

HALCYON DAYS

by

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For Carol

I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or
whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man

- Chuang Tzu

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Part One

The tall one walked side by side with his smaller companion, passing trees which marked off the length of the street into regular parts. The trees disappeared upwards into the night, but both of them knew that there were branches and leaves up there somewhere, because they had observed them during the day.

“Why is life so confusing, J.C?” asked the smaller of the two.

“No idea.”

“Too confusing, huh?”

“Guess so.”

Just around the corner was the place where John T Rex II had dented the bonnets of three cars. None of the drivers had got out to argue the point with him, but had driven off into obscurity. So, eventually, had John T Rex II. Nobody knew where he had ended up.

The smaller of the two twirled his umbrella and skidded Chaplin-like round the corner. The zebra-crossing lights blinked balefully at them in the dusk. “I mean, why are we here, for instance?”

“You mean, here?”

“Yes.”

“Doing the work that we’re doing?”

“Doing the work that we’re doing.”

“I don’t know,” J.C. admitted.

“Do you even understand the work?”

“Understand the work?” repeated J.C. “Now, there’s a novel idea.”

Only one car stopped at the zebra crossing, but both of them eyed it suspiciously. Since it was obvious that they were only wasting taxpayer’s money, it would seem just as obvious that the same taxpayers would try their utmost to do away with them. As J.C. had once pointed out, none of them had actually seen a taxpayer, or even anybody that had claimed to be one. Then Nancy, who was probably

practising to be a recluse, had casually added that neither had anyone seen any of the car drivers. When seen, they were always in their cars, where they couldn't be seen. The inference was obvious. Take great care when near car drivers, because they were really taxpayers who were trying to do away with any wasters of taxpayers' money.

But they made it safely to the other side, and breathed sighs of relief as the cars moved off morosely.

"I guess I wouldn't be here if I did," remarked J.C.

"Did what?"

"Understand the work."

The small one pondered on this for a moment. A smile appeared on his face. "You mean, if you did understand the work, there would be no point in coming here to learn it?"

"Right."

"Neat," commented the small one admiringly. He considered the flawless logic for a minute, then saw a flaw in it. "But what about the lecturers, hey? They must understand it. How do they fit in?"

J.C. rounded on him furiously. "Look, Whoever you are....."

"Yes?" said the small one timidly.

"Look! I don't take kindly to this grilling. What is it, some kind of cross-examination?" J.C. broke off in the middle of his tirade to admire the long word he had used. Big Jim had told him it in a moment of weakness when he thought he was going to lose his voice.

"Anyway!" he resumed angrily. "I - where was I?"

"You were saying how you didn't take kindly to being grilled," supplied his companion.

"Well, I don't," muttered J.C. "Asking what lecturers are Cross-examining....." He lapsed into silence as they started up the last stretch towards the Home.

"But what about the lecturers," persisted the smaller one.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps they're taxpayers too." Both of them stopped in alarm.

"Taxpayers? Here? No, they couldn't plant spies on us here!"

"Couldn't they?" said J.C. glumly.

“Wait a minute!” cried the smaller one, who had been frantically casting about for some reason why lecturers shouldn’t be taxpayers. “They get fantastically long holidays, don’t they?” He looked at J.C. anxiously.

“Okay,” acquiesced J.C. at last. “I guess you’re right. Everyone knows that taxpayers don’t get fantastically long holidays.”

They both breathed another sigh of relief and resumed their walk Home.

“Whoever you are?”

“Yes?” answered the smaller one.

“This means that we will have to be careful - very careful - of any one of us who understands the work.”

“Spies?” asked Whoever he was. J.C. nodded darkly.

“Spies?” asked the smaller one, not seeing the nod because it was too dark.

“Why do you ask?” asked J.C. The smaller one became flustered at this unexpected question.

“I don’t know,” he confessed.

“Well, don’t ask me things you don’t know about!”

“All right, J.C.”

The lights of the Home beckoned more brightly as the night got darker and they got nearer. A tree branch filtered one of the lights into rippling patterns.

“Life’s bloody confusing, isn’t it?” reflected J.C.

“Well, I suppose we wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t,” replied the smaller of the two.

Inside the Home they met Slim Jim, who had reactions so fast that sometimes nobody even saw him move.

“Right lads,” he said briskly. “Ten tomorrow.”

“Ten tomorrow?” queried J.C.

“Exactly,” replied Slim Jim.

“Do you understand the work?” put in the small one, casting a warning glance at J.C., who caught it and immediately grasped the implications.

“Yeah,” he followed up. “You know, the work. Do you understand it?”

“What work?” asked Slim Jim.

The other two breathed sighs of relief again, their third in less than an hour.

“Great,” said J.C. “It’s O.K., Whoever you are, he’s one of us!”

The small one nodded in agreement. “It *is* great,” he said. “Great.” He liked the feeling of the word. “Just *great*,” he added, by way of experimentation.

Slim Jim nodded and smiled to show that he liked being one of us, even though he wasn’t sure who us was. That was one of the reasons why he liked sports: it was usually easy to tell who *us* was, and then by process of elimination, *they* would be anybody left. The other reason why he liked sports, of course, was his incredibly fast reactions. Sometimes he would serve an ace, for example, or score a goal, and his opponents would fail to believe him until he pointed to the ball at the back of the court, or back of the net, as the case may be. The only person who had ever beaten him at anything was Rumbold Jnr, and he had turned into a recluse on the day Big Jim had almost lost his voice. This suited Slim Jim admirably, because he was unable to tell anyone of his victory while he was a recluse.

“Don’t forget the time,” remonstrated Slim Jim, suddenly remembering where he was. “And pass it on.” He left with his usual whooshing sound, as displaced air rushed to fill the spot where he had just been.

“What *is* the time?” asked J.C.

The small one looked at his watch. “Twenty to eight, as far as I know.”

“Why as far as you know?”

“Well, my watch could be wrong,” said the small one defensively. “Hey, J.C.?”

“Yes?”

“Did you notice he didn’t actually say that he didn’t understand the work?”

“You mean, he could have been evading the subject all the time?”

“We’ll have to watch him closely,” confirmed the small one. He leaned back and hurt his back on a jagged hole in the wall.

“Damn that geologist!” he cried.

When they had first arrived, none of J.C. or Slim Jim or even Whoever he was had known each other. They had only known that probably they would get to know someone in time. The more sideways-thinking of them realised that those they were to meet in the future were probably thinking exactly the same lines. So when they all arrived by their different means but at approximately the same time, they all thought it

highly likely that they would meet someone in the future, and some of them realised that all of them were thinking this thought. Cracknell, the moody genius who always understood something the instant before he was told it, even realised that some of them were realising this thought. This gave him a vague sense of pleasure at being on up on everybody else, until it struck him that there might be another moody genius somewhere thinking exactly the same. At this point he got a headache and went to bed.

On their first day at the Home, all of the newcomers were visited by the aloof and elevated Bruce, who was the then longest -standing inmate.

“My name is Bruce. If you have any problems regarding the Home, please see me.”

Bruce had red hair and slightly unfocussed eyes. This and his distant manner combined to give the impression that he was not really there. So strong was his similarity to not being there, that most of the new inmates completely ignored him. He had been at the Home for so long that none of the cleaners knew he was there, and it was certain that Administration was unaware of his presence, because they had let him keep the same room for sixteen years, contravening several rules.

All of the inmates, however unaware they were of the existence of Bruce, were aware of the existence of Administration. It was Administration that made up all the rules, including the one about switching out lights after dark. The first time he heard that rule, John T. Rex I put on his spare pair of biceps and rushed around to the Administration block.

“It’s true enough,” acknowledged one of the clerks. “*Rule24(c). No Lights after Dark.*”

“But what are lights for?” cried John T Rex I.

“Search me,” replied the clerk. “They were here long before I was.”

“But what’s the rule for?” cried John T Rex I.

“Ah, that I can tell you,” answered the clerk. “It’s to save electricity.”

“To save electricity?”

“That’s what I said,” said the clerk tartly.

“But we can’t see with the lights out! How are we supposed to see in the dark?”

“That’s your problem,” retorted the clerk. He leaned forward confidentially.

“Notice that *Rule 24(c)* doesn’t forbid you to put lights on during the day.”

John T Rex I howled.

“Nobody wants to put lights on during the day,” explained the clerk. “So we still save electricity.”

John T Rex I ran back Home on all fours and howled what he had learned to all the other inmates. He then retired to the attic and was never seen again, except by one of the cleaners who went up to feed him each day.

“Poor chap. He just couldn’t take it,” said Bruce.

“I wonder why he did that?” said J.C.

“Probably just couldn’t take it,” said Rumbold Jnr. A howl reverberated around the attic.

“He’d better not do that every night,” said Bruce crisply. “It’ll keep us awake.”

“That hideous howling will keep us awake,” remarked J.C.

“We’ll just have to sleep when isn’t howling,” said Rumbold Jnr. “What worries me is *Rule24(c) - No Lights After Dark*.”

“That’s no problem,” put in Cracknell. “We’ll turn the lights on just before sunset, then it won’t get dark. See?”

The others all nodded. They did see. The lights would have to be on all night every night, so not only would they have to sleep when John T Rex I was silent, but also they would have to become accustomed to sleeping when it was not dark.

The first person Whoever he was had met was J.C.

“You’re the first person I met, J.C.”

“What, the very first?”

Whoever he was scratched his head and took his turn to move before replying.

“Well, here, anyway.”

“I guess it does seem like a life on its own,” acknowledged J.C.

“The second, I suppose, was the Thing in the kitchen.”

“E Flat?”

“The very same.”

“How does one get like that?”

“Addicted to coffee?” said Whoever he was. “It just takes time, I suppose. And plenty of coffee.”

The two of them were sitting in J.C.'s room, hunched over a chess set. They had to sit hunched up because the room was really only big enough for one, and they had to use that room because Whoever he was' room lay directly beneath the part of the attic that John T Rex I was most prone to use. Whoever he was and J.C. had found it distracting to have animal scratchings come from over their heads when they tried to play chess, so they moved to J.C.'s room.

"Don't you agree that it seems like a life on its own here?" asked J.C.

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, can you remember your life before you came here?"

"No—o."

"Do you know what your life will be like when you leave."

"No," said Whoever he was, quickly.

"That's what I mean," said J.C.

"I see what you mean," said Whoever he was. "I suppose it is true, when you think about it."

J.C. snorted. "It's true whether you think about it or not," he snapped.

They played a few more moves with tense concentration, then J.C. sat back, convinced that he had the game sewn up.

"Did you ever play Rumbold Jnr at chess?" asked Whoever he was.

"No. He became a recluse before I knew him that well."

"He was a master, y'know."

"Pretty good, huh?"

"He even beat Slim Jim at squash once. Mind you —" Whoever he was leaned forward conspiratorially "- Slim Jim doesn't like it talked about."

"I wonder what he meant when he said....."

".....ten tomorrow?"

"That's what he said."

"He did, didn't he?"

"Well, I wonder what he wanted," said J.C.

"I don't know," confessed Whoever he was. "It's probably the time of something."

"Football?"

"Could be. We'll just have to go along and find out."

"And if it isn't?"

“We’ll just have to pretend we never saw him.”

J.C. nodded, understanding. He was still convinced he had the game sewn up, but he was reluctant to make a move. It was his experience that it was always best to quit while you were ahead, or at least, when you thought you were. At this stage in a chess game he preferred to stop, otherwise any advantage he thought he had was likely to disappear.

“Who was the third person you met?” he asked.

“He,” quipped Whoever he was, pointing upwards.

“John T Rex I?”

“He was different then, of course. He even lived as one of us.”

“Damn Administration!” snarled J.C.

Whoever he was looked at him slyly. “We fooled them, though. Didn’t we?”

“I guess so,” said J.C.

“Damn Administration!” snarled Whoever he was. A long howl came through the ceiling and filled J.C.’s room.

“There, now we’ve upset him,” said Whoever he was.

“Poor bloke,” said J.C. “I guess he just couldn’t take it.”

On looking back, it seemed that every day was bright and sunny, though everyone knew that to be impossible. There could be no argument, however, that the weather on the first day was as fine as lurked in any memory. The sun shone down on a great number of people who moved and converged, like lines of force, into a straight queue. Not even one cloud was visible in the bland sky. When the queue had first started to form, it had done so outside the door marked *Entrance*, but then one of the clerks had come out and asked everyone to line up outside the exit.

“It’s a slightly larger door,” he said, “and more people go in than come out.”

If anything should have warned those in the queue to move on, this pronouncement should have done so. Instead, because the sun was shining and they had nothing better to do, the people moved, smiling and laughing, into their new positions. One of them even produced a piece of chalk and wrote under the Administration sign: *Out of Bounds. Please Enter.*

After a while the entrance door opened and the person who had been first in the queue lurched drunkenly out. He saw the queue and steadied himself on a lamppost to stop himself falling over backwards.

“Don’t go in there!” he screamed shockingly.

The queue, which had been pleasantly talking amongst itself, fell silent and turned to view this loud person.

“It’s a madhouse!” he screamed on a rising note. The queue looked at him blankly. “Or is it?” he said in a suddenly lowered voice. He bent forward and looked about as if to see if anyone was eavesdropping. “Do you realise - they own me!” he whispered hoarsely.

Somebody in the queue sniggered.

“They do! They do! I.....” his fists clenched spasmodically “.....I went in there a free man, and look at me now.....” He sank to his knees and choked heartrendingly. “Look at me now.....”

Somebody clapped, and in seconds the whole queue was applauding enthusiastically. While they were doing so, the *Entrance* door opened and another dishevelled figure came out. It went to the first one, muttered some consoling words, and the two of them disappeared around a corner. The queue resumed talking amongst itself.

A third of the way along the line stood a tall, black-haired person and a shorter one who was wearing glasses. They were the only two in the whole queue who seemed in the slightest concerned over what could be happening inside the Administration Block. When the queue resumed its quiet conversation, they glanced at each other, and both saw the same worried look.

The tall one pursed his lips, wagged his eyebrows at the Administration Block, and shook his head. The smaller one nodded his head in agreement, then shook it to prove that he knew what he was agreeing to. The tall one leaned sideways and whispered out of the corner of his mouth:

“Personally, I’m going to take great interest in what happens to the bloke in front.”

“So am I,” said the smaller one.

“But that’s me!”

“Yeah. Speak up, so I can hear what you say.”

By this time they had reached the exit. The tall one rubbed at the glass in the door and peered anxiously through it. "Can't see a thing," he muttered.

"Too dark?"

"No - there's nothing there." He turned to his smaller companion. "It was nice knowing you. Shall we go in?"

The small one nodded, and they entered.

The door shut behind them with a slight creak, cutting off most of the sunlight and all of the queue's small-talk. All that could be seen in front of them was a dusty corridor which bent sharply to the left, and up the corridor hurried the person who was in front of them in the queue. They followed cautiously, keeping pace so that they never quite lost sight of him around the bend.

Further on, the corridor broadened and there came into view three partitions let into the side of the wall, in similar fashion to those in railway stations. One of the partitions had A-K written above it, the middle one was labelled L-R, and the third S-Z. Three clerks sat side by side in the first of these.

The person who was ahead of the tall one in the queue walked unhesitatingly to the L-R partition and rapped on the counter, trying to attract some attention.

"Over here, please," said one of the clerks in the A-K section.

"But - "

"Over here, please."

"But - "

"Oh, come on," snapped one of the clerks impatiently. "Who have you come to see?"

"Administration."

"Administration as in apple, aardvark and also ran?"

"Yes."

"Over here," intoned the first clerk. Resignedly, the person who was in front of the tall one in the queue walked over to confront the three clerks.

"Now, I have here a standard from we must have completed before you carry on and - " the clerk coughed delicately" - fill out any other forms."

"Or pay any fees," interposed another clerk.

"Quite. Now, do you understand this?"

The person nodded.

"Right. Name, please?"

“Theobald Rumbold Jnr.”

“Rumbold. Theodore. Jnr,” repeated a clerk.

“No, I said-”

“Father’s occupation?”

“I think –”

“Father’s occupation?”

“ - you - ”

“Look, Rumbold Jnr, just answer the question. Father’s occupation?”

Rumbold Jnr shrugged and just answered the question.

“Accountant.”

“Accountant.”

“Accountant,” repeated a clerk. There was a rusting of paper as another clerk riffled through a book, checked something out, and nodded at the other two.

“Accountant, hmm?” repeated the clerk again, a slight note of envy in his voice. He picked up the form and turned it around so that Rumbold Jnr could see it.

“Sign here, please.”

Rumbold Jnr signed.

“You are now county property. Go through to the first office.”

“But I - ”

“Rumbold!” growled one of the clerks, suddenly awesome.

“Yes, sir?” replied Rumbold, suddenly frightened.

“Move on!”

“Yes sir.” Rumbold moved on.

The tall one approached the partition diffidently, the smaller one close behind. One of the clerks picked up a pen and produced another form from beneath the level of the counter.

“About the form,” said the ball one hastily. “I understand. It’s just a standard form. Routine. It’s just a form I have to” He faltered into silence, unnerved by the triplicate gaze to which he was being subjected.

“Name, please?” said one of the clerks.

The word hung in the air tantalisingly. To the small one who was now next in the queue, they suddenly took on a new importance. He realised abruptly that this was not just a casual question. For a start, it was pretty direct, not the more informal *Hi! I’m Al! What’s your name?* But nor was it the forceful *And what’s your name?*

with which a teacher who had caught him smoking had once regaled him. Yet it was tinged with menace, vibrating and shuddering, dripping acid into the small one's mind. Suddenly the too casual answer to this apparently innocent question resembled the steel jaws of a man-trap.

Hurriedly, he jabbed a warning thumb into the tall one's kidneys.

"Jesus Christ!" the tall one ejaculated.

"Christ. Jesus," repeated a clerk. Then: "Christ? Jesus?" He raised his eyebrows at the other two clerks. "Pretty unlikely, wouldn't you say?"

"Unlikely," confirmed another clerk.

The third clerk looked fiercely at the tall one. "I take it, then, that you refuse to tell us your real name and that no amount of pleading and begging will make you do so?"

The tall one nodded and shook his head dumbly.

"I thought so," continued the clerk. He turned to his companions. "The question is, then, what to put on his form."

"True," confirmed another clerk.

"I once heard," said the third, "that when a person - " and here he glared balefully at the tall one " - when a person gives an alias, he unwittingly uses his own initials."

"J.C., huh?" said the centre clerk.

"Precisely. We'll use J.C. on the form, but we'll file it under D for John Doe. Any dissenters?" Neither the other two clerks nor the tall one dissented, and so J.C. was duly recorded.

"Father's occupation?"

"Preacher," replied J.C., entering into the spirit of the thing. The third clerk riffled through his book, read what it had to say, and shrugged indifferently at the other two.

"O.K." The centre clerk turned the form around. "Sign here, please."

The tall one signed a flourishing J.C. and returned the pen.

"Move on to the first office, please."

J.C. moved away, but only as far as the next partition, where he waited for his small companion.

"Name, please?"

The small one shook his head.

“Name, please?”

The small one shook his head again. “I haven’t got one,” he claimed. There was a shocked silence.

“But what was written on your birth certificate?”

“No idea.”

“But you must have had a name written on your birth certificate! Everyone has!”

“All right, then,” amended the small one. “Perhaps I have got a name. Only I don’t know what it is.”

“Well, that’s better,” said one of the clerks, relieved. “I thought for a minute there that you really didn’t have a name, and that would have completely boggled us. Wouldn’t it?” He turned to the other two clerks for confirmation, and they both nodded gravely.

“Well, now. The question is, what would you like us to put on your form?” asked the clerk cunningly.

The small one considered the question. Obviously the clerk hoped he would unthinkingly say ‘Raquel Welch’ or give some other equally obvious alias, in which case he too would be reduced to initials. He could, of course, say ‘Orville Klaxton’ and be reduced to O.K., or maybe even K.O., but this seemed the easy way out. He reached a decision.

“Plume Denom,” he said.

“Nom. De Plume,” recorded a clerk automatically.

“Father’s occupation?”

“Taxpayer,” replied the small one unhesitatingly. The end clerk riffled through his book, paused, riffled through again, paused, double-checked, then frowned and shook his head at the other two clerks.

“He can’t be,” accused one of the clerks. “It’s not in the book.”

“I can’t help that,” retorted the small one. “It’s what he spends all his time doing. I can’t help it if it’s so lucrative that it’s not in your book.”

The clerks appeared satisfied.

“What was the again?”

“Taxpayer.”

“Payer. Taxes,” recorded the centre clerk. He turned the form around.

“Sign, please.” The small one signed.

“Move on to the first office, please.”

The small one rejoined his companion at the next partition.

“Hello, there, J.C.,” he said, smiling.

“Hello, Whoever you are.”

“Notice they didn’t tell us we were county property?”

“I did notice that,” acknowledged J.C. They started walking down the corridor. Behind them, one of the clerks spoke to the other two.

“Better get the candles out. It’s getting dark.”

Still further down the corridor they came up a series of doors let into the wall. As he studied them, J.C. reflected rather vaguely that just about all the doors he had ever seen were let into the sides of walls. He felt that if he was to pursue this thought, something profound might result, possibly connected with a superfluity of walls. J.C., however, liked to quit while he was ahead, so he did not pursue the notion. He stopped the train of thought entirely, leaving himself with pleasant impression that he had been on the edge of something profound, which was better than nothing.

The first door they came upon had *Last Office* written on it. The next one was labelled *Centre Office 3*, and the next two were *Centre Office 2* and *Centre Office 1*. The fourth and last door had *First Office* printed on it.

Whoever he was stood back and surveyed this sequence of doors.

“It’s because we came in the exit,” explained J.C.

As he spoke, the door of First Office opened and Rumbold Jnr staggered out. He shook his head violently, trying to clear it, then walked unsteadily back up the corridor, passing Whoever he was and J.C. on the way.

“Got to fill in a father’s occupation form,” he muttered,

“But – ” said J.C.

“Never mind,” interrupted Whoever he was. “Let’s not add to his troubles.”

They looked with trepidation at the door of First Office.

“Well, it was nice knowing you,” said Whoever he was. “Shall we go in?”

Dear Mum, wrote Whoever he was, later. *It has been an eventful day, not least because I lost my name. So when you get to the end of this letter, don’t look around for any missing sheets, it really is the end of the letter, only I haven’t signed a name at*

the bottom. All this happened at Administration and I'll tell you about it later. Another thing that happened is that I met Jesus Christ, called J.C. for short.

I still haven't decided what course to take. Physics or French seem the obvious choices, but I won't make any final decisions just yet. J.C. is also undecided. He is going to talk to Heads of Departments before making up his mind, and I think I will do the same.

I forgot to mention that we also saw Rumbold Jnr when we went to Administration. He was ahead of us in the queue. For quite a while after filling in the necessary forms, he seemed rather dazed. He looks much better now and our only anxiety is that he might suffer a relapse.

There's nothing much else to tell you now but I expect I'll write again later. The only thing is, that if the situation starts to get tight, then I won't be able to address the letter in case my name gets discovered. So there's a good chance it won't actually reach you even if I write it. We'll just have to see what happens.

Down the corridor echoed the voice in Rumbold Jnr's mind. *Down the corridor. Down the corridor.* All external stimuli had been cut off from Rumbold Jnr's mind, but somewhere in the depth of his being a small portion of himself struggled to fight back.

Down the corridor-or echoed the echo. Rumbold Jnr writhed uncomfortably on his unmade bed. With a sudden superhuman effort, similar to the one that had been necessary to beat Slim Jim at squash, he threw off the black coils encircling his brain and became aware of the real world about him.

Darkness smote his eyes and the thought that he could not put the lights on because it was dark immediately occurred to him. Then the silence was broken by a long, quavering howl. It echoed tinnily in some remote corner of the attic, but Rumbold Jnr's ears caught it and transformed the echo into.....

He howled once in mournful reply as the black coils slipped loathsomely, familiarly, around his brain once more.

Next door, Cracknell heard the howl and almost started thinking about it. But as he almost started thinking about it, the answer became obvious and he stopped before the problem really occurred to him.

Cracknell's room was something of a museum and something of a library. In all available corners were heaped piles of books, and each time he heaped up a pile, new corners appeared which he felt obliged to fill up with more books. The desk was completely obscured by ream upon ream of half completed brilliancies which occurred to Cracknell a moment after he understood them. Everything occurred to Cracknell a moment after he understood it: it was one of the penalties of being a genius. He went through life understanding everything a moment before he noticed it, and as a result, life seemed pale and unreal.

"Life seems pale and unreal," Cracknell once wailed to John T Rex II. "There's no mystery any more."

"Well, if you will....."

"I know! I know!" cried out Cracknell. "Don't tell me that. I know that already!"

In the exact centre of his room, standing precariously on one foot, was a pearly white skeleton that he had appropriated while doing a biological degree. The missing foot was somewhere in the reams of desk-bound paper, doing duty as a paperweight. The skeleton's name was Holy Joe, and had once been the cause of widespread riots, although Cracknell always maintained that it had been John T Rex II's fault.

"He came in," argued Cracknell, "saw Holy Joe innocently gleaming – it was dark – and went berserk."

"Who wouldn't?" claimed John T Rex II.

"I wouldn't," replied Cracknell.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned....." began John T Rex II.

"Yes, yes," cut in Cracknell impatiently. "Maybe so, but the fact is that you caused the resulting riot!"

"But Holy Joe caused me to cause it," sulked John T Rex II.

This caused Cracknell to fall into a meditative silence. Cause and effect problems frequently occurred to him and the odd thing was, that he failed to understand them. As a result, he once went on a prolonged self-analysis session, trying to find out why he did not understand them, and under hypnosis discovered that it was all caused by a traumatic experience in his childhood. Apparently, while he

was still only a prodigy, someone has asked him: which came first, the chicken or the egg? For two whole weeks he had devoted his entire mind to finding a solution to this problem. At the end of the fortnight, he was lying motionless in bed, steam issuing from fissures in his skull, and ever since then he had been unable to solve cause and effect problems.

This, however, was the only real chink in Cracknell's armour. Other problems caused him no trouble at all. He read such books as *Indecisiveness – The Axioms* before breakfast, and had entered into a long, complicated correspondence with the author of that authoritative text *Intuitive Logic*. The correspondence was made additionally complicated by the fact that the author of *Intuitive Logic* was another genius who understood things a moment before he was told them, and as a result, he and Cracknell never actually wrote any letters. Cracknell would suddenly realise that it was about time he received a letter, and no sooner did that occur to him, than he knew exactly what the letter would say. Whereupon he would sit down and think about composing a reply, although he would never actually write it out, because he invariably got distracted. Then about a week later, he would realise that it was about time he received a reply to the reply he never actually wrote, and the whole sequence began again.

The one person who most frequently visited Cracknell in his cluttered room was John T Rex II. This was because John T Rex II was convinced that Cracknell was his psychiatrist.

"I'm not your psychiatrist," persisted Cracknell. "What makes you think I'm your psychiatrist? Tell me about it."

John T Rex II really had an aversion to talking about himself, especially to psychiatrists.

"Come on," Cracknell reiterated. "What's your trouble? Tell me about it."

"I don't like talking about myself," complained John T Rex II.

"Hmmm. An unusual complaint. What makes you think you need a psychiatrist?"

"Because I don't like talking about myself," confided John T Rex II.

"But lots of people don't like talking about you," said Cracknell, surprised.

"But I really think ought to talk about myself," moaned John T Tex II. "I think I'm mad."

"You think you're mad?" echoed Cracknell.

John T Rex II. nodded unhappily.

“What symptoms do you manifest?” asked Cracknell crisply.

“None,” replied John T Rex II. “But I come to see you every day.”

“That’s pretty crazy,” admitted Cracknell. “I suppose, then, that you’ll keep on coming to see me until you’re cured of coming to see me?”

John T Rex II nodded again.

“We’ll see about that!” muttered Cracknell.

“Thank you, doctor. I feel so much better, talking to you. Can I come back tomorrow?”

“But I’m not your psychiatrist!” cried Cracknell despairingly.

John T Rex II always came back the next day, and if Cracknell wasn’t there, he would sit on a pile of books and talk about himself anyway. But Cracknell was usually there.

“Let’s get to the root of this,” said Cracknell once, impulsively.

“Yes, doctor.”

“Why is it you think you’re mad?”

“It runs in the family,” replied John T Rex II.

“What?”

“It runs in the family,” repeated John T Rex II. He pointed upwards. “Look at John T Rex I, for instance.”

“I didn’t know John T Rex I was a relation of yours,” said Cracknell, surprised.

“Oh, he isn’t, as far as I know,” said John T Rex II. “But he must be, because of the similarity.....”

“..... of names,” finished Cracknell. “Quite. But even if he is a relation, what makes you think he is mad? After all, nobody has even seen John T Rex I for a year, so you can’t possibly know that he’s mad.”

John T Rex II nodded rapidly.

“Thank you, doctor. I feel so much better, talking to you. Can I come back tomorrow?”

Cracknell wailed despondently.

Fortunately, John I Rex II was only mad between eleven and half past eleven every morning, which meant that he was not always going to Cracknell for psychiatric advice. Cracknell, on the other hand, was always out between ten and half past ten.

This was because he knew that John T Rex II was only mad between eleven and half past, but he had forgotten to put his clock back, and consequently was always out at the wrong time. This was a constant irritation to Cracknell and, as he didn't write to the author of *Intuitive Logic*, what with John T Rex II always complaining, John T Rex I always howling, and Rumbold Jnr always threshing about, it was a wonder that he, Cracknell, didn't slip over the borderline and become mad himself.

Next door to Cracknell on the other side from Rumbold Jnr lived the person who was never in. Nobody had ever met him, but everyone knew he lived there, because he really was never in. In fact, he had never been there at all, so none of his belongings could be seen in the room – no books, clothes, or any other artefact. It was almost as if he did not exist at all, like Bruce.

It was J.C. who first discovered the person who was never in. He himself came in late one night to find the Home reverberating to ghostly knocking. His first thought was that Holy Joe was taking a night stroll, and nothing would induce him to go upstairs. But then Whoever he was pointed out that Holy Joe only had one foot, and was therefore in no condition to stroll anywhere. Thus reassured, J.C. went upstairs after all. Each step he ascended took him closer and closer to the ghostly knocking, which became louder and louder as he got closer and closer.

In spite of the claims of Whoever he was, the first thing he checked was the Holy Joe was in his accustomed place. As it happened, Cracknell was out and Holy Joe stood gleamingly alone in the centre of the room.

“Not Holy Joe,” thought J.C., mentally scrubbing him off a list.

The knocking sounded very close, so he burst dramatically into the room next to Cracknell's on the other side from Rumbold Jnr. As he did so, two things happened. One was that he noticed the black emptiness of the unexplored room, and the second was that the knocking stopped.

J.C. panicked. It seemed obvious to him that the ghostly knocker had been in the room all the time and had stopped at his unexpected entrance. The thought of being alone in a black, unknown room with such a companion was too much for him. He reached out and switched on the light, defying *Rule 24(c)*.

The sight that met his eyes was so unexpected that he looked around the room several times before he could believe his senses. There was nothing to see. The first

thought that occurred to him was that the knocker, far from being just a ghostly knocker, was actually an invisible ghostly knocker. Fortunately, Whoever he was arrived at that moment and dispelled such illusions.

“The room’s empty,” he said, peering over J.C.’s shoulder. “There’s nobody there.”

“You think so?” asked J.C. nervously.

Whoever he was nodded, bumping his chin on J.C.’s shoulder.

“You don’t think,” continued J.C., “there’s someone invisible in there?”

They both surveyed the empty room in silence, taking in the absence of books, clothes, and other paraphernalia of living.

“If there is,” said Whoever he was, “I can’t see him.”

The emptiness of the room grew and magnified in J.C.’s brain. Wherever he looked, he could see signs of uninhabitation. Suddenly a thought which was almost profound occurred to him, and his eyes became bright with excitement.

“No-one lives here!” he cried.

Whoever he was nodded again.

“Don’t you understand?” cried J.C. “That’s who lives here – nobody!” He laughed excitedly and turned to grin in triumph at Whoever he was.

“Well, if anybody does live here,” said Whoever he was slowly, “he’s certainly not in.”

J.C. subsided at this new thought. He realised straight away that his idea was also almost profound, and took it up readily.

“You mean, perhaps someone live here who’s never in?”

Whoever he was, thinking hard, failed to reply.

“After all,” argued J.C., “we never see anyone come into this room, do we?”

Whoever he was gestured expansively at the bareness of the walls and furniture. “It doesn’t look as if he’s ever been in,” he said. “I think the person who lives here lives somewhere else instead.”

J.C. nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes,” continued Whoever he was definitely, “it looks as if the person who lives here doesn’t live here after all. In fact, I’d say he’s never even been here. Mind you, we’d better check it out with Cracknell: he might know something, living next door.”

J.C. started to nod in agreement, then jumped with alarm as the knocking reverberated around the Home again, sounding as if it came from just behind them. They whirled round quickly. Just across the hall stood a small, long-haired figure, tapping with a hammer and chisel at the wallpaper.

“Hi,” it said, noticing Whoever he was and J.C.

Whoever he was surveyed the figure through narrowed eyes. “I don’t think I know you,” he said suspiciously. The figure seemed to consider this remark.

“Interesting,” it replied. “I don’t think I know you, either.”

J.C. regarded a ragged hole in the wall, then saw several more dotted along the passage.

“What are you doing?” he cried in alarm.

“Taking samples,” replied the figure instantly.

“But why?” asked J.C. The figure leaned forward.

“I’m a geologist,” he said. He patted the wall. “Did you ever see such a scarp?”

J.C. and Whoever he was looked at him with open mouths.

“Say – you’re not geologists?” said the figure, suddenly suspicious in his turn. J.C. and Whoever he was shook their heads.

“Thank goodness for that. I thought for a moment.....” He broke off and shambled across the passage to the opposite wall. “Another one!” he whispered ecstatically, and started tapping with his hammer and chisel.

“Look,” said Whoever he was, “don’t you think you could – ”

“ - move?” supplied J.C.

The geologist looked up in surprise. “And let somebody else take the credit? Don’t you two know anything?”

J.C. and Whoever he was watched as he solemnly put another chunk of wall into one of his capacious pockets, then shambled slowly along the length of the wall, examining it closely.

“Aha!” cried a voice from the top of the stairs, and Cracknell appeared round the corner. “Don’t tell me – a geologist!” The geologist dropped his hammer in alarm.

“Just what’s needed! Hurry up! The campus needs a geologist!”

“Needs a geologist?” inquired the geologist, shakily picking up his hammer.

“That’s what I said,” snapped Cracknell, who was always annoyed if he had to say anything twice. “The campus needs a geologist. Look sharp!”

The geologist hurried to the stairs and disappeared from view, whereupon J.C. and Whoever he was out laughing and clapped Cracknell on the back.

“Great idea!” enthused J.C.

“Great. Just great,” agreed Whoever he was.

“Who would have thought - ?”

“Around the corner.....”

“Listening all the time!” finished J.C.

Cracknell looked blankly from one to the other.

“What are you two talking about?”

“The way fooled the geologist!” cried J.C. “Brilliant!”

“Great. Really great,” said Whoever he was, who liked the feel of the word.

“Fooled the geologist?” said Cracknell, bewildered. The other two fell silent and regarded him closely. It was obvious he had no idea what they were talking about. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Cracknell. “The campus does need a geologist. There’s a schism between art and science.”

“At this time of night?” asked J.C.

“Of course,” replied Cracknell. “It’s merely so dark that you can’t see it at the moment. Don’t you two know anything?” Shaking his head, Cracknell went to his room and disappeared inside.

J.C. reached out and switched off the light in the room of the person who was never in. He stepped out fully into the passage, closing the door behind him. The clicking of the latch sounded unnaturally loud in a Home which was unnaturally quiet.

“You know,” said Whoever he was, nodding towards the room of the person who was never in, “I think he might be on to something.”

Two doors away from the person who was never in, in between John T Rex II and Rumbold Jnr, lived Nancy. Nancy had been born with curly hair and a vacillating mind, so it was inevitable that he should become a poet. Right from his earliest days he had proved himself to be completely useless at anything at all, but nobody ever reproached him, because he was so obviously poetical. He had only to clasp his hands together and say winsomely – “The meaning of life – ah! the meaning of life!”

– and the person to whom he was speaking would shake his head in admiration and do the work himself.

Nancy was the only poet that he Home possessed, and he was very proud of this unique status. He worked very hard at being a poet, and nobody could claim that he had ever made more than three intelligent remarks. Sometimes he even wrote poetry. Unfortunately, when he did get around to writing something, he either decided that it was no good, and tore it up, or thought it too private for anybody's eyes but his own.

It was some time before Nancy himself had realised his destiny. Of course, he had always known about his curly hair, but it had come as a complete surprise to him to find out about his vacillating mind. Once that had been made clear to him, he naturally put two and two together, and realised he was a poet. This momentous event in his life had taken place while watching television.

“Do you think?” asked the interviewer, “that we should have temporary or permanent nationalisation of the funds?”

“Well,” began the politician, clearing his throat. “I certainly don't think we should have a permanent system, like we had before.....”

“Mum?” said Nancy.

“Be quiet, Nancy.”

“But Mum, they're talking rubbish.”

“I said be quiet, Nancy. I'm listening.”

“I don't understand a word they're saying, Mum.”

“Oh, shut up! You never understand anything,” snapped his mother. “You've got a mind like a sieve. It – It – ”

“Vacillates,” supplied his father.

