

## **PART ONE: Sparks**

**Vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale  
vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla  
vodka and ginger ale** it said in Sparks's head.

**vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale  
vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla  
vodka and** it continued on. **vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla** and  
then, just as Sparks thought he was going to have **vanilla vodka and  
ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale**  
going through his head for ever, it suddenly stopped.

Sparks leaned back on his pillow and sighed. The silence was  
blissful. Birds sang and bees hummed and an ageing fly left over from the  
summer described an incompetent arc around the bedside table before its  
wings fell off and it dropped dead in an ashtray. Sparks closed his eyes  
and let his gaze follow a bit of eye dirt around its orange circuit.

It was the first of May.

The silence in Sparks's head was glorious. Placing a large climb-proof mental fence between his lovely quiet present and the drunken chaos of last night (and one event in particular, which even the sound of **vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla vodka and ginger ale** was preferable to), Sparks inched the pillow under his head a little more and **gin and cranberry juice gin and cranberry juice gin and**

Sparks winced in new pain. When would he learn not to mix his drinks?

Sparks slowly got up. It was the first of May. Somewhere in the world, fierce men with moustaches were marching under red flags. And, somewhere else in the world, they weren't.

Paul Sparks - who no-one ever called "Paul", except his mother, and even then only until he was twelve - got into work, eventually. The people who Sparks travelled to work with were an incurious lot. Possibly this was because Sparks travelled to work on a single decker bus rather than a commuter train, and so didn't have to sit facing the same people day after day. Possibly also this was because many people who use single decker buses are barmy, carry knives and don't like to be asked stupid questions. In this respect, Sparks found it quite a good system, and

certainly superior to taxi travel, where big fools in the driving seat were always asking stupid questions.

Today a taxi would have been preferable, even one driven by a boil-faced ogre high on talking pills. On the bus this morning - the bus being the 106 from Stamford Hill and the morning being May the first, time nine-forty, weather too hard to look up - were several people who in another age would have been known as “colourful characters” but in this one tended to be known as “nutcases”. Large women with bags struggled to get off the bus and bumped their bags against Sparks' head. Men who had breakfasted well on egg and meat products struggled to get on the bus and broke wind in Sparks' face. Noises and discomforts were everywhere. Manners were abandoned, as was hygiene. Sparks could have got up and shouted to everyone the bus that he was a human being and he wasn't going to take it any more. But everyone on the bus was a human being too and they were all also taking it to some degree. Sparks was a nice man (and cowardly when it came to asking teenagers and mad old men and stinking people to do things). So he did the next best thing. He retreated into his mind.

Soon the man behind him's roaring chunks of fear and swearing were far away things. The lad beside him with the bad radio faded into the buzzing of ambient bees. And even the very special odour of

someone near the front became nothing more than the vaguest hint of slightly singed hair inside a damp wardrobe, as Sparks sank into thought.

It was a year ago. Sparks was in a house with Alison, somewhere outside London. The house was enormous, freshly-painted and empty. It had a massive front room, with no decoration other than a gargantuan white fireplace and a dirty great big thing round the lightbulb fitting which Sparks thought might be called a “ceiling rose” but he really didn't know. That was more Alison's sort of thing.

The only other thing in the room was large and white, too. It was an estate agent. The estate agent's name was John and he was showing Sparks and Alison around the property. Sparks had phoned John the previous day to indicate that they were thinking of buying an enormous house, and John had indicated that he had one to show them. Now they were standing in the gargantuan front room underneath the dirty great big thing round the lightbulb fitting, and not saying anything, as people do when they have been shown round a house and want to avoid saying something obvious like, “Well, we've just looked round a house”.

John the estate agent looked expectantly at Alison. It was a very attractive house, and the sort he imagined women would like. Also it was

quite cheap owing to an enormous structural fault (basement, stream) that John was not going to bring up yet, or at all.

Alison finally noticed John looking at her expectantly.

“I like it,” she said. She nodded. “I really like it.”

Sparks made a noise with his mouth. It wasn't a favourable noise.

In fact, it was - phonetically speaking - “phnurth”.

Alison looked at Sparks.

“Did you say something?”

“No,” said Sparks, turning away from Alison and jamming his hands a bit firmly into his jacket pockets (he was wearing a jacket today, to be taken seriously by estate agents)

“Yes, you did,” said Alison. She looked at John, who tried to look blank. “It's a lovely house,” she said. “But he -”

She shrugged.

“He what?” said Sparks, turning round again. “What he what?”

“Nothing,” said Alison. “Only it's obvious you don't like it.”

“Oh,” said Sparks, in the voice of a man who hated vowels. “I am sorry.”

“Are you?” Alison said, and John sensed a small storm cloud brewing.

“I'll just step - “ he began, but Sparks cut in.

“Yes,” he said, “I am sorry. I'm sorry I don't like the house. I'm sorry it's a big white cack house. I'm sorry we had to waste this gentleman's time. But most of all I'm sorry I had to take half the day off work to come all the way out here and look at this... this...”

“I'll just pop down -” said John the estate agent, but this time Alison cut in.

“Day off work?” she said. “What work? If it wasn't for me, working all the hours God gives, you'd be signing on. He hasn't,” she said, turning to John, “been in the office more than an hour a week since December.”

“I've got SAD!” shouted Sparks. “Seasonally Affected Disorder!”

“You've got SHB!” shouted Alison, “Shit For Brains!”

“I think I heard the doorbell,” said John, and fled.

The door slammed behind him.

Alison, eyes burning, strode up to Sparks.

“Well?” she said.

Sparks smiled. “Well,” he said, “I think we've got five minutes.”

He threw his jacket to the ground. Then he embraced Alison and they began kissing each other and stroking each other, quite hard, and slid to the ground.

After four and a half minutes, Sparks looked up at the light fitting.

“Is that,” he said, his left hand still caught in Alison's bra strap, “is that a ceiling rose?”

They saw three more houses that day, and didn't put in an offer for any of them.

Some warm minutes later, Sparks got off the bus, hot, vexed, and smelling like a cat basket, and walked a mile to his office. His office was on the ground floor of a block of modern workshop developments, beneath a West Indian barber shop and next to a printer's that wanted people to phone Florida for £1.99 a minute. He unlocked the door, turned the CLOSED sign round to read OPEN (this always confused him, as from his desk, the sign read CLOSED and he would get up to turn it round again, then realise), and sat down in a very old swivel chair with three working wheels and a dead one. He leaned back in the chair, his head resting on a large cutting tacked to the wall.

The cutting was a full page from an issue of the New Musical Express dated November 6th 1977. It was an ad for a mail order company that specialised in T-shirt designs. Some of the T-shirts featured the logos or LP covers of various bands, most of them American, and several named after states or cities like Kansas or Boston, but most of them were funny slogans and cartoons.

I'M WITH STUPID, one said, over an arrow pointing sideways. PATIENCE MY ASS, said a caption next to a cartoon of two vultures, I'M GOING TO KILL SOMETHING. FLY UNITED, said another, this time over an illustration of two airborne pigs having sex. JOIN THE ARMY, said a long and hard to read one, TRAVEL TO EXOTIC COUNTRIES, MEET INTERESTING PEOPLE AND KILL THEM. Another said, in Gothic script, YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL, 'COS I'M THE BIGGEST BASTARD IN THE VALLEY.

Sparks' entire working life was based on this cutting. He worked for a company who made replica 1970s T-shirts. For a small fee - or rather, a fee about 20 times larger than the original cost of the T-shirts - any retro-obsessed student, nostalgic fortysomething or plain mad person could have an exact reconstruction of a T-shirt design not seen on the streets since punk had happened.

Sparks's job was to reconstruct the T-shirts from the tiny pictures on the ad. Unable to find any originals, he would stare at the drawings for hours, sometimes using a magnifying glass, sometimes using beer-powered eyes, and draw new versions that were as accurate as possible. He had once told Alison that he thought of himself as a T-shirt scientist, reconstructing the DNA of long lost designs, and bringing extinct



diplodocuses of the T-shirt world like PATIENCE MY ASS back into being. Alison's reply had been brief, and involved swearing.

Sparks remembered this now. He had been sure Alison had been joking when he told her was a T-shirt scientist and she said, "Sod off, Sparks", but it occurred to him now that there had been an edge in her voice, some buried tension about to come to the surface. Somewhere in there, he felt, was the sound of Alison getting fed up with him. True, the phrase "Sod off, Sparks" is not in itself an affectionate one, as lots of people had proved to Sparks over the years, many of them builders, but generally, when Alison used the phrase, it was affectionately and in a way that suggested she didn't so much want him to sod off as to, well, sod on, as it were.

And so, whenever he looked at the ad with the T-shirt slogans on, he heard Alison saying, not just "Sod off, Sparks," but something worse, like "It's over, Sparks". As a consequence, he didn't want to look at the cutting any more - he had memorised every design on it, anyway - so, with some effort, Sparks got up again and turned his desk around to face away from it. He could have just moved the cutting, but that, he told himself, would have been too easy.

He sighed and turned on his computer, which was beige and horrible. The screen was off-white and horrible and had a line of Tipp-Ex across one corner for some reason, which had been hilarious when Sparks

was young, and in love but now so wasn't. It contained two icons. One said, 'THINGS TO DO'. The other was the logo of an internet company famous for being inept, expensive and unknown outside Britain and Luxembourg.

Sparks was aware that there were cheaper, better internet companies but this one had infiltrated his system so thoroughly that the only way he could get rid of them would be to throw the computer away. Also he quite liked the idea of being, on some tiny level, a bit Luxembourgish. One day someone might say to Sparks, "I wonder how it feels, how it *really* feels to be from Luxembourg," and Sparks, puffing on the stout briar he had brought specially for the anecdote, would say, "Well, I actually, ah, use their internet company."

Briarless for now, Sparks looked at the two icons, from THINGS TO DO back to the internet company logo, and back to THINGS TO DO again. Then, for no other reasons than boredom and the fact that no-one in the world has ever wanted to open a file called THINGS TO DO, Sparks clicked on the internet icon. After a while of more clicking, he decided to look at his emails. This was not time-consuming as he didn't have any. Sparks was a bit annoyed about this, and opened his online address book to see who was avoiding him.

His online address book was deeply sparse. It consisted of two addresses. One was Alison's, and one - owing to Sparks' not powerful

understanding of how email worked - was his own. As Alison wasn't talking to him at the moment, or, to be more precise, for ever, and as even Sparks wasn't so desperate as to send himself email, there were no emails for him. Sparks closed the address book. Then, just for the hell of it, he opened the address book again and sent himself a blank email. Then, just for the slightly diminishing hell of it, he opened it, and forwarded it to himself. Then he opened it again, wrote a swear word and sent it back to himself. This time, he deleted it without opening it.

Now Sparks had run out of reasons to be online. And, according to his computer, he had THINGS TO DO. But seeing Alison's email address had made him think of Alison again. This was hardly surprising - seeing traffic wardens could make him think of Alison. Pictures of racing drivers could make him think of Alison. Once he had actually been at the pictures with Alison and, engrossed in the film, had forgotten she was there until a huge ant-faced robot had loomed into sight on the screen, and that had reminded him of Alison and he had suddenly started with the realisation that the proper Alison was sitting next to him. He tried to explain this to Alison in the pub later, but she just smiled, in a way that also reminded him of her, if you can be reminded of somebody by something that they are doing when you are actually looking at them.

So Sparks being reminded of Alison by her email address was not deeply unusual for him. Email had played a large part in the early stages

of their relationship, when after a lot of sex and beer, they would have to part and go to their respective places of work. Sparks, feeling empty somehow without Alison, would email her little messages and graphics. He had read about email graphics, little faces made up of semi-colons and commas that apparently when you looked at them sideways made faces. To Sparks they always looked like someone had been shot dead and fallen face down onto the part of the keyboard where the semi-colons live, but he supposed other people liked them. Eventually, Alison sent him an email asking him to stop sending her bits of punctuation because she couldn't understand them. Sparks, who had been trying to convey the emotions of regret and mild lust by drawing a little semi-colon face with some number for a hat, realised then and there that she was the woman for him.

I LOVE YOU, he wrote back.

SO DO I, Alison replied.

SO DO YOU WHAT? wrote Sparks. LOVE YOURSELF, OR ME?

I HAVE TO GO NOW, Alison replied.

Most of their correspondence was like this. It wasn't the collected letters of George Bernard Shaw but it meant a lot to Sparks, and to Alison as well. Sparks found to his utter lack of surprise that he was feeling slightly aroused. The combination of beer, bad food and low grade sleep had not dented the wreckage of Sparks' libido in any way. The fact that his (fairly useless) instincts told him that dumping Alison - because Sparks was the dumper here - was the right thing to do was irrelevant, so far as he libido was concerned. Sparks' libido was like a Japanese soldier in his trousers who thought the war was still on and occasionally would rush out and kill some socks, or something. Right now the soldier appeared to be fixing bayonets for a charge.

Now Sparks was not the kind of person who used the internet in a dubious manner. He would never dream of giving his credit card number to some people in Idaho so he could watch tiny videos of oddly-endowed men and women at it like knives. He still vaguely believed that pornography involved the exploitation of women. He was generally embarrassed when someone sent him material of a suggestive nature on the net. But right now, that second, he found he wanted to see something rude.

*Now what?* thought Sparks, who was no expert on the internet. He had no sites bookmarked, perhaps because he didn't know what a bookmark was, unless it was leather and had A PRESENT FROM

BEAUFORT CASTLE written on it. But he did vaguely remember a conversation he'd overheard in a pub a few weeks ago, when Alison had been at the bar buying them drinks and Sparks was whiling away a few minutes eavesdropping on a pair of spotty men at the next table.

"It's amazing," said the first spotty man. "You just go to the site, and it generates other sites, and it's random."

"What, like dirty sites?" said the other spotty man, who clearly was not ready to move on to the subject of randomness yet.

"Yes, dirty sites," the first spotty man said. "It generates them. At random."

"What do you mean, 'random'?" said the other man.

"I mean random," said the first man. "Random random. How else can I explain it? Random is random. That's the word for it. Random is the definition of random. I don't know! It's random, it's got randomness, it -"

"So what do you do?" said the other man, who had a relentless quality to his enquiries.

"I work in a hobby shop," said the first man, slightly embarrassed. "We sell plastic jets in kit form."

"No," said the second man, "To get the sites."

"I told you," the first man said, "You go to the site and it generates sites, and you click on them, and -".

“These are dirty sites?” the other said.

“Yes dirty sites!” said the first man, a bit loudly. “Random ones! That change all the time!”

“Oh,” said the other man. “Random. I see.”

He took a sip of his beer.

“So they’re definitely dirty then?”

Just then Alison reappeared with the drinks, and the conversation moved on to more salacious topics, like why Sparks didn’t like pasta, and why that man over there was trying to put the other one’s head into his pint glass.

Sparks, remembering the spotty men in the pub, and noting that he now had an ocean-going chub going on, made a decision. He tapped the words RANDOM DIRTY SITE GENERATOR into the computer. Then he looked at them and felt embarrassed. He wondered if other people could find out what sites he had been looking at. A vision of Alison finding out that Sparks looked up dubious sites came into his mind, followed by one of Sparks, unshaven and dark-lidded, being deported for unspecified sex crimes and being made to live in a barrel far out in the Atlantic Ocean.

Sparks looked at the words RANDOM DIRTY SITE GENERATOR again. He erased the words DIRTY and SITE, so now he was looking at the phrase RANDOM GENERATOR. It looked too short.

*Like life*, Sparks thought, except the way he was feeling right now, his life could have got shorter by about fifty years and he wouldn't have been that bothered. As far as Sparks was concerned, Sparks and his life were heading for a divorce. *I've dumped my girlfriend*, Sparks thought, *and now I appear to be considering dumping my life*.

*Life*, thought Sparks. The Japanese soldier in his trousers had retreated to the jungle of his subconscious now. *Life*, thought Sparks again, trying to sound wry in his head. He looked at the computer again, and typed LIFE into the search engine. Then he clicked on GO. Too late, and frankly not caring that much, Sparks realised that when he had written LIFE on the search engine, the cursor had still been where he'd erased dirty site. The search engine was racing off to look for, not LIFE, but something else.

The something else came up. There was one result for it. *Result*, thought Sparks, this time trying to sound ironic in his head. The information on the result was scanty in the extreme. It consisted solely of the three words Sparks had typed in. On the screen in front of Sparks, underlined in a rather nice blue, were the words RANDOM LIFE GENERATOR. Sparks clicked on them.

Everything changed after that. Sort of.

But not quite yet.



Sparks was impressed; you didn't get sites this slow nowadays. It was all highly retro. First the screen on Sparks' computer filled up with red pixels, very slowly, like a large and cumbersome migraine. Then the three letters R, L and G appeared, flashing hesitantly. This went on for fully two minutes, after which the word LOADING appeared. This too flashed for a couple of minutes, until finally the R, the L and the G reappeared, spread out away from each other, and the spaces between filled up with letters. to read, perhaps a little unsurprisingly, RANDOM LIFE GENERATOR.

All in all, six minutes had passed since Sparks had clicked onto the site. Yet he was totally engrossed in its unfolding; so much so that when the word ENTER appeared, in orange letters in a little yellow box that was so almost orangey-yellow as to make the word ENTER almost illegible, he stared at it for a long time, just oddly contented at coming across such an amateurish but somehow engaging site. It was, to use a word that Sparks had excised from his vocabulary and liked to wince at whenever others - such as, mainly Alison - used it, cute. Finally, when the word ENTER started flashing and some sort of rudimentary electronic keyboard began to play the scales in a dinky but sluggish way, Sparks woke from his reverie and clicked on ENTER.

All hell broke loose. The music stopped being dinky and started being jagged and jarring, like some modern classical music Alison had

made Sparks listen to once, while the screen turned black, then red, then a garish yellow, then repeated the colours in a strobing fashion, and suddenly (and, from where Sparks was sitting, a bit too realistically) a tiny object rushed forward from the centre of the screen, getting larger and larger as it got nearer, until - just before it became so big it nearly filled the screen - it turned from small white blob to a huge bleached skull and crossbones.

The skull and crossbones looked unnaturally real to Sparks. Then its white jaws opened and a voice so loud that it made Sparks start (and also made him wonder how his crappy old speakers had got so powerful) shouted:

“WARNING! DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT PERMISSION OR AUTHORISATION!”

Sparks sat back in shock, part of him wondering if anything else scary might happen, like the computer getting off the table and twatting him, or his ears suddenly catching fire. Nothing, fortunately, did, and the skull and crossbones just lurked on the screen, wobbling slightly and not looking all that frightening at all any more. Sparks moved the mouse tentatively across the screen. When the cursor passed over the formerly terrifying skull, a little hand appeared. Sparks clicked on the little hand.

Nothing happened. Then the screen filled with text. Hundreds of words rushed downwards like a dictionary with the trots. Sparks peered

in, to see if any the words were rude. None of them were, although some of them were pretty strange and one of them might have been FROTTAGE. Finally the words slowed down to autocue speed, then some more again, and then they stopped completely. Then most of the words vanished, including the one that might have been FROTTAGE. There were about twelve words left on the screen, and they stood there, blinking slightly like some words picked for a school football team. Sparks leaned over and examined the screen. The twelve or so words didn't make much sense to him.

TODAY'S WORD REDOLENT OPERATING ENTRANCE LONDON  
92 MARYLEBONE HS DUTY R PATTERSON

Then the screen cleared completely, and just as quickly refilled itself again. There were twelve or so new words, and this time they said:

TODAY'S WORD REDOLENT OPERATING ENTRANCE CAEN 45  
RD CENTRALE DUTY JM LEVERT

The screen cleared again, and refilled itself. Now there were some new words and they read - but Sparks had lost interest. The whole thing, whatever it was, looked like it might go on like this, as far as Sparks

could tell, for ever. He frowned and moved the mouse across the screen, looking for the word EXIT. Sparks found it, in the top right corner and was about to click on it when a shrill noise jammed itself into his consciousness. After a couple of seconds, Sparks realised that it was not the sound of a thousand tiny virtual missiles launching themselves with a shriek from the computer into his eyes, but his mobile phone. (He was not a man who got a lot of phone calls, and as a consequence could never quite remember his ringing tone.)

He reached across the desk for his mobile. The display said TLA. It was the lovely Alison - calling, Sparks suddenly realised, for the first time since he had dumped her. Perhaps she wanted to get back with him! Perhaps - perhaps it was more complicated than that! In his mind's slightly bloodshot eye, Sparks could suddenly see two Alisons next to each other in two split screen... screens, he supposed it would be.

One Alison was smiling as she pressed SPARKS in her mobile phone memory. She looked ready to forgive and to make a new start.

One Alison was crying as she pressed SPARKS in her mobile phone memory. She looked as unhappy as a person can be.

Sparks winced. The second image was the likeliest. He pressed ANSWER, and the phone went dead. Alison had rung off, presumably not while smiling. Sparks felt miserable. Suddenly the boring listy website looked interesting again. The words were still coming up on the screen and clearing again and vanishing and returning. *Even for a pretty bastard obscure message*, he thought, *this one looks completely unable to make up its mind*. He decided to see if there was a pattern, like those submarine code things there was a documentary about every week these days.

*Probably*, Sparks thought with a numb excitement, *I have stumbled into some sort of government website and these are codes that could authorise a nuclear war or have the entire Shadow Cabinet rounded up to be eaten by dogs in a Kings Cross lock-up. Then again, probably not.*

He read the latest words on the screen. TODAY'S WORD was still REDOLENT, whatever that signified, and there was still an OPERATING ENTRANCE, but this time it was BIRMINGHAM 32 OLIVER CROMWELL MANSIONS and the DUTY was LIN-YIU. Sparks' head started to hurt in a new way. His hangover - **vanilla vodka and ginger ale vanilla** - started to hover like a nasty drunken fly on the edges of his perception. These messages were hard and possibly too

stupid to be important secret service codes. Then again, Sparks believed the security services to be capable of doing anything at all, especially if it was completely idiotic and the sort of thing that would cause a slightly dim toddler to wave its arms in panic and shout, “No no no no NO!”. Sparks looked at the screen, checking for places to click that might accidentally plunge the world into horrific nuclear darkness. There weren’t any. He sat back in relief as the screen refreshed itself.

TODAY’S WORD REDOLENT it said, as ever, then OPERATING ENTRANCE LONDON 17 OSWALD ROAD DUTY T SINGH. Sparks blinked. His flat was about two hundred yards from an Oswald Road. He groped for a pen on his pen-covered desk and wrote the address down. Then, after a moment’s thought, he wrote down REDOLENT and T SINGH. When he had done that, Sparks wondered why. Normally he was the kind of person who didn’t even reply to letters that promised him millions of pounds and all he had to do was send the letter on to some other gits, but now he was writing down an address from a site that he didn’t know anything about.

*What am I going to do?* thought Sparks, *go to some house, knock on the door and when some bloke opens it, say ‘Redolent’ to him?*

“Yes,” he heard himself say.

In a particularly nasty but giant shed, a thin man known to his colleagues as Jeff turned away from a far too tiny computer screen that had suddenly started bleeping and addressed the equally skinny man sitting next to him.

“Oh bugger,” said Jeff.

“Oh bugger, Jeff?” said the other thin man.

“Yes, Duncan,” said Jeff, “Oh bugger. Oh bugger someone’s online oh bugger.”

He looked at Duncan. “Without authorisation. We’ve had a break in.”

Duncan leaned over and looked at his own computer screen. Now it too was bleeping.

“Oh bugger,” he said. He picked up his phone. It was an old red dialling telephone, with faded Care Bears stickers all over it, and it was very dusty. There was a reason for this; to the best of Duncan’s knowledge, it had never, ever, been used before.

“What are you doing?” said Jeff. He took the receiver from Duncan.

“We have to report this,” said Duncan. Jeff looked at Duncan, in a bad way.

“After last time?” he said. “After what you did?”

Duncan looked downcast.

“Then what are we going to do?” he said.

“We’re going to have to sort it out ourselves,” said Jeff.

“Oh bugger,” said Duncan.

Oblivious to all this, obviously, Sparks was sitting at his desk closing down his computer, a process that took only slightly less time than closing down, say, a small industry. Sparks finally made the computer whirr and grumble into silence, scratched himself in several places where if they were sentient hands would be waving themselves and going, “No no no NO!”, and stood up.

*Funny*, he thought, *I was going to do something*. Then he saw the piece of paper on the desk with the address on it. He picked it up, scrunched it into his pocket and headed for the door. *Lunchtime*, he thought, adding the word *Beer* as, literally, an afterthought.

One Alison takes out a sheet of writing paper and writes a letter to her mother.

*Dear Mum,*



*How are you? I am not bad, well I have been better. I would like if you and Dad don't mind to come home for a few weeks, well maybe longer if that's OK. I will tell you all about it when I get to yours. Sparks sends his love, or he would I'm sure if I was still seeing him, that's another thing I will tell you all about when I see you. Work is fine although I have left my job, another thing to tell you! I will call you from New Street Dad, if you can pick me up, that would be brilliant. I am feeling a bit under the weather.*

*lots of love and don't worry about me, I am fine*

*Alison*

*PS I am not fine, sorry*

*PPS I love you both*

She posts the letter and goes back to her flat. Watching Emmerdale, she feels safer for the first time in a week, although this has nothing to do with Emmerdale.

One Alison takes out a sheet of writing paper and then remembers a small quarrel she had with her mother. Not large enough to matter normally, but enough to make her feel she cannot run home and be comforted by her family. She puts the paper away, goes into her small front room and turns on the television. Watching Emmerdale, she has a small but definite feeling of terrible foreboding, although this has nothing to do with Emmerdale.

Sparks was in the pub, because it was lunchtime. Sparks' local was not the kind of pub he would have chosen to spend his lunchtimes in if there had been any other pubs in the area. In fact, so horrible was his local, Sparks would have gone elsewhere for his lunchtime drink if there had been a meths stall run by a blind tramp that also sold sausage rolls .

There were reasons for this, which Sparks had listed to himself in his daily, unwilling visits to his horrible local. The main reason he hated the pub, as a local, was that it did not cater to locals at all. Sparks was the nearest the pub had to a local, and even he lived three miles away. The customers were exclusively strangers. Plasterers on a job, sales reps, lost drunks, once even a man who had been born in a house that had once stood where the horrible local now was (and who left in tears after a lager shandy, crying "My life is dead!"). They were all

strangers, and none of them were locals. Sparks was even sure that he had once heard the landlord (who did not live above the pub, but got a minicab in from Eltham every morning) tell a customer, who had made the mistake of revealing that he lived up the road, “We don’t get many locals round here. This is a strangers pub.” The local had left at once, to the jeers of the pub’s many non-regulars.

Sparks also hated the pub because it was enormous, but empty. Built along the lines of some concrete ship’s stateroom, the pub was large enough for cattle rustlers to hide entire herds in, had the cattle been old enough to drink. Instead, the pub’s contents were deeply meagre, consisting as they did of two fruit machines, each at opposite ends of the pub, that is, some seventy feet apart, possibly to stop them mating, and a large horseshoe shaped bar, situated, not in the middle of the pub for the convenience of customers, but at the back, by the ladies’ toilets. This meant not only that it was a long walk to the bar from the polarly-oppositional car park, but also that women customers had to squeeze past fat drunks whenever they wanted to use the toilets.

So Sparks, who had been coming to this pub for eight years, really hated it. Alison, who had come with Sparks three times and had heard the list twice, found his ambivalent attitude distressing. She didn’t say that, though. Not being a ponce, she wasn’t given to saying things like, “I find your ambivalent attitude depressing, Sparks”. Instead she said:

“If you don’t like it here, Sparks, why do you come all the time?”

Sparks looked into her lovely brown eyes.

“I don’t know,” he said, absently making a ribbon out of a crisp packet. “I suppose I like the atmosphere.”

“No you don’t,” said Alison, absently rubbing someone else’s lipstick off the edge of her glass, “You like coming it because it gives you something to complain about.”

Sparks shrugged. It was true.

“And that locals thing,” said Alison, “I saw that on a telly show. Locals and strangers, it’s not your joke.”

“Ah,” said Sparks. “But I thought of it first. Anyway, my joke is different, and it’s better, too. I was going to write it up and send it to someone, but I never quite, you know.”

Sparks paused and undid his crisp packet ribbon.

“Got around to it,” he finished.

“You never do, Sparks,” said Alison. She finished her drink and left.

Remembering this moment, which wasn’t hard, as it had only happened about three weeks ago, Sparks himself became sad. Then he became outraged. He did get around to things! He had invented the

replica t-shirts business himself! Well, all right, he had taken the idea to Bill the printer who let him use his office. And, all right again, he hadn't had any new ideas for t-shirts - all right a third time, new ideas in the sense of finding old designs to copy - for a long time, but it had been a great idea at the time. Even if the time had been six years ago. Since then, though, he had done other things.

Sparks made a quick mental list of the other thing he had done. It was quite short.

One, he had started using the non-local pub as his local.

Two, he had made a list of things he hated about it.

*I'd better be careful*, Sparks thought, as he tried and failed to make a ribbon out of a small empty peanut packet, *I could be getting into a rut*. Searching for other things to make ribbons out of, Sparks dug out a piece of crumpled paper. today's word redolent operating entrance london 17 oswald road duty t singh, it said, in Sparks' poor handwriting. Sparks finished his drink. It was still his lunchbreak. Oswald Road was round the corner. He was feeling very decisive. He would go there now.

Unusually, he did.

17 Oswald Road was between 19 Oswald Road and a vast amount of rubble which must at one time, Sparks supposed, have been 1-15 Oswald Road. Children played in the rubble like Blitz kids, only with far more colourful vocabularies. No matter how hard the depredations of the Blitz, Sparks had the impression, even while doodlebugs were falling and rationing meant that the powdered egg was king, young cockney boys and girls did not turn as one to total strangers and address them as “Oi you, arsebandit, innit?”

Sparks ignored the merry Cockneys at their play, even when they threw half a Lucozade bottle at his head (‘Wanka!’), and went and had a proper look at number 17. At some point in its history, number 17 Oswald Road had been a large, moderately grand family house with servants and everything, Sparks decided. He was impressed by the sheer size of the house, but mostly by the slightly manky stone lion above the door. Now it was a variety of dwellings, judging by the acne blast of doorbells all round its porch. Sparks would have had some difficulty working out which doorbell was T Singh’s, but luckily for him there was a huge sign in the first floor window that said T SINGH DENTAL PRACTITIONER.

Sparks ignored a trainer with a dead mouse in it that flew past his ear (“Tossaaa!”) and went through the raddled gate of number 17. He

rang the first floor bell and a buzzer went off like all the wasps of hell.

Sparks pushed the door open and climbed the stairs.

The first floor landing had an unusual ambience, of fresh paint and the pink stuff dentists like people to drink. Sparks, who liked dentists as much as anyone does, felt a little apprehensive. One of his teeth suddenly felt cracked. He crossed the creaky landing to an off-white door which repeated the message that T Singh was a dental practitioner.

Sparks went in. He found himself in a small off-white room with a desk at one end and a split leatherette sofa at the other. Behind the desk was a vast old woman in Henry Kissinger glasses and a white coat. On the sofa was a small grey dog with wet brown hairs sticking up around its mouth. The dog stared at Sparks' chest, and licked its lips. The vast old woman prodded some lemon curd tartlets on a plate for a moment and then looked at Sparks.

"Yes?" said the vast old woman.

"I would like to see Mr Singh," said Sparks, uncertainly.

The vast old woman sighed.

"Do you have an appointment?" she said.

"No," said Sparks, frankly and boldly.

The vast old woman sighed again. She looked over at the dog, as if to say, "Society is in ruins, dog, what else can we expect?" The dog

ignored her. It was still staring at Sparks' chest, and now it drooled a little.

She turned her sighing gaze back on Sparks like a depressed searchlight.

"Go in," she said, and sighed so much that one breast touched the desk, denting a tartlet.

Sparks stood there, feeling a bit uncertain and, if he was honest, scared. He was about to ask the vast old woman if she was sure he didn't need an appointment, when she picked up the dented tartlet, threw it bodily into her mouth and then opened a magazine with a photograph of three horses on the cover and began noisily flicking the pages.

Sparks crossed the room, avoiding the dog's gaze (it was now looking hungrily at his groin) and went through the open doorway that, like its associates, was keen to assert that T Singh was a dental practitioner.

T Singh, dental practitioner, was also T Singh, giant. He stood, six feet seven tall in his dentist's stockinged feet, in the middle of his surgery, his dentist's chair on a slightly higher plinth than usual, wearing an immaculate white coat and an immaculate blue turban, and holding some nasty-looking bits of knives and wires.



“Hello,” he said. “It is my lunch hour.” He sounded slightly nervous.

“Hi,” said Sparks, who was definitely nervous, and beginning to wonder why he had come here on the basis of some stupid crap on his computer which was beginning to look more like a stupid student joke or some stupid thing like that and why didn’t he go back to his stupid office and maybe learn some other words apart from “stupid” and stuff this for a game of soldiers and he should just tell this giant dentist sorry I interrupted your lunch even though I don’t see you with any actual food or anything.

Sparks didn’t say any of this. Instead he said, perhaps tactlessly:

“You’re very tall for a dentist.”

T Singh looked confused for a moment. Then he said, “Yes, it can make life difficult sometimes. Being so far away from the mouth. Fortunately I have long arms.”

There was a pause in the so-far not-gripping conversation. Sparks remembered his piece of paper.

“Redolent,” he said, confidently.

There was another pause, this one quiet enough to hear the gurgle of the fountain where the pink stuff goes.

“Pardon?” said the dentist.

“Redolent,” said Sparks, a little less confidently now.

“Ahhhh,” said T Singh. “I thought that’s what you said. Only you don’t seem the type.”

Sparks thought quickly, about as quickly as he had ever thought about anything.

“I am the type,” he said, trying to sound as though he was, whatever it might be. “The type to say redolent.”

T Singh nodded and pulled back a plastic curtain by the sink. Sparks walked over.

“Excellent. Stand here,” said T Singh, giant dentist, and pushed Sparks through the curtain.

IT REALLY HURTS!

OW!

BOLLOCKS OW!

OW OW OW OW!

IT REALLY HURTS SOME MORE!

These were most of Sparks' thoughts for the next ten minutes or so. In fact, they were Sparks' life for those ten minutes, too, as he could neither see nor hear anything. It was all sensation, and that sensation was pretty much OW! When Sparks stopped being in exciting pain, he found he could hear again, and what he could hear was a low rumbling noise like traffic. Then his sight returned and Sparks discovered that the low rumbling noise like traffic actually was traffic. He was standing next to a tube station. Sparks had been in a dentist's surgery belonging to the tallest dentist in the world. Now he was on the Edgware Road. This was not right, no matter how tall the dentist. He ran through some options in his head:

*I have been drugged.* This would explain the recent pain and the memory lapse. *The dentist must have drugged me and taken me to the Edgware Road,* thought Sparks. *I must have made a rude remark about his height. Or maybe he mugged me and had accomplices.* Sparks had never met anybody who had accomplices and was quite taken with this theory, until he realised that no dentist, no matter how fake or tall, would be likely to kidnap someone and release them slightly over two miles down the road. He patted his pockets; his wallet felt empty. But then it always did. *No-one would drug me,* Sparks decided, a little bit sadly.

*I have gone mad.* This was more like it. *According to my memory,* I went to see a dentist for no other reason than I saw his address on a website and wanted to say “redolent” to him and see what would happen, Sparks thought. *I’d say that’s the sort of thing a mad person does. But then again,* he thought, *isn’t it only sane people who think they’re mad, whereas all the properly mad ones think they’re sane?* Sparks didn’t know, so dropped the theory. He had never been mad before, anyway.

*It was all a dream.* This was nonsense. No-one ever went to the Edgware Road in a dream, unless they had a very restricted imagination or were Dick Whittington or something. Also Sparks could remember the entire day’s events in a non-dream way, which wasn’t very dream-like. And he hadn’t turned into a woman, or started his first day at school, or seen Alison in her underwear saying, “I’m sorry, Sparks”, all of which were the general hallmarks of his dreams.

Sparks gave up. Nothing was clear or obvious, except for the fact that he was on the Edgware Road and - he bought a Standard - it was still Tuesday. The headline on the Standard was still the one on the lunchtime edition, so there had been no significant time lapse. Therefore, Sparks thought, he must have just suffered some sort of amnesia thing. It happened to people, even if generally they had taken drugs and beer to get it. And he’d had some beer in the non-local. Maybe it had gone off, in a psychedelic way.

He decided to have some more beer. He put the Standard in his back pocket and headed towards the nearest pub. Outside the pub there was a small crowd, about the right size for watching a drunk man be taken away by the police. This in fact was exactly what was happening, and the crowd were indeed watching a drunk man with a beard being led away by a policeman and a policewoman, both of whom seemed to know the drunk man, judging by their banter, which was so cheerful it might have come from a TV series about fictional policemen and women. The drunk man's dialogue, though, might have come from a crude modern film, and referred exclusively to parts of the groin in different ways.

Sparks watched with the crowd as the police officers jovially manhandled the drunk into their police car, got in themselves, and then drove off. It was a typical Edgware Road kind of moment, really, Sparks might have thought, but for one thing. As he went into the pub, something was sticking in his mind. Everything about the scene had been ordinary and normal, except for a tiny detail. On the side of police cars, on the door in fact, for as long as Sparks could remember, the word **POLICE** had always been written. Cars had changed, colour schemes had gone from blue to jam sandwich orange and white, but the door had always had one word - **POLICE** - on it. This police car, however, had two words on it. They weren't frightening or bad or even, in the circumstances inaccurate words, but they were two words, and that was

what made Sparks uneasy. On the side of the police car Sparks had seen were written the words:

## **THE POLICE**

Which was different.

In the bar, Sparks had some beer. He said to the barman, who was Australian, “Bit of a commotion out there then.”

The barman agreed. “That was Jake,” he said. “He gets thrown out of most pubs round here and once a month he gets a bit lairy and they nick him.”

“Nice police car,” said Sparks, shoehorning somewhat. “Is that a new design?”

“Dunno, mate” said the barman, who liked cars but was tired from taking seven tablets of ecstasy in a gay pub the night before.

“Only I’ve never seen that on the side of a cop car before,” said Sparks. “THE POLICE”.

“Eh?” said the barman. “They all say that, mate. Because they are the police!”

The barman laughed, felt a brief rush of stale MDMA as he did so, and went to serve another customer. Sparks finished his drink and went

outside. There were no cars belonging to THE POLICE. For want of a plan, he went back to the dentist's office.

The door was open. The office was empty. The vast old woman was gone, as were the dog and the dentist. The curtain by the sink was still there, so Sparks pulled it back and

OW!

OW IN A SORT OF REVERSE WAY!

Sparks found in himself in both pain and the dentist's office. He went downstairs. In the street, a police car raced past, with no extraneous THE on its side.

Sparks went home, and fell asleep on the sofa.

*Bit of a funny day really,* he thought as his head hit the cushions.

Duncan glanced at the old red phone with the Care Bears stickers on it.

"Don't even think about it," said Jeff.

Jeff was tapping madly at a keyboard. An address came up.

“Good,” said Jeff. “Right, let’s get him.”

“Oh bugger,” said Duncan, with feeling.

One Alison gets off the train with a large suitcase with little wheels on it, which her father takes from her and puts in the car.

“Glad to be back, love?” says her Dad, and Alison nods. She feels slightly tearful.

One Alison stays at home and phones in sick, which does not go down well with her boss.

“That’s two weeks in a row,” says her boss. “Are you coming in tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure,” Alison says, and her boss says, “Well, don’t bother coming in at all, then.”

Sparks woke up from a dream where police cars had the wrong things written on them and Alison was apologising to him and crying. His



eyes opened and he found that his head hurt quite a lot. “Have a glass of water, Sparks,” was what Alison would have said at this point, but Alison wasn’t there, so Sparks had a glass of Tango from a can he found in the bathroom. Then he put on a t-shirt (FLY UNITED, it said, with two ducks having sex in mid-air) and went into the front room, where two men knocked him to the ground.

The Tango went everywhere. The men leaned over Sparks and tapped him quite hard on the head with something. Sparks fell to the ground.

“Hit him,” said a voice. There was a thud and Sparks experienced mild pain.

“Hit him properly, Duncan,” said the voice.

“I did,” said another voice.

“Oh, is that what you call properly?” said the first voice.

“Yes, Jeff,” said the second voice, “That is what I call properly.”

“That wasn’t properly,” said the first voice “This is properly.”

Sparks experienced severe pain.

“Oh, right,” said the second voice. “Got you.” There was another thud and Sparks passed out.

Sparks woke up some time later - he didn't know much later, having forgotten to look at his watch before being knocked unconscious - and saw, out of the corner of an eye that didn't know if it wanted to be open or closed - two extremely thin figures in the corner of his office, looking like the number 11 on a bad day. They were making a strange hissing noise and for a moment Sparks thought his office had been invaded by rapidly deflating anorexics. Then he realised that they were spraying something on his walls and the hissing came from aerosol cans.

One of the thin men stepped backwards.

"You've spelt it wrong," he said, and Sparks recognised the peevish tones of the second voice. He peered through his indecisive eye. On his wall - which had been grubby and not too pleasant before - the thin men had sprayed some words. LEAVE WELL ALAN they said.

"Leave well Alan," said the second voice. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh bugger," said the first voice. "I must have been thinking of Alan, and written Alan instead of alone."

"Why? Are you in love with him?"

"No, but he is my boss and I do spend a lot of time working with him and - "

"All right. Just change the A to an O and we'll get out of here."

There was a hissing noise again.

“That looks rubbish.”

“It’s not my fault. You can’t correct things with an aerosol.”

“You could make it look like an anarchy A in a circle.”

“Yes, that would work. But we’d have to do the other A’s as well.”

“Oh yes. Oh, and put an E on the end of Alon. Leave Well Alon doesn’t make sense.”

“I think we should have had a stencil made.”

Sparks groaned. This was an error.

“He groaned!”

Realising what he’d done, Sparks tried to make the groan sound like the noise a man makes when he wakes up, groans and passes out again.

“I think we should hit him again. Just to make sure.”

“Should we hit him properly?”

“Don’t be sarcastic. You have to do these things properly.”

“Where’s he gone?”

“Oh bugger.”

Sparks lay beneath the desk he had rolled under when he noticed his assailants were engrossed in bickering. It wasn’t exactly a secure hiding place, but there were lots of things underneath and Sparks - never

a tidy man - knew what most of them were. Several of them were sharp, and one was a hammer.

He slid a hand towards the hammer and grabbed its handle. Just in time, really, as an extraordinarily thin head peered under the desk.

“I think I can see something,” said the head in a muffled, under-a-desk kind of way.

“Is it him?” asked the other voice.

“Let me get a bit - ow!”

“What do you mean a bit - ow!?”

“He hit me with a hammer. God ouch!”

“Has he hit you again?”

“Yes, on the bugging hand. Ouch!”

“I take it he’s hitting you quite a lot now.”

“Stuff this. You have a go.”

“No! He’ll hit me with a hammer.”

“He might not.”

