

Jungle Fiction

COLLABORATORS

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Chapter 1

Jungle Fiction

1.1 Welcome To Jungle Fiction

5th Dimension Proudly Presents a demo of Dark Portal IV:

* JUNGLE FICTION *

Short Stories by Andy J Campbell

"Meet the doctor who's called out to examine himself, the boy who summons a dragon using an old horseshoe, the recently ditched teenager who dials the telephone number of a pervert, the ex-school bully who one day hears an alarm nobody else in the world can hear, the checkout operator whose dreams begin to alter physical reality, the sleep-obsessed youth who wakes up and finds a crowbar..."

...And many other nightmarishly bizarre situations fresh from the mind of urban horror writer Andy J Campbell, whose work has been published in magazines such as Implosion, Beneath the Surface, Auslander, Axiom, Raw Nerve, and The New Science Fiction Times.

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About the Author

1.2 Dark Confessions - More Information

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

At 21 years of age, Andy J Campbell spends most of his time living under two different roofs - that of his parents' house, and that of his hugely talented writer-girlfriend's (the Dark Fiction featured Donna Louise Taylor). So far he's been published only sparingly on paper, but - almost as if to make up for it - rather extensively in electronic format, most recently in the form of a 4000 word sf/fantasy tale called Black Mosaic in Cluster, a new PC publication (the second issue of which includes a story from the likes of Mr Humorous Fantasy

himself, Rhys Hughes). His influences include Roald Dahl, Thomas Ligotti and Stephen King.

He's also a pretty successful shareware author, and the original grey matter behind the now incredibly popular Amiga PD RPG, Black Dawn. Some of his other creations include Artistix, a children's art programme that's been reviewed and praised by every Amiga zine in existence (Amiga Format gave it PD Pick Of The Month), Illusions, the sequel, (both now available from 5th Dimension for just £4.99 each!) and Pollymorf, heralded by The One magazine (before it died) as "a classic PD puzzler".

Dark Portal IV, of which Jungle Fiction is only a measly sample, has been coded by Campbell himself and features an amazing graphical and musical interface to accompany the best digital fiction available on the Amiga. Featured writers include Eileen Shaw, Mick Carter, Philip Cockburn, Mike Richmond, Donna Louise Taylor and Jordan Jessen.

Dark Portal IV is available for just ** £3.95 ** from the Amiga's leading licenceware dealer - 5th Dimension:

1 LOWER MILL CLOSE, GOLDTHORPE, ROTHERHAM, SOUTH YORKSHIRE, S63 9BY, UK

Tel/Fax:01709 888127 Email:Phil@ware5d.demon.co.uk

Web:<http://www.ware5d.demon.co.uk>

Please make cheques payable to "5th Dimension Licenceware". Thanks.

P R A I S E F O R D A R K P O R T A L

"If the name Dark Portal doesn't mean anything to you, then it will by the time you've finished reading this... a very professional look about it... these tales are not for the faint-hearted."

- AMIGA PRO, November 94 (Star Performer Award)

"Are you easily spooked? Then steer clear of this."

- CU AMIGA, January 96

"Ideal material to read alone, at night, in the dark."

- 82%, AMIGA USER INTERNATIONAL, January 96

"Dark images for dark stories, not for the faint hearted... bloodthirsty horror fans will adore."

- AMIGA FORMAT, April 96

"The quality of the writing is very good... we like a shade of mystery and Dark Portal has to be congratulated for providing it... fun to read."

- 90%, AMIGA USER INTERNATIONAL, June 96

1.3 Jungle Fiction

JUNGLE FICTION

Short Stories By Andy J Campbell

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The Dog In The Car	2800 words
Dreaming Methods	3000 words
Sheets	3500 words
The Dragon Caller	1900 words
Alarmed	1800 words
Having Peter With Cheese	3600 words
Holding The Cane	3400 words

Further stories can be purchased for just £3.95 from
 5th Dimension Licenceware. See About the Author for details.

