Fair Game for the Whole Hog: celebrating abjection and puerility in a comic novel

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by

Jim Younger BA (York) Cert Ed (Garnett College)

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COME ASHORE JOLLY TAR AND YOUR TROUSERS ON

Where we live, we’re out of the way. The track turns to the river, drops, and vanishes into the estuary mud - or estuary water, depending on the tide. On the night we slaughtered the last of the summer porkers the tide was running full when brother Daz came home safe from the war and his ditty-box of treasures hoisted on his shoulder.

Pappy Barking and me were sledging a most unhappy piglet over to the Doughnut when we heard Daz’s cheery whistle below on the track - causing us to pause, cock an ear, and look seaward. Out in the estuary, in the deep purple gloaming, we traced the shadow line of his darkened ship.

A signal lamp winked amber. Up from the river, out of the shadow, Daz came bowling toward us, free hand raised in salute.

‘Proper job,’ said one-eyed Pappy Barking, ‘dropping you right by your door.’

‘Britannia owes me,’ said Daz.

Baco and Ham snuffled in the sties - original parents of thousands or more, so the Breed Book tells. Baco and Ham wept for the last of the present litter, but Ham was noisiest. You would think she’d be used to it by now, the selection going on until there’s only one porker left and no choice in the matter.

Ham moaned and roared and butted her huge backside against the gate that kept her from Baco. Baco snorted and stamped his trotters, poaching the ground by his water trough into a Passchaendale of mud. He hoisted his snout and dashed forward a few paces, hither and thither, sniffing the air and jabbing his tusks at phantoms. But the swine (to call them by their rightful name) soon gave up the palaver when Daz jabbed Ham with the electric prod, and Pappy Barking dropped a fresh load of mangel-and-
acorn in Baco’s manger. Tomorrow, we would put Baco in with Ham, and let him do the business-from-behind, to have porkers enough for the new season.

Together we hauled the sledge over the cobbles - the trussed piglet was squealing for his mum - with Pappy Barking pulling and me and Daz pushing, into the Doughnut and over to the sluice. We hooked the tackle chains to his harness and hauled piglet screaming up to the block, rump-cheeks first, and Daz cut his throat with one swift stroke like he was never away, which was a mercy. I held the nine-pint coggie and the blood spurted and gurgled until all was drained and I poured the thick black blood into the pudding-tub.

Pappy Barking sawed through the rib cage and dug his hands in the paunch, and hauled out the kidneys and melts and liver and lights et cetera, while Daz and me wibbled away with the boning knives to get the quartering and chining done quick, and we parcelled him up in small portions for dainty eaters, half an hour’s work all told. We popped the head in the boner to strip the meat for pungent headcheese and sliced off his harry-pipe – his pizzle, that is – into the delicacy tray for stuffing later, along with his bladder.

We washed ourselves in the trough then dried off. Daz and me snapped towels at each other in noisy horseplay, kicking up the sawdust.

Pappy Barking’s vulture eye feasted on his frolicsome boys. He rubbed himself down with a boxer’s sponge dipped in vinegar-and-water. He pulled on his smock, and crowned himself with a battered Stetson, set all round with plastic mistletoe for a hatband, and a gilt-edge card tucked snug among the berries, reading *Kiss Me Quick*.

‘Let’s go in and surprise Mum,’ said Pappy Barking.
ALL THE NICE GIRLS LOVE A SAILOR

The clock on the mantelshelf, though broken, was still making tick-tock. The hand that ruled the seconds rocked forward and back - tick-tock, tock-tick - not making time. The minute and the hour were stuck at ten-to-three.

Mum was dozing in her Big Mamma armchair by the fire with the telly on quiet. Beside her, on the antique table I fetched her from Chafford market last Mothering Sunday, there was a half-drunk cup of tea, a few crusts of toast, and an open jar of honey with an Apostle spoon standing proud. A honey-drugged bluebottle spiralled slothful around a crumpet.

The telly flickered with vague-out-of-focus pictures of copulation projected from Mum’s sleeping brain. Mum snored. Daz grinned. He held a finger to his lips.

‘Sshh.’

We tiptoed across the room. Hell-cackle burst from the telly and Mum woke in a fright. She started to whimper, but when she saw Daz, resplendent in his Navy dress-blues, Mum gurgled with delight. Daz leaned over Mum and she rose, straining up to his face for a kiss. Daz kissed her honeyed mouth, and licked away her tears. Mum settled back against her cushion.

‘Did you meet any nice girls while you were overseas and East of Eden, son?’

‘A fair few. More than most shipmates, not so many as some. Madam Jojo saw a fair bit of action. Budge up, and give a sailor a berth.’

Daz sidled in beside our ample Mum. It was a squash, but neither seemed to mind. They cosied up and concentrated on the telly. The screen was fully in focus now, alive with bodies writhing and screaming in ecstasy and terror. Daz had his arm around Mum’s shoulder and his hand on her left marimba.
'Did you put many to the sword while you were abroad and overseas, son?' said Mum, putting her hand over his, and pressing it down towards her heart. She kept her eyes on the screen.

‘A fair few, East of Eden. More than most, not so many as some. Old Tickler saw a fair bit of action,’ said Daz.

**A GHOSTLY WHIMPER**

I left them to it and went in the back yard. Jip came staggering over. I crouched down, legs apart, and Jip padded his front paws playful on my crotch, teetering on his one back leg, good old boy. I nuzzled his stump and he yelped.

I walked down the dirt track through the dunes to the shore. The stars were fading in the east now the moon was rising blood-red on the Ness. The ship that bore my brother home was a faint smear on the dark horizon. Across the river, westward on the Kentish bank, the Gravesend crematorium hoisted a plume of orange smoke, erasing the stars in its wake.

I paced with short steps up and down the shingle. The pebbles crunched. The lapping tide slish-sloshed over my canvas shoes.

I turned and saw Jip, his tongue lolling and breath steaming in the night air, cold now the moon was up. He had a bloater, good old boy, so I took him by the collar and hauled him over to the dunes, among the reeds. I knelt down and flipped him over on his back. He yielded a ghostly whimper, like he was in love with me.

I had a groaning bloater of my own. I unbuttoned and spat on my fingers. Whitelady’s seventeenth haiku came to mind.

*Seventeen sly strokes -*

*Masterful hand spends treasure -*

*Pearl on golden sand*
You can’t find golden sand round our side of the Ness, but fair do’s to the versatile Whitelady (‘I do like to be beside the seaside/In the company of pale young boys’) he was abusing himself and others in the bygone days, before the carbon economy was rolling and rocking.

Jip padded his paws on me again. He sashayed on his one back leg, good old boy, and I let him lick the dripping end of my dada, which he’d never done before, so it was spunk for spunk, a bit risky because of his fangs, but at last we were soul brothers, tit for tat.

On the way back to the house, I took a detour, past the hulk of the tramp doughnut we’d snuffed the week previous. Tramps sometimes tried to land to stake a claim, but Pappy Barking was always ready for them with his flamethrower. This particular gang of renegades barely made it out of the hatch before Pappy zapped them. I kicked a fire-blackened skull. The skull shattered. I trod the fragments under my heel.

A GOOD LIKENESS OF CALIGULA

In the house, Daz was alone, sitting in Mum’s place. I watched him a while from the doorway. The telly was off. He was scanning a book, scribing notes in the margin with a pencil. Now and again he looked up, to study his reflection in the blank tellyscreen. Turning to the flyleaf, he sketched a self-portrait with brisk confident strokes. He saw me come forward. He held out the book – *A New Grammar of the Old Hittite Tongue*. I glanced at the sketch. A good likeness of Caligula, in Caligula’s latter days.

Treasures and mementoes of my brother’s time East of Eden were strewn about his feet: a handful of knuckle bones, a fetish twisted from human hair, copper bangles and silver links, silken scarves, wisps of lingerie, photo albums, a tambourine with a genie tattooed on its skin, and newspapers and pamphlets in wiggly writing. All spilled from his ditty-box over the Turkey carpet, once fine, but long since trodden flat and khaki
with pig-muck and straw. In a dark corner of the room, on the harmonium, was a relic of yesteryear: a skull (female Caucasian) with tea-lights burning green inside. Boneyard shadows flickered within the hollow sockets. Alongside the skull lay a naked cutlass, the blade engraved *Old Tickler* above the bloodgutter.

Mum and Pappy Barking were gone upstairs and we heard the bedsprings jingle as he put her to the prick for the umpteenth time that night and day and night, week after week, world without end, amen. Mum was moaning very faint and then loud with excited panting, shouting she was going to come, and Pappy Barking must have shot his load, tipping his sack like an obliging coalman at the cellar door, because there was a roar from Mum, then silence, and after a while he came downstairs, spurs a-jingle.

Pappy Barking stood naked in his cowboy boots and Stetson. He walked bandy-legged to the sideboard and sawed slabs off a loaf to make a sandwich. He licked his fingertips and dabbed them in the moist breadcrumbs scattered on the board, bringing his coated fingers back to his tongue. He took up the knife, slapped on the scrape, and piled up the ham and piccalilli. Pappy Barking gave us both a leery wink over his doorstopper.

‘Either of you boys fancy a bit?’

‘I’m easy,’ said Daz.

‘No thanks.’

‘No sloppy seconds, Barry?’ said Pappy Barking.

‘Good of you to offer, but no.’

He was talking about us having a poke at Mum, not a chomp on his sandwich, but we knew if we went any further than fondling Mum’s marimbas, sly Pappy Barking would have us hoisted on the slaughtering block *toot sweet*. What a joker our father is, leading us into temptation.
Licit was different, not taboo like Mum. Licit was fair game, being only a half-sister to Daz and me - but which half, Pappy Barking or Mum, we didn’t know, because she came along a year or so before me and Daz were thought of, and Pappy Barking and Mum never said - although they were very particular to let her understand she was half-and-a-spare rather than half-and-half, and not a fair copy like me and Daz.

Mum shouted down she wanted another dose, and Pappy Barking looked up at the ceiling and winked his vulture eye. He posted the heel of his sandwich into his gaping maw. He looked down at his slimy jerusalem. He chewed and chewed and swallowed.

Tut tut.

With a flick of his finger he gave the bum’s rush to a bluebottle that slavered along the length of his foreskin. Pappy Barking bade us a mumbled goodnight, turned swift on his heel, and strode upstairs to tend his business.

**CHERCHEZ LA FEMME**

The bedsprings jingled and the dusty cobwebs that festooned the chandelier wafted to and fro. Daz put down his book and stood up, unbuckling to let his trousers fall.

‘Say hello to Madam Jojo.’

‘Howdy, Jojo. *Comment ça va?’*

Daz sat down and we huddled together for a while in silence, staring at Madam Jojo and her one glistening eye. Just like old times, except Daz had been circumcised while he was away at the war and Madam Jojo now looked sullen, bald, and brutal.

‘She’s in a bad mood,’ said Daz.

Mum shouted she was coming, and one of the chandelier chains came loose with a crack and a flurry of plaster. The chandelier lurched and swayed. Frisbees of dusty light flew spinning across the room, hustling shadows out of corners. The light and shadows
settled again, in a different pattern, and Daz said how about a game of Crib, which we played for a good long time with a greasy pack of cards.

Mum screamed and yowled and bellowed she was coming - spunk me, spunk me! By the sound of it, Pappy Barking did the honours. Now Mum and her dutiful husband - our father, so the Breed Book tells - subsided into sleep. Parents began to snore, snug in the grip of Morpheus the Greek.

Daz played the Jack of Diamonds, advanced his peg to the final hole and said, ‘One for his nob and peg out.’

We totted up the points, put the cribbage board aside, and began a game of Old Sledge. Daz fanned his cards. He flicked them with his fingernail for luck. He squinted up at the ceiling.

‘Time certainly hasn’t withered her.’

‘Nor custom staled … you know, the other thing.’

I held my cards to my chest as Madam Jojo rose to peer across the table.

Daz grinned a Death’s-head grin. With a flourish he played the Queen of Spades.

‘Cherchez la femme?’

There was a knock at the door. It was Wendy, the *femme* in question.

**THE MARRIAGE ART**

‘I shall do you here, Wendy, if it’s all the same to you,’ said Daz.

‘Right you are,’ said Wendy, eager to be done - and away they went, hammer and tongs on the carpet.

I looked in the cupboard and found an old - and judging by the stains - exceedingly venerated copy of *The Marriage Art*, by Rear Vice Admiral of the Blue, Sir Lionel Dingwallace VC, RN. I browsed through and called out a few of the more beguiling postures. Wendy and Daz were happy to take requests.
After an hour or so, Daz opined he’d had enough of Wendy’s ha-ha (he meant her pudendum) in a drawl so languid he might have sported a monocle. He fancied a bite to eat.

Wendy crawled from under Daz, slapped some vaseline on her carpet burns, and headed for the kitchen. She staggered to the stove and rattled the fry-pan. I tossed her lozenges of liver and rashers of bacon and we all had a bit of the pig.

Wendy gobbled her bacon and most of her liver, leaving a piece for Miss Manners. She burped discreetly, wiped her mouth, and said she had better be getting away to work. She was on the nightshift, mustn’t be late.

Daz smacked his lips over his liver and bacon, taking his time with the gravy and supping from a silver spoon.

I finished my liver, and the lean streaks of my bacon. I tossed the leavings of Wendy’s liver and my bacon fat and rinds to Jip. Then I took his leash down from where it was hanging on the door, and whistled him for a walk - more of a limp, really, with his three legs, but he enjoys it, game old boy.

WENDY AND LICIT KNOCK OFF

Next morning was fine and sunny. Bees hummed loud among the sweet peas and geraniums. A soft breeze swelled the chintz curtains, rendering the kitchen window faintly enceinte.

Wendy and Licit were back from nightshift at the Domedrome, where they pleasured needy gentlemen in the Rest Room of the Casino.

We sat at the kitchen table and tucked into well-hung fillets of pork, broiled on the grill nice and lean, with all the trimmings, while Mum poured a Hellespont of tea into our Coronation mugs. Over by the Rayburn, our budgerigars were making merry in their cage, variously pecking at cuttlefish bones ... admiring themselves in their mirrors ...
sitting broody on their eggs ... and now and again giving each other a chirpy seeing-to.

Licit crouched by the cage, gurning at them and mimicking their cheeps.

Wendy pointed to Mum’s wedding finger with its gold wedding band. She intoned, ‘A ring I crave, Daz darling – your golden guvnor to rule my ha-ha.’ And she giggled.

I piped up. ‘All women need the guvnor on their pudendum’. (‘Pudenda’, whispered Daz. ‘They have more than one between them.’)

‘Barry speaks the truth,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘All women need the guvnor on their special place, Wendy more than most. It’s disgusting the way she carries on.’

‘Pots and kettles, Pappy Barking,’ said Wendy.

‘Look here, each,’ said Daz. ‘If fate decrees, I shall clap the guvnor on Wendy’s ha-ha. Or if I can’t, maybe the noble Lord Barrymore can. He’s been smitten for years, haven’t you Baz? Do not blush, fratello mio, we all know you’re in love with Wendy.’

‘You would make a lovely couple,’ said Mum to me, waving a pronged sausage at Wendy. ‘But not so lovely as Wendy and Daz.’

‘Quite right, Mater,’ said Daz. ‘Careful with that snorker, you’ll have Wendy’s eye out ... But my dears, I only got back last night from pacifying Um-Ka, East of Eden ... and I’m heartsore-sick, and weary. I didn’t get much sleep. The freezer was humming. My dreams were haunted by visions of the slain. And the pigs were cutting up rough after the mangel-and-acorn was gone.’

‘ Been doing a lot of business,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Got to get a bigger freezer. And swine will whine, once mangel-and-acorn is gone. It’s only natural.’

Jip barked. A knock at the door. Ketchup, the TELEGRAM boy.

Ketchup had thrown his bicycle to the ground, careless of property, as teenagers often are. The bell on his pointy hat jingled as he nodded up and down. He waved a buff-coloured envelope.
‘TELEGRAM for Daz Barking!’

Pappy Barking took the envelope.

‘Cheers,’ said Pappy Barking, pressing a sixpence into his palm. ‘Here’s a tip. If you’re ever East of Eden, up the Casbah, don’t put her to the prick if she hasn’t got a vaccine chitty. Good old boy.’