“I will!” Sparks said, from under the desk.

“You hear that? He’s hammer mental.”

“Let’s go, then.”

“Eh?”

“Come on, Jeff.”

The thin head, which must be Jeff, frowned.

“But - oh, right. OK, Duncan.”

Jeff’s head vanished. Sparks heard loud footsteps that faded. Then a whispered voice said, “Shut the door!” and the door closed. Sparks could still hear breathing. And see feet. The feet were quite close, and in fact were edging closer. When they were extremely near, he rose up as far as he could under the desk and heaved his shoulders into it massively. The desk rose up and, as Sparks rose up with it, he shoved it forwards. His shoulders hurt a lot, but it was worth it to hear the cries and pain as the contents of the desktop - a computer, a printer, a phone and a toy Oscar with BEST DRINKER on the plinth that Alison had given him when he had annoyed her for a drink-related reason - slide heavily off and onto the two thin men.

Sparks heaved again, and this time the desk went over too. He stood up, hunching and unhunching his sore shoulders, and was satisfied to see that his assailants were now pinned down by the desk. One of them had the BEST DRINKER Oscar resting on his forehead like some deformed golden eyebrow.

“Let me go!” said Jeff, windedly.

“Me?” said the other thin man.

“I’m playing for time,” said Jeff. “Come on, Sparks, let me go. Us.”

“How,” asked Sparks, not unreasonably, “do you know my name?”

“Oh bugger,” said Jeff. “It was Duncan’s idea.”

“What was?” said Sparks. Now he had two names.

“We read your mail on the way in,” said Duncan.

“I haven’t got any mail,” said Sparks.

“Some must have just come,” said Duncan.

Jeff rolled his eyes, which looked weird from where Sparks was standing.

“Who are you, and why are you so thin?” Sparks asked.

“That’s not nice,” said Duncan.

“Yeah,” said Jeff. “You don’t have to insult us. I mean, you’ve already got us trapped under a desk.”

“That’s true,” said Sparks, and sat on the desk.

“Ow ow!” said Jeff. Duncan said much the same thing.

“Who are you?” Sparks asked. “What are you doing here?”

“We can’t tell you,” said Jeff. “We came to give you a message.”

“I saw it,” said Sparks. “Leave well Alan.”

“It says, if you *look*,” said Jeff, somewhat prissily, “Leave. Well. Alone.”

“It looks more like Leave Well Alan, with some blotches on the A’s” said Sparks. To move the conversation along, he bounced on the desk a bit. Jeff and Duncan expressed their dissatisfaction with this, and Sparks repeated his questions.

“And if you don’t answer me properly this time,” he said, “I’ll kill you.”

“No you won’t” said Jeff, but he sounded worried.

“I bloody will, you know,” Sparks said. “I hate burglars. I also hate thin people. I was intimidated by thin people at school.”

“They couldn’t help being thin!” shouted Duncan.

“True,” said Sparks, who in reality had nothing against thin people, in fact tended to judge people by their actions rather than their width, “But they could help intimidating me. And burgling me.”

“We’re not burglars,” said Duncan.

“No,” said Sparks. “You just thought you’d nip by, see how I was, knock me out and spray a message on the wall telling me to leave well Alan.”

“Alo - ” Jeff began, but Sparks stopped him by tapping his windpipe with the hammer. Although it was a light blow, it shut Jeff up.

“For the last time before I pull your ears off and make you chew them like apricots,” said Sparks, feeling a bit queasy as he said it, “who are you?”

He tapped Jeff lightly with the hammer.

“All right then,” said Jeff. “Bloody hell, I knew today was going to be crap. Let me up and I’ll tell you.”

“No,” said Sparks. “I don’t trust you. I’ll let him up and he can tell me.”

Sparks got off the desk and lifted one end up. He pulled Duncan out and manhandled him fairly convincingly into a corner.

“Now,” he said, “tell me everything.

Sparks sat Jeff and Duncan down. Jeff sat in a swivel chair, his feet sellotaped to the stem, hands sellotaped around the waste paper bin, which Sparks had placed in his lap. Duncan was tied to another chair, which Sparks had put under the NME T-shirt chart, so Duncan was sitting next to the I’M WITH STUPID T-shirt. A small victory for Sparks, and possibly a petty one, but he felt he deserved it.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Sparks said.

Jeff looked surly. Duncan looked worried.

“I’ll hit you again,” said Sparks.

“No you won’t,” said Jeff. “You’re not the type. You’re a big girl’s blouse.”

“I am not!” said Sparks, hurt. “I hit you before, anyway.”

“That was in the heat of the moment,” Jeff said. “You were angry. Now you couldn’t do it.”

“I could get angry again,” Sparks said, “With the names and all.”

“No, he’s right,” said Duncan. “The moment has passed.”



Sparks thought. The two evil thinnifers had a point, and while he did want to hit them, quite hard, and leave a mark, where people would see it, he couldn't.

Sparks inhaled through his teeth, and felt them bend. He glowered at Jeff and Duncan and went into the kitchen. Jeff and Duncan craned their heads towards the door. There was rustling, and a swingbin swinging. Then some more rustling, after which Sparks came back in with a brown paper bag with squared-off handles, two metal foil cartons, and a small pan.

"We're not hungry," said Duncan.

Sparks ignored him. He opened the bag and the cartons, and took the lid off the pan.

"Oof," said Duncan and Jeff, almost simultaneously.

"That stinks," said Jeff, "Don't you ever throw anything out?"

"No," said Sparks. "I'm a slob, I'm afraid. Some of this food must have been here for a month. Dear God."

"What?" said Duncan and Jeff.

"There's a prawn or something here and wow, I think it's come back to life. Look!"

Sparks thrust the foil carton under Jeff's nose.

"Take it away!" Jeff shouted. "I hate rotting food!"

Sparks shook his head. He dropped the carton into the waste paper bin on Jeff's lap.

"That stinks," said Duncan, from a few feet away. Jeff was too busy wrinkling his nose to speak.

"Tell me everything," said Sparks to Jeff. It was clear that Jeff was trying to oblige, but his Adam's Apple was bobbing in and out so fiercely that he could not speak.

Sparks put a pizza box lid on the wastebin. Jeff swallowed and gurgled for a few seconds, and then started to speak.

"What exactly is it you want to know?" he said.

Sparks thought. It had been so long ago, what with the beating and all, that he had partly forgotten.

"Why there are cars that say THE POLICE," he said. "Why you're here. What a random life thing is. How I ended up in the Edgware Road. Why I went to a seven foot dentist. " A new thought came to him.

"Are you ghosts?"

Jeff looked at him with etiolated contempt.

"No," said Jeff. "We're angels. We're here to protect you and guide your future."

Sparks considered this for a second. "You're taking the mickey now, aren't you?"

Jeff nodded.

“The easiest way to explain all this,” said Duncan, “is to start at the very beginning, three hundred years ago - ”

“Excuse me.” said Jeff. “There’s a bucket of stinking takeaway under my nose. Can we not start at the beginning three hundred years ago?”

“I like starting at the beginning three hundred years ago,” said Sparks. “Carry on.”

“Three hundred years ago,” Duncan said, “there was formed a society. It goes by many names in many lands. Some called it the Brothers of the Zohar. Some the Fellowship of Chance - ”

“None of these people had buckets of stinking prawn curry under their noses,” said Jeff.

“There were many names, as I say, for this society,” said Duncan. “But the name that stuck, the name that prevails to this day, is The Society.”

“The Society,” said Sparks. “Like in building society?”

“Not quite” said Duncan.

Jeff sighed, thinly, and interrupted.

“No, not like building society. Can I do this instead?”

“Why not,” said Sparks. “Do go on.”

“The Society is one of the most important institutions of all time,” said Jeff. “Founded and staffed by scientists, artists, philosophers, mathematicians - ”

“Carpenters” said Duncan, trying to wrest control of the conversation again.

“No carpenters,” said Jeff. “The cream of Western - and, to some extent, Eastern - society was represented. Kings, poets, generals - ”

“Carpenters” said Duncan, stubbornly.

Jeff closed his eyes. “Anyway, a lot of people, and all these people were brought together by one thing, one feeling.”

He paused. Sparks waited.

“It would really help me,” Jeff said, “if you were to say ‘And what feeling was that? at this point.’”

“Sorry,” said Sparks. “And what feeling was that?”

“Thank you,” said Jeff. “This feeling was, at the time, a blasphemous one. It was an anti-establishment feeling. It was, in short, a naughty feeling. There were in the world people who believed in essence that - ”

“That there is no point to anything,” said Duncan.

“Fine,” said Jeff. “Just steal my punchline.”

“Carry on,” said Sparks again, more firmly, “Your turn.”

“For hundreds of years,” said Duncan. “People thought everything was part of a divine plan. God in his heaven, the king on his throne, the carpenter at his bench - ”

Jeff snorted.

“The carpenter at his bench,” continued Duncan. “But then what did we have? Revolutions. Reformations. Copernicus. People saying the sun didn’t go round the earth. People saying if they think, they are. All kinds of doubt and stuff. Things that used to make sense didn’t make sense. Nothing was certain. By now, kings were having their heads chopped off and it was no longer a sure thing that God was in his heaven.”

“And this is why I ended up in the Edgware Road?” said Sparks.

“Yes,” said Jeff.

“Right,” said Sparks.

“Don’t get sarky,” said Jeff. “What happens next is The Society decided to go out and find God.”

“Oh,” said Sparks. “Are you like Jehovah’s Witnesses ?”

“No,” said Duncan. “I mean literally about the portals.”

“The pottles?” said Sparks.

“Portals” said Duncan. “The portals are the great discovery of The Society. You see, after about two hundred years of theorising, someone

came up with the idea that maybe the reason life here seems so utterly random is because there are other worlds.”

“Like Mars and Venus?” said Sparks.

“No,” said Jeff. “Not Mars and Venus. Those worlds are as barren and dead as your... as some people’s minds. I mean other worlds that exist in the same time and space as ours.”

“I’m sorry, I know I’m stupid,” said Sparks, “But I don’t see...”

“Other worlds,” said Jeff, impatiently. “Parallel worlds. Worlds existing at the same time as this one and often in a similar way, but different.”

Sparks frowned.

“OK,” said Duncan. “Think of television. On TV you have different channels. They all have different things on but they all exist at the same time.”

“So...” said Sparks slowly. “This world is like, BBC1...”

“More like the Retard Shopping Channel, but we’ll say yes for argument’s sake,” said Jeff.

“And there are other channels, which are other worlds?”

“Good stuff,” said Jeff. “And this was the theory, that the reason our world seemed so pointless and random was that there are other worlds, some worse, some more pointless, but also some better. And if, as was suggested, there are an infinite amount of worlds - ”

“Is,” said Duncan, “Is an infinite amount of worlds - ”

“Is,” said Jeff, sighing, “then out there somewhere, there are also near-perfect worlds. And, it follows, there is also somewhere out there a perfect world. And that world, it also follows, is God’s world.”

Jeff sat back, his look of triumph only slightly marred by the stinky bin between his legs.

“So,” Sparks said, “was that where I went? Another world?”

“Yes,” said Jeff. “You met an operative, illegally told him the code word for the day, and he let you through a portal - ”

“It does sound like pottle when you say it,” said Duncan. “And you found yourself, we believe, in an alternate world.”

Sparks snorted. “It didn’t look that alternate to me. The only thing different I could see was the writing on the police cars was wrong.”

“Not wrong. Different,” said Jeff. “Wrong would assume that this is God’s perfect world. Clearly it isn’t, or I wouldn’t have a bin full of prawn goo leaking into my crotch.”

“But it was just like this one, apart from the...”

“Writing on the police cars, yes, we get it,” said Duncan. “Random 9 isn’t very different. We, perhaps arrogantly, assume that God’s perfect world isn’t that much different to this one, and it isn’t a planet like, say, Number 22, where Supertramp are so enormous they formed a world government.”

Sparks stared at Duncan.

“I’m joking,” said Duncan. “Really.”

“Thank God for that,” said Sparks. “I hate Supertramp.”

“You’d love Number 46, then,” said Jeff. “I’ll say no more.”

“Anyway,” said Duncan. “Basically, that’s all we can tell you, because if we tell you any more, our bosses will do us. And they can do us far more effectively than you can. So can we go now?”

Sparks looked at the two men. He thought.

“I do have one more question,” he said.

“For God’s sake” cried Jeff. “Just let us go, will you?”

“Just one?” said Duncan. “I mean, we are in some discomfort.”

“Sorry,” said Sparks and moved forward to loosen Duncan’s bonds, then realised he didn’t know how, and stepped back.

“All I want to know,” he said, then corrected himself. “All I’m worried about is, well... when I went into this parallel thing... well, did I change anything?”

“No,” said Jeff and Duncan, so simultaneously as to sound the same, only faster.

“No way,” said Jeff.

“Absolutely not,” said Duncan.



“Only I read some thing where someone went back in time, which I know isn’t the same thing, but they were in the land of dinosaurs and they trod on...”

Jeff sighed. “Trod on a butterfly, we know. And changed the whole course of evolution.”

“Can’t happen,” said Duncan, looking nonchalantly at his fingernails.

“Are you sure?” said Sparks. “Because, you know, I talked to people and stuff, and I could have trodden on anything. Especially in the Edgware Road.”

“Listen,” said Jeff. “I’ve done it. I’ve been... somewhere... and I’ve trodden on, I think it was an actual butterfly. Yeah! I was in some swamp or something and I stood on a butterfly.”

“Wow,” said Sparks, impressed. “What happened?”

“What happened?” said Jeff. “I’ll tell you what happened. I got butterfly nadgers on my shoe, that’s all. Nothing happened.”

“OK,” said Sparks, “But what about today? You coming round and all this? Surely that’s not - ”

“Oh dear God, just kill me now,” said Jeff. “I mean, we’ve answered enough questions, haven’t we? Please just let us go. Really.”

Sparks thought about it again, and untied them.

They shook hands. It was all quite formal. Jeff and Duncan thanks Sparks for letting them go, and Sparks thanked them for explaining everything to him. The effect was slightly spoiled when Duncan tried to jump onto Sparks throat and choke him, but Sparks punched him in the nuts and so everything was equal again.

He would have felt less good if he'd been able to hear the conversation between Jeff and Duncan as they waited for a car to pick them up further down the road.

“We didn’t tell him anything, did we?” said Duncan.

“No,” said Jeff. “But I’m still going to get him for this.”

Sparks sat at his desk, thinking about his slightly too exciting day. He noticed it was getting dark, and turned on the lights. Then he wondered, for some reason, if maybe he should do his accounts and this thought unnerved so much that he decided to go to the pub. Then he decided that he didn't feel like any beer, and this thought unnerved him too, so he went home and had toast, which he burned.

As he scraped huge reefs of black stuff into his pedal bin, he wondered what other Sparkses were doing right now on other worlds. There was something appealing about the whole idea. Perhaps, Sparks imagined, as he made black toast, other Sparkses were going out to

glamorous parties, learning the electric guitar or having miniseries made about their lives.

Sparks would have been deeply disappointed to learn that, in fact, at that moment most of the other Sparkses on other worlds were going home and having toast, which they burned. Three or four Sparkses met a supermodel who had become lost in North London, but none of them thought to ask her out. One Sparks did ask the supermodel round to his, but she left before he could take her home and burn the toast.

Bizarrely, one Sparks stayed behind and did his accounts. On the way home, he was hit by a bus and killed.

A crowd gathered.

“Is he dead?” someone asked.

“Never mind that,” said someone else, “Isn't that woman over there a supermodel?”

Sparks got up and sorted his post. This was harder than it sounds, especially considering the fact that usually he didn't get any post. Around lunchtime, the post would thunder through the door - the local postman was a determined man and, more to the point, hated filling out the WE CALLED BUT YOU WERE OUT cards, so would always brutalise

every large piece of mail, no matter how large, until it fit through the letterbox.

Sparks went into the communal hall, where bicycles hung on the wall like extremely realistic pictures of bicycles on the wall, and unexplained bits of other people's kitchen doors lay about, waiting for someone with a mint condition 1960s kitchen to adopt them. The floor was for some reason covered with a thick, repellent layer of hessian, designed, so far as Sparks could tell, to collect as much dirt as possible and to entrap a similar amount of postman's elastic bands.

Today, judging by the odd wetness of the hessian, the postman had apparently spat a wad of elastic bands into the hall, smashed a Faberge egg in its case, rolled both it and a lot of letters into a rugby ball shape and crammed the lot into the letter box as though he were trying to gag it. Sparks got down on his knees and started uncrumpling the mail; the Faberge egg (or set of thimbles bearing the many faces of Vera Lynn, or whatever) was rattly beyond redemption and the man upstairs (who collected things)'s fury would be audible for ever. The letters, however, could be saved. Sparks gently massaged a water rates bill for the downstairs flat into its former shape, coaxed a postcard from Malaga into rectangular life, and then blew into a particularly crinkled air mail letter. Having done this, he realised that there was actually a letter for him. He stuffed it into his T-shirt and went back into his flat.

There are, letter-wise, two kinds of people in the world. One is the kind that looks at a letter for about three days, studies the blurred postcode and the spidery writing on the envelope, shakes the letter and then says, “I wonder who this is from?”, as though letters generally contained not even the slightest clue about the sender’s identity and usually confined themselves to a few veiled threats like I WILL GET YOU DUMMY. The other kind is the people who look at a letter, and open it, thereby ascertaining in a few seconds who the letter is from.

Sparks fell between categories with his letter. He glanced at the neat, ladies’ writing on the envelope, completely ignored the postcode and was about to open the letter like a normal person, when he stopped. Instead of opening the letter, he put it down on a rather sticky breadboard and sat next to it. For the next few minutes, in fact, Sparks sat staring at the letter. Then he got up, as if about to tell the letter he was going to the shops and did it want anything, and walked out of the room. Then he went into the bathroom and sat on the toilet, looking blank.

Sparks did all this, not because he wanted to look interesting or he was barmy, but because he recognised the handwriting on the envelope, which was Alison’s. This was significant, and also scary. In all his relationship with Alison, he had never received a letter from her. This was partly because it wasn’t 1768 and neither Sparks nor Alison were prone to pressing gold sovereigns into the hands of messenger boys and

making them run through the streets of London town to press missives into each other's hands; but mostly it was because Alison was not a great communicator. She disliked email, thought phones were germy, and found text messaging a bit lugubrious. Not that she had said any of this to Sparks; they never sat up nights while Alison smoked a cheroot and said, "The thing is, Sparks, I find text messaging a bit lugubrious." But the fact was, and Sparks knew it, Alison didn't usually write letters; and, essentially, Sparks was bricking it.

After a few minutes of thinking pointless, looping thoughts and getting his hopes up ("Dear Sparks, I was mentally ill when I dumped you, please marry me") and then getting them down again ("Dear sir, this is to inform you that we are a squad of elite assassins hired by your ex-girlfriend to kill you, please tell us when you will be at home so we can come round and do you"), Sparks gave the toilet roll a long, hard and even slightly grown-up look, opened the door and went back into the kitchen.

The letter lay on the breadboard, a few toast crumbs nestling underneath it. Sparks picked it up, stared at it, and even contemplated studying the postcode, before suddenly ripping it open. "136b Wilmott Road," he read nervously, before realising that this was only Alison's address, and would contain no new emotional information for him. He moved further down the letter, recklessly ignoring the date.

*Dear Sparks, he read, This is Alison. I know normally you're supposed to say that at the end of the letter, but I never know with you. You might be drunk or get bored or accidentally set fire to it, and then you'd just be stood there wondering why your mum was writing you such a weird letter. Not that this is a weird letter. I don't think so anyway, but then I wrote it.*

Sparks stopped reading and lowered his arm. Now, he thought, at least I know why Alison doesn't write many letters. This is stream of consciousness without the consciousness. Then he felt bad about his smartarse thought and started reading again.

*I'm sorry this letter's gone rambly already, he read, and felt guilty, but I suppose I feel bad about stuff. I don't know why I feel bad and I don't think I should, after we had that bust-up, but I do. And I bet you hate letters where people say 'Anyway, here goes,' but anyway here goes. The last few weeks have been really bad for me, I'm sure for you too. But I meant it when I said I couldn't go on like this. You seem to like me, but it's sort of hard to tell when we do is go to the worst pubs in the world. And when I asked you what you wanted from the relationship, I did feel that after two years, just shifting on the couch wasn't a deeply felt response. You never do anything, Sparks, you don't even under-achieve, you just sort of, well, under, really. And I don't want undering, I want a life.*

*Underling's not a verb*, thought Sparks, and then his eye was caught by a very large yellow spider in the corner. He was about to go and wind it up by staring at it really close when he remembered he was reading a letter. He blanked the spider from his mind and carried on.

*Anyway again*, he read on, *I've been up here for a while now and you might call it a rebound or whatever but there was a boy here I used to know, Gary he's called, and -*

Sparks put the letter down, on some jam, and went over to the window. For some reason, he was overcome with a deep, intense feeling of having tricked himself. He went to the fridge, and took beer out.

Later, when Sparks was too drunk to cope with that sort of thing well, he read the rest of the letter. Words swam up at him like angry cod and refused to be part of any actual sentences, but as Sparks looked down at the letter like a man looking through a very squishy telescope, he saw phrases like: we are very happy; I am staying here: and, more confusingly: he is going back to Australia and I am going with.

*Him*, thought Sparks as he passed out somewhere near the meter cupboard, *going with him*.



Duncan whistled as he made his way to his unpleasant workstation. He hummed cheerfully, wiping bits of cigarette ash from his keyboard, and he even winked at a very crumpled polaroid of his mother holding a pint of beer on his personal foamboard.

Jeff leaned over from the adjacent, equally horrid workstation.

“Look at this,” he said, pointing at his own screen. “That bloke’s dead.”

“Which one?” said Duncan.

“The one,” Jeff said. “The one we had the little trouble with... he’s dead.”

“What, here?”

“No,” Jeff said, “Jesus God, no. If he was dead here, we’d be...”

Jeff trembled slightly. “No,” he said, finishing with his trembling,

“He’s not dead here. He’s dead...here.”

Jeff clicked something and pointed at the screen.

“Hit by a bus,” he said.

“Oh,” Duncan said. “I knew *that*”.

One Alison queued at customs, wondering why airplanes made you smell funny and why her new boyfriend had insisted on moving to Sydney a week before the Mardi Gras parade.

One Alison sat back in the back of a car inching its way up a fairly filthy London street. This Alison felt slightly queasy and for a second wondered if she was going to be sick in a car. The moment passed, and she went back to looking out of the window at the thrilling parade of lamp-posts, shops and early-rising tramps who were attempting to throng the streets at eight fifteen that morning. One particularly energetic tramp, who had gone round the back of Starbucks and consumed every latte dreg they had, was trying to throng the street on his own, but dancing round in circles in a heavy granny coat is not enough to throng anything, except perhaps a call box, and thronging a call box isn't very exciting.

"Are you all right, dear?" said Alison's sister, who, being younger than Alison, still thought it was funny to call people dear.

"Yes," said Alison. "Just thinking about thronging, really."

Alison's sister fell silent. This was unusual but fortunate, as Alison was starting to feel a bit weird, weird that is in the sense of "about to go mad and start burbling about tramps and thronging" and she felt that her sister, who was at the time employed in not knowing the names of any bands in a large CD shop, might not have been able to handle Alison's burbling.

"Here we are," said Alison's dad, using one of his favourite sayings (his other was, "There we go"). He got out of the large black car

and opened the door. Alison, in neat black suit, climbed out and looked confusedly around the large cemetery.

“I think they’re burying him over there,” said Alison’s sister, and wondered, as Alison strode off somewhat rapidly, if perhaps she might have said the wrong thing.

“Well, pardon me,” said Jeff. “I shall never tell you anything interesting ever again, since you obviously know it all already.”

He spun round in his swivel chair, presenting his inconsiderable shoulders to Duncan, and spent the rest of the morning playing a card game on his computer. It was an easy card game, but you wouldn’t have known that the way Jeff played it.

The minister and the mourners gathered around a big hole covered in Astroturf. Alison stood with Sparks’ parents.

“Who of us really knew Paul Sparks?” he asked.

“Well, I did,” said Sparks’ dad. “I’m his father.”

“Yes, what a silly thing to say,” said Sparks’ mother. The mourners nodded. “We’d hardly have turned up here if we didn’t know him,” said a man who’d been at college with Sparks and kept in touch.

Alison touched the minister on the arm. She felt sorry for him, having to say insincere things all day long in the hope of making bereaved people feel better.

The minister looked around at the group of friends and relatives.

“How many of us knew Paul Sparks?” he began. “All of us, I think. We were in a real sense all his friends.”

“You weren’t,” said Sparks’ dad.

“No,” said Sparks’ friend from college. “I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

The minister sighed. He never got this at christenings.

Sparks woke up. He was lying on the floor. He stood up, ineptly, and fell into a few things. Sparks rubbed his eyes. He wasn’t well. He felt like someone had walked over his grave. He felt like death warmed up. He picked up an empty beer bottle. He remembered Alison’s letter.

“Oh well,” he said, trying to sound convincing to himself, “It’s her funeral.”

## FIRST INTERLUDE

There is an infinite amount of worlds, was what they taught Jeff and Duncan and Alan and the others, and one of these worlds, by definition, must be God's perfect world. It is the nature of infinity to be all-encompassing, as in that thing where an infinite lot of chimpanzees will write the complete works of Shakespeare given an infinite lot of time; except that so long as you have the right world, you only need a few chimpanzees, perhaps ten or twelve, and a reasonable amount of time, say, a year, because you have an infinite amount of worlds.

In fact, although it had never been discovered, the thinkers of The Society claimed that, logically, somewhere out there was a world where some fool had employed a lot of chimpanzees to write the complete works of Shakespeare. Some people in The Society liked to speculate as to what happened when this proud hypothetical chimp-employer turned up at the publisher's with the complete works of Shakespeare typed by chimpanzees. There was even a popular, if illegal, game among Society staff - Jeff had played it, Duncan had reported him, there were ructions - where people imagined the publisher's likely response to the chimpy Shakespeare. The winners, as it happens, were these:

‘This play has promise on every page, but it has banana and something brown on every page, too.’

“You’ve spelled Hamlet with two “m”s. And forty-six “t”s.”

“This is an impressive feat but the complete works of Shakespeare have already been written. Couldn’t you get them to write something new, ideally featuring a hot young lawyer and some vampires?”

And there was one entry which was suppressed, as if it had been brought to the attention of people like Jeff and Duncan’s boss, Alan, it would have ensured a clampdown on harmless but illegal games.

This entry read:

“This is an extraordinary feat, even by the presumably low standards of some chimpanzees, but not as extraordinary as the fact that a man had already written all these plays and poems, on his own, without monkey help, four hundred years ago. That indicates to me that this, after all, must be God’s perfect world.”

This entry was suppressed, sensibly, on the grounds that chimpanzees are not monkeys, they’re primates, and everybody was able to get on with their work, discovering new worlds in The Society, and seeing if they were perfect or not.

And so time passed. On one world, England played Germany and beat them, 5-1. On another , England beat Germany 5-1 and then ate them, as was the custom. And on still another, there was no such thing as football, so a lot of English people just went abroad and attacked anyone they saw.

As for Sparks, it would be nice to say that he respected the nature of infinite worlds and acted in an infinite variety of ways but, by some fluke of probability-defying character, Sparks managed to do the same infinitesimal amount of work and drink the same huge amount of beer in all his realities. In one, true, he fell down stairs and broke his arm, and in another he bought a little dog to make him look interesting in pubs, but generally, Sparks contributed little to the limitless variety of the universe. And in this world, Sparks had a very good reason for his inactivity. He was drunk, all the time.

Sparks wasn't a heavy drinker, or rather, that is what he told himself. As proof he would point to his time with Alison, when he hardly drank at all, or at least not excessively, or anyway not on his own. The counsel for the prosecution that lives inside everyone, and always makes sure to have plenty of casework to be getting on with, liked to point out to Sparks that his time with Alison was a comparatively short and arguably blip-like period in Sparks' life, where circumstances like happiness and love had, sadly, kept Sparks away from the boozier, except towards the end of their relationship, obviously. One might equally well argue that Sparks had been rarely drunk as a baby.

This argument (not the one about the baby) was becoming more and more convincing to Sparks. Since he had received Alison's postcard, his routine had consisted less and less of waking up, leaping out of bed

nuts a-dangle, whistling at the shaving mirror and working on new ideas for T-shirts, and more and more of waking up, suddenly noticing a new and extremely powerful hangover, staying in bed, and later wandering into another room in search of last night's stale lager.

Lots of people do this kind of thing; some of them never stop; a few go to alcoholic support groups; but many take the Sparks approach, namely be utterly miserable and drunk for months until, if the pain is that sort of pain, it fades to a bearable degree and life can continue in a sober state once more. And this is what happened; after six months or so, Sparks stopped being drunk nearly all the time and started being sober nearly all the time. He even began going back to work again, although he wasn't up to having any ideas for successful retro T-shirts, or indeed any ideas at all.

But while Sparks *was* drunk, he was very drunk indeed; drunk enough to not entirely believe that something very strange involving two small men and a fight had actually happened. And as for his apparent trip into a world where things were slightly different, well, during his drunk six months, alcohol took Sparks to several worlds where things were slightly different anyway.

So when one morning Sparks woke up with the unfamiliar urge to find the kettle and make some tea with it, rather than throw up into it, a



lot of things had a distinct air of unreality about them, and therefore were pretty much gearing up to slip his mind.

Now that he felt better, and now also that it was late December, Sparks went home for Christmas, to see his mum and dad. Sparks' dad was called Jim and had been a polytechnic lecturer. He lectured in English Literature and his one ambition - to turn down the sexual advances of a pretty young student - had never been realised, because Sparks' dad was such a nice man that even the most corrupt and profligate of his students couldn't bring themselves to be seduced by him. After thirty years lecturing, during which time his poly had become a uni and his students had gone from being mad for magic realism to being slightly disappointed by books they had got into after seeing the video version of the movie, Sparks' dad took one farewell look at his class, said, perhaps too loudly, "Bloody hell, I wouldn't go to bed with any of this lot", and retired.

Sparks' mum was called Patricia and she had been a reporter. This had been quite exciting to Sparks when he was young, and he had lived in hope that the whole family might have to relocate to Florida or Latvia after his mum had exposed the Mafia's links with local Swindon businesses. In fact, Sparks' mum had devoted her life to writing about nothing very exciting. This was because she had a husband and son, and wasn't keen get relocated to Florida or Latvia after accidentally writing a

hard-hitting story. She had even been known to turn down reporting on flower shows in case there might just be a Mafia connection. Sparks' mum had met Sparks dad in headier times, when she was young and single, and couldn't give a fig for the dangers inherent in covering the opening of the local poly's new English Department building, having a glass of wine with the new young junior lecturer ("I expect my students will come to fancy me in time") and then getting married six months later, on account of Sparks, but still pleased about getting married.

Now Sparks' mum still covered the odd WI event, which was easy for her as she was a member these days, and Sparks' dad still subscribed to some fairly esoteric critical journals, some of which he now saw that his old students were writing for. They had a nice quiet life and they missed Sparks when he wasn't there and were always happy when he left and their nice quiet life could resume. Sparks was deeply fond of them and almost always remembered to buy them presents or send them the relevant cards.

Today, six months after Sparks had been attacked by beanpole men for travelling into another dimension, and a few weeks after he had retired from self-pitying lushness, he sat down to Christmas dinner at his parents' house. Everyone was wearing paper hats, except for Sparks who had taken his off but found it still felt like he was wearing it. Crackers had been pulled (Sparks got a whistle and a puzzle so obscure he didn't

even understand what he wasn't supposed to do) and a quantity of Blue Nun consumed. Conversation had been light - when your son has had the same dog-end job for ten years and his long-term girlfriend has left him for an Australian, you tend to fall into silence a lot - and Sparks' dad was just about to clear the much-ravaged (by Sparks) turkey when Sparks looked up from the potato he was making, inappropriately, into a little brown Halloween lamp, and said:

“Dad, do you believe in alternate worlds?”

“No,” his dad was about to say, when Sparks' mum interrupted.

“Don't bother your father when he's taking out the dishes.”

This suggested to Sparks' dad that his wife thought he was a man who couldn't handle more than two tasks simultaneously (he had been at the Blue Nun for an hour or so). As Sparks' dad considered himself the kind of person who was quite capable of taking the dishes out and discussing alternate worlds, he decided not to say no and instead said:

“I find the topic very interesting.”

“No you don't, you daft old man,” said Sparks' mum, affectionately but rudely. “You just don't want to look senile.”

Sparks' dad came back from the kitchen and sat next to his wife in a way that he hoped suggested he was ignoring her. A small dog leapt up and began sniffing his pockets.

“Get down, Robert,” said Sparks’ dad who fortunately knew the dog, in fact had paid for it. “I’m having a serious conversation.”

“Robert,” said Sparks’ mum. “What a silly name for a dog. If that dog was human, he’d be furious if he knew you’d given him a name like that.”

“If he was human, he wouldn’t mind.” said Sparks’ dad.

“Robert’s a silly name,” Sparks’ mum said to the dog, “Isn’t it, Boofles?”

Robert, who couldn’t have cared less if he’d been named Brave Lord Filth so long as he was fed and looked after, wandered off to sniff Sparks’ exotic urban groin.

“Alternate worlds,” said Sparks’ dad, who had no idea what he was talking about, “feature in much fiction.”

“I don’t care... I mean, I don’t mean fiction,” said Sparks. “I just wondered if there was any information about them outside fiction. I mean, in, er, non, er, fiction.”

“Well,” said Sparks’ dad, “There is of course JW Dunne’s extraordinary book, *An Experiment In Time*.”

“What’s that about?” said Sparks.

“I don’t know,” said Sparks’ dad, “I haven’t read it.”

“He has no idea what he’s talking about,” explained Sparks’ mum, affectionately. “He rarely does these days.”

“Are you saying I’m going gaga?” asked Sparks’ dad.

“No, dear, it’s more that... well, when you were a lecturer you were always reading the newspapers and listening to the news and keeping up with things and now... you don’t.”

“I do! I get my journals.”

“Yes, but you don’t actually read them. You turn to the back and look at pictures of sheds.”

“Well, I like sheds.”

Sparks didn’t wonder why abstruse academic journals had pictures of sheds in the back. Nor did he wonder why, given that his parents hadn’t had a civil conversation since their wedding (and even their “I dos” were said with a tone of disbelief), they were still together. He was Sparks, and he tended not to wonder about things. Except, now, with alternate worlds.

“So you don’t know anything about alternate worlds?” he said, a little doggedly.

“Um,” said Sparks’ dad. “Not per se.”

Sparks mum looked at him in an I-was-right faced kind of way.

“But,” said Sparks’ dad, “I have got a tape.”

“Ah ha!” said Sparks’ mum, in a voice that she thought was bitingly sarcastic but was in fact only slightly ironical. “The famous tape

collection comes into its own at last! I knew it was worth buying that video recorder.”

“Exactly,” said Sparks’ dad, missing even the ironical tone, never mind the imagined sarcasm.

“Since 19 whenever we got that video machine, we have taped, I don’t know, every single documentary that has been on television, I believe...”

“Oh, surely not,” said Sparks’ dad. “For a start, I hate wildlife.”

“We have an entire room full of videos,” said Sparks’ mum. “I could have used that room. I could have learned to paint. The light is excellent in that room.”

“It hasn’t got any windows,” said Sparks’ dad.

“The electric light,” said Sparks’ mum. “I planned to paint still lifes by electric light. But instead all I do in that room is dust videos.”

“You exaggerate,” said Sparks’ dad, huffily.

“Some of those videos,” said Sparks’ mum pointedly, “are on Betamax.”

“What’s Betamax?” said Sparks.

“Exactly,” said Sparks’ mum.

Fortunately, the video that Sparks' dad believed to be about alternate worlds was not on Betamax. And, while it was very old, and contained several hours of golf in which now-dead light entertainment stars tried to keep up with equally now-dead proper golfers, there was a documentary on the end of the tape, and it was about alternate worlds.

Sparks took the video cosy off the video recorder. Sparks' dad owned the world's only video cosy, which was like a tea cosy only oblong. Sparks' mum hated the video cosy, but it did mean that she and Sparks' dad owned the world's only functioning 1978 vintage VCR. Sparks plugged in the seventeen foot long lead connecting the remote control to the recorder, removed the polythene bag the remote was wrapped in, and pressed "play"..

A BBC logo as timeless and as dated as a heraldic blazon fuzzed up onto the screen, a cartoon globe of a long-lost world spun idly, and a long-sacked continuity announcer told the people of 20 years ago that they were about to watch the first programme in a new series about the far frontiers of science, and that this, which was, as he said, the first programme, was about the possibility of there being alternate worlds. He went on to, essentially, tell nervous people and anyone with a dog or a cat to go and watch ITV, and the programme lurched into action. The whole thing took about two days and all but killed Sparks' desire to watch the tape. *Things were more leisurely then*, he thought, despondently.

After some film of stars and what may have been all of Holst's *The Planets*, Sparks resisted the urge to lash the remote control lead like a whip and flick the whole damn thing out of the window, and settled back to try and concentrate.

The programme was introduced by a plummy man, who was aided by some cheap green lines on a blue cartoon background, and appeared to be saying two important things about alternate worlds. One, they didn't exist and two, if they did, they shouldn't. But the plummy man did reluctantly acknowledge that people had talked about these things, while managing to suggest that such speculation was a bit vulgar, unless of course it was done in a documentary presented by a plummy man. There was a montage of photos of scientists, pundits and philosophers, who Sparks thought all looked a bit mental. He was beginning to get really bored and long for some violence ("Take that, Sir Isaac!") when an engraving of some men in the 18th century waving rolled-up paper at each other came up and the plummy man said: "Most devoted to the theory of worlds outside our own was the so-called Society of God's Perfect World."

Sparks sat up on the sofa, electrified by his own standards.

"The Society, as it was known for short, was founded by eminent men of the day. Scientists, philosophers, and polymaths were all entranced by the fanciful notion that our world is, as it were, random - "



Then the door opened.

“Cup of tea, dear?” said his mum, coming in with one anyway.

“Um,” said Sparks, frantically trying to find the PAUSE button on the aged remote. It didn’t have one.

“Naturally there were dissenters,” the commentator was saying,  
“These men felt that - “

Sparks couldn’t hear what these men felt as his mum was now opening the noisiest drawer in the world. she finally wrenched the drawer open, took out a coaster, put the coaster on the table and put the cup of tea on it. Sparks tried to crane his ears around her as she moved, but all the tea and table action was pretty obscuring and, by the time his mother had gone, the plummy man had moved on to the early fiction of Jules Verne, which wasn’t relevant at all but did provide an opportunity to show a painting of a huge squid holding a steamship like a ciggie.

“Don’t say thank you, will you?” said Sparks’ mum cheerfully as she left the room.

Sparks stopped the tape and rewound it, prodding madly at the remote. It creaked into action and suddenly the tape leapt back four minutes. Sparks tried to hit PLAY, jabbed RECORD instead and spent the next few seconds trying to get the machine to stop recording. By the time he had had the smart idea of abandoning the remote, leaping across

the room and turning the recorder off at the wall, it was too late; they were halfway through the huge squid.

Sparks sat down and disconsolately watched the rest of the documentary, which was highly vague and factless, and then turned into an hour of golf again. He put the tape in a box marked KRAMER VS KRAMER and took his cooling tea out into the hall.

He had learned nothing about alternate worlds. But he did have an idea.

Sparks' mum knocked on Sparks' bedroom door, a habit she had learned the hard way during Sparks' teenage years.

"Cup of tea, dear?" she said, a cup of tea already in her hand.

"Yeah, thanks," said Sparks's voice absently through the wood.

Sparks' mum opened the door, moved a gonk on the chest of drawers, took a coaster from her pocket, set it down and put the cup of tea on it.

"We're going over to the Morgans in a while," she said. "Will you be all right on your own?"

Sparks looked round the room at the children's books, model airplanes, pop star posters and assorted buttons that decorated it. "I'll be fine," he said, wondering as he did sometimes if in fact he had died and

his mum was keeping his room just the way it used to be. Then he dismissed the thought as uncharitable and smiled at his mum.

“I’ve got some stuff to get on with,” he said, and Sparks’ mum saw the bed full of bits of old Christmas cards, felt tip pens and tangled ribbons of sellotape.

“All right, dear,” she said, “Cup of tea up there,” and left.

Sparks ignored the tea for now - there was enough inside him already to tan a pig - and went back to his bits of card. His theory and planning were limited, he felt, by his lack of a computer to lay out grids on and review the whole picture. In reality, Sparks knew nothing about computers and could barely cut and paste some text, let alone work out a divergent self-generating probability model, which is what he was trying to do now with the cards.

After an hour of tearing off pictures of robins, scribbling on the remaining white card, attaching cards to other cards with sellotape, Sparks had two things. A lot of pictures of robins, and a tree-shaped skeleton of cards, each with different sentences on them, crawling up the wall over the pop star posters.

At the top, one card said:

ALISON AND ME SPLIT UP

Below that were two cards. They said:

WE GET BACK TOGETHER and WE DON'T

Below these were two more cards. The ones above WE DON'T  
said:

SHE MARRIES A GIT, and SHE DOESN'T

The ones above WE GET BACK TOGETHER said:

WE SPLIT UP AGAIN and WE DON'T

After that, Sparks pretty much ran out of ideas and wall. He had done enough, though; he'd clarified a few things in his mind, he felt a bit better and, most important of all, even if he didn't actually have a coherent plan or anything that even a monkey might call a strategy, he did at least have a goal. For the first time in ages, Sparks felt excited.

Sparks' mum and dad returned from the Morgans just before midnight. They had been at the red wine.

“Ssh!” said Sparks’ mum as Sparks’ dad fiddled with the front door key. “Don’t set the alarm off.”

“It’s not on,” said Sparks’ dad. “The boy’s here, remember?”

Just then the alarm went off, causing Sparks’ mum and dad to fall backwards into a small table.

“Why’s he set the alarm?” said Sparks’ dad. “Has he gone to the pub with his friends?”

“He hasn’t got any friends here,” said Sparks’ mum. “They all live in London.”

She climbed the stairs, with sherry-laced difficulty. “His bag’s gone!” she called back. “And he hasn’t drunk his tea!”

Sparks’ parents went dizzily to bed.

“Funny lad,” said Sparks’ dad. “I expect he’ll call us in the morning.”

He didn’t, though.

Sparks’ mind ploughed through his new plan, checking it out for errors, and ignoring the fact that both Sparks and his mind were on some horrible train that was not so much racing through the night as walking slightly behind it. Democrats would be pleased to note that the train had

no first class section. There was also no buffet, not even in the form of a trolley pulled by two overly arm-muscled people in red waistcoats. And, in case the weary traveller was happy enough without food or expensive seating, the train had no toilets. It was the kind of train - all plastic bucket seats and useless pictures of scenes from rural life - that should have been taking prisoners to Legoland but instead it was the only way most of the West Country could get out of the West Country and into London.