1.4 The Dog In The Car

T W O D A Y D I A R Y or T H E D O G I N T H E C A R

Monday

~~~~~

I woke up at half past ten this morning but I didn't get out of bed till four. Mum knocked at twelve, as usual, and floated in with some tea and toast held high on a tray, like a waitress. She sat down at the foot of my bed and told me all about the goings on at the house across the road. "Somebody broke in last night and nicked the video," she said. "Didn't bother trying to be discreet, did they, no George, they didn't, they just kicked the bloody door down." Munching my toast, eyes barely open, I then got the full story of how Mum had witnessed a bunch of joyriders take a Fiesta down the fields by the canal. "They nearly ran me down, George," she said. "I've never been so terrified in all my life. Anyway, sweetheart," She stood up and brushed some invisible crumbs off her apron. "Stay where you are, George, you worked hard yesterday. You have a good rest, darling." She gave me a smile before reversing out and closing the door. I scoffed the toast and drank the tea then did exactly as Mum had said - I had a good, long rest. After all, what the hell's the point in getting up to face a world so full of shit?

I've been trying to have a lucid dream for the past three months. Dad thinks I'm going insane. Every three hours or so, I stop whatever it is I'm doing and ask myself if I'm dreaming. I then move to the nearest light switch or other electrical appliance and see if it works. You see, electrical gadgets have a tendency to fail during dreams. Or so I've been told. Anyway, the whole point of this "am I dreaming?" exercise is to eventually bring the routine /into/ my dreams, so that I'll start asking myself that very question, hence triggering the paradox of consciousness during sleep. Something like that, anyway. Like I said, I've had my fingers crossed for the past three months and nothing's happened. To be quite honest I'm beginning to think the whole concept's a load of bollocks.

The point is, I'm sick of getting up. Going to bed is the only thing I look forward to, these days. I've got a cacky full-time-at-the-weekend job and I'm supposed to be going out with a girl called Fiona, but (and here comes the real pisser) they're both about as inspiring as the latest Boyzone album.

Why don't I quit my job? Like yeah, and do what? Go where? To the plug-in sixth-form extension they call University? I'd rather jam a prospectus up my arse and sing a few nursery rhymes whilst I'm doing it than fill in a God forsaken UCAS form. Higher education's for older children - kids who have recurring nightmares about getting a real job in the real world. It's a perpetual loop of "can I be arsed to go to this lecture?" and "is Susan still going out with James?" and "how much beer shall I drink tonight?". If I ever bog off to Uni it'll be when I'm fifty-something - after I've had half-a-century of real life. Maybe then I'll be happy about exposing myself to billions of sheepy little students, all intent on becoming their cattle-prodding parents' pride and joy. "Can't stand up on your own two feet? Can't get a job? Don't have a life? Come to Uni, we'll sort you out!". Piss off.

If my girlfriend's horrible why don't I ditch her? Yeah, no worries, I'll spend the rest of my young life alone, bashing my bishop under the quilt. 99% of girls my age judge a book by it's cover - all they do is hobble about like penguins in miniskirts looking for the best-looking guy on the streets (who, in most cases, turns out to be the same twat who kicked ten buckets of shit out of everybody smaller than him back at school). The thing I find really stupid about this is the fact that when they reach thirty, it all fits into place and they start gazing a bit deeper into the men they attract. It's usually after they've been treated like shit by some exterior-judging male-equivelant, or turned into an emotional humbug and sucked for a while before being spat out in the gutter.

Anyway, I'm getting sidetracked. It sounds really sad, perhaps even a tad contradictory to what I've just waffled on about, but Fiona and I have this... Kind of an understanding: until we find our "ideal partners" we've agreed to keep on seeing each other, if only for the sake of sexual release. The thing is, she's about as appealing as the side of a badly vandalized telephone box and I have the same social compatibility rating as an Egiptian mummy. The odds of us ever breaking up are distressingly poor.

Yeah, so I'm taking the piss out of us both, severely, and maybe we're not quite that bad. In actual fact, I personally don't care if I'm the world's quietest and most unsociable gimp - I've never done a thing wrong to anybody. I've always slipped about the face of the planet, minding my own business, keeping myself strictly to myself. It's my surroundings that're shite, not me.

I went for a walk this evening and got shouted at from the top floor

of a block of flats a few minutes up the road by a bunch of rat-arsed University students. They sarcastically screamed at me that I was "dead fit" and that they wanted to go out with me. I didn't say anything, I just wandered out of range. Further up I got laughed at by a bunch of skateboarding kids for wearing a coat. It's hot weather, you see, and I understand that a coat might seem a bit out of place, but I hardly think I deserved to have stones thrown at me, do you? Following that I got short-changed at the corner shop, nearly run-over by a car travelling at seventy miles-per-hour on a thirty limit stretch, and witnessed a young skinhead being dragged into the back of a police van after being caught trying to break in to a pensioner's garden shed. Mediocre stuff, really, I suppose.

Somewhere near the school playground I got pounded by some pretty heavy verbal abuse. Now, the only problem with "bouncing" verbal abuse is the fact that it always seems to stir up trouble. By the time I'd finished playing bollock-talk badminton I was being legged by a legion of six-foot-tall demon-bully-bastards from Hell down the left hand side of the school building. I managed to outrun my pursuers, thank God, but whenever such an event occurs I always get paranoid that not only am I being chased by a cluster of sexually perverse gay rapists, but also by the same gang that seems to be circling our neighbourhood every night, kicking down doors to "borrow" video cassette players.

The final and most infuriating thing I encountered on my stroll, however, was a dog locked in the back of a car - panting, rushing up and over the seats, barking, whining. It's there nearly all night, every night, I know, I've seen it before, hundreds of times. It's an alsation, vicious looking mutt, but I don't care, it's cruel, locking an animal inside a vehicle during the summer, especially with the windows barely open.

Anyway, I did nothing. Just walked past it, back home. Back to bed. After all, what can I do? What can anybody do? Nothing. Nothing without causing a full scale neighbourhood war.

Tuesday

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Today, I woke up at six and got up at seven. No lucid dream, but plenty of dreams. You see, I was sick this morning. Sick of doing nothing. Sick of ignoring everything and everyone. Sick of being abused by the inhabitants of a planet I have every bloody right to live in peace on.

Mum knocked on my bedroom door at twelve and came in carrying the usual tea and toast. I asked her why she'd knocked and not just entered (after all, it's her house) and why she always insisted on making me breakfast. She just smiled and shrugged and left, shutting the door behind her. I didn't touch my tea or toast until I'd toggled the light switch - sometimes things are so mechanical around here I find myself wondering which side of awake reality lies on.

My sister, bless her snotty little heart, is fifteen, she's off school at the moment, but I haven't seen her for twenty six days. She's like me - she's got virtually no friends and spends most of her conscious life eating junk, watching telly and masturbating (yes, masturbating: in contrast to popular belief, having a girlfriend doesn't always blank out the jack-off option). At the beginning of the summer holidays, Mum and I turned the cellar into a teenage tart's dream hideaway and planted sis down there. Mum often visits with plates full of edible shit and the telly times, but I never go down. The last time I came into contact with my sister she tried to kill me with a can of hairspray.

As for Dad, I don't usually catch him before he goes to work because 99% of the time I'm still asleep, but this morning I grabbed him and asked him if I could borrow the key to the greenhouse. He asked me why. I said I wanted to get the crowbar out. He asked me why. I said I wanted to wrench the door off the Mercedes two blocks up the road. He asked me why. I said I wanted to free the dog that was trapped in there, roasting in the hot summer sun. He asked me why. I told him to piss off and just give me the key.

At midday I pickled about in the garden whacking plants and digging up soil with Dad's legendary and rarely seen crowbar. I hit myself with it, too, and asked myself if I was dreaming. Disappointingly (but rather predictably) I said "no".

Took some balls to go shuffling up the road with that metal stick in my hands, I'll tell you that. How many usually very sane and polite neighbours have you seen patrolling the streets with a crowbar lately? Not many, I'll bet. Funny thing is, nobody seemed to give a shit about me, because... Well, I'm just me, aren't I? Nobody special, nobody worth looking at, just another one of life's automated in-betweens, popping over to the local mini-market for a loaf of bread and a pint of pasturized milk.

The dog stopped barking when I got to the car. Stopped everything, in fact - wagging its tail, flapping its tongue, twisting its ears. It just sat on the back seat, looking at me, as if I'd whispered to it that I knew the secret location of its favourite bone, or something. And I stood there, in the road, gazing back at it, smiling, crowbar in both hands.

It came to me then: to free this dog was to free myself. To wrench the car door open or bash in the windows and free this poor, innocent canine was to release my every inhibition. I /wanted/ to free it. I /had/ to free it. Hell, it was my mission in /life/.

I lifted the crowbar and gritted my teeth. The dog's ears slowly sank. My lower jaw gradually uncraned. My fingers squeezed the metal. My blood began to pump. My heart began to rattle. This was it. This was the answer. I had been born for this moment. This was going to be the ultimate spiritual redemption. The end of the journey. The burning bush at the very end of life's path. I felt wonderful. I grinned. I laughed. This was incredible. This was /ORGASMIC/, JESUS CHRIST! BOLLOCKS TO FIONA-

...And then I realised I was looking and thinking like a complete tosser. I gently lowered the crowbar and mimed an apology to the dog. It barked at me, as if to say "go home, you daft bugger". So I did - I glanced around, wiped my nose, looked at the crowbar accusingly, then shuffled back home. Back to lucid dreaming, back to my sister in the cellar, back to tea and toast, back to bed, boy, back to bed - because that's the answer isn't it? Bed: the most exciting place to be on the surface of the Earth.

Bed.

1.5 Dreaming Methods

D R E A M I N G M E T H O D S

He awoke and went downstairs five times.

And later, when the bedroom wallpaper was the right colour and the

curtains had stopped blowing, he decided to get up and go downstairs for real.

He told his reflection in the bathroom mirror that breakfast would be two boiled eggs surrounded by buttery soldiers and that Katherine would be parked on the sofa in the front room with her feet on the table, reading a book called *The Drug Tunnel*.

"She's broken my mother's plate," he told his favourite bottle of aftershave. "And there's a cat sitting in the garden by the pond."

He slipped a bar of soap off the windowsill and began to stroke it gently across his forehead. He was frightened; these were the raucous whispers of a man on the very outskirts of sanity. What he was afraid to verbalise had become caught in a mental whirlwind... Katherine was going to put the book down, sit in silence for a while... And then... And then she was going to-

The soap sprang from his hands like a plastic toad and crash-landed on the floor beside the bath.

He walked into the kitchen.

Two boiled eggs were sat on a plate in separate eggcups like Humpty Dumpty's twins, chatting to a squadron of butter-soaked bread soldiers. Bored. Going cold. He picked one up, sniffed it, squeezed it until it cracked a little, then put it back and went into the front room.

"Wow, it lives," Katherine said from behind the dark front cover of *The Drug Tunnel*. She pulled the book away from her face like an automatic door. "You'll be pissed off to know I broke your mum's plate this morning."

"It's alright," he said, gazing up at the chandelier. "Doesn't matter."

Katherine looked upsidedown through the patio doors. "Have you seen that gorgeous little cat? Have a look at it, Richard. It's so sweet." She laughed the same laugh he'd fallen in love with and he tried his best to smile. Katherine closed the book and put it down beside her coffee, nearly spilling it. "Rubbish," she said and blinked at him. "Absolute tosh, I reckon the author ought to be electrocuted... Why are you standing there like a gorilla, Richard?"