And he punched him playfully on the shoulder.

‘Ow! Right you are. Thanks guvnor.’

Ketchup tried to remount his bicycle but straightway he got in difficulties, because Jip was trying to mount it too. They struggled a bit and Jip spunked the boy’s trousers.

‘Ow! Look what he’s done. I’ll get the sack.’

‘No worries.’ I knelt down and cleaned up his keks.

‘Good old boy, Baz,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘You saved us a bill for dry-cleaning.’

The boy pedalled away, calling over his shoulder, ‘thanks guv, cheers!’

I went to the sink to gargle. Pappy Barking handed the TELEGRAM to Daz, who stuck his thumb under the flap and ripped it open. He was quiet for a moment. Then he whistled.

‘It’s Balliol. They’ve heard I’m back from the war. The Lictor wants me to take up my scholarship in Ancient Hittite.’

Mum looked up from the Times crossword and pushed her specs to the bridge of her nose.

‘Is that Balliol College Oxford the World the Universe Space?’

‘Too right, Mater, where else?’

‘They must have seen you pulling up the Narrows,’ said Mum.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Daz. ‘Their eyesight isn’t that good. Wendy told them.’

‘That’s right. I was on the blower straight away.’
Wendy lived at the top of the old lighthouse, over by the Ness. She had a clear view of the channel through her spyglass.

‘Coming it a bit previous, aint she, that Wendy?’ growled Pappy Barking to no-one in particular.

‘Now, now, Pappy Barking. I’m almost family.’

Wendy dabbed her mouth with a tissue, screwed it into a ball, and pitched it into the waste-bin.

‘Well, much as I love every one of you – woof woof, indeed! Yes, darling Jip, you too and even vulture-eyed Pappy Barking, bless, though he stinks like a midden – I can’t sit here all day. I have to get off to school to fill my empty vessels.’

She meant her pupils. Wendy worked as a schoolteacher during the day. She only played the fallen woman at night. She didn’t need the money from either job. Her father, Lembit the lighthouse-keeper, now deceased, had left her well-provided for. She seemed to quite like teaching - and having her own empty vessel filled at the Casino, where the punters queued to pour the treasure due their wives into foreign laps.

Wendy took out her compact, flipped the lid, and dabbed her pout with a purple lipstick.

‘There. Right as ninepence.’

I followed her out to the yard, to give her a hand-up to her motorbike.

‘Pray thank you, Lord Barrysore,’ she lilted. ‘You’re a true gent. I would kiss you for that, cara mia, but I’d only smudge my lippy.’

She settled her goggles around her panda eyes, kicked the machine into life, and with a wave she was gone, along the blue-tar road to Chafford Hundred. Overhead, a clutch of tramp doughnuts drifted across the sky, east to west - vagabonds, landless and bitter,
looking for free parking, and a place to breed, slaughter, dress the meat, and a chance to undercut regular folks like Pappy Barking.

I watched Wendy fade into the distance. It was a hot morning already, with wisps rising from the marsh. For a moment of two after she vanished, I savoured her mirage, swirling and shifting on the fractured planes of the molten horizon. Then I went in the scullery to fill my mouth with Perrier and go find Jip.

APOTHEOSIS

Mum was sad and tearful because Daz was leaving us so soon, and Pappy Barking was a bit choked himself because he’d been hoping Daz would be home for good and pitch in with the work in the sties. But they made the best of it, and we had a few precious days en famille - days of work, rest, and play (and for generations of Barkings, these amount to the same thing). We spent our time putting Baco the boar to Ham the sow, cleaning out the sties, polishing the Doughnut to a handsome shine, and singing the old songs in the evening - with Jip woofing along, and Granny Barking, out on parole from The Willows, wheezing away on the harmonium, accompanied on the mouth organ by Cunty McFuck, her imaginary friend from Glasgow.

Then it was Friday, and time for the off. Daz packed his ditty-box, and we shared tears, kisses, and bits of the pig all round. That fine old English gentleman, the Lictor of Balliol, sent the college helicopter. It hovered above the yard, dropped its ladder, and up the ladder went Daz, singing Britons, Strike Home! Every inch the jolly Jack Tar, every inch the scholar.

I crouched beneath the thrumming rotors in the whirling dust and peered through slitty-gritty eyes at my brother ascending. I was mired in envy, and felt every inch the pig-man. Jip limped across and laid his head on my thigh, wagging his tail – Jip my comforter, good old boy.
Early evening, the men from The Willows came with the van for Granny Barking, and we were back to normal.

**A QUICK SHUFTI**

We had the occasional letter and postcard from Daz over the next year: enigmatic messages, composed in the form of haiku, the villanelle, the triolet and rondeau, the sonnet in Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms, and the first cantos of a pastiche Hittite epic whose subject was Daz himself – but Daz in the guise of Zoltan Banjo, the incarnation of some busy-body Hittite Weather-God or another.

In the post came a parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string and sealing wax. Mum unpicked the knots rather than cut them so she could save the string, and she folded the brown paper for her paper drawer. When she’d done, she stared at the contents, puzzled.

‘What’s this?’ she croaked. I took a shufti, flicking through and scanning the typescript.

‘It’s the first draft of a poetical autobiography in hexameters, in imitation of Arthur Hugh Clough. Where do you want it?’

‘Over there for now, on the harmonium, next to the skull and cutlass.’

**GLITTERING PRIZES**

We had no visitations, because Daz was moving in exalted circles and clearly he couldn’t spare the time. When we saw him again it was on the telly, where the crowds in London were celebrating his general election win, amid martial music, fireworks, and a procession of painted barges on the Thames. Among the barges, the waterborne milk-float of the Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen was particularly striking, decked out in Ethiopian livery - red, green and gold. The oarsmen propelled the milk-float in
time to the brittle strum-strum of the minstrel banjos arranged in serried ranks on the poop deck, piccolo to bass.

The spectacle had been choreographed under a deluge of *son et lumiére* by that most able Master of Ceremonies, Everyman Jack. Big political beasts had stalked our son and brother from the hour of his arrival in Oxford - with Everyman Jack ahead of the pride - and Daz’s seduction was swift as January nightfall on the Ness.

With the election looming, Daz abandoned his studies. (He was awarded a Formal First all the same.) He rocketed into politics, massaging his triptych image as briny warrior, oriental scholar, and courtly lover - the Lawrence of Arabia *de nos jours*. Before you could say ‘universal suffrage’ Everyman Jack confirmed Daz as Prime Minister, and he was summoned to the Palace to kiss hands with Andy One – Daz being, arguably, the first fluent non-native Hittite speaker to occupy Number Ten.

Speaking for myself, I have always voted Omo the Clown, and if Jip had the vote (which he should) I’d have him do the same.

**CAIN AND ABEL**

You don’t need me to tell you what life is like for brothers close in age – the rivalry, the jealousy, the hatred of one for the other’s very breath (Why can’t I be the only one? Mummy is mine! I want him dead. Dead dead dead!) and perversely, the way a fraternal soul can saturate your very marrow with impish love (my brother, my boy, my joy, my toy!) as if the brother were a cavernous bath-house Turk and you, chambered inside him, breathe his hot moist rankness while your skin crawls with his sweat.

But mostly it’s Cain and Abel. One brother wins favour from the Gods. The Gods smile on the smoke of his sacrifice. The other just isn’t quoted. Doomed to wander the blighted earth and drink bitter waters, he suffers his very own cartoon thunder-cloud
over his cartoon head. Shag-haired Thor hurls lightning-bolts and thunderstones.

Snaggle-toothed Thor scours the scapegoat sconce.

Even so, the wandering scapegoat, Barrymore Barking, is not alone, partnered by his faithful hound. Jip is my lightning-conductor. If ever I fight a duel with Heaven, enfranchised Jip shall second me, good old boy.

**ONE DOG, ONE VOTE**

The business of Jip having the vote has been a hobby-horse of mine for a long time. Daz and I have come to blows over it. Daz, ever the philosopher, once asked me to state my grounds for holding what he saw as my peculiar view on the extension of the franchise, but the strongest ground then and now is that Jip is the best friend a boy could ever have. A more intelligent and faithful dog has never been known. He bears wisdom beyond his years – and his years are legion, though his legs be only three. This I said to Daz. And I was happy to profess the truth with my fists - although sadly coming off worse, by slipping on a patch of regurgitated mangel-and-acorn, which allowed Daz to strike the winning blow and black my eyes.

As to wisdom and age: Jip, who has been in the family for generations, is older and wiser than any of us. Except maybe Methuselah Bansom, Granny Barking’s Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather. Nobody has seen Methuselah - to talk to - for a century or so, but legend tells he roams the celestial range for ever. One night, when the moon was in her first quarter, my fancy spied him high above, with his faithful hound Rin-Tin-Tin loping at his horse’s tail - ghost riders in the sky, surfing the orange plume from the Gravesend crematorium - a smoky emblem on a field of cold stars.
SING SOMETHING SIMPLE

Granny Barking is fond of the old songs, and if you ever stayed an evening with us in the bygone days (before Granny was taken to The Willows) then you might have heard her sing Whitelady’s *Ballad of Cain and Abel*.

Seated at the harmonium, with her muscular thighs driving the knees that drive the feet that drive the paddles that drive the bellows, Granny Barking would pound the keyboard and chant, as Jip howled along. It was her favourite song when she was tipsy, which meant it was her favourite song all the time, towards the end. She was no boozer, just an Emva Cream sherry at Christmas - but the advent of Cunty McFuck, her imaginary friend from Glasgow, propelled her from light tippler to sozzled alky in a matter of days.

**PRIDE OF CALEDONIA**

Soft, he comes.

‘What’s all the stir?’ cries Cunty McFuck (who becomes less imaginary and more of a fiend with each passing day). ‘I loves my candy-girl, which is auld Granny Barking - or auld Granny Rattletrap, my petname for her. It’s no’ my fault the lassie takes a dram. Look-see, my sugars. Behold the testimonial to temperance, pressed in my wattle, a character scribed for me by the top-banana chaplain in the Bar-L …’

‘The Bar-L? *No comprendo.*’

‘Barlinnie prison to youse, you Sassenach *quesquedillos*. Looksee the creases where the paper is fucked - pardon my French - through being folded a’ this time. My wee pal, the chaplain, nipped his turd syne forty year.’

‘Nipped his …?’

‘Dead, ye chunter-heid. The chaplain maun lie underboard, his coffin beneath the sod, until Resurrection of the Body bring him at last to Judgment on the great day of doom and burning. But thon words o’ yon Reverend Gentleman mean the world to me - and..."
him a Doctor of Divinity no less, in Saint Andrew’s, _magister cum laude_. Ultima Thule!

Cunty McFuck is a man you don’t meet every day.’

The joss-house records show how firestarter Cunty tried to murder his firstborn, Malcolm, by pouring petrol over him as he lay asleep. In the iron-hard Scotch winter, Cunty’s jake-thrawn hands were loath and cold, sticky and shaky from the _vino collapso_. He fumbled the matchbox, upending the tray over the linoleum. Malcolm woke to the clatter of matches and the reek of petrol, and was straightway on the ‘qui-vive?’ Rising up, he battered his father into merciful oblivion with a hardback copy of _Mein Kampf_ (in Gaelic translation) lying handy beside the bed for those wakeful wee small hours.

‘Cunty loves a dram, a wee drap or twa/Afore he gangs awa’ to leave ye/He’s no awa’/to bide awa’/He’ll aye come back to see ye.’

More’s the pity. Yes, Cunty the revenant likes a drink, in moderation.

‘Moderation. Spot on. I’m no’ an alcoholic. I dinnae sport the McAlky tartan. I’m deet a steady heavy, wi’ a taste for the broon. Ayeways I keep my sporran stiff. An’ my burrds has aye been the same inclined. Hoots mon!’

Thank you, Citizen McFuck, we’ll hear more from you later - much later. Maybe on the subject of the _broon_, whatever that might be – perhaps a strong winter ale, of high specific gravity?

‘Listen tae me, ye Sassenach prick, ye’ll hear from me at a time and place o’ my ain choosing, so dinnae come the auld acid wi’ me, pal. And that sister of yours ...’

‘Licit. She’s my half-sister.’

‘Aye, Licit. She might be a half, but she’s a hole. Whit’s the score there? Can a gentle body dip his wick?’

‘The Domedrome Casino is good money, so that’s where Licit does it most, except when she’s doing it elsewhere and free for friends and family, like with me or Daz or
Pappy Barking, or me and Daz - or me and Daz and Pappy Barking. And Jip too, bless him, but he’s never been much use to Licit, only when Pappy Barking smears mashed pilchard over her snatch, good old boy. But you’re almost family now yourself, Cunty, so dip your wick to your heart’s content. Just make sure you leave Mum alone.’

‘I mun check that dalliance wi’ your sister would be okay by auld Granny Rattletrap. I dinnae want t’upset the lady, likesay ye ken.’

‘Granny Barking would be only too happy to see you enjoying yourself with her granddaughter ... oh, you’re invisible just now ... but you know what I mean.’

‘I shall manifest myself in the visible spectrum soon enough. Tell us – amn’t I no’ correct in thinking ye dinnae like your brother?’

‘Not over-fond of Daz, no. I’m Cain to his Abel. Or I would be, if I had the gumption to take my chance.’

‘That’s what you need, boy. Gumption. I spy the lack of it by the nancy cut of your jib. But see you – d’ye no’ think fratricide’s awfy sad, albeit urgent from time to time? Mah brithers an’ me was the best o’ friends, exceptin’ the vile Duncan, Razor King o’ the Mummies. Them’s the gang o’ neds that wrap theirselves in bandages to chib wee weans. Duncan got inside me wi’ my best burrd, Maggie Loudon Lauder, so Duncan had to go, ken what I’m driving at here, pal, eh? Chib chib chib – slash slash slash.’

‘I presume that’s how you came to sup your porridge at His Majesty’s Pleasure?’

‘Presume a’ ye like, pal. But listen, if ye’ve a toty wee bit time, maybe ye’ll fill me in on a few family matters, eh? A wee bit history, to help me get masel straight wi’ what’s what and who’s who roond here? Auld Granny Rattletrap isnae much use as far as that goes. And mebbe, why? If you can manage me the why, I should be much obliged, sir. I have seekit the answer to this riddle all my chuffin’ puff.’
Very well, Cunty. Why might be difficult, but if you’re sitting comfortably, we shall begin the *wherefore*.

**TWO PIGS FUCKING**

Once upon a time, long time ago, when Daz and me were small, and Granny Barking still lived at home, Pappy Barking and Mum sat us in our high-chairs in the yard and stepped on the pneumatic pedals, puffing us up until we were ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet off the ground, to see into the sties and stalls and watch Baco and Ham do the business-from-behind so we could have porkers enough for the new season.

Jip got excited down below and staggered about on his three legs woofing up at me his master, begging me to tell him what I could see.

What I could see was Baco hauling his bulk on to Ham’s hindquarters and sheathing his stout Jerusalem among her scratchings. Baco’s snout glistened with drool, and his tusks and jaws waggled up and down as he moved in and out and in, taking his time, paying attention to what mattered most, which was Ham and her needs. Baco held his trotters tight on her flanks. He whimpered to his mate, tender words to bring forth tender meat.

‘What can you see, son?’ called Mum to Daz, and Daz, annoyed, looked up from his Hittite Primer (a gift from Granny Barking). He piped up in his high squeaky drawl.

‘Just what you’d expect, Mater - porcine coition.’

‘What can you see, son?’ called Pappy Barking to me, and without taking my eyes from the conjoined lovers, I shouted ‘Two pigs fucking!’ - words I learned earlier from Granny Barking, over lunch, when we heard the marital bedsprings jingle overhead the fourth time that day.
When the business-from-behind was done, Pappy Barking and Mum pumped the pneumatic pedals and brought us safely to earth. Daz leaped from his chair, rooted through a feed-bag and chucked a handful of mangel-and-acorn in my face, saying:

‘Remember Baz, thou art mangel-and-acorn, and unto mangel-and-acorn thou shalt return, ha-ha.’

‘Leave him alone,’ said Granny Barking, from her rocking chair in the gazebo.