“Exactly. Now be quiet. We're listening to what the man has to say.”

Nancy had no intention of saying anything. His brain was whirling with the realisation that it was really vacillating, not whirling. He realised several things all at the same time. He saw that he never really understood what other people said, and that they never really understood what he said. He saw that his brain worked differently to anybody else's, causing his remarks to sound strange in other ears. He realised, in short, that he was a poet.

The television picture changed, showing heavy fighting in the middle of a desert.

“Oh, what glorious colour!” cried Nancy, seeing the shiny blue sky.

“Shut up, Nancy. We’re listening.”

From this moment on, Nancy lived his poetic life to the full. He wrote a poem the very next day, which began:

*The houses
Placid bodies but
With smoky arms upraised
Against a steel-grey sky.*

The day after that, he decided that this was just not good enough, so he tore it up and wrote instead a three-word poem summarising the meaning of existence. As time went on, all that happened was that he became more and more poetical, sometimes making oblique comments which were completely divorced from reality, since he made them up.

It soon became known that Nancy was the person to go to whenever you didn’t really have anything to say. Even John T Rex II once went to him instead of to Cracknell, hoping that he could provide a cure for madness. At just on eleven – o’clock he knocked on the door, whereupon Nancy opened it and beamed radiantly out.

“Hello, doctor,” said John T Rex II hopefully.

“Hello, brother,” replied Nancy.

“But I’m not your brother!” cried John T Rex II, taken aback. Nancy observed this outburst with obvious distress.

“Wherefore art so disturbed, brother?” he asked. John T Rex II took this to be a step in the right direction.

“Well, doctor.....” he began eagerly.

“Ah!” cried Nancy. “The Muse calleth!” He flung the back of his hand against his forehead, moaned ecstatically, and retired into his room. John T Rex II despondently returned to his room, convinced that there was no cure for this madness, but that if there was, only Cracknell could find it.

One evening, Nancy returned Home and immediately started moaning ecstatically in the middle of the hall. After a few moments, a door opened and Bruce peered out irritably.

“Stop that, Nancy!” he ordered.

Nancy continued unabated.

“Look – ” began Bruce, when another door opened and Cracknell peered out.

“Nancy!” he cried, shocked. Nancy stopped moaning and turned to him with an inquiring expression.

“You stop that, Nancy,” said Cracknell. “If you don’t watch it, you’ll set John T Rex I off and we’ll have no peace for the rest of the right.”

Another door opened further down the hall and Big Jim peered out.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Nancy.....” began Bruce.

“Nancy keeps moaning ecstatically,” explained Cracknell.

“Why does he keep doing that?” inquired Big Jim. Cracknell frowned in obvious annoyance.

“I don’t know,” he admitted painfully. “Nancy, why do you keep doing that?”

“Ah! The song of life!” quavered Nancy. “Love! I – ”

“You stop that, Nancy,” interrupted Cracknell. “You just answer the question.”

Nancy gave him a blank look.

“Why were you moaning like that?” repeated Cracknell in a severe tone.

“I saw my wife,” said Nancy simply. Big Jim laughed and advanced into the hall.

“You lucky bugger!” he exclaimed, slapped Nancy on the back.

“What.....?” began Bruce.

“What!” cried Cracknell in astonishment. “I didn’t know you were married.”

“Oh, I’m a lark!” beamed Nancy.

“You certainly are,” said Big Jim. Cracknell also advanced out into the hall.

“You can’t be married,” he accused. “You still got your original name.”

Nancy looked confused. “Well, I’m not, yet,” he said defensively. “I only saw her today. For the first time.” His joy visibly returned, swelling up his chest. “Love!” he cried. “Ooooooh!” He beamed ecstatically at Big Jim, who retired to his room in disgust.

“Stop that, Nancy,” ordered Cracknell.

“I’m so happy,” sniffed Nancy.

“You be happy quietly,” said Cracknell. “Go to your room and write a poem about it, you hear?”

Nancy, in spite of his disordered state, got the message and went to his room.

The next day, everyone knew that Nancy had fallen in love.

“Fallen in love?” said J.C.

“Who with?” asked Whoever he was.

“I don’t know. Some girl,” said Cracknell.

“I know,” put in Slim Jim. “I overheard him practising part of his ode. *Oh girl with the two-tone hair*, it went.” Slim Jim paused expectantly.

“I know her!” exclaimed J.C.

“So do I, I think,” said Whoever he was. “She hasn’t got a mole on her left thigh, has she?”

J.C. shook his head. “Not as far as I know.”

“Then I do know her,” said Whoever he was. “I’ve even got her phone number. Do you think we ought to ring her?”

“Why?” asked Cracknell.

“To speak to her.”

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Cracknell.

“We could even tell her about Nancy being in love with her.”

“That’s not a bad idea either,” said Cracknell.

“Are you sure he’s in love with her?” continued Whoever he was. “We wouldn’t want to make a mistake and say he’s in love with her when he isn’t, would we?”

“Why not?” asked J.C.

“Oh, I’m quite sure,” said Cracknell. “He was moaning ecstatically and telling us all about it last night. We were very lucky he didn’t set John T Rex I off.”

“John T Rex I isn’t well,” informed Whoever he was. “He’s off his food.”

“He is?” said J.C. “How do you know that?”

“He hasn’t he been eating it,” explained Whoever he was

“Why hasn’t he been eating it?” asked J.C.

“Because he’s off his food,” said Whoever he was.

“Ooooooooooh,” moaned Cracknell.

“Come on, lads,” cut in Slim Jim. “Let’s ring up this girl.”

Whoever he was went over to the telephone and dialled a few numbers. “It’s ringing,” he said.

The others crowded round and listened to the tiny buzz coming out of the receiver. Suddenly it clicked to a halt and an equally tiny voice said:

“Hello?”

“Hello?” replied Whoever he was.

“Who is this?” asked the voice.

“Er – D.H.Lawrence?” guessed Whoever he was.

“Pardon?”

“Or perhaps Houdini?”

“Look, Whoever you are.....” said the voice angrily.

“How did you know it was me?” asked Whoever he was in surprise.

“Oh, it’s you,” said the voice.

“Yes, it is,” answered Whoever he was. “Is it you?”

“Yes,” confirmed the voice. “Is it me you want to talk to?”

“You haven’t got a mole on you left thigh, have you?”

“No, I haven’t!” agreed the voice, surprised. “How did you know it was me?”

“I’ve got your number,” explained Whoever he was. “Look, I’m ringing up about Nancy.”

“Well, she’s not here.”

“No, no!” said Whoever he was impatiently. “Nancy’s our poet, and he lives here.”

“Then why are you ringing me?” asked the voice.

“Because it’s you he’s in love with.”

“He’s in love with me?”

“Yes.”

“Nancy’s in love with me? I don’t know him, do I? I’ve never even seen him.”

“He’s a poet,” reminded Whoever he was.

“Oh.” A tiny sigh issued from the receiver. “Why don’t rugby players ever fall in love with me?”

“Rugby players can’t write poetry,” reasoned Whoever he was. “You can’t have everything.”

“No,” sighed the voice. “Oh well. This poet. I suppose he’s got curly hair?”

Whoever he was nodded.

“I suppose he’s got curly hair?” repeated the voice.

“Yes,” said Whoever he was hastily.

“O.K.,” said the voice, and rang off. Whoever he was replaced the receiver and pursed his lips.

“I wonder what that meant?” he wondered.

Nancy sat in the middle of his room and thought about his confused thought processes. The more he thought about them, the more he had to think about, and the more his processes became confused. This introspective state sometimes lasted for so long that it was generally believed he was practising to be a recluse, ready to follow in the footsteps of Rumbold Jnr.

“Am I really in love?” thought Nancy. “No more than a half-smile and a flash of leg as she boarded a bus. Is this enough?”

“Coarsely put,” said another part of him. “A half-smile and a glimpse of silken thigh as she was lost from view.”

“All right,” thought Nancy, accepting the correction. “Is even that enough?”

“No,” said the logical part of him, smirking. Nancy knew that it was the logical part of him which was going to cause a problem.

“People have fallen in love on sight,” he thought defensively.

“So you’re one of the chosen few?” jeered the logical part of him.

“Why not?” thought Nancy. Then he shifted mental gears and wondered if other people thought about themselves.

“I wonder if other people think about their thoughts,” he thought.

“I hope so,” he continued.

“Why?” analysed the logical part of him.

“Why did I think that question?” it added quickly. He felt his brain slowly turning inside out as his thoughts caught up with themselves.

“Why am I thinking this question?” he thought rapidly, then short-circuited and failed to think of anything at all for a few seconds. After that it occurred to him with a slight shock that he was still in love.

“I’m in love,” he thought. “Or perhaps I’m just in love with the idea of being in love.”

“But isn’t that good enough?” asked the logical part of him.

“Whose side are you on?” asked Nancy, so surprised at this turnabout that he actually spoke aloud.

“Isn’t being in love with love good enough?” repeated the logical part of him.

“I don’t know!” wailed the emotional part. “I can’t think!”

“That’s just your trouble,” thought the logical part smugly.

“And your trouble,” retorted the emotional part, “is that you’re too cold.”

“Will I ever fall in love?” thought Nancy gloomily. “I’m too introspective. I even think about my introspectiveness.”

“But I am in love.”

“But am I? If I can analyse it like this, can it be love?”

“Oh, I’m deep, deep,” thought Nancy unhappily.

Whoever he was and J.C. came slowly up the stairs.

“It’s been a hard day,” remarked J.C.

“It certainly has,” agreed Whoever he was. He caught sight of Cracknell standing in the hallway. “It’s been a hard day!” he called out.

“It certainly has,” agreed Cracknell. “It was very nearly a hard night, too.” J.C. and Whoever he was, having climbed the last stair and reached the hallway, regarded him blankly. “Nancy was moaning ecstatically,” he explained. “Right here, in the middle of the hall.”

Whoever he was clapped a hand over his eyes.

“Not again!” said J.C.

Cracknell was nodding. “I’m afraid so. Though I managed to stop him before John T Rex I.....”

“He’s still off his food,” interrupted Whoever he was, “so it might not have mattered.”

“I couldn’t take that chance,” said Cracknell.

J.C. and Whoever he was both nodded.

“Same sort of moaning?” asked J.C.

“Yes. He saw her again today.”

“Anything happen?”

“Nancy nearly broke his nose.”

“He did?” exclaimed J.C.

“Ask John T Rex II about it,” replied Cracknell. “He was there.”

“What time did all this happen?” asked Whoever he was.

“Some time in the afternoon,” replied Cracknell, appreciating the point. “Well after eleven thirty. So it could be true.”

“Hmmm.” mused J.C. “Do you think anything will come of it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Cracknell. “It defies all logical analysis. I - ”

The phone rang downstairs.

“Just a minute,” said Cracknell. He started to go downstairs, but realised who the call was for before he answered it. “It’s for you,” he told Whoever he was.

“It is?” exclaimed Whoever he was.

Cracknell nodded. “It’s that girl, actually.”

“Well, what does she want?”

“Oh, it’s about.....”

“Don’t think you’d better answer it?” put in J.C.

“I suppose so,” said Whoever he was, and went down the stairs.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Cracknell, absently listening to the conversation below.

“Have a game of chess, I expect. Want to play?”

Cracknell shook his head. “No thanks. I’ve got some self-analysis to do.”

“By the way,” said J.C. “Ten tomorrow.”

“Ten tomorrow?”

“It’s a message from Slim Jim,” explained J.C. “We just saw him, and he said to pass it on.”

“What’s it mean?” asked Cracknell.

“No idea.”

“Football?”

“Could be. We’re going along to find out, and if it isn’t, we’ll just say Slim Jim never saw us.”

“Not bad,” said Cracknell. “If my analysis gets finished, I’ll come along to find out too.”

“And if it isn’t football?”

“Then I’ll say Slim Jim never saw me, either.”

“But he hasn’t seen you!” protested J.C.

“True,” agreed Cracknell, frowning. “Perhaps I’d better say he has seen me. Is that better?”

“Much better,” approved J.C. “If our excuses match up like that, he won’t have a leg to stand on, will he?”

“True,” repeated Cracknell. He went towards his door. “It’s time I got started. See you at ten.”

“Right,” acknowledged J.C. He leaned on the banisters, intending to shout down to Whoever he was, but the banister buckled dangerously. J.C. looked down and saw a hole in the supporting post.

“Damn that geologist!” he cried.

When asked why he was only ever mad between eleven and half past eleven every morning, John T Rex II always said that it was as much a mystery to him as it was to everybody else. In fact, that was far from the truth, because John T Rex II – when he cared to think about it - knew perfectly well why he was mad during these half hour periods. On the other hand, he never cared to think about it, so to all intents and purposes, what he claimed was true.

In conversation, he often repeated that if it were not for these insane spells, he would be a perfectly normal person. As it was, he spent most of his time worrying about his madness, which naturally caused his thoughts and actions to carry a certain morbidity about them.

“Madness,” he said dismally to Big Jim. “It’s the bane of my life.”

“Not yet, it isn’t,” said Big Jim reasonably. “Why do you go mad, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” claimed John T Rex II. “It’s all very worrying.”

“It must be very worrying for you,” agreed Big Jim.

“It *is* worrying,” said John T Rex II. “Why, I can’t even remember what happened during some of those periods.”

“Good lord!” ejaculated Big Jim. “Amnesia?”

“No, they just happened a long time ago.”

Big Jim nodded.

“And if it wasn’t for these mad periods,” continued John T Rex II, “I would lead a perfectly normal life.”

“I can see that,” said Big Jim.

“I go to Cracknell every day,” complained John T Rex II. “He’s my psychiatrist, y’know. But he hasn’t done me any good.”

“I can see that, too,” said Big Jim. He coughed. “I hope I’m not losing my voice,” he added worriedly.

It was in the evening, and Big Jim was treating John T Rex II to a drink. After that, John T Rex II felt obliged to treat Big Jim to a drink, whereupon they were back where they started and Big Jim treated John T Rex II to a drink. This went on all evening and inevitably John T Rex II became less and less morbid as time went on. When they finally left, in fact, he had forgotten all about his madness.

“I don’t feel mad any more,” he complained. “I feel dizzy.”

Big Jim was supporting him as they descended the steps to the street.

“D’ you hear?” cried John T Rex II, revived somewhat by the cooler night air. “I’ve forgotten about my madness. It’s gone from my mind!” He ran down the street a little way, then grasped a convenient lamppost.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” he moaned. Big Jim caught him up and slapped him on the back encouragingly.

“Come on. You can do it.” The momentum from his own slap spun him round unsteadily, but he ended up facing in the right direction, and he set off down the street. John T Rex II unclamped himself from the lamppost and tottered after him. Both of them lurched around a bend and stopped, dumbfounded.

“What’s that?” gasped John T Rex II.

An orange light was blinking at them from out of the night. Big Jim stepped forward to take a closer look.

“An orange light?” he said dubiously.

John T Rex II went right up close and clamped himself to the striped pole supporting the light.

“It *is* an orange light,” he declared. The lurid glow from the intermittent flash painted his face in curious relief. He swung half way round the pole, then brought himself up short.

“What’s this?” he asked suspiciously.

“Three cars,” said Big Jim. “They’re waiting for us. It’s probably a trap.”

“A trap?” cried John T Rex II. “Like hell!” He leapt out and bashed the first car vigorously, whereupon a dent appeared in its bonnet. While the echoes of this onslaught still reverberated, he bashed the second car, and while the echoes of this new onslaught were still reverberating, he bashed the third. The three cars sat

murmuring to themselves, their dented bonnets glinting as the orange light blinked on and off. Then with one accord they moved off darkly, disappearing into the night.

“Three!” chortled John T Rex II, and immediately passed out. Big Jim picked him up and carried him the rest of the way Home.

The room that John T Rex II lived in was on the other side of Nancy from Rumbold Jnr, which meant that he was one room away from Cracknell, and two away from the person who was never in. In actual fact, he sometimes slept in the room which used to belong to John T Rex I, because of the similarity of names, and because it was downstairs, which meant a shorter walk. Usually, however, he was in the room next to Nancy on the other side from Rumbold Jnr.

Most of the room was taken up with books. John T Rex II was an inordinate reader and had collected an equally inordinate number of books, consisting almost entirely of novels and books dealing with various aspects of madness. At one time he procured a great number of books and retired to his room with the intention of becoming a recluse. It was all the rage to become a recluse, and it was his idea to spend his entire life reading, alone. Unfortunately, one of the books that he bought turned out to be a treatise on fast reading techniques, and after three hours he ran out of material.

Apart from novels and books on psychology, John T Rex II owned several textbooks on widely differing subjects. This was because he had never really decided what subject to take, but he had switched several times from one to another. Each time he did so, he felt obliged to buy a relevant textbook, and then each time he changed subjects again, the textbook was relegated to the dusty part of the room allocated to unread books. This was one of the larger classifications in John T Rex II's classification system. All the subject textbooks belonged there, as did *War and Peace* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The telephone directory was also somewhere on the pile, although it was actually only half on and half off, the other half belonging to the next classification, which was books that John T Rex II failed to understand.

Several times, he had vaguely resolved to dig out the bottom book of the first pile, read it again, and then work through all of the other piles. He even considered the idea of working through the piles devoted to books he failed to understand and

books as yet unread. But each time this resolve came to him, it also came to him that he had abandoned the idea on all previous occasions, so he immediately abandoned the proposition again without bothering to remember why he had done so in the past.

At eleven-o'-clock in the morning, John T Rex II moved along to Cracknell's room and rapped on the door. He received no answer.

"Aren't you there, doctor?" He knocked again, more loudly. "Come on, doctor. I know you're in there."

"I'm not your doctor," came Cracknell's voice from within. The door opened slightly and Cracknell's face peered out. "What makes you think I'm in?"

"Because you're always out from ten to half past ten," explained John T Rex II, "not eleven to half past eleven."

Sulkily, Cracknell opened the door.

"See! You are in!" exclaimed John T Rex II. Cracknell moved back, towards Holy Joe.

"I don't really follow your logic," he sulked.

"Well, I was right, wasn't I, doctor? Obviously my logic was impeccable."

"I'm not your doctor," said Cracknell.

"What's the matter with Holy Joe?" He looks sort of- lopsided." John T Rex II squinted and tilted his head sideways. "There's something wrong with my eyes, doctor! Holy Joe looks....."

"He *is* lopsided," stated Cracknell. "I took off his foot and used it for a paperweight." He moved still further back and sat on the edge of his desk, inadvertently pressing some buttons on a tape recorder.

You are nine said the tape recorder immediately. *Start counting from ninety backwards. Watch my flashing light.....*

Hastily, Cracknell hit the stop button.

"What was that, doctor?"

"I'm not your doctor."

"It sounded like your voice, doctor."

"It was my voice."

"Can I listen to it?" pleaded John T Rex II.

"Privileged information," said Cracknell tersely, trying to evade the subject.

"Now, what seems to be the trouble?"

"I don't know," said John T Rex II.

“You don’t know?”

John T Rex II shook his head sadly. “That’s why I need you, doctor. You’ve got to help me.”

“But how can I help you if you don’t know what’s wrong?” wailed Cracknell.

“Why should I know what’s wrong with me?” countered John T Rex II. “You’re my doctor, not me. My illness should be immediately obvious to you.”

“Perhaps there’s nothing wrong?” suggested Cracknell hopefully.

“Then why should I come to see you?” said John T Rex II.

Cracknell wailed.

“After all,” reasoned John T Rex II, “I come to see you every day. That’s not the action of a sane person, is it, doctor?”

“But I’m not your doctor!”

“Merely a manifestation of my illness,” said John T Rex II crisply. “I was reading about it only the other day.”

“What did it say?” asked Cracknell, seeing a chink of light in the darkness.

“I don’t know,” admitted John T Rex II. “I failed to understand it, so I put it with the telephone directory.”

“Would you like to talk about it?” asked Cracknell. “Sometimes it helps to talk about it.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Well, go on then,” said Cracknell after a pause.

“I can’t think of anything to say,” said John T Rex II.

“What!” exclaimed Cracknell. “No dreams? No phobias? No unreasonable unfounded suspicions that everyone - your trusted doctor included - is biased against you even to the point of using treacherous violence?”

John T Rex II shook his head.

“And yet you remain convinced of your insanity?”

“I don’t have to be convinced,” said John T Rex II. “I *am* mad. I know it.”

“You mean you’re convinced you are mad,” persisted Cracknell.

“That, too,” agreed John T Rex II. “I was thinking of changing my doctor....”

“Yes! Yes!” said Cracknell excitedly.

“...but I realised that this was only unhinged rambling -“

Cracknell’s face fell.

“ - and that if you can’t help me, nobody can.”

“I can’t help you,” said Cracknell.

“But you’re my only hope.”

“I’m not even your doctor.”

“I can’t help that, doctor.”

“Look!” cried Cracknell in desperation. “Perhaps I can convince you of your sanity, or at least unconvince you of your insanity.”

“Possibly,” said John T Rex II. His eyes lit up. “Perhaps if I listened to your tape recording....?”

“No way. But I’ll tell you what. I’ll work on your problem. I’ll try to find something wrong with you. How’s that?”

“Thank you, doctor. I fell so much better, talking to you. Can I come back tomorrow?”

The other thing about the room that John T Rex II lived in, apart from it being on the other side of Nancy from Rumbold Jnr, was that it was really only half a room.

“Half a room?” Big Jim had exclaimed in amazement.

“Certainly,” maintained John T Rex II.

“But how can you have half a room? You might as well talk about half a drop of water, or half a grain of sand!”

“Well, why not?” retorted John T Rex II.

Big Jim was baffled. “I don’t know,” he confessed.

“You can have half of anything, and I’ve only got half a room,” said John T Rex II passionately.

Big Jim grunted.

“Who lives on your left hand side?” asked John T Rex II, determined to prove his point.

“I don’t know,” said Big Jim. He coughed tentatively. “I’ve got a bit of a sore throat,” he complained.

“But somebody lives there?” persisted John T Rex II.

“Oh, probably.”

“And who lives on your right hand side?”

“I don’t know,” repeated Big Jim. “But,” he added, forestalling John T Rex II, “I’m sure somebody does.”

“Well then,” said John T Rex II triumphantly, “that proves it! On one side of my room, I’ve got Nancy. On the other side, nobody at all!”

Big Jim coughed and rubbed his throat gently. “You might have a point,” he admitted.

“Of course I’ve got a point!” cried John T Rex II. “One side of my room is just a wall. Bare brick and cement, with nobody behind it. A whole room has two neighbours, and I’ve only got one!”

Big Jim coughed again and looked worried. “I think my voice is going,” he said worriedly.

“Pardon?” said John T Rex II. Big Jim panicked.

“Can’t you hear me? Has it gone already? My God, what……?”

“It’s OK, it’s OK,” interrupted John T Rex II. “It’s just my little joke: of course I can hear you.”

Big Jim advanced and seized John T Rex II. “Don’t do that!” he croaked. “Don’t you realise how important a voice is to a lawyer?”

“All right, all right……” soothed John T Rex II.

“It *is* going, isn’t it?” whispered Big Jim wildly. “I can hear it getting fainter and fainter and ……” He coughed.

“Possibly,” said John T Rex II. “But you never know. It might improve at any time.”

“No,” gasped Big Jim. “This is the end of it - my voice, my career, my hopes and inspirations.”

“There, there,” soothed John T Rex II. “Don’t panic, don’t talk, don’t do anything. I’m sure……”

“No!” hissed Big Jim. “Give it to me straight.” he coughed some more. “I can take it……”

“Well, I don’t really know,” admitted John T Rex II. “You ought to see a doctor.”

“I ought to see a doctor?” croaked Big Jim.

“That’s a good idea,” approved John T Rex II.

“I don’t know any doctors.”

“You don’t know any doctors?”

Big Jim shook his head, reluctant to use his voice.

“But you’d like to see one?”

Big Jim nodded.

“Well,” said John T Rex II slowly. “There’s always Cracknell, y’know. He’s my psychiatrist really, but I’m sure he’ll take a look at you.”

“I might need a psychiatrist if my voice goes,” croaked Big Jim, “because it’ll mean the end of everything.”

“I’ll make an appointment for you.”

“Will he really be able to help?” whispered Big Jim anxiously.

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so,” said John T Rex II. “Still, I’m sure he’ll try.”

On another occasion, John T Rex I said happily:

“These are halcyon days.”

His companions nodded and smiled agreeably. All of them were sitting outside, on the lawn, waiting for something to happen.

“Looking back on it, I suppose school was pretty good, too,” continued John T Rex I seriously.

“Only because you *can* look back on it,” put in J.C.

“Well, I don’t know about it, because I can look back on things that were definitely not good,” argued Whoever he was.

“Devil’s advocate,” said J.C., smiling.

“It gets more complicated than that,” said Cracknell, “because there are some things which seemed awful when they happened but, looking back on them, they were pretty good after all.”

“Like what?” challenged John T Rex I.

“Oh - the dentist,” said Cracknell.

“Will we look back on these days and think them good?” wondered J.C.

“Probably not,” decided Whoever he was.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because we’re”

“.....sitting here and wasting time,” cut in Cracknell. “Quite true. Nothing seems to want to happen today, does it?”

It was the sort of day where nothing seemed to want to happen. It was sunny and warm, quiet and drowsy, and time appeared to have dozed off for a while. Very faintly could be heard the sound of cars, as of traffic halted and still, engines idling.

“Perhaps we’ll look back and wish we still had time to waste,” said John T Rex I perceptively.

“Jobs?” asked J.C.

“That’s what I had in mind.”

“Is wasting time anything to be ashamed of?” said Whoever he was. “After all, perhaps it means we’ve worked hard and created some spare time.”

“Only we haven’t,” said J.C.

“And there’s always something to do,” added Cracknell. He stretched lazily. “I ought to be analysing the results of my self-analysis, not merely waiting for something to happen.”

“I ought to be doing some weight training,” said John T Rex I. “My new pair of biceps came today.” He too stretched lazily, waiting for someone to take him up on this statement, but time ticked a slow moment forward, and nobody bothered.

“I suppose we ought to be playing a game of chess,” said Whoever he was.

“Or making a cup of tea,” added J.C.

“Or both,” concluded Whoever he was.

They sprawled out more comfortably on the grass, in the sun, and nothing continued to happen while they did so.

“Perhaps we should bet on what cube of sugar the fly lands on,” suggested John T Rex I.

“What cubes of sugar?” asked Cracknell. “We haven’t got any cubes of sugar.”

“True,” admitted John T Rex I.

A cloud passed over the sun but was gone almost before they looked up anxiously.

“We haven’t even got a fly,” said Cracknell reasonably.

“True,” repeated John T Rex I. “I guess it was a pretty useless suggestion, really.”

“I’ll tell you what we should do,” said J.C.

“Go to sleep?” said Cracknell.

“Exactly,” yawned J.C.

“Maybe,” put in Whoever he was tentatively, “maybe we should *cause* something to happen.”

Some time went by in drowsy silence while they all considered this proposition. John T Rex I propped himself up on one elbow.

“What sort of thing do we want to happen?” he asked. “When we know what that is, then we could see about how to cause it.”

“Cause and effect,” said Cracknell gloomily.

“Alternatively,” suggested J.C., “we could just do something and see what it causes.”

Some more time passed while they all considered these further propositions. The sun beat down thickly, making it increasingly difficult to think.

“It’s too hot to think,” complained Whoever he was. “I think we should cause nothing to happen.”

“I thought you said it was too hot to think,” said John T Rex I.

“I could be wrong,” admitted Whoever he was.

“And do you have to do anything to cause nothing to happen?” queried J.C. “Won’t it just happen anyway?”

Cracknell moaned.

“You could be right,” said Whoever he was.

“It’s too hot to argue about it,” murmured J.C.

“I agree,” murmured Whoever he was.

A butterfly appeared from the other side of a hedge and fluttered erratically towards them. Its yellow wings stood out clearly against blue-green backdrops.

“A butterfly,” said Cracknell.

“A pity about those sugar cubes,” said J.C.

The butterfly landed on the grass inches from Cracknell’s nose. He crossed his eyes in order to keep it in focus.

“I would never hurt a butterfly,” stated John T Rex I.

“Why not?” inquired J.C.

“It might be someone sleeping.”

John T Rex I was unique, because he of all the inmates of the Home, knew right from the start which course he was going to take.

‘Physical Education,’ he wrote on all his forms, and told Administration. The fact that no Physical Education course was offered failed to deter him.

“No course in Physical Education is offered,” one of the clerks in Administration told him.

“So what?” said John T Rex I.

“Well...” said the clerk hesitantly.

“Think of the money saved,” interrupted John T Rex I, well aware of clerk mentality. “No lectures, no exams to set, no awkward timetable problems.”

The clerk cleared his throat. “On the surface, it seems like a good idea,” he admitted.

“Of course it’s a good idea,” declared John T Rex I.

The clerk cleared his throat again. “Okay,” he decided suddenly, “we’ll give it a try. If you’ll just sign here...”

“Why?” asked John T Rex I.

“Er...” faltered the clerk.

“I should think not!” exclaimed John T Rex I, and walked out.

This was not the only way in which John T Rex I differed from other inmates. The room that he lived in was downstairs, and was also unique. All the usual furniture had been taken out and replaced with a set of parallel bars and a vaulting horse. John T Rex I never slept, since he considered it a waste of time, so he even removed the bed. On one of the walls, he erected climbing bars, and from the ceiling he suspended a basketball net.

Every day he would diligently work out on this equipment, following the instructions which had dropped through his letter-box one day. Occasionally, he paused to wonder what would have happened if instructions on how to speak Spanish had dropped through the letter-box, but never for long. John T Rex I was well aware that any form of inactivity was a waste of time, so he kept permanently on the move. Big Jim, however, while practising his lawyer’s rhetoric, once took exception to this state of affairs.

“Permanently on the move?” he asked John T Rex I, just to make sure.

“Yes,” confirmed John T Rex I, who was doing a prolonged series of chin-ups.

“And you do this to keep yourself physically fit?” asked Big Jim.

“Yes,” agreed John T Rex I.

“Physically fit,” pressed Big Jim, “in the context of those people about you. That is, in comparison with those persons who in the main are not as fit as yourself?”

“Yes,” repeated John T Rex I.

“But by being permanently on the move, you have removed yourself from that frame of reference to which these people belong, and therefore no valid comparison can be made. In which case,” claimed Big Jim, “you are not, strictly speaking, physically fit.”

John T Rex I nodded uncomfortably, his head being jammed over a steel bar.

“In fact,” pursued Big Jim, “you are not fit in any sense of the word. Neither are you unfit. You simply belong to a different frame of reference, by reason of your perpetual motion.”

John T Rex I nodded again, even though his muscles had seized up and he was suspended three feet from the ground by this chin.

“I put it to you!” cried Big Jim, who was really getting worked up, “that since perpetual motion is a non-starter and that you nevertheless - ” and here he pointed sternly at John T Rex I “ – nevertheless have indulged in that prolonged activity, that you can’t in any way be described as fit. In fact, you could be said to be completely wasting your time!”

Wasting time was so against the principles of John T Rex I that he jerked with horror, lost his chin-hold, and collapsed onto the floor. Big Jim surveyed his motionless body judiciously.

“Now,” he said, nodding, “now, you’re fit.”

“You think these moments of inaction are good for me?” asked John T Rex I from his supine position.

“Probably not,” said Big Jim. “But they are undoubtedly good for your image.”

John T Rex I twitched violently as his muscles started to work again, and inadvertently assumed a prone position.

“I’m not so sure of that,” he said in a muffled voice. “In fact, I’m not sure of anything, because I bumped my head when I fell down. At least I think I did. I’m not sure, now I think about it.” He twitched again, less violently, and remained prostrate.

“Your image does appear to be deteriorating,” admitting Big Jim. “Still, my logic is faultless, and I strongly recommend that you temper your relentless activity with periods of inactivity.”

“When I can move again, I’ll do just that,” promised John T Rex I into the floorboards.

After this conversation, it was not unusual to see John T Rex I indulging in moments of inactivity. At first, he was so unskilled that such moments consisted merely of standing still, arms hanging uselessly by his sides. But gradually he was drawn into conversation, and before very long he was undetectable from the rest of the population of the Home. However, it was one of these conversations which eventually led to his downfall.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” asked J.C., spotting John T Rex I standing motionless at the head of the stairs. John T Rex I was not yet confident enough to start conversation on his own, so he usually began his inactive periods by standing motionless somewhere, until someone noticed him.

“Of course not,” he answered curtly. “A few moments here and there, to put me in the right frame of reference, I can accept. But hours and hours of sleep?” John T Rex I made a snorting noise, expressing his contempt for hours and hours of sleep. Footsteps sounded from above, followed by Rumbold Jnr and Cracknell coming downstairs.

“Hi there,” said J.C.

“Hello,” said Cracknell. he turned to John T Rex I. “I see you’re still in our frame of reference.”

John T Rex I failed to answer. He was still rather unskilled in the art of conversation, and he decided that Cracknell’s remark was a statement which needed no reply.

“Yes, well,” said Cracknell. “It’s turned out nice again today, hasn’t it?”

“It certainly has,” said J.C. “Mind you, it’s pretty cold, even though the sun is shining.”

“It was O.K. when I went out,” said John T Rex I.

“You’re joking! There was frost on the ground this morning!”

“Only a little bit,” claimed John T Rex I. “Anyway, I was perfectly warm.”

“I suppose you were running?” put in Rumbold Jnr.

“Of course I was. Doesn’t everyone?”

Cracknell, J.C. and Rumbold Jnr exchanged glances.

“No, I’m afraid not,” said Cracknell. “You see, this is another manifestation of your being in a different frame of reference.”

“But I’m not in a different frame of reference.”

“Not at his moment, you’re not. But as soon as you start running with intent –“ and here Cracknell waved a finger at John T Rex I “ - with intent to indefinitely continue doing so, then you enter a different frame of reference.”

“You sound just like Big Jim,” complained John T Rex I.

“Well, I’m sorry,” said Cracknell, “but it’s better that you know now, rather than when it’s too late”

“I suppose so,” said John T Rex I. “But I fail to see why running puts me in a different frame of reference. After all, there must be lots of things which put me in the same one.”

“Like what?”

“Oh - we all live in the Home, don’t we?”

“He could be right, y’know,” interposed J.C.

“Not at all,” said Cracknell tartly. “I could see this coming. It merely puts you in a similar frame of reference to that which all the members of the Home are in.”

“What about Administration?” put in Rumbold Jnr. “Everyone has to go to Administration, don’t they?”

“Administration,” said Cracknell thoughtfully.

“At least,” argued Rumbold Jnr, “everybody has been there, haven’t they?”

J.C. and John T Rex I both nodded and looked at Cracknell.

“I wonder now,” said Cracknell. “I accept that we’ve all been there. But I have a vague suspicion that Administration itself might be in a different frame of reference from us.”

J.C. started involuntarily. “You could be right!” he stated fiercely. “You could be so right! Oh yes, you certainly could be quite right!”

Rumbold Jnr was nodding in complete agreement. “I hadn’t thought of it,” he admitted. “I suppose, when you think of it, that Administration the world over is in a different frame of reference from us.”

“It’s true whether you think of it or not,” snapped J.C.

“I don’t understand,” put in John T Rex I, who had been looking anxiously from one speaker to another. “I had no trouble with Administration.”

J.C. Cracknell, and Rumbold Jnr fell silent and regarded him with awe.

“You didn’t?”

“No. None at all. I just told them what I was going to do, and walked out.”

“You didn’t sign a father’s occupation form?” asked J.C.

“True,” said John T Rex I, taking this as a literal statement.

“They didn’t tell you that you were county property?” asked Rumbold Jnr.

“True,” said John T Rex I.

“You can’t have got away without a rule book?” exclaimed Cracknell querulously, thereby confusing John T Rex I so that he was at a loss to know what to say.

“He means,” explained J.C., “did they give you a rule book?”

“No,” said John T Rex I.

“So you don’t know any of the rules?”

“True.”

“He doesn’t know any of the rules,” said J.C., turning to Cracknell and Rumbold Jnr. An uneasy silence ensued.

“What rules?” asked John T Rex I. The question plopped into the uneasy silence without a ripple, and sealed his destiny forever.

“Well,” said Cracknell. “There’s a lot of them, y’know. *Rule 24(c)* is a good one - *No Lights After Dark*.”

“Pardon?”

“*No Lights After Dark*,” repeated Cracknell.

“Are you sure that’s what it says?” asked John T Rex I.

“Quite sure.”

“You haven’t misread it?”

“None of us did.”

“It must be a misprint,” laughed John T Rex I uncertainly.

“It’s no misprint,” said J.C. gloomily. “It’s a rule, and Administration made it up, just like Administration made up all the rules.”

“We’ll see about that!” cried John T Rex I. He rushed upstairs, put on his new pair of biceps, and rushed back down again.

“We’ll see about that!” he cried again, and rushed energetically out of the Home. A faint cloud of dust marked his going, which J.C. Cracknell, and Rumbold Jnr regarded with mild surprise.

“Do you think he’ll have any luck?” asked Rumbold Jnr after a pause.

“What do you think?” said J.C. Rumbold Jnr fell into a meditative silence.

“You know what I think?” continued J.C.

“Yes,” said Cracknell.

“Well, I don’t,” said Rumbold Jnr. “What do you think?”

“I think we’ll be lucky to see him ever again.”