Richard shrugged.

Katherine snorted insultingly, yawned and placed her ever-so-slightly-shaking hands over her face. "Richard?" she muttered.

"What?" he replied in a carefully-matched tone, not sure if he really wanted to hear her hideous confession for the sixth time in one morning - he felt as though he'd already taken a dangerous emotional overdose and that anything more might do some truly permanent damage.

"Richard," Katherine's hands dropped a little. She was staring at the ceiling. "I'm seeing another man."

Richard was surprised when he actually - physically - felt his heart shrivel up in his chest; there had been no such reaction on any of the previous five occasions. At least it proved he was conscious... In one way or another.

"Oh, I see," he said morbidly and began to pick his nails.

Katherine removed her hands and sat up. She looked pale, almost skeletal. "Just thought you ought to know," she said.

"Well... Thanks," He rubbed his neck, turned and went back into the kitchen.

About ten minutes later the phone rang whilst he was in the bedroom. He answered it, talked for a moment, hung up.

"Who was that?" Katherine wanted to know. She was standing in the

doorway wearing very little and holding her coffee in the same way a child might hold it's favourite teddybear.

Richard clipped his pager onto his belt. "Sandra," He said, denying her the luxury of eye-contact. "It's alright, she's just taken me off call, it's nothing important." He began to throw books and papers into his case.

"Aren't you mad?"

Richard paused. "/Me/? I'm... Yeah, I'm mad."

"You don't appear to be," She crossed her legs and took a quick sip. "I wasn't joking, you know."

"I know."

"Well... So then, aren't you going to say something? Aren't you going to shout at me? I've slept with him."

Richard snapped his briefcase closed and scooped it off the bed. "I'm very happy for you," He said matter-of-factly. "I'm late. I'm off to the surgery, okay, I'll see you later."

"Can't you spare just a few minutes?"

"No."

"Alright, fuck you then." Katherine smiled sharply and disappeared.

Richard looked at his shoes for a while, wondering what to think. No matter how much screaming anger ricochet through his mind, he always came to the same conclusion: /go to work, for God's sake just go to work/. So that's what he was going to do.

He was about to march out of the room when he heard a crackling noise and turned and saw that the curtains were lashing out towards him like blank flags.

He came out of the house at exactly the same time as the man next door, who looked as happy and content to be alive as Richard did. They said good morning, exchanged false smiles, climbed into their cars and drove away in opposing directions.

He arrived at the surgery twenty minutes late.

"You're making visits from half-past two," said Sandra, tearing off a print. She held it out to him as he passed. He didn't take it. "Oi, this is yours."

"Later," Richard unlocked and walked into his consulting room. He got rid of his case, loosened his tie and sat down awkwardly on the corner of his desk.

Sandra, looking like a tank camouflaged in a cornfield, thundered into the room and pinned the sheet onto his leg with a drawing pin.

"Jesus!" He yelled, leaping up. "Sandra- what-?"

"There you are, doctor," She gave him a mock-intellective smile. "Do enjoy."

"Sandra, give me a break," he protested wearily as she marched back out. "I've had a bad morning, you know, I'm not..." She slammed the door behind her, blowing some papers off his desk. "I'm not in the mood." he finished for the sake of it.

Richard shook the drawing pin onto the floor and scanned the print, rubbing his forehead. "Sandra you daft woman," he laughed blandly. "This is my /own/ address."

His patients that morning included a man who'd bullied him at school, a girl he'd been out with five times before she'd ditched him, a cousin who he was quite sure had /died/ eight months ago, and two fat, blond-haired twins that reminded him of the boiled eggs he'd found in the kitchen.

Two o'clock.

"Are you sure this is the right address?"

Sandra didn't look up. Richard dug the bell out from beneath a pile of drug abuse leaflets and rang it, twice.

"Hello-o?"

"She called before we were even open," Sandra revealed impatiently.

"I ran her details through the network, of course it's the right address."

Richard peeped out through the gaps in the poster-plastered window at the few remaining patients in the waiting room. They were sat facing him - all of them - with their hands interlaced on their laps.

Sandra looked up at last... And frowned. "Doctor, what's the matter? Are you alright?"

"I'm not a doctor," Richard whispered.

When he got home he couldn't put the car down the drive because it was already there, so he parked on the pavement and sat behind the wheel for a while, watching birds hop about in the road.

The sun's rays were spanning over the roof of the house like a giant spider's web when he knocked on the front door. Katherine came running to open up.

"You're the doctor, aren't you, hi, come in." Richard didn't move a muscle. Katherine waved him across the hallway. "Please, come in, it's just though here."

Slowly, like a soldier being offered freedom by his captors, Richard stepped into his own home and wiped his feet on his own doormat. Katherine closed up behind him.

"Christ I'm glad you're here, he's gotten worse," she explained, nearly pushing him towards the staircase. "I tried ringing the hospital a few moments ago but I couldn't get through, they're /always/ fucking engaged, it's disgraceful."

The wallpaper, Richard noticed during his ascent up the stairs, was the wrong colour - everywhere - and in every room he passed, the curtains were raging.

"...and I don't really know what to do," Katherine was saying. She stopped outside their bedroom door and ran both hands through her hair. "Look," she swallowed. "I told him this morning about a guy I've been going out with behind his back. Everything just... Seemed to fall apart from then on. You don't think /that/ could be the cause do you? I mean, he's a successful writer for God's sake, he doesn't /get/ stressed, he doesn't /have/ to, he just sits indoors all day and writes stories, why do you think I started..." She fell back against the wall. "Jesus Christ. Just... Have a look at him, will you? Tell me what you think."

Richard nodded. He took hold of the handle and paused. "What's he writing about at the moment?"

"Pardon?"

"Your husband. What's he writing about?"

"Oh, Jesus, I don't know, some kind of... Actually, I think it's a story about a doctor," She laughed nervously. "Why, he hasn't been phoning you for research, has he?"

Richard didn't reply. "Wait here a second." He pushed the door open, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

Cocooned by bedcovers, his other self didn't seem to notice him, even though it appeared to be staring straight into his eyes. It was surrounded by screwed-up handkerchiefs, empty cups and plates, tablets

and medicines, and there was a plastic bucket on the floor next to the bedside cabinet.

"Hello?" Richard tried. His voice was thin and unstable. "Can you hear me? Are you awake?"

The curtains in here were no different: they were shooting out like waves and crackling like fire and casting oily shadows across the bed. There was so much movement it was almost as if the room itself was alive, or about to explode, or spinning like a shoebox through space.

Trembling, Richard approached his other self, squeezing the handle of his briefcase. "Hello?" he panted. "Hello can you hear me?"

The body in the bed didn't react. It just kept staring at the bit of wall above the door and breathing rapidly.

Viewing himself in this manner reminded Richard of an experiment he'd conducted with his father's video-camera back in his teens: home-alone, he'd positioned it on top of a pile of cushions and set it recording whilst he turned his head slowly in front of the lense. Later, during playback, he'd almost passed out with shock. 'We live our lives imprisoned inside our own bodies, never really seeing ourselves from the outside,' he thought.

And now he was here, caught in some crazy, alternate reality, a dreamweb, perhaps, scrutinizing his own pallid, paralysed face.

He put his briefcase on the floor and crouched down in front of the cabinet. He pegged his nose and had a look inside the bucket. His eyes widened.

"I've done this before," his other self croaked. Richard fell back on his arse and kicked the bucket over, snatching it upright just before its foul contents had time to splash out.

"What?" he said. "What do you mean?"

The doppleganger's neck squeaked and crackled as it turned its head to look at him. "I'm not the patient," It dribbled and pointed one of its arms towards the door. "It's her. She's the one who's ill."

Later, weak-muscled and bleached with fear, he arrived in the kitchen with a sheet of sticky note-paper pinched between finger and thumb.

Katherine bounced up from the table. "What's wrong with him? What're you going to do? Are you going to call an ambulance?"

"Calm down,"

"Did you get any reaction? Has he got a fever? What's wrong?"

"It's alright, sit down, he's going to be okay."

"What the fuck's THAT?" She pointed at the soggy mess he was holding. "What is it, it stinks!"

"I found it in your husbands's sick bucket," said Richard.

Katherine shuffled away, covering her nose and mouth. "WHAT?"

"It's about you," Richard resumed, sitting on the chair opposite her. He put the sheet down on the table.

"I don't care what it's about..." Katherine met his eyes and the hand slipped away. "/What/? What do you mean notes about me?" She snatched it up and began to read. "I can hardly make this shit out, what's it say? How do you know it's about me? It's not about me, don't be stupid!" She discarded it, crossly.

"Sit down for a second, will you?"

"No, I won't, what the fuck's going on?"

"Be seated and I'll tell you."

With a disgruntled huff, Katherine did as she'd been told. Richard picked up the vomit-coated sheet of paper. "Listen to this... 'her love has gone, her happiness has transformed, her innocence has died, her charm has cracked, her beauty has slipped, her care doesn't exist, her

emotion is choking... The list goes on."

"So?" Katherine blinked.

"This is your doing! You've chucked up all your feelings for your husband! Don't you want him anymore? Jesus Katherine, he's in a state of emotional comatose and you don't look as though you give a toss! Do you give a toss?"

"Yes," She started picking skin off her fingers. "Course I do." She looked up, suddenly. "What the HELL is this, anyway, I thought you said you were a DOCTOR, not a psychologist!"

Richard ignored her. "Your husband loves you."

"Oh yeah, and how would you know?"

"Because he told me."

"/What/? Who ARE you?"

"Let's just say that you were right, and that Richard /does/ phone me up for research. Okay? You're destroying him, Kath. He loves you and you're slowly, leisurely destroying him."

"I don't need this," Katherine began to laugh and shake her head. "I don't need this, not from some... Stranger, no way, you... You just get out of here, mister... Psycho-doctor-whatevert hefuckyouare—"

"You've slept with another man behind his back before," Richard heard himself say. The relief was so huge afterwards he felt physically lighter: /he'd known all this time and he'd kept it to himself! Why?/ Because he loved her, that's why. And because he believed that one day she would have the inner-strength to admit the truth.

"You slept with a man called Gareth Baker, in September, 1990."

"How... The... Hell...?"

"Richard told me. He knows, don't you see? Don't you understand? This was six years ago, Kath. He's known that you spent the night with another man for six years and he's forgiven you, he still wants to be with you. Doesn't that mean anything? Don't you think he deserves a bit of respect?"

"Who are you..." she whimpered, burying her head in her sleeves. "For God's sake what do you want..."

"You... To get better," said Richard. "I'm here to treat /you/, Kath, not your husband. He doesn't need it. Every book he's written has been dedicated to you and you alone. Every penny he's earned has been spent on you. He's slipping away because you're slipping out of his arms. And for who? Do you even know? The dishy guy at work, perhaps. The bloke down the road..." And then he whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks: "The married man next door."

"You mean he knew?" Katherine's head shot up. She was crying. "You mean he fucking KNEW?"

Richard nodded, and everything went dark.

He awoke staring at the bit of wall above the bedroom door.

The bed was covered in bloody handkerchiefs, dirty pots and plates, medicine bottles and packets of tablets. It was a disgusting mess and he tried to get up but he couldn't. He felt paralysed.

And then outside on the landing - voices. Katherine. And somebody else. A man.

"What's he writing about at the moment?"

"Pardon?"

"Your husband. What's he writing about?"

"Oh, Jesus, I don't know, some kind of... Actually, I think it's a story about a doctor," Katherine produced a sweet little laugh. Her laugh. The laugh he adored. "Why, he hasn't been phoning you for research has he?"

"Wait here a second."

The door opened and a man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase slipped into the room. The door clicked shut behind him.

"Hello?" The man said softly. He sounded terrified. "Can you hear me? Are you awake?"