‘Barrymore isn’t a scholar like you. He won’t know what you’re talking about.’

She was sitting in conclave with our neighbours from the marsh - her ancient gossips, Goody Halfling and Goody Clunge. The wizened crones were embroidering a shroud for a neighbour’s husband who was scheduled, three days from now, to take the nine o’clock walk, guided gently at the elbow by the executioner’s unctioned horny hand - Joshuah Rumbold the Fourth, barber and public hangman like his fathers before him.

They keep it in the family, the illustrious Rumbolds. And in bygone days so did we, the noble Barkings. When we couldn’t keep it in our trousers otherwise.

**SALTY FINGER**

When Daz was thirteen, after educating himself in the hayloft, week after week, year on year, through the *Times Literary Supplement* and its on-line archives (Granny Barking had bought him a lifetime subscription to the *TLS* for his fifth birthday) Daz won a scholarship to Junior Academy over by the Ness, and only came home every other weekend.

The Academy boasted a uniform. This was a sailor’s suit, blue and white, with bell-bottom keks and a cheeky little bum-freezer jacket with brass buttons fore and aft. The rig was completed by a ribboned straw hat and silk brocade weskit, a golden lanyard and boatswain’s silver whistle.
Sometimes Pappy Barking and me rowed out in the skiff, over by the Ness, to check the oyster beds and haul up the ones that were plump and juicy and ripe for gobbling. Often on these trips we would call into the shucking-shed to see how the oyster-shuckers were getting on. One day, after tossing a coin to decide if me or Pappy Barking should dip the wick first with a tasty new shucker (I called ‘tails’ and it came down ‘heads’ as usual) we heard the roll of muffled drums, and then the shrill piping of a hundred boatswain’s whistles, joined a beat later by the foghorn on the lighthouse flank. No fog was looming, but the mournful horn blew lonesome all the same, in answer to the Academy summons.

‘Our Daz is somewhere among that lot,’ said proud Pappy Barking, stepping out of his trousers. ‘Hark, you can hear his cheery whistle.’

And although I was loath to hark I could hear, a fraction of a tone higher and shriller than the others, Daz’s distinctive whistle - over the Ness above the Narrows where its screech contended with the leathery creak and sepulchral groan of fretting seabirds before losing momentum to plummet the Sound of Sleet beyond the Deeping Banks anent the Kentish Knock.

‘Two’s up, Barry,’ grinned Pappy Barking. He pulled out, and wiped his harry-pipe on a dirty sock, while the shucker spread herself afresh on the sacks and beckoned me with a salty finger.

**HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE**

So much for Daz and his early education. But what fruits of enlightenment dropped from the Tree of Knowledge, to lie rotted and fermenting in the orchard of Erasmus Barrymore Barking?

Unlike Daz, I needed a preceptor, and my schooling was conducted by Granny Barking herself in the Dame School she had founded in her nuptial years on the back
side of the sties. The pupils were mainly village children from Thorp, Chafford, and the
surrounding Hundreds. Some were golden-haired and golden-eyed, others dark
complexioned with eyes of jet. Nearly all had strange misshapen ovoid heads. My
schoolfellows were furtive and shifty and spoke in a singsong. For a time I thought they
came from Outer Space. They were fond of cabbage soup in the cold months and
brought it to school each day in panikins. The panikins kept warm by the squat black
stove, whose faint radiance heated the schoolroom in winter.

But alongside these mishapes was one young filly of royal siege, whose beauty set
her apart – Wendy, the Dark Infanta of perfect proportion. I blessed the day she came,
and would gladly have eaten her dung, had Her Highness bid me.

PETTICOAT OCEAN

The schoolroom was forty metres square and constructed from a prefabricated kit of
blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. In this room, we were schooled in the rudiments of
grammar, rhetoric, theology and druidic liturgy (according to heterodox doctrine and
rites), and astronomy. Outside, we trained in gymnastics.

Granny Barking was a strict teacher who stood no nonsense and it was unusual for any
of us to finish the day without a sound thrashing from the black-bombazin’d matriarch
who was constantly hitching up her lace-trimmed lilac drawers.

Indeed, there were days when Granny Barking didn’t get much teaching done at all
because she was too busy beating us, and hitching up her drawers in between-times.

But not saucy Wendy, she was too clever for beating, and for sixpence she would
show us her own knickers, with Granny Barking’s encouragement.

‘They’re especially lovely today,’ said Granny Barking. ‘Apricot silk and lace,
designed and manufactured by Keturah Brown if I’m not mistaken.’
She hooked her thumb under the lace edging of Wendy’s frillies and read the legend on the label.

‘Yes, that’s right. Keturah Brown: 85 Regent’s Park Road. Everyone should have frillies like these. I’m going to ask Father Christmas to bring me some next Easter. Children, you should ask for some too. He’ll bring them if you’re good and do your sums. In the meantime, you have permission to pay your sixpences for a glimpse of Wendy’s Keturahs. I’ll just have to cope with my lilac drawers.’

‘You’re coping very well, Granny Barking,’ we chorused, ‘although perhaps your drawers need new elastic.’

Wendy went round with the basket, collecting our sixpences.

**DOWN, WANTON, DOWN**

Wendy soon had me in thrall. Her taste in lingerie was impeccable, and glimpses of her knickers, at sixpence a time, while expensive, became a show I could not live without. Those filigreed confections - Honiton lace adorning shot silks and satins in fruity pastel shades – provoked a yearning in my bowels, and thawed my hitherto frozen marrow.

The stumpy bloater that reared up between my legs challenged my ingenuity. I wangled the job of stove-stoker and classroom coke-monitor. Outside, hidden among the piles of coke, I feverishly recited Whitelady’s “Down, Wanton, Down!” and stroked my dada while moist-eyed, wet-nosed Jip looked on, jaws agape and panting. His rough red tongue flopped between his fangs.

As we grew older, Wendy began to wear full gingham skirts over frothy petticoats. She sat in class with one nylon-sheered calf daintily crossed over the other. The minx knew I was slavering, and hitched her skirts higher, revealing peeping petticoat galore. The tidal surge of my desires tumbled me head over heels in the wild breaking surf of her petticoat ocean.
These petticoat tantalizers were free, but Wendy still charged for a knicker-glimpse. The other children had grown weary and no longer paid, but Wendy, with Granny Barking’s permission, took me alone behind the Japanese screen where the pupils’ commodes were parked, and allowed me to gaze my fill.

Sometimes I couldn’t help but whimper at the sight of so much loveliness, and Granny Barking would peep round the screen to see what was the matter.

‘Take yourself in hand, young Barrymore,’ said Granny Barking. ‘Do not stint. The curriculum will still be here when you get back.’

‘I shall help mop up,’ said Wendy, shaking out her handkerchief.

Soon the pocket-money I had earned around the sties was gone. I asked for credit, but Wendy said, ‘Please don’t. A refusal often offends.’

I stole a trusting piglet, befriended by me in the sties (where I narrowly missed being eaten by an angry Baco). I tied a makeshift collar around piglet’s neck. Then, using one of Pappy Barking’s old school ties for a lead, away I ran like Tom the piper’s son, to Chafford market, where I sold piglet for enough knicker-glimpses to tide me through to matriculation. I escaped flogging for this crime because Pappy Barking and Mum assumed that Ham had turned peckish in the night and eaten one of her own. This happened often enough anyway, bones and grease and all. I helped the deception along by pretending at dinner that I had heard the commotion in the night, and the squeals of the piglet as it was eaten alive. Daz looked up from his plate of trotters and said, ‘Funny. I heard nothing.’

‘You were asleep.’

‘On the contrary, it was you who were in swinish slumber. I rarely sleep just now, busy as I am, preparing for my scholarship to Junior Academy. So much to learn, too few hours in the day.’
‘Liar!’

‘Boys, stop this fighting,’ said Mum. ‘Or I’ll tell Pappy Barking when he gets back from the sties.’

Daz picked up a cloven trotter, and leaned over the table. He wedged it on my nose, like a clothes-peg.

‘Pinocchio,’ he said.

**WENDY MAKES A FRIEND**

I let myself believe that when I came to man’s estate, I would claim Wendy as my bride. She would be my Queen of the Doughnuts, enthroned by my side while I waggled my sceptre and grew the business-from-behind and bought more swine like Baco and Ham (although their longevity and prodigious breeding would be hard to match). I had in mind dynasties of boars, with their consorts of sows and litters of subject porkers. I minded fat chines, black puddings, faggots and breakfast sausage, slabs of bacon, and moist, yellow-crumbed ham - all to make money to buy pastel-shaded lingerie and billows of fluffy net petticoats, for my Dark Infanta. (Cool satin, lagged around one’s harry-pipe, is a sovereign remedy for a groaning bloater, and that too was in my mind.)

Wendy seemed to know what I was thinking, and she coyly hinted that such a royal match would be pleasing, both to her and to her guardian, Aunt Josephine. Now and again, when we sat together in class, she ran her painted nails along the inside of my thigh, and I was forced to raise my hand and ask Granny Barking’s permission to retire behind the screen for sixpence-worth of satisfaction.

Then one day during playtime, over a game of conkers, Wendy said to me, ‘I didn’t know you had a brother.’

‘He sleeps in the house, but he studies in the hayloft. He’s won a scholarship to Junior Academy for next autumn. He doesn’t come to school.’
‘Yes, well, that’s quite obvious, isn’t it? Otherwise, I’d have seen him. Are you going to introduce us?’

‘Oh, he wouldn’t like that. He’s very busy and hardly ever leaves the hayloft while he’s studying, even to make wee-wee and ca-ca in the outhouse. A bit of a brainbox, is our Daz. He’s always taught himself, at least up to now. He does his wee-wee and plop-plop in a bucket.’

I meant him to sound faintly repellent, but I’d gone about it the wrong way. Wendy was fascinated.

‘Daz sounds ever so clever and dedicated. That must be him I can hear in the evenings on my way home. Last night the window was open, and I heard him chanting in a strange tongue - as if he were conjugating irregular verbs. Whatever the language is, the tones he conjured seem ancient and remote, muscular and vigorous. A language in which one might parse eternity itself.’

Wendy’s path home took her by the hayloft, where Daz had his study. She promised me free knicker-glimpses for life if I introduced her to Daz - and that evening, fool that I am, I climbed the hayloft ladder, and asked Daz to come down and meet my friend.

Daz guffawed.

‘What makes you think I would want to meet any friend of yours? Frankly, Barry my dear, I didn’t know you had any friends, apart from that wretched amputee of a dog ...’

‘Don’t you insult my Jip!’ I shouted, putting up my fists.

‘Oh do be quiet. I don’t want to have to knock you down again. I was going on to say ... any friends apart from that wretched dog that follows you everywhere and the poor trusting piglet you befriended and then sold in Chafford market to the Elm Park Satanists, for use in their unspeakable rituals.’

My phiz was white and stiff as one of Wendy’s starched petticoats.
'Come come, brother Baz. Your secret is safe with me. I aint no snitch, no siree. I would never cast you on the tender mercies of that priapic oaf who calls himself our father. Where is this friend anyway?'

'Downstairs in the yard. You can see her if you go to the window."

Daz hefted an apple from the bowl on his desk, and took a bite. He sauntered over to the window and looked down. He chewed and crunched and laughed, nearly choking. He spluttered, 'By Jove! Handsome is as handsome does. And I wonder ... does she?'

'Of course not. We’re only children. All of us, even you."

'Then down we go."

I tried to get ahead of him, but he handed me off with the heel of his palm to the bridge of my nose. He beat me to the ladder, and by the time I inched to the bottom - my nose gushed blood - he stood proud in the yard. Wendy floated across to greet him, and flung her arms around his neck. Daz inclined to kiss her, and as their lips met, Wendy bent her left leg at the trembling knee, as I’ve seen honeymoon couples do on the flicks.

My allergies kicked in from the dust in the loft. My eyes watered. I wheezed and coughed and sank to my knees. My nosebleed ran crimson. I squirmed, trying to get my latchkey down the back of my neck to stop the flow. If anyone chanced by, it would look like I was worshipping the embracing couple in some blood ritual - but Jip was the only witness, who barked and limped over to stick his head up Wendy’s petticoats. He wagged his tail and began a muffled howl.

'That will be sixpence, Barry,’ said Wendy, breaking off her kiss to speak. I fought to catch my breath.

'I thought you said ...’

'That was the deal for you. But your dog pays to see my knickers.’
GET ON WITH YOUR WORK!

Granny Barking told us that the School Inspector was due to make her visitation, and we must all be on our best behaviour and answer her questions correctly. I believe it was then that Wendy sensed the first intimations of her vocation to the teaching profession - being concerned that each child in the class should be able to name the planets of the solar system, a topic dear to Wendy’s heart.

I remember one sickly child, entered on the register as Mobius Tertius. She was a rickle of skin and bone, and rather simple. When asked by Wendy which planet would make her ideal home, she answered: “Clőn”.

‘Clőn,’ said Wendy disgustedly, drawing herself up to her full height and setting her hands on her hips. ‘Where on earth is Clőn, if I may make so bold as to enquire?’

‘Please miss,’ said the urchin, ‘it isn’t on Earth at all, but it was my home, honest it was. Clőn lies beyond Campaspē, in the belt of Orion, several parsecs to the right of Mölqbar. We’ve come to Earth for a better life.’

With a practised sigh of exasperation, Wendy told her to stop telling lies and get on with her work.

When Granny Barking came back glowering from the outhouse, constipated and crotchety as usual, tell-tale Wendy climbed on a stool and spoke quietly into her ear.

‘I hate a liar worse than a thief!’ bellowed Granny Barking. ‘Mölqbar, indeed!’

She rolled up her sleeves and swished the cane with all the savage love she could muster while Wendy and I held Mobius tight and twisted and bent over a bench.

Fortunately for the wretched child, Granny Barking wasn’t on form. It was late afternoon, a time when her resilience was often as feeble as the elastic in her drawers - especially towards the early sunsets of midwinter, when the rays of the low declining
sun slant through the isinglass windows of the schoolroom and set dancing the motes of chalk dust suspended in the chill air.

AN INSPECTOR CALLS

A bitter frost lingered next morning. Hardy Ma Bansom, school inspector, turned up to inspect the school. She was a big bare-breasted fat woman dressed like a slattern, where she was dressed at all, with a greasy pinafore over her crimplene skirt and an unholstered revolver stuffed in the pinafore pocket, and a turban improvised from old dishrags squashed on her head. A dozen or more safety pins were lodged in the turban, and her school inspector’s badge was firmly stapled to the crowning knot. Her worsted stockings were as wrinkled as the varicose veins they failed to hide. Her bare dugs drooped over her swollen belly. She was eight months pregnant, by her Great-Uncle Seth, or so she claimed. This was to be her last inspection before going to Chafford on maternity leave. Malicious gossip had the siring down to Pappy Barking - old Seth being regarded as past all capacity to impregnate. There was a rumour going about the Ness that his jerusalem was infested with gangrene and about to drop off.

Hardy Ma Bansom stood in the middle of the schoolroom, arms folded and a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from her lip. She turned slowly, taking in her surroundings - the children hard at work, either writing ABC on their slates, or betting their lunch on which pair of copulating flies would crawl first up the window. She took in the fetishes mounted on the classroom walls, and the assortment of bones and skulls displayed under glass in our “Heritage Corner”.

I dropped my pencil and in scrabbling for it on the floor I managed to look up Ma Bansom’s crimplene. I saw she was wearing knickers of roughest calico. This alone was enough to make me compare her unfavourably with Granny Barking who always wore her frilly lilac drawers on duty - and off.
‘What’s that child doing?’ said Ma Bansom, nodding towards me and flicking ash on my head.

‘He’s looking up your crimplene,’ said Granny Barking. ‘What’s she wearing, Barry Barking?’

‘Roughest calico, Granny Barking,’ I said, back once again in my place.

Granny Barking nodded, a self-satisfied smile cracking her walnut face.

‘I thought as much. Hardy Ma Bansom never had any savvy in the lingerie department.’

She curled her lip in a vicious sneer, spitting out her words like slimy pips of rotten fruit.