Very late one night, when the lights had been glaring for many hours, Cracknell cautiously opened his door and peered out. The landing outside appeared to be deserted; the light shone whitely, shadowing the pockmarked walls and crumpled banister, turning the window near the staircase into a reflective blackness. It was very still and silent.

Cracknell seemed satisfied with this state of affairs, and withdrew into his room. Quickly, he turned on a wall-light which gave out a relaxing red glow, and turned off his main light. Then he arranged himself on his bed and reached out, turning on the tape-recorder. A muted hum arose in the night silence, and an indicator flashed intermittently to show that the tape-recorder was working.

Listen to me said the tape-recorder suddenly, in Cracknell’s voice. *You are very tired. You are falling, falling....*

There was a pause.

Watch my flashing light said the tape-recorder. *Gaze into its depths. You are falling into it, slipping down...*

Cracknell yawned. “Eighty seven, eighty six, eighty five....” he muttered sleepily.

Start counting down from ninety interrupted the tape-recorder. *And all the time your eyes are getting heavy...*

“Eighty, seventy, seventy nine...”

Your eyes are closed now insisted the tape-recorder. *You can hear no-one but me. Do you understand?*

“I understand,” said Cracknell sluggishly.

You are going back in time ordered the tape-recorder. *Many years are slipping by, faster than you can count. You are twelve, you are ten...you are nine.*

“Nine,” agreed Cracknell.

What are you doing? asked the tape-recorder. A beautiful smile appeared across Cracknell’s face.

“I’m eating.”

Why are you eating? asked the tape-recorder immediately.

“It’s my birthday,” said Cracknell.

Move on. Pass a few months. You are lying in bed and a kind old man is looking down at you. The tape-recorder paused. Can you see this old man looking down at you?

“Yes,” replied Cracknell. He was nodding and smiling up at ceiling as if there really was someone there.

Describe him to me.

“He is tall. He is wearing glasses, and has a beard. I think his name is—“

Yes! yes! I know that! exclaimed the tape-recorder impatiently. *What I want to know is - what is he saying to you?*

Cracknell listened attentively to the ceiling. “What a good boy I am,” he said smugly. “There aren’t many about like me....”

He was a nice old man, wasn’t he? reminisced the tape-recorder.

“Yes,” signed Cracknell.

Now what is he saying?

“He’s saying - “ Cracknell’s forehead creased in thought “ - he’s saying would I like to solve a little problem for him?”

Well, would you?

“I suppose so,” said Cracknell. “He’s asking me the question now. I ...” Suddenly he screamed in terror.

What is it? What happened? cried the tape-recorder.

Cracknell screamed again, then started sobbing brokenly.

What is it? What is it? repeated the tape-recorder.

Cracknell screamed for a third time, and then started threshing about.

Snap out of it! ordered the tape-recorder. Then, sotto-voce *I knew this was going to happen.*

Cracknell threshed about more and more slowly, finally came to a rest, panting.

On the count of three said the tape-recorder - Cracknell opened his eyes - *You will awake. One.....*

“All right, all right,” said Cracknell irritably, and turned it off. He rubbed a hand across his eyes. “Feels like I had a rough time of it. Wonder what happened? I’m glad nobody was here to listen to me.”

He changed the lights back over and carefully unplugged the tape-recorder. Then he moved to the door and opened it gently, intending to check the hall again. Unexpectedly, the light outside was blocked by a large form.

“Aaargh,” cried Cracknell, jumping back in alarm.

“It’s all right,” soothed the large form. “It’s only me.”

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” said Cracknell, relieved.

“Yes,” said the large form.

“And it’s me, too.” said a voice from behind. Cracknell peered around.

“Oh, it you too, is it?”

“Yes, doctor,” said the voice.

“Well, what do you want?” asked Cracknell irritably.

“We were coming to see you anyway,” apologised the invisible voice. “But just as we got here, we heard these noises coming from inside, so we listened. And then, of course, you screamed.”

“I screamed?”

“You certainly did. Three times.”

“I thought that would happen,” muttered Cracknell.

“You were very lucky,” put in the large form. “Much more, and you’d have set John T Rex I off.”

“As it is.....” said the invisible voice.

“.....I was lucky,” finished Cracknell. “Yes. Now, what is it you want?”

“It’s about Big Jim here,” said the invisible voice. The large form immediately and inexorably moved forward into Cracknell’s room, thereby revealing itself to be Big Jim, and the person behind to be John T Rex II. “He appears to be losing his voice,” explained John T Rex II. “I thought perhaps you could help him....”

“How can I help him? I’m not even a doctor!”

“.....but before I ask if you can help him, I want to ask about the talking we overhead.” John T Rex paused to look about him, taking in the sight of Holy Joe and reams of unfinished brilliances. “Good Lord!” he said, surprised. “There’s nobody else here!”

“Of course not. I was talking to myself,” explained Cracknell.

“But there were two voices.”

“They were both mine.”

“Ah, that explains it,” said John T Rex II.

“What about me?” asked Big Jim suddenly, his voice sounding oddly strained.

“Hmm, your voice does sound odd,” said Cracknell. “Now, I hope you realise that this is not really my line?”

“He’s really my psychiatrist,” whispered John T Rex II.

“I’m not!” snapped Cracknell. “And nor am I a voice specialist, so I suppose I’d better see what I can do.” He indicated his bed to Big Jim. “Lie down there, will you?” Big Jim subsided onto the bed, which buckled dangerously under his weight. “Now,” said Cracknell, with an air of setting out on a difficult task, “what makes you think you’re losing your voice?”

“—“said Big Jim, confused.

“Tell me about it,” urged Cracknell. “Sometimes it helps to talk about it.”

Big Jim stared blankly upwards and John T Rex II, sitting in a corner, nodded with satisfaction at this form of therapy.

“Come on,” urged Cracknell. “What’s your trouble? Tell me about it.”

Big Jim made an obvious mental effort to adjust himself to this way of thinking.

“I think I’m losing my voice,” he said hoarsely.

“What make you think you’re losing your voice?” asked Cracknell again, this time with an air of having made some progress.

“My voice is going,” replied Big Jim with some difficulty. “It’s getting fainter and fainter and”

“He keeps saying that!” Over in the corner, John T Rex II jumped to his feet in agitation. “All day yesterday, he kept saying that! And I kept saying not to worry, and —”

“Quiet!” ordered Cracknell. John T Rex II subsided. “Who’s conducting this investigation?” asked Cracknell sternly.

“You are, doctor.”

“Well then,” said Cracknell, and turned back to Big Jim.

“But it is getting fainter and” claimed Big Jim, coughing.

“Say something,” said Cracknell.

“Something,” whispered Big Jim.

“Say it again,” ordered Cracknell.

“—“ said Big Jim, and coughed.

“I see what you mean,” admitted Cracknell. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do. I’m only not a psychiatrist, really. I can’t take on the added responsibility of not being a voice specialist, too.”

“Then wha-?” asked Big Jim, with difficulty.

“I should see a doctor,” said Cracknell. John T Rex II jumped to his feet again.

“That’s what I said, doctor!”

“I think it’s the best thing,” agreed Cracknell.

John T Rex II forcibly yanked Big Jim up off the bed.

“But you said....”

“I know!” cried John T Rex II. “I also said he probably couldn’t! Come on!”
The two of them stumbled over towards the door.

“By the way,” interrupted Cracknell. “Ten tomorrow.”

“Ten tomorrow?” asked John T Rex II. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Cracknell. “I was talking to J.C. earlier, and he told it to me.”

“What did he say it was?” asked John T Rex II.

“A message,” replied Cracknell. “It’s a message from Slim Jim.”

“Football?”

“Could be. J.C. and Whoever he is and myself are going along to find out, anyway.”

“And if it isn’t?” croaked Big Jim.

“We have our excuses ready,” said Cracknell smugly. “What are you going to do?”

“I suppose we’d better go along, too.”

“Pass on the message, will you?” said Cracknell.

“-O.K.” croaked Big Jim.

“-All right,” agreed John T Rex II. “Come on now.” He yanked Big Jim again, and the two of them disappeared out into the hallway in the direction of the stairs. As Cracknell started to close the door behind them, there came a tremendous crash which reverberated all around the Home, and the voice of John T Rex II screaming:

“Damn that geologist!”

After that there was only the sound of some falling debris, and a loud click as Cracknell finally closed his door.

The room next to Cracknell was permanently dark, since the curtains were permanently closed and the lights permanently switched off. There was a thin sliver of illumination visible under the door, but nobody ever saw it, because Rumbold Jnr was the only one occupant of the room, and he never looked in that direction. In fact, Rumbold Jnr never looked in any direction. He spent all his time lying on his unmade bed, threshing intermittently, and thinking thoughts in the locked circle of his mind.

As it happened, Rumbold Jnr existed in the room that was on the other side of Cracknell from the person who was never in. This was the cause of frequent confusion, because not only did nobody ever see anyone go into the room of the person who was never in, but also nobody ever saw anyone go into Rumbold Jnr's room. Consequently, people sometimes went to Rumbold Jnr's door by mistake, when they really wanted to see the person who was never in. As a rule, these people were put right by a passing inmate, and they would go on to the correct door where they discovered, of course, that the person who was never in was out.

A side effect of these occasional errors was that the knocking on the door sometimes pierced all intervening obstacles and impinged on Rumbold Jnr's consciousness. When this happened, Rumbold Jnr would thresh about vigorously and almost wake up. He never did actually wake up, however, because the knocking stimulus was never carried on for long enough for him to do so. Eventually, it got to a stage that whenever someone knocked on the door he would twitch violently in anticipation of a threshing bout, but refrain from doing any actual threshing, because he subconsciously knew that it would not lead to waking up.

There were two other occasions when external stimuli failed to awaken him. One was quite late at night, when the Home was comparatively quiet. A stealthy scratching could be heard, loud in stillness, apparently coming from above.

Rumbold Jnr felt the loathsome coils dropping from his mind as the real sound drifted through the room. He started to consider his situation. The coils around his mind were slipping sideways because the soft sound was pushing through them. The intruding sound was slowly removing the black coils by spearing through them. The loathsome coils..... A picture of his mental state occurred to Rumbold Jnr. The

sound could only remove the coils by going through them, so it could never complete the job, only go on and on and

Whoever he was and J.C. paused yet again to listen.

“Hear it?” whispered J.C. Whoever he was nodded: he shifted in his chair and made an effort to listen even more intently.

“It sounds like - ” He was interrupted as a faint sound once more made itself heard in the room.

“ - mice?” finished J.C.

Whoever he was shook his head. “I don’t think so. It’s more like - ” he stood up and peered at the ceiling, as if by sheer will power he would be able to see right through it.

“ - John T Rex I?” finished J.C.

Whoever he was nodded. “I think so,” he concurred. “It’s too localised and too loud to be mice. Anyway, I doubt if there are any mice up there, what with John T Rex I making it his living quarters.”

“It’s a bit distracting, isn’t it?” ventured J.C. Whoever he was looked down at the half-finished chess game standing between them.

“I suppose it is,” he said slowly. “But what can we do?”

“Three options,” said J.C. crisply. “Stop the scratching, suffer it, or move.”

“You’re right,” said Whoever he was, relieved. “There are three options. Let’s move.” He picked up the chess set.

“Wait a minute,” said J.C. hastily. “Don’t you think it would be best to start another game? New situation, fresh start, and all that?” He looked anxiously at Whoever he was. The game had reached the point where he preferred to stop, because it had got to the stage where any advantage he thought he might have started to disappear. Changing rooms seemed the ideal opportunity to halt the game while he thought he was ahead, an action which would leave him with the pleasant impression that he would have won if they had continued.

“O.K.,” agreed Whoever he was. He put the chess set down again and started putting away the pieces. As he did so, the scratching noise resumed above their heads.

“There it is again,” muttered Whoever he was.

“Poor bloke,” sympathised J.C.

All the pieces were replaced in the box, and J.C. stood up.

“I suppose we’ll have to go into my room.”

“Suppose so,” said Whoever he was.

“There’s not a lot of space.”

“We’ll just have to hunch up.”

“Check to see if it’s clear,” said J.C. folding up the chess board. Whoever he was opened the door and looked out. The hallway was brightly lit as usual, no shadows visible in any corner.

“No, it’s not,” whispered Whoever he was. J.C. came up behind him and also looked out.

“—” he breathed, agreeing.

Across the hall, strangely ragged in outline, wavered a gaunt figure. It seemed to be undecided whether to venture out into the middle of the hallway, or remain pressed up against the pockmarked wall. Long fingernails scabbled nervously, while the whites of its eyes glinted sharply in its dark visage.

“E Flat!” whispered Whoever he was dramatically.

J.C. nodded, bumping his head on Whoever he was’ shoulder.

“I didn’t know he ever left the kitchen,” continued Whoever he was.

“Occasionally,” murmured J.C.

“On the scrounge?”

J.C. nodded again.

“I think – ” He broke off as the strange figure finally lurched forward into the hallway. Its clothes flapped in tatters as its spindly limbs pumped an energetic passage towards the stairs. Its loud gasping filled with otherwise silent Home.

“He’s going downstairs,” whispered J.C.

“Back to the kitchen?”

“Probably.”

The tatterdemalion hesitantly descended the first of the stairs, and took a deep, bracing breath. Then, as if it had suddenly made up its mind, it rapidly continued down the rest of the stairs and out of sight, the sound of echoing footsteps fading away in the direction of the kitchen.

“He’s gone.”

Whoever he was stepped out into the hall, took one rapid look round, and entered the room next door. J.C., carrying the chess board, followed.

“You’re right, there’s not much space.”

“Hunch,” ordered J.C.

They started putting the chess pieces out again.

“Is he dangerous?” asked J.C.

“Who? E Flat?”

J.C. nodded.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Whoever he was. “I spoke to him once, but that was in the kitchen, on his home ground. He seemed fairly normal. However, I get the distinct impression that out of his natural surroundings he would become morose and unpredictable.”

“Dangerous?” asked J.C. again.

“Strength of a madman,” confirmed Whoever he was. “Those eyes! They were gleaming, y’know. A sure indication of madness.”

“How d’you know?”

“It’s a well-known fact,” explained Whoever he was. “It’s also your move.”

J.C. obediently regarded the chess board. The game had only progressed a few moves, but already he could tell that he was going to a good, solid position which would fade away as time went on. He would have to try to stop the game again, later on.

“I wonder what will happen to E Flat?” asked Whoever he was thoughtfully.

“Where do they grow coffee?” countered J.C.

“Why?”

“Well, I was thinking that he could always emigrate.”

J.C. moved a piece. Whoever he was replied immediately, because it seemed to him that no matter how game began, he always started winning about half way through. He studied the position absently, while his thoughts moved back to a time before he had met E Flat. He raised his eyebrows as a thought occurred to him.

“You’re the first person I met, J.C.”

“What, the very first?”

Whoever he was scratched his head and took his turn to move before replying.

“Well, here, anyway.”

Nancy was the first to get there. At just on five to ten, he nervously started up the steps to the hall. He had his kit bag, over his shoulder, just in case, and had brought

along his latest half of a poem, just in case it wasn't the case and he found himself with time to spare.

At the top of the steps, the gigantic double doors were already opened. Nancy paused when he reached them, because of the possibility of a trap. Inside, he heard somebody echoing about noisily, so he bravely peered round into the depths of the hall. Instantly, he found himself pulled inside. He experienced a wave of fright at the suddenness of this movement, but then realised with relief that only one person could act so swiftly.

"Glad you could come!" cried Slim Jim, vigorously shaking his hand. "So nice to see you after all this time!"

"But – " said Nancy.

"You haven't changed a bit!" cried Slim Jim.

" - I saw you - "

"Would have recognised you- "

" - yesterday."

" - anywhere! What have you been doing with yourself?" Slim Jim pulled Nancy to one side confidentially. "Between you and me...." he began, and disappeared.

"Glad to see you!" echoed his voice from by the double doors. Nancy looked across to see Big Jim and John T Rex II being hauled inside.

"Hello," said John T Rex II nervously. "Why are you...." Big Jim caught sight of Nancy and moved across.

"What's this all about?" he whispered.

"Good to see you again!" said Slim Jim.

"But – " started Cracknell.

"Nice to see you, too," interrupted Whoever he was. "My word, look...."

"Rumbold Jnr!" Slim Jim appeared at the doorway and heaved Rumbold Jnr inside. Unnoticed, Bruce followed them in.

"I'm O.K.," said Nancy to John T Rex II.

"Oh, good. I thought..."

"What a gathering!" enthused Slim Jim.

"...you'd really hurt yourself."

"No, I'm ..."

"Look," said Cracknell. "What I want to know is - "

“...perfectly all right.”

“ - why have you - ”

J.C. was nodding rapidly.

“ - brought us here?”

“Hello,” said Bruce into a silence. Slim Jim moved forward and fervently shook hands with Whoever he was. Then he stepped back, raised one hand into the air, and cried:

“To us!”

Whoever he was, not to be outdone, also raised his imaginary glass.

“To us!”

Slim Jim nodded and smiled at the circle gathered around him.

“Friends...” he began.

Big Jim put an arm around J.C. and drew him aside.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” he said hoarsely

“...it’s so nice to see you all again...”

Cracknell shook his head in bewilderment, and tried to catch Rumbold Jnr’s eye.

“What about?” asked J.C.

“Carrying on,” replied Big Jim, and coughed. “You see, I need somebody-”

“It seems like only yesterday,” announced Slim Jim, “that we held our...”

“ - somebody with a modicum of intelligence - “ said Big Jim gravely.

“.....reunion practice,” finished Slim Jim.

“Reunion practice!” exclaimed Cracknell.

“ - to carry on after me.”

Whoever he was took a sip from his imaginary glass.

“You see, I think I’m losing my voice,” explained Big Jim. J.C. nodded thoughtfully.

“It is nice to be together,” said Whoever he was.

“Yes, but - ”began Cracknell.

“What have you been doing?” asked Whoever he was forcefully.

“What have I - ?”

“Since we last met?” clarified Whoever he was.

“Well...” said Cracknell.

Big Jim led J.C. further away from the main group.

“A lawyer needs his voice,” he whispered fiercely. “Without it, he can’t - “

“How are you, Nancy?” asked Bruce.

“ - talk,” said Big Jim.

“I understand,” said J.C. “Perhaps I can...”

“Nancy?”

“Well,” whispered Big Jim. “If I were to teach you some of the key words and phrases, then...”

“...I could carry on,” said J.C. “That seems to be a good idea.”

Whoever he was shook his head. “This is almost as bad as the practice. Nobody seems to have done anything!”

“But ...” said Cracknell.

“Doctor?” interrupted John T Rex II. “Where are you going to be...”

“Great! Just great!” exclaimed Whoever he was, sipping at his drink

“It’s not bad, is it?” said Slim Jim modestly.

“...at eleven-o’-clock? You did say....”

Unheard by any of them, somebody approached the entrance to the hall.

“...that I could come back....”

“It does seem a good idea,” rasped Big Jim from further down the hall, “doesn’t it?”

“... tomorrow,” said John T Rex II. “And that’s today.”

A figure appeared at the double doors, peered in, and called out: “Excuse me!” Conversation in the hall decelerated and trickled to a halt. Everyone looked at the newcomer. “Excuse me,” repeated the figure self-consciously. “Could you tell me the way to Administration?”

“Certainly!” shouted Slim Jim. His voice echoed round the hall and diminished into silence.

“Ah - ” the figure shifted nervously on its feet “ - er, could ...I mean, where is it?”

“Down the corridor!” shouted Slim Jim. The figure turned and hastily departed. Slim Jim craned forward in an effort to watch it leave.

Down the corridor-or.. echoed round the hall.

Whoever he was suddenly caught hold of Rumbold Jnr.

“What...?”

John T Rex II grabbed at the other side of Rumbold Jnr, who was sagging at the knees, whispering:

“No.....no.....”

“It’s a relapse,” gasped Whoever he was, then reeled back as Rumbold Jnr started thrashing about.

J.C. and Big Jim looked across.

“What’s going on?” called J.C.

“It’s Rumbold Jnr,” called back Whoever he was. “I think – ”

“Never mind him,” said Big Jim. “You just concentrate!”

“ - it’s a relapse. My God!”

“*Cross-examination*, ” said Big Jim urgently, and coughed faintly. “Got it? Cross- what’s that?”

A pounding of footsteps echoed around the hall. Rumbold Jnr was running towards the exit with everyone else following. John T Rex II pulled up by the double doors and gasped:

“It’s no use - ”

“Not even Slim Jim - “ said Cracknell, panting.

“Let him go,” said Bruce.

“We’ll just have to let him go,” said Whoever he was. “I’m afraid that...”

“You’re right,” interrupted Cracknell. “He’ll turn into a recluse now.” He looked up as Big Jim and J.C. appeared on the scene.

“Nice to see you,” said Slim Jim absently.

“What happened?” asked J.C.

“Rumbold Jnr, he...”

“It’s Rumbold Jnr...”

“I’m afraid Rumbold Jnr has...”

Big Jim nodded, understanding, and turned to J.C. “It seems that Rumbold Jnr.....”

J.C. nodded, understanding. “But what caused it?” he asked. Everyone shook their heads in silence. “Something must have caused it!” said J.C. Everyone nodded their heads in silence. “Look!” cried J.C., becoming agitated. “We’ve just lost Rumbold Jnr and yet....”

“We’ll probably never see him again,” agreed Nancy quietly.

“That reminds me,” said Whoever he was to Cracknell. “I was going to ask you...”

John T Rex II looked mournfully at Big Jim. “It’s time,” he said plaintively. J.C. looked at his watch and nodded.

“By the way - ”he began.

“...about the person who’s never in,” continued Whoever he was. “I was wondering...”

“No!” said Slim Jim, surprised.

“I’m afraid so,” Big Jim was saying. “I found out when I called on you and you were sleeping...”

“...after all,” said Whoever he was, “you do live next to him...”

“...and I overheard you talking in your sleep,” said J.C.

“What did I say?” asked John T Rex II.

“Apparently, it’s your belief that everyone has a peak time of day, and you discovered...”

“I’m afraid not,” said Cracknell. “I’ve seen no sign of him.”

“...that your peak time *was in the middle of the night* and was no use...”

“I was upset,” admitted John T Rex II.

“It becomes clear,” said Slim Jim. “You obviously decided to - ”

Cracknell had an inspiration.

“Of course, he could be in between ten and half past! I’m always out between...”

“ - have a low peak instead,” concluded Slim Jim.

“Precisely,” said J.C. “That’s why he’s always mad between...”

“..ten and half past,” finished Cracknell. Everybody looked at him.

“No I’m not,” said John T Rex II indignantly.

“Perhaps not,” said Cracknell. “But I am.”

“Oh.”

Everyone fell silent, trying to work out this latest complication. Very faintly could be heard the sound of cars, as of traffic halted and still, engines idling.

“I’m glad we had this practice,” said Bruce. Nobody answered him.

“Yes, well,” said Bruce, and shuffled his feet. “It’s turned out nice again, hasn’t it?”

Part Two

It was the stunned silence after the event. At that time of night it was quiet anyway, but to the young man standing on the pavement, the silence was intense and throbbing, threatening to rob him of consciousness. He knew he would have to go over; knew he would have to make awful confirmation. But first he leaned uncertainly on the striped pole nearby and bowed his head. Gradually, the whiteness left his face and the trembling of his body ceased, but tears ran down his face. Gradually, the roaring silence in his ears lessened, and he could hear his own choked sobbing.

The night accepted this tribute. The flashing orange light continued to paint the scene intermittently. The uncaring stars, visible beyond the gleam of the city, could see no other person on the quiet street.

Part Three

It was a very cold morning. He could tell that as soon as he awoke, because the window was almost completely covered with condensation. He yawned and shivered beneath the bed-clothes, then blindly pawed for his watch. They were going in for an early game that day, and he knew from past experience that even if they were only ten minutes late, the chances were good that all the tables would be gone.

The watch dangled blurredly in front of his eyes, and he read the time: eight fifteen. That left a quarter of an hour in which to get ready. He yawned again, put on his glasses, then threw back the bed-clothes. It was from this moment, he always thought, that his days began. A definite act of will was required to throw back the bed-clothes: after that, actions were dictated by necessity. He got up, dressed, and had something to eat simply because it was most comfortable to do so.

The cobwebs in his mind cleared as he opened the window and peered outside. The grass below was thick with heavy frost. He shivered and closed the window again, wondering if Mike had remembered to get up in time. His watch said twenty-five past eight by now, so he went to the door and listened for any sound outside. A few seconds later, he heard the door next to his bang open, and footsteps hurriedly echo off in the direction of the bathroom. He nodded to himself: good. Mike was doing his usual last minute appearance trick, which meant they would leave on schedule.

To pass the time while waiting for Mike to knock on the door, he sat down and looked at the equation he had been trying to solve the previous night. Nothing new came to mind, so he looked instead at the piles of crumpled paper which represented several attempted solutions. Absently, he started to gather up a few pieces which had missed the rubbish bin.

The door flew open.

“I’m ready!” said Mike.

“No, you’re not,” he said. “You forgot to comb your hair.”

“Blast!” Mike involuntarily reached up to touch his black hair which was unkempt and obviously uncombed, and disappeared.

Every day, he thought as he dumped the pieces of paper into the bin. Every day, he forgets to do something. A ritual, that’s what it was. Life was a series of rituals, some of which strengthen into emotions.

He sat down again and observed the outside of his door, made visible by Mike’s entrance. On the door was a large white card, bearing his initials and the motif: *Out of Bounds. Please Enter.*

“Here I am!” cried Mike, appearing once more through the doorway. He raised a finger into the air. “I believe in toleration!” he declared.

Stephen checked that he had his key, then closed the door.

“Toleration!” shouted Mike into the early morning atmosphere. “I demand - I insist - that everyone believe in...”

“I’ll tolerate you in a minute!” The voice drifted in a Welsh accent from a nearby room.

“Damn these paper walls,” muttered Mike as he started down the stairs. He half turned to Stephen, following behind. “Any luck with that equation?”

Stephen was staring over his head into the lower hall. “Who..?”

Mike turned to look ahead once more. He smiled. Somebody had scrawled the word *graffito* in large red letters which covered part of the wall and all of one door.

“Lipstick,” he grunted as they walked past.

“Probably Nancy’s,” said Stephen.

“What’s the matter with you this morning?”

“What’s the matter with you?” retorted Stephen. “All that shouting, at this time of the morning...”

“Ah, I get it! It’s too early for you. You want to call it off – a moral victory for me? We can always...”

“It is not too early!” shouted Stephen, opening the door.

“Stop shouting! Bugger me, it’s cold, isn’t it?”

They both stood in the doorway and surveyed the thick frost. One set of footsteps could be seen weaving its way between the Hall buildings.

“Milkman’s been,” observed Stephen, stepping gingerly out onto the grass.

“Okay, Sherlock. How many pints did he bring?”

“I forgot my ruler. Look here, Waston, he was killed in dead of night with a revolver.”

“Amazing, Holmes! How did you know?”

Stephen skidded onto the pavement. “A shot in the dark, Watson.” He pointed back towards the Home. “It looks like E Flat’s up already.”

Mike turned to regard the one uncurtained window. “Probably in the kitchen, making his first cup.”

“The milkman has been,” nodded Stephen.

They started down the street, their breath hanging in the air. On each pavement stood rows of trees covered in white, glistening frost. Almost everywhere was similarly treated, except for the occasional underside of a branch, or a window, or house-warmed porch

“It looks like the negative of a photo.”

“And us?” asked Stephen.

“You’ll do,” said Mike, looking across at Stephen’s black jeans and anorak. He himself was wearing blue trousers, yellow jumper and brown jacket. “I suppose I’m a bit out of place, though.” They turned a corner and a pillar box came into view at the end of the street. For some reason it had escaped the frost. “That, too.”

After the pillar box was the main road, which led straight to the centre of the city, and went within a quarter mile of their destination. Their shortest route from the Home was to follow the main road for half a mile, cross by the first zebra crossing, and then go through a small shopping centre which led out onto the park. The first, main road was filled with hanging, heavy fumes and the roar of rush hour traffic.

“It should be easing off,” said Stephen, as they turned the corner and started up the wider pavement. “What is the time, anyway?”

Mike looked at his watch. “A quarter to nine. We must be mad!”

Stephen shrugged. “It’s the only way to get a game and go to that lecture as well.”

“How did you get on with that equation?” asked Mike, remembering.

“No way. There were so many variables that I had to use Greek symbols, and I can’t write the bloody things. Did you finish with my notes?”

“Er...” said Mike, nodding and shaking his head. “Yes and no. I started, and then...”

“You got the urge to listen to some music.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” said Mike defensively.

“Is your name Lewis Carroll, by any chance?”

They had reached the zebra crossing, where Mike stood by the striped pole and stared aggressively at the oncoming line of traffic.

“That’s not the way,” said Stephen. “What you have to do is raise your umbrella, like this!” He lifted an imaginary umbrella and hailed the nearest car: “Taxi!” The car obligingly stopped, as did one coming in the opposite direction. Stephen bowed to the drivers. “Thanks awfully.”

They crossed over and started down the nearest sidestreet, where it was much quieter.

“I mean,” said Stephen suddenly, “It wouldn’t be so bad if it was decent music.”

“Well, I was reading too.”

Grudgingly: “Oh, that’s all right, then.” They were walking past some shops, and greenery of the park was visible in the distance. “Are you going to buy a paper?” “I think it’s about time you bought a paper.”

“What d’you mean, I should buy one? You know I don’t read the news! I reckon...”

“I know what you reckon,” interrupted Mike. “But the fact is, that whenever I buy a paper, you always borrow it, and by the time”

“Okay, okay,” said Stephen. They were standing outside the newsagents which was, as yet, the only shop open along the street. “I’ll tell you what-you buy the paper, and I’ll pay for the game.”

Mike hesitated. “That seems to be fair,” he said doubtfully.

“Of course it’s fair. When have I ever been unfair?”

Mike ha-haed sarcastically, but went through the door and up towards the counter. When he was half way there, Stephen leaned negligently on the doorframe and called into the shop: “Oh, by the way, get some change, will you? I forgot to pick up any change!”

He saw Mike mutter something, probably obscene, so he covered his ears with a theatrical gesture. Mike also muttered something to the girl cashier, who laughed engagingly as she rang the till. Then he returned, and they continued their walk.

“You bastard. You did it again.”

“Of course,” said Stephen.

“Every day, you get me to buy the paper. It’s underhand, that’s what I call it!”

“Of course,” repeated Stephen, and smiled deprecatingly.

“And every day, you get me to pay for the game, too.”

“You haven’t paid for it yet.”

“Have you got any money on you?” challenged Mike. Stephen patted his pockets, and a broad grin appeared on his face.

“Only enough for dinner.”

“Well then,” said Mike. “It’s underhand, that’s what I say. I really don’t understand why you won’t buy a paper.”

Stephen did not reply, since this was the prelude to an old argument that they had gone over many times before. It was his theory that the news was all repeats: that if somebody was to make the mistake of buying the paper from the day before, then in all probability he would fail to notice unless he read the cartoons. Stephen nodded to himself, reflecting that every day the headlines were the same. A murder; a disaster or an M.P. sticking his neck out, although never the thickness of an axe-blade; the business news, of course, which was always bad, so that never changed.

“Hold it!”

The football results, naturally; more than likely a lonely hearts column; then the cartoons or a crossword, or both.

He discovered they had come to the end of the shopping centre, and were waiting to cross over a road before going on into the park. Ahead, the tall buildings rose greyly into the morning sky.

“You nearly walked straight into the road,” said Mike reprovingly.

“I was thinking.”

Although the park was covered in frost, it still managed to look green in comparison with its suburban surroundings. Only a few footprints trailed their way across its lonely expanse. A park bench sheltered beneath a whitened tree had, like the pillar box, somehow escaped the frost, and now contrasted like brown rectangle drawn against a white backdrop, a detail in a surrealist painting.

“Does your paper have a lonely hearts column?” They had crossed the road and now made their own trail over the park.

“You should know, you read it.”

“No, I don’t,” said Stephen irritably. “I only look at the pictures and do the crossword.”

“That’s the attitude of a six-year old.”

“Six-year olds can’t do crosswords. And nor can some who are a good deal older.”

“Spiteful, but true,” admitted Mike. “What I meant was...”

“Dear Mrs X!” cried Stephen, springing into the air. “I have been making love a different girl six nights a week for the past three years. Is this too much?”

“One man’s poison,” said Mike morosely.

“Dear Johnny,” Stephen answered himself in a lower voice. “You have forgotten to send a stamped, addressed envelope ...” A completely unrelated thought occurred to him, and he turned to Mike, who was trudging along accurately in somebody else’s footsteps. “What’s this lecture about, anyway?”

“Relativity.”

“Oh, yes, I remember now. I suppose we can’t afford to miss it, can we?”

Mike shook his head. “Not now we’ve run out of carbon paper.”

A few minutes later, they crossed over from the park into the concrete campus. They passed the bookshop, still closed, and headed over towards the Union building. Several footprint trails were pressed into the frost, but nobody else was to be seen. As they mounted the steps by the side entrance, the sun feebly broke through in an attempt to illuminate the day, but neither of them noticed it.

Inside it was warmer, but their footsteps echoed hollowly and unaccompanied.

“It’s like a to-omb,” quavered Stephen.

“I hope the caretaker’s not left it locked up,” remarked Mike, more prosaically.

“What time is it now?”

“It’s just on nine. We’ve got this down to a fine art now, haven’t we?”

They clattered down the stairs and past the rows of stuffed pigeon holes. Before them, a door opened blackly into the snooker room.

“We’re the first,” said Mike.

“Go in and set them up, then, while I check if anybody’s sent me anything.”

“Swine.”

“Not afraid of the dark, are you? Actually, you might as well put the light on straight away, because of this bloody lecture being so early.”

Cautiously, Mike disappeared into the snooker room, while Stephen checked through his pigeon hole. There was nothing for him there, so he checked through Mike's, too. Still drawing a blank, he went on to discover that nobody has sent anything to Cracknell or Tez, either, although there was a letter, unstamped, addressed to Nancy.

"Hey, there's a letter for Nancy!" he shouted into the snooker room. A clicking, metallic sound answered him, and a light came on in the depths of the room.

"Got it!" cried Mike triumphantly.

"There's a letter for Nancy here," said Stephen, walking into the new illumination, where the four tables stood awaiting their days play. "What shall I do with it?"

"Reminds me of a joke," said Mike. "Why is it that fairies are on top of Christmas trees?"

"I don't know," replied Stephen in his best music-hall voice. He was choosing a cue from the rack in the centre of the room. "Why is it that fairies are on the top of Christmas trees?"

"Well, it was a hard year, and Father Christmas was worked off his feet. Running around like a blue-arsed fly, he was." Mike dissolved in laughter for a moment, then recovered enough to start setting up the balls on the table. "Anyway, right at the height of his troubles, the door hell rings, and there's this fairy standing there with a Christmas tree, calm as you please, and says to poor old Father Christmas: "What shall I do with this?"

Mike laughed uproariously again and also went to the rack to pick a cue. Stephen smiled and searched around the room for a piece of chalk.

"And what did Father Christmas say?" he inquired nastily.

"Up yours," retorted Mike.

"Shall I break?"

"Be my guest."

Stephen played his first shot, then started hunting through his pockets for his own piece of chalk. "Shall I hang on to this letter? Or is Nancy coming in today?"

"I don't think so." Mike blew on his hands. "You might as well take it back and shove it under his door. Christ, it's cold today. My hands are frozen."

"Excuses."

“No, really.” Mike prepared to take his first shot. “We’re complaining about the cold now. But in the summer, it was always too hot for us. We never get what we want, do we?”

“And if we do get it, there’s always something else. Yes?”

Mike nodded, recalling the heat of summer.

It had been one of the hottest summers they could remember, and they had spent most of it doing nothing. Occasionally, they played tennis, or snooker, or lazily revised for impending examinations, but mostly their strength seemed to sweat from them and evaporate in the shimmering atmosphere. Sometimes they sat inside with windows open wide, and played chess. On other occasions, they strolled underneath the shade of trees. More often, they lazed about on the lawn, thinking about the things they ought to be doing.

Cracknell rolled over onto his back and watched a butterfly flutter away, towards a flower bed. He laced his fingers behind his head comfortably. “Why doesn’t the world stop on days like this?”

His companions considered the question seriously. Stephen sat up and waved his arms in an animated fashion.

“Businessmen!” he exclaimed. “You must have seen them, mopping their brows, following their corporation intrigues. Taxpayers all!”

“A clean shirt very steaming day,” murmured Mike.

“Exactly. And where does the money for these shirts come from?”

“Housekeeping, upkeep, keeping up with the neighbours,” interposed John T Rex.

“It all takes money,” agreed Stephen. “I’ll tell you where it comes from!”

“You don’t have to,” said Cracknell. “We can all see the cul-de-sac.” He rolled over again, onto one elbow. Stephen was idly chewing a piece of grass. Mike and John T Rex were both flat on their backs with their eyes out. “More to the point, can we all see the road which leads to it?”

“The road to boredom,” said John T Rex. “Sounds like a good title for a film.”

“See it?” asked Mike, opening one eye. “We’re standing on it, aren’t we? Isn’t everybody?”

All four fell silent at this hitherto unspoken revelation. Far away could be heard the muted sound of traffic and then, as if coming from a great depth, faintly, the sound of clicking footsteps. When they grew sufficiently loud, Mike and John T Rex condescended to open their eyes and peer in the direction of the road. Half obscured by the hedge, a girl with long blonde hair walked past. Four pairs of eyes watched her click rhythmically into the distance, out of sight.