Richard was unable to reply. His body was numb and ice-cold. The man started walking towards the bed. "Hello? Hello can you hear me?" He sounded out of breath.

As the man moved closer, Richard tried to turn his head, but he couldn't (he couldn't goddamnit) and the man went out of sight. But Richard somehow... Recognised that way of walking. He knew that face. In fact, he knew this whole situation!

"I've done this before," he managed to croak. The man toppled backwards, nearly spilling the sick bucket. His eyes were huge, his forehead glistening.

"What?" He said. "What do you mean?"

Then, it happened: Richard won control of the muscles in his neck and managed to crane his head to the right. It hurt, tremendously, and made a horrific squealing noise, as though his skin had been coated in plastic.

"I'm not the patient," Richard felt spit running down his chin as he gathered the energy to point at the bedroom door. "It's her. She's the one who's ill."

And then again, everything went dark.

/Richard I'm going to call an ambulance. Richard please, can you hear me? I'm going to phone the hospital/.

He awoke.

"Don't," he said with his eyes still closed. "No, don't, it's okay. I think I'm out of it. Please... Just wait..."

Delicately, he peeled his eyelids open and stared at the ceiling. And then at the wallpaper, which looked normal... Nice, even. Down at the bed... The empty medicine bottles, the tablets, the blood-drenched handkerchiefs. And then, finally, across towards Katherine, who was sitting on the mattress right next to him, looking angelic, and holding his trembling hands in both her own.

She was crying.

"I'm sorry," she wept, shaking away the tears. "Oh God Richard I'm so sorry."

1.6 Sheets

S H E E T S

Two days after discovering my girlfriend-of-nine-months had been cheating on me, I walked into a public lavatory somewhere in the heart of Stone Bridge, and relieved myself perched on the filthy, freezing cold rim of an aluminium toilet.

The cubicle door was gunmetal grey and scratched to pieces and badly vandalized - the kind of door only thieves, murderers and rapists should have to look at. It had a letterbox-sized rectangle of wire mesh embedded in the top half, the light from which cast another one, inversed and lower down, on the opposing wall. 'Attention!' declared

a sideways message scribbled in marker pen near the bottom. (I read it simply because I had nothing better to do, and whilst listening to the groans of my constipated neighbour and the hushed sniggers of sword-fighting schoolboys). 'Attention! Any males in the area, aged between fifteen and twenty four (slim, preferably white) wanting their cocks sucked while they watch my teenage sex videos should call Sam, in confidence, on -' And there was a full telephone number, which included the area code. The message ended with the words 'very genuine' in massive, bold letters, thickly underlined in red.

With the sure knowledge that it was over between Katherine and I, and that my sex life might never be the same again, I started getting an erection. I stared at the telephone number, patted my trouser pockets, and found a biro. I extracted it and took the top off... And then laughed to myself quietly and put it back on. 'Don't be so stupid,' I thought. 'It's merely some deprived drop-out's idea of an erotic joke, put your pen away for God's sake.' But I didn't. I frowned, and re-read the entire message.

Sam. A rather sexless name, but I cared not. In fact, the idea of a homosexual encounter seemed to excite me even more. And Sam was serious. Yes indeed, I could feel it, just as I could feel grains of sweat beginning to break out on my forehead. That thick, red underline and those gigantic, attention-alerting letters - Sam was serious, and I was in such a desperate state of mind I was interested, so I took the top off the pen again and hurriedly copied the number onto the back of my hand. I then sat still, my erection, a big, red microphone between my legs.

It disgusts me now, may I assure you, to think that I had travelled fourteen miles to Stone Bridge by train with the full intention of talking to Katherine - perhaps re-establishing our friendship - and instead, ended up scribbling some pervert's telephone number on the back of my hand. Sometimes, however, the mind becomes confused and deprived, and it is during these times that darkness finds its way into our lives, albeit through perversion, vulgarity or just plain desperation. Yes - desperation, a suitable word, for prior to discovering my girlfriend's adulterous activity I had been madly in love with her, and assumed the feelings were mutual. Now, however, there was nothing, just an emotional and sexual void, wide open to the greedy claws of evil. And that's exactly what was coming - evil, though it was to take me some time to recognise it.

Back in the lavatory, my frustrated neighbour discarded his load with a relieved sigh and the schoolboys screamed with laughter. I listened to the clatter of their shoes as they abandoned the building, issuing loud, highly pitched vulgarities which bounced the walls.

I was about to get up to leave when I heard my neighbour whispering something - it sounded like "Oi, oi kid," - and then he knocked on the thin wall that divided us, so hard he must have hurt his knuckles, and I jumped up, and wrenched my trousers up, in one swift dash.

"Oi, have you seen it?"

I stood still, hiding my erection with both hands. The pumping of my heart was like the bass from a nearby nightclub. I realised I hadn't wiped myself, and promptly felt what I hoped to God was cold water trickle down the back of my leg.

"Have you seen it? Oi!"

More horrendously loud knocking.

"What do you want?" I heard myself shout. Much to my surprise, my voice had a deep, stable, macho ring to it, which boosted my confidence, enormously. I tucked my erection out of sight and zipped

up, ready for my neighbour's next whispery comment.

"Oi, she's for real, I swear," he gasped, and then broke into a harsh, disgusting guffaw, which ended with the gathering of phlegm, a spit and a loud plop. He flushed his toilet, just as I was about to speak. I heard a lock rattle, a door squeal, and then shoes clapping.

A piece of soggy white toilet roll landed so that the corner poked under my cubicle. The man's shadow promptly followed it, and then there was a knock, hard, on the door.

"Oi. Give her a call, kid," he said and laughed, coarsely, like an old train on a rusty track. "Didjoo hear me, eh?" He kicked the door. "Give her a call, you wet end."

I didn't answer, and didn't move, and eventually, the man's shadow slipped away.

Shortly after emerging from the lavatory, somewhat dazed, I stepped into a phone box, rang Sam's number, conversed with her, hung up, and stepped out of it again.

I remember recalling at that very moment, standing outside the phone box, the first time I had woken up in the same bed as Katherine. I had been on my back, arms by my sides, gazing up at the roof, and she'd been laid partially across me, asleep, like a quilt slowly slipping off. One of my arms had been unuseable, squashed beneath her weight, the other, I had lifted, and gently lowered over the clasp of her bra. I had remained in that position for (what had felt at the time like) several hours, stroking her skin and enjoying the feel - even though cotton - of my aroused organ against the inside of her bare leg. She had stirred into new positions every ten minutes or so, often sighing against my shoulder, or neck, or face, or gripping my biceps with her fingers, and I had enjoyed each and every shuffle, almost as if I was God, and she my creation.

Later, she had awoken, her eyes blinking like butterflies, and she had kissed me, passionately, and whispered erotic requests, which I had gladly carried out.

Sex had been followed by further sleep, and then, mid-afternoon, Katherine had excused herself and left the bed and gone downstairs to make breakfast. Missing her warmth and yet feeling strangely free to yawn and stretch and fart, I had exploded myself into a star-shape, consuming the entire bed, and watched my toes, poking out of the sheets at the bottom, wiggle, like tiny pink puppets. I had grinned, and felt happy - more happy than I have ever felt in my life - and kicked back the covers.

It had been then that I had discovered the stain - a huge, brown streak on the undersheet, thirty centimetres in length at least, and glistening wet. Immediately, I had leapt off the bed, my head spinning so wildly I could barely keep my balance. I had touched my bottom and examined my hands, and found nothing, not a trace of shit, anywhere; with my back to Katherine's dressing table mirror, I had twisted my neck and looked down at my arse and seen two, clean white cheeks. I had leapt over to the bed again, a whistling noise echoing in my ears, and I had crouched down and sniffed and delicately touched the stain. By God, it had been shit, alright - horrible, runny shit, complete with bubbles, like melted chocolate - and yet again, I had staggered away, panic-stricken.

"Stee-eeve, I'm bringing breakfast up," Katherine had called. And then the sound of her ascending the stairs had been the ultimate countdown of terror.

Had I not spotted Katherine's soiled knickers lying discarded below the bedside cabinet, I think I might truly have committed suicide by

leaping through the bedroom window. I remember near-enough pouncing on them, and holding them up against the sunlight, and matching the stain on their insides against the brown slug on the bed - only then had I eliminated the suicide option. As Katherine had thumped up the last of the stairs, I had (at lightning speed) placed her knickers carefully back in their original position, turned and whipped the quilt over enormous accident.

Finally, when Katherine had opened the door, she had found me sitting cross-legged on the bed, my hands carefully hiding my penis, and I had said 'good morning', and patted the space beside me.

And now, standing outside the phone box, memories already beginning to fade, the world around me seemed to be blinking open its eyes, like Katherine, unaware of its stains, its foul-smelling glitches, and moving at a speed which threatened to transcend time itself. Buildings, pavements, roads, billboards, lamp posts, parked cars - everything was abnormally sharp and colourful and clear, as though I were wearing a pair of new glasses for the very first time. My heart felt heavy, my lungs small and tight, and I unintentionally caught the gaze of every person who passed me by.

I recalled my conversation with Sam, who had, to the relief of my inner soul, turned out to be female, and told me to remain outside the phone box so that she could locate me and escort me to her abode.

"Hello, Sam speaking."

Clinging onto the receiver with one hand, squeezing my groin with the other, I had licked my lips and closed my eyes and tried to think of something to say.

"Don't hang up," she had whispered. I had been about to do just that. "Don't hang up, sweetheart. You've read my message, haven't you?"

"Yes," I had replied, rather whimperishly.

"I was hoping you'd call. I've seen you passing here many times. I think you're incredibly sexy."

I had coughed with surprise and rattled around inside the phone box, as though I were trapped, and the thing was about to take off. "Can you see me?" I had exhaled. "Where are you?"

"I'm in a building very close by, and yes, I can see you."

"Where?" I had gazed out over the crystal-clear town, ducking slightly to peer up into dark, reflective windows. "Where? I can't see you. Whereabouts?"

"Don't look for me."

"Why? Where are you?"

"Stop looking for me, sweetheart, or I'll hang up, and you can go home to your handkerchiefs. Alright? Stop looking for me."

I had abruptly ceased wriggling around and focused my attention on the silver push-buttons. "Look, are you for real?"

"Of course I'm for real."

"You don't charge money, do you?"

"Not in your case, sweetheart. You can skip the videos and have it done in the phone box, if you want."

We had promptly come to an agreement that I was a definite customer, and that a face-to-face meeting would settle my nerves. And so I had ended the call and walked outside.

And now I was here, hobbling about like I needed a piss, and wondering - oh god almighty, wondering - what in God's name I was doing.

Another random memory invaded my mind: sometime after Katherine's revelation, I had walked in through the front door of my brother's home and told him, in a dull, emotionless voice, that I was back, for good. He had held me, and I had cried, and then drifted into my cold,

empty bedroom and collapsed on the bed beside Jinx, my battered, childhood teddy-bear.

There had been a narrow rectangle of light shining in through a gap between the curtains (like the one in the toilet door, but without the wire-mesh), spot-lighting Jinx, and revealing millions of tiny golden dust particles, floating, hovering and curling. I had reached out with what had looked like a fleshless hand, and punctured this warm, divine beam. It had resurrected my dying soul, and I had closed my eyes and pushed my face out into the light. I had laughed like a child and grabbed Jinx and parked him on my stomach, and laid there, in that magical slice of sun, enjoying this new found freedom.

I had felt the freshness, the zest, the longing-for and loving of beauty we only experience in our childhood, and as quickly as it had come, I had lost it again.