After that insult, it was only to be expected the inspection would go badly. Hardy Ma Bansom shuffled around the room, from desk to desk, revolver in one hand, holding down her crimplene with the other, and quizzing each child in turn about what it knew of the curriculum, which turned out to be very little. Wendy, bless her, affected a charming infant lisp and tried to steer the conversation round to the \textit{planet’th of the tholar thythtem}, but Ma Bansom herself scarcely knew there were such mechanical entities bound together in dynamic equilibrium around the sun - the engorged sun that this morning glowered a sullen red, and in its swollen state could barely haul its bloated carcase above the horizon.

We were ordered outside, to be put through our gymnastic paces. Ma Bansom waved her revolver and barked commands and we scurried up and down and in and out of the blocks, pillars, slabs and beams which constituted the whole of our playground furniture. Poor Mobius Tertius took a tumble from the highest pillar – the one I chanced to bump against and set wobbling - and she cracked her skull on the frosty ground. A sickly
yellow porridge, alive with maggots in an instant, spilled from her shattered cranium and puddled across the slabs of the playground.

‘Now see what you’ve done,’ said Granny Barking to Ma Bansom. ‘The child is dead, and there’s a mess all over the playground.’

‘The mess will be inspected and duly reported,’ said Hardy Ma Bansom, rolling a cigarette with trembling hands and spilling half the strands of dark tobacco, her shaky authority now tumbled to ruin.

I sent Jip to fetch Ma and Pa Tertius. Jip had difficulty at first in understanding what his errand was - and further difficulty finding the Tertius homestead, and then making them understand what he was getting at with his woofs and growls - so a good few hours elapsed between the catastrophe and its wash-up; but eventually the sorrowing parents, Thoth and Theuth Tertius, mister and missis, followed Jip back to the schoolyard, where they found the broken body of their daughter, now respectfully covered over with a mangel-and-acorn sack.

They lifted the sack and looked with pity on the shattered skull of Mobius Tertius. Theuth wailed and clutched her daughter’s dead hand. Thoth arranged compensation with Ma Bansom.

I never heard officially how much it was, but the Corporation paid a sum rumoured to be between two hundred tanners and a monkey - a small fortune to derelicts who claimed to be interplanetary wayfarers and who lived in a zinc shack beside the rusting shell of what they called their “Flying Saucer”, on the far side of the Ness.

Ma Bansom’s report on the Dame School turned out to be quite favourable after that, and our days went on much the same as before. But gymnastics were henceforth forbidden as being too risky, especially in frosty weather, which in those days kept a grip on the Ness well into early spring.
Spring arrived in a bluster, from Russia beyond the Ness. It was time for me to leave the cloistered world of Granny Barking’s prefabricated Dame School, with its bank of daffodils below the isinglass window, to begin my technical education in the discipline of Doughnut Studies, at the University of Debden Broadway.

Wendy had already said her goodbyes, after winning a scholarship to Junior Academy, recently gone co-ed. She and Daz were now schoolfellows and dorm-chums, destined for the highest academic honours. I was chap-fallen to lose the petticoat-rustle and knicker-glimpse of the chief object of my desires, and afterwards spent quite a bit of my free time mooning about among the coke heaps, cossetting my bloater.

You can imagine me tortured by thoughts of Daz enjoying glimpses of frilly heaven in the subtle sheen of pastel satin. Quite possibly he was enjoying far more by now. I knew he would be quick to demand what he saw as his “rights”, and that Wendy would be only too ready to grant him the sordid boon he craved, alas!

I resolved that even if Wendy proved not to be a virgin when I came to man’s estate, then I would forgive her any youthful transgression, and marry her anyway. According to Ma and Pappy Barking – and they should know - a patch of pig-gut can always serve as a jury-rigged hymen, and a gobbet of fresh sow’s liver fulfil the covenant of blood and consecrate the wedding-night sheets, although I would rather not entertain such ritual tokens myself, being rather more up-to-date in outlook than my parents, and solicitous of a woman’s dignity and rights.

FEUDIN’ DUDES

Relations between the Barkings and the Bansoms continued sour for a long time after the School Inspection. Licit’s success in getting one of the coveted grande horizontale positions at the Domedrome Casino didn’t help, because Hardy Ma Bansom’s daughter
Sally applied to be a fallen woman and never even got an interview. For a short time, Sally and I had ‘gone out’ together (which mainly consisted of ‘staying in’ due to lack of funds) but Licit’s success put the kybosh on that.

Pappy Barking knew that a feud was brewing - and if feuding time is nigh, Barkings shoot first.

‘Take these, son,’ he said, handing me a shotgun and a box of 12-bore shells. Next, a .38 Walther. I checked the safety and stuck it in my belt. Then a black silk hood, with BARRYMORE above the eye-slits, embroidered in austere style by Mum. Pappy’s hood was embroidered PAPPY BARKING, in fancy curlicue - threads of red, green, and gold, the carnival colours of the Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen. Pappy Barking helped their worships on the milk-round over Chafford from time to time when they were short-handed, and if it was raining he wore the hood to save himself blacking-up - otherwise the burnt cork ran streaky. Having the name so clearly displayed was handy too, in cases of disputed paternity – the milkmen being notorious for their licentious appetites and never firing blanks.

We blinkered Sethina and harnessed her to the cart. Hooded, we set off for the Bansom home place. Pappy Barking tugged the reins. He clicked his tongue. I sat beside him on the bench, with the shotgun on my knees. I fanned him with his Stetson to keep the flies from his vulture eye.

In plain view, in the back of the cart, was the Gatling Gun, and a selection of handguns to augment my barking-iron, the .38. Leaning in a corner was the sniper’s rifle with its telescopic sight. Under the driver’s bench Pappy Barking had stowed a rosewood canteen of razors, a mahogany box of cleavers, and the portable corkscrew boner with the ivory handle. Treated right, the boner could fillet a carcase in two shakes. Hidden under a tarpaulin was the flame-thrower. Pappy Barking used it for whacking the weeds
and scrub that were always threatening to encroach on the Barking home place from the surrounding coastal heath – and torching any tramp doughnuts foolish enough to try a landing. His faithful firestick, the 0.55 Spencer carbine, lay across his knees, along with the tally-stick he used to keep count of his victims. He used to carve a nick into the butt of his gun, but after a while he saw he’d have no butt left, unless he tallied his kills some other way.

Robed and hooded, we jogged along, enjoying the freshness of the breeze and the tang of springtime. Across the rich peatland, the scent of dwarf shrub and couch-grass and meadow flowers wafted in the balmy air. I smelled poppy, jet-freaked pansy, and musky violet. I detected a bass note of briny ozone - and the heady overtone of blue tar from the new-laid road.

The fragrant zephyrs mingled with the oaten-straw and horse-piss stench of our hoods, gathered from the stable where they’d been hanging too close to Sethina’s tail.

Just past the five-mile stone, we turned on to the Chafford Hundred turnpike. We paid the toll, and then stopped a while outside the police cottage, where Constable Dippy Barking, a cousin of ours, was tending his marigolds. His picket fence was decorated with the skulls of local malefactors, caught in the act, and lawfully dispatched by good old boy Dippy himself, who had a licence signed by Everyman Jack. The death’s-head grins surmounting the fence gave Dippy’s homeplace a welcoming feel.

‘Why, if it isn’t PAPPY BARKING and young BARRYMORE,’ said Dippy, reading our hoods with a judicious eye. He rubbed his hands and smiled broadly.

‘Long time no see, cousin Dippy Barking,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘How’s the Missis?’

‘Right as ninepins. Except for those Bansoms. Plaguing the life out of her, they are.’

Dippy Barking went on to describe the various humiliations that the Missis had to endure from the Bansoms. He told us how the Bansom womenfolk spilled Guinness over
the wife’s bingo cards and set fire to her knickers in the lavatory of the bingo hall when she was on the loo with her knickers round her ankles. The Bansom menfolk urinated in her ears when she was lying drunk in the gutter. Together they struck matches and set light to her droopy farts.

‘It’s a total lack of respect. But what can I do? They pay tribute to Everyman Jack, and they’re very careful to stay just this side of the law, otherwise their nappers would fetch up on the fence.’

He stepped forward and wiped bird-lime off a skull. ‘It got worse when Hardy Ma Bansom became a school inspector. Once she got the badge pinned to her dishcloth turban, there was no telling her.’

‘We had a run-in with her over book-learning and gymnastics and such. I guess you heard about the Tertius girlchild a while back, the kid who smashed her cranium?’

‘We heard all right. I went round to tell Ma and Pa Tertius about it, but Jip beat me to it by a couple of days. I was late because my bicycle-chain kept coming off and it’s the devil’s own job to fix at the roadside. As you’d expect, Ma Bansom tried to blame Granny Barking, when it was herself waving the revolver that frit the poor mite. Ma Bansom was worried the accident might turn folk agin’er, but now she’s full of piss-and-vinegar. She’s threatening to come back and make another inspection of Granny Barking’s prefabricated Dame School.’

‘Is that so,’ said Pappy Barking flatly. ‘Somehow I don’t think that nag is going to run.’

He half-turned and pointed to the weapons in the back of the cart. Dippy whistled, and nodded his approval.
‘But here we are, Dippy, nattering away all this time and I haven’t introduced young Barry. Last time you saw him he was just a nipper, now he’s gone through puberty and has seven budgies perched on his pole.’

Getting budgies to perch in line on our jerusalems was how we measured them in those days before the threepenny bit was minted. Four perched budgies or more was considered normal for length – if barely adequate. Three budgies or fewer, and you couldn’t call yourself a man - you’d have to go off to the Chafford clinic and have weights attached to pull you into line.

Hidden under my hood I blushed. I bowed my head - but not before I clocked the admiration of Constable Dippy Barking.

‘Seven-up, that’s lucky for some young lady. A seven budgie boy, you must be proud. I only ever manage to get six perched on my truncheon. Fits the missis a treat, though, because we’ve never been blessed with kiddies.’

‘Daz – he’s a ten, by the way, the last time I looked – he’s working wonders over at Junior Academy, and Licit is in her last term at boarding school. She’s been promised a start at the Domedrome Casino when it opens.’ Pappy Barking fluffed himself with pride as he spoke. Dippy whistled.

‘Everyman Jack doesn’t select you for Junior Academy unless you’ve got the makings of a real Oxford scholar. I guess the ten budgies helped Daz there. And it’s good news about Licit. I gather there were a lot of disappointed lasses who were turned down, Sally Bansom for one. Well, better get back to my marigolds, unless ...’

Dippy’s voice trailed off into wistfulness as he gazed at the weapons.

‘Come on then,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘You’ve got good reason, maybe more so than us. At least when Ma Bansom was at the school-inspecting, she never set light to Granny
Barking’s farts. Put this spare hood on. I knew you’d be keen, so I brought it just in case.’

Dippy poked his hooded head, embroidered GRANNY B, through the cottage window and shouted to the Missis that he was going off to help kill the Bansoms. He sprang up on the buckboard, beside Pappy Barking.

‘Shove up Barry,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Let’s make more room for Uncle Dippy here, good old boy.’

Just then we heard ‘woof-woof’ behind us. I turned to see Jip loping along the dusty road, his own hood dangling from his fangs. He’d guessed what we were about, and run limping hell-for-three-legged-leather to catch us up and join the fun, good old boy.

‘Bless him, he’s game for the whole hog,’ said Pappy Barking, reaching down and snatching the hood from Jip’s fangs. Jip growled a bit, just for show.

‘Here boy, climb up here, good old boy, handsome Jip. We shouldn’t have left you out.’

But Jip had trouble climbing up so high because of only having one back leg, so I got down and bundled him into the back of the cart. Pappy Barking handed me the drool-sodden hood to put over Jip’s head. I waved it about a bit to let it air and then settled it on his head, making sure the embroidered \textit{JIP} was straight, and he could see out of the eye-slits, good old boy, and that his nose was comfortably poking through the corresponding hole.

Dippy’s missis came out, rubbing her raw red hands on her pinafore to shake off the floury dough she was kneading to make the best barm-cakes this side of the Ness.

‘Stop for tea on the way back, Pappy Barking and Barry and Jip, do say yes,’ she called.
‘Woof,’ said Jip.

‘After we’ve slaughtered the Bansoms, a cuppa would be lovely,’ said Pappy Barking, and with that he clicked his teeth and called ‘gee up’ to blinkered Sethina, and we were off.

A CLEAN SWEEP OF BANSOMS

The Bansom home place came in sight, a rambling skein of shaky outbuildings surrounding what used to be a farmhouse back in Methesula’s day. But tending livestock and cultivating mangel-and-acorn were never a Bansom occupation. Extortion, rustling, rape, pillage, and school-inspecting were more their line of work. You wouldn’t catch a Bansom husbanding meat-and-mangel, the way Pappy Barking done all his days for scant reward. No siree, the Bansoms preferred to harass innocent bingo-goers like the Missis, in the hope that their husbands would pay for their wives to be left alone. But if you paid to get the Bansoms off your back, you’d find yourself forking over at least a monkey a week – a monkey that most homesteaders out on the Ness couldn’t afford.

Pappy Barking seen his duty for sure. He knowed to make a clean sweep of Bansoms, young and old, and rid the Ness, once and for all, of such extortionating school-inspecting scum.

Smoke was rising lazy from the Bansom chimneys, so maybe someone was home. Otherwise their homeplace looked deserted - aside from a washing-line of patched calico drawers blowing in the breeze. We rode closer.

‘Look at them undercrackers,’ sneered Pappy Barking. ‘A man could never brand them lingerie. They plumb got no self-respect, these Bansom womenfolk, nor the menfolk neither, letting them dress like that. If Ma Barking came to bed wearing calico drawers, even if they was new, then Madonna of my dreams or not, there would be ructions.’
‘Aint it the gospel truth,’ said Dippy Barking. He cleared his throat and spat. ‘The reason them Bansoms is always setting fire to the wife’s lingerie is because it’s top-drawer satin and lace in a range of pastel colours, created by Keturah Brown, sewn by almond-eyed helots, and imported straight from her new Paris salon in the diplomatic pouch. Them Bansoms is eaten up with envy of my wife’s panties and they covet my Masonic links with the Paris gendarmerie – links which allow the missis to be lingerie cynosure of Chafford Hundred, the Ness and beyond, even to the Russian steppes.’

Pappy Barking shook his head. ‘Maybe so they covet your Missis’s frillies - and the way you talk about ‘em and their high-class provenance, I’m inclined to covet them myself. I aint saying you’re wrong, Dippie, but if what you say-so is so, how come they still wear calico drawers? Aint there no shops in Chafford where a gal can get sexy skivvies?’

‘Listen,’ I whispered, finger to my lips. ‘I hear bedsprings jingle in every nook and cranny of the Bansom home place. They must all be on the job. We’ve come at the right time to surprise them on the nest.’

‘They haven’t posted a look-out. Bad mistake.’

Pappy Barking whistled soft to Sethina, and gave a tug on the reins to halt the cart behind a thicket of scrub.

Dippy cradled the sniper’s rifle and crooned.

‘Just let a Bansom boy show himself, and I plug him with this. Hope it’s one of the menfolk who fouly distained the missis, so I can slot his harry-pipe.’

Pappy Barking told us his plan. He posted me, with shotgun and pistol, at the side of the house, so I could cover both the side door and back. He deployed Dippy and his sniper’s rifle behind an old cast-iron horse trough, with orders to cover the windows.

Pappy Barking set up the Gatling to pepper the front door. He threw down a full sack of
mangel-and-acorn behind the breech, to absorb the recoil. He fired up the flamethrower and ran for the house, shooting flame up to the roof. He ran around the house, all the while aiming up at the thatch and spouting oily bursts of smoky flame that whooshed like they were sucking in all the air for miles around.

Pappy Barking closed the stopcock on the flamethrower and ran back to the Gatling. The thatch was merrily ablaze. The jingle of bedsprings ceased, and we heard wretched fearful screaming as Bansoms began to choke and burn.

The front door flung open and out tumbled a medley of flaming Bansoms, fighting for air and life and what they thought was the safety of the yard. Three got clear of the jam in the doorway but Pappy Barking turned the crank of the Gatling, rat-a-tat-tat, and they fell bleeding and dying in the dust. A head popped round the door and hastily drew back, but by now the flames were taking fierce hold, roaring through the attic and upper floor. Sally Bansom came out the side door on a run and shrieking, with a blunderbuss in her hands and her hair on fire, and I cut her in half with both barrels before she had a chance to shoot. Ma Bansom’s baby had been slung across Sally’s chest in a papoose. There wasn’t much left of the pequeño that I could see, not much more than a soiled calico nappy.

