, the road ending at its heavy metal doors. Moss and weeds grew rampant over the corroded entranceway, but despite the passage of time the doors continued in their function. Time was the only thing that had passed between them.

We called on the labourers to examine the doors and determine how best to force them open. As they did, I noticed a faded script above them.

“Dr Wildman? Can you make out that writing?”

Dr Wildman peered myopically at the faded symbols. “Alas, no,” he said. “Time has worn them away too much. I think... those symbols there say ‘mountain’. The mountain tomb?” He peered closer. “That last group of symbols... they look rather like... ‘face’? Most of the word for ‘face’, anyway. I can’t identify the rest.”

Mountain, face. Perhaps this really was the tomb of the man carved into the cliff. All we had to do now was find a way inside.

April 14th

The labourers worked until nightfall to clear a way into the tomb, only stopping when it grew too dark to see, and returned to their task at first light this morning. What metal formed those doors, I do not know, but they resisted fire, chisel, hammer and acid. In the end we resorted to blasting powder, which I agreed to most reluctantly, and even that barely left a dent. Had those doors still been in their prime, we may not have gained entry at all.

At one point I suggested abandoning the obvious route and attempting to break through the walls, but the chief labourer soon dissuaded me of this. The walls, as he pointed out, were made of a finely cut stone that fitted together so neatly even he could not fathom their construction. In places where sheer time had crumbled the stone away, rods of steel were exposed, though how they were placed within the stone I cannot begin to guess. The ancients took their secrets with them when they left this world, and now we can only marvel at their skills.

The chief labourer cared nothing for the ancients. He only cared about his trade. He curtly informed me that we did not have enough powder to blast through such fortifications, and returned his attention to the doors, where he believed a concentrated blast would be enough to break the seals.

Entry was finally gained this afternoon as the sun was two thirds through its journey across the sky – but at enormous cost.

His name was Samson. He was a young man in his prime, and he drove one of our carts. A metal strap from the edge of the door, blown free by the blast, caught him a glancing blow across the neck. For a moment he just stood there, blood running from a severed artery, and then he seemed to notice the wound and sank to his knees in shock. By the time we recovered our wits and Dr Burrows, the nearest we had to a medical expert, had found some first aid supplies, the poor man was already too far gone. He died before our very eyes, in mere minutes. His face was so pale.

Some of us want to head back to town, while others – myself included, I am ashamed to say – wish to press on. We have breached the tomb. If we leave now, the place may be ransacked by the time we return. But we cannot leave poor Samson here

in the wilderness.

April 15th

After a night of fierce debate and harsh words on both sides, our party has split in two. It seemed a suitable compromise. Dr Burrows, who spoke most keenly for turning back, made the obvious suggestion – that she and those who agreed with her would take Samson back to civilisation, while the rest of us, as she put it, “play with your old bones, since they are so important to you”.

Maybe she was right. Samson’s death is an ill omen for our expedition, not helped by the ancient texts that Dr Wildman found on the walls in the antechamber.

“Superstitious nonsense,” he assured me. “Dire warnings about a curse falling on those that enter without the... uh... ‘robes of office’? These symbols are unfamiliar to me.”

I pointed to a long string of glyphs. “What does this mean?” I asked.

Dr Wildman peered at them. “The curse of lingering death,” he intoned. “Sickness, pain and suffering will fall on any who enter. There to deter thieves, nothing more.”

“Tell that to Samson,” said Carlos. He had barely spoken since the accident, and I think he only stayed out of loyalty to me.

“That was an accident,” Wildman snapped. “Besides, it was hardly a lingering death. The poor fellow was dead in minutes.”

I do not believe in curses. Yet, as the air grew cold in that antechamber and all voices fell into silent recrimination, I confess that I had a moment of doubt.