“I wouldn’t mind meeting her in a cul-de-sac,” said John T Rex.

“John! You lower the tone of the conversation!” accused Stephen. “Mind you, I wouldn’t mind meeting her in any kind of a sack.”

The other three groaned, and Mike affected to completely collapse. Stephen stood up and brushed down his clothes. “Anyone for tennis?” he asked, and was met with complete silence. Cracknell rolled over yet again and said:

“My deah boy. Fish gasping in the sun do not play tennis. Please reconsidah.” He lay back again while Stephen reconsidered.

“All right then, anyone for a cup of tea?”

“One,” said John T Rex without moving.

“Two,” added Cracknell, holding up two fingers rather crudely.

“Four,” said Mike, holding up three fingers and speaking in an Irish accent.

“Idiots!” exclaimed Stephen, and walked off towards the Home. His shadow moved across John T Rex, who started to sit up.

“Idiots, is it?” he said loudly. Mike shook a fist at Stephen, who was nearly at the entrance of the Home. “We’ll get you! You’ll see!”

Cracknell screamed: “Idiots? We won’t even drink your tea! You’ll see!” The three laughed hysterically, resuming recumbent positions once again, while Stephen pushed open the door and entered the Home.

Inside it was cooler, quieter, and very much darker. The Home always used to be an old, rambling house set in fairly spacious grounds. Then - and none of them knew exactly when - it had been converted into many small rooms, while other Hall buildings were erected in the grounds outside. Originally, the house had boasted several large, well-lit rooms, but paper walls had been inserted to divide these up, and in the resulting layout there were many unlighted corners and crannies, which served to give the Home an air of gloom.

Past the room where Bruce lived, and down a long narrow corridor, was the kitchen. Stephen walked its quiet length, and tried to recollect a time when the Home

was strange to him. There had been such a time, he knew. He vividly remembered sitting alone in his small room, on his first night, and he knew that at that time the Home must have seemed alien to him. The numbered rows of doors, bright unshaded lights, and tiled lower passageways must have been coldly hostile to a newcomer. But as the year aged, so the Home mellowed. He found that there were other doors, hidden around corners which were invisible to the unpractised eye, and anyway, behind the doors were other people who lived and thought as he did. The bright lights were broken during indoor game of football, and were replaced by red bulbs which attracted the wrong sort of visitors from the night outside.

He laughed, remembering that, and an echo bounced about the corridor.

The tiled floors were still tiled floors, and were unfriendly to bare feet. Fortunately, his room was upstairs, where an ancient carpet covered the floorspace in the hall. He still had to come downstairs to the only kitchen, but whereas it had always been a lonely trek, now he could kick on any door and expect a friendly obscenity in reply.

The kitchen happened to be empty. He filled the kettle, switched it on, and sat down to wait. It was an old kettle which took an eternity to boil.

Mike had a theory about doors. Apparently, it had occurred to him that just about all the doors he had ever seen where let into the sides of walls, and he felt that if this thought were pursued, something profound might result. While he was expounding this rather unresolved theory, he had explained that he liked to quit while he was ahead, which was why he had not followed the idea through himself. Apparently, it also explained why he never did anything brilliant.

Stephen smiled at the inconsistency of a theory which explained why other theories were never completed. He had pointed that out at the time, but Mike had just shrugged and turned it into a joke. Very often, their conversation twisted and turned on an inverted logical basis, which provided many reference points that nobody else would understand. Both of them had a habit of bypassing the mainstream of an idea in preference for the trailing, unfinished threads which lead nowhere but into tangled, unresolved areas. Frequently, this led to competitions to see which of them could sidestep the obvious route of a conversation for the longer. Both of them realised this, and Stephen smiled when he thought of how many times they had managed to disrupt perfectly sane discussions by introducing borderline arguments which turned the subject upside down and stood it on its head.

A banging noise, the opening of the front door, came through the wheezing of the kettle. Stephen spooned tea into the pot as a clamour of voices and footsteps started along the corridor.

“We’re coming to get you!” shouted Mike, still invisible.

“I’m not here!”

“Are you there, Houdini?”

“No!” Stephen turned off the kettle and made the tea.

“Hold it, lads.” Cracknell’s voice.

“What is it?”

“Look, either he’s in there, in which case it’ll be dangerous. Dangerous, d’you hear?” His voice rose and trembled. “God, it’ll be so dangerous, a hell-hole! A—”

“Or,” put in John T Rex, “he isn’t in there.”

“Exactly,” said Cracknell, calmer. “In which case we might as well turn round and go back.”

They had reached the end of the corridor and were standing just out of sight from the interior of the kitchen.

“He said he’s not there,” said Mike helpfully.

“Right lads!” shouted Cracknell. “Over the top!” They burst around the corner, through the doorway, and Stephen backed up against the sink.

“No!” he cried. “No! Anything, but don’t throw me in the briar patch!”

“Ransom,” intoned Mike hollowly. “A cup of tea for your ransom.”

“I’ll pay it! I’ll pay it!”

“Good.” Cracknell jumped up on top of the food lockers and dangled his legs comfortably. “I just fancy a cuppa. What luck finding you here.”

“We were thinking,” said Mike as he opened his own locker, “after you were gone, y’know, about politics and all that.” He coughed enigmatically and looked sideways at Stephen, who commenced pouring the tea.

“Politics is all rubbish,” stated Stephen, knowing that this act of dogmatism would incite an argument.

“But consider!” said Cracknell, holding up a finger sternly. “Consider what it has achieved. Man is widely separated, mentally as well as in distance. Yet through the ages, different cultures have met and talked....”

“...rehearsed,” murmured Mike.

“...have set up trading centres, perhaps even intermingled and become one civilisation. All because of politics. Is this not a great feat?”

“A feat of the imagination, perhaps,” said Stephen dryly. “Politics is the art of procrastination and evasion. If the day of judgement arrived, a politician would hedge around it. My God! It’s Armageddon, Mr President! Don’t be so hasty, my boy. Things may look different tomorrow.”

John T Rex also jumped up on to the lockers, where he banged for silence. “Interesting though this conversation may be,” he said, “and it isn’t, very: nevertheless, I’m afraid...” He paused. “I’m confused,” he said plaintively. “My sentence structure isn’t what it might be.”

“What is it you’re trying to tell me, baby?” urged Mike breathlessly, clasping his hands together and rolling eyes.

“Quiet!” hissed John T Rex. “Just listen, that’s all!”

They listened intently, staying motionless in whatever positions they happened to be fixed.

“Footsteps,” whispered Mike.

Stephen nodded, then caught a faint double echo as slippers rattled on approaching feet. “It’s E Flat!” he gasped.

Immediately, all four moved to the doorway, preparing to escape. They waited until the footsteps reached their back, when a gaunt figure strode unerringly through the door, and then, with a murmured, “afternoon, Eric,” made their way back down the corridor.

In the kitchen, E Flat went straight to the still-warm kettle, his mind filled with one idea: to make himself another cup of coffee.

Big Jim and John T Rex hastened up the last stretch towards the Home, trying to hunch up even further into their overcoats as rain lashed at them out of the dark.

“We’ll be late for the start,” gasped John T Rex. A car hissed easily past them, headlights gleaming on the wet surface of the road, showing a thousand tiny splashes as the rain reached its surface. The wind momentarily blew, parting the storm like a curtain. For a few seconds they could all see the shape of the Home looming ahead of them, and then it seemed to rain even more violently. Big Jim

skipped neatly around a puddle and decided he could not provide John T Rex with a positive answer.

“It’s possible,” he said cautiously.

John T Rex went slightly ahead and negotiated the hole in the hedge first. He headed doggedly across the lawn towards the entrance, water squelching up at his ankles. Big Jim performed a running step to catch up with him. He had used light from the last streetlamp to look at his watch.

“We are a bit late,” he admitted.

“I know that,” snapped John T Rex testily. “They haven’t started yet, though. The light’s still on.”

Big Jim looked up and saw through the teeming rain that the end room was indeed still showing a light. He shook his head sadly. He, the lawyer, ought to have thought of checking to see if it was still on. It was his job - or soon would be - to follow up these logical sequences, to clearly reason from given facts and reach, hopefully, an agreeable solution. He sighed inwardly, but stopped shaking his head, as it caused rainwater to trickle into his eyes.

John T Rex stumbled onto the gravel path and pushed the door open into the haven of a dry Home. “Don’t start!” he screeched, taking off his coat and running for the stairs. Big Jim was not far behind.

“Hold it!” screamed John T Rex, reaching the upper hall and angling his way across it. Big Jim followed closely. A double trail of wet footprints marked their passage.

A door banged open and a hubbub of voices came from within.

“Come on—”

“Hurry up—”

“...only just made it...”

“Jesus! You’re wet! Is it still raining?”

John T Rex and Big Jim bundled into the crowded room and found themselves places to sit.

“Sorry we’re late,” apologised Big Jim. “We missed the bus.”

Somebody switched the light out and conversation died as the room was bathed in darkness.

“Hold it,” came Cracknell’s voice. “Put it back on again, will you? I’m not ready yet.” The light returned to show him fiddling with a slide projector. Just

behind stood Tez, who looked on anxiously. “Okay,” said Cracknell. The room darkened once more. “Now, these are the pictures that Tez has taken over the last – what would you say?”

“Oh, couple of months,” said Tez diffidently. He cleared his throat. “Er - I don’t know how these have come out, lad. It’s a new camera.”

“Excuses,” muttered Stephen from somewhere in the room.

“Number one!” announced Tez excitedly as Cracknell worked the projector. The room was sliced through, first by white light, then by coloured beams which blurred and dappled over the dust-motes, finally to coalesce on the far wall. To Big Jim, still shivering from the cold rain, this phenomenon suddenly assumed great metaphysical importance. He leaned forward intently, trying to apply all of his brain power to this single, slippery idea. Surely, he thought, surely this had to be some clue to the meaning of life. Blurred, focussed, soon to be snuffed out...

Laughter broke through to him, and he realised that nobody else in the room was sharing his thoughtful moment. Rather, they had allowed themselves to be taken in by the final product - the picture on the wall. Big Jim paused in his reverie in order to consider the content of the picture, and not merely the fact of its existence. It seemed to be a frame from an action sequence: game of football, with Slim Jim flying through the air, caught in a awkward pose.

Big Jim nodded to himself, content. For once, his lawyer’s brain had spotted an underlying reality, a parallel reasoning, that no-one else had seen. A satisfied smile appeared on his face, and he allowed his eyes to fix themselves on the next picture. The smile broadened and he laughed in unison with the others in the room. Glorious! John T Rex about to be forcibly struck with a croquet hammer...

“Nobody told me,” grumbled John T Rex in a short silence, while Cracknell wrestled with the slide projector.

“Careful,” remonstrated Tez.

“The bloody thing’s stuck!” said Cracknell angrily. He wrenched at a handle, whereupon part of the projector fell off.

“Careful! Careful!” repeated Tez agitatedly. Somebody turned the light on: Cracknell picked up the broken part and jammed it back in place. Then he peered inside the projector and made some adjustment.

“Okay.”

Once more the room was dark, until a new picture appeared on the wall. A fresh wave of comment swept the audience, but it was completely lost to Big Jim, because he had been struck by an appalling thought. It had occurred to him, during the break when he could see all the faces round about, that perhaps everybody else had already considered the double meaning inherent in projecting slides. There was a possibility, he realised, that his mind was really shallow, that everything he thought to be penetrating and lucid was in fact immediately obvious to everyone else.

“It’s Big Jim!” laughed a voice, and he was shocked into reality. On the wall, he saw himself leering into the camera.

“I was drunk,” he protested feebly.

“Oh yes?” returned someone in disbelief. “Called to the bar?”

Big Jim absently watched the next slide form, his mind wandering again. What was the underlying reality he had discovered, anyway? A lawyer’s mind, he thought tensely, should possess an accurate and retentive memory. Unconsciously he frowned, trying to remember. That was it. - blurred, focussed, soon to be snuffed out. But what did it mean? It seemed to be a description of life rather than a meaning; but did life mean anything? Big Jim started uncertainly. Was that a deep thought?

“Attshboo!” John T Rex, who had seated himself across the room, sneezed with violence.

“Ugh,” said Mike primly. “You didn’t get dry after getting in from the rain, did you? I bet you’ll catch a cold.”

John T Rex sniffed and blew his nose in the dark.

“I don’t want to catch cold,” said Stephen suddenly, and stood up. Immediately, his silhouette appeared on the wall, whereas his clothes took on a mottled resemblance to the lawn outside the Home.

“Sit down!” yelled Tez. “You’re spoiling it!” Abashed, Stephen sat down while Cracknell manipulated the next picture into existence. This time it was a game of tennis, with Tez himself photographed in the middle of his unnatural service. “It’s me!” said Tez gleefully.

Cracknell was nodding, his face half-lighted by some stray reflection from within the projector. “Ah yes, that was the one I took.”

Mike’s voice rose from some other part of the room. “It was bloody hot that day, wasn’t it?” A subdued murmur of agreement rippled through the audience, while each individual remembered just how hot they had been. A slight pause ensued as

Cracknell worked his way towards the next slide. The murmur died away and in the silence, the wind gusted strongly outside, making the windows rattle. Rain machine-gunned onto the glass.

“Weather!” swore Big Jim, suddenly conscious of his wet clothing again. He coughed and muttered, “hope I’m not losing my voice.”

“Ah,” said Tez as the next picture materialised. “I took this one inside, with the flash. It doesn’t ...er, seem to have been a complete success.”

“What was it?”

“Well, it was in the squash court. That blob on the left is Slim Jim, and the other one is...”

“Rumbold!” cried Stephen from his corner of the room. “Of course - the only time Slim Jim was ever beaten!”

The wind howled noisily against the gutters and gables outside. Rain could be heard persistently pattering at the window. The squash court disappeared from the wall, so that the room was in darkness once again. Cracknell cursed under his breath as the projector resisted his efforts to produce the next picture.

Suddenly, there was a clicking sound, loud over the noise of the weather, and the door began to open. A sliver of light from the hall speared through, catching John T Rex in the act of wiping his nose miserably. Everyone sat petrified as the door continued to gape slowly open, like the exit from a tomb. When it was open enough, a head framed with curly hair peered through.

“Nancy!” cried Tez with relief.

“Hello,” said Nancy unhappily.

“Come in, come in.”

“No, I won’t stay,” said Nancy. “Well, I might do,” he amended. “Are you showing your slides?” For an answer, Cracknell manoeuvred the handle of the projector and a picture manifested itself on the wall.

“I see you are,” said Nancy, nodding his head. He leaned forward into the room. “What I want to know is, have you got any pictures of - her?”

Tez scratched his head, trying to remember. “No-o, I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure? Not even in the background?” Tez almost wilted before the hopeful look on Nancy’s face.

“No-o,” he repeated. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t appear.”

“Nancy!” called Stephen. “Look, I’ve got...here, pass this to Nancy, will you?” Big Jim reached across and transferred an envelope from Stephen to Nancy. “Picked it up yesterday,” admitted Stephen. “Forgot to give it to you then, but perhaps it’s from her....”

Nancy nodded eagerly. “Perhaps, perhaps.” he withdrew from the doorway, latching the door behind him so that the room became dark once more. In the silence that followed, he could be heard hurrying across to his own room. Big Jim coughed again, and massaged his throat.

“I’m really hope I’m not going to lose my voice,” he said. Nobody answered him, but he continued anyway, voicing the thought that was in everybody’s mind. “Nancy’s got it bad, hasn’t he?”

“How long has it been?” asked Stephen. “It seems like ages. You’d think he’d give it up, seeing as how he gets so miserable.”

“The course of true love..” said Cracknell. “What wouldn’t he do for her, after all? He nearly broke his nose, didn’t he?”

“That’s true,” said Mike. “Who was it that saw that happen?”

“Me,” said Tez. Everyone started nodding to themselves in the darkness as they remembered the story Tez had told. Tez himself stood pensively in the half-light from the projector, and could see it all happening again, in his mind’s eye.

It was early afternoon, and it was in the middle of a lecture, so nothing much was happening. All those who had a lecture were safely out of harm’s way, closeted behind theatre doors, whereas all those who did not have a lecture failed to turn up in the first place. As a result, nearly everywhere was deserted, and silence hung over most of the buildings.

Tez had comfortably seated himself in the foyer of the building in which he had his next lecture, because nobody was around to play snooker with, and because the chairs were deeply restful there. He was sitting opposite the only lecture room which adjoined the foyer, and next to a set of swing doors that led outside. The only other features which the foyer had to offer were the secretary’s office, which lay off to the left, and a flight of stairs, leading upwards and out sight by the side of the lecture room.

Tez idly flipped the pages of his notebook. What he was waiting for, in fact, was a tutorial where he knew he was going to be subjected to some searching questions. He had been up late studying the previous night, but he was still far from certain that he knew enough to satisfy his tutor. He came to the last page in the notebook and closed it with a sigh. His trouble, it seemed, was that it took him three times as long as anybody else to actually learn something. Why couldn't he be like Cracknell, who almost appeared to understand things before he was taught them?

Some footsteps sounded and he looked up. Somebody unknown to him descended the stairs, crossed the foyer, and departed via the swing doors. Tez looked at his watch; probably that was a tutorial ending five minutes early. He put his notebook away and sat back patiently.

If he listened very hard he could just make out a droning voice from behind the lecture room doors. A faint smile crossed his face as he imagined the poor souls inside. Most of them were probably half asleep, and all of them, unless they had perfected some form of shorthand, would be suffering from writer's cramp, so close to the end of the a lecture. Tez shook his head sadly. Every hour long lecture he attended usually meant three hours of work later, trying to understand what had been going on. The trouble was, nobody else seemed to take as long to pick things up.

More footsteps. This time the secretary emerged from her office with a sheet of paper in one hand, a drawing pin in the other, and made some adjustments to the noticeboard.

"Good afternoon," said Tez.

"Humph," she replied grumpily, returning to her work.

As the hour approached, the afternoon began to stir. Two people talking animatedly about some subject of which Tez was entirely ignorant, plunged through the double doors and up the stairs. No sooner had their footfalls faded away than somebody started downstairs, and at the same time the swing doors opened to admit a cluster of people who headed for the noticeboard.

Tez sat up and glanced at his watch: it was almost time to go and face the music. Absently, he listened to the conversation of the newcomers, and the noise of the doors whooshing to and fro. Suddenly, the figure descending the stairs took on a familiar aspect as it reached the bottom and looked around.

"Nancy!"

Tez almost started to his feet before he realised that his call was going to be unanswered. Nancy, having negotiated the steps, was staring in a distracted fashion towards the noticeboard, while he continued to head for the doors by a reflex action.

“Nancy!” cried Tez despairingly. For a moment, it almost looked as if this was going to produce a reply. Nancy appeared to be on the verge of turning his head, but then his eyes focussed in a different direction, while his feet carried him on towards his doom. It was as if his mind had completely disassociated itself from his body. He continued to walk, although his attention was completely drawn by something on the noticeboard; and as he walked, some animal function signalled that he raise his arms as he reached the swinging doors.

“Nancy?” muttered Tez under his breath, as the awful conclusion to this scene occurred to him before it became reality. The swinging doors neatly evaded Nancy’s outstretched hands, returning with a subdued whoosh as he stepped forward. The edge of the right-hand door crashed forcefully into his face: time, Tez and Nancy all paused at this painful event.

“Urgummph,” cried Nancy in a muffled voice as he staggered backwards, clutching at his nose. Tez finally found the presence of mind to dash across and help him.

“Are you all right? Are you all right?” he asked anxiously, supporting him around the shoulders.

“Inko.”

“What was that?” said Tez, surprised. “Nancy, Nancy, say something to me. Are you all right?”

“I think so,” repeated Nancy, sounding much better. “By dose hurts, though. I bust have nearly broken it.”

“Nearly,” agreed Tez, helping him to stand upright. “Come on, I’ll buy you a cup of tea or something.” He assisted Nancy through the doors, this time without mishap, and then down the steps out in the open air.

“Haven’t you got a lecture or somebing?”

“Something,” said Tez. “But I could do with an excuse not to go. Fancy a game of snooker when you’ve recovered?”

“No heart,” said Nancy, still sounding shaken. “You’ve got no heart. You’re looking at the symptoms, not the cause. Look - ” he clutched at his chest and staggered slightly from the sudden movement “ - look, it’s in here, that’s where the

trouble is!” He pushed away from Tez and walked unaided, although he still seemed rather rubber-legged. “Love! I’m in love, and she was standing there. Jesus!” Nancy clapped a hand to his forehead as he realised what he was doing. “I’m walking the wrong way...”

“Easy, easy,” soothed Tez. “She’ll be in her lecture, by now.”

“It’s all right for you to sympathise!” shouted Nancy. Several people looked at him, so he carried on in a quieter vein. “You don’t realise,” he hissed, “just what a bind it is, being in love. I mean, I came down those stairs, and she was there! So what was I supposed to do? Of course I looked at her, and those bloody doors...” He trailed off, then added “symptoms, not the cause ” before lapsing into silence.

Tez nodded solemnly. “Fancy a game of snooker, now you’ve recovered?”

Nancy was walking along slowly, in an absent fashion. Beneath his swinging feet was the pavement, but in his mind he could still see the noticeboard with the cluster of people gathered around it. In the middle of the group he could still see the blonde-haired figure which had caused him such a painful accident. He sighed sadly as he thought of her, and Tez was forgotten as he remembered the first time she had come into his life.

Tez for his part, looked sideways at his companion. He frowned at the distracted expression he could see there. For the first time, he began to realise just how obsessed Nancy had become, and he shook his head in response to the thought that he failed to understand the need for it all. Nancy was still walking along blindly, a half-smile on his face: more than once a passerby took startled notice of his dreaming state. Tez started whistling. It was obviously his job to help Nancy in his troubles, and he could begin by jolting him out of his present trance.

Meanwhile, Nancy had got round to thinking how nice it was for them to have rallied round. Right from the first, everyone had been sympathetic to him, although he felt that perhaps only Stephen really understood the problem. Tez, now, was whistling along without a care in the world. What did he mean by that? A faint anger stirred in him, that someone could be so cold and unfeeling. Didn’t Tez realise that his every waking moment was filled with thoughts of her? That his work, and even his poetry, were suffering as a result? On the other hand-Nancy rubbed at his forehead - they were all his friends and he knew that they cared really. Only a moment ago he had been thinking how well they had rallied around when the learned about her.

“I wish I knew her name,” he said involuntarily.

Tez stopped whistling and kicking aimlessly at a stone lying on the pavement.

“What I mean is,” said Nancy, rubbing at his forehead again, “that I’m all confused at the moment. Nothing seems to – to tie up. If I knew her name, then perhaps..” He considered the idea. “Well, I don’t know. Just something.”

Tez kicked at the pavement, because there was no stone within reach of his feet.

“I don’t expect people to understand,” continued Nancy. “Well, I don’t know, though. I suppose people have fallen in love before, haven’t they?” He looked at Tez, who nodded sagely.

“Then people should understand,” said Nancy. “Not everyone, of course. Just those who..” He trailed off again and thought some more. “Not that it helps, one way or the other,” he added finally.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Tez. “You’ve had a rough time of it, what with nearly breaking your nose and all that. So I’ll get you a cup of tea. Then we’ll sit about for a bit. And then you can go and talk to her.”

“Talk to her?” breathed Nancy.

“Yes. You’ll need all your courage, true. But can it make anything worse?”

“What’ll I say?”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“But - you said we were going for a tea.”

“No, no, that’s what you say to her - would you like a cup of coffee?”

Nancy felt his heart speed up, just as the thought of it.

“You’ll have to wait for the right moment, of course. Like you could join her at the noticeboard outside the cafeteria.” “Come on!” Tez hauled at Nancy by the arm, pulling him into the Union building. “What d’you say?”

“I don’t know,” said Nancy, doubt written across his face. “I’m frightened.”

“Well, of course you are! Who wouldn’t be? But on the other hand, what can she say or do that’ll make things worse?”

“Well...” faltered Nancy.

“Just so!” cried Tez, excited by this new project. “After all, there’s other things you could say to her. All sorts of trivial chit-chat with to break the ice! Come on, Nancy, what d’you say?”

“Well...” repeated Nancy doubtfully.

“Of course you will. No trouble!” Tez yanked Nancy downstairs, across a hall, and into the cafeteria, where they had to join a queue.

“We’ll eat,” whispered Tez, trying not to attract the attention of anyone else in the queue. “Then we’ll wait outside, in the hall.”

“What for?”

“An auspicious moment,” replied Tez, and squeezed Nancy’s arm reassuringly.

Cracknell had woken up very early and straight away put his mind into top gear. This fact did not surprise him, since it happened every morning, usually just as the sun rose and light seeped through the curtains for the first time. As a rule, he would lie for a few minutes trying to sort out residual dream images from his mind. He never actually woke up because of any particular dream, but he nearly always found that strange convoluted plots would be running through his thoughts when first he opened his eyes to a new day. The logic and possible intuition that was inherent in dreams fascinated him. He was fairly certain that all important or striking events which took place during one day, would almost certainly crop up in dreams that same night: and even if these original events were entirely disconnected, a dream would find some way of linking them up to form a continuous story.

This morning, he found that he was left with a vivid mental picture of himself, dressed in a commando outfit, using a machine-gun to dispose of a row of icicles. He frowned, puzzled. The icicles were plain enough, because the previous day had been bitterly cold, thick with frost. But the clothes and machine-gun baffled him completely. His frown deepened into a look of melancholy. It looked as if it was going to be one of those days.

He got up and dressed, half-heartedly peering across at his desk, where his latest start of a theory was lying. As usual, he had forgotten what it was all about. His look of melancholy deepened still further, into one of great gloom, as his earlier forecast confirmed itself. Not only did his dream images defy rationalisation, but also he had already forgotten his latest proof from the previous night. It was definitely turning into the sort of day that Cracknell longed to avoid.

He sighed and sat down to look at the papers on his desk. Immediately, he remembered what they were about, recalled how the proof was going to finish, so

pushed it away again, deciding not to bother with it any more. He sighed again and checked the time: seven thirty. He had been out for a walk the previous night and not returned until late. As a result, he was very tired. On the other hand, he wanted to prepare his lectures for the day, because he hated hearing something for the first time when he had had a chance to learn it earlier. He shook his head slowly. Everyone seemed to think he was naturally brilliant: didn't they realise how much work he did behind the scenes? Didn't they, too, do a similar amount? Apparently not, from what he could see.

Unwillingly, he pulled a text book from a pile and opened it at the relevant page. He had about an hour in which to get an idea of the subject matter of his next two lectures, before it was time for breakfast.

Outside, the light strengthened as time wore on. The curtains covering the great windows over the stairs had not been closed, so the hall was already brighter than the overhead light which nobody had switched off the previous evening. There were still black, impenetrable corners, but no daylight would ever illuminate them, because they lay behind awkward kinks in the revised layout of the Home. Condensation on the windows was at a minimum; the sun was already warming the day to the best of its wintry ability and unless it clouded over, it promised to be a much warmer day than its predecessor. Everywhere lay peacefully quiet until half past eight, when inmates of the Home began showing themselves.

Stephen was the first to appear. He came out into the hall, rubbing his eyes blearily, and banged with force on the room next door.

"All right, I'm awake," groaned a voice from within.

"Well are we or aren't we?" asked Stephen loudly.

"Not again," moaned the voice. "We went in yesterday, didn't we? Not two days running."

"Well, I'm up," said Stephen, in a tone which implied that if he had taken the trouble to get up early, then so should Mike.

"Ohhh," groaned the voice. There was a pause, and the door opened. Stephen back-tracked hastily as Mike peered out, blinked in the morning light, and said: "I don't feel up to it, y'know."

"You don't look too good," agreed Stephen.

Mike shook his head slowly, and retired back into his room. Stephen sighed and did the same, clicking his door loudly in the silence of the Home.

For a short while the sun grew stronger and the day grew older, and nothing much else happened. Then another door opened, and John T Rex staggered out. The first thing he did was to clasp a hand over his eyes, and the second was to sink wearily to his knees.

“The light!” he cried in a loud voice. “Somebody turn off the light!”

This call penetrated through to Cracknell in the depths of his room, where he had just about finished his preparations. He pushed his papers away tiredly, went to the door, and looked out into the hall.

“What’s your problem?” he asked John T Rex, who was still kneeling on the floor.

“Hangover.”

Cracknell walked out into the hall and switched off the light, an action which made no appreciable difference to the level of brightness in the Home.

“That better?” he asked.

John T Rex cautiously unclasped his hand from over his eyes. He looked about jerkily, as if he had not really grasped the fact that a new day had begun.

“Why not stay in bed?” asked Cracknell.

“Does it matter where I have a hangover?” retorted John T Rex. “I’d feel as bad in bed as ...” His voice trailed off as he continued to look around. “What’s this?” he said in alarm. “Holes?”

Something clicked in Cracknell’s mind as a train of thought materialised and smoothly accelerated to a conclusion. He suddenly remembered the events of the previous evening, when he had returned to find the geologist hard at work. And on the heels of this thought came the realisation that this explained his dream - the rattling of a machine-gun sounded similar to the reverberations from a geologist’s hammer. Cracknell smiled to himself at this point, so swiftly had he solved the earlier problem of the morning.

Unfortunately, his mind refused to stop there, but carried on in a well-worn downward spiral. Why had he not thought of all this before? Why had even such an unusual event completely slipped his memory? Was he working too hard? Cracknell shook his head unhappily, convinced that his mind was becoming disorientated.

“Disorientated,” he muttered absently.

“What was that?” John T Rex lurched to his feet. “What did you say?” He stumbled over towards the wall and peered closely at one of mysterious holes. “It is a hole,” he affirmed. “Why are there holes in the wall?”

“What?” said Cracknell suddenly. “What are you talking about?”

“Holes,” said John T Rex. “Holes in the wall.”

Cracknell was recovered from his reverie and now looked at John T Rex as if seeing him for the first time. “Holes,” he repeated blankly. “Oh yes - they happened last night. A geologist decided to take some samples.”

“Samples!” cried John T Rex, and clutched at his head. “Ohhhh, I shouldn’t have done that.” He leaned back against the wall, then winced as Stephen’s door opened yet again with a crash. Stephen strode out and raised a fist, ready to bang fiercely at Mike’s door.

“No. Don’t.” Cracknell, finger pressed to his lips, tip-toed across the hallway in an absurd parody of haste. Stephen raised his eyebrows at this apparition.

“It’s John T Rex over there,” said Cracknell, as if this explained everything.

“So it is,” said Stephen. “Morning, John.”

John T Rex groaned painfully, managed to say “...hangover”, and then winced in anticipation as Mike’s door also opened. This time, however, there was no crash. The door opened slowly and silently, and the reason for the slowness and silence became immediately obvious when Mike peered out through the opening. His face bore a remarkable resemblance to that of John T Rex.

“I am profoundly distressed,” he moaned. He edged out into the hall and stood there rather vaguely.

“Hangover?” asked Stephen. Mike nodded, then screwed his eyes tight shut, because the floor of the Home undulated strangely.

“What you need,” said Stephen firmly, “is a good hot cup of tea. And you too.” He indicated John T Rex. “Come on, let’s go and make one.” John T Rex and Mike obediently shuffled towards the stairs, and commenced descending them in a fragile fashion. Stephen followed like a shepherd herding a pair of stray sheep. Cracknell, left alone at the head of the stairs, scratched his head thoughtfully.

“Make me a cup, will you?” he called, obviously having come to a decision. “I’ll be down in a minute,” and he turned away, returning to his room.

Just inside the doorway, he paused to survey the books and papers spread out on his desk, and rubbed his eyes, conscious yet again of his tiredness. He had

finished the work, and now knew more or less what the lectures were going to be about, but in his mind he was already wondering why he bothered. It was obvious that neither John T Rex nor Mike had worked, either that morning or the previous night.

Shaking his head, Cracknell moved across to the desk and slowly piled up the text books again. Perhaps he was addicted to work. Perhaps he was merely keeping up with his reputation, which was that he knew everything already. Nobody - with the possible exception of Stephen - seemed to realise just how much of a strain it was, keeping up with the course and trying to make it look easy at the same time. And when all was said and done, what was the point of it all? If he had to work so hard, was he really that clever? Or, if it was true that he possessed unusual insight into problems, how close to the thin edge of madness did he lie?

He finished packing up the work, and headed back into the hall.

That was really the problem which bothered him. Had his mind already lost its grip on reality? Time and time again, he would be listening to a conversation and completely fail to see the point of it. Either the subject under discussion would be too trivial to bother about, or he would find the answer to the argument so obvious that he could not see the point of arguing about it in the first place. Did it mean he had a gifted mind, with exceptional traits? Or did it mean he was vastly overrating himself?

He descended the stairs quickly, and clumped across the uncarpeted lower hall. On the wall facing the stairs was scrawled Graffiti in large red letters. Somebody had cleaned the last two letters from his door, but although this was a comparatively recent phenomenon, Cracknell was already so used to it that he passed by without giving it a glance.

The wheezing of the ancient kettle and a subdued murmur of voices became audible as he entered the long corridor which led down to the kitchen. There were two small windows along the length of the passageway, but they were both so dirty as to be almost opaque, and Cracknell did not bother to spare them a glance, either. He went straight down to the kitchen entrance and just as he reached it, somebody switched off the kettle.

Inside, Mike was slumped on the only stool, John T Rex had somehow managed to climb up on top of the lockers, where he was also slumped, and it was Stephen who was making the tea.

“.....don't you think?” he was saying. He put the lid on the teapot.

“Yes,” said John T Rex lethargically.

“Shall we go in for a game?”

“Okay,” said Mike.

“Or would you rather not?”

“As you like,” grunted Mike.

“Look!” shouted Stephen. “Stop agreeing with me, will you!”

“-yes,” said Mike.

“-no,” said John T Rex.

Cracknell smiled. “Perhaps they’re not as bad as they make out,” he suggested.

“Oh, we are,” said Mike.

“Much worse,” added John T Rex.

Stephen scowled at them. “They keep on agreeing with me,” he complained. “And that’s no way to conduct a conversation, is it? I might just as well talk to myself.”

Cracknell steadied the edge of the door behind his back and leaned on it negligently.

“Well, I mean to say,” said Stephen, pouring the tea. “These two never agree with what I say. Never. And it’s most offputting when they suddenly change.”

“Oh, we do agree sometimes,” said Mike.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, we do!” said John T Rex.

“No, you don’t!” reiterated Stephen. He stopped, realising that he had fallen into a trap. “Okay. Very clever. Now drink your tea.” He handed out three mugs, and took a sip from his own.

“I suppose,” said Cracknell tentatively, “that you two aren’t going over for breakfast?” The grimaces which this remark produced were answers in themselves. “Then I won’t either,” decided Cracknell. “I’ll do some more work instead.”

“Food for the mind,” grunted Mike.

Cracknell drank a little more from the mug, in order to reduce the tea level so that he would not spill out on the way back to his room. “Something like that,” he replied, moving back out into the passageway. “Thanks for the tea.”

“See you later!” called Stephen.

Cracknell nodded automatically as he returned up the long corridor, pausing once to take another sip of tea. He passed Room A, which was popularly supposed to house Bruce, although nobody knew for sure. In the lower hall, he passed the freshly-cleaned door, and the room which Slim Jim lived in. Upstairs, he glanced at the rooms belonging to Stephen and Mike, both of which had their doors open wide. He thought about all these people and shook his head worriedly, because none of them seemed to have the same attitude to life that he did. They seemed to enjoy themselves most of the time. He took another sip of his tea and stared pensively at Nancy's door. There, at least, was somebody who admitted to having some problems, although completely different from his own. Perhaps, after all, people were more complicated than they appeared on the surface; perhaps they, too, had their worries and uncertainties.

Curiously relieved by this idea, Cracknell stopped looking at Nancy's door, went into his own room, and settled down to do some more work.

"I tried to help him," said Tez, over the whirr of the projector and the noisy wind. "Only it didn't work out. We found her, right enough, and I gave him a boost at the right moment: he even followed her for a while. But unfortunately he never got up the courage to say anything."

"What does she look like?" asked Stephen.

Tez paused before replying. In an absent fashion, his gaze fixed itself on Cracknell, who was half-heartedly struggling with the projector again. This time it seemed to be a losing battle, because the slide was well and truly stuck.

"Well," said Tez, visualising her in his mind. "She's quite small, with a good figure. She's got fair hair, and when I saw her, she was wearing it in pigtails. And she had wire-framed glasses." Tez stopped for a moment. "An attractive face," he concluded.

Nothing was said for a while, as everybody digested this new information.

"What are we going to do about it?" asked John T Rex.

"Don't know quite what we can do," said Tez. He lifted his eyes from Cracknell, and looked instead at the blurred mass of the audience beyond. "I've tried once, without success. Anybody got any ideas?"

There was another pause, during which Cracknell gave up with the projector and sat back with a sigh. Tez glanced at him, then reverted to staring back into the depths of the dark room, in the vague hope that someone, somewhere, would come up with an idea.

“Switch the light on,” said Cracknell. “Show’s over. Projector’s dead.”

Tez blinked as the light came on, and simultaneously something Nancy had once said to him entered his mind.