Two less Bansoms to carry the feud into the next generation. I took out my Barlow-knife and whittled two notches on the stock of my shotgun.

Great-Uncle Seth appeared, naked from the waist down, with one hand on his crotch, fingering his septic quick, and the other waving a pair of grubby long-johns tied to the bald-headed end of a broom. The halfwit cried ‘Quarter! Quarter!’ I took aim and shot him down with my .38, a neat headshot through his brow, not stopping to fret about him being distant kin to Pappy Barking nor about to surrender. He writhed, twitched, and lay still. The long-johns fluttered down to cover his face. Brain matter spilled from the
jagged exit wound in the back of his head. The bluebottles hovering over the Bansom family latrine swapped their allegiance to Seth’s spilled brains in an instant.

Faces appeared at the windows and Dippy Barking shot them methodically, calling out as each one fell. He might have been beheading his marigolds, so clinical was his ‘load, aim, cock, fire!’

Gruff, the Bansom family dog, came running on the hurry-up from one of the outhouses, and Pappy Barking didn’t see him until he was almost on him. My shouted warning was lost in the whack of gunshots, the anguished screams of the dying, and above the clamour, the irrefutable hell-cackle of the burning thatch.

Gruff launched himself at Pappy Barking and sank his teeth into his right arm. Jip was keeping a lookout through the slits in his hood and came running as best he could. He was on him in an instant, seizing Gruff in his fangs and biting clean through Gruff’s neck. Jip loped off with Gruff in his jaws, shaking him like he was a rat. Soon nothing was left of Gruff but dismembered limbs, torso, head and tail, scattered around the yard, good old boy Jip.

‘We surrender, don’t shoot,’ cried the few remaining Bansoms, who were advancing from the house under cover of a dustbin lid. Jed Bansom carried a flag of truce, this one made from a pair of lacy white satin frillies. Like Great-Uncle Seth, his flag was lashed to a broom handle. The Bansoms sure were a houseproud bunch, with all these brooms around the place.

But the cosy picture didn’t seem right to me somehow. Them lacy white satin frillies, for one thing. How come they weren’t calico like the other drawers? The question vexed my troubled mind.

‘Where is Hardy Ma Bansom?’ shouted Pappy Barking.
‘Her gone up Lunnon, for to buy sexy lingerie, at Fenwick’s of Bond Street,’ Jed called out, in a thick, trembling, dry-mouthed yokel voice. ‘The Marshal tell her she got to ante-up in the lingerie stakes if she want to cut a caper as a school inspector. Seems like some no-good varmint told on her for wearing calico drawers.’

‘I don’t figure Hardy Ma Bansom needed no telling on,’ shrieked Pappy Barking, ‘with that washing-line of Devil’s drawers a-fluttering and a-flaunting their calico for all the world to see.’

‘Spare us, Pappy Barking,’ whimpered Jed. ‘You done made your point.’

I spat in the dust.

‘Where’d you Bansoms get them satin frillies you got lashed to the pole?’

I broke open the shotgun, ready to reload.

‘Don’t need to look no further for an answer than this prairie-dog here,’ said Dippy Barking, pointing his rifle at Jed. I guessed from his voice that under Dippy’s GRANNY B hood his face was white with barely suppressed rage.

Jed shuffled in the dust and looked down at his barefoot toes like they were the most jim-dandy sight in all creation. He was twitchy as a sack of drowning polecats. He took off his straw hat and held it over his crotch.

‘What you talking ’bout, Granny Barking?’ Jed was bemused, panic in his voice. Then he summoned the dregs of his manhood to look up and face what he thought was GRANNY B square in the hood. ‘That sure don’t make a lick o’ sense, old-timer.’

‘Them white satin frillies, all lacy and dainty, him belong Missis Dippy,’ growled Dippy Barking. In one slick movement he hefted the rifle to his hip and squeezed the trigger, blowing a hole into Jed’s groin, and Jed and his mangled jerusalem to the ground.
The smoke from the burning farmhouse billowed over us as the wind changed direction. Wisps of bloody straw from Jed’s shredded hat blew around like confetti.

The Gatling coughed and rattled.

Jed’s companions jerked like bad-handled puppets, then fell as fate cut their strings.

The dustbin lid they’d used for cover turned slowly on its rim, wobbling like a drunken cartwheel towards the house. I spun my barking-iron round my trigger finger, palmed the butt, and took a snap shot at the lid, drilling it plumb through the middle, just for sport.

‘Better tend to that arm, Pappy Barking,’ I said, tilting the barrel of my pistol toward my lips and blowing gunsmoke across the muzzle.

‘It’s nothing, just a flesh-wound,’ said Pappy Barking with a grin. ‘Let’s get the heads off these critters and into the boner.’

We each took a cleaver and went round the yard, chopping the heads off all the Bansoms we could get to. The fire was so fierce now, it was difficult to reach the bodies by the door - and with those trapped inside, we figured there wasn’t much point unless a cowpoke was pining for barbecue. I went looking for Sally Bansom’s head among her splattered remains, but the fire in her hair had messed up her head real good, so I had to make do with Gruff.

‘Okay,’ said Pappy Barking, ‘crank her up.’

We cranked the corkscrew boner, dropping the heads in one by one and stripping the cheek-meat, soft palate, tongue, and what-have-you, sucking out the jaw-marrow, and turning on the compressor to make blocks of pungent headcheese that would do for the farmers’ market on Sunday, where none of the city rubes could tell the difference between pig meat and Bansom.
‘Waste not, want not,’ said Pappy Barking. We made a pyramid of the gleaming skulls, with Jed’s, the last to be stripped, grinning on top. Dippy poked a half-smoked cigar between Jed’s teeth.

Sethina was happily munching the Bansom’s daffodils, good old girl, and I never saw a horse better able to cope with the clamorous ructions of a family feud as her. We got back up on the cart with Jip in the back. Now, along with the stale oats and horse-piss, my smoky hood stank of pungent headcheese, so musky I could taste it - the ambergris of victory and vindication.

**BOYS, THEM BUZZARDS IS FLYIN’**

We jogged along through the country lanes, heading for Dippy’s home-place. In the distance, I heard the bell of the fire brigade wagon - along with the distinctive siren of the *Chafford Courier*, chasing front-page sensation as usual.

‘How about Hardy Ma Bansom?’ I asked Pappy Barking. ‘She’ll be riled when she gets home to find her calico drawers burnt to cinders.’

‘Jed said she was away getting herself some proper sexy lingerie,’ said Pappy Barking, ‘so maybe the calicos won’t signify as much as they might have in antebellum days. She is going to be mighty pissed though, at losing the whole of the Bansom clan. Leastways, I think enough of her to believe she will.’

Dippy nodded agreement. He tilted his head, to squint through his eye-slits at the sky, where the big birds were wheeling and groaning amid the creak of their leathery wings.

‘Boys, them buzzards is flyin’.’

From his top pocket he took the white satin frillies, carefully prised from Jed’s broom handle. He lifted his hood and used the frillies to wipe the sweat and smuts from his eyes. He pulled the hood down tight over his chin and settled the sweaty frillies on his lap. He sighed with satisfaction.
‘The missis will be mighty pleased to see these pretties again. I know I am. They tune my harry-pipe to a fine pitch. She lost them after the bingo game a month ago. Filched from her in the lavatory by Hardy Ma Bansom herself out of spite for the missis getting the jackpot two weeks in a row.’

Dippy leaned over the side of the cart and spat a chaw of tobacco expertly through the mouth-slit of his hood.

‘Leastways, that’s what she tells me.’

**INTIMATIONS OF A GIRLY THREE SOME**

After a scrumptious tea of barm-cakes, shortbread, and cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off - sluiced down with Missis Dippy’s homemade lemonade and a pot of strong tea - Pappy Barking said we’d better be heading home. He could tell Dippy was keen to get the missis and her knickers upstairs, so we didn’t want to overstay our welcome.

Missis Dippy gave us a box of barm-cakes for Granny Barking and Mum, and a big bone for Jip even though he had a bone of his own. We manhandled the gifts into the cart. Missis Dippy opened her palm and held out sugar lumps for Sethina, who whinnied with delight.

‘Tell Mum and Granny Barking to come over and see me one of these afternoons, and we’ll have a girly threesome. Tell them to bring Jip if they like. I’ll make cheesy barm-cakes for a treat, and mash some pilchards.’

‘Right you are,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘It’s been a long time since Granny Barking had a girly threesome with Jip and mashed pilchards.’

Pappy Barking raised his horsewhip and saluted the happy couple, Chafford Hundred’s very own Derby and Joan. He wished happiness to their sheets. I blushed, and waved
briskly to cover my embarrassment at this frank reference to marital intercourse. Pappy Barking swung the cart out into the crown of the road and we drove home.

**MY FAMILY, MY CLAN**

I was tired by the time we got back, and after giving Sethina a good rub down and attending to Jip’s needs, which included a groaning bloater, I gargled with spearmint mouthwash and went for a kip, so I could be properly refreshed for the task ahead - a ‘getting to know you’ assignment set by my moral tutor at the University of Debden Broadway - 1000 words on ‘My Family, My Clan’. So after crashing the old swede for forty winks, I got up and hunched over the kitchen table and told the story of the Barking clan, beginning with Jip, who has been in the family so long nobody can remember whose dog he was in the first place - although now he’s mine, no question.

Like I told you before, Jip goes back umpteen generations before Granny Barking, and nobody can remember him having four legs. So that’s what I said to my moral tutor, and out it came, clearly printed in eyebrow pencil on greaseproof paper. Nine hundred and fifty words to go.

I sighed. This was the sort of task much better suited to the academic brain of brother Daz, but there never was a Barking was a quitter, so I hunched over again and told the story of Granny Barking’s girlhood, how she started life as a Bansom (second cousin to Hardy Ma) and how Grandpappy Clotho Barking wooed her to become his wife.

**A WIT GOES TO WOO**

In bygone days, Grandpappy Clotho slept in a tarpaulin lean-to abutting Lembit’s lighthouse out on the Ness, where he lived the life of a beachcomber, with only Jip for company. One morning, while idly raking through the classifieds in the *Chafford Courier* and sipping from a can of methylated spirits, he saw an out-of-the-way Doughnut was up for sale – the one we own now.
Rousing himself, he collected a big bunch of driftwood, a gross of polished oyster shells, several sacks of pearls (nearly all of the first water) and made an offer the owners couldn’t refuse, although at first they tried. But they were weary of the meat and the business-from-behind, and they wanted to retire, so after Clotho made his first offer and then followed up by establishing a strong negotiating position - through kidnapping and holding hostage their firstborn (keeping him snug in an old sewer pipe with only a blind teddy bear for company) - they were quite amenable to the idea of treating with him, especially after getting a bloodied ear through the post.

And so, for a song, Clotho got the business, to wit: the Doughnut, Baco and Ham, the goodwill on the meat, Sethina the horse, the farmhouse, all outbuildings, the sties; the effluent pond, the track, all shooting and fishing rights, including the oyster beds; and planning permission for a Dame School.

Having secured his patrimony, the next item Clotho wanted was a wife - a Dame for the school who would also serve as partner in the meat and business-from-behind. For a while now, a comely lass had beguiled his eye. This was Granny Barking, who ran a trotter stall at the lower end of Chafford market. Except she wasn’t Granny Barking just yet, she was known as Alien Bansom, the Welsh trotter-maid.

Clotho spruced himself up, put a feather in his cap, and went a-wooin’. He popped the question, and she saw he was a good healthy match, a man likely to “Bring forth good breed!” - as the Breed Book bids - so off she went to garner her trousseau, starting with the lace-trimmed frilly lilac drawers she was to wear on her wedding night and for the rest of her life, plus a selection of bombazines, mainly black, stored against the day when she would most likely be widowed in a feud, and be known to the clans as Widow-Woman Granny Barking.
At the finish though, it wasn’t a feud that settled Grandpappy Clotho Barking’s hash - it was wanderlust for the open sea.

But I was getting ahead of events here, not setting them out in proper order as commanded by my tutor. I shuffled my pages, trying to make them come right.

I told how Clotho would scour the country, straying away from the Doughnut for weeks and months at a time, leaving Granny Barking at home with a clutch of young ’uns to rear, the Dame School to run, and the meat to slaughter and dress. Home at last, clutching a bag of oyster shells for the wife to decorate or maybe towing a motorbike he found lying unattended outside someone’s cottage, he might stay in the nest just long enough to fix up the bike with a different engine number and a new paint-job. He would sell the bike at Chafford market, then whip out his harry-pipe and put Granny Barking up the stick, and she wouldn’t see him until she popped the sprog, if then.

But say what you like, Alien and Clotho were happy, together and apart (mostly apart), until one day Clotho heard the siren call of the silver darlings - the herring - from the sandbanks beyond the Ness. He went to sea and never came home again.

Lembit the lighthouse keeper swore he saw him in a skiff heading out for the Deeping Banks, beyond the Sound of Sleet, where the fattest plump herring are found, anent the Kentish Knock. Herring tackle was stowed aboard, in plain sight. Clotho waved at Lembit and pointed to his tackle to show he meant business.

Alas, within the hour, the mercury dropped in the barometer, there was a foul weather call on the Knock, and Lembit lost sight of the skiff and its lone fisherman in a gusty squall that blew savage from the north-east. He polished the lamp and shone its refulgent beam on the water, but there was nothing to be seen of Clotho, only white-capped waves, scourgéd by hailstones - and under an umbrella, a mermaid sitting on a rock, teasing her *coiffure* before a looking-glass with a comb in her right hand.
Two weeks later, Lembit found the skiff. The strong neap tide had cast it on the pebbled beach of the Ness, just below the Shoebury dunes. The herring tackle was gone, and there was no sign of Clotho, except for an unopened tin of pilchards, a rotten herring’s head, and an old and very damp copy of ‘Doughnuts Today!’ stowed in the shindle-locker. The subscription coupon was filled in, and half torn out, as if Clotho got interrupted in the act of sending it off - although why he’d be doing that, out beyond the Deeping Banks away from any post-box, stumped us all any time the story was told down the years, and various salacious theories were advanced, mostly involving the tin of pilchards.

There had been talk of salvaging the boat, and mounting it on a plinth in Chafford park as a memorial to Clotho, but when Granny Barking went to retrieve the skiff, she found that a strong tide had swept it out to sea again.

‘THE END’ (ONLY JOKING!)

That slab of narrative took me to nine hundred and fifty words done, fifty to go, and I hadn’t even described Pappy Barking’s birth yet, which happened after Clotho’s disappearance – nor how Pappy Barking was born with a blood clot clutched in his wrinkled tiny fist, like Ghengis Khan, who used to own a whole string of Doughnuts to the East of Eden, where the beast-men and frog-demons dwell in sumptuous tents and crimson marble halls, by red porphyry fountains and limpid pools, amid groves of apricot and pomegranate.

Writing in haste, I brought the story up to date, with a headline summary of the Barking-Bansom feud, and wrote ‘THE END’.

HEUCH AND TEUCH!

Soft, he comes. All hail, Cunty McFuck.
‘Slainte, Cunty! Céad Mile Fáilte!’

‘Give the Gaelic a rest, pal. That was the trouble with my boy Malcolm. It was heuch and teuch from arsehole to breakfast. See here, sweet sugar, I still have the scar where he battered mah heid wi’ the hardback Mo Streachailt.’

‘The Gaelic Mein Kampf? Yes, I remember you said. But it’s healed nicely, and the scar gives you a raffish charm. Malcolm was only trying to stop you murdering him.’

‘Bleddy cheek! Does a faither no’ have the right to slaughter his son?’

‘Only if bidden by his Creator God, like Abraham was with Isaac.’

‘Aye, or bidden by Auld Clootie, which is me, pal. I didnae tell you earlier, eh? I rule doon here on Earth, and in Hell. You can poke your Creator God up the same hole the darkie milkmen sling their pudding.’