Sparks' travelling companions were not the kind of people who once sat convivially across from each other in horse-drawn coaches. They were, essentially, all pissed. There was a young couple, unconscious in cheap leather jackets, who had somehow managed to drool on each other's necks in their ale sleep. There was a middle-aged man, who was trying to look sober by reading a book, but kept giving the game away by having to start the same page again because he was too rat-arsed to focus.

The train stopped at a station with a ridiculous name, like an illness or a racehorse. The man who couldn't focus blundered off and some more people got on. One man, quite young and very unsteady on his feet, sat opposite Sparks and began to unload cans onto the little table between them. He had a lot of cans, all different, and some already open.

Sparks and his mind didn't notice; they were busy going over Spark's plan. At last, Sparks was happy. The plan was simple and even he could understand it. He smiled to himself, which was an error. The

man sitting opposite him stopping looking into opened cans for cigarette butts and stared at him, a bit hard. Sparks smiled back, which provoked a different stare from the young man, a suspicious one. They were saved from any further smiling and staring by the man's mobile phone, which suddenly started playing the theme tune to some awful 1970s children's programme. The young man stopped staring and answered the phone.

Sparks returned to his mind. *I can't see anything wrong with this plan*, he thought to himself.

"Wha'?" said the young man into his phone. "Is he there?"

*Admittedly it is my plan and its flaws are likely to be invisible to me*, Sparks thought, more dubiously. *But that doesn't matter. I'm not thick or anything.*

"Get 'im" said the young man. "Get 'im to the phone." There was a pause. "I don't care. You don't do that." The young man glowered at the phone and raised his voice some more, which was impressive, as he was pretty much up there already. "YOU DON'T! DO THAT! Get 'im."

*All I need is to go back and do it again*, thought Sparks. *I did it once, I can do it again. It's not like there's a set of infinite variables or anything.*

"He's a sod!" said the young man, fortunately to the phone. "Why? You know why. He glued - ". He became overcome with emotion, as well as cider, and could not speak.

*Ah, thought Sparks, bugger. Come to think of it, it is like there's a set of infinite variables.*

“He glued a johnny to under my bed!” said the young man, furious and affronted. “You do not! Glue! A johnny! To under my bed!”

*Oh well, thought Sparks' mind - Sparks was no longer thinking, having become interested in the kipper business - there isn't any other way to do this.*

“You don't do that!” shouted the young man, red-faced. He held the phone away from his face and stared into it like it had recently been a kitten and just then transformed before his eyes into a mobile phone. His face went redder. “Not to Gibbons!”

He snapped the phone shut. Then he saw Sparks staring at him. This was a reversal of normality for the *soi-disant* Gibbons, who was clearly one of life's starers. He evidently found it hard to deal with, and Sparks, who was one of life's starees, felt embarrassed for him.

“I'm sorry,” he said, “I didn't mean to stare.”

Gibbons looked unconvinced. He was getting starey again.

“I was just... so deep in concentration that my eyes were sort of... looking forward,” said Sparks, “At you.”

“Thinking?” Gibbons said, sneering almost. “About what? Your arse hole.”



Sparks was unnerved, partly because Gibbons looked angry now and partly because he had managed to make “arsehole” into two separate words. Nevertheless, he sensed that placating Gibbons, who it appeared no-one sodded with, was a bad idea, so he decided to just tell him the truth.

“My girlfriend left me,” Sparks told Gibbons. “She went off to Australia because I couldn’t commit, whatever that means, and I was crap, which is fair enough. But I love her and I want her back.”

Gibbons was looking dangerous, like an ale shark, if they exist, which they don’t. Sparks forged on:

“Anyway, I also discovered recently that there are alternate worlds. Like this one, only different in a lot of ways, and if you step on a butterfly it doesn’t matter. So I think that somewhere out there is a world where there’s another Alison like the one I love, only this time if I can be less crap, she’ll love me and not care about committing, whatever that means. So I’m going to look for that world.”

“Fnutter,” Gibbons said under his powerful breath, and turned to look out of the window.

Sparks took his Walkman out of his bag and listened to Radio 2 all the way back to London.

Sparks arrived at Paddington Station shortly after midnight. The underground was closed and there were no taxis, so he made his way home on an array of buses. The last bus of the four that he took - which was also the grimmest - happened to take him past his office, and Sparks, noticing this, did something he had never done before. He got off the bus and went to his office when he didn't have to.

Unlocking the door and turning off the alarm system - the phrase "turning off" here identical in meaning to "hitting" - Sparks tried to walk across the room in the door, barked a shin on the desk edge, and using swearing managed to turn his anglepoise lamp on. The room looked slightly better in the dark, as shadows in corners hid a lot of mangy anarchy. Removing some sort of apple core (he hoped) from his chair, Sparks sat down and turned his computer on. It farted electronically into life. Sparks muted the sound and clicked on his internet logo. After a while, the computer - belying slightly computers' general image of being supersmart creatures that will one day enslave the human race and make them pull trucks full of coal around for some reason - noticed that Sparks was clicking on his internet logo, and reluctantly connected him to the internet, in the manner of somebody introducing two people to each other who he knows will get on really well and do interesting things and stuff as soon as he has buggered off and stopped annoying them.

Sparks found a search engine, opened it, and wrote RANDOM LIFE GENERATOR in the little writing gap. As before, the computer started to have what scientists would call a crap attack, and flashed up skulls and daggers and various other pirate things. Just for the hell of it, Sparks turned off the computer's mute button and let the poor sod shudder as its speakers were filled up with music and noises clearly designed to be played on a bigger system, such as one they might have installed at a stadium.

Again, the screen filled and cleared and went mad and then became a field of names. Sparks waited for them to settle down so he could get to work, but the screen changed again. Sparks stared in disbelief and distress at the new details. In a large and unfashionable typeface, the screen requested him to type in a user name and a password. Clearly changes had been instituted.

*Bugger*, thought Sparks, *I'm buggered*. He was tired from the journey and keen not to use up all the swearwords he knew, in case things got worse. Then he had an idea. Remembering the only other people he'd ever met who had heard of the Random Life Generator, Sparks typed in the word JEFF.

Nothing happened; that was the easy bit. Even Sparks knew that user names were easy because they were just names, whereas passwords were extremely difficult, and generally impossible to guess. Sparks

thought a while, but had no useful ideas. The only words he associated with Jeff were unpleasant ones like SHORTY and DIM and he doubted that Jeff would use these as passwords. *But what*, Sparks thought, *what if Jeff is so dim that his password is incredibly simple?*

After a few minutes thought, Sparks found he could think of only one word that Jeff might use, and that word, unfortunately, was JEFF. It didn't look likely, even to Sparks, that Jeff's password was Jeff, but Sparks had no other ideas.

*What the hell*, he thought, and typed in JEFF again, which came up as four big dots. Sparks hit RETURN. Nothing happened. Jeff was too crafty for him! Sparks wondered what to do next. If only he knew someone who was like Jeff but more likely to use his own name as a password!

Sparks erased the JEFFs and typed in DUNCAN twice. He hit return almost casually and sat back for rejection. It never came; the screen filled up with dancing names and deranged tangoing words as it had before, and then pruned itself back to just one sentence. TODAY'S WORD HENNA OPERATING ENTRANCE MANNHEIM 46 HUBERSTRASSE DUTY H GINZER it said. Sparks waited for the screen to clear again. It did so, and this time it read TODAY'S WORD HENNA OPERATING ENTRANCE SYDNEY 7A KING STREET

DUTY L M DERMOTT. He waited for the screen to clear again, hoping that as with the previous time, he would get a London entrance very soon.

Instead, London did not come up the next time, or the time after that, or several times after that. Sparks sat in the half-dark watching desperately as portals all over the world opened and closed, none of them anywhere near him (and one at the bottom of a radium mine in Siberia, which struck Sparks as sod-all good to anyone, except possibly a very cold radium miner who was hoping to be a radium miner in a nice warm world).

At last, as Sparks' eyes were being to go wobbly and his buttocks to melt into one hard, bored muscle, he saw it. It said: TODAY'S WORD HENNA OPERATING ENTRANCE LONDON 88 CONSWARDINE HOUSE TISDALL STREET STOCKWELL DUTY L MACDONALD. Sparks picked up a biro and wrote it all down just before it faded to be replaced with some good news for alternate world travellers based in the Antwerp area.

He looked at the clock on the computer and deducted an hour because he had been too lazy to change the clock after summertime ended. It was 3.32. Too late to go to Stockwell. In fact, Sparks' tired and for once overworked brain decided, too late to go home.

He leaned back in his chair and fell asleep almost at once.

Sparks woke the next day covered in bacon. Anyone else would have been a bit alarmed by this, maybe thinking, “Oh no! A pig has exploded near me!” or something equally panic-stricken, but Sparks was not fazed. He simply assumed that he had woken up, bought a bacon sandwich from the cafe across the road, sat down, eaten most of it, and then fallen asleep again. This was the kind of person Sparks was; not fazed by bacon.

He brushed the bits of bacon off himself that he hadn’t absently eaten and sat up properly in his slightly broken chair. It was 11.02, not a bad sleep by Sparks’ standards, almost conforming in some way to normal sleep cycles, which it would have done had Sparks lived in a slightly out of phase time zone, perhaps below the mighty waves. Unaware but perhaps subconsciously proud of his Atlantis-related body clock, Sparks cracked a couple of knuckles, said “Ow” twice, and looked at the piece of paper on his desk. Then he pulled an incredibly old Streetfinder from a drawer and looked up Tisdall Street. Reassuringly, he found it; less reassuringly, Tisdall Street was quite possibly the longest street in South London; it began just to the left of the big S in the word STOCKWELL printed across two pages of his Streetfinder and ended somewhere to the right of the second L.

Not for the first time, Sparks had a little daydream about London being covered in giant words and estate agents saying to clients, “Yes, it is a dark flat, but it’s very exclusive, it’s right underneath the H in HAMPSTEAD.” Then he woke up, remembered how horrible Stockwell was, and went and had a wash.

People who do not enjoy reading descriptions, especially of journeys they never plan to make, will be relieved to learn that Sparks’ journey to Stockwell was neither unpleasant nor overly exciting; he did however get on a train to Green Park instead of one to Brixton, which delayed him slightly and caused him to arrive in Stockwell slightly later than he planned. But not much later.

Sparks found Tisdall Street easily, and sensibly started walking up it from the end nearest the tube station. After a while, he realised that, as always happens, he was at the wrong end of the street, but since there didn’t weren’t any buses, or even people, in Tisdall Street, there was nothing he could do about this. Sparks wasn’t surprised that Tisdall Street was incredibly empty; if he’d lived there, he’d have avoided it too, as it were.

On one side of the road were huge tower blocks, painted according to some ill-advised ‘70s scheme in black and yellow, like vertical wasps; and on the other was just, well, South London crap. Not that Sparks had

anything against South London (or, come to think of it, most kinds of crap), just that there was nothing here of any use or even shape. Broken painted signs with YARD or SCRAP written on them, fences protecting nothing but old coke cans, playgrounds with everything in them destroyed but little plastic elephants on broken springs, houses that had obviously been teleported from 1950s Warsaw... and no people.

Sparks, feeling a bit spooked now by the absence of people, walked right past Conswardine House and only realised when he ran out of Tisdall Street. Cursing in a modern way, he started back into the silent street and then noticed the largest of the waspy blocks. CONSWARDINE HO S , it said, amusingly, on a sign outside. Sparks looked at his bit of paper and then walked in.

The first thing Sparks noticed about the estate, which seemed to have no name at all, was that everything on it was broken. There were burnt-out cars and motorbikes (and even burnt-out prams), there was a skip that somebody had somehow managed to upend, there was a smashed telly with an incredibly expensive-looking DVD player stuffed into its shattered face, and even the boards on the broken windows of the empty flats were themselves broken. The estate looked as though it had been the victim either of a small earthquake or some kind of epidemic toddler tantrum, like the Children's Crusade only pettier.



He found Conswardine House, behind a sack of rubbish; it was taller, but in most other respects very similar. A small fire guttered in the lobby, throwing unwanted light onto the names spray-painted around the lift. TIGO: CEF: PRO BOY: SACKA: the teenagers of the area named themselves like types of household goods.

Sparks pressed a sticky elevator switch and, much to his surprise, the lift doors opened. He was about to step in when he saw that there was a shopping trolley on its back in the lift. He stepped up to the lift to haul it out, and then stopped, teetering at the door's edge and trying to flail his arms like a limited helicopter. The trolley wasn't on the floor of the lift; there was no floor. The trolley was perched on top of a heap of loose rubbish - tables, bins, dashboards - that reached up from the basement and only coincidentally stopped at ground floor level.

Sparks decided not to take the lift. He took the stairs, moving fairly quickly past bursting black bags and the odd brutalised former music centre, and reached the eighth floor a few minutes later. Then he had a little sit down, to let his lungs stop trying to beat up his ribs, and when he felt a bit less breathless, made his way to flat 88.

The door to flat 88 was not so much open as absent. Sparks knew it was flat 88 because the gaping doorway was between a boarded up door with 87 written on it in bad paint and a perfectly nice door with a carriage lamp-shaped knocker and an 8 and a back-flipping 9 on it. Sparks looked

round and went over the threshold to 88. The light was on, which was good, because the floor was covered in bin bags, old picture frames and old magazines that Sparks didn't recognise but were called things like *This Olde England* and *My EYES*.

The front room was empty, as was the kitchen and the bathroom. This left the bedroom, whose door was closed. As this door was the only one for miles around, Sparks was reluctant to open it. The tiny porcelain plaque on the front that said JOHN'S ROOM with a picture of a 1970s footballer beneath it did nothing to increase Sparks' confidence. He did the sensible thing and knocked. There was no reply. Sparks knocked again, this time more loudly. Sparks summoned up all his courage, which didn't take long, and turned the door handle. It was a bit greasy, but it opened on the first turn. Sparks went into the bedroom.

The room was covered in football posters, all faded and pretty old. Sparks knew nothing about football, but he knew the players in these posters would be lucky to be opening supermarkets these days, or even their eyes. There was a low shelf with badly-made model airplanes and tanks on it, and in the corner some albums. Sparks, who did like music, had a riffle through the albums. Like the football posters, they were all slightly old and neither odd nor interesting. Then he heard the noise.

It was a rustling movement from the corner. Sparks turned, hairs on his neck standing up like tiny toothpicks. The noise came from the

bed. Sparks stared at the bed. It looked like quite a normal bed, even if it was under a duvet covered in cartoon faces from a long-forgotten TV show. The duvet had something underneath it. Sparks picked up a model Phantom jet from the shelf, and threw it cautiously onto the bed. Nothing happened, apart from one of the wings on the jet fell off.

Sparks, feeling made of reluctance, went over to the bed and threw back the duvet. He started as a mouse as big as his thumb leapt off the bed, hurled itself between his legs and ran out into the corridor. Then he laughed, nervously, and sat down cautiously on the bed to steady his nerves. Then he saw something dark on the bed which made him jump - it could have been a stain, it could have been an old comic - and he edged suddenly backwards against the bedroom wall.

There wasn't a bedroom wall.

Sparks fell backwards, the football posters disappearing from view, and then -

OW!

THIS HAS HAPPENED TO ME BEFORE OW!

OW OW I SEE THAT PAIN IS NOT ALTERED BY REPETITION OW  
OW!

OW AND OW AND I THINK WE HAVE ROOM FOR YES WE DO  
ONE MORE OW!

BONUS OW!

OW REPLAY!

OW OW OW OW OW!

WELCOME TO OWTOWN, HOME OF THE OWTOWN PAINSTERS!

OW!

They say that pain cannot be remembered, but as he lay on his back, Sparks though he was having a pretty good go at it. He wasn't actually in pain anymore, having wisely opted to spend ten minutes unconscious so the pain could go away and close the door quietly behind itself, but he could remember the pain as if it had just happened, which it had. It was so memorable, in fact, that he could have described it to the

police, if they'd asked; he could certainly have drawn it for them, and might even have been able to do an impression of it at a party.

Sparks sat up, his senses coming back to him like lost property. It was his sense of smell, oddly enough, which first alerted him to the fact that he was still in the flat. This perturbed him slightly. The whole idea of this unpleasant trip had been to travel through one of those portal things and end up in an exciting new world where he might meet a version of Alison who loved him and wanted to be with him for ever. Instead he was in a smelly bedroom in a stinky flat, just like he had been twenty minutes ago. Things didn't bode well. In fact, thought Sparks as he sat up and crushed the rest of the Phantom jet, things didn't were not doing any good kinds of boding at all. *Oh well*, he reasoned, *at least I'm not in the Edgware Road*. Sparks didn't like the Edgware Road; very few people do. He got off the bed and made his pain-remembering way cautiously to the front door. Sparks took one last, nostalgia-less look around flat 88 and stepped out into the disgusting hall, where he got a big shock.

The hall was no longer disgusting. It was lovely. Thick white shag pile carpets like thousands of Persian cats sewn together flowed in a tide from one end of the corridor to the other. The walls were painted a shade of ochre so restrained that any actual ochre nearby would have resigned in shame and become something easier, like mauve. There were green glass lamps along the walls, and there were pictures. Some were tasteful

photographs of bits of people walking along the street in New York, and some were oil paintings of attractive people. One was of a man being kicked, but in a tasteful way.

Sparks walked towards where the bottomless lift shaft had been, and was not surprised to find that there was a lift there now, a lift with enormous teak doors, possibly carved from a special rectangular tree. There were buttons by the lift, and above the lift door was a little arrow that went from side to side. Sparks summoned the lift, and it came whooshing to him, borne on hydraulics and clean shiny cables. The door opened and a lift attendant was revealed to be behind it. Sparks stepped in.

“Ground floor,” he said, and the lift attendant, barely registering shock at Sparks’ horrible clothes, pressed the button and the lift went down.

*Either I went through a portal, Sparks thought as the lift doors opened onto a marble and gilt-crammed lobby, or the council are really busting a gut on the whole renovation thing.*

Sparks emerged into bright sunlight, and an awful lot of grass and plants. The estate had a look of a place that had been entirely redesigned by the sort of people from films about the future who wear togas and

communicate by thought. Scanning the sky for giant flying heads, Sparks made his way down Tisdall Road, which had changed from a graveyard for all the crap in the world into a kind of modernised Roman boulevard. Big white houses lined the spotless pavements, all arches and columns, and through their windows Sparks could see extremely good-looking people doing fun things like watching enormous televisions or drinking out of very impressive-looking wine glasses.

Sparks sat on a clean wall and collected his thoughts. He was clearly in a very classy world. It looked so classy, Sparks found himself almost wanting to see some dog mess or a burning moped for contrast. But there was nothing like that, just lots of impressiveness.

Sparks walked on, trying to notice more things (he had always been bad at noticing things, like oncoming traffic and Alison telling him stuff). After a while - because Tisdall Road, in this world as in his own, was still bloody long - Sparks did begin to notice something. There were no nice things.

This didn't strike him as particularly bad or wrong, just odd. There were lots of clean things, and lots of new things, and there were lots of majestic things (one big red pillar box Sparks passed looked about ready to march down the street and deliver letters itself), but there wasn't anything nice. No chintzy curtains, no little dogs, no toys in people's

gardens and, in the newsagent's window he was now staring into, no jolly adverts for unwanted furniture or non-smoking flatmates.

Sparks decided to buy an A to Z . An A to Z of this somewhat different London might be useful, he thought, also he could murder a wine gum. He found something that looked like an A to Z of London and something else that was definitely a bag of wine gums and went up to the newsagent, who was picking his nails with a safety pin.

The newsagent stared at him for a few seconds. Sparks stared back, wondering if he had breached some local code, like not smiling or having his flies undone. After a while, Sparks decided to break the ice by saying, "How much are these, please?"

The newsagent signed, put down his filthy pin, and said, "Have I neglected to price those items?"

"No," said Sparks, "I just - "

"Give them to me," said the newsagent. He snatched the items from Sparks, looked at them and dropped them on the counter. "Four pounds thirty-six," he said curtly. "I haven't got any change."

"That's all right," said Sparks, "I have".

"I haven't got any carrier bags," said the newsagent, taking Sparks' money.



“I don’t need any,” said Sparks. He left the shop, feeling uncomfortable. *What a rude man*, he thought. Then he saw the newspapers, and had to go back in again.

“I never short-changed you,” said the newsagent, seeing him coming. “And if you take me to court, I’ll say you touched me.”

Sparks was finding everything a bit bizarre now. “I just want to buy these papers,” he said.

The newsagent took his money. “What are you on?” he said to Sparks. “What’s your game? Because it’s not clever. It’s not funny, know what I mean? I could have you crippled.”

Sparks took the papers and left the shop in a hurry.

Sitting on the bus to his house (the driver called him a tit and several of the passengers blatantly tried to trip him up in the aisle), Sparks went through the newspapers with a rising sense of puzzlement.

He had bought two tabloids and two broadsheets. The tabloids had chosen to cover the departure of an actress from a soap opera. Sparks, not being mad, was used to tabloids failing to contain any news, because that was what they were for. He also had no problem with subjectivity, because the opinions in the tabloids always sounded more interesting than his own, if nutser. But these tabloids shied away from any kind of

objectivity at all, and as for the news aspect, well, there was some, but it was a bit shaky.

Both papers had focussed on the fact that the actress had left the soap under a cloud; one had decided to speculate on the reasons for her departure, while the other had simply opted to look towards the future. More specifically, one paper had the headline **FAT DRUNK ANNETTE GETS THE SACK**, while the other went for the even snappier **HEY BLOBBO! NOW YOU CAN DRINK YOURSELF TO DEATH!** It appeared to Sparks that these headlines lacked charity.

The broadsheets, naturally, did not concern themselves with such trivia; they probably had a snidey story inside, Sparks thought. Their front page stories were of a loftier nature; one paper was following an ongoing war, while the other, which was a bit more liberal, had elected to cover the fact that the ozone layer was having another bad day. This time the headlines were **MORE WAR AND ORPHANS PLANNED FOR FOREIGNERS** and **BUY SOME POLAR BEARS WHILE YOU STILL CAN, ZOOS ADVISED.**

He got off the bus at his tube station and was immediately approached by a small boy, who thrust a piece of paper at him.

“I don’t want one,” said Sparks.

The boy looked mortified. “You have to take it,” he said, “Or my dad will break my arm.”

“Bloody hell,” said Sparks. “Give it here then.”

He took the paper and walked off, shaking his head. Sparks found children weird, but didn’t believe in hurting them; he felt the same way about cats, apart from the hurting part. Sparks unfolded the piece of paper. It looked to be a flyer for some forthcoming event, a rave or a concert. Then he felt a finger prod him low in the thigh. He turned round; it was the boy again.

“What?” said Sparks.

“You took my flyer,” said the boy.

“I know I did,” said Sparks. “You wanted me to.”

“You have to give me a pound now,” said the boy.

“No I don’t!” said Sparks. “I didn’t want it in the first place. Here, you can have it back.”

The boy looked confused. “You have to give me a pound,” he said. “Else my dad will break my arm.”

“He sounds very keen on breaking your arm,” said Sparks.

A couple of people had stopped now, and were looking at Sparks and the boy.

“Go on,” said the boy. “It’s worth having.”

“I don’t want it,” said Sparks. The couple of people had increased to five or six and Sparks was very conscious of being stared at.

“I can’t go home without my pound,” said the boy. His face creased up like a chamois leather about to cry.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Sparks, and gave the boy a pound. The boy’s face uncreased, like a chamois leather that had forgotten about crying, and he looked up at Sparks.

“Wanker,” he said and ran off.

Sparks was disconcerted to find that the small crowd were applauding. He strode off, feeling stupid and embarrassed. As he left the station concourse, he heard a small old woman with enormous ankles say to her friend, “Smart kid”.

Sparks felt like all the idiots in the world at once. He stopped once he felt he was safely out of mocking distance, and looked at the flyer, fully expecting it to be blank. It wasn’t; it was for a real event. The boy hadn’t been lying about that, as the event looked to be a dramatic and important one. Stars of TV and cinema were promised to be in attendance, and some royals that Sparks had heard of would also be there. The event was free to the public, too.

Sparks found, despite himself, that he was quite tempted to go. He had never been to an event where cats and Frenchmen fought each other naked in the dark before.

Sparks walked through his part of town, or the equivalent of it, and was not surprised to see that it, too, looked like it had come up in the world. All the beggars and mad people who would normally be hanging round at this time of day (and all the other times of day as well) appeared to be either missing or at some sort of beggars and mad people's conference; there was no litter, and the buildings, while still bad Victorian and random council, were clean and well cared-for. The streets also had an air of corresponding to the ones in his own world, which was handy.

Sparks had a vague plan; he needed some sort of temporary base to make phone calls and so forth from. He had a feeling that going to his flat might be a bad idea, as he might meet himself and destroy the universe in some sort of anti-matter collision or whatever, so he decided to go to his office, reasoning that, since in his own world he never went there, he probably didn't in this one either.

His office in this world was a bit nicer from the outside, in that it didn't have swearing written all over it, and the steps weren't a kind of informal dog toilet, but Sparks was reassured to see that his building was easily the tattiest one in the street, which might explain the FOR SALE sign outside. He was more reassured when his key opened the door on the first try; clearly this world was like his own in a lot of ways.

He opened the door and went in. His office door key worked, too, and Sparks went into the moderately scabrous room where he worked in his own world. This was different; it was completely empty. There were no upturned bins, coffee cup rings, swivel chairs with one wheel missing. Anyone looking at the lack of old music paper posters and CD boxes with the wrong CDs in would have assumed that Sparks had never had an office here.

Sparks himself was of the same mind, and felt slightly uneasy at some unconscious level at the whole neatness and spaciousness of the room, as though he was responsible for the mess and decline of his own room, which of course he was. He dismissed the thought with no difficulty and set about looking for phone books. Pulling open a spotless drawer in the clean desk, he found some paper clips and a yellowed corner of paper, which looked familiar. Sparks examined it; it was a bit of old music paper, and had the bottom of an old T-shirt mail order address on it.

He felt distinctly odd; this had been his office, and somewhere out there was another Sparks, who also sold T-shirt designs. There were two Sparks in this world, one of which was him and the other was like him, the same size and smell and everything, with similar thoughts, and lungs and teeth in identical locations. The idea was a lot more disconcerting than the one about not having a tidy office; and Sparks found it harder to

dismiss. He wondered if the Sparks in this world knew the Alison in this world, and if they were still together and (he couldn't stop the thought) if they were doing it right now. This thought made Sparks feel so weird that he had to sit down in the swivel chair which, not being broken, also felt utterly disconcerting, but did enable Sparks to notice a large pile of phone books under the desk just before he fell off the chair.

He pulled the phone books out. There was a totally useless directory for North London businesses, apparently produced under the illusion that people in North London only want to buy things in North London and have no interest in the produce of, say, the simple folk markets of the West End; and there was a proper phone book with the phone numbers of people who lived all over London. Sparks riffled through this one, found the pages he wanted and tore them out like a vandal.

He was just stuffing the pages into his pocket when he heard the outside door click. This caused two things to happen; first, nothing at all, as Sparks' brain seized up rather than leap into action; and then, when his brain had stopped seizing up and starting being a brain again, Sparks had a thought. This was Sparks' thought: *If this office is my office in an alternative world then the person coming through the door must be...* Then, filled with terror, Sparks' brain seized up again. He had often wondered what it would be like to meet himself. Now that the

opportunity had come up, come up the stairs in fact, Sparks found it would be horrible to meet himself. He vaguely remembered from comics that sometimes people exploded when they met themselves. At best, he would have a jazz beard. Sparks did not want to either explode or have a jazz beard, so he quickly opened a window and crawled out onto the low roof.

As he closed the window behind himself, Sparks heard voices entering the office.

“I thought I heard something,” said one voice, adenoidal and harsh.

*Do I sound like that?* thought Sparks.

“Well, there’s no-one here, officer,” said the other voice, and Sparks thought, *No, I sound like that. Wow. it’s like hearing yourself on the radio, except I’ve never been on the radio.* He felt unpleasant goosebumps on his shoulders. It is one thing to hear your own voice on a tape or a video or, perhaps, singing a number one record, but it is quite another to hear your own voice coming from, as it were, you.

“You’ve got me out of bed for nothing,” said the man who must be the other Sparks, unless he was a voice impressionist with a stupidly obscure repertoire. “I shall report you to your superiors for this. And then sue you.”

Sparks was impressed despite himself, as it were, at this other Sparks, who stood up to police officers and even threatened them with



pointless legal action. He was less impressed when, a second later, the sound of hitting ensued, followed by the sound of pleading and falling over.

Clutching his phone directory pages, Sparks sneaked off down the road to sleep in a park. He found the benches all occupied apart from one, so he pushed a weaker-looking tramp to one side, sat down next to him and fell immensely asleep.

Sparks woke as dawn broke. *Rosy fingered dawn*, he thought to himself, and wondered if that was the name of a film. London was a good place to be in at daybreak, and while Sparks had probably seen Halley's Comet more times than he had been up at daybreak, he liked the time of day immensely. Cleaners and tube staff going to work, clubbers and drunks going home, the sun fighting its way over the clouds like a smoker climbing the stairs, strange shards of golden light illuminating estate agents' signs and those high trolleys they move bread around on.... Dawn in London was a wonderful thing.

Sparks had a plan. This was his plan, as written down on Sparks' piece of paper:

## ALISON HOUSE PARENT HOUSE

It was a simple plan. To accomplish it, he needed to get some money (MONEY????), a tube pass (PASS!!) and, most of all, to find Alison's house, and if that was not possible, her parents' house. This was why he had bought the A-Z and stolen the pages from the phone book.

But now Sparks had to get the money to buy the tube pass. And this is where he began to get ingenious.

*If there is a me in this world who seems to be like me in that he doesn't have two heads or, more pertinently, he is so like me that he has my office and my job, reasoned Sparks to himself as he walked along, trying not to be begged at, then he will surely have other things in common with me. Like a bank account with not much money in it. And if he has a bank account, it doesn't matter that he doesn't have much money in it. All that matters is he has the same PIN number as me.*

Sparks walked until he found a cashpoint. He stood a few feet away while he adjusted to local cashpoint etiquette - which, basically, consisted of people trying to shove each other out of the way and even grabbing their money off them - and, having waited until the cashpoint was clear, ran up, shoved his card in and tapped out his PIN.

The illuminated display began to flash. It said TAKING MONEY OUT? YOU'LL GO BROKE, YOU SPENDTHRIFT WASTER. IN FACT, IF YOU COME BACK HERE AGAIN, WE'LL CALL THE

POLICE. Sparks found this unduly aggressive, but then he found everything in this world unduly aggressive. He tapped in a largish sum of money and waited for what seemed like (and actually was) a bit too long before the machine reluctantly slid out a tangled mass of crumpled and sellotaped-up notes. Sparks was delighted. He knew he ought to feel guilty at robbing someone who was technically a stranger, but then again that stranger was also technically him. *Also*, thought Sparks, *now I know why I'm always a bit short on my current account*. Someone from an alternative universe had clearly been dipping into his money; at least, that's what he would tell his bank next time he went into the red.

Sparks stuffed the raggedy notes into his wallet before a passing old man could shiv him for them, and hurried off to the tube station. He took out the sheet of phone book and looked for Alison's address. It wasn't there and nor was Alison's number when he called directory enquiries ("Yes? Make it snappy, I haven't got all day. No such number, bye"), but Alison's parents' address was.

Tiring of phone rudeness, Sparks decided to visit them.

There has been a lot about Sparks' travelling in this chapter, despite various vague assurances that there wouldn't be, so Sparks' journey will be dealt with briefly. Sparks went from Finsbury Park to

Streatham, via bus from Brixton. On the tube he saw a guitar-playing busker severely beaten up by passengers, and on the bus, some small boys clung to his ankles and tried to take his wallet as Sparks dragged them along.

Shaking the last small boy from his legs, Sparks got off the bus and took out his A-Z. He consulted the phone book sheet, got his bearings and walked off through Streatham which, although previously not deeply rundown, now resembled, say, Hitler's idea of a perfect South London. Supermarkets were marble cornucopias that sprouted their own produce, cinemas were more like cathedrals dedicated to the work of American midgets, and even the pubs gleamed like galleons. On the flipside, mind, Sparks noted that things were quite expensive and the alleyways were frequently full of people hiding and coughing.

He found Alison's parents house in a leafy, sloping avenue. Like everything else here apart from the tramps, it looked shinier and cleaner and also, if this is the right word for a mock Tudor semi, crueller. Sparks rang the doorbell. It chimed with the clarity of a freshly-sharpened razor's edge. *Good doorbell*, thought Sparks, impressed.

The door opened, and a woman appeared. She was wan-faced, tired, wearing a greasy apron and had too many little plasters on the ends of her scarred and scabbed hands.

"Are you Mrs Irvine?" asked Sparks.

The woman sighed, rolled her eyes and closed the door. A few seconds later, there was the sound of a slap and the door was opened again, this time by a completely different woman. This woman was well-dressed, deeply clean, expensive-looking from her uneconomical hair to her glittering shoes. Sparks thought she was the most glamorous-looking woman he had ever seen, and it took him quite a few seconds to realise that she was Alison's mother. This is because Alison's mother was, as far as Sparks could remember, an old-school Guardian-reading mother who wore bifocals and cardigans and frowned at people who didn't know about the minimum wage. This woman looked like she not only didn't know about the minimum wage but, if you mentioned it, would make you eat it.

"I am Mrs Irvine," she said. "You have ten seconds to state your business before I call the police."

"Good morning," said Sparks. "I was wondering - "

"Five seconds," said Mrs Irvine. "I told you."

"I haven't said anything yet," said Sparks. "I was - "

"One second," said Mrs Irvine. She held up a very small telephone and pressed a key. "Hello, police?"

"I know your daughter Alison!" shouted Sparks.

Mrs Irvine looked at him.

“We do not,” she said, “have a daughter. We considered it, a long time ago, but decided we could better spend our money on drugs and vases. I understand this is why there’s something of a decline in the population, but I couldn’t care less. Now I am calling the police.”

She pressed the key. Almost immediately the air was solid with screaming.

“That was quick,” said Sparks. He ran away, again.

Sparks made his way down back streets, past tramps, vagrants and people who were just dying in alleyways, up impressive Olympic boulevards that in his world were just streets, and with the aid of the rudest black cab driver he would ever meet, found Tisdall Road again. He ran into Conswardine House, and found flat 88. The door was still open. Sparks went in. A very large naked man was sitting on the floor, and as the large man gaped at Sparks, two women dressed as air hostesses came in. They too gaped at Sparks as he ran past them into the bedroom.

Sparks locked the bedroom door. As thumping ensued outside,. he took a quick look around at the most unpleasant place he had been in his life.

“Goodbye, cruel world,” said Sparks, and sat down on the bed.

OW!

OW!

DOESN'T GET BETTER WHEN YOU GET USED TO IT THEN!

OWWW!

Sparks woke up. Judging by the smell he was in the Flat 88 in his world. He opened his eyes. A small, amazingly filthy boy was staring at him. Sparks stood up. He felt awful, and slowly tried to stand up.

“Are you my dad?” the boy said.

Sparks stopped trying to stand up. “No,” he said, “No, I’m not.”

“Good,” said the boy. “You’re a loony.”

Sparks went home.

Jeff and Duncan were playing cards when the alarm went off.

“The alarm’s gone off,” said Duncan.

“I know,” said Jeff. “I can hear it. In fact, it’s so loud I couldn’t hear you saying ‘the alarm’s gone off’. But I knew that’s what you were

going to say because that's what you always say when the alarm goes off."

"What did you say?" said Duncan.

Jeff went over and turned off the alarm.

"Nothing," said Jeff. "Anyway, I knew the alarm was going to go off."

"No you didn't," said Duncan. "How could you?"

"It's him, isn't it?" said Jeff. "He's going round, doing stuff. Setting alarms off."

Duncan looked troubled. "I think we should tell someone. You know, in authority."

"No," said Jeff. "When the time comes, we'll do something ourselves. In the meantime, you're bust."

"They don't have bust in whist," said Duncan, but he folded up his cards all the same. There was no point arguing with Jeff.

## SECOND INTERLUDE

The Society, in its constant search for God's Perfect World, came to a few conclusions over the centuries of its existence. One was that



God's Perfect World was very much not going to be just around the corner. Having visited thousands of worlds, none of which were perfect and most of which were just horrible, The Society realised fairly early on - well, not too early, say about 1875 - that God was not going to give them this one on a plate. One of the problems of searching an infinite variety of worlds was, basically, that it would take an infinite amount of time to visit them all. Of course, you might get lucky and find the one you were looking for straightaway - and the laws of chance said it was just as likely each time that someone would step through a portal and bingo, there would be a lot of people with flags and sashes and banners reading HEY! WELCOME TO GOD'S PERFECT WORLD DUDE! - but as time went on, the members of The Society were finding it less and less likely that the things with the flags and sashes and banners reading HEY! WELCOME TO GOD'S PERFECT WORLD DUDE! was going to happen any time soon.

As a result several people tried to invent ways of speeding the process up. Some of them just took lots of drugs that made them go faster and in theory meant they could visit more worlds in a day. This, however, combined with the stresses and pain (OWWW!) of movement between portals, just meant that the travellers went mad and were no use to anyone. In fact, a lot of them took so many drugs that they would just go to the shops, see an old man with a beard or something and then come

back convinced they had travelled to God's Perfect World. (Later they would feel sick and really stupid, but by that time they were in a dungeon.)

Some travellers tried to catalogue all the portals - this was in Victorian times, when cataloguing was seen as an end in itself - but this was a waste of time, as the portals didn't take well to being catalogued. The nature of portals, the cataloguers found, was that they appeared and disappeared all the time, like a bad father only without the cheap teddy bear and the faint hint of whisky on the breath. A portal that one day was just hanging around the basement of the Empire State Building would turn up the next day at the bottom of the Marianas Trench, no good to anyone but fish with enormous jaws and bulbous light fittings on their foreheads. Another portal might have spent a pleasant afternoon at the ABC Turnpike Lane, before nipping off to a traffic island near Magnetogorsk. There was no point cataloguing portals because they wouldn't stay put; it was like taking pictures of wriggling kittens, except useful.

However after a very long time, and the invention of computers, someone did find a way to guess where the portals were going to turn up, and this was the Random Life Generator, a name which didn't say much about what it did, in fact was rather misleading, but did sound good on the proposal, so it stuck. The Random Life Generator simply plotted

where portals might appear on the very complicated evidence of where they had been before, allocated a password and an operative to the portal, and then operative had to get down there before it vanished and guard it until a more senior operative turned up. This worked a lot better.

But even being able to predict where a portal would be - and posting a man posing as a dentist or whatever to guard it - did not speed up the process much, as no-one could work out far enough in advance where the portals were going to be next.

Then one day, someone had a brilliant idea. His name was Duncan. Unfortunately, Duncan told his idea to his best friend Jeff, and Jeff got all the credit. Jeff's (sorry, Duncan's) idea was a very simple one, and he took it to the Senior Executive of The Society. The Senior Executive of The Society was a group of fairly old men who met every ten years. This meant that most of them were dead by the time the next meeting came round, which was inconvenient, but they were the oldest members of The Society and therefore, it was supposed, the cream of the crop. This also meant that Jeff (or rather Duncan) was extremely lucky to have his, or Duncan's, idea when he, or Duncan, did, as if he (etc.) had had it a week later, he'd have had to wait ten years for another meeting.

Anyway. Jeff was ushered into the Star Chamber of the Senior Executive, where he found the full panoply of The Society arraigned, or as he later described it to a still somewhat sullen Duncan, a lot of old men

sitting round in bedsheets. One of the old men - who was The President, or the Chairman, or some such title that Jeff couldn't remember - stood up, slowly, and said:

“State your name and your business here.”

Jeff found that, despite being one of the most unpleasant people in the world, he was also quite nervous. He coughed and said:

“My name is Jeff and I have found a way to speed up the process of discovering God's Perfect World.”

There was a buzz of conversation in the room. Jeff felt quite excited. He felt a little less excited when the President, or whatever, said:

“I'm sorry, we are all quite old and none of us could hear what you just said. Would you care to repeat it?”

Jeff repeated it. This time a real buzz went round the room. Oh, and someone laughed, just to show they'd been here and done that before.

“Explain,” said the President or whatever.

“If there is an infinite amount of worlds -”, Jeff began, and was immediately interrupted.

“If?” said the President. “What do you mean, ‘if’? There's no if about it. This whole society is founded on the premise that there is an infinite amount of worlds.”

“I know,” said Jeff, “I was just setting out my stall.”

“I mean,” continued the President, “If there isn’t an infinite amount of worlds, we might as well all go home. If there’s only twenty or something, we’ve wasted our time somewhat, don’t you think?”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic,” said another old man. “You’re only the Secretary, not the President or something.”

“Yes, get on with it,” said another man. “I don’t want to have to come back here and talk about all this again in ten years.”

“Carry on,” said the Secretary.

“If there is an infinite amount of worlds,” said Jeff, as pointedly as possible, “then it follows that there must be an infinite amount of Societies. Societies like this one.”

“We didn’t think you meant building societies,” said the Secretary, and then shut up after a glance from the old man on his right.

“Not every world will have a Society,” said the other old man.

“And not every world that has a Society will have a Society exactly like ours.”

“No,” said Jeff. “But enough worlds will have enough Societies like ours. And if we find those Societies, we can persuade them that we too have a common aim. And if we all work together to find God’s Perfect World, we will surely find it much more quickly.”

All the old men looked at each other. Then the Secretary said, “This is an impressive idea. We will make a note of it, and debate it at the next meeting of the Senior Executive, in ten years time.”

Jeff felt deflated. He had hoped to sell the idea and make a lot of money. Then the old man who wasn’t the Secretary stood up and said:

“What a load of nonsense. This is an excellent idea and we shall implement it now. And this young man will be in charge of it.”

He turned to the old man to his right. “Issue an order today that this young man will lead the search for other Societies. And give him a nice office.”

And so Jeff had a new job, a nice office and a slow assistant (Duncan). He was now considered a rising star in The Society and one day would sit around with a lot of old men every ten years. But for now, things were not ideal. Two years had passed since Jeff (or rather... you know) had had his great idea, and in that time he had failed to find a single other world with its own Society. People began to whisper behind Jeff’s back, and point fingers. It was noticed that the rising star aspect of Jeff’s career had been replaced by a jumped-up bighead aspect.

“I’m in danger of losing my job here,” said Jeff to Duncan one day.

“What are you going to do?” said Duncan.

“What I always do.”

“Cry?”

“No. Cheat.”

People who enjoy lists and rules will be delighted to learn that The Society, being very old and very formal, had some lists and rules. Anyone who has ever been in a society - even a building society - will know that most lists and rules are designed to prevent interesting things happening, perhaps because these things tend to lead to mass death, or in the case of a building society, mass death and rising interest rates.

The Society had lots of lists. These were mostly to do with where things had been put, because, as The Society was very old, it had acquired a lot of things - suits of armour, some crowns, a few yachts, France - and it would have been easy to mislay these things (except, obviously, France) without making a lot of lists.