“I’ve just thought,” he said, and the tone of his voice made everybody sit up and take notice. “He doesn’t know her name yet. When he was talking to me, that day, he seemed to think that knowing her name might help. Come to think of it -” he voice became quite excited “ - he doesn’t know *anything* about her at the moment. So perhaps if we could do a bit of spying...”

“Do you know what subject she takes?” asked Mike.

“No,” put in Big Jim. “He was talking to me, once, and he mentioned that although she had at least one lecture in the Maths building, he didn’t think she was a mathematician. I say he mentioned it,” added Big Jim with heavy emphasis. “What I mean is, he talked about nothing else for half an hour.”

Cracknell stood up and stretched. “That seems to be the thing, then. We’ll put out a network. We’ll cover the campus! Christ!” He banged the table in front of him. “Nothing will escape us! Certainly not the identity of one individual..”

“Tub-thumper,” said Stephen, also standing up. “We’re agreed, then? We’ll all keep an eye open for some information to lighten Nancy’s lot. Then no-one can say we haven’t tried to help.”

There was a general murmur of agreement, and people all over the room began to stand up, stretch, and form little groups amongst themselves. Big Jim, who happened to be nearest the door, opened it and started nodding affably to those who filed outside, as if they were guests leaving a party of which he was the host. Soon only a few people were left in the room, and all of those were gathered around the projector.

“Whose is it?” asked Cracknell, who had unplugged the machine and was gathering up the lead.

“No idea,” said Tez. “I found it lying around in one of the buildings, and since it didn’t seem to be with anybody, I brought it Home. I can see now why no-

one claimed it.” He leaned forward and struck the top of it forcibly. “What’s the chance of getting it mended, do you think?”

“It’s not so much mending it, as extracting your slide,” said Cracknell. “See, there’s this bit here, and if you look very closely...” The two of them bent over the projector and peered into its depths. Mike and Stephen glanced at each other, and Stephen raised his eyebrows in an interrogative fashion. Mike nodded minutely. Silently, they moved away from Tez and Cracknell, towards the door. Gathering speed, they moved on and out, and tiptoed rapidly across the hall into Stephen’s room, where they both breathed sighs of relief. Stephen sat on the edge of the bed and Mike, without being asked, reached up on top of the wardrobe to bring down the chess set.

“Who won the last game?”

“The last game we completed?” returned Stephen. “I did, I expect. But you manage to stop so many games half way through that setting up the pieces is usually a waste of time.”

“I’ll finish this one,” promised Mike as he opened up the board.

Stephen’s room was on the other side of the Home from that of Tez, so neither the rain nor the wind sounded so fierce. Nevertheless, every now and then the window would rattle loudly, and the curtains would billow inwards, because Stephen always left open what he called a fresh air gap. The room itself was extremely small: there was just space enough for a bed, a working table, and a wardrobe. Behind the door, Stephen had managed to heap up all his suitcases and cardboard boxes, a pile which was in the habit of toppling over about once a week, usually in the middle of the night. Whenever this happened, Stephen, Mike and whoever lived in the room on the other side would be woken up with a tremendous shock. Presumably whoever lived below had a similar rude awakening, but as nobody seemed to know who lived in that room, this supposition could not be properly tested.

“What did you think of the slides?” asked Stephen suddenly. The game had been going for a few minutes, and it was Mike’s turn to move. Mike scratched his head thoughtfully and filed the question away for later consideration. He was well aware that Stephen, although genuinely wanting to discuss the merits and faults of the slides, was also trying to break his concentration. So he studied the position for a little longer, and made his own move, before replying. This had the added advantage that he was talking when it was Stephen’s turn to move, a further tactical ploy.

“Not bad. Pity about the squash court one being too dark. What did you think?”

Stephen was also aware of the tactics behind chess-playing conversation, so he too filed the question away for later conversation. The few opening moves had been played, and it had reached the point where he usually began to get a grip on the game. On reflection, perhaps it might have been better to start the conversation earlier, during the opening, when Mike was in the stronger position.

He shook his head slightly. His thoughts were drifting away from the game, which meant that the ploys of his opponent were succeeding. He had to concentrate more.

“In a few years time,” said Mike, just as he had made this resolution, “they’ll be historical objects, won’t they?”

Stephen momentarily abandoned the game.

“In a few years time, everything will be a historical object, if you see what I mean. What exactly did you have in mind?”

“The slides,” said Mike. “After we’ve left, and gone out into the world, and all that sort of thing, they’ll gain sentimental value, won’t they?”

“I suppose so.”

“Are you going to ask Tez for some prints? I think I might get a copy of that football one, with nearly everyone in it.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” admitted Stephen. “Yes, that seems like a good idea. Think I’ll wait till I’ve seen them all before choosing, though.” He returned his attention to the game, since Mike appeared to have run out of things to say.

“All those people,” continued Mike suddenly. “We’ll be able to look at them and say: these are people we knew, and knew well.” He seemed to have got up a head of steam, so Stephen sat back again. “I mean to say,” said Mike, “for three years we’ll have lived in the same place, done the same work, played the same games. Who will we know better?”

Stephen nodded sagely. “Mike?”

“What is it?”

“This wouldn’t be your way of holding up the game again, by any chance?”

“Good Lord, no!” exclaimed Mike, immediately wondering what other method he could use to achieve that very end, since the game appeared to be slipping from him. “What was that noise?”

Stephen too had heard the noise, and if he had been asked, he would have been forced to admit that there was no way that Mike could have made it. A guttural scream, closely followed by a ringing silence, had come from somewhere upstairs in the Home.

“Perhaps we...” began Stephen, when he was interrupted by another guttural scream, considerably closer, and then someone pounding on the door. It burst open to reveal the very frightened face of Tez.

“Get out of here!” he shouted hoarsely. “Go downstairs! Don’t just sit there - run!” The last few words were shouted as he disappeared from the doorway, but already Stephen and Mike were on their feet.

“What’s the trouble?” called Mike, but Tez was kicking at another door, screaming out his message, which was rapidly becoming incoherent. Stephen and Mike stared at each other, perplexed, and then the repeated yelling of the obviously frightened Tez caused some primeval fear to move in them. They went out into the hall and saw Nancy also standing about, worried, but not sure what to do. Tez was out of sight, but could still be heard exhorting somebody to “get out, quick!”

Stephen headed for the stairs and broke into a shambling run before he reached them. Nancy and Mike followed in silence: tension had grown almost tangibly in the air. Other people appeared at the top of the stairs and started down. A rumble of footsteps resounded as they reached the uncarpeted lower hallway. Stephen, now seriously affected by a sense of growing panic, burst into the placid television room.

“For God’s sake, get out of here!” he shouted, fear evident in every note of his voice. The half a dozen people watching television, faced with this sudden apparition, rose as one and joined the general exodus. The television flickered and chattered to itself in the empty, darkened room.

Stephen kicked at all the remaining doors and shouted out similar instructions, but that was largely unnecessary now: a person would have had to be stone deaf or very stupid to ignore the shouts and stampede noises now roaring around the Home. Doors banged open and were left open as their owners joined in the rush. Tez himself appeared, taking giant leaps down the stairs and managing to take frightened looks behind him as he did so. He bulldozed his way into the throng by the main exit in a frantic effort to obey his own instructions and leave in a hurry.

Suddenly Stephen found he was the last one in the hall, indeed, in the Home. Everybody else had crammed themselves outside, taking their shouts and screams with them. The Home had become ominously quiet, and Stephen ran for the exit, thinking: "Christ! Will I make it?" while all the time he had not the faintest idea of what there was to stop him. His footsteps echoed away into empty rooms and down towards the kitchen; his breath laboured in his own ears as he ran. Then he yanked open the door and was free.

All the other inmates were gathered about in a vague semicircle, huddled together in an attempt to escape the worst of the wind and rain. They all gazed at Stephen, and he gazed back, everybody in a kind of aftershock. Then, when the wind temporarily died, Mike called out:

"Did you see anything?"

Stephen shook his head dumbly, an action which was perfectly visible because most of the Home lights were still switched on, shining from the windows to illuminate the lawn outside.

"Why?" shouted Nancy in another moment when the wind quietened. He was looking about in an effort to locate Tez.

"There he is!" cried Stephen, advancing. Tez, still looking shaken, was being supported by Slim Jim.

"You're the one who started it," accused Stephen. "Why?"

"Yes - why?" asked Mike and many other voices, rounding on Tez.

"Upstairs..." quavered Tez nervously.

"Yes?"

"-yes? Come on!" ordered Nancy.

"Well, I was going to see Cracknell..."

A head moved near the back of the group as Cracknell started in surprise. "I was in the television room."

"Yes, you weren't in your own room," said Tez, gaining confidence. "I knocked on your door, y'know, and there wasn't any reply."

"I've been in the television room ever since the slides," muttered Cracknell to those nearest to him.

"Anyway," said Tez, clearing his throat. The wind gusted, and someone called:

"Speak up! We can't hear at the back!"

“Anyway,” began Tez again, more loudly. “I went in and Cracknell wasn’t there...” He paused, and his eyes glinted in the half-light washed from the Home. “But something was in there! Something strange and ghostly.....gleaming at me out of the darkness! I think...” here his voice dropped, and everyone leaned forward to catch his words, so vivid was his description “...although I wouldn’t swear to it, I got out of there so bloody fast, I think it was...” his voice dropped still lower, and everyone leaned still closer, as if attached by a single string “...a skeleton!”

“A skeleton,” breathed Stephen, although nobody heard him, because the wind immediately swirled the words away.

Hysterical laughing broke out from Cracknell. He banged his forehead on the shoulder of the person next to him. “A skeleton!” he shouted, when he had gained sufficient control of himself. The wind gusted strongly, almost as if in reply, and he was forced to sweep wet hair from his eyes. “Oh no, Tez! There is a skeleton in my room.”

“I know. I saw it! And quite a...”

“No, no! A real skeleton, Tez. I’ve got a real skeleton, name of Holy Joe.”

“A real skeleton,” breathed Stephen inaudibly. Silence descended on the group, as some stood dumfounded at this unexpected development and others nodded their heads as they recalled seeing Holy Joe before. The rain came down even more strongly: Mike wrapped his arms around his sodden shirt and said simply:

“I’m bloody cold.”

This was an uncomplicated thought with which everyone found they could agree. They all moved back towards the main entrance.

“Sorry about that, lads,” apologised Tez, courteously waiting to be the last one in. Cracknell, still shaking with mirth, struck him gently on the shoulder. Before long, it was all over. All of the inmates, some of them still mumbling to themselves, had trooped wetly back into the Home and closed the door on the noise of the continuing storm.

Stephen and Mike stared wanly at the rear of the bus as it disappeared around the corner. Yet again, they had tarried too long in the snooker room, and now faced the prospect of the tiring trek Home.

“Come on, Hitler,” muttered Mike, stoically setting off for the park.

“Yes, Hitler,” said Stephen. They goose-stepped out of the campus and onto the grass: Stephen startled a passer-by with a loud hail.

“If we were Hitler,” mused Mike, “we could commission our own bus.”

“Or tank,” said Stephen.

“Or anything else, for that matter. We could leap out into the road and stop anything we liked.”

“We would never miss the bus!” shouted Stephen triumphantly.

The park was still soggy from the recent rain, so they stopped goose-stepping, because otherwise water squelched up over socks and shoes. Mike leaped over a particularly wet patch, slipped, and almost fell. Stephen grabbed at his shoulder, murmuring: “Steady on, Silver.”

They angled their way around a huge puddle, heading for the safety of a gravel path. Dusk and bad weather hung almost palpably in the sky, mixed inexorably to uniform greyness. All day the rain had held off: Both Mike and Stephen hoped it had not merely been saving itself for this enforced walk.

“We could catch an ordinary bus on the main road,” suggested Stephen.

Mike shook his head. “Not at this time of night, you won’t. They’ll all be full up. Home from a day’s work, dear? Yes dear, the bus was crowded out by students today.”

“All the taxpayers,” said Stephen. “I’d forgotten about them: nine-o’-clock and half past five, lemming ritual. Non-inclusive logic,” he added thoughtfully. “All taxpayers are lemmings, but not vice-versa.”

They made a faster pace on the hard surface of the path, which led straight to the edge of the park nearest to the shopping centre. Street lights were already shining. Not many cars were visible, but the thunder of rush-hour traffic could be heard from the direction of the main road.

“Has it occurred to you,” began Mike slowly, “that we’re training to be taxpayers ourselves? We get our receipt, and then; click! We’re locked out. Thrown to the world and the mercy of the taxpayers already there, who’ve been licking their lips all this time.” He shivered. “What’s the point of it all?”

“Live for the present,” advised Stephen.

They came to the road and waited to cross over into the shopping centre. A pair of headlights detached themselves from the gloom, accelerated towards them, and

passed with a muffled roar. Stephen leaned forward to watch the disappearing taillights.

“Red sports car,” he said. “I’ve seen that one before, somewhere...it must live near Home.” They started to cross the road. “I wouldn’t mind one of those myself.”

“Taxpayer mentality,” said Mike.

“I suppose you’re right.” Stephen thought for a moment. “You want something, you have to work for it. And if you start working, then at the same time you get sucked into a circular vortex. One day you look in a mirror, and a lemming looks back. Did I use an unnecessary adjective there?” He looked across at Mike, who was shadowed strangely in the diffuse light from the shop windows. A dog tied to a waste-paper basket snuffled at them as they walked past.

Mike nodded. “I’m afraid you did.”

Both of them automatically slowed down as they neared the newsagents. A bus roared past them, making conversation temporarily impossible: it pulled up outside the newsagents and started to feed on a queue of people waiting there.

“Look at those people,” muttered Stephen. “They’ve been hypnotised. They look dazed and uncomprehending. Almost as if someone has slugged them, and they’re not even sure if they want to recover.”

“Daily routine,” said Mike cryptically, and came to a halt. Stephen swung round and peered through the lighted window.

“Are you going to buy a paper?”

Mike looked indignant, but had to wait before replying, because the bus chose that moment to roar off into the dusk. “Why?... what?” he spluttered. “You give me one good reason why I should get the evening paper as well as the morning one!”

“Well,” said Stephen. “I don’t know whether you noticed, but I think....” He paused while a late shopper walked past. “...I have a feeling, anyway, that the girl cashier has taken a fancy to you.”

Mike’s face immediately froze as he recognised this as a master-stroke. He had no idea if the claim had any justification, but he obviously had to check it out. And the best way to do so would be to go in and buy a paper.

“...this morning,” Stephen was saying. “I noticed then how nicely she was smiling at you.”

Mike's face adjusted itself into a resigned expression. He was fairly and squarely caught: there was no way out. In all probability, Stephen would now press home his case by offering to himself.

"Of course," said Stephen, "if you insist..."

Wordlessly, Mike brushed past him and went into the newsagents, fishing in his pocket for the necessary change. Stephen leaned against the doorframe. He saw the girl at the counter say something brightly, heard the ring of the till, and then Mike returned.

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if I'd had a nice day."

"See?" said Stephen triumphantly. "It's because you're a regular customer, and she recognises you. Why didn't you ask her to go to that film tonight?"

"I'd forgotten about that," said Mike. "Christ! Does that mean we've got to walk all the way back again later on?"

"We'll manage, I expect."

The noise of the rush hour was getting louder as they negotiated a bend and headed towards the main road. A criss-cross pattern of headlights could be seen at the end of the street; occasionally, a shrill squeal of faulty brakes made itself heard over the general din.

"They're still at it."

A pair of headlights diverged from the main stream and came towards them, only to stop some way short. The lights died. The car disgorged its occupants with a metallic, staccato clamour of closing doors.

"I wonder what they do when they stop work?"

"I wonder what we'll do when we leave here?" returned Mike gloomily.

"You're not still on about that, are you? Look - " Stephen was forced to pause as a lorry rumbled past in the traffic. "Look - " he began again. "Oh, let's wait until we've crossed the bloody road."

Someone was already waiting at the zebra and as they watched, the traffic grumbled reluctantly to a halt. Quickly, they sprinted along the pavement so that they could cross over at same time, and overtook their fellow pedestrian on the zebra itself. Then, without bothering to consult one another, they went down the first side-street in order to avoid the heavy traffic, even though it was not their usual way Home.

“Look,” repeated Stephen, who had had time to consider his case, “you just take care of the present and the future will take care of itself. Half the problems people come up with are because they think too much about what might happen in some distant time to come. You mark my words!”

Mike looked up as a cyclist clanked past. “I don’t know,” he said slowly, as he watched the red rear light weave into the dark. “What would happen if....?”

“Stop!” cried Stephen. “You’re doing it again. Stop thinking about the future!”

“But - ”

“No buts! That’s the sure way to a permanent headache. I cite....” he assumed the rhetorical voice of a lawyer “...Cracknell, for a start.”

The cyclist finally disappeared round some bend and they were left alone on the street. The pools of yellow lamplight failed to make much impression on the night-they even failed to show the tops of the trees, although Mike reflected rather vaguely that this proved nothing: everyone knew that trees did have tops, because they were visible during the day.

“Cracknell?” he said, even more slowly. “I didn’t know Cracknell had any problems.”

“Oh yes,” said Stephen. “He works too hard, y’know. Doesn’t get enough sleep. Crams his mind so full of facts that there isn’t room for anything else - and that’s how being a recluse starts.”

“Good Lord!” said Mike. “I would never have guessed...”

“Of course not,” interrupted Stephen. “You’ve got your mind fixed on the future, and so you don’t notice the first thing about you! Look at Big Jim, for example.”

“Big Jim!” exclaimed Mike, and fell silent. Absently he noticed that the noise of the main road had died away, and that their footfalls echoed oddly in the deserted street, but mostly his thoughts were occupied by the unfamiliar concept that Big Jim was secretly obsessed with some problem.

“Oh yes,” said Stephen again. “Haven’t you noticed?” He worries intensely about the future, because he’s not sure he’s got it in him to be a lawyer. So he thinks about the finished product, instead of buckling down to learn the trade. And as result, he gets all worked up. A sad case....” Stephen shook his head with mock sadness, and glanced across at Mike. “Still, not as bad as Tez.”

Mike almost missed a step in his astonishment. Briefly he entertained a crazy vision of Stephen, dressed in a white coat, holding sessions to which every conceivable person came along to confess their worries.

“Not Tez!” he managed to gasp.

“Oh yes,” said Stephen for the third time. “He reckons he’s slow. If you watch him it becomes obvious that he thinks things are going too fast for him.” Stephen sighed heavily. “Now, if all these people were to concentrate more on the present, instead of some insubstantial future, then they would find the world a better place. Taxpayers and all.”

“Like you do?” asked Mike.

“Like I do,” affirmed Stephen.

They turned a corner which put them back on their usual route, on the last stretch towards Home. A car moved up the street they had just vacated, and the sound of it dwindled into the timeless night.

“It’s not what you might call a definite philosophy,” said Stephen. “But it’ll do. Rather like the line from the song: you’ll still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not. Only I prefer to think of it the other way round.”

Mike automatically considered the idea. *Your dreams will still be here tomorrow, and you may not.* Presumably Stephen meant that there was nothing new under the sun, and that somebody else would carry forward your hopes and aspirations, even if you inadvertently passed away on the spot.

“Life goes on,” he said.

“Does it?” Stephen looked up at the featureless night. “Does it indeed?” he said softly. He glanced across at Mike again. “You can’t see the stars tonight.”

“Stop changing the subject,” said Mike. “Don’t you have a secret worry, then?”

“Only that I haven’t got any secret worries. Will that do?”

Mike scowled. “Sophist!” he swore grimly. He indicated the lights of the Home, which were almost upon them. “D’you think Slim Jim will be in? He wanted to come to that film too, didn’t he? He likes Westerns.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Stephen squeezed his way through the hole in the hedge and squelched his way across the lawn. “If it starts raining, I shan’t bother going at all.”

“Nor me.” Mike peered over Stephen’s shoulder as they both ritually wiped their feet by the main entrance. “Look, I’ll go and see Slim Jim now. If he’s not there I’ll leave a message.”

Stephen plodded upstairs, while Mike went across the lower hall and knocked on a door. There was no reply, so he went in and started hunting about for a piece of paper.

Stephen, meanwhile, had reached his own room and was searching in his pockets for his key. As he did so, somebody walked across the lower hall, paused, then commenced climbing the stairs. Stephen looked over curiously to see who it would be. The footfalls rounded a twist in the stairs, a blonde head appeared, and suddenly a girl walked up the last flight into the hallway. Stephen gaped. What was a girl doing in the Home?

“Er,” said the girl. “I’m looking for Nancy.”

Stephen managed to control his gape, but now the very appearance of the girl played havoc with his mental processes.

“Somebody told me that was what he was called, even though it wasn’t his real name,” continued the girl. “If you get what I mean.”

Stephen nodded dumbly. The sight of her spectacles and pigtails, just as Tez had described, was proving too much for him. Attractive face, did he say? Beautiful, more like.

“I hope they weren’t playing a joke on me,” added the girl, becoming a little discomfited. “Or that I haven’t come to the wrong place.”

Stephen found his voice at last, and waved his arms wildly at the same time. “No, no. Not at all!” he squeaked loudly. “That is,” he added, regained a measure of control over himself, “you haven’t, no. Ahem.” With a finger that trembled slightly, he indicated Nancy’s door. “He lives over there.”

The girl nodded and smiled. “Thank you.”

Stephen watched her cross to the room and unhesitatingly knock on the door. Absently, he resumed his search for his key. After a moment, Nancy’s door opened, although Nancy himself was invisible within the shadow of the doorway. The girl spoke a few words, then disappeared inside. The door closed. After another few moments, Stephen discovered that he had found his key and was staring at it as if he had absolutely no idea what it was. Automatically, he pushed it into the lock.

“I had to leave a message!”

Mike came across to his own room, then stopped short in evident alarm. “Good God, what’s the matter? You’re as white as a sheet.”

Stephen looked at him blankly, wondering how he could appear so normal. The door in front of him creaked open.

“What is it?” Mike came closer, and peered into his face with some concern.

“I think I’ve got a problem after all,” said Stephen. As he spoke, he realised that he had been breathing unevenly, and then suddenly a wave of trembling swept over him. He went inside to sit down. “Christ!” He looked up at Mike, who was standing in the doorway. “I’ve just seen Nancy’s girl.”

“And?” demanded Mike.

“I wish to God she was mine,” said Stephen simply.

Big Jim sprinted up the steps and paused by a small side entrance which was lit by a single yellow bulb. He was wearing an old bush hat, jammed tightly on his head so as to shade his eyes, and he had turned up the collar of his coat. As he peered around the entrance to see if anyone was in view, he had to raise a pair of dark glasses and look underneath them, otherwise everything was too vague. He appeared satisfied with the state of affairs around the corner, because he replaced the dark glasses, and beckoned to somebody behind him.

Tez, in similar heavy disguise, hastened across the lighted pathway and mounted the steps. He almost fell at the top, because he too was wearing dark glasses, and he failed to notice that he had reached the summit and there were no more steps to mount. Big Jim caught and steadied him.

“I don’t know how they do it,” hissed Tez.

“Shh!” cautioned Big Jim, finger pressed to his lips. “You wait here. I’ll go and see what there is to see.” He started to move off, but Tez dragged him back.

“You can’t go like that, can you? Anybody who sees you will know...”

“You’re right,” interrupted Big Jim crisply. He was turning down the collar of his jacket. “Normalcy is the best disguise. Here, hold these.” He thrust the dark glasses at Tez. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He moved away again, unrestrained by Tez, and walked across a small hall with exaggerated casualness. At the far end, he stopped before a large, glass-covered notice board. After a few moments, he leaned forward surreptitiously, and Tez lifted

his own glasses in an attempt to see what was going on. Big Jim leaned back again, shook his head, and returned across the hall in his peculiar ambling stroll. Tez regarded him anxiety as he resumed his disguise.

“Well? Well?”

Big Jim shook his head slowly. “Nothing doing. The timetables are there, all right, but the bloody things overlap so you can’t see the room numbers properly. I tried to open up the glass covers, but they’re all locked.”

Tez raised his hat and scratched his head thoughtfully. “That sort of buggers things up, doesn’t it? Shall we go back?”

Big Jim frowned disapprovingly at this lack of moral fibre, and ignored the question. “We have to assume the problem has a solution, right?” Tez nodded in the feeble overhead light. “I mean, that lecture must be on a timetable somewhere, if we can only find it. Right?” Tez, already nodding, merely carried on doing so.

“So,” muttered Big Jim, looking around in the gloom. “It’s not in there, and it’s not in there, and ...” He continued looking about, mentally checking down a list. “How about the biology?”

“The Biology!” ejaculated Tez.

“Shhh,” remonstrated Big Jim. “We’re spies, remember?”

“You’re right,” whispered Tez. “We haven’t checked the Biology. It’s my turn,” he added, rubbing his hands together. “You wait here till I signal.”

He turned to survey the nearby path. No-one was visible, so he eased cautiously down the steps, took a last look round, then ducked hastily through the light into the shadows opposite. Big Jim could just make him out, but only because he knew he was there.

Tez parted two branches of a small bush and peered down a large, lighted flight of steps which led to an equally large entrance. As he looked, somebody clumped up the steps, turned sharply in front of him, and disappeared. He remained very still until the footsteps had died away, then beckoned behind himself. Seconds later, Big Jim eased down at his side.

“There’s only one thing for it,” murmured Tez. Big Jim also looked between the branches, and nodded in agreement.

“Frontal attack?”

“I’m afraid so.” Tez, who had already removed his disguise, grinned suddenly in the gloom. “I thought for a minute you were going to say ‘full frontal attack.’”

“This is no time for nudity. I mean levity. You go down there and bring home the bacon. You hear?” Tez nodded, and they shook hands solemnly.

“Good luck,” said Big Jim, a catch in his voice. He watched Tez climb onto the path and start down the steps, then burst into muffled laughter.

In front of the entrance, Tez glanced around to make sure no-one was regarding him with undue suspicion, then went inside swiftly. A secretary looked up at him through a little window in her office, but Tez ignored her. He strode across the entrance hall, purposefully heading for the inevitable notice board, which was completely covered with various bits of paper. Once there, he had the good fortune to find the timetable almost immediately.

He frowned. What was it about Biology, anyway? As far as he was concerned, the timetable was complete nonsense. How was anyone supposed to make out a weird conglomeration of arrows, headed laconically by such brevities as *Wed-BG1*? For the particular hour of the week in which he was interested, there were half a dozen headings and room numbers, none of which appeared to mean anything. An arrow went straight through the whole lot, with *Prac: BG3* written on it.

Tez became indecisive. Should he go back and complain to Big Jim about all this, and risk being told off? Or should he use his own initiative, and forge ahead? He steeled his jaw in the best movie tradition. It was obviously his duty to press on, regardless of the consequences.

To this end, he thrust his hands in his pockets and forced himself to stroll casually over to the secretary in her office. She looked up at the sound of his approach, and he raised his eyebrows in an enquiring fashion.

“Er....” he began, and realised suddenly that he hadn’t got his cover story straight. “Working late, aren’t you?” he asked, to give himself time.

“Scarcely,” she replied, looking faintly amused. “I’m on the evening shift.”

“Oh.” Tez’s mind went into overdrive, and it occurred to him that there was no real need to tell her anything specific. “I wonder if you could explain how the timetable works? That one on the wall over there. I was trying to figure out.. something, and I can’t make head or tail of it.”

“Well, no, I can’t,” said the secretary. Tez panicked inwardly. Good God - what had he done? What infernal biological taboo had he tampered with? “I don’t know myself,” admitted the secretary, and he relaxed. As it turned out, he relaxed too

soon, because she then asked the question he had been dreading. “Why did you want to know?”

Why did he want to know? He cast around for some plausible reason, failed to find one, and ended up by mumbling:

“Link. On a Tuesday, you see....”

“Ah, you want to book the Link!” said the secretary brightly.

Tez nodded, unwilling to take verbal responsibility for this misconception.

“Well, I can’t help you there, either,” said the secretary, not very sympathetically. “You’ll have to go along...” she pointed to a doorway “...there, and see the Director about it.”

“The Director?”

“Yes,” she said patiently. “He directs, y’know. His office is along there, and it’s got ‘Director’ written on it.”

Tez raised a finger with the air of one who was just had a brilliant inspiration, turned, and headed towards the door she had indicated. Inwardly, he was thinking that she was rather a supercilious secretary who ought to be removed forthwith. He had been made to feel rather foolish and he, after all, was the customer who should be satisfied. On the other hand-Tez smiled a half-smile to himself - she had vastly underestimated him. She had no inkling that he was a spy. That was really professional: no glory, only the sense of a job well done. Yes. His half-smile broadened into a full grin as he reflected that he had fooled her rather cleverly. Big Jim would be pleased to hear about that piece of under-handedness.

A door bearing the inscription *Director* suddenly appeared before him, a forceful reminder that the job was far from complete. He hesitated. Should he go in and risk the whole operation, or just walk on past and rejoin Big Jim? At least that way he would remain unknown. Unconsciously, he re-steeled his jaw, then knocked on the door and entered.

A grey-haired man inside looked up and enquired mildly: “Yes?”

Tez swallowed nervously. Yet again he had neglected to gather together a cover story, and now he faced the prospect of some accelerated and uncomfortable thinking. “I was wondering about the Link,” he said, deciding to put on a bold front.

“You want to book it?”

“Er - no. I just want to find out who’s in there at ten-thirty on Tuesdays.”

“You a biologist?” asked the man sharply.

“No.” Tez suddenly invented a story and decided to stick with it. “No, you see, I have to give somebody a lift...”

“Oh? What’s his name?”

“Er, I don’t know that. He’s a friend of a friend...”

“What group is he in?”

“I don’t know.”

“What year?”

“I don’t know that, either.” Tez shifted uncomfortably as he made these admissions.

“You don’t know much about him, do you?” Paradoxically, Tez sighed with relief. The tone the man had used showed that he was not interrogative by nature, but merely intrigued by the problem.

“No,” said Tez, thinking fast. “He should recognise me, in fact. I just wanted to make sure of...” He let the sentence trail off as the man thumbed through an index file.

“I don’t see ... Wait a minute, though. Could he be a first year?”

Tez nodded dumbly.

“Then that’s it!” The man sat back, and Tez momentarily thought: bureaucratic triumph.

“Biochemistry 1B. Check it out on the timetable.” The man’s interest almost visibly waned. The problem had cropped up, been presented, and he had solved it. It was over. Nodding and mumbling a vague form of gratitude, Tez backed thankfully out of the room.

Moments later, he rejoined Big Jim, who had abandoned concealment in favour of sitting on a step outside the building. Without saying anything, he stood up and started off for the Home beside Tez, who immediately launched into a lengthy and colourful description of the events which had befallen him. In fact, it was so lengthy, and Big Jim interrupted so many times, that they had covered three quarters of their journey before it was finished.

“Whew,” said Big Jim, and slapped a lamppost they happened to be passing. “I bet you were worried when the Director went for his gun.”

“It was nothing,” said Tez modestly. “I knew he was with Administration, so I was ready for it.”

Big Jim squinted through the night towards the lights of the Home. “A valuable piece of information,” he said. “Nancy will be pleased, won’t he?”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” said Tez magnanimously.

“I should think not,” said Big Jim, indignant. “It was my idea in the first place.”

“Like hell!” said Tez rudely. “You would never have thought of bracing admin.”

Big Jim squeezed through the gap in the hedge and tactfully changed the subject. “Shall we tell Nancy right away?”

“I was coming to that,” said Tez. “I think we should tell Stephen or Cracknell first. They’ve been collating the information, haven’t they?”

“Information. If any,” corrected Big Jim, crunching onto the path and opening the door. “Come on, let’s see who’s in.”

They went upstairs, both satisfied with their efforts of the evening. Big Jim was thinking that it had been a brilliant idea, to check out all the available timetables in order to discover exactly who was in the Link at that time on Tuesdays. It made use of the only piece of information Nancy possessed about the girl: that she had a lecture in that place at ten-thirty. He, the lawyer, had assimilated the facts, and come up with a continuation which had produced results. Big Jim nodded to himself. Not only had he boosted his confidence in his own rational abilities, but he had also done something to help Nancy.

Tez, following behind Big Jim as they reached the top of the stairs, was also smiling to himself. He had come through his self-imposed ordeal very well. Seldom had so many difficult questions been shot at him in so short a time, and yet he had acquitted himself nobly by answering them all, without leaving any suspicion in the questioner’s mind. He had needed to do some fast thinking back there, but he had come through, and now was in a position to give Nancy a helping hand.

At the top of the stairs, they both paused. Cracknell’s door was securely closed, but from round the corner, Stephen’s room was throwing some extra light into the hall. With one accord, they wheeled around and headed towards it.

“...just take it easy,” a voice said. They came closer, and saw it was Mike, who was helping Stephen to sit upright.

“What’s happened?” asked Big Jim. Mike looked up at the new arrivals, and noticed how excited they looked.

“You’ve lost sixpence and found a shilling, haven’t you?” he accused.

“Yes, maister,” grinned Tez, tugging an imaginary forelock. Mike straightened, his face registering interest.

“Information,” said Big Jim succinctly. “We’ve got some information about Nancy’s girl.”

“Nancy’s girl,” groaned Stephen.

“-Nancy’s girl!” cried Mike. “Don’t mention her, or he’ll faint or something!” Big Jim and Tez looked curiously at Stephen, who seemed somewhat the worse for wear.

“I’ve just seen her,” admitted Stephen. “She’s taken matters into her own hands, by coming to see Nancy. She’s in there now.” He groaned and rubbed his forehead. Absently, Tez remembered the same action performed by Nancy. “I saw her because she asked me directions,” continued Stephen. “God, she’s fantastic.”

An abrupt pause descended upon the four of them as he finished, and they thought their separate thoughts. Mike, perhaps the least affected in the group, listened intently for any stray sounds. He failed to hear any. Whatever was taking place inside Nancy’s room, it certainly wasn’t animated conversation. He sat down on the bed, next to Stephen.

“Cheer up,” he said comfortingly.

“Yeah,” muttered Tez, his thoughts elsewhere. “Why don’t you? The worst is yet to come.”

Nancy sat in his room and thought dismally about his state of mind. He did this so frequently that his brain automatically followed a well-worn route, like logical and inevitable steps in a mathematical proof. It had become such a familiar train of thought that most of the time he did not really consider it at all, but pondered instead on the way in which he had come to this circular situation.

He well remembered the first occasion on which he had seen her. At the same time, it came to him that he had thought about this momentous event an innumerable number of times. In this way, his brain sidled two-fold around the problem. Half of it considered that moment in time when she first came into his life, and the other half considered the fact that, yet again, he was considering that moment.

It took place, quite unexpectedly, in between lectures one afternoon. He was sitting on a bench with some other people, thinking about the possible start to a poem. Around him buzzed conversation almost entirely devoted to the imminent lecture, but he managed to block most of this out and concentrate instead on the few lines he had in mind. After a while, everybody stood up and started to shuffle reluctantly towards the door, because the lecturer had appeared from within and said brightly:

“Here I am! Come in, one and all!”

Nancy sighed and temporarily dismissed the proposed poem from his mind. He slid off the bench, and as he stood upright, he glanced absently at the stairway arising from the middle of the concourse. The stairway was comprised of white steps edged with black. Several people were descending them, clutching various books and cases, and looking suitably windswept by the weather outside. Nancy only eyed them because they happened to come within his field of vision, but the result was a hammer-blow shock which almost knocked the breath from his body.

Sitting alone in his room, in the future, he remembered with perfect vividness that initial violent reaction. As a side issue, he wondered whether other people experienced the same kind of thing, the same dizzying, staggering, delicious disbelief. It was almost as if it had been stage-produced. All sounds swirled and diminished down some circular well, vanishing entirely. His eyes took on a telescopic property, tracking one figure as it descended the stairs. The other new arrivals blurred into peripheral movement; edging in a dream. His whole attention was caught by one girl: pig-tails swinging slightly, glasses glinting in the overhead lights, frowning as she came down the steps with care. Nancy's telescopic eyesight followed her smoothly down, all the way to the floor level, and even then he was incapable of any rational thought.

Other people jostled past him, into the lecture room. Somehow, part of him was aware of this, although virtually his entire attention had coalesced onto the walking figure of the girl. In the future, almost as if hypnotised and reliving the event, he saw with unnatural clarity that many people had noticed his immobile stance. At the same time, he reflected that each time he relived the first occasion, a little more detail came into view, a few more staring faces drifted across his mind's eye.

The girl had turned sharply at the foot of the steps, away from him, and walked towards some distant lecture room. More new arrivals then came down the

stairs, all of them bit players in this silent scene, and effectively blocked her from view. Nancy had stood there, unmoving, until he was convinced in spite of himself that she was not coming back to throw his mind again into that wondering confusion.

In his room, he sat back and sighed deeply. Nothing had ever been the same again. He had missed that particular lecture, because he had forgotten to go into the theatre - he had stood in a kind of thrall for some time. Now, it had got to the stage where almost any passing thought would bring an image of her floating across his inner vision. Even now, he could see her smiling face and confident walk: her pig-tails and long green coat were more real to him than the confines of his room.

“You poor bugger,” he said loud to himself.

Another voice, unbidden, arose in his memory. “You lucky bugger!” Big Jim had exclaimed when he had first heard about the girl. That had been - Nancy’s forehead creased as he tried to remember - oh yes, in the hall, outside this very room. At this unexpected thought, reality intruded, and he looked around.

The room was in complete darkness, because night had fallen while he had sat in his reverie. Now, he rose and stretched stiffly, went across to switch on the light, and then returned to his chair.