‘Sling their …? That’s a new one on me. Have they diversified their product line?’

‘Dinnae come the auld acid wi’ me, pal.’

‘Sorry. Anyway, I doubt there’s room for pudding. But that’s enough of your family – what do you think of mine?’

‘Youse-all is badder than my yins for impetuosity by the crack of it. That Clotho – what an hombre! I wouldnae mind swallowing a few bevvies or jacking up the broon wi’ a real man like him. But listen, sweet sugar, happen if me and Old Granny Rattletrap wiz tae plan oan getting hitched - wooed an’ merrit and a’ that – spliced in a trice and licensed for embracement – two sweethearts to piddle in the one chanty-po, ye ken – d’ye believe she would want a church wedding? Or mebbe the Chafford Hundert Registry Office would suffice, wi’ nibbles in the Scout Hut afterwards - whidye say?’

Oh, Cunty! If only you knew how vital rites and liturgy have been to every Barking who every breathed! Not the Registry Office, no. And certainly not the Scouts. You
wouldn’t want to put temptation in the way of Gervase Whitelady. Granny Barking is sure to invite him, and you don’t know where he’s been for the past four hundred years.

**BLOCK PILLAR SLAB BEAM**

I speak of rites and liturgy. Let us look back, Cunty, more in sorrow than anger, and live the past as if it were today, to see if I can make the Barking spiritual life clear to you. Imagine that my fourteenth birthday has come. Out in the yard, a fresh supply of blocks, pillars, slabs and beams has just been delivered. From today, my task, along with Granny Barking, is to help Pappy Barking build the Temple of Venus Aphrodite, a goddess long venerated in our pantheon, but so far without a proper tabernacle.

The temple is an idea of Pappy Barking’s, to save us the trek into Chafford on Sunday. He’s been inspired by the blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams that constitute our playground furniture. He is possessed by the idea that a fresh supply can be put to sacred rather than secular use. The idea has been a long time coming to fruition, mainly because he’s never properly explained to any of us what he’s up to, not even to Granny Barking, who has been his sole helpmeet in the project up to now.

The blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams, and what my father and grandmother had been doing with them, puzzled me for years, before the penny dropped.

**QUEER SHOULDER – SACRED WHEEL**

Beyond the onset of puberty, and well into my teenage inferno, I used to lie wheezy in my bed in the late summer evenings, with eyes gummy and red from my allergies, and ears runny with yellow discharge. I would hear Pappy Barking shout to Granny Barking: ‘Block: Pillar: Slab: Beam.’ In the morning I rose, to clean my ears with matchsticks and scrape the crusted yellow matter from my eyelids. As I peeped through the chinks in the nursery curtain to check the weather, I could see Pappy’s blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams – but whether arranged to an original purpose or some other or none, I could not
tell. Sometimes they were raised in such a form as to suggest the skeleton of a stone outhouse, and, if the weather was inclement, Jip would limp into shelter, out of the rain, then squat down and defecate - much to Pappy Barking’s annoyance. At other times they were scattered just higgledy-piggledy-any-old-how on the ground, making it difficult for Mum to peg our keks on the washing-line without tripping.

Of an evening, after kneeling in prayer, I would peep again through the jagged tear in the nursery curtain. Pappy Barking called ‘Block’ and Granny Barking brought him a block; he called ‘Pillar’ and she fetched a pillar; ‘Slab’ brought forth slab and ‘Beam’ engendered beam.

That was on a good day. On peculiar evenings when Granny Barking’s confusion was high, when her knotted fingers scrabbled in the piping of her black bombazine, and she hummed and buzzed, shouting out to her invisible friend to come over and let a Granny take a cluster of Caledonian nuts in her mouth, the correspondence was not always maintained. But the items were in the yard next morning in some sort of arrangement just the same, but of course quite different, and one whose pattern and meaning were never clear.

Now that puberty was well upon me, what Pappy Barking and Granny were up to was transparent, and I could hardly wait for the job to finish, so we might all participate in our homespun rites of Venus Aphrodite. I joined in the work with gusto, feeling that with my help the work would get along quicker. Pappy Barking didn’t discourage me, but he warned me against getting my hopes up of an early finish.

‘Son, we have a while to go yet before the job is done. Just watch and pray, night and day, learn the business-from-behind like a good Barking, and pitch in with the building work where you can.’
Pappy was right to be cautious. Each time we thought the Temple nearly done, a pillar would wobble and the whole shebang crash down around our ears. I was not discouraged. I figured the construction skills I was learning might come in handy in the future, when Wendy and I were married. No doubt there would be little jobs to do around our home from time to time, satisfactory completion of which would guarantee me my conjugal rights.

**YOU MAY HAVE LOST AN EYE, PAPPY BARKING, BUT WE STILL SAY AYE-AYE!**

After many a day of struggle, the Temple was done. Only the copestone remained to be surmounted. Heavy rain came on, so we took a break.

Pappy Barking and me went for oysters to the beds we owned over by the Ness. On the way home, we took the skiff on a leisurely detour to the shucking shed, where I called heads and the coin came down tails.

When we got back, Mum and Granny Barking were waiting by the jetty. Granny Barking waved her fist. I had never seen her so angry. She shrieked and bellowed.

‘The Temple of Venus Aphrodite has fallen down again! A big slab from the tabernacle landed on the head of my invisible friend, Cunty Mc-you-know-who.’

‘No disrespect, Granny Barking,’ I said, ‘but I don’t suppose we’ll notice the difference in him - him being chemically dependent and mentally impaired and all, let alone invisible most of the time. Pappy Barking, you need to get a proper builder in. This has been going on for years.’

‘We can’t afford it,’ said Mum. ‘Granny and Pappy Barking will have to do the best they can with your help. I would give a hand if I could, but I’m too busy, washing Licit’s lingerie when she’s home, my lingerie, Granny Barking’s lilac drawers – when I can get them off her, that is - and your brother’s dirty footer bags he sends home from school.’
‘My keks could do with a wash too. And my um-ka hums a bit, but fair cop, that’s for me to sort out now I’m nearly grown. And when can I have some underpants?’

Granny Barking snorted with disgust.

‘You don’t want underpants! You want to let the air get at your privates - cock, balls and what-have-you ........ Underpants get dirty and breed infection. In the Royal Navy, so Cunty tells me, when a ship is going into action, the sailors all wash their foreskins - if they’re lucky enough to still have ’em - and change into clean underpants in case they get wounded in the nadgers. That’s the beauty of lingerie - in a man’s world it never stays on long enough to become a health hazard.’

Granny Barking was having one of her half-lucid days, so when Pappy Barking asked her there and then if she’d like to “get them off” because he was bursting his harry-pipe, she told him to belay that sordid remark - and anyway what did he think he was up to, with Mum standing right by him and Cunty McFuck, head bandaged, looking askance over his shoulder?

‘Sorry, Granny Barking,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘I was beset on all sides, and down the middle, with waves of lust, and they nearly overwhelmed me.’

He wheeled and whined. ‘I haven’t had it since lunchtime and I’m desperate.’

Shamefaced at his lie, finger to his lips as if to shush himself, aware he’d gone beyond the beyonds by propositioning his own mother - and feeling guilty about recently tupping an oyster-shucker within the dark confines of the shucking-shed and then pelting his son’s fyking hurdies with oyster shells as Barrymore’s arse went up and down in his turn - he faced Mum, and by way of a peace offering, proffered in atonement what promised to be the plumpest juiciest oyster from the heart of the barrel. Mum quickly shucked it with her shucking-knife and tipped it down her throat.
‘Come with me, silly Pappy Barking’, said Mum with a roguish twinkle in her eye.

‘And I’ll shuck your oyster daft.’

Mum twirled coquettishly, and her skirt and petticoats billowed around her. She can-canned, giving us a quick flash of stocking-top and garter, then stood at ease, rooted and monumental as a Sequoia tree – trunk bearing down firm on her gnarled legs where the varicose veins hung in bunches. Hands on hips, she breathed deep, enjoying the gentle breeze that frolicked across the estuary now the squall had passed.

She gave Pappy Barking a saucy look, and if she’d had eyelashes she’d have batted them.

‘As long as it’s understood I get a potent dose of your generous length. I haven’t had it since lunchtime either, as you very well know.’ And she winked.

Hand in hand, horny as rhinos, and no less bulky in the case of Mum – bless! – the lovers waddled up the track, over the rise, past the Doughnut and into the house. We heard the farmhouse door slam.

‘Love’s young dream,’ said Granny Barking. ‘Carefree as newly-weds tumbling toward the nuptial couch.’

So that left me and Granny Barking to bring home the barrel of oysters. We lifted it between us. Grunting under the load, Granny Barking said she thought her bowels might be stirring – a blessed relief, as she’d been constipated for months.

‘Time to try for a motion,’ said Granny Barking. ‘Care to join me in the attempt?’

We picked our way unsteadily through the tumbled makings of Venus Aphrodite’s temple, towards the outhouse. The rain had now turned to drizzle, so we lifted the lid of the barrel to let the oysters freshen. There wasn’t much chance the molluscs would make a run for it, and if they did, Jip would round them up toot sweet.
The outhouse was timber-built and solid. Within, there was a sweet-smelling haze of cedar incense. A musty muslin curtain filtered grey daylight. Against the end wall was a long seat with seven holes of different sizes with nameplates above each one, the holes arranged left to right: Granny Barking, Pappy Barking, Mum, Barry, Daz, Licit, and Jip - although Jip wasn’t often seen on the crapper, preferring to pass his motions in the fresh air, being an outdoor defecator by and large if the weather was dry. Even so, Pappy Barking, with his adze and his plane and his circular saw, had made sure the indoor option was available to our furry kinsman should his heart desire it.

Granny Barking lifted her dress and settled in her place of honour with a contented sigh. Her frilly lilac drawers flounced dainty round her swollen ankles.

‘Here, boy, sit next to me,’ she said. I shook my head. My lips were tight and my Adam’s apple bobbed with fear.

‘Mmonono,’ I buzzed. No way could I usurp Pappy Barking’s berth on the crapper, below his nameplate, next to Granny Barking. What was Granny Barking thinking of? Did she want me hauled up on the slaughtering block, as surely as if I’d tried to go further than titting Mum up? Pappy Barking would make no allowance for my tender years. Terror seized me and my bowels turned to water. I dropped my keks, squatted in my rightful place, and let fly.

The griping in my gut faded. I reached out for the squares of the *Times*, strung on a line above our heads. I wiped my um-ka, checking each sheet to see I was getting clean.

‘I will be some time achieving a satisfactory motion,’ said Granny Barking. ‘I’ve been terrible constipated of late, since Doctor Drain changed my medication. You just sit there and keep me company, and I’ll tell you the story of how Pappy Barking lost his eye.’
‘Aye aye, Granny Barking.’ I sucked the newsprint off my fingers. Wild squeals came from the sties. It sounded like Baco was trying to mount his beloved Ham and do the business-from-behind out of season and Ham just wanted to be left alone. Jip started to woof woof woof. Through the animal cacophony and Granny Barking’s steady whine, I heard from afar the faint jingle of bedsprings, as Pappy Barking and Mum performed the marriage act – *façon de Dingwallace, style Polonais*, at a rough guess.

Granny Barking cleared her throat, spat, and roused her corncrake voice to spiel the tale about how Pappy Barking came to have one eye.

**YOUR BISCUIT-CRUMBED KISSES IS WHAT I MISSES**

She had barely begun, when the intimation of a movement shivered her bowels. For a moment her face brightened. Alas and lackaday! It was only a zephyr of uncommon fragrance. The radiance faded from her walnut cheeks. Her face resumed its mournful costive aspect.

She hadn’t gone far in her tale when her lucidity clouded over. The tide of her madness ran fast and faster, surge after surge, until the swell of invective rose in a towering wave of abuse. Her anger was directed at me, because I hadn’t the courage to squat next to her in her hour of need.

Assaulted by her fearful din, I had trouble riding out the storm. I clung to the crapper, my knuckles white. Granny Barking tore at her bombazine until her bitten fingers were bloody. She changed tack, and rushed towards the climax of her epic tale. She bellowed a familiar story about caves and bones, torn-off limbs, and a man with a flaming torch and a fiery spear who had lunged at poor Pappy Barking until his precious dexter orb, sister to its sinister milky-veiled vulture twin, was speared by the burning brand. The vanquished eye oozed its vile jelly down his cheek.
Granny Barking hadn’t put up with this, oh no, a thousand times no - what did I think
Barking womenfolk were made of – sugar and spice? Inspired by the threat to the
eyesight of her first-born, she had grabbed a beam, and with the strength of ten burly
men and more, she had swung with all the strength she could muster. The spear-wielder
fell across a slab, breaking his back. She picked up a pillar and brought it down smack
on his head.

‘And that is why his brainpan burst like a pomegranate hit with a lump-hammer.’

Granny Barking was quiet for a few minutes. When she spoke again, it was in the low,
lilting singsong of her early childhood in the Welsh valleys.

‘So, boyo, we buried him in the tidy-hole, right under here, look you, where the main
sewer from the outhouse runs to the septic tank beneath the bed of leeks and the cereal
patch where the maggots are snitheing through the rye. Aai Dai! But that was later. First
there was me bathing poor Pappy Barking’s raw socket with vinegar-and-water, and
clapping a mustard poultice to it. No matter! All’s well that ends well in the fell suburbs
of Hell, look you and look you again and again. He sees better with one eye than many a
Taff with two.’

Granny Barking relieved herself of the burden of her heroic tale but she hadn’t eased
her bowels. And Granny wept.

‘I can’t go on!’ she cried. ‘I’ve got a badger stuck up my hole. I feel all hairy-arsed
and prickly. And my bleeding piles are back.’

My fear abated. Moved by her distress, I slid over and put my arm across her
shoulders.

‘There there, Granny Barking. Some day you’ll do ca-ca again.’

Granny Barking turned her port-and-lemon-scented face to mine and began to lick my
nose, bestowing her whiskery, biscuit-crumbed kisses.
‘Do you believe that? Do you promise me plop-plops? Good boy, good old boy,’ she said, perhaps confusing me with Jip, who at that moment came woofing into the outhouse, with Pappy Barking snapping at his heels wielding a carpet-beater and shouting.

‘I’ll teach you to crap on the site of the Temple of Venus Aphrodite, just when I’ve got the makings nice and clean.’

Spying me, his anger turned from delinquent canine to transgressor son.

‘Oh ho, what have we here? A double felony. Crapping in his father’s glory-hole and titting-up Granny Barking.’

‘Titting-up his lovely Nan is allowed, according to The Marriage Art, magnum opus of Rear Vice Admiral of the Blue, Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN,’ said Granny Barking. She sniffed. ‘Don’t know about the other.’

‘It is written - such shall not be,’ sobbed most unhappy Pappy Barking.

‘It may well be written - but where? Tattooed across Satan’s buttocks ?’ said most lucid Granny Barking.

By now I was squealing in terror, like the little fat porkers when we take them from their mum. My own Mum came into the outhouse, swivelling sideways to get her massive hips through the door. She managed to calm Pappy Barking down, and after a few minutes pow-wow, my loving parents agreed that I shouldn’t be strung up to the slaughtering block, but thrashed instead.

They stripped me naked in the yard (not difficult as my keks were already round my ankles) and fettered me at the wrists to the pole that held up the washing line. Pappy Barking bound me with rusty cuffs and iron chains, their links clotted with ancient grease.
Granny Barking and Mum took it in turns to buffet me with rolled-up copies of *The Times*, while Pappy Barking stood aside, shouting directions as he waited his turn.

Jip, good old boy, wandered round my ankles. He smacked me fitfully on the shins and calves with a rolled-up yellowing *Daily Mirror* clenched in his septic fangs.

Granny Barking, wearied by her stint, went in the house to seat herself at the harmonium. Manic strains of a wheezy waltz billowed from the open window. The music seemed to provoke Jip, who waved the rolled-up tabloid in his teeth with demented enthusiasm, as if he was wielding a conductor’s baton. He growled and barked his joy in waltz time: - growl! woof-woof:- growl! woof-woof:- growl! woof-woof.