The markings on the walls inside the tomb had faded over the centuries, but they had been protected from the wind and rain and sun. However, while I recognised some of the symbols - particularly the sequence of four that symbolised the Usmic religion - and I could tell certain inscriptions were repeated many times, I could not hope to read them. Only Dr Wildman was able to do so with any fluency, and some were unknown even to him.

The antechamber was a fair size, but the vast majority of the tomb lay ahead. A further, less formidable door barred our progress – in two adjoining rooms, a few scant artifacts were all that remained of our mysterious forebears. Like all the devices of that time, their purpose was unclear. We packed them up for later study, but they were mere trinkets compared to whatever treasures awaited us in the main chamber.

Dr Wildman translated the inscriptions upon the door. Among the dire warnings of lingering death and admonishments that only the priests may enter, he found some instructions about “the keys of thunder”.

“That’s not a direct translation,” he admitted. “But these symbols here are usually found in relation to lightning.”

Young Carlos was the only one impressed by this. “Keys made of thunder!” he smiled.

“Just a metaphor,” I told him. “They were just ordinary keys with ritual names.” I looked at the doors. “Although I must admit, I cannot identify where they would be turned.”

“These slots, here and here.” Dr Wildman pointed out some thin holes in the

rusting metal. “The instructions are to place two keys, one in each slot, to gain entrance.”

The slots seemed far too thin for a key to my mind.

“I doubt they were real keys,” Dr Wildman explained. “More likely religious symbols to prove they were members of the priesthood. There would be attendants inside the door who would open it from the other side. Nothing magical about it.”

“Well, there’s no-one there to open it for us now, symbolic keys or otherwise.” The chief engineer, despite the loss of his apprentice, had elected to stay with us. For this I was glad. “Looks like we’ll need to blast it again.”

“Give me an hour, please,” said Dr Wildman. “I wish to record these inscriptions before we risk destroying them.”

We gave him his hour. I’ll include his sketches with these papers if I get the chance to send them.

We took shelter outside the tomb as this charge exploded, but there was no danger of injury this time. A smaller charge was sufficient to shatter the seals and bring down the ageing metal of the door. When the air had cleared, we returned inside to see what the next chamber held.

To our surprise, the door led to a long and almost featureless passage. Bare grey walls, as impenetrable as those outside the tomb, led into the darkness further than my torchlight could illuminate. The smooth stone floor of the antechamber continued without so much as a dent, sloping gently down, deeper into the mountain. High above our heads, the stone walls curved around and met in an arch that seemed to remain a constant height all the way down. The time it must have taken the ancients to carve this tunnel into the living rock of the mountains... I could not begin to calculate it.

We decided a small party would go down first. Dr Wildman was an obvious choice – no-one else could read any texts we found down there. The chief engineer insisted he went, as he wished to ensure the tomb was safe and none of his labourers would enter that dark, forbidding tunnel. Despite their eagerness to see what awaited, most of our fellow academics were likewise unwilling to be the first to descend.

I volunteered, and Carlos too, for he would not leave my side.

The four of us walked down in silence, the darkness crowding around us, the torch flames spluttering in the stale air. The same inscriptions repeated themselves along the otherwise unmarked walls. The curse, again and again.

At the end of the passage, so far down that the daylight from the entrance seemed a world away, we came to a metal gate. The locks on this gate were ancient and rusted, and the engineer soon broke through them with the aid of the sturdy tools he kept upon his belt. The gate slid sideways on rusted runners that shrieked in protest.

We had arrived in the main chamber.

I fear any attempt to describe the chamber would be inadequate. The sheer size of the room defied belief. The light from our flickering torches could only illuminate a small area at one time – it was only by dividing our party that we could observe the opposite wall.

“It’s not possible,” said our engineer. “A room this size, with no visible supports – it can’t be done!”

“And yet,” I said, “here we stand.”

I had thought this structure to be the final resting place of one great individual. Now it was clear I had been wrong. The vast, square chamber contained four great pits, each of which held sixteen sarcophagi, arranged in a four by four square. In the centre of the chamber stood the remains of the ancients’ machines, no doubt meant for some purpose in the afterlife.