Childhood: the fading key to such a vast chamber of knowledge, vanished so early in our lives, and yet what do we do once we have found our own spiritual path? We strive until death to recapture it, like a medicine concocted and thrown away, and as childhood itself is stolen from the blood of our offspring, so our journey becomes longer, and more dangerous, and the less our so-called spiritual travellers uncover its raw value.

Innocence is rejected, pushed away, attacked, for it reminds us of our emptiness, our aimlessness, and makes us yearn for the only true wealth which we have lost.

Jinx was with me now, as I stood outside the phone box, waiting impatiently for Sam's arrival. He was small enough to be tucked away in my back pocket, and he'd been there ever since that magical morning with the flakes of dust and the sunbeam.

It happened; a tall, slim brunette of no more than sixteen appeared out of nowhere, crossed the road and caught my gaze. She smiled, and winked, and I knew it was Sam.

She wasn't 'good-looking'. There is no such thing as 'good-looking'. It is simply a term that has been invented by society to describe what is appealing to the majority, not to the individual. Deciding on behalf of the whole world whether a person is 'good-looking' or not is as wrong as deciding if they are 'ugly'. We have a right to our own inner-judgement, and nothing more - something that everyone seems to have forgotten in the nineties.

Sam, who was wearing a baggy tee-shirt and jeans, had an almost triangular face, with big, blue eyes, and wet lips the colour of cherries. Her smile was small and neat and promising, and held up at the edges by strands of short, curly hair.

I was not attracted to her. In fact, I felt nothing, not a trace of sexual arousal. She was a child for God's sake, a young soul drained of vitality, and without even a spark of hope in her eyes. There was no perversion here, only misguidedness, and it was then that I realised that - through Katherine's betrayal - I too had suffered great loss. My purity had been banished and, like Sam, I had been unable to resist the pulling power of the gutter, the enticing darkness of self-indulgence. Sam and I were held captive in a single chamber, bound by one length of wire, and about to be consumed by one force of evil.

She came and stood beside me, as tall as I, and reached out and ran her index finger down the buttons on my shirt. She grinned, and said she was horny, and asked me where I wanted to do it. She said I could put it in her mouth, up her arse, anywhere I liked, without a condom if I wanted. She said she had videos of herself doing it with other girls, and that I could view them whilst she performed between my legs.

So what'll it be? she kept asking. What'll it be? Come on, sweetheart, what do you want? I haven't got all day, you know. What do you want?

Smiling, I carefully extracted Jinx from my back pocket. I straightened his head, fluffed up his ears, and held him out for Sam to take. The girl frowned and stepped away from me, as though I'd pulled a gun. She then laughed, and took Jinx, and studied him for a moment, and said, "What's this? What're you doing? What's this?"

"Medicine," I told her.

1.7 The Dragon Caller

T H E D R A G O N C A L L E R

On the night Chris summoned the dragon, a violet mist draped the fields like the tassels of a torn scarf, shrouding the gang from an audience of amber lights that lingered like glowing glass eyes behind the dark trees. The wind massaged their clothes with the delicacy of moist fingertips, curious but never probing, and formed icy phantoms which whistled around bark and stone as the young adventurers trampled through an ocean of fading leaves and weeping ground.

As they neared the remains of the stable, their hoods draped against the weather, they clung onto each other's glistening coats like ducks, beak-to-tail. The coppery door of the ageing building rattled; diamonds of dust fell from the roof as Chris elbowed his way inside, breathing in huge white gasps and dripping as though he'd climbed out of a river. The others scrambled in behind him, coughing, pushing and shaking themselves like wet dogs, until all four were inside and the door was kicked shut.

"Oi, Chris, give us some light," Neil hissed. "Come on, man, it's pitch black in here."

"Who's got the matches?" Kelly's grainy voice drifted eerily from a bulky silhouette near the door. "Debs, have you?"

"Yes. Chris, here... Take them."

"Hang on."

Shoes crunched over gravel and smashed-glass; twigs snapped like bones breaking.

"Here."

"Where? Hang on, hold them still. Ouch, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just a nettle."

Chris struck a match and held it up in front of his face. His eyes looked like black beads and his skin, coated in raindrops, appeared to be melting. He coughed and nearly blew out the flame.

"You're pissed through," said Neil, shuffling backwards until he hit the wall. His coat brushed the brickwork and made a noise that reminded Debbie of her mum sweeping leaves out of the drive. "You're gonna be off sick tomorrow. All of us are, probably. This is stupid. I say we go home."

"What?" Kelly exhaled.

"For God's sake, Neil," Debbie chuckled, flicking water out of her hair. "You're always moaning, aren't you."

The two girls whispered and tittered to each other as Chris and Neil exchanged powerful stares.

Neil wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "What? What're you

looking at?"

Ignorance was Chris's favourite and most effective weapon; "Everybody ready?" he said, and lit another match. He'd been secretly shuffling together a miniature bonfire of twigs and dead leaves and now he lowered the match towards it, using one hand as a shield.

"You'll choke us in here," cautioned Neil.

"Shurrup, will you?" Debbie hissed, now tying her hair back in a neat tail. "If you complain once more, I'll smack you."

Kelly trickled laughter. Neil sighed, seconds before a crown of flames whooshed up in front of the crouched Chris, whose mouth creased with delight. He blew the match out, tossed it away and held his palms against the heat.

"Alright!"

"Nice one, Chris."

The girls shuffled forwards and knelt down in front of the fire, cheerful and appreciative. Neil didn't budge; he thought Chris was being an ill-mannered show-off.

"So how many dragons are you going to summon?" he said, overdoing the infantile sarcasm. The girls stopped chatting and turned and looked at him, plainly irritated. "Wish you'd hurry up about it," Neil added hesitantly, feeling uncomfortable under the scrutiny of a female audience. "I'm getting bored standing here."

"Siddown, then," Chris shrugged, feeding a branch into the fire.

A whipcrack of thunder made the ground vibrate; tiny crystals of dust fell like magic from the roof.

Kelly pointed at the patch of dry grass that lay between Debbie and Chris. "Okay, okay," Neil breathed reluctantly and strode away from the wall. He crouched beside the dancing flames and sighed again, producing a big orange cloud of air. "Happy now?"

He was answered by a deep rumble from the heavens, and then a slow crackling, which diverted the whole gang's attention towards the roof. Rain began to hammer against the door, like furious knocking.

"You can imagine it, can't you?" Kelly whispered suddenly. She was watching the ocean of smoke that was gathering on the ceiling through eyes that glimmered like uncut rubies. "A dragon, soaring over the stable." She tilted her head towards the door. "Landing in the field and lashing it's tail." She looked at Debbie. Over to Neil. And then directly into the eyes of Chris, who nodded slowly, as though he'd shared and understood Kelly's vision.

"So where is it then?" Debbie said, making her hands disappear up her sleeves.

Chris produced the Dragon Caller from his inside pocket and held it above his head like a footballer exhibiting his team's greatest trophy. Neil groaned with impatience.

"God, we're not playing the Game now, are we?"

"We must all link hands, close our eyes and imagine," said Chris.

"Then the dragon will come."

"Out of the storm?" Kelly sat up, excitedly. Debbie tried to make her relax again by whispering "only in the Game, Kelly, only in the Game", but Kelly wasn't having any of it. "Piss off, Debs, alright?" she barked. "I'm talking to Chris... You mean we can call a dragon with that? A real one?"

"You bet your life," Chris assured her, gently rocking himself back and forth. He was sitting cross-legged with his hands resting on his knees, as though about to meditate, and his face was a stained glass window of amber and black shards.

"Oh shut your mouth," Neil stood up, quickly, nearly losing his

balance. "It's just some crap piece of metal, Kelly."

"No it isn't," Kelly protested firmly, almost angrily. She then seemed to lose her confidence and turned to Chris for support. "It's not is it Chris? Tell him."

They'd found the Dragon Caller amidst other junk piled on a scrapheap by the lake several hours before the storm. It was a rusty, horseshoe-shaped chunk of iron that in reality none of the gang could identify. To be precise Chris had found it, but then it was his Game, and he knew exactly what was going to happen. The others had simply nodded in fake amazement and gone along with him, as they always did.

Still, Neil could not deny Chris's unrivalled imaginative powers. Chris could make even the most material of minds believe it was being pursued by cannibalistic wolf-men, or that the lake was full of frozen corpses, or that he had a real baby stegasaurus hiding away in his locker. Chris was a magician, and his illusions worked, so much so that his friends had often found themselves still living in his fantasies long after they'd been called in for their suppers.

A flash of lightening cast a halo around the door. Neil staggered away from it.

"Look at him, he's shitting himself!" Debbie laughed.

"It made me jump, that's all."

"Liar."

"You're a wimp, aren't you Neil," said Kelly, examining her nails. She paused to glance up at him. "Aren't you?"

"I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you bloody are."

Debbie shuffled up beside Chris and put her arm around him. Kelly made a girlish squeal and promptly did the same, cuddling up to Chris from the other side.

Framed by female flesh, Chris lifted his head and stared coldly at Neil, his eyes now almost entirely black, his lips a sluggish purple. Outside the sky itself sounded to be breaking into pieces like a sheet of ice; the door flung open and closed, squashing the fire flat for a moment, as though it had been trodden on by an invisible foot.

Neil whipped his hood up. "I'm going home."

"You'll never make it," said Chris.

A cold pain began to descend Neil's spine. "I'm not playing out with any of you lot ever again!" he declared, very loudly.

The girls "oooh"ed and cackled in chorus. Chris hushed them. "Leave us, Neil," he said, pointing at the hooded boy. "and that will be true."

Neil battled with the door, and won, and staggered out into eyes of the swirling storm. The rain was coming down ferociously in thick grey blankets, and as he trundled away from the stable, now on the verge of tears, it actually began to hurt him, like small stones.

With his eyes barely open, he risked a quick glance straight ahead, and saw that the field he was crossing had become one enormous sea of silvery mud. More frightening still, it was reflecting the blowing ash that was the clouds, and dragging plastic bags and torn tree branches down towards the stable, like luggage from a wrecked ship.

A short time later, his shoes consumed by deep mud, Neil turned and squinted back at the building. It was beginning to disappear behind the arms of the fog but he could just make out that the door was closed - nobody was coming. Not even Debbie. Four flashes came in one group, as though God were talking pictures, and Neil, crying now, the wind and

rain ploughing into his back, screamed that he hated the whole world.

He took shelter behind a wall, in a place where the stones were piled dangerously high, and allowed the pain of being rejected to take its miserable toll. He wanted to collapse onto the ground and curl up into a tight little bauble and forget about being alive but he couldn't, for the storm had flooded the field right up to the very edge of the walls. Instead, he plunged his hands into his pockets, put his back to the bricks and watched the weather cruelly punish the land.

Dark shapes began to appear in the sky. Huge, bluish-black blades, cutting gracefully through the smoky horizon. Neil, although intrigued, assumed that they belonged quite naturally to the storm; mutant clouds, perhaps or secret lightening generators that hovered, unknown, above all the drenching, deafening chaos... 'Or an aeroplane,' he thought, as the shapes began to transmogrify and billow. 'An aeroplane of unimaginable dimensions... Or a hot air balloon... An alien ship...'

Neil pulled back his hood, letting the cold chew on his ears, and watched the awesome object pass gracefully over the stable, fragments of its mystifying form reflecting in the sea of the field like a whale swimming close to the surface. With its enclosing presence came the sound of beating wings - a flock of a thousand birds escaping a premature winter - and a warm wind that carried a faint smell of burning.