The worst part of it all, was that he felt utterly unable to do anything about the situation. All his friends said he should just go and talk to her, but he found he simply lacked the courage to do so. Even within himself, he didn’t know why. What could she do, after all, that would make things worse?

He remembered that Tez had said exactly the same. That had been on the day he had walked into the door - a silly thing to do. But it wasn’t really his fault. It was simply that he couldn’t help himself. He smiled faintly, and scratched his head in an embarrassed fashion, even though he was alone in the room. That was literally true. And Tez had tried to help, but failed-or at least, he had failed to take advantage of the assistance Tez had offered.

They had sat in the cafeteria for ages, it seemed, and Tez kept on trying to cheer him up.

“Come on, look on the bright side.”

In his lighted room, Nancy rocked forward on his chair, and muttered ‘the bright side’, an untypically cynical look on his face. If there was a bright side, he couldn’t see it. The same thought had apparently occurred to Tez after a while, because he had tried a different tack.

“Cheer up!” he exhorted. “The worst is yet to come!”

As an attempt at humour, this had fallen exceptionally flat, and Tez shifted uncomfortably when he realised it. Nancy only looked up and gazed sightlessly across the cafeteria. Perhaps, he thought in the future, perhaps he should have produced at least a token smile. Tez had only been trying to help.

Eventually, they had stood up to leave, and the girl had chosen that very moment to show herself, walking away from them, out into the concourse. Nancy immediately started to follow her, and Tez, understanding what had happened, caught up and prodded him in the back.

“Go on, then. Go on.”

Nancy remembered that his determination at this point had never been so high. He had walked out into the concourse fully intending to catch her up and speak to her. But a small cluster of people interposed itself between the girl and himself: all he could do was follow on behind them as the whole group started upstairs. It was impossible to get past the people and catch her up. The stairs curved slightly, so he was able to keep her constantly in sight, and he recalled that all the time he chafed impatiently to reach the top, where he could at least do something positive towards his desire to get to know her.

Then something curious happened. The girl had been looking all around her, because she too was following behind a group of people, and was moving more slowly than she wanted. When she was about three quarters of the way up the steps and Nancy about half way, she glanced behind her. Her eyes momentarily met his, then passed on, looking down at the concourse they had just left.

To her, this held no significance at all. To Nancy, it was an overwhelming event. All his courage oozed away and congealed on the cold stone steps. His breath came in gasps. His knees started to buckle, and it was only Tez grabbing him from behind that prevented him from toppling over backwards, and falling down the stairs. The girl then reached the upper concourse and disappeared from view long before Nancy was even recovered enough to put one foot in front of another.

In the future, he shivered suddenly. More time had passed while he sat motionless, and the room had become bleak in the strangling grasp of night. The uncurtained window was a featureless blank, although from certain places it took on the aspects of a mirror, reflecting the interior of the room. Strangely, the overhead light did nothing but enhance the empty, almost eerie atmosphere.

Yet again, he arose stiffly. He went across to the window and tried to peer through it by leaning very close and shading his eyes, but all he could see was his own face peering back. Somewhere in those eyes, he thought, there had to be a note of desperation, but all he could see were faint traces of amusement. Was it always to be like that? Deep down, would he be forever unable to see any way of resolving his own, self-admitted plight?

With a sharp movement, he closed the curtains, an action which somehow forced reality into the room. The harsh noise of the curtains was immediately followed by a tapping sound, and it was some moments before he could comprehend that someone had knocked on the door. Tiredly, he walked across, put out his hand, and reluctantly opened the door.

It opened enough so that he could see who was standing there, and time instantly stopped with an almost audible screech. He stood stock still and stared, fascinated, at the girl who had so completely commandeered his brain. His thoughts ground to a halt. He did not wonder why she was there, or what was going to happen, or indeed anything at all. He was suddenly transformed into a detached observer, with no ability to influence even his own actions.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you Nancy?”

Nancy considered this question. Was he Nancy? The query entered his ears, stopped short at the stunned surface of his mind, then slowly filtered through. He supposed, upon reflection, that he was Nancy.

“Yes.” He nodded slowly, contriving to keep his eyes on her face as he did so. Some other part of him was able to visualise the scene with perfect clarity-himself nodding inanely, and nothing in his brain.

“I thought I’d come to see you,” said the girl, smiling. “Can I come in?”

This question also took its time to get through to him, and during the pause the girl’s smile began to fade, awkwardness almost becoming apparent. Then Nancy jerked into action, stepping back, and saying breathlessly, “yes! yes, of course..”

She moved forward, and Nancy started to close the door behind her. Momentarily, he caught sight of Stephen standing transfixed by his own door, looking across in their direction. Then the latch locked the sight from view, and the girl started to say:

“What....?”

Nancy, turning almost in slow motion from the door, had already made up what was left of his mind to speak. He spread his arms and said expansively. "Take a seat!" and then realised he had interrupted her. He mumbled a few more incomprehensible words.

The girl smiled again, smoothed her skirt, and sat in the armchair Nancy had so recently vacated. He perched on the edge of the table and cleared his throat. The stunned sensation in his brain had faded away, and now his thoughts were accelerating into a state of incredible confusion. Time started to move again, slowly gentling forward into the silence. He folded his arms and tapped a foot on the floor. The girl kept on smiling at him, time kept on moving forward, and he couldn't, for the life of him, think of anything to say. His thoughts accelerated still further, pushing him into a vortex of chaos; he breathed heavily, opened his mouth and, eyes still fixed on that friendly smile, said desperately and in spite of a sudden rattle of rain on the window:

"Er - it's turned out nice again, hasn't it?"

Cracknell glanced at his watch while John T Rex was sizing up the position.

"Should be ten minutes left," he said. "But I'm sure the bloody thing's short-changing us."

"You could be right," murmured John T Rex. He selected his shot, and played it steadily.

"Hah, missed! You've got no chance!" cried Cracknell, who waited until the balls stopped rolling, then also started sizing up the position.

"So how did the tutorial go?" asked John T Rex. "I had one last week, but the bloke forgot to turn up, so I went back Home. Maybe he's forgotten all about me," he added hopefully.

Cracknell nodded. "My bloke turned up, all right. Mind you, there are three of us who go at the same time. He'd have a job forgetting all three of us. I..." With a smug click, the meter ran out and automatically switched off the light. The illumination was suddenly transformed into meagre radiance provided by a light shining outside the snooker room. "Bugger! The damn thing's definitely up the spout. That game was over five minutes short."

John T Rex sniggered. "I was winning at the time. Moral victory."

Cracknell did not bother to reply. He replaced his cue in the nearest rack and took down his coat. Outside, it was fairly certain to be cold, although the rain had managed to hold off all day.

“We’ll try a different table next time. Then we’ll see who wins!”

With a last check to make sure they had left nothing behind, they went out into the concourse and headed for a side entrance. At that time of evening it was almost deserted, and their footfalls echoed loudly down various corridors. Cracknell stuffed his hands into his pockets and frowned.

“Yes, the bloke turned up, and we spent yet another hour discussing the nature of reality. Every time it’s the same. We start off on the proper subject, then some smart alec always asks something like: ‘But how do we know the information we receive isn’t purely subjective?’” He snorted. “As if it really matters, one way or the other.”

John T Rex skipped ahead, opened the door at the side entrance, and looked out into the night. Cracknell came up behind him and also peered out. Both of them were relieved to see that the rain had continued to hold off, although there was a coldness in the night air. They buttoned up their coats and went down the small flight of steps, illuminated by a single bulb.

“The question,” said John T Rex suddenly and precisely, “begs itself. I mean, it’s either information, or it isn’t. There’s not a lot of leeway, is there?”

Cracknell shook his head in the darkness. “Exactly what I was saying. Matter of definition.” He blew on his hands and banged his feet hard on the ground to keep circulation going. “I suppose it’s rather arrogant to assume that we humans, with our paltry five senses.....”

“.....or six,” murmured John T Rex, and Cracknell bent an invisibly stern glare upon him.

“....are capable of receiving all the information available to us. Even with artificially extended ranges in those senses.” He took his hands out of his pockets and blew on them again.

“But what’s the point?” asked John T Rex.

“I agree,” returned Cracknell obscurely.

John T Rex thought for a few minutes, while they reached the park and trod gingerly across the still sodden grass. He shook his head in a gesture of helplessness. “You have a peculiar method of arguing,” he said finally.

“Who’s to say?” argued Cracknell. “I don’t find it in the least unusual. If you want to argue with me, you’ll just have to get used to it.”

By tacit agreement, they both veered towards a convenient gravel path, because the park was not so much a park as a mud-bath. Before they reached it, John T Rex trod in a deep puddle and swore horribly. Cracknell chuckled and said:

“By our Lady! Good Lord, don’t tell me you believe in all that stuff? Why do you do it?”

“To keep myself from crying,” grumbled John T Rex, who was squelching along in considerable discomfort.

“Ah, so you’ve heard that, too. You’re not the religious sort, then?”

“A devout atheist,” replied John T Rex.

Lights in the shopping centre shone brightly at them from the other side of the road. The rush hour had died away, and with it the roaring of traffic. John T Rex and Cracknell found themselves walking through a cocoon of silence, woven by the size of the park.

“There are people who claim that everybody has a need to believe in something,” said Cracknell. He scuffed at the gravel, glanced up at the invisible sky, and blew on his hands again.

“Perhaps they don’t believe in themselves,” said John T Rex, and squelched to a halt by the side of the road. All was clear, so they crossed over and headed down the shopping centre. “After all, if they don’t believe in themselves, how can they believe in anybody else?”

“Nor do I understand,” said Cracknell, whose thoughts had moved off in a different direction, “why everything has to be attributed to some supernatural force. Why does so-and-so happen? Ah - God decreed it, don’t y’know.”

John T Rex nodded in mute agreement, and a pause developed while they considered these weighty problems. They walked straight past the newsagents and around the bend which would eventually bring them out onto the main road. A few cars droned past them as they did so, and a few pedestrians kept them company on the pavements, but for the most part, even the shopping centre was deserted. Some of the shops had already closed. It was not until they reached the main road and the zebra crossing came into view, that Cracknell finally thought of something to say.

“Come on!” cried John T Rex, and squelched off at a faster rate. Cracknell, his train of thought completely broken, hastened after him. A car had stopped at the

zebra to let a girl cross over, but she had completed the trip, and the car had moved off, before they could get there.

“Taxpayer!” shouted John T Rex, waving a fist at the disappearing tail-lights. Cracknell surveyed the now empty road.

“Why the bother? We can cross anyway.”

“It’s not so much fun,” grumbled John T Rex. “Where’s the challenge in crossing an empty road?”

They went over and continued on towards the sidestreet which eventually led Home. Cracknell cleared his throat moodily. “I was about to say something just then, and you interrupted me. Now I can’t remember what it was.”

“Must have been important.”

Cracknell cast back in his mind, trying to recall what they had been talking about earlier. This was a favourite hobby of his. Occasionally, he would find himself thinking of some strange fact or notion, with no recollection of how he had come to do so, and he had developed the habit of reconstructing the train of thought which had led to that state of affairs. Now, he remembered that they had been talking of religion, and he had been about to say:

“It seems to me that religion, and all that sort of thing, sets down a lot of moral rules for people to live by. Is that right?”

“Right,” confirmed John T Rex.

“But then it goes haywire, because some omnipotent being is credited with the rules. It seems to me that it shouldn’t matter two hoots who’s got the copyright. Yes?”

“Pride, perhaps,” said John T Rex. “Though I agree with your argument,” he added hastily.

“The bible,” continued Cracknell, “is the best ever selling work of fiction, right?”

“I guess so,” replied John T Rex in an American accent.

As they turned up the sidestreet, by the pillar-box, the first few drops of cold rain began to fall, and a wind began to stir. They both turned up their collars and walked faster. A group of people, talking and laughing in the night, made their way in the opposite direction, on the other pavement. The sound of their voices and noisy footsteps faded and disappeared behind.

“Mind you,” said John T Rex, “I wouldn’t necessarily agree that it was a good work of fiction. I was arguing with somebody only the other day. It got quite heated. I maintained - ”

“Come on, hurry up,” said Cracknell, walking even faster. In places, the rain was now visible, slanting down from the black sky into the pools of yellow lamplight.

“I maintained,” repeated John T Rex, breathlessly but with dignity, “that a good book was one you enjoyed, not one that everybody else said was good. And so, in my opinion, a good Western was better than War and Peace. And still is,” he concluded, slightly confused.

“Matter of definition,” gasped Cracknell. “I think we’re just going to make it before it really come down.”

The lights of the Home were almost upon them, and their hurried footsteps began to race with the increasing hiss of rain. Water was already dripping from the hedge as they pushed their way through it, and the lawn was slowly becoming water-logged, rather than merely muddy. Hastily, they reached the gravel path and opened the door into shelter.

“Cup of tea,” said Cracknell without hesitating, and carried on down the corridor towards the kitchen. John T Rex followed, shrugging off his coat in a careful manner calculated to keep the rest of him dry. The light in the kitchen was switched on, and the kettle was steaming gently, so it was obvious that someone had been there only recently. Cracknell refilled the kettle and prepared various bits and pieces in readiness for two cups of tea. “Bloody weather,” he grumbled.

John T Rex spread out his coat on the food lockers and sat down on the small stool by the sink. He flipped back some wet hair from his eyes.

“Shopkeepers,” he said conversationally, “don’t seem to be able to talk about anything else. Morning sir, can I help you? Bit nippy out, isn’t it?”

“Then put - ”

“A packet of tea,” interrupted John T Rex firmly, “two cigarette lighters, and a ham roll. Yes, still, it’s not as cold as yesterday.”

“Perhaps it’ll be warmer tomorrow,” continued Cracknell, entering into the spirit of the conversation. “That’ll be thirty-nine and six, sir.”

“Outrageous prices! The government ought to be ashamed of itself!”

“Indeed, sir. Thank-you, sir.” Cracknell rang up the sale on a till. “Perhaps we are due for a brighter spell.”

The kettle wheezed strongly into full voice. John T Rex stood up, turned it off, and filled the pot. He returned to his seat, pausing once to close the curtains before he sat down. The kitchen seemed smaller, and somehow warmer, without the blank night peering in through the window.

Cracknell struggled out of his own coat and laid it beside that of John T Rex. As he did so, the kettle faded into silence, and the weather outside made itself heard: rain beating on the window, wall and ground. Faintly, voices from upstairs filtered through the corridor into the kitchen.

“Somebody’s in,” said Cracknell. “Let’s take this lot upstairs.” He rooted around for a tray, found one, and loaded it up with all the tea-making paraphernalia. John T Rex watched this procedure without speaking. “Leave the coats,” ordered Cracknell. “They’ll dry more quickly in here. Let’s go and find out whatever there’s to find out.”

John T Rex nodded agreeably, and followed his companion through the corridor, into the lower hall. On one of the walls, in large red letters, was inscribed *raffit*. Somebody else had been hard at work with a cleaning cloth.

Cracknell ascended the stairs carefully, applying all his concentration to the delicate matter of not over-balancing the tray. Once upstairs, he found the source of voices to be Stephen’s room, so he turned left and went in that direction.

“Tea up!” called John T Rex from behind him.

Conversation in Stephen’s room died and four faces looked up at the newcomers.

“Christ!” exclaimed John T Rex hastily. “I didn’t know there was four of you. I amend my earlier statement.” He followed Cracknell in to the crowded room. “In fact, I retract it.”

Cracknell lowered the tray onto the working table, and became conscious of a heavy tension in the room. “What’s up?”

Mike cleared his throat, and looked across at Big Jim, who indicated Tez and said: “Tell it.”

Tez also cleared his throat. “Er... it seems we have a problem. Stephen here....”

“Firstly,” cut in Big Jim, “you might as well know that Tez and I went spying tonight. Hah! Spying tonight!” He caught a glimpse of Stephen’s sombre face, and

quietened down. "Sorry. Anyway, we discovered that Nancy's girl is a first year biologist."

John T Rex looked from one person to another. "But that's great!" he enthused. "Well done! So what's the problem?"

Tez shrugged expressively. "It was all a waste of time."

"She took matters into her own hands," explained Mike. "She's come to see Nancy of her own accord - in fact, she's in there now." He glanced at his watch. "Been in there ten minutes already."

Cracknell frowned. "I still don't see the problem. So a bit of spying was a waste of time... At least Nancy..."

Mike indicated Stephen, who was still sitting on the bed with a distracted and unhappy expression on his face. "*He's* the problem. He's had the misfortune to talk to the girl and fall head over heels in love with her. We've been sat here trying to figure out what to do ever since. And I," said Mike, leaning forward confidentially, "have been dreading the moment when that door opens and she comes out again."

Rain pattered loudly on the window, and Slim Jim looked irritably towards the curtains, as if he could quell the storm by a mental effort. The wind gusted, then subsided into a faint background noise. Slim Jim transferred his attention back to the book he was trying to read. For the last hour he had been sitting in his armchair, vainly trying to peruse as much as he could before he considered it time to stop work for the day. Circumstances, however, dictated that he was continually disturbed; by people coming in or going out of the Home, by the storm which had blown up, by other people holding conversations just outside the door to his room. He turned a page and was interrupted yet again, this time by somebody knocking on the door. Resignedly, he closed the book with a snap.

"Come in."

Mike entered, a vaguely surprised look on his face. He took in the sight of Slim Jim sitting in the chair, then peered across the room in the general direction of the working table. "Didn't you get my note?"

Slim Jim assimilated this question and answered it without batting an eyelid. "Nope."

Mike advanced into the room, strode across to the table, and seized a piece of paper which was lying there. He cleared his throat in oratorical fashion. "Reads-" he peered over imaginary spectacles to make sure Slim Jim was paying attention" - 'Are you going to that film?' Short, but I think you'll agree it's to the point."

Slim Jim was looking at him with undisguised astonishment. "Go to the film?" he exclaimed. "In this?" He made a vague gesture which indicated he was referring to the storm. As if to punctuate his remark, the wind gusted once more, although the rain sounded less persistent.

"Well, it is a Western." Mike cleared his throat again, aware that this constituted insufficient reason. "Er - we weren't going to go, in this weather, either. But Stephen wants something to take his mind off - er-things. You see..."

He paused. Slim Jim regarded him expectantly. "Yes? Go on."

"That is," hesitated Mike. "Oh, I suppose you'll find out soon enough. Everybody's wandering about with lugubrious faces, so it's pretty obvious something has happened."

Slim Jim leaned forward; absently, he heard footsteps descending the stairs outside. "Yes, yes? Go on."

Mike hesitated a moment longer, then said in a rush: "Stephen's very upset because he's fallen for Nancy's girl, and we've all been wondering what to do about it. You wouldn't know, by any chance?" he added hopefully.

Slim Jim sat back and steepled his fingers. "Well, well," he said. "Well, well."

The wind blew loudly, rattling the window pane, and Mike turned to peer through the curtains. When he squinted hard, he could just make out the shape of a tree bending in the wind, although vision was obscured by darkness and blurred by water on the window. On the other hand, he failed to see any rain, even in the light which was escaping from the room.

"It looks as if it might have stopped raining."

He turned back to Slim Jim, who was twiddling his thumbs earnestly. At Mike's statement, he looked up.

"Maybe so, but it doesn't sound so good to me. I think I'll stay in tonight. Join you next week, perhaps. And if..."

"Mike!"

The call came from the general direction of the stairs, and Mike anxiously recrossed the room towards the door. "That's him now. See you later, Jim."

"Sure." Slim Jim watched as Mike left the room almost at the run, then opened his book in order to return to his reading.

Outside, Stephen sat dismally on the stairs, a mug in his hand. He was looking over the banisters, towards the main entrance, and signs of bewilderment were mixed with the unhappiness in his face. Mike ascended a few steps to sit down beside him.

"How can she do this?" asked Stephen. "A couple of hours ago, I had no troubles at all."

Mike shook his head, but couldn't think of any suitable reply. Stephen continued to look at the main entrance for a few more moments, then glanced at his mug, across at Mike, and ended up by staring sightlessly into the lower hall. Finally, he sighed, and started to stand upright.

"Why the mug?" Mike also got to his feet, and clambered up to the top of the stairs behind Stephen.

"It was my excuse for coming down at the same time as she did. But I couldn't think of anything to say to her." Stephen pinged his finger against the mug, sighed again, and walked back to his room. "Come on, let's get ready. Is Slim Jim coming?" Another thought struck him, and he turned in the doorway. "Come to that, are you coming?"

Mike was opening the door to his own room. "Yes, I might as well. I think it's stopped raining, anyway. But Slim Jim is leaving it for this week.

Each of them went into their respective rooms to get their coats and, in Stephen's case, a hat. They returned to the hallway and walked in silence back downstairs to the main entrance. Outside, it had indeed stopped raining, but it was still quite windy. They both buttoned up their coats. It was also very wet underfoot, so they took the longer route along the gravel path for a change, because the lawn was invisibly water-laden.

Side by side, they carried on down the street, still without talking. Stephen was occupied with his own dark thoughts, and Mike simply couldn't think of anything to say. He had never seen his friend in such an introspective state before, and was far from sure how he should react. He could behave in a very concerned fashion, but then perhaps Stephen would suddenly revert to his usual cynical self, and mock him for being so sentimental. Or he could take a light, bantering attitude, except that then

Stephen might get upset at his apparent lack of sympathy. Perhaps the best thing to do would be to take a middle course, and see how the land lay. For that matter, perhaps that was always the best course to take. Mike nodded to himself, and this action served to jolt a query into his mind.

“What are you thinking?”

At first it appeared that Stephen had failed to hear the question. Then he made an effort to look around him, for the first time since they had left the Home. “What I was thinking?” he repeated slowly. “Well, I’ll tell you.” He paused, and looked around again, as if vaguely surprised that nothing had really changed since last he had been there. “I’ve been thinking about...” he shrugged “...life, I suppose. Life in general, and mine in particular. Do you want to hear about it?”

“Sometimes it helps to talk,” said Mike.

Stephen looked across at him. “And sometimes it doesn’t,” he returned evenly.

They were speaking quite normally, because the wind had died away almost as soon as they had started along the road. Everywhere now lay oddly quiet, either glistening wetly or shrouded in darkness. A thin stream trickled along the roadside guttering and every time they passed a drain, they could hear a subdued gurgle as water fell into unseen depths. Overhead, the sky was beginning to clear, revealing stars on a velvet backdrop.

Stephen suddenly made up his mind to speak. “Some of the things apply to you as well, y’know.”

“What things?”

“Question: what have you done with your life so far? Answer: nothing. Nor have I. But I’m beginning to feel the lack of ...something.” He was staring at the ground. “Something,” he repeated softly.

Mike was pleased that Stephen had started to talk, but was appalled at the bleakness of his words. “Things can’t be that bad, can they? Isn’t somebody always worse off than yourself?”

“Spare me your bloody clichés!” snarled Stephen, with a savageness which made Mike jump. “What sort of an answer is that? Comparing me with others is the last thing I need.”

Mike prudently refrained from replying. He started fixedly ahead, where the pillar-box at the end of the street had come into view. A car splashed easily past,

decelerating, indicator flashing left. It turned onto the main road and moved on out of sight.

“I was thinking,” continued Stephen, his voice now somewhat remote, “that if they did a programme - this is your life - on me, then they could fit it in the commercial break.”

“Mine too,” said Mike.

Stephen smiled briefly, appreciative for the first time of Mike’s efforts to cheer him up. “It doesn’t bother you, though. We think differently about the same thing, so you can’t really make a comparison.” He paused. They turned the corner onto the main road. “I wonder what Nancy would think of all this? Would he be sympathetic, or incensed at my bloody cheek? Though I must say - ” Stephen took a large step over a puddle “ - that I can’t really imagine Nancy getting worked up in that sort of way.”

Mike’s thoughts went back, not to Nancy, but to Slim Jim, sitting alone in his room. Presumably he was still sitting there. He wondered whether the conversation would have taken the same course if all three of them had gone in to see the film. He peered across at Stephen, who was still walking along with a distracted expression on his face. “Wonder if the film’ll be any good?”

Stephen looked up. His eyes gleamed as they passed a lamppost. “Christ! What an unfeeling thing to say!”

Mike almost smiled to himself, but suppressed it in case Stephen should misunderstand. It was the first time he had correctly predicted the response to one of his remarks since they had left home. Since before that, in fact. Stephen had been morosely unpredictable right from the time he had seen Nancy’s girl.

“I mean who cares about the film? What does it matter? Why should a piece of celluloid command such attention?”

Mike did not reply, since Stephen was really getting worked up and there was the hopeful possibility that this might act as a release valve.

“Taxpayers watch films! Good God! Perhaps I should go off someplace where there’s no people, and I wouldn’t feel so alone! Films...” Stephen threw up his hands and stomped on ahead. “Come on - hurry up! Let’s go and see the wretched bloody thing.”

Mike watched him stalk angrily towards the zebra crossing.

“Wait till you feel like I do.” Stephen had turned, was resting his hands on his knees, and was shouting at the top of his voice. “Come on - catch me if you can!”

He turned and ran into the zebra, and at that precise moment a red sports car hurtled around the bend, engine whining, correcting a slight skid. Mike stopped, horrified. He had time to notice that front bumper was already dented, before it caught Stephen as he slipped on the wet road. The car grunted slightly, as if with the effort of throwing that obstacle up into the air. Stephen cartwheeled sickeningly over the bonnet, arms flailing rag-doll fashion. Even over the noise of the car, Mike heard a distinct thud as he hit the top of the windscreen. Then the engine noise grew as the car accelerated, and Stephen was finally thrown clear, landing face downwards on already fading tyre-marks in surface water.

Mike lurched in shock, and almost fell. His thoughts swirled dizzily; for a moment, he was on the verge of passing out. Strangely, it came into his mind that he was watching a film and the spool was slowing down. The whole scene seemed to progress in awkward jerks. Inconsequentially, he wondered if some giant clock was slowing down too. He imagined he saw a bright thread somewhere snap, and grow dim.

Then the grey surface of the ground reeled into reality before him, and he knew that time, whether he wanted it or not, had pressed events inexorably to a close.

Part Four

With a misleadingly animate convulsion, the rag doll bounced onto the hard surface of the road. The frightful force of impact adjusted its limbs in macabre positions, before it came to rest several yards from the zebra. There it was out of the light, and took on the appearance of a sprawled, ungainly hump.

The car slewed sideways violently for a few seconds longer as the driver fought for control. Then, exhausts spitting, it accelerated away and disappeared into darkness. The roaring of the engine dwindled rapidly, and was eventually swallowed up by distance, leaving behind a deceptively peaceful scene.

It was the stunned silence after the event. At that time of night it was quiet anyway, but to the young man standing on the pavement, the silence was intense and throbbing, threatening to rob him of consciousness. He knew he would have to go over; knew he would have to make the awful confirmation. But first he leaned uncertainly on the striped pole nearby and bowed his head. Gradually, the whiteness left his face and the trembling of his body ceased, but tears ran down his face. Gradually, the roaring silence in his ears lessened, and he could hear his own choked sobbing.

The night accepted this tribute. The flashing orange light continued to paint the scene intermittently. The uncaring stars, visible beyond the gleam of the city, could see no other person on the quiet street.

Part Five

It was a sunny afternoon, and even the busy thoroughfare seemed to feel the somnambulant influence that the day was trying to offer. On some other, ordinary day, which was neither too hot nor too cold, people could be seen hurrying everywhere, as if there was not a second to waste. In rainy weather, they scurried even faster; in snow, a little slower, in case they fell and the important job they were obviously about had to be postponed. But in the hot sun, everybody lingered, everybody slowed down; shoppers, shift-workers, businessmen on mistimed lunches. All of them, invariably shirt-sleeved or in short summer skirts, seemed reluctant to leave the street and enter into whichever grey vault housed their place of work.

Only the cars seemed unaffected. They buzzed and hummed and blustered much as usual. Perhaps the drivers, enclosed within their small steel shells, did not feel the effects of the sunshine. Certainly, owners of open-topped vehicles cruised far more peacefully along the length of the street. Pedestrians who decided to cross over had to upgrade their attention and live for a short while in a sunless, fuming atmosphere unchanged by weather, before they reached the opposite pavement.

At one point the broad, cool façade of a restaurant faced outwards. Passers-by seldom looked in, but if they had done so they would have seen about a dozen people, in assorted groups, calmly consuming whatever they had ordered. It was evident that the noise of the traffic and numberless people about their business failed to reach the quiet interior. Indeed, it was only when a customer peered through the broad window that he remembered he was anywhere near a busy street. The soft murmur of overhead fan and low conversation produced a world within a world, complete in itself. Only the sleepy afternoon affected it to this extent: that each of the customers brought with them a sense of restful ease, which was melded by the receptive atmosphere of the restaurant into a likeness of that summer somnambulance outside.

The door opened. For a moment, the peace was broken by traffic noises and the nearest, passing footsteps. Then it closed to cut off the hubbub, and all was as before except that now a newcomer stood open the premises, blinking to adjust his eyes from the bright sunlight outside.

A few people glanced at him casually. They saw a well-built young man in an open-necked shirt, with a sports jacket slung over one shoulder. His hair seemed slightly ruffled, but an upward movement of his hand brushed it neatly into place. As his eyes became accustomed to the less bright interior, he looked about inquiringly. A waiter approached. The interest of the other customers waned, and they resumed their own solitary or conversational meals.

After a few quiet words, the newcomer was guided to a table which until then had been reserved. The waiter fussily helped him to sit at one of the eight set places, poured him a glass of water, and after a few more words, let him to his own devices. The young man glanced at his watch, then sat back with an attitude of expectancy. To pass the time, he looked out of window at the passers-by, and tried to guess their various occupations.

Moments later, the door opened again. He glanced quickly across, only to find that another customer was leaving. Once more the sounds of outside activities filtered through, and once more they were cut off abruptly as the door closed. The young man looked out through the window again. He smiled faintly to himself at some stray thought, and absently considered the sunny scene outside. Then his eyes stilled and took on an unseeing aspect, because the hot summer day and the quiet atmosphere surrounding him triggered something in his memory: he found himself reliving another hot day, in a summer since gone by.

“Hey there, James!”

He started, then looked round. “Christ, Tez, you made me jump. Come in, come in.” He grinned delightedly as Tez limped forward with painful slowness. “What’ve you done to your leg?”

“Rugby.” Tez lowered himself into the nearest chair and cursed. “Some bruiser took my left leg, y’know, and another took my right, and the first said to the second...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But why play rugby in summer?”

“Well, why not?”

“Yeah, I guess so. We were never noted for our sanity, were we?”

Another door banged, somewhere, and Slim Jim looked up from the book he was trying to read.

“Coming out?”

He closed the book with a sigh.

“Look, there’s four of them out there, just lying on the grass. I’m sure we could get a game going.”

He looked, and sure enough, there were four of them just lying about on the grass. Cracknell was peering intently at a butterfly which had landed inches from his nose.

“I don’t know, Tez. It’s hot.”

“So what?” Sound of approaching footsteps, as Tez advanced into the room. Outside, Stephen had risen to his feet and was walking towards the entrance, while Mike shook a fist at him.

“So what?” repeated Tez. “We’re not noted for our sanity, are we?”

Slim Jim shook his head to clear it of the intruding image. “You haven’t changed much,” he observed.

Tez was smiling broadly. His hair was still long and untrained, he still wore a faded tee shirt, and his jeans looked, is possible, more disreputable than they ever did before.

“It’s a wonder they ever let you in,” continued Slim Jim gravely.

Tez indicated his injured leg. “The old war wound, y’know. It’s as good as the old school tie.” He slewed his chair round and rested his elbows on the table. “How’re you?”

“Fine, fine,” said Slim Jim vaguely.

“Been waiting long?”

“No, only a few minutes. It seems strange - ” He paused. It was in his mind that arranging to see Tez like this unreal somehow. “I mean, I used to see you nearly every day, didn’t I?”

Tez nodded.

“I mean - ” Slim Jim stopped again. He was trying to say that it seemed unbelievable to actually have to fix up a time and place to see Tez, like some medical

appointment. But the words escaped him, and he smiled instead. “Well, anyway. How’re you, if it comes to that?”

Tez slapped his leg. “Apart from this, fine.”

“Still studying?”

“Yep. Struggling down the same old trail. I got a better from Mike, y’know.”

Slim Jim looked interested in this new topic. “Oh, what did he have to say for himself?”

“Not much,” said Tez. “The usual things.” He remembered how his thoughts had gone back to Mike as he read the small, neat print. “I suppose he’s coming today?”

“As far as I know,” said Slim Jim, indicating the other set places.

Tez’s thoughts were still in the past. “Funny how every time you think of Mike, you think of Stephen too.”

There was a slight pause. Slim Jim shifted uncomfortably.

“Yes, well,” said Tez. “Wonder how many of the others will turn up? It’ll be strange to see them again. You heard from anybody else?”

“Fraid not. I saw Cracknell once, some time ago. At that time he was doing - oh, I don’t know. Some course or other.” He smiled at Tez and the conversation halted for a moment. They both remembered where they were.

“Nice place,” commented Tez, looking around.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

The door rattled and they both looked across, but it was only another customer leaving. Slim Jim checked the time. “We’re a bit early. How did you get here? Train?”

Tez nodded. “Got in at ten past and I walked from the station. Limped from the station. How about you? Still got that rattle-trap sports car?”

Slim Jim looked suitably surprised. “How did you know about that?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Tez, looking vaguely worried. “Perhaps Mike told me in his letter.”

“But I haven’t seen Mike either. How did he know?”

“Perhaps he’s seen Cracknell. Or perhaps - ” Tez grinned slyly “ - perhaps it wasn’t Mike who told me in the first place.” He sat back, pleased with himself, and Slim Jim also grinned. Both of them were secretly glad that they could still converse with illogical ease.

The door opened yet again and Tez, who was in the best position to see, suddenly jumped to his feet and waved. "Over here!" he called. "Speak of the devil," he added loudly.

Slim Jim tugged at his tee shirt, vainly trying to get him to sit down. "Shh! Remember where you are." At the same time he half twisted in his seat, and was rewarded with the sight of Mike advancing towards them. "On cue," he approved.

Mike sat down and regarded the others benevolently. "Don't I know you two from somewhere?"

Tez clapped a hand to his forehead.

"God, yes! Back in forty-nine..."

"Fat Clara!" exclaimed Slim Jim, snapping his fingers.

"Cocktails after eight..."

"..the old general with the wooden arm..."

"Those were the days!" said Mike. "Remember that buffalo hunt, back in thirty seven? Or was it seventy three.....?"

Tez reached across and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "How're you doing, windbag?"

"Not so bad, I suppose." Mike brushed some hair from his eyes, and laid the coat he had been carrying on a nearby chair. "Had trouble finding the place. Seems like I made it in time, though. How about you two? Did you get my letter?"

Dear Mum -

Well, it happened today. Rumbold Jnr had a relapse and dashed out of the hall before anybody could stop him. Then he went into his room and turned into a recluse. I doubt if we shall see him again.

I see J.C. quite a lot, because he lives next door to me, and appears to be doing the same work that I do. His room is smaller than mine. I'm afraid I can't tell you either of our addresses, though, in case Administration gets hold of our real names.

For the same reason, I won't sign my name at the bottom. I hope this doesn't confuse you, but there really is nothing else for it. Someday, perhaps, I'll figure out a way of beating the system.

"You can't send that!"

"Why not?"

“Well, how would you feel if that letter came through the post to you?”

“Surprised.” Whoever he was looked up in alarm. “Do you think I should take out a copyright?”

He blinked.

“.....informative,” Tez was saying. “I don’t even know what you’re doing now. Come to that, I don’t know what you’re doing, either.” He stabbed a finger at Slim Jim.

“What about you?” asked Mike.

“Still studying.”

Another customer left his table and made his way outside. Mike twisted in his seat to look out of the window for a moment. “It’s quiet in here, isn’t it?”

Slim Jim nodded. “Makes a change, I can tell you. During the week I work – in an office, y’know, but the office is in a factory. Hellish racket. Wish to God the factory made earphones.”

“What does it make?” inquired Mike.

“God only knows,” said Jim frankly. “I only do the paperwork, y’know. Statistics and all that. Results of tests. If it falls in the right range, then I pass it. Who cares what the thing actually is?”

“Business,” said Mike. “Nine to five, I take it?”

Slim Jim nodded.

“Two weeks holiday?”

Slim Jim nodded again.

“Well, I decided against the lemming ritual. I’m teaching at the moment.”

“I thought you had to be highly motivated to do something like that?” The tone of Tez’s voice spoke volumes.

“Yes, well,” returned Mike wryly. “I can turn my hand to most things, I suppose. Including the stage.”

“All the world’s” began Slim Jim without thinking. He recollected how the quote continued, and deftly changed the subject. “Only three of us here, and time’s getting on. What do you reckon the chances are of the others coming?”

Mike frowned. For a moment, he considered telling the other two of that different world he had inadvertently entered when he had woken screaming in the darkness, fighting for air to breathe.

“Cracknell’s usually late for anything,” said Tez, beginning to count off on his fingers. “Remember when he put his clock back and arrived for a lecture an hour early?”

Slim Jim chuckled. “And he never did put his clock right, did he?”

“So how come he’s always late?” interposed Mike.

Tez shrugged. “Don’t ask. Cracknell’s law unto himself. I don’t think he even knew what a convention was.” He discovered he was still counting on his fingers. “Ah yes-where was I? John T Rex, now. As far as I can make out, nobody knows what’s happened to him.”