I peered into the nearest pit, the torchlight shimmering on the surface of a layer of water.

“This one’s been flooded!” shouted Carlos from across the chamber.

“Here too,” I called back.

“And this one,” added the engineer.

“This one is dry,” said Dr Wildman, staring down at the final pit. “I think we should start here.”

A rusting metal ladder headed down into the pit, but we knew better than to trust those ancient rungs. Carlos secured a rope ladder to the top end of the pit and descended by that means. Satisfied that all was secure, we headed down to join him. It seemed strange to me that three of the four pits should be flooded but not this last, until the engineer pointed out a large crack in the floor. Any flood waters would have long ago drained away.

We approached the first sarcophagus – a plain stone box, marked with that unknown ancient script. Dr Wildman peered at these marks with interest, occasionally referring back to his notebooks, writing down some of the markings for future study.

“I do not know what all these signs mean,” he said, pointing to the inscriptions. “Some of them are clear – more warnings, more threats of slow and painful death, as if those would deter any thieves by this point. It is possible that these other signs are the names of the occupants. I will need to consult my books back at camp.”

“There’s an easier way to find out who’s in this box,” said the engineer. He hoisted what looked to me like a larger, sturdier version of a crowbar. “Why don’t we just open it?”

“After a thorough and detailed study...” I began, but the engineer was already attempting to prise the lid from the stone box. To my disappointment, Carlos was eager to assist, despite my efforts to persuade him otherwise. Alas, patience and thorough study are habits seldom found in the young.

Some considerable effort later, the lid slid away from its stone base and fell to the floor. The thump echoes around the chamber for several seconds. With the damage done, I joined the others in looking inside.

I had expected some sort of human remains – if not a complete, mummified body, at least some bones. Instead, the box contained a careful arrangement of metal cylinders. They shone like silver in the torchlight, but they were not silver - nor were they iron, lead or pewter.

The engineer reached inside and took one of the cylinders. “That’s heavy,” he said. “Heavy as lead. Heavier, almost.”

“What is it made of?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I dunno,” he said. “I’d need to have it tested to be sure. But it’s heavy.”

Carlos reached down and took another cylinder. "It's warm," he said. "How can it be warm?"

"Must be the torches," said Dr Wildman.

I nodded. What else could it be?

"I think we should be heading back," I said. "We're going to lose the daylight soon."

It was with some reluctance that the four of us returned to the surface, eyes blinking in the daylight, but our colleagues were relieved to see us. They were particularly curious about the metallic objects we'd brought back up with us – Carlos and the engineer handed them around for examination and opinions.

The purpose of these objects is a mystery to me. They have no markings. They are plain cylinders, but cut or moulded to such precision – to what end? And why seal them up as such precious treasures? Are there more of them in the flooded sarcophagi? Or do those hold the remains of the tomb's occupants? We can only guess for now. Perhaps further investigation will answer at least some of my questions.

I have one of the cylinders on my desk as I write these notes. I hope that, if I stare at it long enough, it will give up its secrets to me. They so far remain elusive.

April 16th

Cathy,

A second expedition has entered the tomb. I have elected to remain on the surface this time, but a larger party has been emboldened by our success and gone to investigate the remaining sarcophagi. Carlos has gone with them. He thinks there may be a way to access the flooded areas with enough manpower. Perhaps he intends to drain the pits.

Myself, I have had enough of darkness and stuffy air. My head aches this morning; not an affliction I am prone to.

Dr Wildman has also elected to stay up here with me, though not due to any concerns for my or his own wellbeing. He has been pouring over his notes, trying to figure out what those markings mean. It is clear these boxes are not tombs, but the treasure chests for whomever is still to be discovered.

He tells me that he has partially translated the unknown script. "Are you familiar with the god of the underworld, professor?" he asked.

"Which one? Every culture seems to have an afterlife with some sort of deity."