So there were lots of lists. However, despite being, as has been said, very old and formal, The Society did not have a lot of rules. Nobody really knew why this was; possibly it was because having a management body that only met once a decade meant that making rules was very time-consuming and by the time the rules were agreed on, no-one could remember what the rules were for. Possibly it was because The Society

was so old that most of the rules had been lost (and a few of the old members could sometimes be seen shaking their heads and saying things like, “In my day we were never allowed to put a hot mug on a polished wooden surface”, but things like that were probably not really rules). But most historians and people in pubs agreed that the reason The Society was a bit low on rules was because it only needed a few.

“A few” is, to be honest, exaggerating things slightly. In fact, The Society only had two rules. These rules, though few and (in one case) brief and easy to understand, were iron rules, set in stone. And literally, not just a mixed metaphor. All over The Society’s buildings and properties, all round the world, the two rules of The Society were carved out in white stone and filled in with black iron letters.

The second rule was the one that need not concern us here. This is because it was extremely long and dealt with smoking and where you could and could not do it on The Society’s premises; it was a recent addition, and a lot of people felt it went against the spirit of the Society, not because The Society was pro-smoking, just that it was a bit completely irrelevant and sort of looked stupid next to the first rule.

The first rule was far from stupid and was as non-irrelevant as could be. It was also quite short, and it said:



## **NO-ONE SHALL GO ANYWHERE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

It was pretty clear, as rules go (in fact, compared to the second rule, which went off at weird tangents about pipes and ashtrays, it was a masterpiece of clarity). It was not the subject of endless textbooks and heated debates at committee level, because its meaning was understood. Nobody even made sarcastic remarks about it, or said things like, “I’m just going for a slash - oh, do I need permission?”, because everybody knew it didn’t refer to minor stuff like that.

The first rule was known by all to mean that nobody was to go rooting round any other worlds without permission. The logic was simple; while The Society didn’t particularly care about messing with anybody else’s culture and was quite happy in principle to let people go round showing other people how to invent fire if they hadn’t invented it yet, they did feel rather strongly that a quest for God’s Perfect World might be slightly hindered by their operatives wandering around willy-nilly, meeting themselves and so forth. So they decided that anyone could go anywhere, provided they got permission first.

It was, as had been said a lot, a simple rule, and easy to follow. Easy, that is, if you weren’t the impatient type.

Jeff was the impatient type. He broke the pants off the rule.

The problem, for Jeff, was that his plan wasn't working very well. The idea that they would soon find lots of world with Societies in them was a logical one, but also an optimistic one.

"You could go your whole life without finding another Society," said Duncan.

"We'll just have to look harder," said Jeff. They were wandering around a world where the Dutch had, by a totally unexpected turn of events, won the Second World War.

"They're going to get annoyed with you soon," said Duncan, buying a big floppy pancake off a street vendor. "They're going to sack you. And me."

"I know," said Jeff.

"As soon as they find out we're visiting all these worlds for no reason, we've had it."

"They're not going to find out," said Jeff. "I've disabled the alarms."

"But," said Duncan, "But what about permission?"  
Jeff laughed, cynically.

"I don't do permission," he said.

"But what if we get caught?"

“We can’t get caught. I’ve disabled the - ”

“I’m not happy.”

“Then report me. Resign from your nice job and grass me up.”

Duncan said nothing.

“Exactly. Now shut up and give me some of that pancake. In fact, give me all of it.”

And so Jeff and Duncan continued to ramble about various worlds, looking for Societies that clearly weren’t going to turn up. And time went on, and they got increasingly desperate.

Then one day one of them made a silly mistake. Which was where all the trouble started.

Not that they were going to tell anyone. Oh no.

Sparks woke up. His mind cleared slowly, like a stadium after a concert attended entirely by people who wanted to linger and crumple their way through thousands of plastic beer glasses. He remembered his busy day in the cruel world and his failed attempt to find Alison, who hadn't existed in that world. He wondered where the Alison from his own world was and if she was sitting on a beach because that's what people did in Australia, or if she was on a sheep station whatever that was in the middle of an unpleasant arid desert (Sparks was right on the first guess).

He decided to get up. This was risky for him, because it was still only early in Sparks terms and Sparks had never been an early riser. When he had stayed over at Alison's, their early morning conversation would always go something like this:

ALISON

I'm off to work now, Sparks. There's bread in the cupboard and don't use the grill pan, you'll burn yourself to death.

SPARKS

Mnurgh.

So Sparks was always a little bit happier and more clear-headed when he had had a lot of sleep. And Sparks' idea of a lot of sleep was almost verging on the twenty-four hour-ish. Sparks had never achieved his ambition of sleeping a whole day and waking up on, say, Tuesday and thinking it was, say, Wednesday, but one day, he hoped, he would. As things stood, he was doing pretty well, often putting in long, arduous twelve hour stints of sleep, having entire weeks, in fact, when he would completely miss all the hours between one minute to midnight and noon (Sparks hated to be around when hours repeated themselves. He had often said to Alison, "Who wants to go through half past seven twice in a day?" Alison, who often felt that she had gone through half past seven about four times every day, remained silent).

Sparks opened his right eye, then his left, then closed them again. It was light in his bedroom. Then he tried to get up without opening his eyes. He made it as far as the chest of drawers before barking his shin and falling over. This forced him to open his eyes, which was a bad thing. Someone had been in his room. Oh, and ransacked it too. Chairs were overturned, CDs were scattered across the floor, his computer had been turned on and left that way and, most obvious of all - Sparks being one of those people who was always going to be prone to the "I've been burgled"/ "How can you tell?" scenario - his waste paper basket was on fire.

Sparks was properly awake now, almost. He leant against the wall, partly for support and partly because he thought he might be able to sleep standing up and forget all this. Instead, his hand slipped. He looked at his hand and saw it was smeared in red. Then he looked at the wall. Someone had written on it, ruining Sparks' picture of the London Underground with all the names changed:

Stop it Sparks

The writing was red and shiny, like fake blood. Sparks licked his hand speculatively to check. Then he started spitting a lot. It wasn't fake blood, after all.

Then his bed burst into flames.

"You didn't have to set fire to his waste paper basket," said Duncan, as he and Jeff made their way home (they were early risers and had done Sparks' place over while he slept).

"He's got to learn," said Jeff. "This is serious. Hence the fire and the pig's blood".

Duncan shuddered. "And I don't see why I'm the one who has to get the blood from the butchers every time."

"I told you," Jeff said. "I can't do it because I'm a vegetarian."

Just then a sheet of flame shot up from the upstairs window of the house behind them and knocked out the glass.

“Timer switch,” said Jeff.

Duncan looked up. He could see Sparks running about, trying to put out the flames on his burning bed with an equally burning duvet.

“You had a bacon sandwich in the cafe,” he said accusingly.

Sparks was a bit shaken up by the fire and the pig’s blood. A lesser man, in fact, would have been shaken up enough to take the advice on the wall and stop, but Sparks had a stubborn streak. This was partly why Alison had gone, and partly why he had never had a proper job, believing shirts and ties to be Satanic in some way (and ties to be a literal symbol of restriction and oppression), but it was also partly why Alison had liked him, and why he was able to continue working at a job that would have depressed one of those vicars who favour the tambourine and the chirpily-rewritten Bible story. Sparks was tenacious, often to the point of pointlessness, but if two extremely thin men were going to come into his flat, burn his waste paper basket and then his bed, and write things on his wall in blood, just to make him give up doing what he was doing, then Sparks wouldn’t.

However, the blood and the fire and the overturned chairs and the left-on computer did make him think a little, and instead of leaping out of the house and into action, Sparks decided to consider things a bit more fully. Not much more, he wasn't, he told himself, Professor Brainstein, but a little bit, just to bolster his own confidence.

Sparks went downstairs to the kitchen, which like the rest of the house was very unransacked. He made himself a cup of tea, put some milk in it, smelled the result and poured it down the sink. Then he got a glass of milk, drank half of it before he realised the cause of the tea smelling was probably the milk, and poured the milk down the sink. Finally, after some thought, he got a can of lager from under the sink, sat down at the kitchen table and made himself a list.

The list was the longest thing Sparks had ever written that didn't end with the words "please come back".

*How much danger am I in?* it began, and went on -

*What happens if I meet myself?*

*How can I avoid going to worlds where there's no Alison?*

*Why do I end up sometimes in the same place and sometimes in a different one?*

*What's this password thing and why sometimes do I need to talk to a dentist and other times not?*



*Why are all these worlds only a bit different? Why haven't I been to a world where it's just monsters or monkeys?*

And, after a few moments' thought -

*How long can I keep doing this before they get really annoyed and do something properly bad to me?*

Sparks put his pen down. He felt better already. He looked at his unopened lager put it back under the sink, and went into the bathroom, where he suddenly jumped in alarm. The bathroom had also not been touched by his intruders, but, as Sparks learned when he caught his reflection in the mirror, they had made him up like a clown.

"That's it," said Sparks, annoyed. He hated clowns.

Sparks got dressed and went to his office. He turned on his computer, went online and clicked onto the Random Life Generator, which he had bookmarked under NATIONAL TRUST HOLIDAYS to fool any intruders.

The usual threats and noises came up, skulls raced to the front of the screen like inquisitive skull fish, if there was such a thing which, Sparks supposed, somewhere there was, and then the mass of text appeared and it all resolved itself. The first phrase on the screen was:

TODAY'S WORD BALUSTRADE OPERATING ENTRANCE

WASHINGTON DC 476 SMITH AVENUE DUTY OFFICER M LIPS

Sparks briefly contemplated flying to America and saying “Balustrade” to a complete stranger, but he would never have got there in time and, besides, he could barely afford to go to the shops, let alone Washington DC. He waited for a few sites to pass, one of which was in Warrington, wondered if he would have to hitch to Warrington, and then the letters rearranged themselves:

TODAY'S WORD BALUSTRADE OPERATING ENTRANCE

LONDON 96 MARSH ROAD E4 DUTY OFFICER J PATTERSON

This was much better. Sparks wrote the address down and was on his way out when he had a thought. He went into the kitchen and made some crisp sandwiches for when he got there in case the food was toxic, or nasty. Then, because it might be cold, he put on some gloves and stuffed an old ski balaclava into his pocket. *Better prepared for every eventuality than not*, Sparks thought to himself as he walked up the road to the bus stop, eating his crisp sandwiches.

Sparks was, however, unprepared for 96 Marsh Road. It was a pub, the smallest pub Sparks had ever seen (and over the years, he had seen

many pubs, some tiny and some enormous). There was barely room for a door between its two tiny windows, while the pub sign, as it swung from side to side, was in danger of harming the occupants of 94 and 98 Marsh Road when they leaned out of their windows, which they probably did from time to time to refill their pint mugs from their beds. The pub was called The Grand Old Duke of York and was, Sparks supposed, about the same size as a duke.

Sparks pushed open the pub door and went in. The pub was, untardislike, as small inside as it was out. It consisted of a small counter and a small table with three chairs round it. These chairs were each occupied by an old man, and none of the old men were talking to each other, probably because they were blind drunk. In the corner of the room was a broken door marked GENTS. There did not appear to be a ladies' toilet; Sparks supposed that none had ever been needed.

Behind the bar, a young man with a T-shirt that said YOU ARE A TWAAAT was polishing the grime back into some pint mugs. Sparks approached him.

"Yuh?" said the young man, making no attempt to put the mugs down or even point either of his eyes at Sparks.

"Are you J Waterman?" said Sparks.

"Nuh," the young man snorted, apparently stunned and contemptuous that anyone could make such an elementary mistake. He

turned his back on Sparks and, before Sparks could vault the bar and rip the young man's head off his shoulders, shouted "Boss! Someone to see yuh!" into a hole that might once have been a dumb waiter. Then he turned back into his unpolishing.

Sparks stood at the bar, wondering what would happen now. Then a voice shouted back through the hole, "Send him up!" The young man winced as though he had been interrupted in some great mathematical task and jerked his head at Sparks to indicate a door beside the bar that said PRIVATE. Sparks opened the door and went upstairs. There was another door, which he opened, and behind it was J Waterman. And J Waterman, Sparks realised with slight horror, was also J Singh, giant dentist from the Edgware Road.

J Waterman was doing something with a crossword puzzle, and had not registered Sparks' presence yet. Sparks hurriedly pulled on his balaclava and, just in case, his gloves.

"Hello," he said in what he hoped was a disguised voice.

Waterman or Singh or, for all Sparks knew, Mister Kippers, BA, but he was bloody tall either way, looked at him.

"Why are you wearing that balaclava?" said J Waterman.

"I've got mouth scabs," said Sparks, hoping that his reply would be so unpleasant as to put J Waterman off.

“Let me have a look,” said Waterman, to Sparks’ horror, “I’m really a dentist.”

“They’re outside the mouth,” said Sparks.

“Oh, well, that wouldn’t be ethical,” said Waterman, disappointedly. “Did you want something?”

“Yes,” said Sparks. “Balustrade.”

“This way,” said Waterman, still sounding disappointed. He pulled a mat off the floor to reveal a big hole.

“Take off your clothes,” he said to Sparks.

“Pardon?” said Sparks, as one would.

“Take off your clothes,” said Waterman. “And put them in this bag.”

He held up a large plastic bin liner. Sparks thought Waterman looked a bit determined, so he stripped and put his clothes in the bag. Waterman looked happier, but not, Sparks was both relieved and disappointed to notice, in a kind of happy to see Sparks’ fine nude frame kind of way.

“Did you bring a towel?” Waterman said. Sparks shook his head and Waterman sighed. He gave Sparks a horrible towel that felt like cardboard, tied up the bag of clothes and indicated the big hole in the floor.

“Jump in,” he said.

Sparks jumped in.

Ow!

And so on.

Sparks, having left his own world by jumping through the floor, entered the other world at some speed and as he hurtled towards the ground, he wondered what might be below him, and if it might be rocks. By great good fortune, it wasn't rocks. It was water. In fact, it was a lake. Sparks sank like a stone wearing gloves and a balaclava, rose again with some furious paddling, and struggled to the surface. Trying to both breathe and tear the balaclava off filled up a few seconds of his life, but soon, with some furious water-treading, Sparks was able to see that he was fairly close to shore. Then he had an extremely worrying thought; as he had surfaced in the middle of a lake, he might have some difficulty finding his way. He looked around for a landmark. There wasn't one, obviously.

“Oh, bugger,” said Sparks. He had no idea what to do now.

However, he couldn't tread water for the rest of his life, so he decided to swim towards land and have a think.

As he swam, Sparks had a further horrible thought; what if he had arrived in some sort of prehistoric world where man had never evolved? If this was the case, he thought, not only would he be trapped without any human company, but also there was little chance of phoning Alison up and asking her out for a drink.

Land loomed close, and Sparks began worriedly climbing a small mudbank to the shore. He stood up, and peered optimistically back at the lake. To his astonishment and relief, he could see a slight haze over the part of the water where he had surfaced, like a localised fog, which resembled a misty window that someone had rubbed with a finger. Sparks tried to make a mental note of the haze's location, realised that he couldn't, and sat down instead to open the bag and dry himself with the insanely scratchy towel. He could only hope that the haze would remain visible when he returned.

Dressed again, Sparks stood again and had a look round. The lake was surrounded by unkempt grass, scrubby trees and the thorny-looking bush. Sparks was just wondering if he had arrived in a primitive world when he backed into something hard. It was a large metal pole with a

small metal sign attached to it. MUNICIPAL RESERVOIR the sign said.  
KEEP OUT.

Feeling perversely regretful now that he hadn't been plunged into a prehistoric hell where he would have spent all his time trying not to step on butterflies, Sparks could see that he was in fact in a part of North London that he recognised, just up from King's Cross Station in fact. He hid the bag and the abrasive towel under a bush and set off to find a phone box.

As he walked onto the Pentonville Road, another large sign caught his attention. This one was much bigger than the reservoir sign and had lots of bright colours and big boggly letters on it. What caught Sparks' eye mostly about the sign, though, was what it said:

ISLINGTON WELCOMES BEARS!

and there was a little cartoon of a very frightening-looking bear being welcomed by some people as though it was an old friend returned from a long sabbatical teaching media studies in Italy, rather than an enormous deadly lump of teeth and muscle that would stun you with its bear breath and then rip your lungs out before getting bored and going to sniff some beehives.

Sparks thought this was a bit strange, and wondered why Islington, or anyone other than a ringmaster or a zookeeper, would welcome bears



anyway, and why, if it came to it, Islington was welcoming any bears in the first place. And then, ten seconds later, in what Sparks thought was an uncanny coincidence but obviously if he'd thought about it wasn't, there was a lot of screaming from the car park of a large nearby hotel, and a very large brown bear came roaring out with murder in its eyes and blood and cloth on its claws.

Then Sparks noticed two things. One, nobody was attempting to restrain or even shoot the bear and two, it was coming straight at a woman standing in the car park. The woman appeared to be, and in fact was, Alison.

## **PART TWO: ALISON**

Alison had spent most of the morning standing in line in a supermarket. She felt terrible. The line wasn't moving. It wasn't ever going to move. Everyone in front of Alison appeared to have warehouses of food, forests of vegetables and estates of cans. Alison had a basket with a can of Diet Coke and a banana in it. The man at the front was trying to pay with a credit card that the checkout girl had never seen before. She called the manager. He had never seen one before either.

“Have you got any money?” the manager asked.

“Yes,” said the man. “But I want to pay with this card.”

The line groaned. People sagged. Alison's basket got heavier. Alison moved her basket to a different hand. It made no difference. The man at the front with the exceptional credit card was holding his ground. A woman in front of Alison swore briefly and walked away, leaving her heaping trolley in front of Alison. She pushed it away and it rolled off into a large man's backside, denting it briefly. The large man glared at Alison. She moved forward.

Now she could see the till more clearly. It was covered in meat products and sugary drink bottles. Next to the checkout girl was some sort of electronic display. It ought to have been flashing up price totals

and whirring with the sheer joy of capitalism. It wasn't. Instead, a message in spindly electronic letters was idling across it.

For want of something to do, and not having a machine gun, Alison peered at the message.

**goodbye hope**, it said. It scrolled off and said **goodbye hope again**.

Alison couldn't believe it. She was also deeply unsettled. Supermarket slogans were normally more optimistic than this. They said things like COME BACK SOON! Or BEARS ARE MAGIC! But there it was, again and again. goodbye hope. Alison could take it no longer. She dropped her basket and walked quickly out of the supermarket.

*It's an electronic display, she thought, you shouldn't take these things personally.* But she did.

Alison set off for home. It was a sunny day. Somewhere in the world, fierce men with moustaches were being very nice to bears. And, somewhere else in the world, they weren't. Life was like that. She heard a noise, and turned. Behind her was the source of the noise. Behind her was a bear.

A snarling, stinking heap of fur and claws will tend to make an impression on anyone standing near to it. Alison turned and saw the bear

and her expression melted from fear to sheer terror to complete horrified understanding that she was about to die.

While Alison was experiencing all the bad emotions in a short space of time, Sparks was searching for a weapon. Improbably, he found one in the form of a large waste paper bin. Equally improbably, when he threw it at the bear, it hit it in the head, knocking the bear sideways and covering it in MacDonald's boxes and half-eaten Thai green chicken wraps (it was a nice part of Islington). The bear stopped being about to kill Alison and stood there for a second, looking stupid, even for a bear. Then it discovered that it was covered in food and staggered off to lick itself.

Alison sat down on a nearby low wall and Sparks found he was feeling very shaky. He had never attacked a bear before, even while drunk at the zoo. He was also still a bit shocked to find Alison - or at least a parallel Alison or a version of Alison or something - so easily. He wondered if she was surprised to see him. Perhaps in this world he was dead

"You're dead," said a voice next to him.

"What?" said Sparks.

"You're dead, mate," said the voice, which belonged to a man in a red t-shirt.

“Did you see what he just did?” said a woman to another woman.

The other woman nodded.

“You can’t do that,” said the man.

“He must be foreign,” said the woman. “They do that there.”

“Yes,” said her friend, a late entrant to this, and possibly any other, conversation. “Foreign.”

“In this country,” said the man, speaking slowly and loudly, “We don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?” said Sparks. “Stop bears attacking people?”

“He’s not foreign,” said the woman.

They thought about this for a moment.

“Let’s kill him,” said the other woman, and to Sparks’ further astonishment the two women and the man began to close round him, clearly quite intent on doing him lots of harm.

He was about to make some sort of complaint about this - “Don’t kill me”, that sort of thing - when Alison stood up.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I know him, I think.”

“What do you mean, you think?” said the man, clearly keen to get on with killing Sparks. “You either know him or you don’t.”

“Let’s kill him,” said the other woman again. She was not an indecisive woman.

“He’s been ill,” said Alison.

“No excuse,” said the man, but disappointedly, as though he was acknowledging that it wasn’t OK to kill the unwell, no matter how many bears they had attacked.

“I’ll take him to the police and sort this out,” said Alison.

“I’m not going to the police,” said Sparks.

Alison gave him a look which he found very familiar.

“Oh yes I am,” said Sparks.

They walked down the street together and then Alison turned left, sharply, into an alleyway and, after he had shown no signs of following, yanked Sparks in with her. Then she yanked him again, this time into a small yard full of huge metal bins on wheels.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she said.

“Pardon?” said Sparks, as was often his inclination.

Alison said it again, but this time didn’t wait for a reply.

“Is this one of your look-at-me mind game things, Sparks?” she said, so at least Sparks knew that he wasn’t the only Sparks here, in fact was clearly pretty similar to the other Sparks, as the other Alison had also been prone to asking him questions containing phrases like ‘look-at-me mind game things’.

A hundred - well, five - thoughts raced through Sparks' brain as though they might win something. Clearly, this was a weird place, especially re bears. Clearly, Alison was annoyed with him. Equally clearly, she was often annoyed with the other Sparks who, equally equally clearly, she thought he was. The alley thing probably meant she wasn't really taking him to the police station, unless it was an extremely small police station in the bins. But the annoyed thing suggested to Sparks that he would have to explain himself, and in a way that wouldn't enrage Alison, such as, for example, the actual truth.

Sparks thought fast. He would tell her that he had been pretending to be a foreigner who didn't know local customs. Alison and he had once spent a day doing this, putting on foreign accents and booking hotel rooms in the West End and then having sex, foreignly, so it wasn't such a bizarre assertion.

He was about to assert it when Alison said, "And don't tell me you were pretending to be a foreigner, Sparks. You weren't doing the accent."

Sparks stopped thinking for a moment, literally, like a stalled car. His brain rotated uselessly in its skull. Then he said:

"I think I've got that flu."

"What flu?" said Alison. "The one where you go mental and act like a complete idiot?"

“Yes,” said Sparks, immediately realising Alison was being sarcastic. “All right, no. But I do have flu and it’s really doing my head in. I got up this morning and I didn’t know where I was.”

“You were at my flat,” said Alison, her eyes changing shape in a dangerous way, as though the irises and the pupils were regrouping to throw tiny eye rockets at Sparks. “We had sex and you said it was brilliant and then you asked me to marry you.”

“Oh hell,” said Sparks, feeling immensely guilty. Then he realised that in fact that morning he hadn’t had sex and proposed to Alison; he had been in bed in a parallel universe, dreaming he had retractable legs. But this logic wouldn’t work on Alison, even if she wasn’t, which she now was, very angry.

Then her expression changed completely and abruptly from anger to bafflement. It changed so completely that Sparks thought it looked like someone had stuck a slide of a person looking baffled into a series of holiday slides of people looking angry.

“What’s wrong?” said Sparks.

Alison wasn’t listening. She gave every impression of concentrating hard on looking baffled.

“You’re not Sparks,” she said.

Sparks felt an electric wave go up his spine and mess with the hairs on his neck.



“Yes I am,” he said, which was pretty much the truth. In fact, it was the truth. And also, it wasn’t.

“You look different,” said Alison. She looked scared, Sparks thought. and wondered once more at the human capacity to change emotions like a chameleon on a gay flag. *One of those rainbow ones*, Sparks explained to himself, then realised he was going into a reverie and Alison was crying, in a scared way.

“What’s going on?” said Alison. “I mean, you are Sparks, I can see that, no-one would be as daft as you, but - ”

“Thanks,” said Sparks, before realised that mild sarcasm never helps with crying, in fact may not even be noticed.

“But also you’re not Sparks. Which doesn’t make sense.”

Sparks inhaled powerfully. Then he looked around, in case anyone had written the solution to his problems on some nearby walls. Then he spoke.

“I have an explanation. It’s stupid, but it’s true.”

Alison sniffed a bit and wiped a tear off her cheek. He really was scaring her, Sparks realised.

“OK,” she said. “That sounded like the sort of thing Sparks would say if he was being sincere. Um - where is he, by the way? You haven’t killed him or occupied his body or... I’m going to stop talking now.”

“I don’t know where he is,” said Sparks, “I expect knowing him, you know what I mean, knowing me, anyway, I expect he’s still in your flat, looking for bacon. Does he like bacon or do all the bears get it here for free?”

“Bears don’t eat bacon,” said Alison. “They eat - ”

“Anyway,” said Sparks, anxious to move on. “We need to talk about the bears thing but I suspect me being Sparks is more of a priority for you.”

“Have you been on a training course of some kind?” said Alison. “Because you’re talking like you have.”

“Anyway,” said Sparks again, and told Alison everything. It took ages, and he missed out the giant dentist the first time, so he had to start again. When he finally finished, Alison looked like she was wearing all her emotions at once, just to see if she could. Then she said:

“Bloody hell, Sparks. You couldn’t make that up.”

“I know,” said Sparks, “It’s amazing.”

“No, I meant *you* couldn’t make it up,” said Alison. “That’s how I know you’re not lying, because you’re not that... you don’t have that kind of... imagination.”

“I see,” said Sparks, like a detective’s assistant, because he didn’t see at all. But he was glad that Alison believed him.

“Also,” said Alison, “Normally when you try and explain things, if there’s too many words, I can see you thinking of them, and putting the sentence together.”

“I see,” said Sparks, this time more like a cold assassin who has been corrected and will never forget the slight.

“Sometimes it’s like being at an airport and watching the destinations and the gate click round and you know it’s going to say gate four but you still have to wait - ”

“I see. I really see,” said Sparks, this time not like a detective or a cold assassin but a man who just felt stupid.

“Sorry, Sparks,” said Alison. “I’m just a bit confused.”

Sparks, who nevertheless wished that Alison had actually said, “I didn’t mean a word of it,” said, “It’s OK, I’m a bit confused myself. Um... so tell me about the bears then.”

Alison looked puzzled. “What about them?” she said. “I mean, apart from the fact that they’re lovely and nice and look after people, there’s nothing to say.”

“That one wasn’t lovely and nice. He wasn’t going to look after you,” said Sparks. “He was going to bite your head off. That isn’t considerate, not in most cultures. I mean, maybe he thought you had a spot on your neck and the best way to get rid of it was to sever your head from your body, but that’s not - .”

“Don’t be sarcastic about the bears,” said Alison. “You don’t understand.”

“Sorry,” said Sparks. “But I do think you’re being defensive.”

“No I’m not.”

“All right, you’re not, but the last time I remember you talking in this sort of way was about Rob Lester who you said was an all right bloke when everyone knew he two-timed you.”

“God,” said Alison with some meaning. “How depressing. I even went out with Rob Lester in a different universe.”

“At least one,” said Sparks, who rarely knew when to let things drop.

“But I split up with you.”

“Is that meant to be like compensation? You went out with Rob Lester but you split up with me? It evens out sort of thing? Swings and roundabouts like?”

“No,” said Alison. “But much more of the old Sparks aggrieved self-pity and it will be. I was just wondering... I mean, here, in this world...”

“The one with the bears,” said Sparks, helpfully.

“Leave off the bears for a minute,” said Alison. “I was wondering why I split up with you in your world.”

“I was just wondering why you stayed with me in this one,” said Sparks.

“I was thinking about dumping you a year or so ago,” said Alison.  
“But then there was the fight. I was amazed.”

“Fight?” said Sparks. “What fight? Did we fight?”

“No,” said Alison. “You and some men fought. It was in the paper.”

“Were bears involved?”

Alison looked sharply at Sparks.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You were in a shop when some men, there were two of them, started laying into the woman behind the counter, all Paki this and Paki that - ”

“I remember that,” said Sparks. “It was really embarrassing. I always wish I’d said something.”

“But you did,” said Alison. “You said, I don’t think you should be talking to people like that - ”

“Was I drunk?” said Sparks.

“No, it was too early. Anyway, they objected to you intervening and there was a fight. Turned out afterwards one of them had been in jail on GBH charges - ”

“And I beat them up?”

“No... they beat you up. But it was all on camera, and they got done. And that’s why it was in the paper. The other one, the not GBH one, he was wanted for some proper crime.”

“Beating me up is a proper crime!”

“Yes, that’s what you said at the time. But the point is, I was thinking of dumping you, but that whole thing made me think... and when you came out of the hospital a month later - ”

“A month?”

“Yes. My Sparks has, I can see it now, a slightly different shaped jaw.

When you came out of the hospital, you were different. Like less - ”

“Casual? Flippant? Devil-may-care?”

“Of a prat, I was going to say. Less of a prat.”

“So all I had to do to stay with you was get beaten up?”

“Not quite... I suppose you had to be there. Literally. You know, Sparks, you’re a bit of a boy really. Which is what I like about you but also it drives me mad. At least, it used to. I think you, or, anyway, him, anyway, Sparks is different.”

“Not a boy?”

“Not so much a boy.”

“I see,” said Sparks, in the manner of a duchess who has just been told by a social inferior that he will not be attending luncheon. Sparks really could say “I see” in a lot of different ways.

“I’d better be getting back,” said Sparks. “Thanks for everything.”

“Don’t get huffy,” said Alison. “Really, you’re a nice person and I’m sure there’s someone out there for you.”

“Ta,” said Sparks.

“It’s not me,” said Alison. “You know, Sparks, maybe it’s not her either. I mean, maybe it’s not her as in it’s you as in you’re the problem. You know people who leave town to get away from their problems and when they get to the new town, they find they’ve brought their problems with them? Perhaps that’s what you’re doing.”

“We’ll see,” said Sparks, just to avoid saying “I see” again.

“And don’t worry about the bears,” said Alison. “I expect in your world, it must sound odd letting huge animals roam free, but in our culture they’re very important.”

“Sacred cows,” said Sparks. “Literally, I suppose.”

“What?” said Alison. “Is that an expression?”

Sparks told her what a sacred cow was. For the first time that day, Alison laughed.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “I mean, what would the bears eat?”

Alison walked Sparks back to the reservoir. He pointed out the haze of the portal to her and she was suitably amazed.

“Want to come and see some worlds?” said Sparks.

Alison thought about it.

“No,” she said. “Life’s weird enough as it is. Besides, I don’t think I could stand the way you people treat your bears.”

They embraced.

“Don’t take it too hard, what I said,” said Alison. “Even though it was true and I meant it.”

She kissed him. Sparks felt a small tear of nostalgia for being kissed by the other Alison and kissed her back.

“Goodbye,” he said, “And thanks. Now I have to take my clothes off and swim out to the middle of the reservoir.”

“That sounds like Sparks,” said Alison. “I shall avert my gaze.”

Sparks swam out to the shimmering portal. He turned and waved to a distant Alison (who had no way averted her gaze, in case Sparks had some interesting alternative tattoos, or just a nice bottom) and plunged down under the water.

Then he came back.



“Bloody hell, Sparks,” said Alison. “You have no idea how to make an exit.”

“Sorry,” said Sparks, dripping a lot. “It’s just I’ve had a shit hot idea. Can you get me into your bloke’s office?”

“What?” said Alison. “I mean... what? I mean, why, I suppose. I thought you had to go and find some more portals or something, not stay here and carry on freaking me out.”

“That’s it, though,” said Sparks. “Not the freaking you out part, the portals part. Can you get me into the office?”

Alison perched a hand on her hip and looked askance at the sky, as though it had really annoyed her by not going away when she had already said goodbye to it.

“Bloody hell, Sparks,” she said again.

Sparks could hear voices in the next room. One of them was freaking him out quite substantially. It was his own.

In the next room, Alison was persuading the other Sparks to come out and have a curry with her. The other Sparks was suspicious, and again

Sparks felt freaked out, because he kept thinking what the other Sparks was thinking, and then a second later hearing the other Sparks say it.

“I just fancy a curry, that’s all,” Alison said unconvincingly, through the thin wall.

*Alison hates curry, thought Sparks. She says it makes her spotty and she farts.*

“You hate curry,” said the other Sparks. “You told me it makes you spotty and you - ”

“Well, I just fancy it,” said Alison, a bit sharply.

*He’s going to think she’s pregnant,* said Sparks.

“Are you OK?” said the voice of the other Sparks, suddenly concerned, and Sparks had to admit, he was impressed at the other him’s near tact.

“I’m not pregnant!” said Alison. “I nearly got eaten by a bear, OK, and I feel a bit stressed, and I don’t think it’s fair of you to give me... to just...”

Alison sounded genuinely upset, and Sparks realised that she had the other Sparks beat. A direct, confusing emotional appeal always worked on him.

And so it was. Within seconds, after some vaguely romantic noises that Sparks tried to block out (fingers, ears, wax), the outside door slammed shut and Sparks was alone.

Sparks crept into the office. It was the same as his office, with the same wall of 1970s T-shirt designs, only missing a T-shirt that said DO BEARS CRAP IN THE VATICAN, presumably because in this world, they did, and anywhere else they wanted to as well. He leaned forward and turned on the other Sparks' computer, which was reassuringly identical to his own.

He clicked the mouse. The screen billowed up the familiar gusts of words and numbers, only this time in a typeface that Sparks, had he been in the least homophobic (and, really, even if he hadn't) could only describe as "gay-faced".

In gay-faced type, the screen read:

TODAY'S WORD MANATEE OPERATING ENTRANCE KIEV 75  
AVENUE KRASNY DUTY R K D KUZNETSOV

The screen emptied and then filled up again.

TODAY'S WORD MANATEE OPERATING ENTRANCE LONDON  
TOYO'S 246 REGENT STREET DUTY MRS REEVES

Regent Street was a short tube journey away. Sparks looked at the screen in the hope of seeing a nearer address which wouldn't involved meeting anything with claws or teeth, but there wasn't one. He shut down the computer, after changing the typeface to annoy his other self, and sneaked out the front door.

By now it was evening, and while this might prevent anyone recognising Sparks as the man who didn't let bears eat people, it did mean that lurching fanged you-know-whats might come charging at him from nearby Londises and betting shops. Sparks hurried to the tube station and asked the woman at the ticker counter for a single to Piccadilly Circus. Then he changed his mind, and asked for a return, as he was probably coming back to the same part of town later, only in a different world. Sparks felt proud of himself for this trans-dimensional piece of economy.

Regent Street was quiet. A large sign outside the tube station that read LONDON'S WEST END WELCOMES FEROCIOUS, WISE BEARS might, Sparks felt, have held a clue to this. Instead of the trampling humps of tourists and late night shoppers eager to get some tartan cashmere before the shops closed, there were some nervous-looking policemen and a few tramps, most of whom were worryingly

single-limbed, and some of whom held placards saying BLESSED BY CONTACT WITH A WONDERFUL BEAR! PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY.

Sparks made it to 246 Regent Street quite speedily. He was a bit surprised to see that it was a large department store; after a few seconds, he realised that this made a lot of sense, as Regent Street was generally well-known for being full of large department stores rather than tiny wooden huts or pretty thatched cottages. The store at 246 Regent Street was called Toyo's, and it was, logically enough, a toy store.

Sparks was happy about this. He liked toy stores, especially big ones where there were lots of free things to do, and this one was enormous. As he looked for the duty person who was (he consulted his tube ticket note) Mrs Reeves, he could take time to have a go on the train set, test out some radio-controlled tanks and, most interesting of all, make some battery-powered puppies yelp and do back flips.

Sparks made his way through the store, towards the back where some tanks might be. Instead, he found himself in his least favourite place in the world, the stuffed toy section. On shelf after shelf, sitting with their useless stumpy legs sticking out and their pawless arms reaching forward, were tens of plush cats, fake fur doggies and the odd bloated clothly lion. The whole thing was insufferable, and Sparks headed for the lift at speed.

He was stopped by the sight of an enormous bear. It wasn't a real bear, it just looked like one. It stood next to a sign that said THIS WAY TO THE TEDDY BEARS. The sign did not look friendly; to Sparks, it was worded in such a way as to not in any way say, PLEASE COME AND LOOK AT SOME CUTE BEARS, IT REALLY MIGHT BE FUN! or OOH BEARS! HOW LOVELY! Sparks found himself compelled to go and look at the teddy bears, even though he hated teddy bears, as well as Winnie The Pooh and pretty much anything to do with the toy ursine world.

The teddy bear section was not what he had expected. There were bears of all sizes, bears of several colours, and bears available in a variety of fabrics; but that was all the resemblance they bore to normal teddy bears. These bears, frankly, put the fear of God into Sparks. The tiniest of them looked like they were about ready to run up Sparks' back passage and chew through his lungs; the largest just looked like they fancied killing everything in the world.

Sparks suddenly felt amazingly keen to leave this world. He walked out, breathing hard, and approached a sales assistant.

"Do you want to buy a bear?" said the assistant.

"No," said Sparks. "I want to see Mrs Reeves."

“Oh,” said the assistant, in a sort of “Oh, you must be the other weirdo we always thought would come round and want to see Mrs Reeves” way. “She’s on the third floor, in tanks.”

Sparks felt suddenly relieved, and took the lift.

On the third floor, there were lots of reassuring tanks, all trundling about, bumping into other tanks and knocking over helpless green soldiers. Operating about three of them at the same time was a middle-aged woman in a white lab coat. She looked as happy as anyone Sparks had ever seen.

“Are you Mrs Reeves?” he said, hopefully.

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs Reeves. “Would you like to play with the tanks?”

Sparks looked at the tanks for a long time. He sighed a tiny sigh of quiet air and said, “The word of the day is Manatee.”

Mrs Reeves gave Sparks an odd look and said, “It’s in the storeroom.” She put down her tank remote control and stared at Sparks quite hard. “You don’t look like one of them,” she said. “You’re not thin enough.”

“I can explain,” said Sparks, a bit hopelessly.

“No you can’t,” said Mrs Reeves. “And I don’t want to know.  
Here, before you head off there, have a go on this tank. It’s smashing.”

And Sparks and Mrs Reeves had a go on the tanks.

WUH!

URH!

OWF!

Sparks woke up as his feet hit the floor and immediately started staggering around, half-blind and with his ears whirring. After a minute the whirring and the half-blindness stopped, and were replaced with the desire to vomit and, at the same time, the desire to blunder clumsily into the door post. Sparks fought the desire to vomit successfully, but found himself unable to combat the desire to blunder clumsily into the door post. He crashed into the door, fell over, and was sick on his T-shirt. Then he fell asleep.



While he was asleep, Sparks had a very exciting dream. It didn't make much sense to him, but this wasn't too surprising; Sparks had a powerful capacity for being confused by even the simplest dreams. He had once woken Alison in the middle of the night and said, "Alison, I've had a really weird dream."

"What?" said Alison (or, more accurately, "Wobg?").

"I dreamt I was driving a car and I couldn't control it and it went over a cliff... it was really weird and I don't know what it was about," said Sparks.

"Sparks, you've got your driving test tomorrow," said Alison, and went back to sleep.

"So?" said Sparks.

Sparks' new dream was much less coherent than his driving dream (which, by the way, Sparks had stopped having since he failed his test, which was a relief in some ways). Sparks' new dream was set in a large white hall with extraordinarily high ceilings. *I'm glad I don't have to paint those ceilings,* thought Sparks as he walked across the large white hall with the loud clup-clup of feet that people always have in these rooms. Then he came to a door with a sign on it. OPEN ME, said the door. Sparks stared at it, and the sign changed to read IT'S NOT A TRICK.

Sparks opened the door, and walked into a very small room, full of dolls. Even Sparks, whose knowledge of dreams was limited, groaned inwardly. He didn't know what dolls meant in a dream, but he knew they were really naff. These dolls were all Victorian in style, the creepy porcelain kind with old man's wispy hair and big eyes that stared right through Sparks. They were pretty much no fun kind of dolls. After a second, Sparks noticed that they all looked like Alison. This made sense; Alison was a bit doll-like in some respects, in that she was attractive and had blonde hair, although in others, like attitude, and height, she wasn't.

Sparks reached out for one of the Alison dolls. It stepped backwards. Sparks, a bit shaken, tried again with the doll next to it, but that one moved too. Sparks reached in further after the second Alison doll, but it just moved back more. Sparks reached in some more, and then he was on the shelf, chasing the dolls back and back. The dolls just got further and further away, and Sparks gave up. He turned around to retrace his steps, and saw that everything was black and he was lost.

Sparks woke up with a jolt.

"Blimey," he said out loud. "Even I understood that one."

Sparks looked around the room. It was very similar to his own room, which was a good sign. He eased open the door and went outside.

It was early evening and the streets looked quite normal. There were even a few people Sparks knew, in the sense that they were tramps and mad people and newsagents he had seen before, but - not being a tramp or a mad person or a newsagent himself - had never spoken to. And there were no bears. This was clearly a sensible world. Sparks bought a paper, noticed the headlines were about some pop star he had heard of marrying some sportsman he had also heard of, checked the picture to see if they had five tongues or if any members of an oddly Nazi-like world government had attended the wedding, and walked on, feeling fairly relieved.

He went into a pub and ordered a drink. The barman served him immediately and didn't give him a pint of lizard's eyes or anything like that; nor did Sparks receive a handle of human teeth as change. Sparks drank his beer and pondered his next move. *I could just go and see where Alison lives*, he thought, then thought again. *What if, as seems likely, she is going out with me in this world, like in the other one? It might save me a bit of time if I checked first.*

Sparks finished his drink and left. He was going to go round to his flat and see if he was going out with Alison.

After an uneventful, if slightly odorous, bus journey, Sparks finished up outside his flat. He was pleased to see that his key fitted and

somewhat surprised to see that the mail on the doormat was pretty much near identical to the mail on his own doormat; and that this other Sparks was level-pegging with him in the red bill stakes.

Sparks rang the doorbell. There was no answer. He allowed a minute or three for hangovers or mental confusion, and rang again. After a similar non-answer, Sparks let himself in to the flat. It was, again, alarmingly like his own flat, so much so that there was even the same crumpled empty beer can acting as a really inept bookmark in the same paperback he had been reading for the last six months but (he checked) had never been able to get past the part where the two men who both owned a second hand record shop had a fight in the road over the secretary.

Sparks creaked open his bedroom door, as he was beginning to think of it, and was pleased to see that his bed was rumpled and empty (but less pleased to see that the Spiderman sheets and the Incredible Hulk pillow case were exactly as faded as his own). He sat down by the bed. A thought had occurred to him.

*Oh bugger, was the thought, I've come back to my own -*

The thought was interrupted by the huge dull thud of something huge and dull thudding into the back of Sparks' skull. For the second time in, what?, half an hour - *and, while we're at it*, Sparks thought, *about the fifth time this year*, Sparks lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sparks woke up, lying on the bed. Everything was dark.