“Vanished,” agreed Mike. “I thought if anybody knew what happened to him, then Big Jim would, so I wrote to him a while back.”

“And?” prompted Slim Jim.

“Well, he had no idea, either.”

“Two down,” said Tez, bending back another finger. “What about Big Jim himself?”

Mike shook his head mutely to indicate that he didn’t know.

“Well, he’s a possible, then,” said Tez. “I hear he got to be a lawyer, after all.”

“Loud and clear,” put in Slim Jim, laughing. He shook his head, and repeated softly, “Loud and clear...”

He got up from his chair.

“Who’s that?”

A scratching noise came at the door, and a voice whispered: “Let me in, if you can hear me.”

Slim Jim moved across to the door and inclined his head in a listening attitude. After a few moments, he heard a resigned sigh, and the voice muttering hoarsely: “Oh well, he can’t hear me, either.”

Slim Jim threw open the door and caught Big Jim in the act of turning away.

“Aha! Got you!”

Big Jim beamed happily. “You heard me..” he whispered.

“Of course I did!” exclaimed Slim Jim. “Loud and clear.....”

He shook his head, smiling.

“Did he ever actually lose his voice?” asked Mike.

“No,” said Slim Jim. “It all began on the night of the slides, y’know. He got wet through, and got himself a sore throat into the bargain. But he was always able to whisper enough to make himself understood.”

Mike extended an imaginary microphone towards Slim Jim in his best interviewing technique. “Tell me in your won words, sir..” He coughed, and retracted the microphone back to himself. “In your own words, perhaps you could tell us about that period in his life when he was under the impression that he was losing his voice?”

John T Rex tapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t forget the time I played that practical joke on him,” he said.

Outside the restaurant, the sun momentarily disappeared behind a cloud. The window darkened, and Mike unintentionally shivered, looking out and up at the sky. Even as he did so, the cloud moved itself out of the way: the street became bright once again. Mike reflected that it was as if the cloud stayed still and the sun rolled out from behind it.

“Nancy?” said Slim Jim, breaking into his reverie. “Do you think he’ll be coming?”

“Has he been invited?” put in Tez.

Mike shrugged. “Same as Big Jim, really; I can’t say one way or the other. Mark him down as a possible.”

Tez ticked off a fourth finger, then smiled as something occurred to him. “It was funny about that girl, wasn’t it?” He was staring reminiscently at the tablecloth, and so missed the warning glance which Slim Jim threw his way. He carried on in a dreamy voice. “She was like a legend, really. All that time, he didn’t know her, but kept following her about, and all that sort of thing. And then, when they met - ”

“ - they didn’t get on,” said Slim Jim. “Very sad, that. Who else is there we haven’t considered yet?”

“I saw how much he was affected by her,” continued Tez, failing to catch this blatant attempt to change the subject. Then he looked up, saw Slim Jim’s face, and

realised his mistake. “Well, it was very sad,” he said, nodding. “Now, who have we missed out?”

There was a pause. Mike was yet again wondering if it would be a good idea to tell the others of that problem which was worrying him. It looked as if the conversation was continually going to bring it to mind, so perhaps it would be as well to get it over with.

“Rumbold!” exclaimed Tez in triumph. “He’s the last one!”

“Eighth and final,” agreed Slim Jim. “I’ve no idea whether he’ll turn up or not. Mind you, I never even knew him that well. He spent so much time working in his room that I hardly ever saw him.”

Mike made an effort to clear his brain of those fogged images, and said: “Like Cracknell, only more so.”

Tez tapped his fingers on the table thoughtfully. “I don’t know about that. On reflection, y’know, I rather think that Cracknell did a hell of a lot of work. Several times I went to see him, very late, and he was still hard at it.”

“Keeping up with his reputation?” asked Slim Jim.

“Precisely.”

“I wonder if he’ll come,” mused Slim Jim. “When I saw him, he said it would depend on how much work he had to do.”

“Saw him?” said Mike, surprised.

“Yeah. Several months ago.”

Tez stopped tapping and pinged his finger against the water jug instead. “When it comes right down to it, we don’t know if any of the others are coming. I only got a letter from Mike.....”

“...and I’m here!”

“...but that doesn’t mean that those who didn’t write letters aren’t coming.”

“Give me an example of a double negative,” ordered Slim Jim. Tez cleared his throat, and the other two looked at him expectantly. They both knew what he was going to say.

“Sorry, teacher, I don’t know nothing about that.”

Mike smiled.

“Anyway,” continued Tez. “We’ll just have to wait and see if anybody comes.”

“It’s hell,” said Slim Jim mildly. “Hell, I tell you. The waiting: I can’t stand the waiting.”

“Then you know what to do, then, don’t you?” asked Mike. Slim Jim shook his head. “Well, I’ll tell you later,” promised Mike. “You just hang on for a bit.”

All three of them turned at the sound of the door opening, and held their breaths as this time they saw that it was somebody coming in. However, it was a middle-aged businessman in a bowler hat eventually appeared. Somehow, in spite of the fact that he was carrying his jacket over one arm and had loosened his tie, the bowler hat did not look out of place.

Mike turned away, stifling a laugh.

He had been back, to see E Flat and view all the memorable places. He remembered that it seemed very strange to drive up the road he had walked so many times. It looked just the same. The trees were the same, and the pillar-box was the same, and there were even people trudging along the same old route he had used. Young people, nevertheless providing an air of permanence. During the length of that visit, he never quite got used to the sameness of it all. Somehow, he felt that it ought to have changed now that he and the others were no longer there.

Even the Home looked just the same, from the outside at least. Inside, improvements had been made, changes which meant little in themselves, but which together conspired to alter the character of the Home completely. Walls had been cleaned. So had the two small windows which nobody had ever been able to see through before. A fire door had been inserted at the top of the stairs, and the banisters had been repaired. The holes in the wall had all been filled in. Somebody had even replaced the red bulb in the landing light with a regular white one. The net effect of all these alterations was that the Home seemed to lose that air of having a life of its own, and became instead an ordinary building. Perhaps the worst two offences were that the kitchen had been painted a dazzlingly antiseptic white, and all the doors had been neatly, logically numbered. The Home, Mike thought as he clumped down the corridor in search of E Flat, had turned into a cell-block.

“E Flat!” echoed a voice.

“On the scrounge...?”

“Strength of a madman!” The voices were trailing away.

“Those eyes....!”

The kettle wheezed into silence as he entered the new, shining kitchen. E Flat was in the act of turning away from the sink.

“Oh. Ulloa. I suppose you want a drink?”

Mike could scarcely refrain from laughing out loud. He had not seen E Flat for almost two years.

“Please, Eric.”

Phlegmatically, the kettle groaned back into life, and the tea was made. Mike ran his hand over the top of the food lockers. “Where have my initials gone?”

“Covered up.”

“It’s not the same. is it?”

E Flat rapped the new surface with a spoon. “Non-stick, that. Good stuff. Noa chance of cutting letters into that.”

“It’s just not the same,” complained Mike.

They both went out into the long corridor. E Flat paused once to take a gulp of coffee, and then went on ahead. A familiar double echo from the slippers on his feet rang against the walls.

“Footsteps!” whispered Mike.

“It’s E Flat!” gasped Stephen.

“Echoes,” murmured Mike to himself.

The quietness and reality of the restaurant billowed up about him, forcing him to look around as if he had just woken up. Tez was looking anxiously out of the window. His wild hair and disreputable clothing were curiously out of place in their present surroundings. Slim Jim was making a design on the tablecloth with a fork: Mike eyed his smart jacket and remembered their earlier conversation. Still, one lemming out of three wasn’t bad.

“What was that?” Tez had half-heard Mike’s whispered words.

“I was listening to some echoes,” said Mike enigmatically. “Along the corridor, by the kitchen.” He did not feel like explaining any further.

“Christ!” Slim Jim looked up. “Remember those windows? How many storms had they seen, I wonder? Or rather, not seen,” he added.

Mike refrained from imparting the information that they had been cleaned. To do so, he felt, would be to detract from the legend of the Home.

“I thought I saw Cracknell for a moment.” Tez jerked a thumb at the window. He turned round properly and put his elbows on the table again. “It must have been someone else, though. Nobody of any importance.” He grinned at the dogmatic nature of these words.

Slim Jim was wondering how all the others had turned out. Mike and Tez were here before him, and he found that imagination furnished everyone else with a ready description. Whether or not his extrapolated ideas matched the reality remained to be seen. Or at least, he hoped it did. Time was getting on, and he was beginning to think that no-one else was coming.

“How’s the work been going, Tez?”

“Not so bad. One of the supervisors came to see me, the other day, and he seemed satisfied.”

“Supervisors!” exclaimed Slim Jim.

“Yes.” Tez looked across at him. “They have to make sure the work we’re doing isn’t some wild goose chase. Dead end. And that we’re doing any work at all, of course.”

“Do you understand the work?” put in Mike. Tez grinned, and Slim Jim replied:

“Work? What work?”

“It’s a better system, y’know.” Tez leaned forward. “The supervisors coming to see us, I mean. Much better than us going to tutors, anyway, because that was always so bloody unreliable.”

“Remember Nancy and the door?” chuckled Slim Jim.

“Do I!” said Tez feelingly. “But at least he’d already been to his tutorial - I missed mine, trying to get him to talk to that bloody girl.”

“You could still have gone.”

“I didn’t like tutorials,” complained Tez. “I always got asked questions about things I’d never heard of. It’s much better doing research. Tables well and truly turned. How the hell can a supervisor cope with something you only made up that morning?”

“Is it like that?” asked Slim Jim.

“No,” replied Tez, sighing. “But it’s a nice thought, isn’t it?”

A small pause ensued. Slim Jim stopped drawing on the tablecloth and attempted to balance a spoon on top of a knife instead. The clink that these instruments made as he did so were clearly audible over the muted hush inside the restaurant. Almost as if he had initiated some sort of tuning process, other clinks which the other customers made emerged from the general background murmur, sounding like some off-beat tribal rhythm.

Mike stirred and said pensively: "I wonder what her name was?"

Slim Jim and Tez exchanged a glance, but vouchsafed no reply.

"I suppose Nancy found out," continued Mike, looking up, "but I can't recall him ever telling us. Mind you, I suppose that events weren't exactly conducive to conversation at that time - " he shivered " - and perhaps he didn't want to talk about it anyway, after it all broke down."

"A strange thing," said Slim Jim.

"Incompatible," agreed Tez.

"But how did they find out so quickly?" wondered Mike. "And what would have happened if she'd known..."

".....yes?"

"...about Stephen?" He broke off abruptly. A blackness was trying to enfold him: Slim Jim and Tez saw him wearily close his eyes.

"Are you ready to eat, sir?"

He turned sharply, almost gratefully, to the waiter.

"Yes, yes.... at least, I think so. What about you two?"

"Might as well."

Slim Jim looked at his watch and nodded. "If anyone else comes, we'll just have to wait him out."

"It's all been arranged." The waiter straightened, began to turn away.

"I - " Slim Jim stopped thoughtfully and fell silent. The waiter, having paused at the sound of his voice, carried on, threading his way between tables towards some distant goal.

"How has it been arranged?"

Slim Jim shook his head to indicate total ignorance of the whole affair.

"Who arranged it?"

Slim Jim shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe better. You obviously got the same letter as I did-all I know is, that if it wasn't one of us two, then it must have been someone else."

"Scarcely a brilliant deduction," said Cracknell scathingly.

"Don't you recognise the handwriting?"

"It's typewritten," pointed out Slim Jim.

"True." Cracknell paused, marshalling his thoughts. "But suppose -"

"Never mind the deductions!" interrupted Slim Jim rudely. "What I want to know is, are you going to go?"

"I don't know yet," said Cracknell, considering the idea with part of his mind.

"I might do. It depends on the state of my work."

"What work are you doing?" pressed Slim Jim. He had asked this question before, without success.

"What work?" mused Cracknell, his thoughts evidently elsewhere. "Hmmm? What was that you said?"

"Come on." Slim Jim stood up and grasped Cracknell firmly by the arm.

"Let's go and have a game, now that we're here."

He cleared his throat and changed the direction of his sentence without making it too obvious. "I know what you mean: echoes. People often remind me of some of the others, y'know. That's something which never used to happen before."

Mike nodded.

"Maybe I just didn't know enough people to start off with," continued Slim Jim. He was frowning with concentration, an expression which remained even after he gave up with the spoon and knife, which he replaced gently in their proper places. "And now I've got a sort of file in my mind, full enough to make comparisons. What d'you think?"

"I think you'd better sit very still," said Tez. "There's an unfriendly person watching us, and -" his voice dropped dramatically " - he's got us covered. No! Don't move!" Mike had made as if to turn around. Slim Jim took the opportunity to shift slightly and peer out of the corner of his eye in the direction of the door. He almost grinned, but managed to keep himself rigid as stone.

"Christ!" he muttered. "Who is it? Do you recognise him? Have you seen him before?"

“Shhhh,” ordered Tez. “He reminds me of someone. I’m comparing him with my memory file.”

Mike’s lips trembled, but he kept control of himself and stared woodenly ahead.

“What do we do?” asked Slim Jim, allowing a note of hysteria to creep into his voice. Surreptitiously, he too another quick glance at the unmistakable shape in the doorway. It was pointing two fingers in a menacing fashion at the three seated at the table. “We can’t just sit here!” whispered Slim Jim excitedly. “We can’t let him just gun us down without making a move! Christ, what a way to go...”

“Shhhh,” repeated Tez. “I’m thinking.”

A few seconds only had passed since Tez had hissed his first warning. They all knew that the initiative lay with the person in the doorway. Mike didn’t yet know who it was, but he decided to lend a verbal hand.

“The window,” he murmured.

Tez glanced theatrically towards the doorway, then back at Mike.

“Backward somersault,” explained Mike. “Over the table. Escape in the crowd.”

Tez nodded minutely, then opened his eyes wide and cowered back in his chair. Slim Jim gabbled something shrilly. Mike at last turned around.

“Punks,” growled Big Jim, throwing his gun onto the table with a casual gesture. He removed his bush hat, turned down his collar. “You’re lucky, this time. It’s only me.” He raised a finger sternly. “You should know better than to sit with your back to the door.”

“Big Jim!” exclaimed Mike with pleasure. Big Jim nodded agreeably, and sat down on his hat without realising it.

“You’ve sat down with your back to the door,” accused Tez.

“True,” said Big Jim mildly. “I didn’t say anything about my back, did I? I don’t have to follow my own advice, do I? Any more than a doctor does.” He shifted his chair nearer to the table. “Been here long?”

“Ages,” complained Slim Jim.

“Hi there, James.” He consulted his watch. “I guess I am a bit late, at that. Where are the others?”

Tez looked at the ceiling.

“Yeah, stupid question. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“We’ve already been waiting,” said Mike pointedly. Big Jim grinned amiably again.

“Hi there, Mike. Long time no see.” He studied the interior of the restaurant. “Bit different from the practice, what?”

Slim Jim chuckled as he recalled that episode. Mike pointed an accusing finger at him. “You were responsible for that.”

“Well, it seemed a good idea at the time,” said Slim Jim defensively. “I thought it was necessary. And there were a damned sight more there than there are here, anyway!”

“If you see what I mean,” murmured Mike.

“What was the message that went round?” asked Tez suddenly.

“I seem to remember that you organised it quite a time before, didn’t you? Now, what was it....?”

Mike smiled.

“Ten tomorrow.”

“That’s what he said.”

“He did, didn’t he?”

“Well,” said J.C. “I wonder what he wanted....”

“Hey, that’s my line,” grumbled Slim Jim.

“Only the day before?” wondered Tez, shaking his head. “I must admit I thought it was longer than that.”

“By the way,” said J.C. “Ten tomorrow.”

“Ten tomorrow?”

“It’s a message from Slim Jim,” explained J.C. “We just saw him, and he asked us to pass it on.”

“What’s it mean?” asked Cracknell.

“No idea.”

“That’s what it was, all right,” agreed Tez. “I remember now. Cracknell told me one night. Come to think of it, you were there as well, weren’t you?”

Outside the restaurant, the sun shone for a moment on the window of a passing car. Mike, who happened to be looking on that direction, caught the brunt of the reflection in a bright gleam which temporarily blinded him. For just a few heartbeats, all he could see was a uniform whiteness which completely dazzled him. And then, as the brightness started to fade, he experienced a curious hallucination. He fully expected to see the shapes and lines of the restaurant and its occupants materialise out of that blindness: the tail-end of Tez's question was still ringing in his mind. Instead, the newly white-washed kitchen showed itself firmly, with E Flat turning away from the kettle. The outline of the food lockers, and even the view through the half-open window, was unsparingly clear and concrete. The voice of E Flat and his unsurprised greeting – Ulloa - in his own peculiar accent, lent a curious air of permanence and reality to the vision.

It all faded, in less time than it takes to breathe. Mike reflected that presumably E Flat was still at the Home, possibly even making a cup of coffee at the very moment. He very much doubted if that stoic mind ever hallucinated anything in reciprocal fashion.

Big Jim had just made a reply, and he sought in memory for the sounds which made up the meaning behind the words. "Yeah-that tape-recorder." Tape-recorder? What were they talking about now? He made that small jump forward in time, only to find that he had just missed Tez making some remark. All in all, he had lost the thread of the conversation.

"Well, how are things, anyway?" asked Slim Jim, with an air of having got around to an inevitable topic.

"I'm quite enjoying myself," admitted Big Jim. "I still have to do a lot of studying; some more exams coming up soon. And I have to follow some cases, to try and gain experience. Very occasionally I get some simply clerical type work to do, but most of the time I just get left to myself. Everything will be revealed after the exams-whether or not I've been behaving myself, and so forth."

"Your voice is O.K., then," said Tez dryly.

"Well," said Big Jim, having the grace to look a little disconcerted. "I don't have much time to practise my lawyer's rhetoric, y'know."

"No cross-examinations yet?" asked Mike, and received a mournful shake of the head in reply.

“How’d you get here?” put in Slim Jim, changing the subject. “Judging by when you arrived, you walked it.”

“Train,” said Big Jim briefly. “But that reminds me of something I was going to ask. Which of you.....?” He let the sentence trail into silence, but looked inquiringly around the table. Everyone understood the question he was trying to ask. Tez elected himself spokesman.

“We don’t know. We thought perhaps it might be you, but if it isn’t, then presumably it must be one of the others. Who’ve we got?” He looked at the empty spaces. “Nancy, Rumbold, andoh yes, John T Rex. Odd that whoever it is hasn’t turned up on time, though.”

Mike started violently. “Christ! What if....?” He thought he saw a black, oily swell heave across his vision, but some part of him fought it down as being unreal.

“Sir?” Rattle of a tray, and the waiter looking with undisguised astonishment at Big Jim.

“Oh, yes.” Slim Jim removed his puzzled gaze from Mike and waved a casual hand. “Another one of us has turned up. Perhaps you would be kind enough to bring one more?” The waiter nodded rapidly, apparently relieved at having the decision taken from him. There was a small pause as he set down the other three meals; then, tucking the emptied tray under one arm, he walked off along the same route as before.

“You missed Cracknell off your list,” said Big Jim. “But on the other hand, I think you can forget about John T Rex. I know him well enough to say he is not responsible for - ” he swept his arm around in a semi-circle “ - all this.”

“Take your pick,” said Tez, beginning to eat. “There’s no-one else.”

Mike shook his head, apparently trying to clear it of stray thoughts. “Something just occurred to me,” he said. The others looked at him curiously. “Let’s approach it indirectly, though. I had this dream, you see.” He jabbed a finger at Tez. “D’you remember that day on the lawn? Very hot day in the summer?”

“Yes, I think....”

“Four of us, just lying about?” said Mike, gaining confidence.

“I think ...”

“Halcyon days, someone said at the time. Could even be true. Do you remember the bit about the butterfly?” He had taken complete control of the conversation. The other two, remaining silent, looked anxiously at Tez, who screwed up his eyes and nodded reminiscently.

“Oh yes, I think....”

“A butterfly,” said Cracknell.

“A pity about those sugar cubes,” said J.C.

“I would never hurt a butterfly,” stated John T Rex I.

“Why not?”

“It might be someone...”

“....sleeping,” murmured Tez. “Yes, I can hear it even now.”

“Well,” said Mike, leaning forward. “Bear that in mind. Now, I had this difficulty which all began with a recurring dream...”

Even that was not really true. It all began with a dream which later recurred and turned itself into a problem. In fact, it wasn't even a dream: more accurate to call it a nightmare.

When was the first time? Already that was lost to his mind: all he could say with certainty was that it came after the accident. He shivered in the telling of the story. Even more awful if it had occurred some time before...

He dreamed, anyway, that he awoke - or was he asleep? - and in that waking was a half-remembered image of a giant black butterfly, with wings fluttering, battering in his brain. He knuckled his eyes to destroy the persistent vision, then saw clearly his bedclothes, the grey light of a dismal morning, and the corner of his pillow jutting up to obscure part of the curtained window in his room.

Or was it a cell? The thought jolted him into full awareness and he turned sharply to look at the door, half expecting it to be inlaid with iron bars. Why he should be in a cell, he was not sure, though some nagging reason was buried in his head. Perhaps it was a leftover ghost from some other, ancient dream. Anyway, he was relieved to see that the door was merely painted black, offering otherwise no visible means of constraint.

Absurdly, he thought for a moment that there was another room, of different dimensions, trying to impose itself over the one before his eyes. His own room - but how could that be?

A loud bang made itself heard on the black door. It did not make him jump, because for some reason he was expecting it. He was not even sure that he really heard the sound at all, only saw the door shuddering in the aftermath.

It's time a voice echoed dimly. He knew, nonetheless, that there was plenty of time to get dressed. He did not answer the voice, but swung his legs over the edge of the bed and started to don his clothes.

A strange remoteness seemed to govern all the movements of his body. He saw and knew that his arm was doing this, or that, but he could not feel the motion. It was very odd, but he carried on regardless, putting on the garments which he found neatly folded on a black-backed chair.

A white shirt, with buttons, because he could never work cuff-links. Everything else, though, was black. There was a note of incongruity in the choice of a tie - one of the string types so often seen in Western films - but even that was black. It was certainly a sombre array. When he was finished, he straightened and regarded himself in a full-length mirror. Not at all bad. He looked fit for a funeral. He picked up his car key as he left the room. Why was it not as bright as usual? The chrome seemed dulled; even the shape of the key, as he ran his finger along its edge, appeared to be blunted, as if from constant use.

"You've got to remember," he pointed out, "that quite often we went in for an early game, before the first lecture. I suppose that's why I felt this sense of timing...."

"But you never had a car," objected Tez.

"Nor did I then," said Mike sombrely. "It seemed as though we came down the stairs, and went outside, and there was this hearse drawn up by the side of the Home, waiting for us."

Something was wrong about the hearse being there, he knew, but for some reason he was unable to come to grips with the problem. This was where a curious hiatus in the events occurred. Logically, he should have spent some time wondering why the hearse had appeared, why he had the key which was going to fit its ignition, not to mention why he felt he had the right to drive off in it. Instead, there was a chronological waver. He found himself pulling away from the kerb, smiling briefly at Stephen, who sat in the passenger seat.

No sense of strangeness there. He had walked with Stephen so many times that it seemed perfectly natural for him to occupy this unexpected vehicle as well. Why not? Presumably they were going to the same destination, as always used to be the case. Always used to be the case? This was an unusual phrase. Some twinge of remembrance was stirring in his mind, so he reached for a button on the dashboard, hoping that this small action would assuage it.

The windscreen wipers lethargically began to move. Straight away, it began to rain. Until that point, the light outside the hearse had held no interest for him; now, he realised that it was dark and stormy. Sheets of water washed the windows clean, flooded over the sloping bonnet. He turned and smiled again at Stephen, who with perfect timing turned and smiled back, teeth flashing with unnatural brightness in the sudden gloom. He returned his attention to the road ahead: the hearse seemed almost to drive itself.

After a short while he switched the wipers off, and the rain stopped. It occurred to him that everywhere outside would now be dripping wet, and this gave him the idea of looking out of a side window to see exactly where they were. To his surprise, he recognised the scene. The hedges, pavements and houses, seen as if from a considerable height, formed precisely the same sight he had witnessed when peering out of a bus window one day on the way to town. Odd, that the same thing could be seen from out of a hearse.

Pay attention.

Eyes front, now. With a shock, he realised that he had been watching the scene roll past for some moments, quite forgetting that he was the driver. What was that? Slow down, now, it was a bend, and they were going too fast. Ease off the brakes before changing direction, otherwise they would lose control. Swing the wheel: keep the nose pointing to the centre of the road. Christ, they were only just going to make it.

Black humour in the situation suddenly occurred to him. *Hearse driver caught speeding*. Or, still more ironically: *Hearse goes up in flames*. Grinning, he took the briefest of moments to glance across at Stephen, to see if he was amused by the same thoughts. Icy shock: Holy Joe grinned fixedly back, as if pleased to be once again in his natural habitat.

“A skeleton, Tez. A real skeleton!”

Swirling of a cold wet wind, perhaps; image of a group half-circled on a lawn; rectangles of light glinting on rainwater.

“A real skeleton, Tez! Name of Holy Joe...”

“Hell of a shock,” said Mike. “Completely unexpected, and I never learned to anticipate it in all the recurrences. How can a skeleton gleam and look shaded at the same time?”

“Know what you mean,” said Tez, ruefully.

The initial impact of horror was forced into the back of his mind, because he was still struggling to retain control of the hearse. But even as he fought this physical battle, he was aware that the strange events posed two eerie problems. One: what was Holy Joe doing, sitting beside him? He had not been there at the start of the trip, and he was not capable of moving independently, because he had a foot missing. So how had he got there?

The second question was even more disturbing. Where had Stephen gone? It was simply impossible for him to have disappeared into thin air, but that seemed to be exactly what had happened. It was impossible, and he knew it was impossible, but the facts were inescapable. He felt that Stephen had deserted him just when he was in considerable trouble: he only just managed to guide the hearse around the bend.

What was that? A blood-red beacon, illuminating the perspective of the road like a lamp in a confined room. It gleamed intermittently on wetness and darkness—what purpose could it serve? He felt, with sudden startling clarity, the wheel of the hearse slippery in his hands. He firmed his grasp, strengthened his concentration.

Half-seen in the garish light, was a shambling figure in the middle of the road. Moving inexorably closer. He knew with fierce joy who it was, why he was there, what was going to happen. “Desert me, would you?” he screamed.

Accelerator to the floor, and the wheels biting wet road with painful slowness. Then the night was rushing past with increased, and increasing, speed: windnoise hurtling with confusion against the windscreen. The figure slipped and failed to regain balance. There was a crunching, shuddering blow. A dim-lit, cartwheeling parody of a human shape was flung into the air. He thrust on the accelerator once again, and shouted with an obscene twist of meaning:

“Come on! Catch me if you can!”

His shadow lengthened and finally bobbed forward to join the greater shadow of the Home. Mike slumped onto his back and stared at the blue sky. “A cloud,” he remarked.

John T Rex I and Cracknell also slumped onto their backs.

“A big blue one,” agreed John T Rex I.

“What?”

“A big blue cloud,” explained John T Rex I. “With a small white hole in it.”

Cracknell blinked. He could just see one of the trees which lined the nearby road. “Is that tree falling down?” he asked.

“A hole,” continued John T Rex I dreamily, “through which rain occasionally trickles.”

“Or am I falling up?” asked Cracknell.

“Just think,” put in Mike. “If that hole started to rain now, we wouldn’t get a drop of it, because of its relative motion to the ground.”

“Or am I rotating?” inquired Cracknell. “In a contraelliptical sort of way, don’t y’know?”

They all paused, watching the slow progress of the cloud across the sky. Faintly through the hot afternoon could be heard the sound of traffic, as of cars halted and still, engines idling.

“Hey!”

“Someone calls,” said Cracknell immediately.

“Hey, you!”

“Yes?” murmured Cracknell to himself. “Over?”

“Hey, you! D’you want a game?”

“Someone wants a game,” reasoned Cracknell. “What do we think?”

Mike closed his eyes and let the summer heat wash over him. He heard John T Rex I rely, as if in another world: “Too hot. Anyway, Stephen’s making us a cup of tea.”

Cracknell lifted his head slightly. A window came into view, through which he could see Tez and Slim Jim. It was Tez who had been doing the calling.

“Too hot!” he replied. “Anyway, Stephen’s making us a cup of tea.”

Tez grumbled something and retreated back inside the room. Cracknell lay back again to regard the sky. He discovered that the small white cloud had almost reached the edge of the tree.

“Hey,” said Mike, opening one eye and turning his head sideways, the better to see John T Rex I. “What was all that about a butterfly?”

“It comes from an old quote,” said John T Rex I.

“An old quote?” asked Mike. The words hung, shimmering, above his face, so he blew them away. He heard Cracknell muttering to himself.

“An old quote,” confirmed John T Rex I.

“Well, I don’t know it,” complained Mike. “How am I supposed to what you’re talking about, ifwhat?”

“It’s taking long time to fall down,” repeated Cracknell, more loudly.

John T Rex I sighed and began to sit up. “I’ll tell you all about it some other time,” he promised.

He was abroad in the night, and everything was coloured the deepest black. Overhead, thick greasy clouds swirled in angry silence, trying to blot out even the smallest star. But always, a patch of clear, dark sky - no bigger than a giant’s thumbnail - showed through. And always, a shining light gleamed unwinking in that small expanse.

Perhaps that was what provided the thin illumination. Perhaps it was all in his mind. He could see the whole scene, dimly, like an under-developed black and white film, stopped still and unmoving.

Hesitantly, he moved forward.

It all came closer, as if a camera on wheels had rolled a little nearer. A murky street, a half-seen lamppost, unshining. Somewhere there may have been a tree, because the slightest of rustles seemed to hang on the air.

“Mike?”

The voice was giant but painless, filling with dead-pan accuracy all the confines of his vision, and his brain. Where did it come from? He felt the fluttering pressure of black wings again, just behind his eyelids. Street scene fading with inconceivable rapidity, to be replaced with a uniform void.

“Mike?”

His eyes unclamped slowly, and light filtered through: his body was lodged in a new reality.

“Some dream, that.” Big Jim was just starting his meal. Evidently the waiter had been and gone.

“Ungmph,” Mike grunted. It seemed there had been a pause after the telling of his story, and his mind had wandered.

“Recurring, you say?” mused Tez, not really wanting an answer.

“I had a dream,” said Slim Jim. “I dreamed that I was trying to put a hat on. It was very strange. Every time I put it on, somehow my hair sprouted out through the hat and made it useless.” He leaned forward intently. “I knew that there was some reason for having it on, but every single time I tried, I’d look in the mirror and see the hat receding under my hair. It was very strange,” he repeated, shaking his head.

“So what happened?” asked Tez.

“Oh, I could see I was getting nowhere. So woke up.”

Big Jim smacked his lips appreciatively. “Nice,” he commented.

“Christ! As quick as ever!” exclaimed Tez. An evil light dawned in his eyes. “Do you remember that trick? Do you think we...?”

Slim Jim interrupted him by reaching out and gripping his arm. “No, we couldn’t,” he said firmly. “If we got chucked out again, and some of the others arrived afterwards, we wouldn’t be very popular, would we?”

Big Jim was looking puzzled at this exchange, but something in the conversation jogged his memory, and he too looked around the restaurant with malicious intent. “An ideal opportunity,” he admitted.

“No!” said Slim Jim.

“Like old times...?” pleaded Tez, putting a whine into his voice.

“Stop whining!”

“You’ve forgotten my tip, m’sieur,” said Big Jim.

“What’s that?”

Big Jim pushed his plate away, and patted his stomach. “A French whine,” he said gravely, and winked.

“Aaaargh,” exclaimed Cracknell, covering his eyes with theatrical gesture. “I don’t wish to know that. Kindly leave the auditorium.”

“Restaurant,” corrected Big Jim.

Cracknell peered through his fingers at him, then looked round at the immediate surroundings . “Restaurant,” he admitted grudgingly. “Though that makes it worse. Statements like that-” he pointed at Big Jim - “in a place like this –” he indicated the restaurant “ - could give me indigestion.”

Tez also glanced around at all the other people calmly eating their meals. Stephen caught the look, and nodded understandingly.

“Look at all those people...” said Tez.

..... “they’ve been hypnotised. They looked dazed and uncomprehending, don’t they? Almost as if someone has slugged them, and they’re not even sure if they want to recover.”

“Daily routine,” said Mike cryptically. “Are you going to buy a paper?”

“I bet I could stir them a little.” Cracknell rubbed his hands together. “Shall I? Shall I?” He looked at his companions and bobbed his head winsomely.

“What’s the plan?” asked Big Jim.

“Actions speaks louder than words,” said Cracknell. “Have we all finished? Does anyone want a second cup of coffee, or possibly a brandy by the log fire?”

“No, we’ve all finished,” sighed Stephen. “Carry on, Machievelli.”

“Well,” said Cracknell. “See how placid they all are? Remember it well.”

A waiter was handing out plates of soup in one corner. Two new arrivals were consulting the menu in another. Elsewhere, customers carried on with their meals without assistance, temporarily without a care in the world. Stephen imagined an ante-room by the entrance: there would be a place for hats, a place for coats, another for umbrellas, and a fourth labelled ‘cares’. A customer could hang up those, too, and enjoy peaceful meal in the quiet interior of the restaurant.

“Well now,” whispered Cracknell. “You are sitting quietly. Everyone else is doing the same. No-one is paying any attention to you, unless it is the waiter bringing your order. At least, that’s what you think. In fact, a murderer lurks in the shadows,

over by that hatstand. Bloodstained clothes, unkempt hair, ragged breathing. Those eyes! He's killed three times today, and he's far from satisfied."

They listened to him, mesmerised.

"Jesus!" screamed Cracknell. "Look out behind you!"

Everyone in the restaurant reacted instantly to this sudden, shocking interruption. The new arrivals whirled round and bumped their heads together painfully. Several people almost choked in their hasty efforts to look behind them. The waiter lost his balance and split up soup over his nearest customer who, because he was looking the other way, thought something dreadful was happening to him and sprang to his feet. This had the effect of upturning the table with a tremendous crash, and three other customers were knocked into the mess on the floor. The entire restaurant was in complete uproar.

Big Jim stood up and pushed his chair tidily underneath the table. He leaned forward and shouted over the din: "Perhaps we'd better be going."

Tez glanced behind him, and also scrambled to his feet. A well-dressed man was purposefully picking his way through the chaos towards them. Stephen helped Cracknell to stand upright, and put a bracing arm around him.

"What the hell...?" started the man, having arrived.

"We're very sorry!" shouted Stephen. "It's Machievelli here."

Tez and Big Jim began to move, and they all walked slowly towards the exit. "He's very bright," explained Stephen, less loudly, because things were beginning to quieten down. "But I'm afraid he sometimes..." he tilted his hand suggestively, and the man looked at Cracknell with evident distaste.

"Close to the edge!" put in Tez, and as the man switched his gaze to him, Big Jim surreptitiously opened the door.

"Wha-?"

"Nice meal," smiled Tez, and closed the door. They all ran quickly down the pavement outside, until they were safely around the corner. All heaved sighs of relief.

"You're a naughty boy, Cracknell," intoned Big Jim. "A very, very naughty boy." And he wagged a finger sternly."

Mike stirred.

"At first," he said, "I'm not sure if I'm asleep or awake. And then the whole situation takes on a .. an aura of unreality. Black door, black clothes, a wall-length

mirror appearing out of nowhere. Only it's not completely unreal, because sometimes even true life, and ordinary events, seem odd."

"Deja-vu?"

"No, something more than that." Mike looked up. "No, I mean that sometimes everything seems...oh, superficial. It all seems insubstantial. Like if I blink my eyes, then things would vanish. A wave of my wand, and the world changes."

"Or brings back the past?" said Tez quietly.

Mike frowned, and watched as one of his hands closed itself into a trembling fist. "Perhaps. Anyway, I move through this apparently unreal world, and end up in the hearse, with Stephen alongside. It all seems perfectly logical, y'know? Weird, perhaps, but logical." He looked up again. "I'm thing what seem to be logical thoughts, and nothing is out of place. Even the rain and the wipers being back to front."

"Reversal of causal postulate," said Tez. Mike looked at him gratefully.

"Yes, we took the same course, didn't we? But the point is, right up to the time when Holy Joe appears, things seem to be normal, even though when I'm –" he paused " - when I'm awake, I can see that isn't the case. Then Holy Joe appears and things go haywire."

"Let's get this straight," interrupted Big Jim. "You mean that even in the dream, Holy Joe's appearance strikes you as being odd?"

"Exactly."

Tez and Slim Jim nodded to themselves, and Mike continued.

"I mean, take the whole thing in sequence. First of all I get up, and although everything is mysteriously black, getting up seems like a perfectly natural thing to do. Then I get in the hearse, which I admit is odd, but at the time I'm unable to think about it. My mind blanks out for a bit. So there's this gap, and the next thing I know I'm driving off with Stephen sitting beside me. All rather strange, but perfectly feasible. And then, suddenly, right in the middle of almost piling up on the bend, Stephen is gone and Holy Joe is there instead. Of course that seems bloody peculiar! And just to make things worse, when I see that figure in the red light, I know straight away who it is." He paused. "How did I know that? Why did I think he'd deserted me? And why should I be driving a bloody hearse anyway?"