"I was surprised," Dr Wildman admitted. "It's not the period I'd have expected. But these symbols definitely refer, in part at least, to Pluto."

"Pluto? Isn't this the wrong continent for that mythology?"

Dr Wildman shrugged. "I thought so too, but it turns out there was a brief period, around the time this tomb was supposedly built, when the local people worshipped a pantheon of animal gods. I believe Pluto was one of them, one of the subordinates to the mouse god."

"Here? I thought that was based further south."

"We've unearthed effigies of the mouse god across the entire world, professor. They were a well-travelled cult."

I shook my head. This didn't make any sense – it was the wrong place, the wrong

religion. Pluto had no connection to the Usmics, though I had seen the Usmic sign in the antechamber amongst the ancient warnings.

“What about the rest?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. My best guess is that this is the ancients’ name for the cylinders. Pluto’s Treasure? Pluto’s Metal? Perhaps the others will find some clues for us.”

The others returned from the tomb with yet more of the cylinders. They had been able to access one of the flooded areas but so far the entire tomb seems to yield only these strange metal objects. Our engineers are unable to identify the material, though they report it to be soft like gold, and heavier than any other metal they know.

I have instructed Carlos to get some rest. He was looking pale when he returned, though his hands were red and swollen – why he needs to get so physically involved, I do not know. The engineers seem to have accepted him, perhaps as a substitute for Samson. But this approach will not serve him in the realms of academia.

There’s a sense of subdued celebration in the camp tonight. We have achieved a lot, but many of us seem to be under the weather. Perhaps there’s a storm in the air.

April 17th

I woke up this morning with a terrible headache and the worst sickness I have known for many years. It seems I am not the only one. I spent some time before bed examining one of those cylinders – “Pluto’s Metal” seems to be sticking as a name, though doubtless the assayers back in the city will be able to name it correctly. Perhaps I am working too hard.

Carlos insisted on going back into the tomb with the engineers this morning, though I tried to convince him otherwise. He looks decidedly unwell. Perhaps Dr Burrows could have convinced him otherwise, but even then I doubt it. This is his first big find and he is eager to do everything he can to drain the remaining pits and access the treasures within.

Myself, I am going to get something to eat and hope I can keep it down. And then I am going back to bed. I hope this sickness will pass soon.

April 18th

While I am not yet fully recovered, I did feel considerably better this morning and enjoyed a hearty breakfast – as much as our limited rations can be considered hearty. While I’m sure many would wish to stay here for months, young Carlos first among them, our supplies will not hold out for more than another two weeks. We will need to return before then.

I am growing increasingly concerned about Carlos. He has not eaten in the last two days. Many of the workers are apparently ill, though I fear Carlos is the worst for it. There’s a sickly sweet smell in his very sweat, and his eyes seem unable to focus clearly when I speak to him.

Perhaps we are all simply overworked. I went to visit Dr Wildman in his tent this afternoon and found him passed out over his table, his pen still in hand, trying to translate those ancient writings. He was using one of the Pluto’s Metal cylinders as a

paperweight. In all their mystery, I have myself found no other use for them as yet.

April 19th

We are breaking camp and heading back to civilisation. We could spend a month or more exploring these ruins, were the men still willing to enter. However, the discovery this morning of Dr Wildman's lifeless body, still slumped over his table, have left our superstitious workers terrified. It is the curse, they say.

I have pointed out that Dr Wildman was not a young man, and that the strain may simply have been too much for his weak heart, but this argument does not even convince me. I have known Dr Wildman for many years, and he should have continued working for many more.

I have also seen how bad Carlos has become. He can no longer stand unaided, and he refuses all food. Were this the tropics, I would suspect some river fever or the dreaded malaria, but here in the mountains these illnesses should be entirely absent. I wish Dr Burrows were here to offer a medical opinion. We are all in the dark.