“Are we going to do him?” said a voice. The voice sounded unenthusiastic.

“No,” said a keener voice. “Not now, anyway. We need him.”

“What for?” said the other voice.

“Things,” said the second voice.

“What things?” said the first voice. “You can’t just tell me ‘things’. I might have to prepare stuff.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“I don’t know... stuff.”

“Well, that’s a bit vague, isn’t it? ‘Stuff’. That’s as vague as ‘things’. More vague. At least I know what I mean by things but you don’t know what you mean by stuff.”

“Hello, Jeff,” said Sparks, opening his eyes. “Hello, Duncan.”

“Why didn’t you blindfold him?” said Jeff, annoyed.

“Why didn’t you?” said Duncan.

Sparks looked at Duncan and Jeff. They looked tired. Jeff in particular looked awful, and had bits of crusty yellow sleep in his thin eyes.

“You look thinner than ever,” Sparks said, and got to his feet.

“I suppose I should have tied him up as well, should I?” said Duncan.

“What are you doing here?” said Sparks. “Have you followed me? Are you allowed to do that? Go round lots of other worlds following people?”

Duncan was about to speak when Jeff interrupted. “We haven’t been to lots of other worlds,” he said, smugly. “This is - ”

Sparks groaned a bit. “This is my world, isn’t it?” he said. “I thought it looked familiar.”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Jeff. “To tell you it doesn’t work. You can’t keep using the portals. Can you, Duncan?”

“No,” said Duncan. “You can’t keep using the portals. Because...”

“Because there’s a loop effect,” said Jeff. “You keep using them, you loop back. Back to where you were. Back to here. You’re stuck here now.”

Sparks looked at Duncan.

“How am I stuck here?” he said.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Jeff, before Duncan could speak. “You’re stuck, that’s all. End of stupid search for whatever it is you’re searching for. Back home and stuck here.”

Sparks got off the bed.

“That’s not true,” he said, more hopefully than anything else. “It can’t be.”

“But it is,” said Jeff. “Look around you. Look outside. You’ve come back home.”

Jeff stood up. Duncan stood up.

“Enjoy it,” said Jeff, and they left.

Sparks sat on the edge of the bed. He didn’t hold his head in his hands, because people don’t do that. He didn’t cry, because he couldn’t. He just sat there and felt pointless.

*All this, he thought. I thought all this meant I had a chance. I thought I could change my life and make everything right. But I can’t. It’s all useless and there’s no reason to it. It’s all random. And I’m stuck.*

Sparks, although for once nowhere near unconsciousness, lay back down on the bed and closed his eyes.

Most people have different mechanisms for dealing with defeat and disillusion. Some people find the best thing to do is to kill themselves. While solving aspects of the problem - immediate reduction in pain, complete severing of any feelings of defeat (or anything), and so on - this approach raises more issues than it solves. If, for example, there is a hell,

that's where they're going, and arguably it's not a good idea to top yourself because you're mightily hacked off, as you might find yourself spending eternity being boiled in a big crater full of unnecessarily hot carbolic acid while people you dislike stand around nearby clearly just about to get off with your favourite lady film star.

A better option is to bring it up with someone in authority. The problem here is that there is, in life, no-one in authority. Praying has limited effect, as God, if he exists, is in some ways like a DJ, in that He only plays the requests he likes.

So most people go for the third option; crawling into bed, staying there, and feeling deeply sorry for yourself. This may not solve any problems, but it does enable people to eat a lot of pizzas, watch all the bad TV in the world, and hide under the duvet. Sparks, perhaps inevitably, took the third option. He took it from 6.30 pm that evening until 12.10 the next afternoon, when he had to go to the toilet, and thereafter for the next two days, the odd cold pizza break excepted. He felt utterly disillusioned with life, cast down, and so glum that even watching the horrible sunny lives of people in lunchtime soap operas made him feel envious and want to be a surfing waiter.

*I must be depressed, Sparks thought, I've never wanted to be a surfing waiter before.*



This thought made him so depressed - and there is nothing worse than becoming depressed about the idea of being depressed - that he decided to go outside in his pyjama bottoms and look unhappy for a minute. (Actually, this was not the actual thought Sparks had, more what would be the physical manifestation; Sparks' intended plan was to see if he could start smoking again, as smoking was cheap and not too labour-intensive, and might cheer him up inbetween the bouts of cancer guilt).

Sparks got up, put on some pyjama bottoms, and went downstairs. He picked the keys and some change off the kitchen table and was about to go outside when he heard voices outside. Sparks froze; the voices were talking about him.

“Is he in there?”

“I saw ‘im!”

“But he’s can’t be. He’s dead.”

“I saw ‘im! He’s back from the dead to kill us all.”

“People don’t come back from the dead, ma’am. Not even serial killers.”

“I don’t care. I seen ‘im. Mad Dog Face Eater Sparks. ‘E’s in there.”

“Sigh. OK, Sergeant, guns at the ready... let’s kick down the door.”

Sparks froze even more. Jeff and Duncan had lied to him. He wasn't in his own world at all. They had only told him that to make him stick around. He was in a world where he was - or had been, since these people thought he ought to be dead - a serial killer. One with a long, but unappealing, nickname, too.

Sparks turned and headed for the back door, just as the back door exploded. Several policemen in body armour ran into the kitchen.

"I can explain - " said Sparks, inefficiently, as the policemen knocked him to the ground and handcuffed him, painfully.

Sparks, although in pain, was fully aware of the passage of time as the police took him away. Thus he was able to really feel the plastic cords of the handcuffs digging into his wrists like hungry mouths. He was keenly sensate of his shoulders being wrenched up by the two large police officers as they dragged him along. And he was completely and unambiguously aware of the large crowd of staring people who looked at him with a raw mixture of hatred and interest as he was trundled at speed toward the police van.

There was something odd about the van, but Sparks was too busy being trundled at speed and avoiding hate-filled stares to take it in. The van itself took an interest in the proceedings when it hit Sparks in the

face. Then its doors were opened and the policemen threw him into the back, causing Sparks to hit some kind of metal bench quite hard with most of his jaw. Sparks fell to the ground and decided he fancied writhing in agony for a bit. Then his writhing, if not his agony, was curtailed when someone put their foot on his chest.

“Ow,” said Sparks.

“Shut up, Sparks,” said the tired voice, and Sparks twisted his head round to see that he was being addressed by a very long-looking woman with a great big nose. The woman took her foot off Sparks’ chest and leaned down to breathe through epic nostrils at him.

“Steady, ma’am,” said one of the policeman.

“Don’t worry,” said the woman. “He won’t hurt me.”

“No,” said Sparks, disappointed to find out that he was indeed clearly a bad person in this place. “Besides, I can’t move and I’m in quite a lot of pain.”

“Boo hoo,” said the woman. “Wish you’d thought of that before killing all those people.”

This was the kind of line Sparks really hated. It always made him want to say something like, “You’re right. I’d never have done it if I’d thought someone might try and arrest me.” But he didn’t. He had a feeling it might make things worse.

“My name is Detective Inspector Walters,” said the woman. “I have only one question for you, Sparks. We nicked you, six months ago. We gave you life imprisonment. Seven sentences, all to run consecutively, just in case you were going to live for ever, seven times. And you disappeared, Sparks. From a closely-guarded cell. Saving the state a lot of money, but not satisfying all those people who think justice should be done.”

“Sorry,” said Sparks, who had got caught up in the flow rather.

“And then, just when we think justice will never be done, we get a report from some woman that she’s seen you in your old flat. The one that your old mum has kept the same ever since you were nicked. We thought she was just sentimental - ”

*Just forgetful, more like,* thought Sparks, but secretly he was impressed with his parents. He was a serial killer and they still loved him!

“ - but now it seems she knew you’d be back,” said Detective Inspector Walters. “How did you do it, Sparks? How did you disappear?”

There comes a time in everyone’s life when the truth must be told. Sparks told Detective Inspector Walters and the policemen the truth.

“Oh dear,” said Detective Inspector Walters, “I can see I’m not going home tonight.”

D.I. WALTERS: Interview with suspect Paul Sparks, 8.20 a.m., Friday  
the -

SPARKS: Are you supposed to say that?

D.I. WALTERS: What? Shut up! Say what?

SPARKS: Suspect. You said I'd been tried and sentenced.

D.I. WALTERS: Ah, so you admit it.

SPARKS: No. I said "you said". I'm not admitting anything. Anyway,  
I'm not having a go. I'm just asking why you said I was a suspect. I  
mean, if - as you say - I've been tried and sentenced -

D.I. WALTERS: Yes, yes...

SPARKS: Then I'm not a suspect, am I? I'm guilty.

D.I. WALTERS: Suspect admits guilt, 8.24 -

SPARKS: No I didn't. I meant, if you say I did it, then how can I be a suspect?

D.I. WALTERS: Sigh. Well, what do you suggest we call you? Sergeant Baverstock and I are all ears.

SPARKS: That's not for me to say.

D.I. WALTERS: Interview terminated.

D.I. WALTERS: Interview recommenced with suspect - accused - guilty... guilty suspect Paul Sparks, 9 -

SPARKS: Interview recommenced after I was beaten up!

D.I. WALTERS: No-one beat you up. I just had to go out for a cigarette.

SPARKS: Ow!

D.I. WALTERS: "Ow"? What do you mean, "ow"?

SPARKS: He just hit me again.

D.S. BAVERSTOCK: No, I didn't! You thumped the table. He just thumped the table, ma'am.

D.I. WALTERS: I have a sick headache. Interview terminates 10 -

SPARKS: Ow! He did it again!

D.S. MOLLOY: I didn't! Sir - Ma'am! You saw me!

SPARKS: Saw you what? Eh?

D.S. BAVERSTOCK: Saw...saw me not hit you!

D.I. WALTERS: Interview terminated whatever bloody time it is.

Looking back, Sparks decided that the interview had not been a success from anyone's point of view; the police were clearly a little disappointed by Sparks' answers, but this had not made them any keener on releasing him.

*Typical*, thought Sparks, as they kicked him towards his cell, *I failed the interview and I still got the job.*

Sparks lay on his bed and decided to reflect for a bit on how much he hated irony. He went through the last ironic few hours in a trough of despond. Sent home by a loop in the space time... thing, arrested for a crime he hadn't committed, thrown into a van with THE POLICE written on the side, interviewed by a sarcastic woman...

Sparks froze in his trough. His mind, always much smarter than him, had tricked him into reviewing the day's events and in doing so had released new information, or rather, old information that Sparks had failed to register. But what was it? Sparks' mind, possibly wishing that it was inside a dolphin's speedy skull, tiredly flashed the words THE POLICE! THE POLICE! in Spark's brain.

Sparks got it. The van he had been thrown into, and against, was a police van, but instead of having POLICE written on it like it should - Sparks was really catching up with his mind here - it had THE POLICE written on it. And the last, or first, or only, time Sparks had seen THE POLICE written anywhere - Sparks was ahead of himself here, a condition his mind could nearly sympathise with - was on the side of a police car, in the first parallel world he had ever been to, the one with the Edgware Road in it.



Sparks lay back on his mattress, his thoughts reeling like drunken midgets in the tiny pub of his brain. If he was in a parallel world, he thought, then he couldn't be in his own world. And if he wasn't in his own world, then not only had he been tricked by Duncan and Jeff, but there was still hope for his grand plan.

Sparks lay back some more (it was a very soft mattress). Of course, there was also the fact that, in his own world, Sparks wasn't a dead serial killer, and in this one, he was.

*I should have thought of that*, thought Sparks.

In some deep mental recess, Sparks' mind slapped itself on the forehead again and again.

On the plus side, Sparks' grand plan was not thwarted. He had not been sent back to his own world, and he could still travel on and continue his search for Alison.

On the minus side, he was probably in jail for life for serial murder, and was unlikely to ever get out.

These were the thoughts that flipped, binarily, in Sparks' head as the police van - helpfully labelled THE POLICE - took Sparks, and some other serial killers, to a very large institution for very dangerous unwell

people. It was in the Lake District, not far from Sparks' mum and dad's, actually.

*Oh well*, thought Sparks with perhaps more optimism than the situation merited, *maybe I can look myself up in the prison library and see what serial killings I did*.

It was an unusual shard of hope to cling on to, but, oddly, one that all the prisoners in the van were thinking of, at the same time.

Sparks sat in his room. It was really a cell, but it was called a room to stop prisoners giving themselves airs. The prisoners were also called patients, for the same reason. There had been a time when the prisoners were called customers, but then someone noticed that customers were supposed to be always right, and in a maximum security institution for the dangerously unwell, this could cause problems. So patients it was.

Sparks had a cell, or rather room, to himself, even though he was supposed to share it with another patient, or, as the warders put it, psycho, but as the previous occupant had tried to strangle the other previous occupant with some bookbinding thread from a very old and large-spined encyclopedia, the room was temporarily unmanned. This was also why the prison library was closed, as guards, or carers as they hated to be

called, spent days removing anything threadlike from the books, so all the spines fell off and some of the patients, or nutters, ate them.

Sparks knew none of this. He just sat in his room, wondering if he should make some notches in his bedpost or if that would just depress him. As Sparks was pretty depressed already, this was semi-academic, but it passed the time, of which there was a lot knocking about.

Then his cell door opened.

“Visitor,” said a carer, or bastard.

“Yes, I suppose you are,” said Sparks.

“No,” said the carer. “Not me. Your mum.”

Sparks was so surprised, he dropped his penknife. The carer picked it up.

“We’ve got to get some more consistent rules in this nuthouse,” he said, and ushered Sparks towards the stairs. “Hospital,” he added, correcting himself.

Sparks’ mum sat on a large leather sofa, holding a bag of fruit. She looked confused, as well she might, Sparks supposed.

Sparks was directed by his carer to a large wooden chair next to his mum. He was surprised at the informality of the visiting system, but then he noticed the large billy club in the carer’s waistband. Reassured

factually if not emotionally, Sparks sat down next to his mum. He didn't know what to say.

His mum did.

"You're not Sparks," she said.

"How can you tell?" said Sparks, hurt at the ability of people in parallel universes everywhere to not mistake him for more interesting or exotic versions of himself.

"Well, for a start, Sparks is dead," said Sparks' mum. "That's a giveaway. But you don't look like him."

"I wish the police thought that," said Sparks. "I wouldn't be in here."

"The police know nothing," said Sparks' mum. "If they did, they wouldn't have arrested my son."

"You mean me?" said Sparks, adding politely, "Mum."

"No," said Sparks' mum. "You're not my son. I just said that. And please don't call me mum. It's distressing enough seeing someone who looks like my son without that. Call me Patricia."

"Sorry," said Sparks, but still not calling a woman who looked like his mum anything resembling her first name. It sounded too libertarian.

"So," said Patricia, "What alternative world or whatever the phrase is are you from?"

Sparks, who believed in the truth of cliché, was still surprised to feel his jaw actually drop.

He was about to speak, and say things like, “What?” and “Pardon?” when the carer leaned over and said, “Time’s up.”

“See you next week,” said Patricia.

Sparks’ jaw continued to ache from dropping for several minutes.

Next time Patricia came to visit Sparks, he was quicker off the mark.

“What do you mean, what world are you from?” he said.

“You know what I mean,” said Patricia. “I tell you, Sparks’ dad won’t come. He thinks this is all his fault.”

“What?” said Sparks, as ever. “Why? What?”

“He thinks it’s his fault because he told Sparks about alternative worlds and all that, and that’s why Sparks started to look for Alison, and it all went wrong,” said Patricia.

“But I knew about the worlds thing before I asked Dad about it,” said Sparks.

“That’s what I told him,” said Patricia. “But he feels guilty. And me coming to see you doesn’t help. It doesn’t help me much, either, come to think of it.”

“I’m very confused,” said Sparks. “I don’t know what to say.”

“This is so hard for me,” said Patricia, “Knowing you’re not my son, but you’re so like him. Same face, same dress sense, same lack of gumption.”

“Why is it,” said Sparks, heavily, “that every world I go to, people keep telling me how useless I am?”

“I knew you were from somewhere else,” said Patricia, with maternal triumph. “Sparks’ dad said you might be a police trap, but I couldn’t see what for. Also your nails are dirty for a copper.”

“All right,” said Sparks, “I am from somewhere else. I split up with this girl in my world - ”

“Alison,” said Patricia, sighing. “We got a letter from her, after our son disappeared. Of course, you can’t say it’s her fault, but...”

“And I found a machine that enabled me to go to these places - ”

“The Random Life Generator,” said Patricia.

“I went to several worlds, one with bears, and then I was tricked and came here,” said Sparks. To make life faster for the modern reader, he explained his recent life in detail that even Patricia found excessive, and she was his mum, sort of.

“Well, that’s not what happened to Sparks,” Patricia said, stifling a yawn.

“What did happen to Sparks?” said Sparks, forced to refer to himself in the third person like he was a dictator.

“Well,” said Patricia, “that’s - ”

“Time’s up,” said the carer, reluctantly, as he had been happily eavesdropping on what sounded to him to be the maddest arse he had ever heard, and him working in a loony bin, or caring zone, too.

“Next week?” said Sparks, hopefully.

“I don’t know,” said Patricia. “The buses are terrible.”

The week after that, Patricia didn’t come. Sparks began work on a basket, to be ironic.

The week after that, just as some of the sharper carers were beginning to realise that Sparks’ basket was ironic, and that therefore they should tap him on his face quite hard, Patricia popped by again.

“Thanks for the unnecessary tension,” said Sparks.

“Sorry,” said Patricia, “But I had to check some facts in my diary. Also I meant it about the buses. It’s miles and you have to wait half an hour. And the other visitors! You can imagine.”

Sparks imagined. He felt sorry for this woman who wasn't his mother exactly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Don't come if it's hard."

Patricia ignored him, as people often do when apologised to. Instead she turned to the carer.

"Can you ask the chief screw to fix it for my son to use the prison library?" she said.

Sparks winced. But the carer just smiled, and said, "I'll have a word."

Not for the first time in his life, Sparks wished he was someone's mum, just for the service.

Patricia turned back to Sparks.

"This is what happened," she said.

It took more than one visit to piece it all together, but eventually Sparks and Patricia worked it out. About the time that Sparks had come into his first world - the world he was jailed in - the other Sparks, the one from this world had, with some sensible symmetry, gone into a third world. This world, he later told Patricia, was extremely unpleasant.

"Were there bears?" asked Sparks.



“Shut up,” Patricia said. “This world was... unevolved, was the word Sparks used. He said nothing felt right. The air tasted funny, the colours were not quite the same as here, and the people...”

She paused. Sparks thought she was going to tell him to shut up again, even though he wasn’t talking.

“Sparks said the people just didn’t seem right. He said they seemed.... badly made, and dangerous.”

“Like a cheap toy?” said Sparks, trying to understand. “One with a sharp edge or a rusty spike in it?”

For the first time, Patricia looked at Sparks the way his mother looked at him.

“Those,” she said, “were his exact words. Like a cheap toy with a rusty spike in it.”

“I had one of those once,” said Sparks. “So what did... your son do next?”

“He said he was going back there,” said Patricia. “He said he thought he’d seen Alison,”

“And he never came back? That’s when he disappeared?”

“No, he came back, but with the dead people,” said Patricia.

“The dead people?” said Sparks.

“They found him near his flat, sitting there, with the dead people. The ones they said he killed,” said Patricia. “There were two of them, which I suppose made him a serial killer.”

“Who were they?” Sparks said, finding that he was taking an almost proprietorial interest in his doppelganger’s apparent victims.

“Nobody could identify them. They had no ID on them and no-one claimed the bodies,” said Patricia. “But they were dead. Oh, and very thin.”

“Thin?” said Sparks. “In what way?”

“Thin,” said Patricia, almost as annoyed as Sparks at his call-and-response interview technique. “Just thin. And tall. Like stick insects.”

Patricia looked at him.

“Did you know them?”

“Not quite. But I know some people who are them,” said Sparks.

“In the way that I am your son.”

“I see,” said Patricia, and it looked to Sparks like she did see. “So where’s my son?”

“I don’t know,” said Sparks. “It sounds like he got away, at least. And it definitely sounds like someone was out to get him. And me, too.”

“Well,” said Patricia, looking up at the barred windows. “I’d say they’re doing a good job so far.”

Sparks saw what she meant.

“I’m not coming again,” said Patricia. “You’re not my son, but I feel he would have wanted to help you. So - ”

She got up.

“Bye then,” she said. “You do have some of his good points, you know.”

Sparks rose to say goodbye, but once again Patricia was talking to the carer. And staring at Sparks as she did so.

“This library,” she said, “does it have a computer?”

Sparks applied for permission to use the library. This was refused, so instead Sparks applied to become a trusty. He didn’t really know what a trusty was, but it was obviously something to do with libraries, so he thought it was worth a go. After a week or so, he was brought before the chief doctor of the institution, a round-headed man called Doctor Allman who wore square spectacles to make himself look more angular, or, if results were the criterion, a melon wearing glasses.

“It says here you want to be a trusty,” said Doctor Allman.

Sparks couldn’t help noticing that the doctor was looking at a bare desk. He decided to ignore this detail.

“Yes, I do,” he said.

“Do you know what a trusty does?” said the doctor.

“Not really,” said Sparks.

“Good,” said the doctor. “Because if you did, that would mean you’d been inside this institution before, which would make you a recidivist. And we can’t give positions of trust to recidivists.”

Sparks felt relieved, if not deeply sure he knew what a recidivist was.

“Why do you want to be a trusty?” said Doctor Allman, adjusting his glasses to make them look squarer.

“Because I want to look up the Random Life Generator on the computer, if there is one, and see if there’s a portal I can escape to,” said Sparks. He had decided to gamble on telling the truth, thereby making himself look mental.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Doctor Allman. “Which only goes to show that you are clearly mental...ly ill. And the fact that you are mentally ill means, again, that you are not a dangerous criminal but rather a sick patient, who can be treated.”

“I would like to be a library trusty,” said Sparks.

“Ah,” said Doctor Allman. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

Sparks’ heart sank.

“Libraries are dangerous places for mad people. By which,” the doctor added, “I mean the unwell. Books full of stories and encyclopedias

with unpleasant facts. Even the dictionary is a minefield of inspirations for the crazed killer. No offence.”

“None taken,” said Sparks, from his mental basement of despondency.

“However, I am a lenient, and angular-faced, man,” said the doctor. “I shall give you a trusty’s job elsewhere. You can work here, in my office, doing the filing. Not the dangerous filing, of course, just the dull stuff.”

“How do I do filing?” said Sparks, glumly.

“You’ll need to know the alphabet,” said the doctor. “Oh, and you’ll need this computer.”

He indicated a large, blue and white computer on a desk behind him.

“I’ll do it,” said Sparks, as enthusiastically as he dared.

Doctor Allman’s office was darkened, half-lit by the eerie glow of the computer screen, and also half-lit by the eerie glow of the computer screen bouncing off Sparks’ face. It was late at night, but Sparks was now a trusty, his new status reflected in his trusty pass, which allowed him to go anywhere but the library, and his trusty’s uniform, which was a pair of navy blue dungarees and a nice red T-shirt.

Dressed as a git, every night Sparks would come in, pretend to do some filing for a few minutes, read the doctor's junk emails ('Unusually-shaped head? Acquire relief for less than \$10000 with Nu-Crania-Shape') and then type in the address of the Random Life Generator. The first time he did this, he realised how long it had been since he'd last done it, and he almost forgot the details, but the screen filled with the same imagery and Sparks began frantically writing down everything he saw.

At first, most of it was pretty useless to Sparks, unless he'd been able to nip out to the Isle of Man for the afternoon, and of course, if he had been, he wouldn't be sitting in a doctor's office in an maximum security happy house writing addresses down. However this evening there were a couple of possibilities which, had he not been crammed to the eyes with tranquillisers, would have excited him, and as it was, still made him quite pleased.

The first pleasing location was about fifty miles away, behind a church in a small historic village. Sparks found the location appealing, not least because he used to go there as a boy and try to remove pennies from a nearby wishing-well, into which he had actually fallen one day, coming out soaking wet but with £3.29 in very small change. Unfortunately, the village was pretty inaccessible for a dangerous mad person, and too far to go before the portal closed.

The second location was less pleasing but much more interesting. Nearby, at least by van, there was a clinic where some of the inmates were taken for the kind of minor medical treatments that the institution could not do itself. This sounded sinister, but probably wasn't, unless you believed that dental caps and crowns were thought control systems. Several of the people in Sparks' institution did believe this, and they could usually be spotted by their terrible teeth.

If Sparks could feign an immediate teeth problem and, once there, make a break for it before the portal disappeared, he would be all right. *If*, Sparks thought laconically, in the traditional sense of the word by accident.

The van looped bumpily down several country lanes, knocking bits of hedge off and splashing happily into big holes full of old water. Had the van been in a children's animated TV show, it might have had a cheerful face and honked as it passed old ladies and farmers, it looked so cheerful. But, unfortunately for the van, it wasn't. It was taking several sociopaths to the dentist, which pretty much disqualified it from any forthcoming kids' shows. In fact, real children found the van frightening too, as its stern black exterior, grilled-over reflective glass windows and

perhaps excessive gun turret jarred with the van's chirpy country road-hopping.

All these things occurred to Sparks as he sat in the back of the van. Initially he had ruled out the chances of getting an instant dentist's appointment, or even of rolling around on the floor moaning and clutching his face, as the dentist would soon be shut, and anyway, people were always rolling around on the floor moaning and clutching their faces in this place. However, after a few minutes of sipping cold water and wincing, prodding his cheek, and so on, Sparks found that Doctor Allman could easily be annoyed.

"What's wrong with you?" said the doctor, which was a bit undoctory.

"Tooth," said Sparks succinctly.

"Dentist, now," said the doctor, and Sparks found himself being bundled out of the office into a threatening-looking but potentially cheerful van, which was now burbling its murderous-looking way happily down hill and dale. Sparks, surrounded by men who were mad, bad, dangerous to know and suffering from toothache, worked on his plan. It was a simple one.

1. Ask to use the toilet.



2. Instead, run away and escape via portal.

*How could it fail?* he thought.

Doctor Allman reached for his phone with oddly thin fingers, fat man-wise.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, he is. What? Yes, he is both, I mean. Yes he is exceptionally dim, and yes he is under the impression that he’s going to the dentist. Yes, I know.”

The doctor put the phone down. He hated two things in life. One was working undercover against the very Society he had once believed in so passionately. And the other was wearing a fat-suit.

The van pulled in outside the clinic, eagerly braking as squirrels and rabbits fled its ominous presence. Carers, armed with big industrial syringes, hauled the inmates out into the evening light and into a big door held open by one of those male nurses you only see in films, namely a huge bulk-laden man in a white tunic with no collar whose name ought to be Urgo or Fist but is generally Mike.

Sparks shuffled down the white-lit corridor, pretending his jaw hurt. He was shoved down onto a bench and a magazine pressed into his hand. It was a 30 year old copy of *Punch*.

“Stay here,” said their carer, and walked a few feet away to talk to a notionally attractive receptionist. The inmates, dulled by pain and some very strong pills, tried to study their magazines. Sparks opened his *Punch* and immediately became engrossed in a series of cartoons about the generation gap.

“Sparks,” a carer said, so neutrally that he almost didn’t hear it. “Sparks, the dentist will see you now.”

Sparks got up.

“I have to go to the toilet first,” he said.

The carer smiled.

“Of course. Here, I want to talk to this receptionist. Off you go on your own, now”.

Sparks was not a suspicious man. He was a gullible man. Only his own personal poverty prevented him from regularly investing in pyramid sales schemes, internet start-up schemes and company pensions. However there was something in the carer’s almost lewd grin and unpleasant, leering face that suggested he was being made a fool of. So he decided to be cautious.

Walking determinedly down the corridor, Sparks kept an eye out for anyone with a billy club or syringe. He rounded a corner and, safe from the carer's insolent gaze, began looking for a fire exit or a window. There weren't any. For a dental clinic, the place was amazingly secure. Sparks walked on some more and then found he actually did want to use the toilet. *The perfect alibi*, he thought as he opened the door of the gents. Then he saw Jeff and Duncan behind the door, and closed it again.

Jeff and Duncan had in fact been in the gents for some time, and, forming the conclusion that Sparks wasn't as predictable as they had believed, had decided that they too actually did want to use the toilet. Turning to the urinals for a long thin slash, they were therefore facing the wrong way when Sparks came in, giving him valuable seconds to run off into the nearest hiding place, which was the ladies.

"You can't hide in there for ever!" Jeff shouted, banging on a cubicle door.

"No," said Duncan. "This room is for women!"

Jeff turned to Duncan.

"Fool," he said, and returned to banging the door.

"You'll have to come out sometime!" shouted Jeff.

“We can wait all day!” said Duncan. “Unless,” he added, thoughtfully, “some women come in.”

Jeff turned round and looked at Duncan.

“I don’t think you entirely get this threatening people thing,” he said.

Inside the cubicle, Sparks was only vaguely aware of Jeff and Duncan’s presence.

“I expect you’re wondering how we found you.” said Jeff.

“You can’t say that,” said Duncan, sulkily.

“Why not?” said Jeff.

“Because it’s a cliché. Villains say it in films.”

“No they don’t,” said Jeff. “Unless it’s the gay porn films you watch.”

“I resent that,” said Duncan.

Sparks found he wasn’t too concerned how or why they had decided to trick him into coming here so something nefarious and dental could be done to him; he didn’t even care how they knew he was looking for a portal. In the corner of the cubicle, incongruously near the loo brush for a miracle of trans-dimensional strangeness, was a patch of shimmering air. Sparks had found the portal.

There was a light thudding outside, like a very thin man throwing himself at a door, followed by a thin curse. Jeff (or Duncan) began

hammering at the door instead. Sparks leapt at the portal, just as Jeff's hammering reached a crescendo. Then the hammering vanished, like a clumsy edit.

OW!

This takes me back!

OW!

OWOWOWOW!

Sparks woke up, as ever, in some pain. Worse, he realised as he cleared what felt like but weren't tiny red hot pikes from his eyes, he was back in the toilet. Admittedly, he was now in the next cubicle, but this was hardly a great escape. He turned to see the portal vanish with an audible pop (as opposed, he thought vaguely to those inaudible pops which are so much part of modern life, or at least modern popping).

Sparks waited for the cubicle door to be kicked in by Jeff, or possibly Duncan. He crouched down to cushion the blow, if a door falling

on someone can properly be called a blow, but no blow came. The place was quiet, even for a lavatory. Sparks opened the cubicle door and peered out. The room was empty. A dripping tap and a bin full of crumpled-up green paper towels indicated either recent human occupancy or a race of bears that used lavatories. Sparks suppressed his fear of the latter possibility, and sneaked out into the corridor.

He walked, almost literally, pretty much, right into a prison carer. Sparks drew back his fist, ready to punch him inefficiently.

"Can I help you?" said the carer.

"Um," said Sparks, thrown by this. "No!" he decided to say. "No, I'm fine."

He walked away. "Oh," he said, turning to face the carer. "And I'm not one of your inmates. I just dress in denim because I like it."

He walked out. Then he came back.

"Um," he said, "Just checking something."

"What?" said the carer.

"Do I look like a serial killer to you?" said Sparks.

"No," said the carer unhesitatingly. "And I've met millions of them. I've killed three."

"Ta," said Sparks, and walked out properly.

"Sodding nutcase," said the carer to himself and returned to his charges who, maddened by being left alone, beat him up and stuffed him into a linen cupboard.

Sparks walked out into the summer, or whatever it was, evening. Right now he didn't care what new world he had arrived in. It was almost certainly one where he wasn't a serial killer or in a booby hatch, and that would do for Sparks. He looked around. Clearly and obviously he was still in the Lake District, which even Sparks would agree was a very nice place. But far from London, which Sparks needed to be in, and which also, with little or no justification, he thought of as civilisation. This monocentric view of the world - shared in its day by several empires - had been one of the several barriers between him and Alison.

"London isn't everything," said Alison once, as Sparks had again turned down her idea of moving to somewhere less like London (in this case Hastings).

"When a man is tired of London..." said Sparks, tailing off not for dramatic effect but because he couldn't remember the rest of the line and by stopping halfway through he hoped Alison might think he was tailing off for dramatic effect.

Alison looked at Sparks. Sparks, who couldn't tail off any more than he had already, considered making a fruity hand gesture, but decided against it.

"I like London," he said, using all his powers of debate.

"Well, it's not the be-all-and-end-all," said Alison. "There are lots of other nice places in the world."

"Nice" said Sparks. "I hate that word, nice."

"I don't," said Alison. "I'm more annoyed by people who say they don't like the word 'nice'. They can never say why they don't like it, it's just a smartarse thing to say that most people grow out of when they're 16 and discover that nice things like, say, central heating and scones sort of have the edge over, I don't know, heroin and syphilis."

"I only said I liked London," said Sparks, but he could tell that Alison was miffed.

Sparks was recalling this conversation right now not because he had a lot of time on his hands and liked to sift through moderately unpleasant memories, but because he was lost, and his mind tended to wander off in search of useful memories when this happened. Right now, his mind was trying to recall if this particular part of the Lake District was either the one where Sparks and Alison had spent an unsuccessful weekend camping (it wasn't Sparks' idea) or the one where Sparks had gone on cub camp and lost six eight year old boys on a hill at night. His



mind decided it was the former, and in that case, there should be a small town somewhere over to the right.

Sparks registered this memory, claimed the insight for himself, and set off to the right.

Sparks' insight was, for once, spot on, and resulted in the following:

a) small train with two coaches from somewhere quaint in the Lake District to somewhere far from quaint in the Midlands.

b) large train with fourteen coaches, no buffet and a toilet apparently designed as a urine aquarium from the Midlands to just outside London, where it became immobile, or broody, or both.

c) large immobile train moving very slowly from just outside London to London, arriving late and full of compensation slips unfilled in by people who couldn't be arsed filling in a form to reclaim five pounds for a train journey that cost seventy-five. ("I blame the unions," said one elderly passenger, but when challenged, couldn't remember why.)

d) tube from London station to North London.

e) long walk from tube station to Sparks' office, whichever Sparks this might, and if indeed there was a Sparks here, or even an office, to be confirmed.

Sparks stood outside the building that might contain his office and arguably him. He suddenly felt very tired. In the last few weeks he had been arrested for murder, locked up for life, escaped from a nuthouse, being attacked by thin villains, and travelled on a train. None of these things were pleasant in any way. He was no nearer to his quest, a simple thing of travelling through an infinite amount of worlds to find a woman who might love him, and would have to be exactly like his ex-girlfriend, in fact, be his ex-girlfriend, only not find him annoying. And he was really hungry.

He looked in his wallet. There was no money in it. Sparks wondered if his cashpoint card would work in this world, too. It was a possibility, if there was another Sparks, if that Sparks used the same bank, and so on, and so forth. It was equally possible that in this world, hot tea would come out of a cashpoint, but Sparks was prepared to take the risk.

He walked to the bank. The bank was where it ought to be. So was the cash machine. Sparks inserted his cash card, keyed in his number, and decided for a test run to take out £10. This was in fact more a habit thing than a test run thing, as Sparks often had not much more than £10 in his account and suspected that the other Sparks, if he existed, might be similar. Then he had another thought. Behind Sparks, a bus pulled up. By the time Sparks had finished his thought, the bus had pulled off, leaving several people on the pavement.

Sparks - briefly distracted by a large movie poster on the side of the bus shelter which had an unfamiliar yet familiar face on it - decided to act on his thought. Instead of taking some money out, he checked his, or rather the other Sparks' balance. The screen flashed, and did not tell him he had keyed in the wrong number. Instead it told him his balance. Sparks gulped, like a cat in a cartoon that has just seen a bulldog standing behind a mouse with a hammer. The balance of the account was enormous. It contained hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Sparks stared at the balance. In this world he was clearly a millionaire, or at least a builder. Perhaps he was even famous. Suddenly, Sparks remembered the poster. *Oh wow!* he thought, *I'm -*

"Bloody Nora," said a voice behind him. "For goodness' sake," said another. "Take some money out, why don't you?" suggested a third, not charitably.

Sparks acted. He took out a lot of money, stuffed it into his wallet, turned round to face the fractious queue, and said ‘Sorry about that’ to Jeff and Duncan.

“Oh,” he said, recognising them.

“Oh indeed,” said Jeff, and lunged out of the queue at Sparks. Sparks ducked out of the way, but Duncan made a lunge of his own. Sparks, hemmed in, lungewise, grabbed his wallet. He pulled out the money and threw it everywhere. The queue suddenly unlocked itself and people leapt at the money. Jeff and Duncan were knocked flying, being so thin, and Sparks fled.

“Famous people,” said a man in the queue. “Typical.”

A few minutes later, having sneaked into his nicely-decorated office and turned on his computer (neither of which, of course, were his, but while he was throwing his money around, again literally, such definitions were otiose to Sparks), Sparks found himself staring at the Random Life Generator. Destinations and place names danced around the screen, not literally.

Sparks grunted. He was starting to feel tired. Nothing was getting him anywhere. He wrote down an address almost resentfully, and headed out the door.

Sparks found the portal. It was at the back of a shirt and tie shop. After hundreds of young men had asked if they could help him, Sparks saw the portal in a changing cubicle. He grabbed a handful of bad ties and vanished.

OW!

OW! Bumpy

Shi

Why is it bumpy?

It wasn't bumpy before

*It wasn't bumpy before!* Sparks thought, groggy but awake. It was bumpy now, though, and he appeared to be, in fact he definitely was, in some sort of chair, which was better than being, say, not in a chair.

Sparks opened his eyes (little ants, inserted individually, by fairly clumsy giants) and saw

Lots of darkness, mostly. *Wait up*, he thought groggily again.

There were tiny lights in the darkness, red and white, with pictures of cigarettes, and hands clasping like those Irish rings that people liked, with the, well, as Sparks had already thought, with the hands clasping.

No. Not hands clasping. Hands on a seatbelt. Hence the -

Hence the bumpiness. Hands on a seatbelt as in fasten seatbelts as in bumpy ride as in -

*Oh bugger*, Sparks thought, *I'm on an airplane*.

Sparks supposed he wasn't totally surprised to find himself on an airplane. After all, he had previously found himself in a lake and on the Edgware Road, so the world was clearly full of possibilities, and in some ways, maybe he should be pleased that he hadn't landed in, say, the belly of a whale or the Straits of Magellan. Not that he was sure what the Straits of Magellan were, but he had a pretty clear idea that they wouldn't be a great place to land in. (Later, Sparks got an atlas, and saw he was

wrong. The Straits of Magellan were perfectly fine, unless you were Magellan, which he wasn't.)

He tried to accustom himself to the darkness. Then he got annoyed with that and turned on his overhead light. This confirmed his initial impression; he was definitely on an airplane. Around him, men in suits slumped about, half throttled by their ties, while some people made dim dozy faces at little screens showing tiny films. One of the films was about a cat, and Sparks had seen it and found it cloying but normal, so at least he wasn't in an utterly terrifying world where cats were lords of all or something.

Sparks thought fast. He was clearly in a plane, a large commercial airliner sort of plane that was going somewhere, as planes do. He had no idea where. He could be in or rather over any country or continent, and in any reality where it was OK to make films about cats. None of this was helpful.

However, Sparks remembered one thing about planes. He reached up and pressed a switch. After a while, a flight attendant came along. If she was surprised to see Sparks occupying a seat that had been empty for the first seven and a half hours of the plane's journey, she didn't show it. He was sitting in economy, so she didn't care either.

“Yes sir?”, she said, smiling.

“Can I have a large brandy?” Sparks asked.

“No,” said the flight attendant. “We're landing in five minutes.”

“Oh,” said Sparks. Then, realising he ought to seize the moment more firmly, opportunity-wise, he said, “Where?”

The flight attendant's smile became thinner. This man, Sparks realised she was realising, was a drunk.

“I'm not a drunk,” Sparks said. “I just have that mind disease, where you forget. Things.”

The flight attendant smiled, more but tauter, like a hammock with a fat man in.

“Stansted,” she said. “Near London.”

“Bloody hell,” said Sparks. “That’s no good.”

The plane landed, and Sparks enjoyed, if that is the word, which it isn't, the sensation of travelling from an airport with no luggage (thank God it was an internal flight, he thought) and then into town, all to get back to the point he had started from.

On the train back, he quickly worked out how this world was different - there was apparently some kind of religious persecution thing going on, or possibly an ad campaign involving ginger-haired men being displayed in large iron cages at every crossroads - and made a note to get out very quickly.



North London. Office. Computer. Random Life Generator. Address.

Sparks was getting fast.

Journey. Small Hackney flat. Portal.

Ow!

Ow!

It was very quiet where Sparks was.

“I don’t like it,” said Sparks, “It’s too quiet.” He had always wanted to say that, and felt happy. Later, he just felt he had been frivolous.

Where Sparks was was by a river. The river was enormous, like the Thames only surrounded by trees and shrubs rather than bits of stone crap and metal crap. On either side of the river, there were more trees and

shrubs and then some green bits. The green bits might have been fields if any order had been involved in laying them out; but they just looked on closer inspection like bits, that were green, and their purpose, if any, which there wasn't, was to not have only trees and shrubs. Conversely, it was equally likely that the trees and shrubs were only there to break up the monotony of the green bits.

Certainly the sky wasn't helping. There were no pylons or airplanes or vapour trails to break up the blue and white dullness of it. In fact, as with the ground, it wasn't clear whether the clouds were there to break up the as it were blue skyitude of the place, or the blue was there to give the eye a break from all the white fluffiness.

And it was astonishingly quiet. Despite the warm weather, nothing buzzed at Sparks and tried to bite him or made a threatening "cheep cheep" noise or barked or even swore in a Cockney accent.

Sparks walked around a bit. Then he walked in a straight line for a while. Then he ran crazily across a green bit. Then, for want of any new ideas, he hid behind a tree. Then he got bored. Then he got scared.

An hour later, after some more walking and running and being scared, Sparks came to a conclusion. Either he was in a sodding big park that was closed for the day, which probably wasn't the case given the

lack of insects and pylons, or it was something worse. The something worse was that Sparks might be in a world where there wasn't anything. Anything alive, anyway. Anything alive with legs or wings, obviously. Or that lived in a river.

As Sparks tried to make a definitive list of things that were alive that weren't trees or plants, a second, more exciting but scarier thought came into his busy mind. Having run around and lost whatever bearings he had (ie none) he now had no idea where he was, where he had been or, more pertinently, how to get out.

*I hope I like berries*, Sparks thought.

Sparks couldn't find any nuts and berries. This didn't mean that there weren't any, just that he wasn't very good at finding them. He had a vague idea that berries grew on bramble bushes, and that these could be found beside railway lines, but there were no railway lines in this world, on account of the whole total failure of mammalian evolution thing going on. Similarly, the only nuts Sparks had ever seen were either in little bowls on bars or in supermarkets, again neither of which were likely to come along until some sort of as-yet uninvented fish were to crawl out of the sea, grow legs, and millions of years find Sparks some nuts.