When the presence passed through the air high above him, Neil froze, and looked not into the sky but into the shimmering swamp that rippled beneath his drowning shins. There, beyond the dead leaves and vibrating grass, he saw the mud-soaked stomach of a giant lizard, scales gleaming where the sun could penetrate, and rolling through the froth of the clouds.

1.8 Alarmed

A L A R M E D

He was about thirty seconds away from making love to his cousin when he heard an alarm go off.

At first, he thought it was a car being broken into somewhere down on the street, or the next door neighbour burning some toast, or perhaps even an old, forgotten-about watch under the bed, and he paused, briefly, in an attempt to register the sound. When he couldn't, he figured that having sex with Charlotte was a tad more important than discovering the location of some dull and vaguely distracting noise, and so he continued, kicking off the last of his clothes.

"What's up?" whispered Charlotte, breathless. "You're not having second thoughts /now/ are you?"

Russell grinned and kissed her throat, peeling his shorts over his ankles.

"Just wondered what the sound was."

Russell hated talking during sex. It spoilt the mood, and he became quickly annoyed with himself for uttering a word when Charlotte decided to inquire.

"What sound?"

Moving into position, Russell thought about not replying, but couldn't help it.

"That alarm."

"What alarm?"

"Nothing, just that noise."

"What bloody noise?"

She grabbed his shoulders and squeezed, meaning 'stop and explain before going any further'. Russell struggled. Charlotte stared into his face, holding him strongly at bay.

"Look, shall we just forget it?" he tried. "It's not like it's important, is it, it's just an alarm."

Charlotte remained utterly still for a few moments. Her eyes wandered to the curtains. Impatient, Russell decided to make the most of her reluctance and aroused himself further by examining her body - her breasts were two wet cherry pies, her stomach, the top of a wedding cake, and Russell swiftly decided that if he didn't eat soon, he'd die of starvation.

"I can't hear anything." Charlotte said eventually.

"Then maybe it's just me," Russell grinned. "Maybe my body's going into sexual overdrive."

"You mean you can still hear it?"

'Jesus Christ,' Russell thought. 'Will this bastard conversation ever come to an end?'

"Look, do you want to do this or not?" he demanded, brushing his hair away from his face. He felt extremely irritated, mainly because /she'd/ been the one to initiate this sudden, semi-incenstuous scramble-into-the-sack. He'd been quite content watching the East Enders omnibus, downstairs.

Charlotte lay still for a while longer, mouth slightly parted. She was listening again, and hearing everything - traffic on distant roads, dogs barking, the wind gasping around the house, even the gentle drip of the cold water tap in the bathroom.

"I can't hear no stupid alarm." she said.

Two hours later, after having sex and getting dressed and tidying up, they decided to sit out in the garden for a while and eat some junk food. The sky was bright turquoise-blue, like a hotel swimming pool, and there was a warm wind making the trees hush, pleasantly.

"Oi, Cuz." Russell threw a dead leaf at Charlotte, who was hunched up in a plastic chair, reading Poppy Z Brite and eating an icechoc. She lifted her shades and looked at him, lips wet and white.

"Don't call me that."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't feel right."

"Why not?"

Charlotte sighed softly, let her shades fall back onto her nose and carried on reading.

"Hey, I'm sorry," Russell sat up. He'd been picking leaves and small black stones out of the lawn and toying with them. Now, he was just plain bored. "Charlotte? Oi, Charlotte?"

"What?" She turned a page, violently.

"I can still hear that noise, you know," He watched a flock of birds dart across the sky. "Do you think I've got dog's ears?"

Russell waited for some form of response. She bit into her icechoc, turned another page and then tried to swat a fly. 'Bitch,' he thought, recalling how she'd refrained him from taking her two hours since. 'Clever, games-playing bitch.'

He slithered off his chair and came crawling across the grass to her feet. "Oi, do you remember, ages ago, when we kicked the shit out of Kenny and dropped his watch down the grate?"

Charlotte nodded slowly, engrossed in her book. Russell stroked one of her bare feet, then attacked it with his lips. She laughed, then squirmed, then did both and nearly fell off her chair.

"Russ, don't, it tickles!"

"Just before the accident, do you remember? Jesus Christ, you wet yourself laughing, Charlotte."

"Me?" At last she discarded the book. "I wasn't the one who nicked his watch, /you/ did, /you/ dangled it over the grate for God's sake. Whole thing was your fault, nobody else's."

A piece of icechoc dribbled and dropped onto Charlotte's chest. She met his eyes.

"Killer," she whispered. "Now look what you made me do."

Russell snatched her hand. He shuffled closer, touching her legs, and scooped away the mess with his tongue. The alarm suddenly became shockingly loud and he fell backwards, covering his ears.

"Fucking hell!"

Charlotte fell after him. "Shit, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

"The noise, Jesus, the noise! It's loud, Charlotte! Christ, it's like a siren! It's deafening, for God's sake. Why can't you hear it?"

Charlotte, sunglasses barely clinging to her nose, knelt up, and listened only to the soft chirping of birds and the gentle breathing of the wind.

The problem, Russell realised as he tore along the main road, was that it /was/ the sound of a watch alarm. And for some reason it had hit him that this wasn't just any old watch going off, but /Kenny's/. That daft, spotty little tosser with the uneven eyes and the psycho-bitch mother.

Russell and Charlotte had been particularly vicious toward the little twat, but shit, deservedly so. Kenny was a black sheep in an otherwise stable, successful and good-looking family, a scruffy, foul-mouthed, talentless drop-out with absolutely no positive values whatsoever, a stinking, steaming entrail that needed SNIPPING OFF AND SHOVING IN THE BIN-

"Jesus somebody shut that fucking alarm up!"

The car swerved. Russell dropped a gear, snatched a cloth and wiped the windscreen. Part of him hadn't a clue where he was going. Another part knew /exactly/.

"Do you want your watch, you little pecker?" he recalled, gritting his teeth. He was back in his school uniform playing dodge-the-car-tig in the main road. Kenny was on, chasing Charlotte relentlessly, ignoring the others. Russell moved into fifth gear, put his foot down, and ran for Kenny.

"Tig!"

"What?"

"Tig you greasy little shit."

"But you're not on. /I'm/ on."

"Tig!" Russell punched him. "TIG!" In the face. Kenny went down like a red brick.

Overtaking cars, Russell bit into his bottom lip and started fumbling around with Kenny's watch. Kenny's big, expensive, birthday watch.

"No, don't take me watch! It's mine! Me mum bought it for me!"

"Shurrrup!"

"No, please!"

"Shurrrup, you wet cabbage. Do you want it, eh? Do you want it?" Running for the grate, crouching over the grate, dangling Kenny's birthday watch so loosely over the grate.

"Do you want it? Eh? Come and get it then, you daft twat!"

Kenny, crawling across the road. The watch, slipping out of Russell's hands. The watch, the big, bold, birthday watch, tinkling between the dirty metal vents. Disappearing into the void. Splashing, softly. Gone. Banished for ever.

"I'll kill youuuu!"

And then the car. And Kenny's screams cutting off, abruptly.

When he pulled up outside the church gates, the alarm was so loud Russell barely heard the engine die. He'd only experienced noise so intense when he'd been stuck in a lift in a building in Leeds - some bastard had triggered the fire alarm, and now, he could feel the same deafening panic rising slowly in his chest, like a shipwreck being blown to the surface. This time, however, it felt far more terrifying, for the racket seemed to belong to him, and him alone, and he - at least consciously, logically - knew nothing of the source.

An elderly couple out walking with a dog the size of a hedgehog gave him bold, church-going stares as he battled to push open the gates.

"Oi, you!" the older man bellowed but Russell didn't hear a word. He could barely hear his thoughts, never mind the squeal of the gate or the crunch of his shoes as he broke into the grounds.

Like a giant's punched-out teeth, the gravestones stood bright and scattered, and Russell ran between them, bouncily, hands over his ears, as if expecting an explosion.

Kenny's grave was relatively simple to locate: Russell remembered coming here with Charlotte some weeks after Kenny's death to pour black paint over the flowers. There was a head stone now - God knows who'd been stupid enough to fork out for that - and, infuriatingly, it was a nice one, too: pure, clean white with the words chipped out in gold. 'KENNETH JOSEPH JONES' it said, followed by the usual sentimental gravestone bullshit. Russell collapsed, his ears physically /sore/ from the noise, and pushed his forehead down onto the dry, weedy ground.

"GO AWAY!" he screamed. "FOR FUCK'S SAKE SHUT UP!"

The wind whispered 'make me'.

Russell lifted his head and opened his eyes wide and saw it: Kenny's watch. Kenny's big, colourful, amazing birthday watch, lying on its side on the dusty ground beneath the shining white head stone. Banning his mind from registering the item, Russell scrambled for it, picked it up and squeezed it, and the mind-numbing alarm fell silent.

Several hundred yards away, the elderly couple with the tiny dog mimed some insults, before slamming the church gate closed. It made no sound.

1.9 Having Peter With Cheese

H A V I N G P E T E R W I T H C H E E S E

I was excited at first. I don't know why. But you get small patches of life like that, don't you? Colourful chippings in a big grey bag of mundane rubbish - joke-fodder for coffee mornings in the staff room, a good yarn for the atmospheric but quiet bit at the end of the party, something to fill in one of those relationship-threatening silences you share with your new boyfriend. Modern life seems to be constructed

of a dozen or so happy, depressing and bizarre situations, all chained together by strings of regular routine. Like a diagram of a chemical element, perhaps.

Still, what the hell would I know? I'm just a checkout operator at Nettos. The most exciting thing I've done in recent weeks is scoffed 99p cheese and potato bakes, blown off under the bedcovers and had vivid dreams. Well, that's not exactly true, but anyway.

You see those ready-to-cook meals, though, don't you? And you think, "God, that looks nice, I'll get one of those, one day" only sometimes years pass and you never put one into your trolley at all.

They don't have ready-meals at Nettos, of course, and if they did they'd probably taste like camel shit. Me? I shop at Sainsbury's. Kind of ironic, that, isn't it? Working full-time at the lowest grade super-market in existence and yet shopping at the highest. It's not that my wage is massive or anything - God, it's peanuts really - it's just... Well, there's only me to buy for, so why shouldn't I fork out on good food? After two hundred or so credit card transactions, three fifteen minute KitKat breaks and a swim in the chaotic crowds of peak-time-town for a salad sandwich, it's not like I don't deserve it.

Anyway, two Mondays ago, I got one. Ha! Up yours regular routiners, I did, I swear, I bought myself a cheese and potato bake and scoffed the bastard that very same evening. Delicious. Self-indulgence works wonders.

On the bowels, especially. Shit, I've never keffed so many times in one night in my whole life. It was the cheese that did it. Takes ages to digest and has a volcanic effect on the rectum. I kept having to waft open the bedcovers to release the gas - it was either that or die a slow, suffocating death, I tell you. Eventually the room began to stink like somebody'd been eating free range eggs, so I got up and dug the air freshener out from under the sink and did a sort of music-less shake-and-vac at half past two in the bloody morning.

I also had a frightful dream about serving a customer whose hair was on fire and who couldn't be convinced to put it out. By the time he'd bagged his shopping and paid on Visa his head had become a steaming block of charcoal. I recall returning him his card along with a ridiculously long and curly receipt, saying the compulsory "thankyou, bye", and then watching him walk out of the building and onto the strangely deserted streets, where a huge gust of wind blew his fragile black head into a thousand tiny ashes. Poor man had forgotten his six-pack of tomatoes, too, and I remember tearing open this solitary packet and extracting one of the tomatoes and eating it. I woke up after that.

So, it was Tuesday morning when it started, I guess; as soon as I was out of the shower, somebody rang the doorbell. Don't you just hate it when that happens? I was still dwelling furiously on what my dream could possibly symbolise when I unlocked and answered the door. I had piss-wet hair and a loose picnic towel draped around my shoulders and what do you know, it was Peter, the boy who lived across the road, bless his innocent heart, and he was looking for people to sponsor him for a cross-country walk.