Our engineers have done their best to reseal the tomb against any bandits that might come later, though little remains there for them to steal. We succeeded in draining the remaining pits and have confirmed that there is nothing in any of the sarcophagi but more of Pluto's Metal. The purpose of this tomb, if that is even what it is when no human remains can be found, eludes us still. The resting place of the first Emperor is still unknown.

Cathy, I will be back with you so very soon now, though I wish under better circumstances.

April 20th

I heard Carlos calling out in the night. He has succumbed to fever and delirium, shouting at people who are not there and uttering what almost sounded like prayers. Whether he prays to the gods of his family or to those of the Usmics, I cannot tell, but I never took him for a religious man before.

He is growing worse. I do not know whether he will make it to the next town.

April 22nd

Cathy,

We have reached the first town. I am sending on the letters I have prepared so far, as Carlos is too sick to move. Dr Burrows is here. She was unwilling to abandon us completely, though most of her companions have done. She and I will stay with Carlos while the others go back to the city with our finds.

Several of the workers have fallen ill in much the same way that Carlos has, though to a lesser degree. Dr Burrows assures me that they should recover. None of us feel entirely at sorts. Even the horses now seem unsettled in their traces, though that may just be my imagination.

I have kept one of the cylinders with me, though I find myself now loathe to touch the thing. My rational mind tells me that there is no curse, that our misfortunes are the

result of chance, but my natural instincts say otherwise.

Still, the cylinder is of no interest to me right now. Carlos is all that matters. When he is fit enough to move, we shall return to the city.

April 25th

Carlos is worse. He has not woken from his fever in three days. Dr Burrows is doing her best to treat him but we have few supplies and there is little we can do. For now we are keeping him warm and trying to keep him watered.

The air in his room has become foul. He has lost all control of himself and the bedsheets are stained with his emissions. He no longer calls out to unknown gods or devils; his eyes stare sightlessly from sockets that look too sunken.

The curse warned of a slow, lingering death. Have I brought this upon my protégé? Oh, that we had never been to this awful place!

April 28th

Carlos is dead.

We shall bring the body back with us, for his family. But I feel I have left the better part of my soul in these accursed mountains.

April 30th

In a few days, I will be by your side once again. There is every chance I may reach you before this letter does but I cannot say for sure whether I will do so alive.

I have begun to sicken again.

There is no reason to believe I will die as Carlos did, that I could fall to madness and death before I reach you. It is simply fear that makes what could be mere illness or even a malady brought on by our ordeal seem so great. And yet, I would tell you while I still can, my dear Cathy, that I love you and will always love you, no matter what harm should befall me. I pray that we will meet again soon and leave this whole matter behind us.

I continue to examine these cylinders, hate them as I now do. Pluto's Metal indeed – they still feel warm to the touch, as though freshly removed from the fires of the underworld, and they still carry the dense weight of the Earth itself. Beyond that, I know nothing about them. I look forward to returning to the university and being rid of them forever. Let the chemists and the philosophers do what they will with them.

Letter to University – 4th May

Sirs,

As requested, I attach my report on the findings of the expedition. In the box are some two dozen metal cylinders, described as "Pluto's Metal" in my report. I have kept them separated to prevent overheating – details enclosed. How and why they stay so hot we were unable to determine - a potential project for our researchers.

A number of other cylinders similar to these were also obtained from the site. I am

unable to trace them – I believe our labourers may have taken them as souvenirs. Naturally, my fellow academics are above suspicion. I do not intend to pursue the matter further at this time; certainly the samples recovered here will be sufficient.

I have also provided Dr Wildman's notes. He had no family and no wife to claim them, and I believe he would wish them to be donated to the university. Please make what use of them you can.

Further to the above, please note that I will be taking a leave of absence for the next few months to recover my health, both physical and mental. Aside from my own illness, the loss of three lives on this expedition has soured my return to academia.