The planet, or rather this bit, which had Sparks known it, was essentially Luton, was teeming with edible life, and any experienced survivalist or keen boy scout would have been able to stuff himself on plant grub all day long. Sparks, however, was not a survivalist. His boy scout days ended at nine when another boy told him that his parents had lied and you couldn't get measles from bunking off cubs. And he had never, ever, read any books where people manage to live in difficult and remote circumstances. The books that Sparks had read, which involved either large-breasted women on other planets getting snarky with large-breasted men from other planets, or dead people having a pop at people who weren't dead but soon would be, were no help at all.

Sparks, in fact, was starving to death. His diet for his first day and a half in the empty world was embarrassingly low in nutrition, although a cow with an eating disorder might have liked it. He had eaten some grass. He had drunk some river water. The river water contained some sort of floating germ, and this had made Sparks throw up the grass. When Sparks felt well enough to eat something, perhaps a little clear soup and a pale sherry, he found there was still nothing to be had, except some more grass.

Sparks decided to go to sleep instead, as it was getting dark and he was surprisingly bored, as a starving person. He pulled his coat over himself, used his arm as a pillow, and fell asleep. Then he was sick again.

The next day, Sparks woke to a cloudless blue sky, sunlight bouncing off the dewy grass, and the sound of no life whatsoever. Wind swished some leaves about, some other wind made some small stones fall down a hill, and far off, a very old tree that had never been disturbed by insects eating it or birds building nests up it just fell over with a fairly pointless thud. It was another useless day in the empty world.

Sparks' mouth was dry and sticky. He needed a shave, a shower and an enormous amount of toothpaste. Worst of all, as he stood up and dusted some bits of woody stuff off himself, he realised he was very hungry. He was also pretty thirsty, but in the "look at me!" stakes, hunger was beating thirst. And this was what worried Sparks the most; traditionally, thirst was the feeling that had its hand up fastest, especially when Sparks had been drinking. But Sparks had not been drinking; his last drink had been on the airplane, and that had been rather small, as Sparks hadn't realised he was in economy and tried to drink it all before the stewardess made him pay for it, which he couldn't, so she grabbed it off him mid-sip.

Sparks, feeling even worse at the memory of a half-drunk drink in a different world, leaned against a tree. A nut fell out of it and rolled across the ground, but he didn't see it. His eyes were swimmy with

unwellness and his stomach was cramping. *I can't go on much longer like this*, he thought, and for once he was right.

When Sparks was little, they showed a film at his school. It was the one with a little boy crouched under a tree, much as Sparks was doing now, only the little boy wasn't vomiting and crying, he was looking at a mosquito. Then the camera pulled up, high above the trees, and Sparks saw that the boy was in a forest. The camera pulled up some more, revealing the forest to be in a large country, and then some more, showing the country to be part of a continent, and so on, until the camera had somehow got into outer space. And then, just as the camera threatened to reveal all the secrets of the cosmos and do an establishing shot of the universe from the outside, it stopped, changed its mind, and began hurtling back towards the Earth again, where it did a lot of interesting stuff involving the little boy's cellular structure and that.

If this camera had decided to have some pulling-up fun in this world, it would have been a spooky affair, pulling up from the buckled and puking figure of Sparks, high over trees and valleys, up into the skies of a world with no other humans, or animals of any kind. Then, instead of whizzing off to have a look at the universe, it might have decided to have

a look around the empty world, just to emphasise the complete and utter lack of any other life other than one dying man.

And then it would have seen something a bit odd. A bit of hazy air, just visible as a kind of hazy pinprick in the sky, which was suddenly almost ripped open by turbulence, said turbulence being caused by the arrival of a large, twin rotor helicopter, the kind that looks like it has been broken a bit in the middle.





### **PART THREE: JOSEPH KAYE**

Joseph Kaye woke up and found that he was thinking about a cockroach. A very large cockroach, about three inches in length, with a shiny back and long legs. It was lying on its shiny back and waving its long legs in the air. He went downstairs to the kitchen, where his father and mother were having their breakfast.

“Drink your coffee before it gets cold,” said his mother.

“I woke up this morning and found I was thinking about a cockroach,” said Joseph.

His father snorted. “What the hell’s a cockroach?” he said.

It was the first of May.

“You can’t sit in there all day, Joseph!” his mother shouted. Joseph Kaye shifted his position on the cold black plastic lavatory seat. He thought that he could sit in the toilet all day. It was a lot better than going mad. His mother, now noisily moving about the house, passed by the toilet, and banged on the door as she did so with a flat iron. Kaye sighed and got up. Before he unlocked the door, he took a quick look behind the toilet bowl, as he had a vague idea that if there were any cockroaches in

the house, they might be hiding there. Although, he had to admit to himself, he had certainly never seen any cockroaches there, or indeed anywhere else in the house.

In fact, Joseph Kaye thought, as he left the house ignoring his mother's sarcastic queries about his faulty stomach, he had no memory of ever having seen a cockroach, in real life or in a photograph, ever in his entire life.

"No," said the head librarian, "I have never heard of it. Or them."

Joseph Kaye's head was starting to hurt.

"Are you saying that I have imagined this thing?" he heard himself saying.

"No," said the head librarian, now moving a large leather-bound ledger nearer to himself, as if, Kaye, thought, he was preparing to repel an attack with it.

"I will be back," said Kaye's voice. His head was beginning to hurt very much now

"I don't care," said the librarian. "We still won't have any books about cockroaches."

Mrs Kaye tapped on Joseph's bedroom door.

“Are you all right, Joseph?” she said. There was no reply. “I’ve made you some beef broth,” she added, wondering even as she said it why she had said it. Not only was there no bowl of beef broth present at this time but also Mrs Kaye had never made beef broth in her life. Once she had attempted some sort of indeterminate lamb stuff with hot water, but that had not been a success. Joseph’s father had refused to eat it, while Joseph had eaten three bowls out of maternal love and then been violently ill all over the settee. So to refer to broth at all was tactless. Mrs Kaye thought she might be getting a little hysterical, that or her son was making her nervous.

“I’ll take it back downstairs,” she said, feeling even more foolish. “The cat can have it.” She set off for the kitchen, only then remembering that they did not have a cat.

In his room, Joseph Kaye heard his mother’s footsteps recede and her faint muttering of, “Mmm, delicious beef broth” become fainter and fainter. *Good*, he thought, *peace and quiet*. He turned his attention once more to the things on his counterpane. There were a dead bee, a dead fly, a sleepy spider with one leg missing, and a sort of green beetle. *Round up the usual suspects*, thought Joseph Kaye, and laughed mirthlessly but rather loudly. “Bee fly spider beetle,” he said. “No cockroach.”

In the kitchen, Mrs Kaye set about the cooking sherry with gusto.

Joseph Kaye lay in his bed, the place he had first inadvertently formed the notion that something was missing from the world, something shiny and small with legs and feelers. Not necessarily a good thing missing from the world, but a missing thing nevertheless. The omission - or the sense of omission - bristled up against Kaye's sense of right and wrong. Other people, like his father, perhaps, might have said, "Well, they certainly sound unpleasant, these cockroaches, and not very original either, since they are essentially a sort of hard beetle, so I can't really see why we want more, or rather any, since to have more we'd need at least one, and we haven't got one." But Kaye was not like that. If something was missing from the world, however unpleasant or odd, then the world was by definition incomplete.

Kaye didn't like the idea of the world being incomplete. In fact, it was getting to him. Some people, his mother perhaps, might have argued that, what with the pet shop business and the unpleasantness with the head librarian, it had got to him already. But Kaye had realised the pointlessness of these small actions. He needed to do something to warn the world that something was missing from it. Something big.

He went out onto the landing, down the stairs, and picked up the phone that his parents had had installed in the hallway, possibly on the

grounds that there wasn't a less private or more uncomfortable place to have a telephone in the house.

"Hello, operator?" he said. "I should like the number of Speaker's Corner."

He fiddled with the phone cord as the operator said something.

"Oh, you just turn up, do you?"

Kaye rang off, feeling slightly foolish.

*The world will know the truth!*, he thought, as he made his way back upstairs and accidentally kicked over the bowl of cabbage stew that was still lurking outside his bedroom door.

It was a wet Wednesday morning, and Alison was already regretting her New Plan. Her New Plan was to walk to work every day, which would have been a fantastic plan if she had lived in Madrid or Rainless Paradise, California. But she didn't; she lived in Dalston, where rain and filth were constant companions, and only took time off to go bowling with gale force winds. Even this might not have been so bad, if her place of work had also been in Dalston. But it wasn't. It was in the West End, a part of the world as easy to walk to from Dalston as, say, Madrid or Rainless Paradise, California. On a sunny day, true, Alison's New Plan might have been passed by some notional committee of slightly

slow-witted people as an excellent way to get fit, see London, and forget all about bereavement caused by the still fairly recent death of an ex-boyfriend in a bus accident. Today, however, as the rain came down like a tarts' drawers in liquid raindrop form, even a committee of really stupid people would be looking at Alison as she ran along the road, trying to keep gussets of dirty London rain off her neck by hunching, and made tapping-head gestures, rotating-fingers she's-a-loony motions and even the odd impression of a teapot.

And Alison would have agreed with them. She was half an hour late for work - well, she said work, she was being optimistic, she meant a job interview - she was sodden between skin and clothing, and her emergency plan - running underneath the trees in Hyde Park for cover - wasn't working, as there were so many other people already hiding under the trees that someone could have made money employing a bouncer and a guest list and selling tickets.

Alison gave up. There is a point where, even though you know that you can get wetter, you actually feel that you can't get wetter. Alison had reached that point; and, seeing as she was completely sodden, she also felt that no job interviewer would say to her, "We admire your decision to walk here on the rainiest day of all time, and we have decided to ignore your drenched condition. Please have a job". (And she was right; in none of the worlds where Alison went for this job did anyone offer her the job.

In one, she was eaten by a bear, but not after being offered the job, so the argument still holds.)

And then, just as Alison was completely fed up and wet and convinced that she was unemployable, it stopped raining. This of course was not quite the transcendent moment it might have been, as immediately after it stopped raining, Alison began to experience the foul, sticky sensation of former rain now just being water running down her back. She hunched again to try and keep the rain away from her skin, which didn't work, and began to think about buying a cup of tea to reduce her misery slightly.

Walking through the park, which was now milling with other, hunching people and a smaller group of smug people who had remembered to bring umbrellas, Alison looked around for a tea stand. After a few minutes, she began to wonder if in fact there was such a thing as a tea stand, or if maybe she had just seen one in a romantic comedy film. There were certainly none to be found here. Then she saw what looked like a small mass of people huddling up around something. Perhaps they might be an excited group of tea drinkers? she wondered, and hunched off to have a look.

A tall man in a billowing raincoat was standing on some sort of box - Alison was no box-maker so couldn't be certain - and shouting. The wind was whipping the tall man's words away, so each time he said

something, it would be removed and dumped somewhere else in the park. This didn't appear to bother the tall man, as he mostly appeared concerned with getting his message out, rather than ensuring audio clarity. Alison was sure it was a message the man was trying to get out, rather than, say, his favourite song titles, because of the man's demeanour, which was a heady mix of earnest and frightening.

Alison moved closer to the tall man, who she now noticed had really excellent cheekbones. She had never been a fan of cheekbones before, largely because the only men she ever saw who had them were either on the covers of magazines or singing hits of the '80s. No-one Alison had been out with, either, had been particularly cheekboney, even Sparks, who, while not unattractive, had never had the kind of face you could cut yourself on.

This man did. And with the billowing raincoat, the sense of earnest and frightening and the cheekbones, he was a compelling sight. Alison found herself powerfully drawn to him and his inaudible speech ("Mumph! Mumph whumph dumph!"). Unfortunately, so did several other people, most of whom looked very annoyed and were themselves shouting. The difference was that they were shouting clearly and audibly, possibly because they were facing into the wind, possibly because they had had a lot of experience in shouting.



It only took a few seconds of shoving and brushing her sodden clothing against the small crowd for Alison to get near the front. There she could both see the cheekbones and hear the speech more clearly.

“There is something going on!” the tall man was shouting.

“Something wrong!”

“Sod off!” shouted someone.

“Be more specific!” someone else shouted.

“Something is missing in the world!” the tall man bellowed.

“Is it coherence?”

“Sod off!”

“Stop being so vague!”

“All right!” said the tall man. “I’ll tell you. For the last few months I have been searching for something - something,” he added hastily, “very specific indeed. I have searched museums, books, computers, everywhere I could think of...”

“Where was the last place you saw it?”

“Did you look under the bed?”

“And!” the tall man said, “I could not find it. Which proves to me that there is a conspiracy to prevent me finding it.”

“Good argument!”

“You’re mental!”

“Give him a chance!”

Alison was surprised to hear herself shouting the last phrase. The crowd looked pretty surprised, too, as they stopped shouting in order to stare at her.

“Let him speak. You know, and that,” she added, a little less emphatically. The crowd gave a collective shrug, but it was silent.

“Thank you!” said the tall man, and his cheekbones burned red as he caught Alison’s eye. “Yes! Unable as I was to find proof, I have constructed proof! Look at this!”

And the tall man took a matchbox from his pocket and tipped out the contents into his hand.

“See!” he said.

“No! Hold it up!”

The tall man held it up. It was most unimpressive. It looked to Alison like some sort of plastic beetle that someone with no modelling skill whatsoever had made, using bits of other, more well-made plastic beetles.

“Behold,” said the tall man, “the missing roach!”

There was a moment of silence.

“Bollocks!”

“Push him into a hedge!”

“I defend the right to free speech but that’s ridiculous!”

“Stick his beetle up his arse!”

“Yeah! Do that! That would be good!”

The crowd moved angrily forward, crushing Alison. The tall man looked alarmed. His fake beetle fell out of his hand and onto the ground. Alison heard its plastic back snap as the crowd surrounded the tall man and his box. She closed her eyes in panic.

“All right... that’s enough.”

An authoritative voice had cut in, calm and patrician and, more to the point, using a megaphone. The crowd, aware that megaphones are often followed by batons, stopped being a crowd and started being some disgruntled people off for a mutter in the park. Two policemen appeared, along with the holder of the megaphone. He was very tall, taller than the tall man. He was also, Alison was almost shocked to see, ridiculously thin.

“Joseph Kaye,” the very thin man was saying, still through the megaphone even though he was about a foot away now, “You are under arrest for breach of the peace. Get down off that box.”

“This is Speaker’s Corner!” Kaye shouted as the two policemen pulled him off the box. “I am entitled to speak!”

“Leave him alone!” Alison said, angered. “He’s harmless, isn’t he?”

“Let’s hope so,” said the very thin man. He paused. “Oh no,” he said. “Look, he’s got a knife.”

“I don’t see a knife,” said Alison, wondering why she was being so defiant.

“Well, I do,” said the thin man. “Looks like he’s going to the loony bin.”

Suddenly he stopped, and stared hard at Alison. He smiled, in a way that disturbed Alison to her core.

“Sorry about your boyfriend,” he said, and smiled again. Then he pushed past Alison out of his way and led the man he had called Joseph off. The last thing Alison heard Joseph Kaye say before a large white van appeared was, “How did you know my name?” (The last thing she heard after the van appeared was a policeman saying to the thin man, “Where’s my money?,” which was equally odd).

She stood in the park for some time after that. The sun was out at last and was belated drying everything out and making it clammy. Alison unhunched her damp shoulders and walked towards an exit. There was a small crunch under her feet. She looked down, to see that she had trodden on the two halves of Kaye’s insect.

Alison picked up the broken beetle and went home.

Sparks was dying. His body was running out of nutrients, liquids and the will to live. He was hallucinating in a moderate way, seeing not very thrilling visions involving cats and tinned food. His life, disappointingly, was failing entirely to flash past him, although he was getting bursts of a particularly unpleasant school football match where he fell into some mud early in the game.

His mind full of light and nonsense, his mouth confusingly at once both dry and tasting of mud, Sparks was not in a good way. There was no light at the end of the tunnel. There was, in fact, no tunnel. An angel was not standing in the mid distance, arms outstretched.

Sparks' last thought before his gummy eyes closed was: *Well, I can't say I wasted my life. Although, on second thoughts, I have.*

His first thought as his eyes were prised open was: *Oh great, them again.*

The helicopter rose above the unpopulated ground, buzzed a couple of trees that would never be chopped down or hugged or nested in, and flew over a fishless river. Inside, Sparks lay on an old mattress, by look, smell and texture the ex-property of the world's clumsiest tramp. He had something stuck in his arm, and he felt appalling. Groggily, he decided that the two facts must be connected.

“Stop that,” said Jeff.

Sparks ignored him. Ignoring Jeff was, he discovered, a new pleasure. He tugged at the thing in his arm.

Jeff said, “Oh for God’s sake. Leave that drip alone. It’s feeding you.”

“What?” said Sparks.

“The drip. It’s feeding - why do I have to repeat everything? Jesus, a whole world with no people and it gets you. The new Adam.”

“Mnuh,” said Sparks, who had now established that the thing in his arm was indeed a drip. The thought of having a drip in his arm made him feel queasy.

“Nearly there!” said a cheerful voice from the front of the helicopter which Sparks guessed must be Duncan’s.

“I am going to strap you down,” said Jeff.

He did so easily, because Sparks was too weak to resist. Then Jeff sat on the other side of the helicopter and strapped himself in. Then the helicopter went through something, and Sparks passed out in the usual inevitable manner, only this time strapped down, in a helicopter.

Alison was having a dream. In it, a man in a flapping overcoat was standing in the park shouting ‘There’s something missing!’ at an

audience of tall thin men in bowler hats. They were all booing him, but Alison found his words deeply moving. She woke up feeling very odd indeed, and made herself a cup of tea. The tea, despite being muddy-looking and not very milky, reminded Alison of the man in the overcoat whose name, she suddenly remembered, was Joseph Kaye. Alison went downstairs and got her post. All of her post, which was mostly bills and a catalogue from something horrific involving knitwear, reminded her of Joseph Kaye.

Alison wondered what was wrong with her. Then she wondered what Joseph Kaye was doing.

At the exact moment that Alison was wondering what Joseph Kaye was doing, about two hundred miles away Joseph Kaye was also wondering what he, Joseph Kaye, was doing. Kaye was sitting in the office of a man called Doctor Allman. Doctor Allman had a piece of wood on his desk with CHIEF DOCTOR engraved on it. Doctor Allman also had a round head, and a small goatee beard. This caused him to resemble an egg that liked jazz.

Doctor Allman was staring at Kaye with wide-open eyes.

“I’m sorry I’m staring at you with wide-open eyes,” said Doctor Allman, “but I’m experimenting with contact lenses.”

From the way Doctor Allman said “experimenting with contact lenses”, it sounded to Kaye like he was grafting tiny mouse heads onto the contact lenses or making the contact lenses smoke cigarettes. Kaye wondered if he was being unduly paranoid. On the one hand, he reasoned, he did have a tendency to see conspiracies and evil everywhere. On the other, he was in a high security mental hospital.

“Why am I in here?” said Kaye, as Doctor Allman struggled to stop his eyes spinning in their sockets.

“Because you committed a crime,” said Doctor Allman, “And because the balance of your mind was disturbed when you did it.”

He paused. “Not that you’re mad, of course. We don’t use that word here.”

“I know I’m not mad,” said Kaye.

“That’s right,” said Doctor Allman. “That’s right. You’re not mad. You’re just - ”

“What?” said Kaye. “If I’m not mad, what am I?”

“As I said,” said Doctor Allman, “We don’t like to use the word mad.”

“What word do you like to use?” said Kaye, feeling his ears get red. “And is it that I’m not mad or you just don’t like the word mad?”

“Well,” said Doctor Allman. “You’re not mad. No. Not at all. You’re just - ”



Doctor Allman searched his mental vocabulary. It was a small one and the only synonym for ‘mad’ it contained appeared to be ‘nuts’.

Kaye sat, waiting to be told what he was if he wasn’t mad.

“You’re - ” said Doctor Allman, unhelpfully. Then suddenly he shouted, “Jesus Christ!” and thrust his fingers into his eyes.

“I’m Jesus Christ?” said Kaye. This was a new, and worrying, development.

Doctor Allman wasn’t listening. “Jesus Christ,” he repeated. “These bastards are driving me insane.”

He pulled a contact lens case out of a drawer, dropped the lenses into it, and put on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Then, composure regained, he turned his red and flooded gaze back at Kaye.

“When I said driving me insane,” he said, “I didn’t mean that in a clinical sense. I meant that - ”

“I want to go back to my cell and be sedated now, please,” said Joseph Kaye.

“Well, I want to get out of this fat-suit,” said Doctor Allman, “But we don’t always get what we want, do we?”

Joseph Kaye was feeling better. He had decided that there was nothing to worry about. If he was mad (and given the evidence - belief in

imaginary beetles, over-reacting to situations, being arrested and put in a loony bin - he was mad), then everything was fine. He was mad, and he was in a mental hospital, which was how it should be. If he was not mad, then at least he was right. There was something wrong in the world, something to do with a cockroach, whatever a cockroach was, and it was clearly his duty to find out what it was - 'it' being both the cockroach and the thing that was wrong with the world.

Either way, Kaye was reasonably content. He found that his new mood was a calmer one and he was no longer so angry, even without eating the little pills he kept finding not ground up properly in his meals. And his new bifurcate approach of treating every situation in two ways - how would he react to something if he was mad, and how would he react if he wasn't - was extremely easy to maintain. If he wasn't mad, Kaye decided, he would continue his quest, assume that everyone was out to get him, and try to regain his freedom. If he was mad, equally, he could do what he wanted to, being nuts, and doing what he wanted to in this case meant, again, that he would continue his quest, assume that everyone was out to get him, and try to regain his freedom.

His plan was so clear that sometimes Kaye wondered just how fine the line between being mad and being not mad actually was. Nevertheless, it was a good plan, and Kaye decided to get on with it. To this end, he applied for permission to use the library. This was refused, on

the grounds that Kaye was mad, if not in so many words, so instead he applied to become a trusty. Kaye's extensive reading had told him that in institutions, sometimes inmates, mad or not, were allowed to hold minor positions. From the point of view of staff and warders, these positions were too dull or unpaid to be worth holding, but from the point of view of the inmates, anything was better than sitting in your cell all day pretending to be interested in what flies do.

After a day or two, Kaye was taken to see Doctor Allman.

"Do you know what a trusty does?" said the doctor.

"Yes," said Kaye.

"Good," said the doctor. "Because if you didn't, and you were as well read as we know you to be, that would mean you're lying. And lying is in many ways a form of denial. And we can't give positions of trust to liars. Unless," the doctor added after a moment's thought, "we wanted the liars to feel that we trusted them with responsibility. Even though we don't because they're liars."

Kaye nodded, hoping to impress Doctor Allman with his sanity and honesty. This was a waste of time, as the doctor was studying a fly to see if it was looking at him funny.

"Why do you want to be a trusty?" said Doctor Allman, taking off his glasses and pulling a small contact lens case out of a drawer

“Because I want to prove that there is such a thing as a cockroach and thus prove that unknown forces are controlling our, and in particular my, lives, or life,” said Kaye. He had decided to tell the truth, as that would make him look mad, even if he was, or wasn’t.

“Wow, you’re as nutty as a fruit cake,” said Doctor Allman. “Which is what a layman would say,” he added quickly. “But I am not a layman. I can tell from your remarks that you are unwell in the head.” He shoved a contact lens into his eye. It fell out again.

“So can I be a trusty?” said Kaye.

“I should say not,” said the doctor, patting his jacket in search of the lens. “Being a trusty is a responsible position, given the limits of being a patient in a booby... a mental hos... an institution for cureitude. And you are clearly too... too brain-seasick to be given responsibility.”

“Oh,” said Kaye. He felt his small, painful world get smaller, and more painful.

“However, I am a kind man, if not too lucky with my contact lenses,” said the doctor. “I shall instead let you use the library. You can read books but not lend them out to other people. Or chew them.”

“But you wouldn’t let me use the library before” said Kaye.

“Ah yes,” said the doctor. He looked like he was thinking. “That was to teach you that life isn’t a picnic. ”

“Thank you,” said Kaye. “I suspected life might not be. What with being in a mental hospital and everything.”

“Booby hatch,” said Doctor Allman absently as Kaye was escorted back to his cell.

Kaye’s membership of the library was a pleasant thing. Every three days he was allowed to leave his cell, cross the tree-lined courtyard to the admin block, sit in his own corner, and read as many books as he liked. He could even take out three library books to read in his cell. As the institution had once been a large country house belonging to a vicious but literate earl, and the library had remained intact when the country house had become a lunatic asylum (with the vicious earl its first inmate, which was neat and tidy), it was a superb library for a bughouse.

After several months, Kaye had hardly begun to work his way through the fiction section. He had become well acquainted with several novels of the boys’ public school variety, some of which were unusually heavy on the punishment-of-innocent-victims side, and he was reading all the classics of 20th century literature that he could find. There were quite a few of these, as the library liked to confiscate inmates’ books for their own stock (which explained the large and perhaps inappropriate haul of

serial killer biographies, histories of the Third Reich and novelettes about men coming to terms with fatherhood).

What Kaye was not doing, and this was the beating heart of his plan, was reading any non-fiction. Now that he had decided that being mad or not mad made no practical difference to his life, Kaye was feeling quite clear about things. He was particularly clear about one thing above all else; that, if he started taking out books with names like *A Universal History of Weird Insects or How Mysterious Beings Have Lied To Us*, the authorities would infer that he was still mad, and therefore could not be let out into the world to live in a sleeping bag on a street corner. If, however, Kaye developed a new interest in books about doctors who have their children kidnapped and so forth, they would conclude that he was all right in the head, and let him go home.

It was a good plan, and Kaye's faith in it was confirmed one day when, taking out a novel where an idealistic young architect realises the SS are somehow running his local yacht club, he saw the library trusty write the book title down on a piece of paper headed FTAO DOCTOR ALLMAN. Kaye was being monitored.

"I have struck the first blow," he said to the library trusty, who, being a former axe murderer used to interpreting random words as signals to go culling, spent the rest of the morning in a state of confusion.

Doctor Allman rubbed his lens-filled eyes and tried to focus on the list in front of him. It was a list of some of the most popular novels of recent years, all of which had been taken out of the library by Joseph Kaye in the past few months. Several of them Kaye had kept for weeks and then taken out again apparently to re-read. This had happened so often that other inmates had complained.

Allman read and re-read the list. There was no mention of any kind of insect or conspiracies. He fumbled about his desk for a telephone, found one or something of a similar size, and dialled.

“Hello?” he said. “It’s Doctor Allman. Yes. Yes, quite safe. Yes.”

He rubbed his eyes again as he listened to the voice as the other end.

“True,” said Doctor Allman, “But in that case you can always kill him. Yes.”

Kaye was given a lot of tests. One of them was of an inkblot, folded over to make it symmetrical. DOES THIS INKBLOT REMIND YOU OF ANYTHING?, it said underneath. The inkblot looked like a beetle. It had six legs and antennae. Kaye wrote IT LOOKS LIKE MY MOTHER next to it. The next inkblot also looked like a beetle. Kaye

wrote IT LOOKS LIKE A BEAUTIFUL FLOWER next to it. The next eight inkblots also looked like beetles. Kaye wrote anything next to them but the word BEETLE.

On the final page, there was a photograph of a beetle. WHAT IS THIS? said the caption. Kaye stared at it for a few minutes, then wrote A BEE.

Joseph Kaye's cell door opened. A carer appeared with Kaye's belongings in a box and a suit on a hanger.

"Blimey," said the carer. "Look at this suit. You must have been in here for fifty years or something."

Kaye took his things in silence and changed into his suit.

"Is it a retro thing?" asked the carer, who sensed he had been tactless. "Oh," he added, as if it had just occurred to him, which, him being not too sharp, it was, "You've been released."

Kaye smiled, thinly.

"Good," he said, "Follow me" and led the way from the cell towards the main door.

"Why am I following you?" said the carer, "I work here". But he followed him anyway, and when Kaye paused at the gates of the institution, let him out back into the world.



Joseph Kaye's mother was emptying a lot of cold tea leaves into a bin when the back door opened and her son appeared.

"I'm home, mother," said Joseph as his mother dropped the teapot.

"Joseph," said his mother. "Are you all right?"

His father appeared, drawn like an earthenware ghoul to the sound of a breaking teapot. "It's him" he said. "The madman. What do you want, madman?"

"Leave him alone," said Kaye's mother. "He's been ill. Come in, Joseph. I'll make you a cup of... a cup of coffee, I suppose."

"Huh," said Joseph Kaye's father. "You wouldn't make me a cup of coffee if I'd gone mad."

"They came and took your books away," said Joseph Kaye's mother. "And your computer. They said it was for charity."

Joseph Kaye sat at the kitchen table. It felt all right to be home.

His father appeared in the doorway again. "Oh," he said. "I've arranged for you to have your old job back."

"Thank you, father," said Joseph Kaye. "That's very good of you."

His father looked surprised at this emotional outburst.

"That's all right," he said. "Just buy your mother a new teapot."

Back at Joseph's workplace, some people were pleased to see him. This was because they were new to the office and hadn't been there when Joseph lost it. The people who had been there when he lost it were really hacked off.

"Nice to have you back," said his old boss, who didn't mean it.

"The place hasn't been the same without you," said his head of department, leaving out the end of the sentence, which was "because you are a nutcase."

"We kept your desk exactly as you left it," said his workmate, ushering Kaye to a beaten-up metal and wooden thing with legs and piles of paper strewn all over, under and round it. "Only we've removed your computer."

"Get these done by four o'clock or you're out on your ear," said a man from accounting.

Kaye sat down and began working. By half past three he was done for the day.

"These are fine," said the man from accounting. "Good to have you back, Kaye."

Kaye tidied his desk and went home.

"He didn't mention roach cocks once," said the head of Kaye's department to his boss.

Joseph Kaye's work routine became gradually more and more normal. He got up in the morning, had breakfast with his parents, went to work on the train, and came home again in the evening. His life returned to its old path so much that his father stopped grunting at him and his mother started asking him when he was going to get a girlfriend.

After a few weeks of establishing this pattern, Joseph Kaye broke it. Telling his parents that he was planning to investigate a particularly enticing new chess club in the area, Kaye instead went back to the main library.

"Oh no," said the head librarian when he saw Kaye at the counter. "Please don't hurt me."

"I didn't hurt you last time," said Kaye. "I just locked you in a cupboard. It wasn't my fault a load of books and cleaning equipment fell on you."

"Well, technically it was," the librarian said, and then stopped. Perhaps it would be better to not pursue this line of complaint. After all, the man had been sent to the funny farm. "I trust you are a reformed character?"

"Yes," said Kaye. "They did terrible things to me in there. Mostly involving small, sharp hammers."

“Good,” said the head librarian before he could stop himself. “I mean - ”

“No,” said Kaye. “You’re right. I deserved it, especially the sharper hammers. And I have come back to apologise. What with my obsession with... with those things, and the harm I caused you, I feel very bad. And sorry. I’m sorry,” he added. “I really am.”

The head librarian nodded, trying to look sympathetic. He wasn’t at all a sympathetic man, but he liked being apologised to.

“Would you like to be reinstated as a full member of the library?” he asked, with a reptile’s kindness.

“Yes,” said Kaye. “And to use the computer facilities.”

Joseph Kaye sat in the computer room. Everyone else had gone home. He had about ten minutes before the library was closed. He closed the files he had been pretending to work on and went online. He used the head librarian’s password, which he had written down earlier (the head librarian was not the sort of person who heeds warnings like DO NOT WRITE YOUR PASSWORD DOWN ON A BIT OF PAPER AND LEAVE IT LYING AROUND FOR ANYONE TO SEE) and he had a computer textbook with him, which told him how to remove any obvious trace of where he had been.

He was ready. He cracked his knuckles, winced, and typed in a word.

When Sparks woke up again, he was in a very nice restaurant. Tinkling piano music wafted around the slightly scented air, low lights reflected off crystal wineglasses, and to either side of him sat Jeff and Duncan, each behind porcelain plates gently heaped with expensive food.

“Why haven’t I got any food?” said Sparks. By now his life had become so confusing that asking questions like “Why am I in a restaurant now when I was in a helicopter before?” or “Oughtn’t you be murdering me now?” was nothing more than a big hairy waste of time. Whereas asking “Why haven’t I got any food?” was, in comparison, amazingly practical.

Jeff didn’t answer. He was busy eating as quickly as possible. Duncan put his fork down.

“Because you’ve been on a drip for two days and rich food might kill you,” he said. “Also because Jeff doesn’t like you.”

“Two days?” said Sparks, unwillingly falling back into the whole pointless quest for sanity thing. “I’ve been on a drip for two days?”

“You were starving,” said Duncan, as Jeff was involved in not so much swallowing as swallowed by some sort of difficult scallop thing.

“So we put you on a drip. So you can’t eat this delicious meal, which is a shame, because it’s very expensive and because where we are it’s also very hygienic.”

“Why is it very hygienic?” Sparks asked, but at that moment, Jeff grabbed Duncan from behind and started rabbit-punching his throat.

“Heimlich manoeuvre,” he said, as Jeff began to choke.

“That’s not the Heimlich manoeuvre,” said Sparks. “For one, you’re not meant to punch people in the throat. And for two, it’s supposed to make people stop choking, not start.”

Jeff let go of Duncan, who instantly began choking some more and massaging his throat.

“He talks too much,” said Jeff. “Here, have his dinner.”

Jeff pushed Duncan’s dinner over. Sparks, despite feeling sorry for Duncan (despite their previous history), was extremely hungry. He ate Duncan’s dinner.

*Hygienic, eh?* Sparks thought to himself as he chewed massively. He wondered if it was a clue. He hoped not; Sparks was rubbish with clues.

After dinner, Jeff and Duncan took Sparks outside for a cigar. Even Sparks thought this was absurd. As they walked around the restaurant’s

pleasant grounds, Jeff occasionally stopping to sniff a gardenia or whatever the big plants with fat leaves were, Duncan occasionally stopping to rub his crumpled trachea, Sparks began to suspect that something was up. On previous occasions when he had met Jeff and Duncan, they had often tried to hurt him, or kill him, or make him spend the rest of his life in a loony bin. Now they were rescuing him and feeding him, or at least letting him eat Duncan's dinner. And now, right now, Jeff was actually lighting Sparks' cigar, which was apparently a very expensive Cuban one named after a Shakespeare play ("Is it Hamlet?" Sparks asked, and got an unpleasant look from Jeff). Unless the cigar contained a bomb or thousands of tiny, flame-fearing spiders ready to run into Sparks' mouth and sting him, Sparks had a feeling that he wasn't going to be killed.

"The fabric of the universe is about to be screwed up by one man," said Jeff.

"Thank you," said Sparks, puffing fiercely at his cigar.

"Pardon?", he said, his thoughts catching up with the sudden conversational shift. "The fabric of the what did?"

"The fabric of the universe is about to be screwed up by one man," said Jeff again.

"Oh," said Sparks, suspecting that "Oh" might be the wrong answer. Jeff took Sparks' cigar and threw it into a bush. "Oh," said Jeff,

in a mimicking voice. Sparks' suspicion was right. He tried to look more comprehending. "I see," he said. Jeff looked at him, hard.

"No, I don't see," said Sparks. "I don't see at all. I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Good," said Jeff, nodding thinly. He looked at Duncan, who began scrabbling in the bush for the cigar.

"The universe is a very delicate thing, you know," Jeff said, as Duncan dusted some crap off the cigar and returned it to Sparks. "All these worlds exist in a - "

"Delicate balance?" said Sparks, finding some insect grit on the end of his cigar and flicking it off.

Jeff shook his head. "He's trying not to say 'delicate' twice," explained Duncan.

"These worlds exist in a complex state of equilibrium," said Jeff.

"Well done!" said Duncan.

"And," said Jeff, looking pained and triumphant at the same time like a dictator with piles, "if anything should happen to throw these worlds out of kilter - "

"Off balance," explained Duncan.

"Then that fabric, the fabric of the universe, that I mentioned before, would be ripped," said Jeff. "The universe would be irreparably harmed."



“You can’t mend a broken egg,” said Duncan.

“And that’s what’s about to happen,” Jeff said.

“Someone’s going to mend an egg?” said Sparks.

“No,” said Jeff. “Remember this sentence? ‘The fabric of the universe is about to be screwed up by one man’. That’s what I have been talking about for the last two minutes.”

“Hang on,” said Sparks. “I’m still not up to speed on this.”

“Bloody hell,” said Jeff. “I wish we’d brought a dog. At least you can train a dog. Look. Someone is messing about with the - I can’t believe I’m going to say this again - the fabric of the universe. On this world. Here. And this is going to affect not just this world but others too. I can’t explain how but it is.”

“No” said Sparks. “I got that. That was easy. What I don’t get - and don’t roll your eyes at me, please - what I don’t get is when we first met, when I beat you up and all that, you told me that this couldn’t happen.”

“What?” said Jeff.

“When I beat you up,” said Sparks, enjoying the reiteration no end. “You told me all that thing about someone stepping on a butterfly and changing history was nonsense.”

“No I didn’t!” said Jeff.

“Yes you did. You said all you got if you did that was butterfly nadders on your shoe. In fact,” said Sparks, “You said you did it.”

“He’s right,” said Duncan. “He’s absolutely right, you know.”

“Shut up,” Jeff said. “All right,” he added after a moment, “I might have said that.”

“You did say that,” said Sparks.

“I did say that,” said Jeff. “But it’s different.”

“Why?” said Sparks. “Because I was beating you up?”

“Stop saying that,” said Jeff. “No, it’s different because - oh, you tell him.” Jeff turned to Duncan. “If I have to say ‘fabric of the universe’ again, I’ll split down the middle.”

“All right,” said Duncan affably. “I don’t mind. Right,” he said.

“What Jeff means is that if you do something in a world that’s... that’s of that world, it’s OK. But if you do something in a world that’s not of that world, it’s not. OK.”

“Oh,” said Sparks. “No, I don’t get it.”

“Flaming gumboils,” said Jeff, a little heatedly. “Listen, you twit, it’s really simple.”

He leaned in towards Sparks, his thin nostrils flaring alarmingly. He breathed heavily and spoke slowly.

“Me go to world,” said Jeff. “Me see world. Me see local flora and fauna. Me tread on local flora and fauna. No harm. But! Me am local flora and fauna. Me see me. Me go mad, tell everyone, ‘Look! Thin man from other world!’ Fabric of universe collapse.”

“But I saw you,” said Sparks. “I saw you, and I beat you up, and the fabric of the blah didn’t change.”

“Because you didn’t tell anyone,” said Duncan. “Because you didn’t seem to care very much.”

“You are a moronic exception,” said Jeff. “No offence.”

“What?” said Sparks.

“For generations, we’ve been taught, don’t let the locals find out there’s such a thing as the Society, don’t go round telling them you come from another world, all that. And why? Because the theory is once the locals find out, they’ll want to join in. They’ll all be noncing about an infinite amount of worlds, muddying the waters and making the search for God’s Perfect World impossible,” said Jeff. “And what if some fool stumbles on God’s Perfect World, and messes it up?”

“It doesn’t bear thinking about,” said Duncan.

“But instead, we meet you,” said Jeff. “And while you’re a pain in the arse, trolling round like a drunk in a barrel making a fool of yourself, you haven’t told anyone what you’re doing.”

“I told Alison,” said Sparks. “In the bear world. And I told my mum, in the world where they thought I was a serial killer.”

“Anyone important,” said Jeff, caustically.

“Oh,” said Sparks.

“So, you’re a sap. You’re like some kind of homeless person of the universe, going from world to world not making much sense and definitely not having any impact.”

“Thanks,” said Sparks. He didn’t mean it.

“Not at all,” said Jeff. “I mean, it’s almost an achievement. Discovering a way to travel between different realities, involving yourself in those realities, and having absolutely no effect on those worlds. It’s like building an atom bomb and then forgetting where you left it.”

“Which actually happened on one world ” said Duncan. “You see - ”

“Be quiet,” said Jeff. “So there you are, Mister Useless. We had to stop you, of course, because that’s part of our job, but you were pretty low on our damage limitation list.”

“Have we got a damage limitation list?” said Duncan.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “I expect. Anyway, you’re not the issue. You’re not the problem. You’re an idiot. Someone else is the problem.”

“Who?” said Sparks, disappointed to learn that he wasn’t the problem.

“Someone who isn’t an idiot,” said Jeff. “Someone who’s very close to working it all out. And someone who’s more dangerous because he’s going mad.”

“Are you sure it’s not me?” said Sparks, hopefully.

“Dear Lord,” said Jeff, rubbing his eyes. “Listen, I’ve got a migraine and I’m knackered. Also I don’t think your mind can take in too much information in one go, so we’re going to take you up to a luxury hotel room and lock you in. Then we’ll do the rest of the explaining.”

“Will there be - ”

“Yes,” said Jeff. “There’ll be a movie channel in the hotel. And a mini bar. And room service.”

He turned to Duncan and sighed. “These people, they’re so predictable.”

*Ha!* thought Sparks, ‘*will there be a phone?*’ is what I meant. He felt he had achieved a small victory.

*Good news about the mini bar and the movie channel, though,* he added to himself.

Joseph Kaye went to the library. He was going to spend an hour looking on the library index system for subjects which could in no way be connected to cockroaches or bugs or even things with more than four legs.

He walked into the library, nodded at the head librarian, who instinctively ducked, as though Kaye’s forehead was firing brain-mulching rays at him, and went into the reference section. The reference

section was in many ways the beating heart of the library. It was also in many other ways a really boring place. Built at a time when library architects were clearly despotic figures with an imperial bent, the room was a huge copy of some sort of Roman palace, all decked out in wood and marble, with a huge clock over the atlas section. As the clock was rather noisy, the hands had been removed, giving the room a literally timeless flavour. Time, Kaye decided, did not so much stand still in this room as lie on its back with its legs sticking up in the air.

Rows and rows of, inevitably, bookshelves surrounded the room; the cases were heavy and glass-covered and contained no book that was not leather-bound and embossed in gilt. Even books that had never been leather-bound and embossed in gilt, like *The World Guide To Plumbing* and *World War I Made Simple*, had been rebound so as not to stand out. Kaye hated this room. It was like a court run by books, juries of books lining the room, a public gallery of non-fiction behind him and in front of him a really attractive girl.

The really attractive girl didn't fit into Kaye's simile of a court made of books, largely because Kaye had never seen her in the library before. She was sitting down with an enormous book on the desk in front of her, flicking through its giant pages with some difficulty and frowning. Kaye was intrigued; he affected to saunter past and look over her shoulder. As he sauntered ineptly up to the girl - difficult in a library,

where the atmosphere dampens sauntering like a bursting dam on a cotton swab - she must have heard him, because she closed the book and turned round, and looked shocked.

“Oh!” said Alison. “It’s you.”

Kaye stopped sauntering and stood, awkwardly and confused.

“Pardon?” he said.

“I... I’ve seen you before,” said Alison. “In the, in the... somewhere else.”

“In the somewhere else?” said Kaye. “What a nice expression. Is it Canadian?”

Immediately he said it, Kaye knew it wasn’t Canadian, and wished he hadn’t spoken.