"Unpleasant," said Slim Jim.

“It all seems so real, too. The wet road, and the noise of the wind. Like I was really there, and it really happened.”

Tez cleared his throat. “I’m no psychiatrist,” he apologised, “but it couldn’t be caused by some feelings of ...er, guilt, could it?”

Mike hesitated, and stared unseeingly towards the window.

He wanted to stop moving forward, but found that his limbs were no longer under his control. With every step, the road grew nearer, widening in perspective until it filled the entire scene. At the very edge he was allowed to halt. He looked out over the dark tarmac as if it were a black, stagnant sea. Faintly he could hear that trace of a rustle, as if a breath was stirring crisp, dead leaves. Otherwise, no sound disturbed the stillness, and overhead, only one star gleamed between oily clouds.

After a few moments, he stepped off the kerb and started to cross the road. He fought against this forward movement, but it was almost as if a giant finger was gouging in his back, propelling him on. The road was still deserted, and everywhere was still covered in complete, quiet blackness, but somehow a sullen tension had raised itself. The very silence seemed indicative of some impending event. Slowly, he plodded onward. The road was wet and slippery beneath his feet.

The tension grew and grew, mounting toward some hidden climax of which he was entirely ignorant. An invisible power still governed his limbs, but he retained enough awareness to know that he was trembling violently. He trod on as calmly as he could, but he could feel the edge of panic looming over the horizon of his self-control.

Half way across his nerve broke, and he lunged forward in order to escape whatever was going to happen. The far pavement seemed, in that instant, to hold all the promise of a pagan paradise. But he knew he was not going to reach it, and on the thought, he foot slipped; he scabbled desperately for balance.

The night burst into brilliant colour as lights on the distant kerb came furiously alight. Reds, oranges, ambers, all of them flashing regularly but not together, so that the overall effect was of an electric kaleidoscope filling the dome of the sky. Somehow a giant rushing noise had evolved, too, which he had missed in that first, heartstopping moment when he began to fall.

Then, very faintly, as if emerging from a great depth, he could hear a buzzing sound. It grew, and became a muted hum, and still grew, promising to become an

engine's roar. He listened to its approach, in that endless moment while he struggled to stand upright. He listened to its approach, while a breach of cold air seemed to stir at his back and a thin, high scream escaped into the inhuman night. It rose in pitch, turning and twisting beneath the splashes of colour, then trailed away in deference to the approaching roar. The sound magnified as it grew closer and closer, and suddenly he knew what it heralded, knew its name with shocking certainty....

"No, not guilt," he managed to say.

...Nemesis.

Every time, he awoke white and shaking with the haunting sensation of that terrible killing blow which had never come. He shrank from the bone-crunching force of impact, the jarred, whirling images as he was flung high into the air. Colours blurring into streaks of red, not white, and the night air suddenly so cold.

He trembled down into the softness of his bed, and it was all the more terrible because he had never experienced any of it, not even in his dreams.

"So what is reality?" Cracknell had asked, finally breaking into the conversation. It was all a waste of time, and he knew it, but he might as well try to show them the uselessness of their thoughts.

"God knows," admitted one of the others.

"Possibly," returned Cracknell. "But what are we going to allow as being real, and what is not?"

"That which can be seen, or felt, or heard."

"An idea?" asked Cracknell.

"Perhaps not," conceded his opponent.

"Should we not approach it from the other direction?" put in the tutor. Cracknell disliked this form of question.

"How so should we?" he replied blandly.

"What is not real" asked the tutor. "Perhaps by process of elimination we can arrive at a suitable answer to our question."

"Your question," corrected Cracknell. "I think this is all a waste of effort, and by the time we've done all the eliminating, if any, then we'll have forgotten what the question was."

“If any?”

“What is not real?” countered Cracknell. “Think of something. Give me an example.”

The others thought for a few moments, and then the tutor smiled. “The stuff of dreams?” he quoted.

Cracknell laughed. “Hokum! A dream is a dream is a dream. It exists, does it not? - even if it is in the imagination. So it is real.”

“No, no,” said the tutor quietly. “Listen to what I say. I did not say ‘a dream’, did I? Consider rather ‘the stuff of dreams’...”

“Sir?”

Mike glanced around irritably, catching a glimpse of the waiter’s white jacket. “Yes? what is it?” He was surprised at his own irritation. At the same time, he saw Tez grinning broadly, and wondered what he had missed. “Yes?” he repeated. “What do you want?”

“Oh, no sir,” replied the waiter. “What do you want, sir? A nice girl, perhaps: nice naked long-pig, deliciously a-tremble?”

All thoughts of the dream vanished as Mike recognised the voice, but he managed to restrain himself from looking startled, and even from uttering some surprised remark. “Hmmm. I’ll take one. But make sure she’s left handed and –” he turned to prod Cracknell in the stomach “- that there are no bikini strap marks. An even tan, d’you here?”

“Well done, medium, or rare?” asked Cracknell smoothly.

Mike grinned, outmanoeuvred. “Sit down, you clot. We thought you weren’t coming.”

“Work permits,” punned Cracknell.

“I thought I saw you, a few moments ago,” said Tez.

“Where?”

“Right here,” claimed Tez. “I was sat here, and I said to the others ‘I thought for a moment I saw Cracknell out of window.’ Isn’t that right? Didn’t I say to you, only a few moments ago, that...”

Big Jim thought it was about time he got in on the act, and leaned forward impressively. Tez trailed into silence, and stared at him. Everyone else did the same; even Cracknell bent down a little, so as to hear more clearly.

After a few moments, Big Jim leaned back again and nodded to himself. The others all realised that they had been caught out and sighed. Slim Jim murmured: "Touche."

Having divested himself of his borrowed jacket, Cracknell sat down in one of the vacant seats, grinning amiably around the table. "How're things, people?"

Tez clapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation. "Jesus! We've been through all that already. Why couldn't you get here at the proper time?"

"Well, my watch was wrong," said Cracknell defensively. Tez resisted a grin, and nominated himself historian. "Him - " he pointed at Big Jim " - he's not doing anything very much, because he's got exams coming up."

Cracknell nodded.

"Him - " this time Slim Jim was indicated " - he's doing something, but nobody knows what it is. Business, of course."

Cracknell nodded again.

"Him - "Mike took up the story " - he's not doing much, either. Some sort of studying is the cover. Like you."

Cracknell raised his eyebrows, but nodded yet again.

"And I'm teaching."

"Teaching?"

"Yeah. You know, two and two make four, four and four make eight, eight and eight make a damn sight more fingers..."

"...than I've got. I see." Cracknell pulled his chair closer to the table. "And where are the others?"

Mike glanced at the remaining three places and shrugged.

"I see," repeated Cracknell thoughtfully. "Which ones are they, anyway? Nancy, I suppose..."

"Rumbold and John T Rex," supplied Slim Jim.

"And since they haven't arrived," continued Cracknell, "it's not very likely that one of them is the organiser, is it?"

"He could be held up, or ill," said Big Jim doubtfully.

"Could. If," said Cracknell with disdain. "We need facts. I'm assuming, by the way, that it isn't one of us." The rise in his voice turned this statement into a query, and everyone responded by shaking their heads.

"One of us could be keeping a secret," accused Tez.

“Pure Agatha Christie,” said Mike. He made his voice quiver with tension. “One of those sitting round this very table....”

“No.” Cracknell was shaking his head. “No, there’s no reason for it to be kept a secret, is there? Any more than there was for the practice.”

“I know,” said Slim Jim gloomily, before anybody else could speak. “Don’t tell me. I was responsible for that.”

Cracknell suddenly seized a glass of water, and raised it into the air. “To us!”

Mike, not to be outdone, grabbed at this glass, and also raised it up, splashing some water onto the tablecloth. “To us!”

Slim Jim nodded and smiled. “Friends...” he began reminiscently.

All of them had a temporary vision of that great, echoing hall which completely dwarfed their small gathering. Even their voices were made tinnily remote by its size. The wooden floor, made up by long boards, seemed almost to diminish with distance towards the far end. The walls were painted some nondescript colour, and were mostly concealed by climbing bars anyway. The giant double doors let into the side of one of the walls were uncompromisingly open.

Mike reflected rather vaguely that just about all of the doors he had ever seen were let into the sides of walls of one sort or another. The exact and embracing nature of this idea ought, to his way of thinking, to be the start of a beautifully simple concept that no-one had ever thought of before. But he knew that the conclusion to notions such as these never occurred to him, so he stopped the train of thought entirely.

A group of people stood about in random fashion a short way into the great expanse of floor. Two of them had separated themselves from the others, and were moving further away. Big Jim and Mike: one of them was whispering hoarsely, the other agreeing in an absent fashion while thinking his own vague thoughts. Elsewhere, Slim Jim and another were just lowering their imaginary glasses, and the hall still echoed to their ringing toast.

“So I asked them,” said Cracknell, punching a fist aggressively into the air, “straight out, I asked them: ‘so what is reality?’”

John T Rex looked across at him. “So what is it?” he enquired innocently. “Did you manage to solve the problem?”

“Of course not,” grumbled Cracknell. “It was a complete waste of time, as usual. It’s always the same. We start off on the right topic, and then some smart alec asks some bloody stupid question, and we spend yet another hour discussing the meaning of life, or reality, or some equally useless subject.” He kicked at an outsize piece of gravel on the path. “It’s always the bloody same,” he muttered.

The waiter stared in surprise at Cracknell, and Slim Jim airily waved his hand yet again.

“Oh, yes. Another one of us has turned up...”

“...a little late,” murmured Tez.

“...so would you be kind enough to bring one more?”

The waiter nodded resignedly and left in the same manner as before. Cracknell pushed his glass further onto the table, out of harm’s way. “How long have you been here, then?”

“First,” claimed Slim Jim.

“But only just,” said Tez.

“Followed by me.”

“I haven’t been here all that long,” admitted Big Jim.

Slim Jim glanced at his watch. “All told, half an hour? Three quarters? Something like that.”

Cracknell looked speculatively at the three vacant places. “It’s getting a bit late to expect them, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Mike sadly.

The waiter chose that moment to return with Cracknell’s meal, which he plonked down with noticeably less grace than he had all the others. “Ah,” he said, smiling. “Still five, I see.” Everyone nodded mutely, stuck dumb by the unexpected fact of the waiter being able to originate a remark all on his own. “Would you gentlemen care for the second course?” he continued. Everyone nodded again, and Cracknell waved a fork in the air, saying:

“Me too. I’ll be finished by then.”

The waiter made some mysterious marks on a piece of paper. “It was arranged for eight,” he complained. “So it looks as if three are going to waste. I suppose...” He muttered something incomprehensible, stuffed the paper in his breast pocket, and left, threading his way along a new route between the tables.

“What a man,” breathed Mike.

“I caught a distinct note of sarcasm when he asked about the seconds,” said Tez. “I vote we remove his chevrons and demote him to dishwasher.”

“Probably automatic.”

“D’you remember that time I braced Administration and got hold of that information about Nancy’s girl. That secretary thought she was a bloody aristocrat, too. I don’t know - ” Tez fluffed his hair petulantly “ - these menials aren’t what they used to be.”

“More important,” interrupted Slim Jim, “did you notice what he said? It’s been arranged for eight, he said. Arranged. And we still don’t know who did it.”

“Well,” said Cracknell, munching industriously. “Obviously it was one of the missing three, and he’s ill or something and couldn’t make it.” He gave no sign of realising that he was going back on his earlier opinion.

Mike held up his hand. “Question: whose invitation had a readdressed envelope?”

“Yes!” Slim Jim looked surprised. “Both mine and Cracknell’s did. I happened to notice when we met that other time. How did you know that?”

“All in good time. What about you two?”

Big Jim and Tez couldn’t remember.

“Well, I’ve got an idea,” said Mike. “And I bet Rumbold wasn’t invited, either.” He fell silent, and the others looked at him with open curiosity. “Before you came...” he inclined his head in Cracknell’s direction “...we were talking about a dream I’ve been having. Or at least, I was talking about it, and the others were listening. We hadn’t got very far. You see, I had this nightmare which involves the accident, only I appear to be the one driving.”

Cracknell made as if to interrupt, but Mike raised a hand to forestall him.

“No, hear me out. You’ll see what I’m getting at in a minute. Now, the reason why we got onto this subject in the first place is because..well...” Mike nodded his head as if submitting to a superior argument “...because I was worried by it, true, but also because of something Tez said.” He paused, and smiled briefly at the puzzled expression on Tez’s face. “And you also said something else, although it was on the wrong track: guilt. I’m sure that’s not the reason, because I also have a dream where I’m the one that gets knocked over. Or nearly so. No, no, it has to be something

else.” He repeated to himself, ruminatively: “There has to be something else, some other reason.”

“What’s the matter?” shouted Whoever he was.

“Nancy!”

“Well, what’s the matter with Nancy?”

“Same as before.”

They reached the top of the stairs and stared at John T Rex II with horror.

“Not moaning again?” demanded J.C.

“Again,” affirmed John T Rex II.

“What, in the middle of the hall?” asked Whoever he was.

“Right in the middle,” affirmed John T Rex II.

“Good grief,” muttered Whoever he was.

J.C. looked appraisingly at the ceiling, then back at John T Rex II, who shook his head.

“No, he didn’t disturb him, thank God, although it must have been a near thing. I persuaded him to go and write a poem about her, instead.”

“Same sort of moaning?”

“Exactly the same,” confirmed John T Rex II. “Extremely harrowing. I think it’s about time somebody did something about it.”

“We’ll give it some thought,” promised J.C. He went into his own room and, deep in thought, Whoever he was followed. John T Rex II disappeared somewhere, and the Home resumed a semblance of peace.

“What’re you thinking?”

J.C. had started to set up the pieces, and Whoever he was absently helped.

“Oh - I was looking for a common denominator.”

“Find one?”

“No, not yet.” Whoever he was suddenly noticed something.

“What the hell? I was black last time!”

“But we didn’t finish last time.”

“True, true.” Whoever he was subsided meditatively. He was pretty certain to win, in any case.

“What sort?”

“Um?”

"I'll put it another way - between what?"

"Um?"

"The common denominator," said J.C. patiently. "What sort are you looking for? Between what things does it commonly denominate?"

"Oh." Whoever he was nodded, understanding. "Well, it was thinking of Nancy that did it. I wondered whether he, and Cracknell, and one or two of the others..." He almost trailed off, but pulled himself together sufficiently to say "...whether their various troubles can be attributed to a single cause."

"Philosophy," remarked J.C.

"Sort of. It'd give me something to work on, anyway."

"Found one yet?"

"No," admitted Whoever he was. "No, I haven't. But give me time."

They clumped down the steps, into the corridor, which echoed with its customary early morning emptiness.

"I don't know how you do it," said Cracknell. "I'm usually up by this time, but God knows muster all the energy to walk all this way."

"You just have," pointed out Stephen.

Cracknell allowed this fact. "But only this once. Twice would kill me."

Without replying, Stephen stopped off at the pigeon holes, while Mike cautiously entered the black maw of the snooker room. Cracknell hesitated indecisively between the two. "Anyone else ever here?" he asked.

"Only on Tuesdays."

"Why's that?"

"Peculiarity of the timetable, I suppose. Anyway, we don't come here on Tuesdays any more, so for all we... Grief! There's a letter here for Big Jim!"

"Leave it," advised Cracknell. "He's coming in later, so he can pick it up himself."

There was a click from within the snooker room, and a burst of light, and Mike shouting triumphantly: "Got it!" Stephen and Cracknell sauntered in to begin the game.

"So why's your tutorial different this time?" asked Mike, as Cracknell fussily selected a cue from the central rack.

“Oh, he’s got to go to London, or something. Christ, these cues are bad, aren’t they? Half are bent, half haven’t got any tips, and half have weights rattling around inside.”

“And the other half can’t add up,” said Stephen’s dryly.

“Who’s got to go to London?”

“The tutor,” said Cracknell briefly. “He does his best, poor bloke, but I think we’re too much for him, and he needs a rest cure. Anyway, he’s changed the time to nine thirty. Aha! Here’s one!” He took out a cue, seized a nearby piece of chalk, and autonomously elected to break.

“Rubbish,” said Stephen, regarding the split pack and the cue ball far from safe.

“He changed the time to nine thirty?” persisted Mike incredulously, “and you still came in?”

Cracknell shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Yes, well. I hate to admit it, but last week’s effort wasn’t bad, for a wonder.”

Stephen looked up just before taking his shot. “Oh? What was it about?”

“Time.”

“Oh yes?” He played his stroke and cursed fluently. Mike, smiling, took his place at the table.

“Yes,” continued Cracknell. “It all rather hinged on whether time was a series of unrelated events or a continuous, possibly inevitable chain.” He paused while Mike potted a convenient red. “And also, whether only one part of time exists at any particular point, or whether all points exist simultaneously, somewhere or other.”

“Go on,” urged Stephen, curious.

“For example,” said Cracknell. “In some different space and time, is there a Stephen holding out an envelope, saying: ‘Grief! There’s a letter here for Big Jim!’ at this very moment? Eternally. You see what I mean?”

“I do indeed,” said Stephen thoughtfully.

“Damn it!” exclaimed Mike. “Bugger it!” He had just missed his colour, and had left a red comfortably set up for the next player.

“He found his philosophy, y’know, and it was very simple: live for the present. When we were walking home one night, close to the end, he told all about it. Very

persuasive. He did his best to convince me that all problems are merely causes of looking overmuch to the future. And he more or less did convince me too. The only thing that doesn't fit in is that old butterfly quote, because it challenges reality. What is reality? What is the present?" He paused, then stated the problem more clearly. "What is the present we should live for?"

"Pass it! Pass it!" screamed Tez.

For once, the giant hall failed to dwarf the motley group within its walls. This time, the doors were closed, two goals were set up, and the entire area was filled with multi-coloured action, regardless of where the ball happened to be.

"Jesus Christ!" screeched Tez. "Get rid of the bloody thing!"

Mike had the ball at his feet, and several of the opposition were converging upon him at great speed.

"Here!" coaxed Stephen.

"Over here!" roared Tez.

Slim Jim, doing duty as goal-keeper, was jumping up and down in excitement. Suddenly, he stood still and regarded the nearest wall with a thoughtful expression. Mike passed to Tez, since Stephen was on the opposing team. Immediately, all the action thundered away from Slim Jim, up towards the other goal mouth, where John T Rex I was waiting nervously. But Slim Jim failed to notice this. An idea had blossomed in his brain, and he grinned happily into the echoing chamber spread before him.

Another time, or the same time, four of them sprawled on the lawn as the sun beat down heavily. They spoke languidly for short while, and then were interrupted by a butterfly, which landed on the grass very close to one of them. He rolled over in order to watch it, and it took off again, fluttering over some flowers, behind a hedge. The four continued to lie there, allowing the summer to wash energy from them.

A girl with long blond hair walked past on the pavement, and they all turned in her direction. After a few moments, she disappeared from view.

One of the four stood up, smiling. He brushed down his trousers, then started off for a nearby building. As he did so, his shadow fell across one of his companions, and another shook his fist in mock anger. But he carried on into the greater shadow

that the building made, and vanished inside. The remaining three continued to lie lazily in the sun.

A window opened in the building, to show two people within one of the rooms. A shouted conversation took place, then the window closed peace descended once again. Far off could be heard the muted sound of traffic, as of cars halted and still, engines idling. A few birds chirped in the trees, but most of them were probably too hot and exhausted to bother. The sun still beat down relentlessly: the start of a shimmering heat-haze could be seen in the shining sky.

Suddenly, the three stood up and ran, laughing, towards the building. One by one, they passed through the pool of shadow, and clattered inside. A door creaked shut behind them. After that, no untoward sound at all disturbed the peace of that timeless afternoon.

“You know,” said Cracknell slowly, “I had theories about dreams back at the Home. For the most part, I think they are just distorted pictures of what has happened that very day, of reality. Oh.” He paused, realising what he had just said, and nodded across at Mike. “Yes. I see what you mean.”

“Damn butterfly!” said Tez, trying to inject a note of humour. “Myself, I reckon the entire world was created the minutes ago, complete. Each of us ready-made with implanted memories, and faked history all around us.”

“Quite a job,” remarked Big Jim dryly.

“And botched,” said Slim Jim.

Cracknell looked at Mike, who still seemed deep in thought. “What I don’t understand is how this connects up with the reunion. Who organised it? Why was Rumbold not invited? Why yes the organiser himself failed to come?” He pinged the water jug again, and looked at the group around the table; and they, in turn, all looked at Mike.

During the pause, Big Jim suddenly remembered the stretch of road leading up to the Home. He imagined himself rising up into the air, circling, with his eyes fixed firmly upon that familiar route. He could see the double row of trees as a line of greenery, brown trunks hidden below; he could see the red splash of the pillar-box at one end of the street, like a colourful full-stop; he could even see, if he looked very closely, a gap in hedge outside the Home, put there by countless people short-cutting across the

lawn. And the Home itself, of course, red brick and angled gables sprawling out beneath him in plain view. The green spread of the lawn was curtailed sharply by the road, and on either side of the road were houses which, to the pedestrian, were hidden behind tall hedges.

The whole scene revolved slowly upon some invisible fulcrum underneath the earth, so that after a while the Home and the pillar-box exchanged places. The road looked exactly the same either way up, so Big Jim reasoned that it must bisect his view, and be symmetrical about the dotted line down its centre. Only the Home and the pillar-box were different: even the houses on either side of the road seemed to interchange smoothly, without altering the overall picture. The whole thing was similar to a photograph thrown causally onto a turntable almost still.

Big Jim smiled vaguely as he remembered all the times he had walked the final stretch of that length of road. Oddly, he could only bring to mind the occasions on which he had returned Home, rather than the times when he had been going the other way. Logic told him that presumably he had left the Home as many times as he had returned to it: his memory, however, chose to be capricious in which memories it retained.

Once, he had returned with John T Rex, trudging up the road in the beginnings of a storm. The whiplash cold of the rain slanting out of lamplight felt almost tangibly real, and he shivered in response. They had arrived back at the Home just in time to catch the slide show, and were so wet through that it was surprising that they did not also catch colds.

Another time, he had crunched along after a fall of snow, a tricky operation, because quite a few people had done the same before him, and much of the snow was crushed flat into ice. So he concentrated on putting his feet in the least slippery places since, as he had reflected rather wryly, if he did tumble over, he had a long way to go. He could see it now, in every detail.

“Halt!”

He had reached half way up the tree-lined street, and was considering the fact that when he finally got back Home, his hands would be too cold to do any work. A snowball arced surreptitiously from over a hedge and landed just in front of him. He stopped in surprise.

“Halt! Who goes there?” cried the disembodied voice.

“Me!” he called back, trying to locate his challenger. He bent down and started to gather up a handful of snow.

“You may not pass!” cried another voice, and Big Jim straightened in alarm. Two of them? He decided the odds were becoming a trifle unfair, and edged over towards the nearest tree, in the hope that it would afford some protection. “I’ll pay the toll!” he shouted.

Another pedestrian on the other side of the road looked up at this uninvited outburst. Big Jim waved at him cheerfully.

“Act normal!” hissed the nearest voice. “Put one foot wrong and you won’t know what hit you.”

Big Jim stopped waving, and started to plod Homewards instead.

“Where are you going?” demanded the nearest voice.

“You told me to act normal,” retorted Big Jim, “so I’m acting normal. I’m going Home.”

“But - ” A hedge rustled, and Cracknell appeared from behind it. “But I - ” Another hedge rustled, and John T Rex came forth. “I mean we - ” amended Cracknell hastily.

Big Jim moved off at the fastest pace he could manage without slipping over. He was within about thirty yards of the hole in the hedge when a snowball whistled past his shoulder and splashed on the pavement in front of him. Obviously he was not yet out of range. He increased his speed beyond that which he really considered safe and, when he was within about twenty yards of the hole in the hedge, he fell over and covered himself in freezing snow.

“Germolino!” shouted Cracknell in triumph, and rushed up in so much of a hurry to see Big Jim in this uncomfortable state that he too fell over, covering himself in snow, and transforming himself into a miserable hunk of shivering ice.

Big Jim jerked and glanced quickly around the table. It was odd, how real those events had seemed, and yet there was Cracknell, sitting placidly opposite him, very far from that frozen apparition of the past. This thought caused Big Jim to look contemplatively at Mike, for he, no doubt, would pose the question: but were they so far removed?

Cracknell, for his part, found himself recalling the very last day. He had been one of the very last to leave, and he had wandered about in a desultory fashion,

looking in on empty rooms, perhaps meeting up with somebody in the process of packing. Next door, Rumbold had been one of the first to go. His room was bare of any sign of habitation: the bed had been stripped, the doors of the wardrobe hung open to reveal empty innards, the floor showed an occasional area of cleanliness where something long-standing had been removed. On the walls were marks made by peeling off sticky tape, and clean rectangular places obviously once covered by posters. The boards echoed grimly under Cracknell's feet as he turned to observe this scene of desolation. He went back outside, closing the door, and even that click seemed to ring with an air of finality.

"Have you gone yet, doctor?"

"Go away!"

"Come on, doctor. I'm still here, so you might be."

"I'm not your doctor."

"Let me in! After all this time, and I'm still insane! Perhaps you can come up with a last minute reprieve..."

"Go away. I'm packing."

"...or an eleventh hour solution. How about it, doctor?"

Cracknell opened his door and peered out at John T Rex II, who was shuffling hopefully from one foot to another.

"I'm packing."

"I'm sure watching will do me good, doctor. Or at least, do me no harm."

Cracknell frowned, but beckoned him inside.

"What's that?"

"It's a case."

"And what're all those things?"

"They're all my things."

"It's a mess," stated John T Rex II. "I've never seen such a mess in all my life. Good God! What a fantastic, incredible mess!"

"Well, I'm sorry," apologised Cracknell. "But I am packing, y'know. You have to take everything out before putting it all in, you see. Out of cupboards and into cases."

"And boxes."

"And boxes," agreed Cracknell.

“And Holy Joe?”

“Ah, Holy Joe,” said Cracknell, nodding. “Yes, I think - ” He strode over to Holy Joe, who was lying on his back in the middle of the room, and strived to pick him up. At first this was rather unsuccessful, since only Holy Joe merely lolled in all directions, becoming completely disjointed and out of shape. But eventually Cracknell managed to cradle him in his arms and stagger over to the wardrobe. John T Rex II watched, amazed, as he held the door open and crammed Holy Joe, now upright, inside.

“Doctor.”

“Ungh,” grunted Cracknell.

“You can’t do that!”

“I’ve just done it.” He closed the door and stepped back, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. “Be a surprise for the next occupier, won’t it? Skeleton in the closet.”

“Good God,” repeated John T Rex II, more quietly.

Cracknell moved over to a filled case, and closed it up. Part of a sock resisted his efforts for a moment, but eventually he triumphed and the whole thing was neatly strapped up.

“Rumbold Jnr’s gone,” said John T Rex II.

“Yes, I know.”

“His room’s all bare and empty.”

“Yes, I know that, too.”

“How come you know so many things, doctor?”

“I don’t know,” said Cracknell.

John T Rex II shuffled forward and sat on a convenient case. “I think the person who’s never in has gone,” he said.

“Oh yes?”

“It’s a bit difficult to tell, though” admitted John T Rex II.

Cracknell closed up another case and leaned it against a cardboard box which was already packed. He stood, arms akimbo, to observe how he was getting on.

“When’re you going, doctor?”

“Oh, pretty soon.”

John T Rex II stood up. He shuffled back towards the door, and started to leave.

“Thank-you, doctor I feel so much better, talking to you. Can I come back tomorrow?”

Cracknell turned to grin at him, but the door was already closing.

“Of course - ”

The doctor clicked shut.

“Of course you can, John,” he murmured. “Come back any time you like....”

He looked at the three unoccupied chairs, clustered at one end of the table. John T Rex. There was an echo, if you like. No-one knew where he had gone. He had disappeared into oblivion, like the cars he had once dented. Perhaps nobody would ever see him again.

Slim Jim looked curiously at everyone else around the table. Mike was still gathering his thoughts. Tez and Big Jim and Cracknell all appeared to be lost in contemplation. A strange hush had come over their gathering, and it seemed to Slim Jim almost as if he was the only one there. All of the others, by some temporal magic, had been transported into other realities, leaving him behind.

He sighed, waiting for Mike to begin.

Outside the restaurant, the sun was still shining brightly, colouring the scene with unusual richness. Passers-by were less frequent now, because the afternoon was pressing inexorably forward and most people were about their work. But the street still bustled with housewife shoppers and others whose presence was less easily explained. For a minute or two, he wondered what their occupations were, as he had done earlier.

It occurred to him they must present a curious tableau. They had all finished eating, and now sat around in silence, everyone apparently lost in thought. Even he was lost in thought, although at least he was thinking about the fact that everyone else was sat around thinking....

“Lazy buggers.”

“I told you it was hot, didn't I?”

“Lazy bugger.”

“Well, I agree with them.”

“How d’you think the West was won? Not in a bloody spring, that’s for sure.”
With which enigmatic remark, Tez stomped out, closing the door forcefully behind him.

Slim Jim sighed and opened his book again. It was hard, in this weather, to build up a sense of urgency. In fact, he seemed to be the only one working; all the others sat around on the lawn, or strolled beneath trees, or talked about the things they ought to do. It was generally decided that it was too hot even to play games, let alone do any work.

He found himself gazing out of the window, and instantly reverted his attention back to the book. Another revelation followed—he had read at least half a page without taking a sign word. And examinations so close... Perhaps it was too hot, after all. Perhaps Tez would wander into the room one day and find nothing but a dried-up, over-worked corpse stretched out on the floor.

Slim Jim smiled to himself. At least he would be a thoroughly revised and well prepared corpse. He could almost see Stephen waving a placard, gathering together a group in the hall. “James will now give a talk entitled: what it is like to be dead.”

A rumble out in that very hall; a glance out of the window, see that the lawn is now empty. Presumably they have all come in for Stephen’s cup of tea.

Come on. This wasn’t good enough. Open the book there, open it. Smartly! Top of the page - read! Make sure, this time, that it all stays in the mind and doesn’t seep back onto the printed page.

For a moment, one of the passers-by resembled John T Rex, and he almost started to his feet in excitement. But then, as the pedestrian, walked past and the angle of view changed, he saw that it was not so. He sat back with an inaudible sigh.

Once before, the same thing had happened, except that he had been waiting for Cracknell on that occasion. They had arranged to meet at a certain time in the snooker room. He had got there punctually but Cracknell, as usual, was late. Ten minutes after the deadline someone had walked through the door and he had risen to his feet, calling: “Here I am!”

The newcomer had then walked forward into the light and become recognisable as a complete stranger.

He laughed, and they all looked sharply at him.

“Oh,” he said, feeling obliged to explain. “I was remembering when I mistook someone else for Cracknell.”

“When was that?” asked Cracknell.

“You weren’t there,” said Slim Jim reproachfully. “You were late again. But it was just before we met up in the snooker room, the last time. Remember?”

“How can I remember, if it was just before we met?”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

“True.” Cracknell nodded. “Yes, I remember.”

They lapsed into silence again, this attempt at a conversation being something of a failure.

The waiter became visible across the restaurant, appearing as if by magic through an invisible gap in the wall. He threaded his way between intervening tables, stopping once to hand someone a glass of something, and ended up by their table again.

“Your desserts, sir....”

Cracknell pushed his empty plate into the middle of the table, muttering “It’s about time.” He had long since finished his first course. Everyone watched as the waiter laid down five plates, gathered up Cracknell’s used crockery, and left. Mike picked up his spoon, turned it this way and that in the sunlight from the window, seeing it glint.

“The last time we were in a restaurant together, we got out without paying,” said Big Jim. “And this time it’s been arranged for us, so I suppose we won’t have to pay this time, either. Except that we had to get there in the first place, of course. In short - ” Big Jim poked at the food in front of him - “ in short, all this is for free.”

“Thank-you, Micawber,” said Tez dryly.

Mike had his spoon back down again, and glanced out of the window, almost as if checking that the view outside was unchanged.

“Once, I conducted an experiment,” said Stephen, crunching across the frosty park. “I sat down at eight-o’-clock one day, and determined to myself that I would do exactly the same one week later. And on that second occasion, I would think back into the past, back to the first occasion, at eight-o’-clock that day. And on the initial occasion, of course, I was thinking about that time one week in the future, and was trying to make some contact... Believe me, it’s a funny experience, trying to think to

your future self, who is trying to transmit to your present self, who is yourself, doing all the thinking....”

“Did you get through?”

“Nope. Not a sausage. And on reflection, I’m not surprised, either, because the present self is happening all the time, somewhere in parallel universes, or something; and as far as that present self is concerned, the future self is non-existent.”

“So?”

“So, of course there’s no contact.”

“But don’t all the future selves exist all the time, somewhere, just like the earlier ones?”

“Beside the point. Time is chronological. I mean it has direction, and we must take the earlier times as bases.”

“Stephen?”

“What is it?”

“Don’t go on: my brain hurts.”

“Bugger your brain. What would have happened if Einstein kept on complaining he had a headache? If he had dosed himself up with aspirin instead of getting down to the problems of time?”

“Nothing, probably,” returned Mike. They had almost reached the campus, and his thoughts were beginning to strain ahead, into the snooker room. “But what, may I ask, is wrong with that?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Stephen sighed. “Why is life so bloody confusing?”

“No idea.”

“Too confusing, huh?”

“Guess so.”

He stopped looking out of the window, and stared at all the others instead, without really seeing them.

“Stephen was right,” he said slowly. “The accident is only one event, but it’s happening all the time. It’s happening now...and now... and it will always happen. Just as this conversation will always take place, somewhere. Stephen is still wandering up the stairs, or playing chess, or snooker.. somewhere. And my dream

was trying to tell me that: the same thing happening, from different viewpoints. I feel better for knowing that. Yes, I feel better...”

The others all stopped eating and stared back at him, surprised at this sudden speech. Mike frowned in concentration and carried on in an even voice.

“As to the other, make some questions into statements. State; *whoever arranged this did not come*, instead of asking it. State *invitations were re-addressed from old addresses*. State that *Rumbold was not invited*. Then what do you get? Do I need to say it?” He looked round the row of staring faces, and tapped on the table indecisively. “Oh, well...”

A cloud swept across the face of the sun, and the window dimmed, then brightened.

“Oh, hell!” The row of faces smiled in simultaneous relief. “I can’t be serious with you lot. Come on, you - ” he pointed at Big Jim “ - give us a story.”

“Once upon a time,” said Big Jim immediately, “there was this place called Home; and all the people in it were insane...”

“Or other people thought they were,” put in Tez.

“...probably because of being quite bright...”

“Or at least, other people thought they were-”

“Shut up, Tez. ”

“Sorry.”

“And the tale I am about to tell concerns a beautiful princess that nobody had ever heard of.”

“Go on! Go on!”

“Ah, we have a problem,” said Big Jim. “I’ve never heard of her, either.”

“Heard of who?”

“Who wrote this story, anyway?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I ever heard of him.”

Mike looked around the table and felt, somehow, that an exorcism had taken place: a great weight had left his shoulders and evaporated as if it had never been.

“Come on, tell up another story.”

“Which one would you like?”

“What about the greatest squash match of all time?”

“Go on.”

“Sweating it out beneath the arc lamps, unseen, unknown...”

“Yes, yes, go on.”

“Wait a minute, who’s telling this story anyway?”

Their voices bubbled out of the restaurant, into the street, and floated up into the shimmering sky. Somewhere, perhaps, another group listened.

“Hear it?” whispered J.C. Whoever he was nodded: he shifted in his chair and made an effort to listen even more intently.

“It sounds like....” He was interrupted as a faint sound once more made itself heard in the room.

“ - mice?” finished J.C.

Whoever he was shook his head.

“Got it!” cried Mike from within the snooker room. “Come on, hurry up.”

“Wait, I - ”

“Come - ”

“No, wait, I think - ”

“What?”

“I think I heard something.” Stephen shook his head. “It couldn’t be Cracknell, could it? He managed it yesterday, after all. Perhaps he....”

Mike came out of the snooker room, grasped Stephen firmly, and hauled him back inside. “Don’t be silly. You know there’s no chance of Cracknell coming two days in a row. If you heard anything at all, it must have been something else...”

The sun beat down relentlessly, covering everything with heavy syrup through which it was difficult to see, let alone move.

“I would never hurt a butterfly,” murmured Tez. “Yes, I like that. It makes a sort of sense.”

--“*Speak up!*”—

Footsteps rumbled in the hallway, an echoed about the Home. Anyone could have made them.

-“Can’t hear at the back!”-

“Not a sausage,” Stephen was saying sadly. “Not a sausage. Not a sausage.”

-“A skeleton?”

“A real skeleton, Tez! Name of Holy Joe...”

All the voices mingled and filtered down a funnelling tube, to disappear into the great maw of time. Mike nodded. It all made sense. Time always existed, so presumably all the voices did too. Somewhere, the Home still rang to cheerful obscenities, and was lit by a swinging red bulb.

“Once upon a time,” tried Big Jim again, “there was this place called Home, and in it lived some imaginary people.”

“What?”

“Imaginary?”

Chorus of protest: Tez looked round anxiously and said, “well, I’m real, aren’t I?”

Everyone looked at him, considering. He repeated hopefully: “Well, aren’t I?” He swallowed, loud in stillness.

“Flap your wings,” said Mike slowly. “Flap your wings, and then we’ll know for sure.”