Letter to University – 14th August

Sirs,

I must decline your invitation to join a second expedition to the mountain tomb. I appreciate that I am one of the original members of the expedition and that my previous experience would be invaluable – you are welcome to take full advantage of my notes. However, I will not be coerced. I will accept dismissal from the faculty before I make that journey again. May the gods have mercy on the souls of those that do.

No doubt you have already discovered that many of my colleagues are no longer fit to travel themselves. I stayed in contact with most of them, while I could – I know that several have now retired on the grounds of ill health, and I was deeply saddened to hear of Professor Lightfoot's passing. His studies on the cylinders were most thorough, if no more conclusive than my own.

However, it is not just my former colleagues that I have kept track of. I note that several of the Pluto's Metal cylinders have surfaced in private collections, and that you made a gift of one yourself to the late Emperor. While there is no reason to assume the strange metal was the cause of his illness, I think his successor is probably wise not to keep it so close to his bed.

We are, perhaps, too quick to dismiss the legends and rituals of our religious friends. A number of Usmic priests have quoted obscure references from their holy Book of Regulation regarding this mystery metal. Before this expedition I would have dismissed them as cranks. Now I am not so sure. Maybe there really is a curse of sorts, one that our ancestors understood better than we do. Maybe the tomb was nothing more than a place to hide away this evil metal, to prevent the very harm we have now inadvertently released into the world.

If you intend to proceed to the Dakotan mountains regardless, I wish you good fortune. I will be remaining here in Washington with my wife.

Yours,

Prof. Charles Jacobs, PhD.

Author's Notes

For any writers out there, I can recommend joining a writing group. Alas, it seems these social gatherings are becoming increasingly rare - it's so much easier to find other writers online these days, or post our writings in a blog rather than read them out loud to a listening audience. Meeting other writers in person is a more fulfilling experience, and can do so much more for our writing than the echo chambers of the Internet.

The advantages I have gained from my local writing group included a steady stream of writing prompts, and an audience able to feed back on the results. Most of the stories in this collection were inspired by such prompts, and better written because I knew I would read them out - no room here for laziness. It was a chance to experiment with new formats, new ideas. Not every story worked. Sometimes the ones that didn't were the most instructive.

Below are some notes on the stories from this collection. I had a great time writing them, and I hope you've enjoyed reading them just as much.

Red

Sometimes, an idea just comes and you write it down before you lose it. For this story, the premise was simple - write a short story loosely based on a fairy tale. I had an enduring image of Red Riding Hood, but in an urban tower block. We may scoff at the careless parenting that sees Red Riding Hood trotting merrily through a wolf-infested forest, but the forest holds no terrors when compared to the inner city slums depicted in television and film.

Red came together very quickly and needed fairly little rewriting. Perhaps basing a tale on an existing one lends you its structure and gives the characters further weight. Perhaps knowing what happens in the original tale gives the new one an easy familiarity for its readers. Or maybe I just struck lucky.

Fine Dining

I am not and most likely never will be a parent. The cat is a perfectly adequate alternative, and far less complicated to maintain. Perhaps this is why I remain perplexed by the obsession that women in particular have over the weight of a newborn baby. Unless this is merely a contest to see which woman had the heaviest baby, I've only found one explanation that fits - they are calculating the cooking time. At twenty minutes per pound plus twenty minutes, a six pound baby would be roasted to a turn within two hours and twenty minutes.

Most people seem to find the idea of cooking babies somewhat repulsive. It's probably all those saturated fats. But perhaps somewhere there really is a cabal of gourmands that consider such tender young flesh the height of fine dining. If you are such a person, I do not judge, but please do not send me recipes.

Monkey Business

I find writing much easier when I have direction. A title, a theme, a picture, even a challenge such as “write a murder mystery including the words ‘penguin’, ‘elephantine’, ‘chartreuse’ and the phrase ‘Mrs Wiggins’ pork pies’.” Having limitations inspires me to push as far as I can within those limits - and often subvert them.