The day of my punishment was the eve of the summer vacation, and my siblings were on their way home from their respective boarding schools. Licit arrived first, proudly waving her Leaving Certificate. The ribbons on her straw boater streamed in the wind which by now was blowing strong from the Ness and ruffling the Narrows. She too assaulted me, with a copy of *The Lady*, and just as her arm was flagging, along came Daz, his cheery whistle heralding his return as he strolled up the track from the water where the Academy’s skiff had brought him ashore, along with a couple of schoolfellows.

‘I say, what a jolly rag!’ breezed Daz, handing rolled-up newspapers to his comrades. For devilment, they untied their lanyards and whistles and beat me with those too, raising weals and inflicting cuts until Pappy Barking noticed what they were up to. He ordered them to stop, so I would have the stamina to face the ritual climax of his pounding.

When Daz and his schoolfellows finished their business, they sank weary with exhaustion into the arms and legs of Licit amid the chaos of the blocks, slabs, pillars and beams. Now it was Pappy Barking’s turn to buffet me.
He stripped to the waist and carefully performed his necessary ablutions, sponging himself down with vinegar-and-water. Mum approached me with a dipper made from a dried gourd, and gave me brackish water to drink. She mopped my brow with an old pair of unappetizing calico drawers that belonged to a pigman we had briefly employed until he’d been trampled by Baco and eaten by Ham.

‘It’s for the best, son,’ she said.

Pappy Barking windmilled his muscle-taut arm, warming up, and then began the steady tread of blow after blow, until the family stock of back issues of *The Times* was nearly exhausted and the yard was heaped with grey drifts of newsprint confetti.

‘Steady on, Pappy Barking,’ said Mum. ‘At this rate, we shall have nothing left to wipe our um-kas with.’

And so I was taken down and Pappy Barking poured a bucket of vinegar-and-water over my head to revive me and make me know what I had suffered. Then it was early to bed, lying on my front and sobbing into my pillow. The thick ticking scratched my face.

I felt the burden of six months’ news imprinted on my skin.

Outside I could hear the whole family cheerfully sorting through piles of stone and lumber in the fading light, as Pappy Barking called, ‘We’re nearly there! Block. Pillar. Slab ... Beam! Beam! Beam!’

Night fell. The moon rose blood-red, cold on the Ness. Baco and Ham snored in swinish contentment, and Jip woofed happy. Only poor agonised Barrymore was forlorn, with his jerusalem shrunk to the span of an anchovy and his itching scrotum inflamed and inflated to the girth of an octopus.

**THE PAPS OF HADES**

Lord Barrymore crawled out of his pit next morning, and after Herculean struggle, he gained his feet. He heard shrieks of revelry and merriment, mixed with groans and cries
of despair. At first, he thought the groans and cries of despair might be his own, but no, they came from beyond.

Peeping through the jagged tear in the nursery curtain, he saw that the yard was filled with masked, but otherwise naked, men and women, boys and girls, writhing on mangel-and-acorn sacks. They spilled out from the newly built Temple of Venus Aphrodite, rammed to the rafters for its consecration ceremony. Puff-balls of vapour from burning incense drifted here and there. A scrofulous dwarf kicked over a censer, and scattered the burning coals on the ground. A buxom worshipper kicked off her sandals and trod brisk and barefoot over the coals.

‘Come and join the party, Baz!’ called Daz in his high squeaky voice, just on the point of breaking to a languid baritone drawl. He beckoned his brother with a bony finger, and leaped to join the dance.

Daz cavorted high-kicking among the throng of delirious orgiasts. Transported in the rites of Venus Aphrodite and Dionysus, they hurtled through the purgatorial throes of terror and despair, towards heavenly ecstasy and jubilation. The pillars of the Temple were shaking, but still the Temple stood.

‘Come and join the party!’ bellowed Daz. His voice cracked like a rock-fall in the Paps of Hades.

Barrymore whimpered.

‘Can’t. I’m too sore,’

‘Don’t be sulky, Baz, it doesn’t suit you, and speak up,’ squeaked Daz.

Daz’s voice dropped. ‘Come over here, come out, you loathsome turd!’

But Barrymore was sulky, and as far as Barrymore was concerned, he had every right to be. So the loathsome turd stayed where he was, with his face pressed to the window.
Anyway, the Temple looked like it could collapse at any minute. Best off out of it, he thought, and perhaps I was.

**INTERLUDE WITH A GENIE DUDE**

Mementoes of my brother’s time East of Eden are strewn around, and there’s booty all over the floor. Be careful, Cunty, how you step. The insurance on the Doughnut doesn’t extend to accidents in the house.

‘Aye, okay. Shite, I banged my shin on yon cutlass. Look, it’s bleeding.’

Never mind. Let us examine the treasures from the ditty-box of Daz, home from the war. Perhaps the treasures can give us a glimpse of the secret duties Daz performed, as an agent of Everyman Jack, and servant of Britannia, during the first Um-Ka campaign?

Here are knuckle bones, and a fetish twisted from human hair - bangles and scarves and photo albums, wisps of lingerie, a tambourine with a genie tattooed on the skin, and newspapers and pamphlets in wiggly writing. All spill from his ditty-box and lie tumbled across the Turkey carpet that once was fine, but now is trodden flat and khaki with pig-muck and straw.

Take the tambourine in your hand, Cunty, and gently shake it. Hear the jingles ring.

‘Aye, *caramba!* *Hombre*, that’s bonny!’

Spit on your horny thumb and caress the goatskin of the tambourine, smearing spittle across the genie’s belly. As you smear, your thumb makes tiny involuntary leaping movements, skipping across the hide like a skimming stone. Hear the taut ripple of sound. Gather your thumb to your fingers, muster a fist, and rap on the goatskin, once, twice.

‘Fuck me sidewise!’
Summoned by Cunty with the ancient words of command, our Genie stands before us, arms folded, head tilted to one side, and his light-brown moustache surmounting a quizzical smile.

‘I give you good day, my masters. At your service. I am Gervase Whitelady, genie, poetaster, dramatist, part-time window cleaner, and tender companion of pale young boys. What will you have, masters, what will you have?’

His voice is oily and dark, slick as diesel. Cunty is tongue-tied in the presence of another sprite, so I speak for us both.

‘First of all, Master Whitelady, may we say we have long been admirers of your poetry?’

‘You’re very kind.’

‘Not at all.’

‘And the drama? How does it do?’

‘Not so well as the poetry.’

‘Pity. That’s where the big bucks lie. Hollywood is unlikely to option any of my haikus. How’s my window cleaning?’

‘Passing fair, for a sideline. It’s your skill as a genie we’re chiefly interested in just now.’

‘Understood. I’ll do my best to bring satisfaction. What do you lack, masters, what do you lack? Might it be pale and tender chucklewit boys?’

‘Heaven forfend! Do we look like nonces? Our first wish is that you relate what adventures befell Daz the warrior and secret agent, in his mission East of Eden in the service of Britannia and Everyman Jack. And our second wish is for a bit of the other with a lingerie-clad houri, so don’t be too long about it.’

‘Gladly, masters. But you have three wishes.’
‘We shall tell you the third wish later on, after we’ve achieved a satisfying conclusion to the story, and savoured the business-from-behind, with a copious emission for each.’

‘Aye, whit he sez - jist get on wi’ the business, likesay, ye ken.’

‘Okey-doke, here we go.’

And so Gervase Whitelady, poetaster of the middle rank in a Silver Age, faithful companion and groomer of pale tender chucklewit boys, mischievous genie to nobles and gentry through the centuries, begins his tale of Daz Pasha.

THE TALE OF DAZ PASHA

Lo and behold!

The cloying scents of mingled apricot and pomegranate weigh heavy in the over-ripe night. Their miasma grows thicker by the hour. The stench clogs the orchards that line the road that twists and dips, mile after stony mile from the blood-soaked invasion beach towards the distant city of Too-Ba. Shrouded in his patchwork cloak, Daz shallow-breathes the putrid air and hurries on through the wet heat. His cheeks, forehead, nose and chin, are stained brown with crushed wayside berries, but his hands now are patchy and pale by dint of rubbing his sweating hands nervously in the folds of his cloak.

Daz has raised his cowl against the grit-laden wind. His eyelids are half-shut. Rather than offer his gaze to the distant horizon, he peers down at his shuffling feet. When he pauses from weariness to look back, his body shrinks as from a blow. He thinks of the home he has forsaken, and the cause he has embraced.

Yes, his body shrinks, but his soul blossoms. His soul is a Japanese paper flower, submerged in rosewater, where its bud opens and blooms. He sees his image in years to come, vitrified in panes of stained glass, erected and set on high for veneration in the east window of the transept of the soon-to-be-undertaken Cathedral of Too-Ba.
Now he opens wide his sore and sorrowful eyes. With fervent desire, he tears open his shirt, and displays his heart to the country he has come to succour and save from its own perversity. In the firefly night he sees before him the purple paps of the sacred Ba-Gel Mountains heaving their bulk above the eastern horizon. He offers a prayer to the ancient God of Battles. The mountains seem no nearer than when he began his journey this morning.

All day above the dusty plain, high in the copper sky, the lurching buzzards have churned their wings beneath the rancid buttery sun; and now at night, from the orchards, the rabid plump bats flit across the swollen pock-marked face of the rising moon. Silver-gleaming, the Lake of Numcha-cha swells with pregnant longing. Fish swim below her belly-skin, their shoals rising here and there to feed some, fuck some, and fuck and feed some more. The finny drove digests and excretes, tarnishing the silver sheen of Numcha-cha.

Daz looks up and sees the torches of Too-Ba burning faint in the foothills of the Ba-Gel. With the dying of the wind, he quickens his pace. By the Warlock’s Craigie - the feature has been marked by a long-dead Scotch surveyor on the ancient oilskin map Daz carries - a toothless donkey-driver idly relieves himself of bladder-water in a limpid pool. His tribe of mokes drink deep among the splash. Seeing Daz, the driver calls out, in Aramaic, the thirty-third name of God. And Daz the weary atheist hears, pauses, and is refreshed.

The two men approach each other freely. The donkey-driver bundles his circumcised tool into his robe, and Daz, as yet uncircumcised, fishes a battered leather wallet from inside his robe. Daz flips open the wallet. Daz speaks quick and low. He displays its contents under the brilliant moon.
The donkey-driver utters soft, fluttering cries from the back of his throat. Swiftly the two men spit on their right hands, shake, and the bargain is struck. In return for a gilt-edged picture postcard, showing an artist’s obscene impression of Everyman Jack captured in an intriguing honeymoon posture with his bride (who might be called Everybird Jill but is not, for Jack is unmarried and celibate, and the posture in the picture mere conjecture) the donkey-driver consents to spare Daz’s feet the rigours of the pebbled road and bring him, mounted on a patient ass, to the city gates of Too-Ba.

The donkey train sets out at a steady plodding pace, and Daz shrinks into his robes and allows himself to doze.

Fragments of a dream flicker in his medulla cortex, glimpses of his faraway home place, where the track turns to the river, drops, and disappears into the estuary water or estuary mud depending on the tide. Where a steady drizzle, as it might be the fertile seed of Heaven, drips on the heads of his mother, father, and brother, his half-sister Licit, and the ancient family retainer Jip - but not, of course, his Granny, who lies snug as a bug in The Willows, in the junk-tracked arms of Glasgow’s finest citizen, Cunty McFuck. According to his own testimony, Cunty isnae an alky, he’s deet a steady heavy, wi’ a taste fur the broon, a man you don’t meet every day - et cetera - but even so, his familiars soon discover he is not only chemically dependent, but mentally impaired to boot.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding, his fellow Scotchmen love him all the same, by virtue of his being a reliable guide to their sad country’s historic misfortune, a cultural bell-wether. Auld Cunty, the Warlock o’ Cludgie - as they cry him in Scotia - is the last of his clan, unless he elects to go with a lassie more nubile than Granny Barking.

But it’s those lace-trimmed lilacs bind him in thrall. They put hard lead in his Caledonian pencil. Citizen McFuck has recently achieved a sticky coitus with his aged
paramour, and now she sweetly sleeps, while his spermatozoa rummage glumly through her withered parts looking for bargains.

Granny Barking, herself a dream of Daz, dreams first of Daz, always her favourite, and then of Jip. Catching sight of Jip’s bloater, Granny Barking groans, and desperately tries to open a tin of pilchards, for mashing, but her arthritic wrist is giving her grief. She knows that somewhere there are tin-openers specially adapted for arthritic folk, but they are forever not to be found in her dream, nor neither in Daz’s dream, nor in The Willows, where tin-opening is conducted safely by able-bodied carers who follow standard operating procedures, adhering to the strictest protocols.

She consoles herself in tongues, the only Granny in The Willows adept in the post-Babel languages of Europe - along with Turkish, Comanche, and two dialects of Cherokee, not to mention Ancient Hittite, monarch of them all. She finishes with two dirty French ditties, learned from a company of marching legionnaires from the French Foreign Legion, who marched past her trotter stall one balmy May day - viz:- Maman, j’ai le con qui bâille, and L’autre jour, l’idée m’est venue, sacré nom de Dieu, d’enculer un pendu.

Daz listens to the latter song fade in the distance along with the rhythmic tread of legionnaire boots, moving up and down again. The last words he can make out are: j’ai jamais enculé avec autant effort - sacré nom de Dieu, on est jamais content!

How true, especially in such a circumstance!

Daz looks up and spies Granny Barking, standing in the shade of a laurel bush, waving her handkerchief in farewell to the Legion.

Granny sports a wide-brimmed lilac hat, trimmed with tulle and garnished with a peacock’s feather. She wears an astrakhan coat, with a ferret-fur collar and has her back turned to her grandson. Daz reaches out to his Granny with a gentle ghostly hand. He
taps her on the shoulder. She turns to face him - but she has no face, just a skull, grinning beneath the shadow of her hat’s wide brim. Her teeth chatter a greeting.

‘Hello dearie, going my way?’

The 69 ‘bus waits, engine throbbing, by the Cemetery gates. A damseled dulcimer plays. Felt hammers, wielded by supple bangled wrists, strike taut strings of copper and brass.

The jangling fanfare dissolves his enchantment. Daz wakes, with a faint memory of shimmering music. His cheeks are wet from sobbing. He shivers despite the heat, and gathers his robe around him, tight as a shroud.

The donkey-driver ignores the massive bronze gates set in the walls of Too-Ba, where sentries are posted, and takes Daz through a narrow portal, bounded on one side by a pillar of polished ivory and on the other by an amber pillar sheathed in transparent horn. The tiled beauty of its vestibule leads into a fetid alleyway which winds and winds to the heart of the souk. Here Daz parts with his Jehu, and the canny conductor goes on his way, to offer glimpses of the postcard to paying customers who will fork over their drachmas with their right hand while relieving the intense pressure in their Dead Sea Scrolls with the left.

Daz looks casually up and down the alleyway, his gaze taking in the rickety stalls where sellers of camel-tripes haggle with hungry customers amid flurries, storms, and hurricanoes of blackest flies. He sees the open booths in ramshackle buildings where the carpet-knotters squat, biting off yarn with their betel-stained teeth. He sees nothing amiss in the riotous throng and he ducks into the narrow doorway of a coffee shop. The proprietor is on the nod, dozy beneath his fez, but he rouses himself on the entry of the stranger. Daz makes a sign known only to a few good men and true, a flourishing
gesture where he taps his right elbow-pit with his left palm, bringing his right forearm level with his shoulder, forming the initial V of Venal.

‘I’m not feeling myself tonight.’

The proprietor gives the countersign. ‘You’re not feeling me.’

Daz raises an eyebrow. The proprietor taps his elbow in morse code, spelling out:

‘Oh go on - . - . - if you insist.’

‘I do.’ Daz offers his hand. The ceremony of recognition is complete.

The proprietor leers, exposing surprisingly white and plentiful teeth - at a guess, more than his natural entitlement. Teeth are a token of wealth in this country and a man can never have too many. The proprietor points to the far wall. An enamelled panel depicts the coition of Peacock and Peahen before the Peacock Throne. The throne itself is painted with images of the business-from-behind as performed auto-erotically by Zoltan Banjo (an exceptionally lithe Hittite Weather-God of perfect proportion and unbridled licentious appetites). The banner above the throne is a luminous confection in blue, green and gold, and it displays the archetypal Frog-Demon, Um-Ka himself, for whom the country is named, who squats on the posterior of Banana-Shah, the original Peacock. The proprietor encourages Daz to press an emerald eye on the peacock’s tail. The panel springs back. Concealed behind the panel is a narrow spiral staircase.