“Yes, it is,” said Alison quickly. “No. No, it’s not. No, I saw you somewhere and didn’t want to say where, in case you were embarrassed.”

“Oh,” said Kaye, desperately trying not to say anything stupid again. “Where - no, you already said you didn’t want to say where.”

Something occurred to him.

“It was in the park, wasn’t it?” he said. “When I was - ”

“Speaking,” said Alison.

“Being arrested,” said Kaye. “But it’s all right. I was in a mental hospital. But it’s fine. I was cured. I am cured.”

“I never thought you were mad,” Alison said, sliding her book under a newspaper.

“I did,” said Kaye. “I thought I was mad. Now I don’t mind either way.”

“I think people who don’t mind if they’re mad are generally not mad,” said Alison, and immediately looked surprised. She had never actually had an opinion on the subject before, but now suddenly she did.

Kaye was looking at her in a thoughtful way.

“Yes,” he said. “You may be right.”

Now Alison was looking at Kaye in a thoughtful way.

“Is there an unpleasant cafeteria attached to this place that we can go to?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” said Kaye. “I know just the one.”

The cafeteria was incredibly unpleasant, perhaps because it had something to do with the government. It was a windowless room on the third floor of the library building. No-one was entirely sure why a room on the third floor should have no windows, unless it was to stop diners seeing people outside eating nice food, running pell-mell out of the building and grabbing the sandwiches out of their very mouths. Instead of windows, there was a mural on one side of a very big pie, painted by



someone who had clearly never seen a pie before, and believed pies were cylindrical and had PIE carved on them to aid identification. This mural had cracked and peeled over the years, making the pie look as though it was made of flaky paint pastry, and sometimes bits of it would fall into the actual pies on the counter, where it made no difference to the taste. (“Probably improve it,” said diners, knowing that it didn’t).

The other wall was even worse. It was an enormous tropical fish tank. This might in another venue have been a thoughtful and elegant addition to the decor, but here, in this grim cafeteria, it wasn’t, basically. The tank, dimly lit in an already dimly lit room, was filled with miniature ruined castles and galleons, round which really miserable-looking fish swam like finny depressives. The effect was of some horrible marine graveyard prowled by unhappy giant fish, most of whom could actually see bigger, dead fish behind the cafeteria counter. Some of them had possibly made the connection between themselves and the dead fish, and imagined themselves in hell.

These were, at any rate, the chipper thoughts that normally kept a smile away from Joseph Kaye’s face as he queued for dead fish or pie with bits of paint in it. But today he found the fish tank attractive and even cute. The pie mural looked almost accurate, for a cylinder. And the staff, who normally looked as though they had been conscripted into a

terrible army of filthy caterers who would live and die in the cafeteria, looked like a jolly bunch who loved their work.

They weren't, of course. Nor was anything in the cafeteria remotely pleasant. However, Kaye felt otherwise, and the cause of this, he suddenly realised, was standing next to him, holding a tray and saying, "What's wrong with that mural?"

Kaye was disconcerted. He had rarely felt attracted to someone before, and if he had, he had never been this strongly affected by their presence. He found everything Alison said incredibly interesting, he found her clothes deeply fascinating, and there was something about her wrists that was so astonishingly appealing that he was surprised the whole cafeteria wasn't crowded round Alison shouting, "Hey! Look at these wrists! Someone bring a camera! No, wait - cancel that! Someone bring a sculptor! We've got to get these wrists immortalised!"

Kaye wanted to tell Alison all of these things, although he suspected she might be a bit alarmed by the wrist part. Instead, he smiled and said, "It's meant to be a pie."

Kaye and Alison sat down. They looked at their fish, then at the fish tank and looked at each other instead.

After some time, Alison said, "Tell me about yourself." Then she looked embarrassed. "Sorry," she said. "I know you've had a difficult time, what with being - "

"Put inside a mental hospital," said Kaye, without rancour.

"Put inside a mental hospital," agreed Alison. There was some silence.

"Sorry," she said.

"I know," said Kaye, trying to sound jolly, and realising that sounding jolly meant sounding like Santa Claus, so he stopped, and sounded pleasant instead. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Alison leapt at this suggestion as though it recast the whole concept of originality.

"Well," she said, enthusiastically. "My name is Alison, I live locally... I don't have a job... my boyfriend was killed by a bus."

She fell silent again, and looked at her fish.

"Oh dear," she said. "What a cheerful conversation."

But Joseph Kaye was looking extremely cheerful.

"Can you use a computer?" he said.

The job interview was an unusual one. It took place in a pub, two hundred yards away from the library, and consisted entirely of the following searching interrogation.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Yes please. Can I have a gin and tonic?”

“The job’s yours.”

“What if I had asked for a different drink? Pernod and black?”

“The job would still be yours. Would you like to go to the pictures tomorrow night?”

“I don’t think anyone says ‘the pictures’ any more.”

“Sorry. I don’t get out much.”

“Then we’d better go to the pictures tomorrow.”

### THIRD INTERLUDE

Mark and Peter stood outside the darkened and closed-up room. Gary threw the great doors open and they filed in with the others.

“Do you have to do that, Gary?” said Mark.

“What?” said Gary. He blinked in the dark.

“Throw the doors open. Why can’t you just push them?”

“We always throw the doors open.”

“It’s not even as though they’re particularly big doors. if they were great huge iron things with I don’t know carvings on, fair enough. But they’re only what? about the size of office doors.”

“It’s a tradition,” said Peter.

“How is it a tradition?” said Mark. He pulled his white robe down where it was riding up. “We’ve only ever done this once before.”

“Well, we threw the doors open that time,” said the third person, who was called Peter.

“How do you know? Last time was over four hundred years ago.”

“I read it.”

“No you f - ”

A loud stomping interrupted Mark, as if made by an oak pole on a marble floor, which is what it was. All the lights in the room came on, illuminating about a hundred very skinny men and two reasonably sized doors. (“Much better doors.” “Ssh!”). The lights revealed that the person doing the stomping with the pole on the floor was, unusually in this gathering, uniquely even, neither skinny nor a man. It was a large woman. She was standing in the middle of the skinny men, a hefty magnet drawing in a lot of anorexic iron filings

“Welcome,” said the large woman, “to this extraordinary meeting of the Society.”

A drone of excitement filled the room at ear level. The large woman banged the pole on the floor again.

“For the second time only in five hundred years, we have been compelled to meet,” she said. “For the second time in five hundred years, all of the members of the Society who are not otherwise engaged are gathered here to discuss a new problem. A problem of such urgency that it could destroy our mission.”

“Do you mean,” said a voice, “do you mean the search for God’s Perfect World?”

“No, the search for a new kind of badger,” said a voice. A tall man appeared behind the others. The large woman stood back to let him in.

“Welcome, my friends,” said the man, who had an air of affable smugness, like a vicar who has done well on the Stock Exchange.

“Welcome, Alan,” said the others.

“I was being ironic when I mentioned the badger,” said Alan. “Our friend is quite right, if a bit slow. The quest for God’s Perfect World is indeed in peril. May I take the staff please, Mrs Reeves?”

The large woman gave Alan the pole, and he tapped it lightly on the floor. The lights went down and a screen appeared. Two speakers rose up from beneath the floor to bookend the screen.

“This must have cost a fortune,” said Peter.

“Shh!” said Gary.

The speakers began to play ominous music. The screen chattered with numbers and then the numbers resolved themselves into a gargantuan image of a human face. The face was Joseph Kaye's.

"Gentlemen and Mrs Reeves," said Alan. "We have a major problem. This man - "

He stopped.

"By the way," he said. "Has anyone seen Jeff and Duncan lately?"

Later, in his room, as workmen took the television away, Sparks went through what Jeff had told him. Some of it he even wrote down on hotel notepaper to make it clearer. After a while, he drew some stick men and a Venn diagram to see if that would help. It did, although later Sparks thought he might have regretted the Venn diagram as not having been strictly necessary.

Jeff's points were, essentially, these:

- 1) The person who was about to cause all the trouble did not know that he or she was about to cause all the trouble. Despite this, they still had to be stopped. ("Like in that DVD," said Sparks. "Shut up," Jeff said.)
- 2) The trouble this person was about to cause concerned the Society.
- 3) The trouble concerning the Society affected more than one world.

At this point, Sparks had a good point to make.

"Why?" was his point.

"Because there is a Society on more than one world," said Duncan.

"And all these worlds are different, but on them the Society is the constant. We've been active for so long that the search for God's Perfect World is taking place on a myriad - "



“Hang on,” said Sparks, feeling like an incredibly clever philosophy professor, and thus wishing he hadn’t prefaced his point with “hang on”. “You said there are an infinite amount of worlds.”

“Is,” said Jeff. “Is an infinite amount, yes.”

“Well, therefore then,” said Sparks, “there must be a load of worlds where there is no Society.”

“Yes, you bozo,” said Jeff, a tad warmly. “But we’re not concerning with saving the Society on worlds where there is no Society, are we? That would be stupid. We’re concerned with damage limitation. We want to save the Society to further its purpose.”

“But there must be worlds where the Society’s purpose isn’t what you want,” said Sparks.

It went quiet. Duncan pretended to be looking at chutney.

“What?” said Jeff. He sounded cold and hard, even for Jeff.

“If there is an infinite amount of worlds, then in some of them the Society must have deviated from its purpose,” said Sparks. “Because that’s what infinity does, right?”

He stopped. He wasn’t very comfortable with the infinite, and Jeff was giving him a deeply superior and cold and hard look.

“No,” said Jeff. “The Society exists outside these worlds as well as on them. Therefore - ”

“But -” said Sparks.

“Therefore the Society will always have a common purpose,” said Jeff. “I mean,” he said, a horrible laugh gurgling out of him like mud in a toilet, “There isn’t, there isn’t a world where the Society is trying to find a nice golf course. So - ”

“But,” Sparks said again.

“So to return to my main point,” said Jeff, adding some foamy spittle to the gurgling mud-toilet laugh, “If this person - this person that we’re supposed to be talking about - is causing trouble to the Society in this world, he’ll be doing it on other worlds - and - ”

Jeff held up a hand to silence Sparks. “And as the Society also exists outside the worlds it exists on, then...”

He looked around and wiped his hand on the grass.

“Then we’ve all had it,” he said.

“So what’s it got to do with me?” said Sparks.

“Um,” said Duncan. “You’re the only one who can save us.”

“I’m the only one who can save you?” said Sparks.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “How sad is that?”

The workmen left, then came back for the minibar and the telephone. Sparks crumpled up his diagrams and lay back on his pillow.

Joseph Kaye crumpled up his diagrams and lay back on his pillow. He had spent the last hour trying to draw the insect in his head, something he did every night. But now he found he was tired of drawing and wanted instead to think about recent events (and part of him was relieved not to have to obsess about bugs and beetles for once).

So Joseph Kaye lay back and thought about Alison.

Sparks lay back and thought about Alison. He found he hadn't thought of her for a while, presumably, he presumed, because he was in life-threatening circumstances on an alien world (and he wondered in what way this world would be alien, maybe the cars were powered by dandruff or something unpleasant like that). He wondered if there was an Alison on this world (he made a mental note to look, as soon as he had got away from Jeff and Duncan, found a computer and got out through a portal, not really intending to participate in the skinny men's plan, which sounded to him both complicated and dull).

Sparks stopped thinking about Alison and started thinking about Jeff and Duncan's plan. They wanted him to stop someone doing something. This wasn't surprising, as Jeff and Duncan were exactly the type of person who was always trying to stop someone doing something.

What did engage Sparks' interest was how he was meant to do the stopping, and who he was meant to stop.

He hoped it wasn't someone he liked off the television.

Alison went to the supermarket for a late night bout of fruit shopping. As she stood in line, basket in hand, she thought about Joseph Kaye. Since Spark's death in the bus crash, she had avoided thinking about men, partly because this was generally unproductive, and partly because she had been too sad. Now she found she was feeling a lot less sad, and was even looking forward to things. And, given that these things involved visiting a library and working for the civil service, this was quite a remarkable achievement.

*Maybe this was meant to happen,* Alison thought vaguely. Then, shocked, she analysed the thought. *Do I mean that maybe it was a good thing that Sparks died so I could meet Joseph?* she thought.

Just as she was about to pay up so she could go home and spend the rest of the evening feeling guilty and wrong about things, she noticed a small electronic display by the till. It was flashing up a message. **goodbye hope**, it said, and then **goodbye hope again**. Alison felt even more deflated.

“Bloody thing,” said the checkout girl. She whacked the display.  
“It’s always doing that.”

**goodbye hope**, the display announced once more. Then it hiccupped out **goodbye hope to see you**, and finally **goodbye hope to see you soon**. It repeated **goodbye hope to see you soon**. And again **goodbye hope to see you soon**, clearly happy to go on like that all day.

Alison picked up her purchases, feeling immensely cheered for some inscrutable reason. “Goodbye,” she said to the checkout girl. ‘Hope to see you soon.’

The checkout girl smiled, just in case.

Jeff woke up. Duncan was asleep, dreaming about headless meerkats running around being chased by his mother. Jeff lay awake, listening to Duncan murmur “no, mum, no” softly to himself. He was in a very good mood. He had a plan, and it was an unpleasant one that would not only sort out all the difficulties that were plaguing him, but it was a plan where at least one person would be hurt and probably killed.

*Maybe two*, he thought happily.

The next day, Joseph Kaye woke up and found that he was thinking about Alison. The sun streamed approvingly through his bedroom windows, covering various drawings of bugs and weapons with golden light. He went downstairs to the kitchen, where his father and mother were having their breakfast.

“Drink your coffee before it gets cold,” said his mother.

“I think I’m in love,” said Joseph.

His father snorted. “Gay sort of remark,” he said.

It was, oddly, the first of May.

Sparks woke up. Jeff was standing over him.

“Get up,” said Jeff. “Jesus, I spend my whole life telling you to get up. I ought to have GET tattooed on one set of knuckles and UP on the other.”

“You’d have a lot of knuckles left over,” said Sparks.

It was the first of May.

Alison got up and thought about Joseph Kaye. She made a cup of revolting instant coffee and drank it with a smile on her face.

It was the day before the second of May.

“What did you wake me up for?” said Sparks.

“Shut up,” said Jeff.

“You say that a lot, too,” said Sparks.

“Maybe I should have that tattooed on my knuckles instead of GET UP,” said Jeff, breathing oddly.

“You could have GET UP on one hand and SHUT UP on the other,” said Sparks. “Except you’d have to have the S on one hand as well.”

“Pardon?” said Duncan.

“Don’t listen,” said Jeff. “He’s trying to annoy me.”

“Which would mean you’d have GET UPS on one hand, and HUT UP on the other,” said Sparks.

“Oh for God’s sake,” said Jeff. “Next time we’ll open his head up and put in a remote control device.”

“No,” said Duncan. “That’s assuming you start with GET UP. If you started with SHUT UP, you could have SHUT U on one hand and - ”

“Shut up!” Jeff shouted, “Get up!”

“See?” said Sparks as he got to his feet. “It’s much quicker if you just shout it.”

Jeff and Duncan pushed Sparks into a black cab (Jeff did most of the pushing). The car ploughed through London like a dead pig through syrup.

“Can’t you go any faster?” said Jeff, clutching his case to his angry chest. “We’re on important business.”

“It’s these traffic lights,” said the driver as he slowed down to avoid some air.

“We’re not tourists,” said Jeff. “Drive properly or I’ll report you, you pointless Cockney chuff-tickler.”

The taxi stopped abruptly, or as abruptly as a slow cab can stop, which is almost imperceptibly.

“Get out,” said the cabbie. “I’m not putting up with that.”

“Drive on!” shouted Jeff. “It’s important!”

The driver got out of the cab and walked round to Jeff’s side. He opened the door.

“And I want twenty pounds for the cost of cleaning my cab,” he said.

“Cleaning?” shouted Jeff, twitching like a preying mantis in a suit. “What cleaning?”



“Blood,” said the driver, punching Jeff in the nose. Jeff went down like a cocktail stick on a slope, and Sparks jumped out between him and Duncan and ran off.

“Come back,” said Duncan, but quietly so as not to attract attention.

“Heeb’s gob my bab,” said Jeff, through most of his nose.

Sparks had no computer, no portal, but he did have Jeff’s bag, and that was the core of his plan. If Jeff and Duncan were travelling through portals, and clearly they were, then they must have some way of knowing how to find them. Therefore they must have a computer. The only luggage Jeff and Duncan had was this attaché case. There must, therefore, be a laptop in it. Sparks would go online, find the Random Life Generator, and head off home. He didn’t know where home was, but that was part two of his plan. Sparks would let Jeff and Duncan find him, and then offer to trade them their laptop back for directions.

He prised open the case. There wasn’t a laptop in it.

Duncan wiped what he hoped was the last of the blood from Jeff’s nose.

“There,” he said. “Good as new.”

“Not quite,” said Jeff, as they sat on the kerb. “That dick has escaped, he’s got my bag, he thinks there’s a laptop in my case and he almost certainly wants us to find him and be blackmailed into sending him home.”

“But there isn’t a laptop in your case,” said Duncan. “There’s - ”  
Duncan paled.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “There’s. Quite. There’s.”

He folded his more than adequate legs up like a spider.

“We’re stuffed,” said Jeff.

“Look,” said Duncan.

“What do you mean, look?” said Jeff. “Do you have an idea?”

“No,” said Duncan. “Look, like look up.”

Jeff looked up. Sparks was standing above them, with the empty attaché case and a piece of paper.

“There’s no laptop in here,” he said, and threw the case down.

“We don’t need a laptop,” sneered Jeff.

“We’re the Society,” said Duncan, “We know the codes and passwords, so - ”

“There’s just this piece of paper,” said Sparks.

“Have you read it?” said Duncan. He didn’t sound happy.

“Yes,” said Sparks. He didn’t sound happy either.

“It’s just a form of words,” said Jeff. They were in a cafe that was meant to be French, in that it served milky coffee and was staffed by the apparently undead.

“It doesn’t look much like just a form of words,” said Sparks.

“A turn of phrase, then.”

“Not that either. Nor something that’s a bit ambiguous, or a joke, or a misprint. It’s very clear.”

“It’s not ours,” said Duncan hopefully. “There’s been a terrible mistake and someone’s switched briefcases.”

“Bollocks,” said Sparks. “It’s signed by Jeff and it says Dear Duncan at the top. It’s yours.”

“All right,” said Jeff. “You can have that one. I don’t see what you’re moaning about, anyway.”

“You don’t?” said Sparks. He unfolded the piece of paper. It was a printed-out email.

“Dear Duncan,” he read out, “The only way we are going to save the plan is by getting that moron Sparks to kill the other troublemaker. Yours. Jeff.”

Sparks folded the letter. “You people are sick,” he said. “As well as inept. I’m not going to kill anyone.”

“Quite right,” said Duncan. “Killing is bad. I try not to do any myself. All right, we’ll be off now. Can we have our letter ba - ”

Sparks ignored Duncan’s reaching hand and put the letter in his pocket. “I’m keeping this. I might take it to the police.”

“Good idea,” said Jeff. “They’ll really know what you’re talking about. Ooh ooh officer, two men from another dimension or something want me to do a murder, I think, ooh ooh I don’t really know because I’m a bit stupid.”

Sparks sighed. There was no worse feeling than being right and being unable to win an argument. So he punched Jeff in the eye. Jeff fell back.

Then he took a gun out of his pocket.

“Right,” said Jeff. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m going to tell you who you’re going to kill. So shut up”

Sparks shut up.

Joseph Kaye and Alison went to the library together. It was deserted apart from a ginger man working his way through several atlases, and a young girl with a stern brow. Kaye realised with a pleasant frisson of something - pleasure, probably - that he hadn’t been to the library for weeks. Nor had he turned on his computer at work to look

anything up. He had in fact lost interest in the whole issue of... Kaye tried to drive the word “cockroach” from his mind.

“I’ve never enjoyed libraries...” said Alison.

“Nor have I,” said Joseph Kaye hastily, at exactly the same time as Alison finished her sentence by saying, “so much.”

“So much,” Kaye said even more hastily, but Alison continued on.

“I mean, they’re not sexy places, I don’t mean sexy, I don’t know why I said sex, sexy, I mean, when you think of the vocabulary of, of it, of them, words like microfiche and ladder and shelf, they’re not very, well, I suppose microfiche is sort of sexy.”

“Please kiss me,” said Joseph Kaye.

Alison kissed him, and the ginger man with the atlases looked up and frowned. The stern girl also looked up, but because of her brow, it was hard to tell if she was frowning or not. Kaye didn’t care.

“Shall we go somewhere else?” Alison said.

“Oh yes,” said Kaye in a new deep voice that startled him.

“We could stay here and look things up if you like,” said Alison, “I know you’re working on an important project and I could help you...”

“No,” said Kaye. “By the way, I live with my parents, who are a bit Eastern Europe at the turn of the last century about things.”

“I’ve got a flat with a great big bed in it,” said Alison.

“All right then,” said Kaye, and they left the library.

“Get a room,” said the ginger man with the atlases, about five minutes after they had left, and then he realised that that was what they were going to do, and felt sad, and wished he was in love, and saw that the girl across from him with the stern brow was laughing, and laughing at his joke, so he went over and asked her out.

Alison woke up in her own bed with a different life. The sheets next to her were crumpled like hills of dralon, and there was the sound of a kettle protesting that its very entrails were being boiled out of it from the next room. Alison didn’t care about the kettle, because one, it was a kettle and two, she felt so happy she also felt ridiculous. Everything made her grin, some things made her giggle so much she suspected that her dignity and poise and self-respect might never return, and this didn’t bother her.

In the next room, upsetting the kettle, was a man who had recently been released from jail for being mad and dangerous, and she had just spent all night having it off with him. And she had never felt better.

*Clearly I’ve gone mad,* she thought.

The thought did not bother her at all, she noticed, which was, she supposed, further proof that she had gone mad.

“His name,” said Jeff, “is Kaye. Joseph Kaye.”

“Like in - ” said Sparks.

Duncan interrupted.

“He lives in London, this London,” said Duncan, looking nervier than usual, “And we’re very worried about him. The Society is, that is, is what I mean.”

“You must be worried about him,” Sparks said, “if you want me to top him. Which I’m not going to do.”

“Yes you are,” said Jeff. “Carry on, Duncan.”

“Kaye is about to discover everything about the Society,” said Duncan. “He came across something which it’s only a matter of time will lead him to... discover everything about the Society, yes.” Duncan trailed off, caught in the loop of his own sentence.

“Oh no,” said Sparks. “That would be awful. The world would end.”

“Everything would end,” said Jeff. “We’ve been through this. He’s a dangerous madman and we have good reason to believe that apart from the universe being in jeopardy and so forth, people here would die.”

“Wow,” said Sparks, “So not only will the universe be destroyed, but people will die as well. Because I’d been hoping that, despite the

destruction of the universe, a few people might live on. You know, in the hills and stuff.”

“What hills?” said Duncan, interested.

“He’s being sarcastic,” said Jeff.

“It’s my turn,” said Sparks.

Just then their coffees arrived. In fact, they were someone else’s coffees, but life is short, so they took them. Duncan started blowing on his until Jeff pointed out it was an iced coffee.

“Look, this is all old stuff,” said Sparks. “All you’ve told me is his name. And I’m not killing anyone just because you’ve told me their name.”

“There is one other thing,” said Jeff. He looked at Duncan nastily. “You tell him,” he said.

“Which thing?” said Duncan. “The roach thing or - ”

“Oh well done,” said Jeff. “I wasn’t going to tell him that.”

“What roach thing?” said Sparks.

“We could have just told him the other thing and it would have been fine,” said Jeff.

“Well, I didn’t know which thing you meant.”

“Obviously I meant the important thing. Not the thing which makes us look silly.”

“Which is the thing that makes us look silly? The roach thing?”



“Yes!” shouted Jeff. “The roach thing!”

“Does it make us look silly?”

“Oh yeah,” said Sparks. “Really silly.”

Jeff wiped his narrow forehead with a slim hand.

“You’d better tell him,” he said.

“About the roach thing? Or the other thing?”

Jeff’s slim hand left his narrow forehead and slapped Duncan’s thin cheek.

“All right,” said Duncan. “The roach thing.” He fingered his reddening cheek and leaned forward in his chair.

“It was a Friday,” Duncan began. “No, wait - ”

“Start again,” said Jeff. “No-one cares what day it was.”

“I do,” said Sparks. “I think setting is very important.”

“Thank you,” said Duncan. Duncan thought for a second.

“It was a Wednesday,” he said. “I remember because Wednesday is my day for excursions.”

“What are excursions?” said Sparks.

“Doesn’t matter, carry on,” said Jeff.

“Excursions are what we call forays or trips into other worlds.

We’re not supposed to do them without per -,”

“Get on with it,” said Jeff abruptly.

“Oh yeah,” Duncan said. “Anyway, it must have been a Wednesday. I was in the office that morning, and I was just going through some old notes. You know the sort of thing...”

“No,” said Sparks. “Tell me, it’s really interesting.”

“I suppose it is to an outsider,” said Duncan, sounding pleased. “I keep notes on my excursions. You have to, in case you have an accident or get eaten, you see, and they need to find out what you would have told them in your report, had you lived to write it. Of course, since we were doing it without - ”

“Get on with it,” said Jeff.

“I was getting on with it,” said Duncan. “That’s why I said ‘well’. To indicate that I was about to get on with it.”

Jeff muttered something. Duncan ignored it.

“Well,” he said pointedly, “I was looking at my notes, and I noticed, in my notes, that there was a world I was supposed to have checked off, a couple of months before. Now this world, as it happens, is a pretty dull one. No presidents who didn’t get assassinated or world wars that got won by Germany, no governments of ants, that sort of thing...”

“Governments of - ” Sparks said.

“It’s more common that you think,” said Duncan. “So this world is pretty much like the one we come from. I knew there wasn’t much going on there. But - ”

“But,” said Jeff, “He’s incredibly anal.”

“Thorough,” said Duncan. “I’m incredibly thorough.”

“Not so thorough you remembered going there,” said Jeff.

“True,” said Jeff. “You see,” he said to Sparks, “that’s one of the problems of the job. You go to so many worlds that are virtually identical - a world where there’s no word for magenta, a world where cats love swimming, those kind of tiny differences - that you sometimes sort of *forget* you’ve been.”

“You forget,” said Jeff.

“I said you,” said Duncan.

“You as in you Duncan,” said Jeff. “Not you as in one. Not you as in me, or anyone else. I’ve never been to a world and forgotten it.”

“All right,” said Duncan. “I admit I do have a tendency to do it, more than some. But I always go back, you see. I always go back and check.”

“I wish you hadn’t,” said Jeff. “We’d be all right. Thorough. Yeah.”

Sparks was trying to hold on to the greasy and fraying thread of Jeff’s narrative.

“What does that mean, you went back and checked?”

“This world was so ordinary,” said Duncan slowly, “that I could not remember if I had been there before or not. Any difference between

our world and this one would be so minuscule as not to register. But that's not the point."

"Yes it is," said Jeff. "You're supposed to be looking for God's Perfect World, not God's Ever So Slightly Different World."

"God is in the details," said Duncan. "I read that. I couldn't just go, oh well, I can't be bothered checking this world, I'll just put DONE THIS ONE in my book and move on. It's not me."

"So what did you do?" said Sparks, wondering if he could order a gallon of Pernod from a waiter.

"I did what I was supposed to," said Duncan. "I went back."

"You didn't do what you were supposed to properly, did you, though?" said Jeff. "You didn't, for example, tell me that you'd cocked up and you were going back."

"Yes," said Duncan. "But I didn't want to get penalised."

"Why would you be penalised?" said Sparks. "I thought this was your job."

"Never mind," said Jeff.

"I went back," said Duncan. "Without per - without, um... And I did what I call the Duncan Test."

"Gosh," said Sparks, "Why's it called that?"

Duncan looked at him.

"Because I invented it."

“Sorry,” said Sparks. “What is the Duncan Test?”

Duncan brightened. “Well,” he said. “Whenever I go back to a world where I’ve forgotten if I went there - which isn’t often, really - I ask myself, what was the defining characteristic of that world? And - and this is the brilliant part - ”

“You mean the stupid part,” said Jeff.

“ - the brilliant part is, I take something that represents, or just is, the defining characteristic of the world.”

“Oh,” said Sparks, mightily confused.

“In some cases, it’s representative, as I say,” said Duncan. “So if it’s a world where there’s no Italy, I take an Italian phrase book and talk Italian until I discover that people can’t understand me.”

“Genius,” said Jeff in a voice that suggested he didn’t think anything of the kind.

“And if there’s say no hats in a world, I’ll wear a hat until someone laughs at me, or arrests me, or ties me to the back of a cart and drags me through the - ”

“We get it,” said Jeff.

“These are all negative things,” said Sparks. “What do you do when there’s a world where there’s things that aren’t in our world?”

“Don’t ask,” said Jeff, “That hasn’t happened yet. But he’ll think of a way to cock it up.”

“Anyway,” said Duncan, hurt. “In this case, the instance of this world, there was a negative thing, or so I thought I remembered. I could vaguely remember noticing an absence of this thing, so I packed it up and I took it with me. And that’s where the trouble started.”

“How do you mean?” asked Sparks, contemplating a glass of wine on the next table and wondering if he could nick it.

“It wasn’t my fault,” said Duncan. “I wouldn’t have shown it to him if he hadn’t told me his name.”

“Who?” said Sparks. “What wouldn’t you have shown him?”

“It was because his name was Joseph Kaye,” said Jeff, coldly.

“Joseph Kaye is in some book Duncan read.”

“Yes,” said Duncan, sounding upset. “And I thought it was really funny that the man in the book with the name was famous for being associated with the thing, so I thought it would be funny to show him the thing.”

“What thing?” said Sparks.

“The thing from the book,” said Duncan.

He reached into his pocket and took out a matchbox.

“I told him what it was called and everything,” he said. “And he got weird about it, so Jeff hit him. And that’s why it’s all gone wrong.”

Sparks opened the matchbox. In it was a cockroach. A very large cockroach, about three inches in length, with a shiny back and long legs.

Alison and Kaye were in the library.

“There’s a book here with a man in it with the same name as you,” said Alison.

Kaye looked up. He smiled and closed his eyes, in a quoting way.

“Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning’. That’s one. There’s another - ‘It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay under deep snow.’ He’s called Joseph in that one too.”

Alison looked disappointed, as people do when they want to tell someone an interesting fact and it turns out the other person knew already. But she was secretly impressed.

“No-one ever wrote a book with somebody with my name in it,” she said, a look of impressed love in her eyes. “It must be odd.”

“Come on,” said Kaye, “I want to show you something.”

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect” said Jeff. He rolled his eyes.

“What?” said Sparks.

“That’s the line,” said Duncan. “Only I got confused with the other book. I thought Joseph K was in the book with the cockroach and he’s not, he’s in the one with the trial.”

“That would be The Trial,” said Jeff, drier than year-old parchment.

“I don’t understand,” said Sparks. “Even if it was the right book, there’s no cockroaches. You said insect. Not cockroach. They’re different.”

Duncan smiled weakly. “A lot of people think it’s a cockroach,” he said.

“A lot of people can’t read,” said Jeff.

“Jeff tried to kill him,” said Duncan, suddenly.

“Shut up,” said Jeff”.

“Well, you did,” Duncan said. “That’s why he can’t remember it properly. “

“I told you to shut up,” said Jeff.

Abruptly, he aimed the gun at Duncan’s head.

Alison and Joseph were in the poetry section. Nearby, a librarian was stacking books. He gave Alison the strong impression that he knew



Joseph, because he was eyeing his books nervously and at the same time shuffling towards a desk with a phone on it.

“It’s all right,” said Joseph. “I’m much better now. And I’m not here to get books about... about other things.”

The librarian smiled with an oceanic lack of conviction, but he stopped moving nearer to the phone, possibly because if he sidled up to it any nearer he would have been in the phone.

Kaye pulled a small book off a shelf, which he showed to Alison.

“The person who wrote the book about the man being arrested also wrote this,” he said. “And he wrote a poem about the same character. Only he made him into a cat.”

“You’re a character in a poem?” said Alison, as though she had never suspected anything different.

“Funny poem,” said Kaye. “I mean, comedy poem. Apparently he was miserable because he was ill, but then he got better and wrote lots of funny stuff.”

Alison looked at the book of poems. Its title looked familiar.

“Didn’t someone awful make this into a musical?” she said. Kaye looked uncomfortable. “And all the song were about different cats in the book?”

“Yes,” said Kaye. “It’s true.”

He looked sombre, or at least like a man pretending to be sombre.

“I have the same name as a funny cat in a musical,” he said.

Alison kissed him. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said.

There was a cough. The librarian was standing behind them, phone in hand.

“I’m calling the police!” he said.

“Relax,” said Alison, “My boyfriend’s a pussycat when you get to know him””

But they left anyway.

“Pussycat?” said Kaye later.

A few minutes later, he sat up and said:

“Boyfriend?”

He sounded quite happy.

“Are you going to shoot him?” said Sparks. He sounded nervous even to himself. To other people, he was sure, he sounded incontinent with terror.

“Yes,” said Duncan after a few seconds, “Are you going to shoot me?”

Jeff pulled the trigger. Duncan yelped like a cat and hurtled towards the floor. Then he got up.

“Hang on, I’m not dead,” said Duncan.

“No, there weren’t any bullets in the gun,” said Jeff. “Look, I took them out.”

“What did you do that for?” said Duncan, as Jeff loaded the gun.

“I was demonstrating how to shoot someone and for dramatic effect pretended to shoot you,” said Jeff.

“I’m not happy,” said Duncan.

“Maybe,” said Jeff, his breath a little tight, “If you spent less time showing cockroaches to people from worlds where they don’t have cockroaches on the grounds that they have the same name as someone in a book who turns into a cockroach - except they don’t because a, you got the book wrong and b, even if it was the right book, he doesn’t turn into a cockroach... maybe we wouldn’t have to persuade this idiot to shoot someone.”

“No” said Sparks. “I’m not going to shoot anyone. I don’t like guns, I don’t want to shoot anyone and I’m not going to.”

“All right,” said Jeff. “I didn’t want to do it this way.”

He stopped.

“You didn’t want to do it this way what?” said Sparks.

Jeff said nothing. He looked at Duncan.

“Oh yes,” said Duncan. “Time to tell him about the girl.”

“What girl?” said Sparks.

Jeff continued to say nothing.

“No,” said Sparks. “No.”

Without thinking, he put the gun in his pocket.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “Oh yes indeed.”

Jeff and Duncan took Sparks to a fish and chip shop.

“What girl?” repeated Sparks. He had a pretty good idea what girl, but the urge that makes us dig at red bumpy spots on our faces was making him ask.

Jeff said nothing. Duncan said, “Three plaice and chips please” to the large ginger boy behind the counter.

“Don’t give him plaice,” said Jeff. “Get him some cheaper fish. Or those bits of batter.”

“Two plaice and chips and those bits of batter,” said Duncan to the large ginger boy.

They sat down and drank filmy cups of tea. Jeff took Sparks’ bread.

“What girl?” said Sparks once more.

“Yours,” said Jeff, and Sparks’ heart turned into oil and seeped down into his stomach.

“Well, not specifically yours,” said Duncan. “I mean, technically you’ve never met her.”

“On the other hand, you have,” said Jeff. “On this world, you went out with... with Alison until you were killed by a bus.”

“A bus?” said Sparks. “I never go on buses.”

“You don’t have to go on a bus to be killed by one,” said Jeff, his already disdainful voice topped up with contempt. “You just have to have too much beer and walk in front of one.”

Sparks suddenly remembered a flash of something involving beer, darkness and red honking.

“It missed me,” he said. “I was going to cross but I saw a woman who I thought might be a supermodel and it missed me.”

“There it did,” Jeff said. “Here it didn’t.”

“It was a 29,” said Duncan.

“You wait all day for a bus to come,” said Jeff, “And when it does, it knocks you to the ground and kills you.”

“Shut up,” said Sparks, who found his own death unamusing.

“So at the time of this fatal crash, you were still with Angela...”  
said Duncan.

“Alison,” said Jeff.

“Alison, sorry,” said Duncan. “She was very upset.”

“That is, she was still in love with you at this point where you died,” Jeff said. “That is, you hadn’t cocked up your relationship with the only woman who ever cared for you, and so - ”

Sparks lunged at Jeff. Chips went everywhere. Customers turned round from their place and bits of batter.

“It’s all right,” said Duncan to the customers, who, embarrassed at being addressed by such a strange-looking man, turned away again.

“I did not cock up my relationship,” said Sparks.

“Yeah, you did,” said Jeff. “That’s why she left you. That’s why you’ve been doing this searching the universe crap.”

“I think it’s very romantic,” said Duncan.

“Dear God,” said Jeff. He addressed Sparks again. “We’ve done research. She left you. We don’t know why and we don’t care.”

“We weren’t talking,” said Sparks. “She said I wasn’t serious about anything. She said all I wanted to do was go to the pub and watch videos. She said at my age that was a bit sad.”

“Boo hoo,” said Jeff.

“She left you because you watched videos?” said Duncan.

“Not quite,” said Sparks. “I think she wanted more from us being together.”

“She loved you and you didn’t love her,” said Jeff. “The end. She saw you as the waster you really are. The inner dick.”

“Leave me alone,” said Sparks, realising as he said it that leaving him alone was the one thing Jeff and Duncan weren’t ever going to do.

“Leave her alone,” he added quietly.

“We can’t,” said Jeff. “She’s in mortal danger.”

“Not - ,” said Duncan.

“She is in mortal danger,” Jeff said again. “This is what this is all about. This is why you are here. This is why we chose you, out of all the people in the universe. Even though I would rather have used one of my own shoes, you are the one.”

Duncan opened his mouth. Jeff glowered at him.

“If you qualify anything else I say, I’m going to deck you,” he said. “We’re supposed to be convincing him, not ushering in a climate of debate.”

“Sorry,” said Duncan.

“What are you supposed to be convincing me of?” said Sparks. “Why is Alison in mortal danger?”

“You mean how is she in mortal danger” said Jeff.

“No, why is she will do as well,” said Duncan.

Jeff gave Duncan a murderous look.

“I’m just aiming for clarity,” said Duncan.

Jeff turned back to Sparks. Sparks had, however, gone.

“He’s gone,” said Duncan, ten minutes later. “And he’s still got the gun.”

“I know,” said Jeff.

“Sorry,” Duncan said. “Only you haven’t said anything for ten minutes and I felt I ought to break the silence.”

“I’m thinking things through,” said Jeff. “This might work in our favour.”

“Because we’re always telling him what to do and if he sees for himself he’ll come to his own conclusions?” said Duncan.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “That’s exactly what I meant. What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” said Duncan, but he didn’t sound like he meant it.

“You’re patting your pockets,” said Jeff.

“No I’m not,” said Duncan brightly, as if he had convinced himself of something, or rather nothing.

Sparks ran down the road, which was one he recognised. It led to another, smaller road, which in his world contained a large internet cafe. If the internet cafe was there, and it took normal money, he would be all right. And judging by the pennies he saw lying on the pavement and the



few coins in beggars' cups, this world used the same money as Sparks' world, so all he had to do was arrive at the internet cafe and hope it was an internet cafe and not, say, a meeting point for cannibalistic elms. (Sparks also had a notion that this world was the same as his in every way but one, but this notion was floating around the back of his mind, just above his teeth, as yet as it were unopened).

Sparks stopped running. He was outside the internet cafe. Its prices were cheap and corresponded to the coins in his pocket. All he had to do was walk in, pick a computer, dial up the Random Life Generator, and head for home. He walked into the cafe, picked a computer and sat down. Then he stared at the computer for several seconds. Instead of going onto the Random Life Generator, he went on to a search engine, Then he typed in Alison's name.

*I don't trust Jeff and Duncan, some unconscious part of Sparks' brain noted, because they are thin and evil, well, Jeff is. But I am worried about Alison and more worried that she has done something silly.*

At least, that was how the supposedly smart part of Sparks' brain justified not escaping when he could.

After half an hour and all his change, Sparks had found several references to Alison on the internet. Some were useless - CDs she had

written reviews of on shopping sites when tipsy round at Sparks's - but some were alarmingly revealing. She was, for example, mentioned in a newsletter welcoming her to a new job about three weeks ago. She had sold some personal items on an auction site (this made Sparks partly sad, as they had been gifts from him, or a version of him, and partly vexed because some of them were quite cool, and he could have bought them). More pertinently, Alison was listed as a subscriber to a school reunion site, and while she had not left any contact details, lots of other people had.

Sparks went to the school reunion site. He typed Alison's name into the LOG IN space. Then he stared at the space for PASSWORD and thought for a few seconds. He had no idea what Alison's password was. After a moment's embarrassment at his vanity, and a few more moments' feeling bad about being intrusive, Sparks typed in SPARKS. He tapped RETURN, and was welcomed onto the site.

Sparks immediately wrote an email, which he sent to everyone who had been in Alison's year at school. The email said:

Hi!

This is Alison. I have just moved, but I keep getting post to my old address. I can't remember if you have my new address. Sorry to be a

pain, but could you let me know what address you do have for me, and, if necessary, I will amend this.

Sparks looked at the email. He took out all the commas, put in a load of exclamation marks, and sent it. Then he went for a bar of chocolate

When Sparks came back from his bar of chocolate, he went online again and checked his emails. He had five. Two of them denied having ever heard of Alison, one of them wanted to know why she had changed her email address, one claimed to remember her as a freckled blonde with enormous glasses, but the last said:

Alison!

You are mad, you know. I have Flat 3, 14, Plover Gardens, W14. Is this up to date?

Jen

Sparks emailed back that it was up to date, and wrote the address down. Then he went to the pub.

Three pints of beer later, Sparks decided that he had better get on with it before he was too drunk. He went outside and hailed a cab.

“Plover Gardens,” he said to the driver. Then, once inside the cab, he had a thought.

“Is there a hotel near Plover Gardens?” he said.

“Blimey,” said the driver. “Change your mind every six seconds, why doncha?”

“I have five hundred pounds in cash and no credit cards,” said Sparks to the receptionist. “But I do have - ”

He stopped. He felt himself to be slightly drunker than he had realised. He had certainly intended to go to a nicer hotel than the one he was in.

“Of course,” he said, “As I am the person who is drunk as well as the person who is trying to see if I am drunk, then both of us are drunk.”

“What’s that in your hand?” said the receptionist, who was no philosopher. Instead, if forced to guess, Sparks would have said that the receptionist had actually devoted most of his life to the study and breeding of dandruff.

“Never mind,” said Sparks, ramming his hand back into his pocket. “Because I have five hundred pounds and no credit cards.”

“One hundred pounds a night,” said the receptionist, “There’s no lift.”

The receptionist pointed to where a lift might be, if there was one.

“That’s all right,” said Sparks, “I’ve not got any bags.”

He raised his arm, to indicate any bags he was carrying, if he had been carrying any.

The receptionist gave Sparks a tiny key attached to an enormous piece of wood and Sparks made his way to where the lift wasn’t.