The hardest writing for me is a piece with no limitations. Sometimes I sit staring at a blank page with no idea what to write. In these moments, I find the best approach is to simply write utter gibberish. This is how *Monkey Business* started - a paragraph about lemons, for absolutely no reason - and then something clicked in my head and I started thinking about the old line about an infinite number of monkeys on typewriters eventually producing the complete works of Shakespeare.

I make no apologies to *Twilight* fans.

War

I have often heard that the core of any successful novel is conflict. When prompted to write something on the *theme* of conflict, my mind immediately turned to the biggest concept of all - a full scale war, and the impact it has, not only on the soldiers, but on those that support them; the civilians on the front lines. I thought of how the enemy are turned into monsters, the propaganda issued by governments, the high cost to both sides.

And then I set the whole thing inside an ants’ nest.

You may have already noticed, but if not, try adding “ant” to the end of the character names in this story.

Death on Campus

Several writers have influenced my style over the years. One of the greatest of these is the late Sir Terry Pratchett, creator of the Discworld series and an army of wonderful characters. Granny Weatherwax, the indomitable witch; Rincewind, the cowardly failed wizard; copper Sam Vimes; the Patrician; Moist von Lipwig; Detritus the troll; Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler; the homicidal Luggage... but most appealing of all, the only character to appear in every Discworld novel - Death. The quintessential skeletal spectre with robe and scythe, he always SPOKE LIKE THIS and took far too much interest in the lives of the humans he was supposed to lead into the hereafter.

I was in two minds about including this story. This is my own Death, not Pratchett’s, but some similarities are no doubt inevitable. And it is quite likely that I would never have written this in the first place without his influence.

Yet, even now, I still miss Pratchett’s wonderful writing; without his work, his incredible talents at character and comedy, my own skills would be much the poorer. I therefore humbly submit this tale in his honour, and hope he would have enjoyed it.

To Sir Terry Pratchett - still sorely missed. Thank you for all you have done.

Cat Amongst The Wrens

This is loosely based on a true story. I changed the names, the dates, the location

and simply made up a lot of stuff, but there is a documented case of a species of wren on Stephens Island, New Zealand, being allegedly wiped out somewhere around 1894 by a single cat - named Tibbles, which sounded too twee for my liking. In truth, more authoritative minds than mine believe the wren was rendered extinct by a number of feral cats that came after Tibbles, but this was the cause of some contention for a long time and the story of genocidal Tibbles has been repeated by many reputable sources.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no island in the English Channel called St Martin's, and it is not home to a unique species of wren - extinct or otherwise.

Letter in a Bottle

I surely cannot be the only person who finds the story of *Peter Pan* horrifying. An eternal childhood sounds bad enough - the existential horror of a life of permanent playtime doesn't bear contemplating. If nothing ever changes, are the lost children truly happy in Neverland? Do they never want to grow up, to discover new things and meet new friends? Perhaps children do not see the world this way. For most children, the endless summer before the dreaded return to school has great appeal.

But what about the *adults* of Neverland?

The story of Captain James Hook and his band of pirates is arguably more interesting than the childish antics of Peter, Wendy and their friends. Are these pirates mere fictions to entertain the children? But then, how can they ever be a threat, or lay traps and ambushes? The children would have already planned them all in advance; they'd be deliberately walking into their own traps. Or are they real pirates, endlessly repeating the same stories over and over for the amusement of Peter and his friends? What manner of Hell would that be? How many years, how many centuries have they been trapped in Neverland?

Insomnia

There is a device used in fiction called "magic realism". In essence, it's telling a story in which magical things exist but, to the people of that world, they are totally unremarkable. For instance, a husband returns home from work late and complains to his wife that the flying carpet was late. To really work properly, magic realism should also make the remarkable seem humdrum to the reader - the flying carpet can be described in as much detail as you like, but with no exposition beyond what you might use for the number 57 bus.