Peter was a sad child of fourteen who'd lost most of his mates because a bunch of them had spied through his bedroom window and seen him pulling his pud over a girly magazine. Big deal, or what? And talk about invasion of privacy. Caught in the midst of enjoying the number one teenage hobby and that had been it for poor Peter. Rants, raves, taunting, teasing - every day before, at, and after school. Me? I felt sorry for the lad. He was soft, gentle, polite and cute. In fact, he sort of reminded me of a teddy bear.

"You do realise that in order to sign your piece of paper I'll have to release my hands from this towel," I cautioned him.

Peter, pale and blue-eyed and splashed with ginger freckles, nodded briskly, an awsome eager expression on his face, that said he was perfectly happy for that to happen.

So - just spur-of-the-moment - I made it happen. I did, I swear: I let go of the towel and took the sheet of paper from the stunned boy and signed my name, in the nude. Sponsored him two quid, as well.

I posed for a moment in the doorway, you know, the way those models do in catalogues, just to make sure Peter got a decent eyeful, then I said, "Thankyou. Bye." and smiled my checkout operator's smile and shut the door. Well, hey, I'm twenty six, and not in bad shape, really. And besides, surely life is about giving others a good time?

Anyway, excitement over, I got dried and dressed, fannied around my hair, and then set about making myself some strictly non-cheesy breakfast. Disturbingly, when I opened the fridge to pluck out a few ingredients for the pan, I noticed that one of the tomatoes had gone missing from my six-pack.

Shite day, shite pay, but isn't it always?

After my seven-hour shift, I stand - along with five other equally as cardboard-looking ladies - at a bus stop that's located directly opposite a rather lah-de-dah cafe. You get blokes, don't you, dressed in black and white suits, ponsing down the pavement, glancing at you dismissively, and leaning casually against walls and lampposts whilst their girlfriends fanny about upstairs in the cafe, brushing their teeth and puffing up their cheeks until they're in a fit enough state to be escorted home. Home at turbo-speed in love-of-my-life sports cars, out again at seven thirty for candlelit dinner. Pub-hopping, mate-back-slapping, fumbling drunk with keys at half-past twelve. Boil up some coffee, lean over the fireplace, skirt up, buttfuck, Jesus Christ that was good, nighty-night kiss and it's loop the loop. And us, the black-and-yellow-carrier-baggers, standing in the rain, what are we? Rough and tumble, no sophistication, laddered tights, daft enough to wander out alone at night without makeup or perfume, what are we I ask you, economy? Yes. Ignorable. Cheap shit. The market's own brand.

A solid-object's reflection in the murky eyes of the shirt-and-tie clones, that was me, that night, and I remember thinking: I too can be luxurious. They say that the first step to riches is to pretend that you already /are/ rich. Fine. I abandoned my usual bus that Tuesday evening and went shopping at Sainsbury's. Salmon and broccolli bake, £2.99. Wild mushroom soup, £1.69. Cheese and tuna roly fucking polly, £3.49. Oh yeah. I know how to fill a shopping basket.

Home, stone-cold and half-dead, £30's worth of ready-meals dripping on the kitchen table. Point proven, Karen, well done, lass, I thought. And then, depressed, I cooked up some more cheese, forgetting all about bowel-trouble until it was too late to turn back.

Later, sprawled out on the settee, the tv on mute and the lights dimmed and outside the rain noisy like piss, I scoffed the bake so quick I got indigestion. Promptly, tears in my eyes, I raked up my skirt and did it to myself, gently, over some of those blokes in suits outside the cafe. Hate them, hate them, hate them, wanna fuck them. Hate them, hate them, hate them, wanna fuck all of them, fuck any of them, but isn't that what life's all about?

Very early Wednesday morning I awoke still sticky on the settee, and

bunged up with wind, and with faint recollections of another supermarket dream: faceless women in velvet dresses and black leggings with barcodes on their wrists walking down the trolley aisles in single file, and me waving my lazer-wand until they bleeped and dropped what they were carrying - usually undefrosted ready-to-cook meals, which I tore open and scoffed down in single snake-like mouthfuls.

And when I wandered into the kitchen and opened up the fridge, sure enough, the boxes of a dozen ready-to-cook meals had been slashed open and gutted of their contents. Now this was a hell of a lot more alarming than the odd vanishing tomato, and no mistake - I actually felt my pulse begin to thunder.

But when you're living on your own in a semi, the rent half-paid for by your parents, and when your only friends are Horlicks-drinking working colleagues at some cheap shit supermarket branch, and when you're sad enough to sit with your skirt knee-high on a raggy settee, porking yourself over snobbish middle-class accountants, you hold on to these wild dreams and puzzles and deep down you never want the bastards to end. You're exciting, you're mysterious, you're pissing with the paranormal. You're spanking, you're special, and by God you're really worth fucking.

Despite the fear of the unknown, I laughed, and did a little Irish jig in front of the fridge, before slamming the door closed. As far as I was concerned, this was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to me.

But, as I'm sure you can imagine, seven hours of food-bleeping, signature-checking, customer-thanking work depleted all but the final few drops of my excitement. I emerged braindead from the building at five o'clock pm, kicking the shit out of my own bloody chin.

That evening I did no shopping or daydreaming or fantasising - I just went home on the bus with everyone else, clutching my ticket tightly in both hands on my lap, in true depressed-worker style.

I had the radio on and a cheese and potato bake slammed in the oven and I was tiredly cutting up some bread when the the doorbell went. It was Peter, this time holding not a blank sponsor form, but a rather dead-looking bunch of carnations.

"Oh, Peter," I couldn't help but chuckle. "Are these for me? You're very sweet. Thankyou." I took the flowers and smelt them and saw his ex-mates dancing about behind the bushes at the end of my garden path like over-excited chimps. "Listen, do you want to come in?" I heard myself say.

I don't think being invited into my house was even scribbled down on Peter's Things That Might Happen list; he seemed to lose what few tiny straws of confidence he'd managed to gather and shuffle around on the spot as though he wanted to use the loo.

"If you'd rather not, it's okay," I prompted.

"Ah, I, yes," he stuttered, glancing at his giggling observers. I smiled my checkout operator's smile and pulled the door wide open. Peter stepped boldly inside, hands tucked into his pockets. I told him to go through to the livingroom. Nervously, he did. I then moved out onto the doorstep. "Oi, you lot, oi!" I bellowed. Some of the gang stood up, looking worried. "Why don't you FUCK OFF!" I slammed the door and put my back to it, breathing ridiculously fast. "Luxurious," I remember whispering.

We lit some candles that night, Peter and I, and played some Mike Oldfield and shared a cheese and potato bake and some salad. I slapped together apple pie and custard for pudding, followed by mugs of Earl Grey and ginger biscuits. Neither of us said much. I don't suppose

there was any need. I asked him how school was. He said it was boring. I asked him if he'd prefer a more upbeat background - Suede or Ash or The Prodigy, perhaps. He said it was okay, he liked what was playing.

"What's the name of your best friend?" I inquired as we sat side by side on the settee. I felt fourteen myself, and wondered if I ought to nip into the bedroom and dig out my old school uniform and put it on to see Peter's reaction.

"Kevin Brown," said Peter, barely able to meet my eyes. He was fidgetting furiously.

"And where does Kevin live, then?"

"Up on Manning Road somewhere. Why?"

"What's your phone number?"

"Mine?"

"Yes."

"Three four nine five eight six, why? Why are you asking me these things?"

I shuffled to the end of the settee, picked up the phone and dialed Peter's number. Peter watched me curiously, his bottom lip drooping and his hair stuck up at the back. I winked at him.

"Ah, Mrs Chambers? Hello, I'm sorry to disturb you, this is Mrs Brown, yes, Kevin's mother. Yes, that's right, Kevin Brown, Peter's friend. Yes. Oh yes, he's here, and he's fine. Actually, I was ringing to ask you if it would be alright if Peter stayed over. Oh yes, plenty of room. Yes. They're having such fun, that's all... Pardon? Yes, I will. Yes. Yes. Don't worry, Mrs Chambers, I'll take care of him. He'll have the time of his life. Yes. Thankyou. Okay, thankyou, bye."

I put the phone down and looked at Peter. He was shuddering as though he were about to face his execution.

Two hours later, naked ontop of me, he was as calm as the dead sea.

I dreamt of stealing eggs from customers by secretly opening their egg boxes once I'd bleeped them. The women were red and velvet with featureless faces and the men had charcoal-heads and black chippings down their jackets. And they never noticed me nicking their eggs and scoffing them. They just carried on, regardless, bagging shopping and holding out credit cards and touching each other's backsides as though they were magnetised.

I awoke to the smell of toast and tomatoes and fried mushrooms and sat up to be served a breakfast beautifully cooked and arranged by young Peter. He was different that morning. Colourful, energetic, and almost glowing with hope. He looked /younger/, and it dawned on me that perhaps I hadn't stolen his innocence, but rather given it back to him.

"You sleepwalked last night," he told me in a soft voice. "I remember my mum saying you should never wake sleepwalkers. But you did, you sleepwalked."

I put my fork down on the plate, rather shocked. "Where did I go?"

"Into the kitchen. Then into the bathroom. Then back in here again. It was really weird."

"Peter... Are you sure I wasn't getting a glass of water or having a wee? I remember getting up to have-"

"No, you got some eggs out of the fridge," He was on the brink of laughter. "You took the eggs out of a whole box full and carried them into the bathroom. You did, I saw you."

"You're lying."

Peter looked genuinely hurt. "I'm not, I'm not, I wouldn't like to you, I swear I wouldn't."

"Okay, I believe you."

We finished breakfast, kissed, then I went for a shower. I looked in the bathroom bin. In the bath. Down the toilet. And then in the medical cabinet, the contents of which poured out onto the floor as soon as I pulled it open. One soggy tomato. Six shattered eggs. Five greasy ready-to-cook meals. Not quite sure whether to scream or snigger, I left the door hanging open and everything piled shittily on top of the weighing scales, and had a long, hot shower.

Peter came the next day with more flowers, and the day after that, and the day after that, but I didn't - I /couldn't/ - let him in. I smiled my checkout operator's smile and said "thankyou, bye" and put his gifts in cups of water but Jesus Jesus Jesus, I thought, a fourteen year old schoolboy, fourteen, four/teen/... I couldn't. I just couldn't. I'd done my share. I'd done all in my power to help him.

And then dark and dull on Monday night, waiting for the bus beneath a vandalised shelter, a jacketless clone in a black and white suit came sauntering out of the drizzle and stood beside me, sucking a cigarette. He glanced at me inquisitively from time to time, Mr Dream Lover Sports Car, Mr Yorkshire Bank, Mr Three Piece Leather Suite. And I, Miss Card-board Box, Miss Economy not Luxury, Miss Braindead Loser who Lives Alone, glanced curiously back.

"Cold innit?" he said.

"Hmmm," I nodded. I could smell his perfume. Expensive. Subtle. Seducing. He unfastened his tie and plucked open the first few buttons of his shirt, letting me see plenty of hair and skin.

"Smoke?" he offered.

I didn't, but nodded, and took one. "Thanks. Do you have a light?"

"Yes, here," He cupped his hands and struck his lighter. I pretended to show great interest in this item and asked if I could have a proper look.

"My uncle's," he smiled and then blew out smoke. "Nice, isn't it? Original. Solid silver."

I nodded, turning it slowly in my hands as though it contained all the answers to my deepest desires. I looked up. The clone had his back to me. Tottering from one foot to the other, he was, and shivering a little, and cursing for the bus to hurry up.

And his hair, brown and bushy and perfectly styled, was close, enticing and perfect for lighting. Cupping palms against the wind, gritting teeth against the hate, pissing drips against the thrill, I stepped up to him, resisted him, defied him - yes me, a slug, a slime, a servant, offering her master a deadly firefly - moved flame to hair, cutting streaks through the drizzle, splashing glows against the glass, breaking the class barriers, tearing, igniting, flaming-

"What the hell are you doing?" The clone staggered away from me, holding his hands up in defence. "Good God, you're mad, what're you trying to do, set me on fire? Hey? What're you doing?"

I snapped the lighter closed and offered it back. "Just dreaming."

1.10 Holding The Cane

H O L D I N G T H E C A N E

I was slouched like my dad watching telly on the bouncing back seat of a heavily vandalised bus heading in the direction of Dewsbury, when a