“Good night,” he said to the receptionist. The receptionist ignored him. Five hundred pounds or not, this guest was clearly too drunk to want any prostitutes.

“He could have gone to hers,” said Duncan.

“He doesn’t know where she is,” said Jeff.

“He could have looked it up,” said Duncan. “He’s good at that.”

“I suppose,” said Jeff. “It doesn’t matter.”

“He could have gone to him,” said Duncan.

“He doesn’t know anything about him.”

“He’s got a name.”

“I suppose. It doesn’t matter.”

“Cheer up.”

“Don’t tell me to - I really hate it when people tell me to cheer up.”

“Well, you keep saying ‘It doesn’t matter’ like you’re depressed.”

“I’m not depressed.”

“Then why do you keep saying - ”

“I keep saying ‘It doesn’t matter’ because... It. Doesn’t. Matter. As in it doesn’t matter because if he finds her or if he finds him, it’ll only confirm what we told him.”

“But he’ll know - ”

“He won’t because he’s in luuvvve with her.”

Jeff spent a long time saying ‘luuvvve’, even for an elongated version of ‘love’.

“And because he’s in luuuuvvvve with her,” he added, “He’ll believe us.”

“What if he hasn’t gone to look for her, or him?” said Duncan. “or does that not matter either?”

Jeff was silent for a second. Then he said, “What did he take from you, exactly?”

“Answer me first.”

“No, you answer me.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

Sparks woke up with a slight headache. The room was fuzzy and yellow, as though a huge dog had put its leg up on the window. This was in keeping with the room's overall design, which looked as though a kind of decor-eating animal had eaten a lot of cheap furniture and vomited it up, but Sparks decided, more rationally, that he must have fallen asleep with the curtains open, and now the room was filled with the urinary light of street lamps.

He got up off the bed, whose candlewick patterns clung to him worryingly, and went to wash his face. *Somewhere, if Jeff and Duncan are right, there must be a world where there actually is a decor-eating animal*, Sparks thought to himself as he splashed one handful of boiling and one handful of freezing water onto his face.

*If Jeff and Duncan are right*, he thought again.

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

“No - ow!”

Sparks looked out the weeing windows. The street - Plover Gardens - was narrow, dirty and laid out according to some mystical dry-cleaner/ curry house alternating scheme. He noticed that most of the dry-cleaners and curry houses had flats above them, most of them empty right now, but one or two occupied by large middle-aged men who spent their evenings leaning on the windowsill and watching television while smoking. At that exact moment, Sparks felt that there could not be a more fantastic way to live one's life, certainly compared to ways of life like, say, being chased around the universe by two psychotic anorexics who had just told him that the love of his life was now at it with a nutcase who he had to kill.

Sparks guillotined this thought and put on a coat. He went downstairs to the lobby, pretended to wait for the lift to annoy the receptionist and went out into a night acrid with curry and cleaning fluid.

14 Plover Gardens was a big thing, a white house with tall cake pillars sandwiched inbetween other white houses with tall cake pillars in a street composed entirely of cake pillar white houses. It was big enough to contain four or five flats, and so it had been divided into seven or eight flats. Flat 3 was on the first floor and, fortunately for Sparks, faced the main road.



Sparks sat inside a Portuguese chicken restaurant, wiping grease from his burning fingers and looking out at 14 Plover Gardens. For once, he did not have a plan, unless “LOOK AT ALISON’S OLD FLAT ALL NIGHT” was a plan. He sat at the window for two hours, killing time by occasionally going up and getting more refills of diet cola (Sparks hated diet cola but reckoned that the staff would be less likely to throw him out if he drank something he didn’t like. How the staff would know, or even care, that he didn’t like diet cola was not something Sparks wanted to think about.)

Sparks was onto his fifth diet cola of the evening when he saw Alison come out of 14 Plover Gardens. She was laughing and wearing a yellow coat. Sparks remembered the coat, or its equivalent; he had bought it for Alison on her birthday. Or, more accurately, he had given Alison the money and she had bought it. Or, even more accurately, he had given Alison not quite enough money and she had made up the difference and bought the coat. *But then*, he thought, *she once got me the wrong CD one Christmas so we’re even. Well, not even, much. Or at all, rea -*

There was someone else with Alison, coming now out of the doorway and carrying an umbrella. He was tall and, even across the street through the window of a Portuguese chicken restaurant, intense-faced. This was the sort of face that would look intense under clown make-up and a big straw hat. It was all cheekbones and brooding dark eyes. If the

face's owner had not just then been kissed by Alison, Sparks would have hated it. As it was, it did get kissed by Alison, and Sparks really did hate it, a lot.

Alison and the man with the face crossed the road. They were coming towards the restaurant. Sparks, meant to be dead, stuffed his face into a Portuguese menu; peering over it like a git, he noticed that, even crossing the road, the intense man managed to look intense, and brooding, and shifty. He looked as if he was watching for something, suspicious of every passer-by and car. Sparks found he had never distrusted someone he hadn't met quite so much in his whole life. The man put his hand out, and a cab slowed down. He bent down to the driver's window in what looked to Sparks a brooding way and spoke to the driver, intensely. The driver nodded, and the man opened the cab door.

Alison got into the cab, and it drove off. The man went back inside 14 Plover Gardens. And then, presumably, up to Alison's flat. Possibly, probably even, Sparks thought, to sit on her bed and rumple her sheets and generally act suspiciously.

He had no choice. He had to go and look.

Sparks stood outside the house with a lot of keys. He rattled one out of the bunch that had a bit of green marker pen on it. It was, in his world, the key to the outer door which he had had copied when they were still together and failed, as happens, quite often actually, to return when he had given back the key to Alison's flat. Alison had never mentioned this, probably because with only the outer door key, all Sparks could do was hang around Alison's lobby, and she knew that Sparks wasn't really that kind of person.

Today, however, Sparks was that kind of person as he let himself into the lobby of 14, Plover Gardens. He climbed the immense, windy, banister-wise dubious stairs to the first floor. Once there, his options pretty much ended. He could hardly break the door down and shout, "I am here to eavesdrop on you! Carry on doing what you were doing!" at the man. Nor could he listen at the door, in case one of the other people in the building came by and saw him. The door also had no letterbox, as all the mail tended to lie downstairs in a big heap to be sifted through.

Sparks stood outside Alison's flat, wondering how to look convincing on a landing. He was just deciding that this was impossible when an old man came out of his flat to put a cat on the landing.

"Door's open," said the old man. "I don't think she's in, though."

"Pardon?" said Sparks.

“The door’s open,” said the old man. “You’re Sparks, aren’t you? I remember you now.”

“Yes, I am,” said Sparks.

“I thought you were dead,” said the old man.

“I get that a lot,” said Sparks.

“Well, you’d better go in,” said the old man, watching the cat as it buggered about the landing.

The old man laughed through dated teeth. “Go on, you daft animal,” he said to the cat, “Go out the window and enjoy yourself. Be a cat.”

The cat ignored him and buggered about some more.

“Stupid thing,” said the old man, without rancour, and went back inside his flat. The cat immediately stopped buggering about and sat down. It stared at Sparks. Sparks noticed that the cat had a slight squint, which made it look slightly baffled.

“I don’t know,” said Sparks. But he did. Feeling even more cautious, he pushed Alison’s door. Very quietly, it opened.

The cat ran in, and Sparks, feeling more justified by this, followed it.

Sparks had of course no intention of speaking to the intense man (“Carry on! Don’t mind me!”) or even of being seen by him. Alison’s flat was quite big for a small flat, as it were, and Sparks thought he would just sneak around, gleaning, and trying not to walk straight into the intense man.

He walked straight into the intense man.

Joseph Kaye had been going to make a cup of tea and watch a cartoon about an animated bathmat (Alison liked cartoons, and had pointed out several of her favourites to Kaye) when he heard voices on the landing, laughter and the word “dead”. His suspicions, never exactly low, were instantly raised high like a traitor’s quartered corpse on some ramparts. They went through the roof when the door began to slowly open.

A cat appeared. It looked baffled by something, and went straight past Kaye into the living room, where it sat under the TV set and mewed at Kaye, ineptly.

“Foolish cat,” said Kaye, and was about to go in after it when Sparks walked into him.

“Hello,” said Sparks.

The other man stared at him, intensely.

“I was...”. Sparks rifled his mind for a verb. “I was following the cat,” he said.

“Is it your cat?” said the man.

“No,” said Sparks. “I was just... no”

*It’s not going well*, Sparks’ brain told him. *I know*, Sparks replied.

He looked for an exit. There wasn’t one.

“Who are you?” said the man. “Because following a cat is not a good enough reason to enter someone else’s property.”

“I used to go out with Alison,” said Sparks.

*Fantastic*, said Sparks’ brain, *maybe we sh0uld let the ears or the liver do the thinking from now on*.

“What?” said the man. “Who are you?”

“Um,” said Sparks. “I have to go now.”

“You can’t go,” said the man.

“You wanted me to go just now.”

“You can’t go!” said the man. He looked agitated to Sparks. In fact, he was shaking. Sparks was alarmed. People rarely shook when he said he was going

“Who are you?” said the man again. “You didn’t go out with Alison.”

He seemed very angry about this. *Affronted*, Sparks' brain might have said, if it wasn't so affronted itself.

"I did," said Sparks, himself now affronted.

The cat walked between their legs, wall-eyed but at least not affronted by anything.

"What's your name?" said the man.

" - " said Sparks.

"That's not a name, that's a mouth noise," said the man. "You're not some... boyfriend. Why are you here?"

"I...", said Sparks. "Cat," he added, inefficiently.

Sparks turned and ran.

Kaye was vibrating with anger and fear. The intruder was deeply upsetting on a level he couldn't explain. Kaye didn't believe the intruder's story. No-one would go out with this bizarre figure, who acted mad and looked as though he had slept in a moat, and the cat story was an obvious feeble cover. Kaye did not know what to do next. Then his anger overcame his fear and he lunged at the intruder.

Kaye lunged a second after the intruder turned and ran. As the intruder was turning in a small corridor, Kaye's lunge connected fairly successfully and he pushed the intruder to the ground.

“Who sent you?” he said, sitting on him.

“No-one sent me,” said the intruder.

“That’s not true,” said Kaye. “You don’t know me. I don’t know you. You must have been sent. Who sent you?”

“Fair point,” said the intruder. “I can’t really say. Not down here.”

“I know what you want,” said Kaye, pulling the intruder’s arm round from under him.

“Good,” said the intruder. “That means you don’t have to sit on me and pull my arms out of their sockets.”

“Where did you get Alison’s name?” said Kaye. “I ought to kill you.”

“I went out with her,” said the intruder.

Kaye pulled the intruder’s arm harder.

“I bloody did. For six years. Until last summer. ”

“He’s dead,” said Kaye. “You’re not dead.”

“I can explain that,” said the intruder. “Only I need my arm.”

“I need your arm. Because if I do this - ”

“Ah!”

“Then you feel pain. If you feel pain you’re not dead. So you’re lying. Who are you?”

“You’re mad.”

“Don’t say that.”



“OK. But you are mad. Ah!”

“Tell me who sent you or I will kill you. I mean it. I have had enough.”

“Let me up and I’ll tell you.”

“Don’t be stupid. I have watched television.”

“That’s nice. What’s your favourite programme?”

“I mean that even on television, people who say ‘Let me up and I’ll tell you’ are going to attack the person not letting them up when they get a chance. Now tell me who you are.”

“Right. Good point. But I could tell you who I am and be lying. And - and! - I mean but...”

“And? But?”

“And, but my wallet with my ID is in my coat pocket which my nipple is lying on. So I have to get up to prove it”

Kaye thought about this.

“All right.”

He got off the intruder and stood back to let him get up.

Sparks got up. He reached into his coat pocket for his wallet. Then he leapt at the man, who was clearly crazy and probably meant it about the killing him thing.

The man must have guessed that Sparks would do this, because he hit him very hard on the chin. Sparks staggered back onto the wall and, to his great surprise, passed out.

Kaye dragged the intruder into the front room. The cat walked around the intruder's unconscious body. Kaye took the wallet and threw its contents onto a table. There was about four hundred pounds in cash, a cashpoint card and three video club membership cards, all of which belonged to a man called Paul Sparks, and a picture of Alison. This last Kaye found more disturbing than he could explain. The money wasn't too reassuring either. It looked perfectly fine, but it also looked wrong. It looked too perfect, Kaye thought. He took out a ten pound note from his own wallet and put it alongside one of the other notes. They were identical, but the other note made his note look fake. This too Kaye found disturbing, but in a different way.

He took one of the video membership cards and the picture of Alison and stuffed Sparks' wallet back into his coat. Then he sat down on the floor and shook for several minutes. After that, he went into the kitchen and opened as many drawers as he could, as loudly as possible. He was ostensibly seeing if Alison had any old packets of cigarettes at the

back of a drawer, but really he found that slamming the drawers made him feel better.

Kaye found some cigarettes, lit one, discovered it was so elderly that it made him depressed just smoking it, extinguished it under the tap, and went back into the other room to find out who had sent Sparks.

Sparks was gone.

So was Kaye's wallet.

Waking up, Sparks noticed he was alone, sneaked out of the room past the kitchen, where he heard some banging, decided not to see if the banging was drawers or guns being loaded, went into the hall, saw a wallet on a table, took it and left, full of fear, triumph and dramatic irony.

There was a noise behind him. Sparks froze, then turned.

"Go away," he said to the cat. "Bugger off."

The cat, still none the wiser, buggered off. Sparks went downstairs as slowly as possibly, which made the stairs creak like galleons, and fled into the street.

A window opened above him and the crazy man who had attacked him leaned out.

"I am going to get you!" shouted the crazy man.

Sparks ran away. He leapt onto the platform of a passing bus and took a seat.

Alison opened her door.

“I’m back,” she shouted into the flat. There was no reply, so she went into the front room. Kaye was sitting in it, holding something small.

“I’m back,” she said again, quietly. “Are you OK?”

“I don’t know,” said Kaye, ‘Who’s this?’

He handed her the small thing. It was a photograph. On the back someone had written MR HANDSOME! in biro.

“Oh God,” said Alison. “It’s Sparks.”

“You told me he was dead.”

“He is dead. Where did you find this?”

“Why did you tell me he was dead?”

Alison’s forehead tightened. Kaye sounded strange. Everything felt wrong.

“Because he is dead,” she said. “He was killed in an accident. Why - why are you looking through my things?”

“What do you mean?” said Kaye, sounding confused rather than strange, which was an improvement, she supposed. “I would never go through your things.”

Alison walked out of the room, her entire head feeling compressed and muddy. She took a box out of a cupboard and brought it back into the front room. Kaye was smoking now.

“You don’t smoke,” she said. Kaye didn’t say anything.

She opened the box.

“Oh,” she said. Kaye looked at her. Alison took a photo out of the box and handed it to Kaye. It was the same photo as the one he was holding. Kaye turned it over. On the back, someone had written, in biro, MR HANDSOME!

“What’s going on?” said Kaye. He sounded cold.

“I don’t know,” Alison said. “I don’t understand.”

“He was here,” Kaye said. “You said he was dead, and he was here.”

“Who was here?” said Alison. “I don’t understand.”

“I have to leave now,” Kaye said. He got up and walked out of the room.

Alison sat on the sofa, holding the two photos.

“Sparks,” she said, as bleakly as possible.

Sparks sat in a cafe blowing on the world’s smallest espresso and going through the wallet he had taken. It contained a few pounds, a credit

card and a security pass. The pass contained a photograph of a wild-eyed man who might as well have had the words I AM NUTS instead of a photo. The pass and the credit card confirmed the man's identity as Joseph Kaye, which meant that he was the maniac that Jeff and Duncan wanted him to kill.

*And I do want to kill him,* thought Sparks.

Alison left the flat. She didn't know why, but sometimes when you have a problem and no solution, movement can be a good substitute for a solution. So she put her coat back on and went out. She walked down the road, looking at people in case they were Kaye. None of them were, especially the women, but she didn't expect them to be. She had an awful, twisting feeling that she might not see Kaye again.

She stopped outside a cafe. It was one that she had once been in with Kaye. Not that he'd be in there now, having a coffee so near to her flat when he'd just walked out on her, but it was somewhere to stop outside. She looked in through the cafe's steamy window.

Her dead ex-boyfriend was sitting at a table, blowing on a small cup.

Sparks drained his espresso, which meant essentially sticking his nose so far into it that he got the end wet, and pondered his next move. Perhaps he should start following Kaye? He should certainly find a place to confront him quietly and sort him out. Sparks felt uneasy about the phrase “sort him out”, but then he felt uneasy about Kaye. *Still*, he thought, *I know what I have to do now*. Now Sparks had a plan. It was, even his tired brain conceded, a very strong and realistic plan

Then the door to the cafe opened and Alison came in and Sparks struggled to his feet, possibly with an idea of crashing through the window, possibly to smile at Alison and say, “I can explain everything,” or something equally not true, but in the end he didn’t have to do anything, because Alison just stood in front of him and said, “Bloody hell, Sparks, what do you think you’re playing at?”

“What do you mean?” said Sparks, for the last time here displaying the lack of ready wit that had dogged him for months.

“You,” said Alison, “are dead. And - ” she all but held her hand up for silence, “I don’t mean in trouble dead. I mean dead dead. I went - ” now she really did hold her hand up, because Sparks was showing signs of wanting to explain things, “I went to your funeral, Sparks. I comforted your mum and dad, and they comforted me.”

“You went to my funeral?” said Sparks. He was touched, and encouraged. If someone went to your funeral, that might mean that later on they would want to live with you.

“I was devastated,” said Alison. “I mean, I was going to split up with you, but it would have been heart-breaking. As it is, you died, and that was more heart-breaking.”

“Why were you going to split up with me?” said Sparks.

“I’ll ask the questions,” said Alison.

“You haven’t asked me any yet,” Sparks said.

“I’m about to,” Alison said. “But since I’m still thinking of some, the reason I was going to dump you was because you were immature, Sparks. You wouldn’t change your life, and you hadn’t got much of a life to change in the first place.”

“I had an interesting job,” said Sparks. “I had a good social life.”

“You only liked your job because it was near your flat,” said Alison. “And your social life was me and some beer. And I think the beer was winning. You never wanted to do anything, Sparks.”

“Why should I have to want to do anything?” said Sparks. “Why should I have to want to go to museums on Sundays and parks and interesting new films?”

“When I say ‘do anything’,” said Alison, “I mean anything. Like get up, or dress, or wash.”



“I was depressed.”

“What? With your interesting job, your good social life and me?  
Sparks, you weren’t depressed, you were just - ”

“What?”

“One day,” said Alison, “we went to the pub, and you had your  
pyjamas on underneath your tracksuit.”

“It was my birthday!”

Alison looked at Sparks.

“It was my birthday,” she said.

“Oh,” said Sparks.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Alison said.

“Yes, I do,” said Sparks.

“I had two cokes and you had - ”

“Vanilla vodka,” said Sparks. “Vanilla vodka and ginger ale. And -  
”

“Gin and something disgusting,” said Alison. “And we had a  
massive row and I dumped you.”

“I dumped you,” said Sparks.

“In your so-called world, maybe. But I distinctly remember  
dumping you,” said Alison.

“Oh well, all that’s in the past,” said Sparks, as much like an idiot  
as he could. “But... but I’m different now.”

“Yes, you’re dead,” said Alison.

She sat down.

“Sorry, I know I should have done the finding out how you’re dead and not dead part before the telling you why I was going to dump you part, but I’ve been wanting to get this off my chest for a long time now.”

“Oh good,” said Sparks. “Listen, I have to - ”

“Tell me later, I want to know about your death,” said Alison.

“Shit! I’d better phone your mum and tell her. She’ll be furious. And pleased,” Alison added, hastily. “But initially furious.”

“You’re taking this well,” said Sparks. “I thought you’d be more freaked.”

“I am freaked,” said Alison, “But I just got all that off my chest - I mean, I couldn’t shout it all at your grave, well, I could, in fact, I did, but you weren’t listening, being dead. And I am pleased you’re not dead, even though I’d still dump you. And I’m in love.”

“That’s what I want to talk - ”

“Tell me later.”

Alison’s face lost any relaxedness it had had. “What are you doing with Joseph, Sparks?”

Things did not go well after that. Sparks said something about, oh, it's Joseph now, Alison mentioned Kaye's wallet, Sparks remarked on Kaye's insane-looking photo, Alison said that she was in love with him, and Sparks, perhaps unwisely, confided that Kaye was a psychopath who planned to destroy the universe.

"You're just jealous," said Alison.

"Why?" said Sparks. "I don't want to destroy the universe."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't."

"No, why the other?"

Sparks explained. He waited for the *deja vu* to kick in, having already explained most of it to another Alison, but it didn't. *Perhaps*, he thought, *deja vu only happens when you haven't actually deja vu'ed something.*

"I don't know," said Alison.

"Why not?" said Sparks. "You believed me last time."

"There was no last time," Alison said. "I'm not that Alison, with the bears. And I'm not the Alison in your world or whatever either."

"So," said Sparks, more triumphal than a parade, "you believe me. Possibly," he added, lowering some mighty flags of conquest.

"I don't know, I said," Alison said. "You're not a liar, Sparks, it's one of your good points."

“What are my other good points?”

“Shut up, I’m not in the mood. You’re not a liar, and while you have pretended to be some stupid things before, like a dog, once, you’ve never pretended to be dead. At least not in earnest.”

“I could be mad.”

“No,” said Alison, carefully. “You’re not. I’ve been around people who’ve... been mad.”

“You mean him. Kaye face.”

“Kaye’s his name. Putting “face” after it doesn’t make him bad. Or mad.”

“But you do mean him. He is mad.”

Alison picked up Sparks’ tiny cup and looked into it as if it were a tiny porcelain well and she was at the bottom.

“He wasn’t in his... he wasn’t well. Mentally. But he’s OK now. I know it.”

“He didn’t look OK this afternoon. He was virtually frothing.”

“You’re wrong,” said Alison, although she didn’t sound convinced.

“Funny, I can swallow all this time and space rubbish, but not - ”

She got up.

“I feel like I have to choose,” she said. “I don’t know what, but I do. And whatever it is, Sparks, it isn’t you.”

She got up and left.

Sparks sat in companionless silence with himself until the cafe's owner came over.

"I don't know if you're dead or not. It's not uncommon in here to be either," he said. "But I want three pounds fifty for the espresso, and I want you out of here."

Sparks paid.

"Weirdo," said the cafe owner as he went back behind the counter.

"Espresso," said Sparks as the cafe owner turned on a large screen TV for the sports news.

Joseph Kaye ran. He ran faster and faster until at last, somehow, he found himself outside his parents' house. He opened the door and ran inside.

"Evening, dear," said his mother. "You've missed your tea."

"We gave it to the dog," said his father.

"Good," said Kaye, absently, and hurtled up the stairs. In his room, he pulled boxes and shoes from under his bed.

"Get your own place if you're going to have parties!" shouted his father from downstairs as Kaye threw shoes and boxes against the wall.

Kaye found a large grey cardboard box. He ripped it open, and its contents exploded in a spray of A4 paper and bits of spiral notebook.

Grabbing fistfuls of paper and notes, Kaye kicked the boxes back. Then he went to a drawer, pulled it out, and took out something heavy. He closed the drawer and this time walked downstairs.

“You’re annoying your father,” said Kaye’s mother at the foot of the stairs.

Kaye stopped. “Goodbye, mum,” he said. “I love you.”

He kissed her and went out into the night.

“That boy will be the death of us,” said Kaye’s father.

“Oh do shut up,” said Kaye’s mother. She touched her cheek where Kaye had kissed it.

Alison sat on her sofa. She felt incredibly peculiar, as she supposed she would, given that the man she loved had apparently just lost his mind again after meeting her ex-boyfriend, who was supposed to be dead but in fact had been in... Alison wondered why she hadn’t lost her mind, and felt guilty. She consoled herself with the thought that, at this rate, it wouldn’t be long.

There was a noise in the background. Alison realised it was the television, which Kaye had left on. She disliked the television for reminding her of Kaye’s recent, happier, TV-watching presence, picked up the remote and went to turn it off.

“Leave me alone,” she said, unreasonably, to the television.

“Police have just surrounded a rooftop in central London where a man is believed to be threatening to kill himself,” replied the television.

Alison put the remote down. Then she picked it up again and turned up the volume.

Sparks stared at the TV screen.

“I want the sport,” said the cafe owner.

“Hush,” said Sparks.

The huge screen showed a large, green-flaring building from the air. Police helicopters flew past and there were some cars with big letters on their roofs moving about below. On top of the building, a thin man was doing a bit of waving.

“Give me the remote back,” said the owner.

“I know him,” Sparks said

“Of course you do,” said the owner. “You’re a weirdo.”

“Where is that?” said Sparks to an old man, who looked like he knew stuff.

“That’s the old thingie,” said the old man, “In town. The ‘60s one.”

“So it is,” said Sparks, who understood this kind of talk. He gave the cafe owner his remote back and went outside.

“West End,” said Alison.

“Whereabouts?” said the cabbie.

“That ‘60s building in the middle,” she said.

“Gotcha,” said the cabbie.

“I don’t know where it is,” said Duncan. “Ask the front desk.”

“What?” said Jeff, “Hello front desk, you know that building on the news, where is it?”

“Why not?” said Duncan, and picked up the phone.

Thirty seconds later, Duncan said, “I know exactly where it is.”

“Good,” said Jeff. “Let’s go.”

“Sorry mate,” said the minicab driver, “I dunno where you mean.

“It’s the big one in town,” said Sparks. “With the lights.”

“I’m Russian,” said the driver. “Better on Novosibirsk than the West End.”

“Why’ve you got a Cockney accent?” said Sparks .



“It happens,” said the driver. “Here, I’ve got a Streetfinder somewhere.”

Alison paid the cabbie and got out. The building was ringed with police cars and news vans.

“Rats,” said Jeff. “The place is full of fuzz.”

“Fuzz?” said Duncan. “Who are you, Mister Woodstock?”

“Don’t get cocky with me,” Jeff said. “We need to find a side entrance.”

“This way,” said Duncan, and walked off.

“Wait for,” said Jeff, taken aback, “me.”

Joseph Kaye had made a bonfire on the roof out of all the files, folders and bits of paper he had been collecting for the last few months. Pictures of beetles curled up at the edges and browned into nothing alongside heavily-typed documents and eager-to-be-flammable faxes and photocopies. Over sixty pounds of public money was wasted as Kaye’s

carefully collected hoard of near-evidence, half-proof and unwell conjecture turned into yellow fire.

Kaye himself appeared to be burning, but this was because, one, he was standing next to the bonfire and the flames were reflecting off his sweaty face and, two, he was in quite a state. His mind was trying to run through a version of events that made sense, but it wasn't doing well.

*I believed that I was ill, Kaye thought, then I believed that I was sane, and decided to carry on looking for proof that I was right. And then, just as I did that, I met someone who made me forget about looking for proof. And just when I had forgotten, it turned out that she was lying.*

A large helicopter flew over Kaye, and he batted a hand at it, as if to swat it away. Obviously, it didn't work, but Kaye was past caring. He had trusted someone, gone so far as to love them, and it turned out that her dead boyfriend was very much not dead. It was all very clear; he didn't blame her. Or even the dead boyfriend.

*It was me, Kaye thought. It was me all along.*

Sparks got out of the cab.

"I can walk it from here," he said, dropping a crumpled ten pound note onto the driver's lap.

“You couldn’t tell me how to get home, could you?” said the cab driver, but Sparks was already running.

Alison, who used to belong to a gym below the building, knew there was a subway and a back way. If she was quick, she could avoid the police.

She was quick. She avoided the police.

“There he is,” said Duncan.

“Give me the gun,” said Jeff.

Duncan did, and Jeff stepped in front of Sparks, who had given up running and was panting outside a shoe shop.

“Fancy seeing you here,” said Jeff.

“Get out of my way,” said Sparks.

“So you can pant more freely?” said Jeff. “I’d be happy to. Here, you might want this.”

He handed Sparks the gun. Sparks looked at it consideringly.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Oh, it’s thank you now, is it?” said Jeff, but Sparks was already moving away.

Kaye dropped a last piece of paper on the bonfire and moved away from it. He hoped he could get to the edge of the roof before the police appeared.

Alison came out of the service lift. She opened the fire exit door and immediately she could see Kaye's bonfire. She ran out towards it, waving motes of burning paper away from her eyes.

Kaye was standing by a low rail, a few feet away from the ledge.

"Joseph!" Alison shouted.

Kaye turned round. His eyes looked rudderless.

"Go away," he said. Then he appeared to reconsider. "Or stay. It doesn't matter."

"Come over here," said Alison.

"It's not your fault," Kaye shouted.

"I know it's not my fault," Alison said. "It's Sparks."

"It was me," said Kaye. "All the time, it was me."

"It wasn't you," said Alison. "You're right"

"I am, am I?" said Kaye, and he sounded angry. "I believe in something that doesn't exist. Actually," and as he expanded the thought,

he hopped the low rail. Now he was a few inches away from the ledge.

“Actually, I believed in a few things that don’t exist. I believed you when you said your lover was dead.”

“He’s not my lover. And he is dead,” said Alison.

“I want to believe you. See?” said Kaye. “It’s me. It’s all me.”

Alison went over to the rail. She walked round it.

“It’s not you,” she said.

Kaye looked at her. She took his hand and wrapped her fingers in his.

“I don’t know who to trust,” he said. “I can’t even trust myself.”

Alison turned to follow Kaye’s stare. Sparks was on the roof, with his hand in his pocket.

“Hello, Alison,” shouted Sparks, walking towards them. “Please move away from Joseph.”

“It’s the dead man,” said Kaye. “Hello, dead man.”

He moved towards the ledge. Alison, her hand still in his, moved with him.

“Stop there,” said Sparks.

“No,” said Kaye. “Let go,” he said to Alison.

“I’m not letting go,” said Alison. “Move back, Sparks.”

“No,” said Sparks.

“What’s happening?” said Jeff.

“Everyone’s standing close to the edge of the roof and he’s got something in his pocket,” said Duncan.

“Ooh,” said Jeff.

“Are you mad?” said Kaye. “Move back.”

“Are you mad?” said Sparks. “That’s what I want to know.”

“Yes,” said Kaye, “I am. It’s all my fault. I know how to end it, though. So move back.”

“You’re holding my girlfriend’s hand,” said Sparks.

“I’m holding his hand,” said Alison.

“Your girlfriend?” said Kaye. “I feel so stupid.”

“I am not his girlfriend,” said Alison.

“Let go my hand,” said Kaye.

“No,” said Alison.

“All right,” said Sparks. “This really is enough.”

He reached into his pocket.

“What’s that?” said Kaye. “How typical. I’m about to kill myself but still you’re going to - ”

He stared.

Alison stared, but not as much as Kaye.

“Oh my God,” said Kaye.

“Has he shot him?” said Jeff.

“Why don’t you have a look?” said Duncan, and handed Jeff the binoculars.

Jeff looked through the binoculars. He could see three figures on the roof. They were all standing.

“What are they doing?” he said, and focussed the binoculars again.

“What the hell is that?” said Jeff.

Sparks stepped back from Kaye, who was staring at the object that Sparks had given him.

“What is it?” said Alison.

“Oh my God,” said Kaye again.

“It’s a cockroach,” said Sparks.

“It is,” said Kaye, wondering. “It is a cockroach.”

“I took it from the man who showed it to you,” said Sparks, as Kaye removed the cockroach from its matchbox and gazed at it like a long lost insect uncle.

“Then I’m not mad,” said Kaye. “I was right all along.”

“Yes, great,” said Sparks. “We should go now.”

“What’s a cockroach?” said Alison.

“I’ll tell you later,” said Sparks. “First I think we really should get down off here.”

Kaye and Alison came round the rail, Kaye still holding the cockroach. Sparks went to the fire exit.

“The door’s closed from the inside,” he said.

“I should have propped it open,” said Kaye. “But I didn’t think I - ”

The door opened.

“That was lucky,” said Sparks.

“No, it wasn’t,” said Jeff. “Now get back over there and jump off the roof like you’re supposed to.”

Jeff and Duncan moved towards them.

“I’ve seen you before,” said Alison. “You were at Speaker’s Corner.”

“He showed me the cockroach,” said Kaye.

“We’ve all known each other for years,” said Jeff. “Now get over there before I shoot you.”

“How many guns have you got?” said Sparks.

“Just the - ” said Jeff, as Sparks took Jeff’s gun from his pocket.

“Good plan,” said Duncan.



“Shut up,” said Jeff. “You won’t shoot me,” he said to Sparks.

Sparks fired the gun. A bullet bounced off the ground in front of Jeff.

“I’ll just stand a bit nearer next time,” said Sparks.

“What are you going to do with them?” said Alison as Sparks ushered Jeff and Duncan down the stairs.

“I don’t know, tie them up and leave them in a conference room or something,”

“This is all real,” said Kaye. He stared at Jeff and Duncan again.

“I’m sorry, I’m going to be a bit like this for a while.”

“This broom cupboard looks like a conference room,” said Sparks, stopping at the foot of the stairs

“What are they doing here anyway?” said Alison. “I mean, it sounds a lot of wasted effort, trying to kill you and Joseph. I mean, not that you’re not worth killing. I mean - ”

“I don’t know,” said Sparks. “I thought I did, but I don’t.”

He opened the cupboard door. The stairwell filled with light. Great rays of silver and gold luminescence poured out and got everywhere

“Oh bugger,” said Jeff.

Kaye was so stunned he almost dropped the matchbox. Just when he thought he might not be mad, events were conspiring to make him go mad. As the stairwell stopped filling with light and started being a stairwell again, Kaye could see two figures coming out of the broom cupboard. One was tall and thin, like the two men who had tried to kill him, and the other was wider and stout.

“Hello Jeff,” said the thinner figure, now no longer a silhouette.

“Hello Duncan,” said the stouter figure, who was a woman.

“Hello Alan,” said Duncan. “Hello, Mrs Reeves.”

“I know you,” said Sparks. He was talking to the woman. “You work in a toyshop.”

“Not primarily,” said the woman. “Nice to see you again. And your friends.”

“Can I have that, please?” said Alan. He indicated the matchbox.

“No,” said Kaye.

“I don’t think so,” said Alison. “We’ve been through a lot of grief because of that.”

“Anyway, it’s dead,” said Sparks. “And there’s that whole no-one would believe us business as well.”

“I suppose so,” said Alan. “Actually, it was just the matchbox I wanted.”

He took it from Kaye, tipped the cockroach into his hand, and put the matchbox in his pocket.

“Hang on,” said Sparks. “There’s a picture of - ”

Alan put his finger to his lips.

“Least said,” he said. “We’re not starting that all again.”

“Cup of tea, anyone?” said Mrs Reeves.

The Society's headquarters, if that's where they were, which it was, was a big Victorian building full of oak-panelled rooms and enormous tables.

"What a lot of oak," said Kaye.

"I like oak," said Alison.

"You never mentioned that before," said Sparks.

Alison gave him an old-fashioned look.

"Shall I be mother?" asked Mrs Reeves. She had a large teapot and an awful lot of biscuits on a plate

"What?" said Kaye.

"It's just an expression," said Alison.

"Obviously," said Sparks.

"Don't get snippy, Sparks."

"I'm not. I just meant it's a common expression."

"You're getting snippy."

"It's all right," said Joseph Kaye. "I think we're all entitled to some degree of emotion at this point."

"I've got Garibaldis and fig rolls," said Mrs Reeves.

A large oak-panelled door opened and Alan came in. He looked more and more like someone who worked for the BBC. He even had a green corduroy jacket with elbow patches.

"Where's Jeff and Duncan?" said Sparks.

“They’ll be along in a while,” said Alan. “We were debriefing them. We don’t often find members of the Random nowadays.”

“Bit like teddy boys,” said Mrs Reeves. “Do you have teddy boys where you are?”

“What’s the Random?” said Sparks, “Is it anything to do with the -  
”

“Random Life Generator,” said Alan. “Yes. It’s what they use to get around. Slow thing, really, but all they could cobble together, given their resources.”

“What do you use then?” said Sparks.

“That would be telling,” said Alan.

“I know,” said Sparks. “I want you to tell me.”

Alan gave Sparks a look.

“You see,” said Mrs Reeves, “We are not the Random. We are the Society. The Random are a sort of splinter group.”

“Well, they are a splinter group,” said Alan. “There’s no sort of about it. Sorry.”

“Have they been illegal and persecuted for hundreds of years?”  
said Sparks, hopefully.

“No,” said Mrs Reeve. “They used to meet in the pub across the road. But they got rowdy and the landlord banned them.”

“The Society does disapprove,” said Alan, “But what can we do? We’re not the police.” He sounded slightly disappointed.

“Then what are you?” said Sparks.

“Where do we start?” sighed Alan

“How about three hundred years ago, with the aim of finding God’s Perfect World?” said Sparks, who really didn’t like Alan.

Alan looked at Sparks, as a man who knows everything looks at a man who knows too much.

“Oh, and they like hitting people and telling them to shut up,” added Sparks.

“No, that’s the Random,” said Alan. “The hitting part, anyway. The Society is still looking for God’s Perfect World, but in a more informal, nicer way. The Random, however, differ. They don’t believe there is a perfect world, made by God or anyone, but rather than the universe is - ”

“Random,” said Sparks, guessing wildly.

“Yes,” said Alan. “While the Society has a noble sense of deistic purpose, the Random believe that the chaos of alternate worlds proves only that if there is a God, he is incredibly indecisive, and that this world, and the others, are half-baked, unfinished and senseless.”

“Well,” said Sparks, “they sort of have a point.”

The room went quiet.

“I mean,” said Sparks, ploughing on. “Look at wars and that. ”

“Illness,” said Kaye. “Imprisonment and injustice.”

“Death,” said Alison.

“Accidents,” said Sparks. “And... random events.”

“Have you actually found any perfect worlds yet?” said Alison.

“Or come near to it even?”

Alan sighed like someone important at the BBC being asked something obvious about the licence fee.

“This is a very old argument,” said Alan.

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t valid,” said Alison.

“Yes,” said Kaye. “In fact, its age tends to suggest that you’ve been unable to refute it.”

“Yeah,” said Sparks, not to be left out.

“Well, the maths is on our side,” said Alan. “There is clearly an infinite amount of worlds out there and one of them must be perfect.”

“Whose definition of perfect?” said Alison.

“Yes,” said Kaye. “How do you know that, say, the world I come from, the world that Alison comes on isn’t perfect?”

“Yes,” said Alison. “It seems pretty perfect to me.”

Sparks looked at Alison.

“There aren’t any cockroaches,” he said.

“That’s not - ” said Kaye. He stopped because Alison nudged him.  
Sparks was looking very unhappy.

“Come outside a sec,” said Alison.

“I only did all this to get back with you,” said Sparks.

“I’m not that Alison,” said Alison. “If you wanted to get back with that Alison, you should have gone after her. Not every other Alison in the universe apart from her.”

“She’s in Australia,” said Sparks. “It’s very expensive to go there.”

“Sparks, you’ve been round the universe. Australia’s fairly easy to get to in comparison.”

“I just... I’ve changed, you know.”

“I know you have. You’re different to the Sparks I knew. I mean, you’re not dead, but also... you’ve changed.”

“Then - ”

“Sparks. I love you. I do. But I am in love with Joseph. And he’s in love with me.”

“He’s a nutter.”

“You know he isn’t.”

Sparks was silent. He knew this to be true.



“I know,” he said. “It’s just all a bit disappointing. I mean, not for you. Or him. It’s great. And I am glad. Or I will be. But - ”

He stopped.

“Oh, you know.”

They went back in. Kaye was saying to Alan, “For all you know, God’s Perfect World might be composed entirely of cockroaches”, and Alan was saying, “Look, we’ve got a booklet that explains that,” and Mrs Reeves was opening more packets of biscuits. They all stopped when Sparks came in, probably because he looked so devastatingly sad.

“I want to go home,” said Sparks.

Alan looked at him.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll get Jeff and Duncan.”

“Great,” said Sparks. “Pardon?”

“We’re not the police,” said Alan. “We don’t arrest people.”

“But they did bad things,” said Sparks, “They made me, well one of me, disappear.”

“Oh, him,” said Alan, annoyingly. “He ‘s fine. He went to some bloody world and became a pop star. We’d have got him back but he seems to be liking the sex.”

“They tried to kill me,” said Sparks. “They tried to get me to kill people. And they set fire to my bed.”

“Well, we might reduce their privileges,” said Alan, virtually yawning.

“A lot,” said Mrs Reeves, quite firmly. “And re-assign them. There’s a world where no-one remembered to invent personal hygiene. That’s not nice. And there’s one where thin people are considered a delicacy.”

“The possibilities,” said Alan. “are infinite.”

“I am sorry,” said Duncan. “But I got confused.”

“Because he’s an idiot,” said Jeff.

“I was an idiot,” said Duncan. “Now, oddly, I find Jeff’s hysterical personality and aggression more pitiable than interesting.”

“What?” said Jeff. “I’ll do you for that.”

“No you won’t,” said Duncan. “While thin, I am heavier than you. And more patient. You’ll stop bullying me now.”

“Can I hit him?” said Sparks. “For old times’ sake.”

“No,” said Duncan. “I’ll be looking after his sorry behind from now on. Maybe he’ll turn out to be less of a fool now.”

“I can see that happening,” said Sparks.

Duncan shrugged.

“I agreed with a lot of this Random stuff,” said Sparks.

“It’s a good theory,” said Duncan. “But sometimes you think the other lot have got the right idea. I mean, all this stuff and it just got here somehow?”

“It’s possible,” said Jeff.

“Who knows,” said Duncan. “Here,” he said to Sparks, handing him a small bag.

“What is it?” said Sparks.

“It’s a small bag,” said Duncan. “In it is an A-Z of Melbourne in Australia, and an address.”

Sparks looked in the bag, then back at Duncan.

“She’s dumped him,” said Jeff. “Obviously can’t make her mind up. Spends her life wandering from unsuitable man to unsuitable man. We’ve all done it.”

“Are you gay?” said Sparks suddenly.

“Yes,” said Jeff. “Problem with that?”

“No!” said Sparks. “Why are you giving me this?”

“It was her idea,” said Duncan. “Not the one in Australia, the one having tea with Alan. Resolve it, she said. Go down under, not sideways. Whatever that means.”

Sparks took the address out.

“Blimey,” he said.

“In here,” said Duncan, and opened a door. A lot of blinding light came out again.

Sparks saw Jeff and Duncan, first as silhouettes bordered by sheets of light, then as waving stickmen, and then they were gone. And then -

OW!

NOT AGAIN!

OWWWW!

Sparks woke up. He was outside a large apartment block in a very sunny street.

“Excuse me,” he said to a woman passing with some dogs, “Is this Australia?”

The woman looked at him and walked off.

Sparks got up. He took out the A-Z. He looked at the address. He went up to the apartment door and rang a buzzer. He waited.

Several thousand miles away, in North London, a young woman got out of a cab. She walked up to a small grubby door and rang the bell. She rang it six or seven times.

“Bloody hell, Sparks,” said Alison.

**THE END**