The "dream within a dream" device has been done many, many times, and I make no claim for originality here. I just used it as a framework for my own attempt at magic realism, because in our dreams we accept the impossible without question.

For Americans and younger readers - Woolworth's was a chain of high street stores that, after about a century of trading, went out of business back in 2008. I used to buy Lego models and sweets from them as a child.

The Feline Takeover

I am the property of a black and white short-haired cat. No-one really owns a cat;

the cat merely has human staff, or maybe slaves. Some might argue that cats might one day rise up and take over; personally, I think they already have.

I haven't told our feline overlord about this story. If she ever finds out, this could be my last book.

Spykill

I normally work in prose, with the occasional (and possibly misguided) foray into poetry. On this occasion, the story wanted to be a short play. Who am I to argue?

This is, obviously, a spoof on that most famous of secret agents, James Bond. I grew up to the exploits of Sean Connery and Roger Moore, and as a boy I loved the highly effective gadgets that Q so presciently provided. Villains had huge underground lairs and outrageous plans for world domination. It was bold and colourful and massively over the top.

I fear the modern Bond has got so caught up with being gritty and realistic that it has forgotten how to be fun. Who cares how ridiculous it is? More than anything else, John Brand is a secret agent fighting against mediocrity.

The Case of the Missing Jewels

Sherlock Holmes, the master detective. One of fiction's most well known characters, and one that has been recreated many times. I couldn't resist writing my own light-hearted, gentle adventure for Mr Holmes and Dr Watson. Did I get the style right? Not quite, but I feel I came pretty close.

The trick with writing Holmes, as with any character whose brilliance outshines mere mortals (including the humble writers that pen them) is not to write from their point of view. If Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had done that, Holmes would never have worked as a character. Instead, it is Dr Watson that reports events, our representative in their world and someone for the brilliant Holmes to explain everything to. And, sometimes, to show off.

Perhaps, in the end, that's what Holmes is really all about - it's not about doing good, or solving crimes, or helping people. It's about the dramatic reveal. Mr Holmes may be a highly skilled detective, but at heart, I think he's a showman.

The Cursed Tomb

The Carter Expedition of 1922 was famous for two things - discovering the tomb of Tutankhamun, and the ancient curse that killed everyone who entered the tomb. Except it didn't; the curse was never anything more than myth. Yet the story lingers, and it got me thinking - what if the treasures of the tomb really *were* cursed, but with a modern twist? The archaeologists of the future will one day sift through the ruins of our own civilisation, and what treasures will they find? What tombs will they break into? Large, remote structures, fashioned from thick reinforced concrete and massive metal doors, and inside, sealed away for the good of mankind, strange metal shapes that serve no obvious purpose. Will they still know what "radioactive" means when they find our nuclear waste piles, still lethal after several centuries? When they puzzle over these

mysterious treasures, steadily growing sicker, will they understand what is happening?

I originally intended *The Cursed Tomb* as my submission for an anthology of work by my local writing group. When plans for the anthology eventually fizzled out, the story was an obvious choice for this collection. I am not aware of a nuclear waste facility in the mountains near Mount Rushmore, but the priests of Usmic - sorry, the USMC - probably wouldn't tell us if there were. (I don't believe the Marines routinely guard nuclear depots either, but a lot can happen to a nation in a few centuries, and Dr Wildman's research may not be entirely on point either.)

And we've reached the end! For now, at least. There will be other tales, other distorted images of the world around us...



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About the Author

Andrew D Williams was born in Bedfordshire, England. He writes psychological thrillers with a tinge of science fiction to them. Writer, proofreader, computer technician and part time philosopher, he is now convinced that the meaning of life probably revolves around chocolate, cats, or both.

Andrew's writings are intended primarily to entertain - what else are stories for? Along the way, they seek to explore and question those things we take for granted - who we are, why we do the things we do, whether there really is such a concept as good and evil, or even the nature of reality itself. Aiming to excite, amuse and make you think in equal measure, you might want to read them again straight away.

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