gang of schoolboys at the front decided to mutate their cocky glances into something of a more threatening nature. Not the wisest move they'd ever made, considering what I did to them in the end.

"Oi, here. Dickhead. Have you ever sucked your Mum's tits?" enquired the dark-skinned leader of the tribe as they came sauntering up the aisle. "Have you? Eh?" He fell into the chair in front of me, his mates tumbling after him.

"Shurrup Jordan, you fuckin peasant," said one, looking intensely irritated. He poked his head over Jordan's shoulder and told me: "Don't answer him man, he's a fuckin psycho. Just don't answer him, alright?"

Jordan, without turning round, slapped his hand over the intruder's face and pushed him right out of the way. The boy fell over backwards and cracked his head on one of the metal supports. He started crying. The others laughed.

"Answer me," Jordan demanded. "Have you ever sucked—"

"No." I said, looking out of the window.

"Ahhhh!" Jordan cried and banged his hands on the side of the bus. "You have, actually, you cockmop! You sucked your mum's tits when you were a baby! Ahhhhh!"

"No, I didn't," I said defensively, still gazing outside. "I was abandoned very promptly after I was born."

Jordan seemed to require a bit of time to think about this.

"Argh, fuck off, you dick," he bellowed. (I suppose it's a good thing there was nobody else on the bus.) "Bet your mum were a fuckin horse, wantshe?"

"No," I gave him an disinterested glance. "She was a cow."

Jordan failed to laugh. "Did you grow up with a man, then?" he said, leaning very close, obviously convinced he'd caught a firm hold of yet another explosively witty balloon. It was as though he was incapable of continuing his existence knowing that somebody had actually managed to get the better of him.

"Yes," I yawned, getting bored now. "I grew up with my father."

Jordan was rolling around in the hilarity of his own thoughts long before he said: "So did you suck his nob? I bet you did, didn't you. Did you swallow? Or did you spit?"

I smiled at his oh-so-innocent childish humour and remained mute. I really couldn't be arsed. Besides, it would be better if I didn't do much talking. Better in the end.

The thing is, you never get away from verbal witicism, do you? It exists everywhere - from the school playground through university and sixth form (it rings alarm bells at sixth form) right into to the very pinnacles of the working industry - and when we're caught within this matrix of clever jokes, one-liners, put-downs and backstabbers it's 'every man or woman for himself'. As a society, we have become unaware that we waste hours, days, weeks of our precious lives doing little more than deflecting accusations and thinking of cunning ways to return verbal attacks. It doesn't matter where we are or who we assault, just as long as we scale the ladders by raking in all the recognition. It's pathetic really.

Jordan folded his arms across the silver rail on the back of the seat and lowered his chin onto them. He reminded me of my five-year-old cousin settling down to listen to a bedtime story (the only difference being that my cousin was a child and not an evil, foul-minded comprehensive school hybrid.)

"You think you're hard you, don'tcha?"

"I am hard." I said.

The boy barked laughter and flung up off the seat and looked at his mates, who laughed also, but with faint traces of uncertainty detectable in their eyes.

"This guy's fuckin mad, isn'ee? Shit! Who joo think you're harder than? Eh? Who joo think-"

"Everybody." I nodded.

"Oh man, what a wanker!" Jordan seemed very amazed by my declaration; he shuffled off the seat and stood up. "Oi, Chambers, come here, man, have you heard this specky nob?"

"Aye," came a faint male voice from approximately two or three seats down the line. "So what, he's a dick isn't he."

Jordan came forwards again, his face so packed with intrigue he might have been looking at some strange insect in a tank in a pet-shop window and not at all into the eyes of an untidily dressed teenage warehouse assistant on his way home for supper. I couldn't help but grin.

The boy allowed himself to be rocked around by the stop-starting of the bus whilst he stared at me so torridly I could almost hear the cogs chugging away inside his otherwise empty head.

"Oi, four-eyes... Joo think you're harder than Van Damme?"

I laughed. "Jean Claude Van Damme? What's so hard about him?"

"What do you mean what's so hard about him. He's fuckin rock hard inne you dickhead."

"Why?"

"Why!" Jordan shrieked (so loudly he started coughing). "Chambers joo hear that?"

"Aye."

"Why he sez! Why! Cocksucker! Fuckin Van Damme'd kick ten billion buckets of shit off've you you specky twat!"

"But why would he want to?" I inquired.

Funny how kids of Jordan's calibre never really think about what they're saying. I was disturbed, though - was Jean Claude Van Damme truly the 'idol of perfection' against which the majority of thirteen-year-old males measured themselves (and indeed other members of their own sex)?

"Have you ever met Jean Claude Van Damme?" I asked.

"No," Jordan folded his arms. He half-closed his eyes and said in a voice that oozed with sincerity: "Man, he'd kick the fuckin shite off've you. Piece a piss, man."

"I once saw an interview with Mr Van Damme on television," I confessed. "He appeared to me to be a stuck up pillock who demanded a lenthly pause each time the audience clapped for him."

"Shurrrup, you great nob."

"Isn't he the only famous Belgian in existence?" I quizzed.

"What the fuck are you on about? Van Damme's fuckin rock hard, he'd fuckin pick you up, like that man, and squash all the shit outta you in one fuckin splat." He arced his neck. "You heard this cunt Chambers?"

"Aye."

"What a dickhead, eh? Isn't he a fuckin dickhead?"

"Aye."

"You are man," Jordan looked at me again, speaking as if to a naughty child who didn't want to go to school. "You are, I swear."

The problem with our kids today - as Jordan's behaviour clearly demonstrated to me on that tedious bus journey home - is confidence. Our kids are gaining confidence. Enough of it to lash out upon anyone they fancy, anytime, anywhere, with the fueling knowledge that to be punished is to be admired - and to be locked up is to be treated like royalty. They are the ones who currently hold the canes.

"You feeling your dick, or somethin?" said Jordan. We were talking one-to-one now; his associates, it seemed, had lost interest, and were amusing themselves by spreading chewing gum across the seats. I had my hands tucked neatly in my pockets. They'd always been there.

"I'm making sure that what I've got hidden in my coat doesn't fall out," I said revealingly.

"Why, what've you got in your coat?" Jordan leaned over. "What is it? What've you got?"

"A weapon." I said.

Jordan looked me straight in the eye. His lips quivered. "Fuck off," he hissed. "Whatchoo fuckin on about, what weapon, bullshit, let's see it then, let's see it."

"No." I protested.

"You're a fuckin lying cunt, you've got no weapon. Bollocks." He stretched his upper-body entirely over the rail and started prodding my coat.

I brought my right hand out of its pocket and grabbed the boy by the tuft that was his hair and yanked him brutally upright. I pocketed my hand again. Jordan's mouth opened and his eyes watered.

"What... You doing?" he gasped, prodding the top of his head with his fingers. "Ouch, you... Bastard... Whatjoo fuckin do then? What joo fuckin do to my hair?"

"Sod off," I snapped. "Alright? Sod off and leave me alone."

Jordan didn't even flinch - he just carried on delicately examining his scalp and swearing furiously. "What is that fuckin weapon?" he shouted. "You fuckin show it me now you specky twat, I wanna see it."

"Oh you'll see it, alright." I growled, getting rather worked up all of a sudden. "You'll see it loud and clear, sunny jim."

"Show it us, then. Show it us... Ahhhh, you can't can you, cos you haven't fuckin got owt. Ahhh."

"The weapon I carry is the one I intend to use against you," I explained to Jordan carefully, sitting up a little. "Please, rest assured, you will get to see it, but not until the bus stops and we all disembark. In the meantime, may I suggest that you shut your mouth and go play with your friends for the remainder of the journey. Because this, Jordan, might be the last journey you ever make."

"You wouldn't fuckin dare touch me," Jordan slid off the seat.

"Chambers! You heard this four-eyed fadge? He sez he's gonna stab me with a fuckin knife or somethin."

"Well he's a nob, innee." sighed the elusive Chambers.

Jordan reversed slowly down the aisle, keeping firm eye contact.

"Bollocks, fuckin bollocks," he muttered until he was almost out of my hearing range. He eventually knelt down on one of the seats near the front and just peeped at me from time to time.

I began to contemplate what might happen to Jordan as he grew older. His life, relationships and career - if indeed he was capable of sustaining any of them. A vulgar, urban gang-land leader, possibly, on the dole through choice more than circumstance and with dizzy girls servicing him like a flower left, right and centre. A shithole flat in Mixenden, the back room clogged to high hell with illegal sex and death videos, his lazy, criminal troops crammed onto two green armchairs floating amidst a sea of empty Foster cans.

Or cheated success at sixteen, perhaps, and a leap onto the safe platform of extended education, sixth form and all the half-grown up childishness and pressure that comes bottled with it. Help from sympathetic bed-partners and teachers to fill in forms and it's a few months of pissing around before he's off to university, bloated mother

and matchstick father's winning offspring, the rest in their bedrooms, turning pages with cum-coated fingers. Miles from home, the pitiful emptiness inside him is given the space to breed as he keeps record of his one-night stands, marking them out of ten in a cash book, and spending borrowed money on memory loss. Injecting himself with information, he learns only what has already been learned, and becomes yet another shining cog in the cyborg of society.

I wonder, young Jordan, I wonder.

The bus pulled in adjacent to a large red-bricked housing estate. Jordan and his mates flew out of their seats and hurried to the door, pushing and shoving, nearly all of them glancing back at me to check, I suppose, if I had made my promised move.

I purposely waited until the very last minute - until the doors had hissed open and the first few members of the tribe had stepped off the bus. Then, I secured my weapon, got up and ran, my shoes banging across the floor like rubber mallets.

"Don't set off," I shouted to the driver. "I was daydreaming. Sorry." I clattered down the double-step.

As soon as I was out, the gang, as if they'd been recharged by the rays of the sun, started shouting and screaming and laughing from their position a little further up the pavement. Two of them broke away from the main bulk and ran. (I squinted to make sure neither of them were Jordan... No, the boy remained, near the front.)

I decided that in order to successfully complete the exercise I would have to chase the gang at a fairly energetic pace, so I zipped my coat pockets up, unravelled my arms and broke into a jog.

Even though I had only slightly increased my speed, the fleeing boys found it enough to justify a full-blown panic. The whole gang of them exploded like a tube of smarties falling out of a shopping bag, tearing off down snickets, leaping over dustbins and ducking behind walls. Jordan himself vanished behind a high, pine-coloured fence. I locked onto him and put my foot flat-down on the pedal.

"Fuck off man! Fuck off!" he screamed as I enclosed. He shot round the back of a house, scaled a wire-mesh fence and fought off a bounding, barking Jack Russell before splashing back out onto the road. I kept up, nearly summersaulting over the fence; I landed on both feet and kicked the dog across its own lawn and then shot out of the garden like a cannonball.

Jordan was only metres away from grabbing-distance when I realised my pursuit was almost at an end. He took a sharp left, and bolted up the front garden of a semi-detached bungalow with three white cats sat gawping in the window. The cats vanished with an audible squeal when Jordan collided with the front door.

"Muuuum! Muuum!" he squealed, rattling the letterbox frantically and pounding his fists on the wood. "Open the doooooor! Mum pleeeaaaase! Open the doooooo-oor!"

I came to an abrupt halt at the bottom of the garden to catch my breath. Jordan's mother, I assume, opened up and poked her head out. Jordan, crying hysterically, bulldozed past her and wailed off into the front room, shouting "don't let him in mum! don't let him in!"

The woman, who was wearing fluffy bunny-rabbit slippers and had her hair wrapped in an enormous pink towel, shuffled out onto her doorstep.

"Hey," she called. "Hey you, there. Just what do you think you're doin'? What have you done to my son? Hey? What've you done?"

I cleared my throat and began to unzip my pockets. "Madam, if you could spare me a moment, I have something-

"Who are you? What you talkin about? David! David come here a

second! Explain to me who this is!"

The woman watched me, her face screwed up, as I carefully extracted my tape recorder and pressed the eject button.

"It'll need rewinding," I explained, walking up the garden path and holding out the tape. "But I think you'll find listening your son's conversation very interesting."