Daz hesitates before he climbs. The air is hot and sour, tainted with putrefaction. He sets his foot on the first step. The panel closes behind him.

The staircase takes Daz to a narrow landing, lit by guttering candles set in a copper sconce and festooned with the loomings of spiders and dust-devils. A dog, dead three days by the stench of it, lies deliquescent in a corner. Daz wrinkles his nose. There are bat-wing doors to be brushed aside. In a long room, whose arrangement reminds Daz of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, stands a plain deal table. Thirteen men sit waiting. Figs and
dates are set out in shallow polished cedar bowls, along with farls of unleavened bread, warm from the oven.

‘So, English, you have come,’ says Achoo-Pa, the undisputed leader. (Undisputed since the last disputee, Aerkun Pablia, was hung from a meat-hook and had his tripes torn out living, and given in charity to the poor of the souk.)

‘Yes, I am come to Um-Ka, the land of the frog-demon, to offer you terms.’

Achoo-Pa breaks bread, sprinkles it with salt, and offers it to Daz. Daz takes the proferred morsel and offers thanks in Aramaic.

‘My pleasure,’ says Achoo-Pa. ‘You come to save us. To save our country from four thousand years of ignorance, feudal sodomy, and oppression by the beast-men who are the acolytes of the frog-demon.’

‘I come to offer you terms, from Everyman Jack and Andy One. Terms which will indeed deliver you from four thousand years of ignorance, feudal sodomy, and frog-demonic oppression.’

‘What are these terms?’

And Daz tells them the terms, which will allow them to break free from four thousand years of oppression by the frog-demon, and concomitant feudal sodomy, but which, unknown to them, will leave them in ignorance, and also deliver the land of Um-Ka, their wives, children and chattels, and above all, their natural (and not so natural) resources, into the blood-stained hands of Everyman Jack and Andy One, whose reptilian masters dwell in tenements, malls, and marble halls, across the western ocean.

They nod agreement. By becoming rebels and treating with the enemy, they put their lives and the lives of their families at risk of torture and execution. They are true sons of real men – men of courage, men of honour. Achoo-Pa, the brave, the heroic, the honourable, speaks.
‘We are willing to risk all, on the good faith of Everyman Jack and Andy One, and the
honour of their emissary, the wise and learned Daz Pasha, Pasha Barking, who knows
our languages and customs so well. But first, as a token of good faith, Daz Pasha, you
must submit to the circumciser’s knife.’

‘Gladly. I was wondering when you’d ask.’

Achoo-Pa and his twelve companions stand. They drink a toast in sherbet to Daz’s
doomed prepuce. Achoo-Pa, with gentle hands, guides Daz to another room, an
operating theatre.

Daz is surprised by what he sees. He has been expecting a stained couch strewn with
greasy rags, and the dull, rusty crescent blade of the snicker-snee, wielded by a
hysterical eunuch. These are present, of course - the eunuch’s hell-cackle is particularly
trying in the wet heat - but around him also are shelves of gleaming hi-tech equipment
whose purpose he can only guess at.

He guesses, correctly, that they are computing machines whose task is to predict the
exact date of the end of the world. The prediction will allow the timely transfer of the
population of Um-Ka in a fleet of gleaming silver ships to the planet Clën, two leagues
beyond Campaspé and three parsecs to the right of Mölqbar in the belt of Orion - if the
technology which might exist at the doom-time should allow.

Daz salaams to the eunuch. The eunuch is deaf, and has been so from birth, the sad
effect of his mother’s rubella. He reads Daz’s lips. He cackles, high and squeaky,
pleased by what he reads. Achoo-Pa tells Daz that the eunuch’s testicles, on the cusp of
puberty, were excised and eaten raw (with a sprinkling of black pepper and squeeze of
lemon for zest) by the Grand Vizier himself, before a crowd of thousands in the Golden
Square of Too-Ba. A man feels it a great honour to be circumcised by this eunuch, the
premier eunuch of Um-Ka. The eunuch is never short of work. You just have to be very
precise in your instructions in case he gets carried away and believes your stones are surplus to requirement.

The eunuch strips Daz of his robe and Daz lies on the couch. The eunuch lifts Daz’s buttocks and slides a pillow under his hips. Madam Jojo, coiled in sleep, wakes and sighs and stretches, and rises to peer around her, the pink-brown head with one glistening eye emerging languid from its hood.

Achoo-Pa signs to the eunuch who proceeds to the preliminary stage of the operation. Sweet-smelling unguents are massaged into the tip of Madam Jojo. She spits bitter flecks.

Daz closes his eyes, and as the snicker-snee begins its spiral cut, he flees through the labyrinth of memory to a hot summer’s day in Junior Academy, when he lay languid on his bed, satiated with self-love, but ripe for auto-erotic repetition nonetheless.

Too-Ba recedes. The Ness comes into focus. Daz hears the buzzing of plump green-bottle flies. They feed and fatten around the local landfill site. Tempted by novel aromas, wayfaring flies buzz happily in the confines of Junior Academy, latching on to the student body and its secretions.

Daz remembers a greenbottle called Buzzlebub the Nomad, such a big-knob in the world of flies, he has no peer. Buzzlebub the Nomad has traversed the crinkled tundra of Daz’s scrotum. After feeding on the colony of mites who make their home among Daz’s stiff hairs, he crawls slowly, replete, along the underside of Daz’s shaft until he reaches the tip of Daz’s foreskin, where he pauses to rest and regurgitate, and lick up the half-digested acid remains of Daz’s recent emission before tackling his smegma dessert and lighting a tiny cigar.

Tempted by the aroma of mashed pilchard (Daz has been experimenting as boys confined within academy walls will do) Buzzlebub stubs out his cigar (‘Ouch!’ says
Daz, wondering what’s the matter) and squeezes himself into the darkness of Daz’s foreskin, enjoying the hot engorging tom-tom beat of Daz’s voodoo blood.

Aware of his uninvited guest, Daz pinches his fingers at the tip of his foreskin and enjoys a sublime and timeless moment.

Trapped, Buzzlebub the Nomad buzzes frantically within, tap-dancing on the bonce of Madam Jojo, as medieval angels might be said to have danced on a pinhead.

Daz swoons as his *petit mort* takes hold, but still retains enough presence of mind to keep the foreskin’s tip pinched tight.

A tide of jissom swells Daz’s foreskin until he feels it will burst, but yet he grips tight, tighter. He joins his soul with the death-struggle of Buzzlebub.

The struggle peaks, bringing Daz to an orgasm of surpassing intensity, before it too subsides with the rapidly expiring lifeforce of the Lord of the Flies.

The eight little legs of *puir wee Buzzlebub*, as Cunty McFuck cries him, waggle faint and feeble as the fly drowns, tuggered by the spunkish vortex into the Halls of Pluto, where the shortling Devil waits.

‘Catch yersels oan,’ sez Cunty McFuck. ‘Were yiz thinking there’s nae flies in Hell? Too hot, even for them, eh? I’m tellin’ yiz there is flies in Hell, buzzin’ awroond the heid o’ Auld Clootie, which is me. And every flyman jack got here the same way.’

As the snicker-snee completes its work, Daz quits his happy memories of Junior Academy, whirls through time and space, and returns to Too-Ba and the sacrifical moment. He wryly reflects that such a fly-blown experience, as he once had with Buzzlebub the Nomad, is now beyond him for ever. He adds his foreskin to the list of sacrifices he has made for the long-suffering people of Um-Ka, for Britannia, Everyman Jack and the wider interests of the Anglosphere whose reptilian masters dwell across the western ocean in tenements, malls, and marble halls of surpassing loveliness.
The Circumciser tears a strip of newsprint from the Lonely Hearts pages of “Circumcision Today!” He wets it with his spittle, and winds it round the bleeding tip of Madam Jojo.

Outraged and affronted, *la belle dame sans merci* has recoiled into a sulk. Daz, now in post-operative delirium brought on by the gangrene raging in his knob, murmurs savage endearments to her. Frothing syrups and anti-bacterial ointments are applied. The gangrene subsides as quickly as it came.

Daz knows it will be some time before Jojo forgives this violation. He must spend time with her - quality time, facetime, not mere lip-service - counselling her and making her comfy with her new appearance: sullen, bald and brutal. He must show Madam Jojo her reflection in an antique mirror in a room with kindly lighting, where the walls are hung with faded tapestries, and a consort of sweet viols plays Adson’s *Courtly Masking Ayres*. There amid the fumes of incense and the chanting of votaries (if they can be found at short notice) Daz will effect the reconciliation between Madam Jojo and her fate.

Above all, his only brother, Erasmus Barrymore Bazzabubba Barking - custodian of a hundred thousand mangels, and as many acorns as there are stars in the sky - must kneel before Jojo and pay homage. Bazzabubba the swineherd must compliment the darling *coquette* on her new appearance, preferably in Ancient Hittite - if he can ever get his cases sorted, and gain mastery over the ablative. Daz makes a Memo to Self to see if a correspondence course in Ancient Hittite can be arranged for his brother - to bring him to a greater degree of competence in the monarch of tongues.

**PHEW!**

We lift our hands to silence the genie. During the tale, Whitelady has become a genie of the female persuasion, with a clean upper lip and handsome pair of marimbas. She
begins to protest at having her narrative cut off, but we’re keen to enjoy our second wish.

‘That’s enough of that. Can we get on with ... you know, the pieces-of-eight and lingerie-clad houri?’

‘As you wish, masters. I don’t remember the pieces-of-eight, but I’ll throw them in for nixes.’

The genie claps her hands. Our wish, being her command, is satisfied twice - the two of us taking it in turns to fill our boots with treasure and each enjoy the other’s sexual fantasy as well as his own - without the sort of trickery and arch meanderings that we have all come to expect from genies in general and female genies in particular.

One wipes one’s clotted jerusalem with squares of The Times carried on an enchanted breeze from a faraway outhouse. One looks around for somewhere convenient to dispose of the evidence. Whitelady takes the crumpled rags, flings them into the air and they vanish. She recalls us to our business. We are not the only ones she has to attend to tonight.

‘Your third wish. What is it to be?’

Cunty McFuck and I incline our heads towards each other and mutter rhubarb. We straighten up and fix our genie with a frank gaze.

‘We wish to return to that point in the story where Barry has recently suffered an exemplary buffeting for daring to usurp - or so it seemed - Pappy Barking’s berth on the crapper, but only if you can arrange it so that neither Wendy nor Granny Barking finds out about our hooly with the houri here tonight.’

‘Correctemundo ... whit he sez ... Wendy, his future bride, and auld Granny Rattletrap, my future bride ... the twa o’ they future brides no’ to be fashed by oor oriental transgressions - that’ll dae nicely, for me and my pal, pal.’
‘Your portmanteau wish is cheeky, masters, nevertheless it is my command. Lo!’

MOURING BECOMES MA BANSOM

Next morning, feeling a bit sore after my buffeting, but surprisingly cheerful, I’m up in good time to catch the charabanc to the University of Debden Broadway. I have an early class in ‘Doughnut Governance’ to attend.

I saunter up the time-worn steps of the varsity and make my way to the staff room corridor, where I pop ‘My Family, My Clan’ into my moral tutor’s pigeon hole. Then I go to the junior common room and look in my pigeon hole, where I find a flyer for the varsity’s new fortune-telling service that will help me plan my future. It’s still early days, but Madam Sosiris will be worth a look, so after Doughnut classes (first, a very entertaining and above all useful lecture on the Regulations as applied to throughput and accruals - followed by a theory test for Doughnut Pilot’s Licence 101) off I trot to the fortune teller’s booth in the varsity funfair.

There’s no queue so I go straight in. The veiled fortune teller is busy directing a scrofulous dwarf who holds a paintbrush and a paintpot. Have I seen him somewhere before? That’s right, yesterday evening at the consecration of the temple. The badge on his lime-green jerkin reads Gandalf. Now he’s putting the finishing touches to a sign.

‘Here, son,’ says Madam Sosiris to me. ‘Prop that up outside the booth, there’s a good chap, and let’s see if we can’t drum up some trade.’

I take the sign from the dwarf, holding it carefully at arm’s length so as not to get wet paint on my freshly laundered smock. The sign shows iconic images of the fortune-teller’s craft - a conical hat emblazoned with stars, a crystal ball, a teacup with a smudge of tea-leaves, a crude representation of an almanac, an outstretched pink palm with black lines drawn across it, and a giggling monkey in a fez, with one hand clutching his tail and the other an outspread fan of playing cards, all hearts and diamonds.
I step outside for a moment, mount the sign on an easel, and go back into the booth. Madam Sosiris the fortune teller is now unveiled and I’m face-to-face with none other than Hardy Ma Bansom of yore. The dwarf crosses himself. He makes a hurried excuse, winks his left eye, and leaves.

‘Hello Barry, long time no see,’ says Ma Bansom. ‘You should know that I’ve given up smoking since we last met. Now I know what damage it can do. I suppose you heard about my clan being incinerated in the Great Fire of Chafford Hundred? If only they’d had the sense to follow Dingwallace Rules, the ones relating to ‘No smoking on the job’, then they’d be alive today. The firemen wouldn’t even let me see their remains, they were so badly disfigured. I suppose it was good of them to dispose of the bodies in a common pit before I got back from Fenwick’s of Bond Street with my sparkling undies – sorry, my lingerie I must learn to say - but I think maybe I should go and dig them up again so I can grieve and mourn properly, what do you say to that, Barry? Perhaps you could give me a hand with a shovel?’

I tell her the firemen know what they’re doing, and if they think it best to spare a survivor’s feelings, then we should honour their expert judgment and leave well alone.

But what I’m really worried about is if the exhumation goes ahead Ma Bansom might notice the gunshot wounds, and the absence of nappers from the corpses of so many of her kinfolk. Luckily, Ma Bansom nods, seeming to accept my argument about the expertise of the fire and rescue service.

‘You’re right, Barry. I have a new life here now. Let the dead bury the dead is what I say. I have a glittering career ahead as a fortune-teller, and I can keep this going with the school inspecting, now that my knickers pass muster. So what’s it be, eh? The cards, the tea-leaves, the crystal ball, the palm, or would you like me to feel your bumps? But that costs extra.’
‘Let’s start with the crystal ball,’ I say, crossing her palm with silver.

‘Right you are,’ says Hardy Ma Bansom, aka Madam Sosiris. She takes the crystal ball down from the shelf and warms it up in her outstretched hands. I watch her with the ball. I marvel at her resilience. She’s lost her whole family, and here she sits, embarked on a new career. She gives me a piercing look and I quail beneath her darting eye. What if she divines that me and Pappy Barking and Dippy are responsible for her misfortune? But then I remember she’s contracted to see into the future, not the past, so that’s all right as I’m not planning to kill any more Bansoms, even if there were any left to kill beyond Ma Bansom herself (or Methuselah Bansom if we could find him). She drapes a black cloth over the crystal ball, passes her hands over it, mumbles an incantation, and then carefully uncovers the ball, folding the cloth and laying it reverently aside.

Ma Bansom gazes into the dome of discovery. She lifts it as a priest lifts the chalice. She swirls it and sniffs. She sets it on the table, and sighs.

‘Barrymore Barking, I see much trouble ahead. First though the good news. Shortly you will have sexual intercourse with a fortune-teller in the public lavatory next to the engineering block, because - ’

I interrupt her.

‘Let’s go and do that now, shall we? I’ve got a groaning bloater to dispose of and I’m panting for a glimpse of your tantalizing knickers.’

‘Actually I could do you in here. I’ll put up the ironic “called away on unforeseen business” sign and we can rut to our heart’s content, without fear of disturbance – although you’re a young man and relatively inexperienced, and I expect your blow-hole will spout rather fast, so it shouldn’t take long. I shan’t lose much custom.’

Then that’s what we do, and Ma Bansom is right, it doesn’t take long, and all too soon the sumptuous frillies are back under wraps.
'I expect you’re feeling a lot better for that,’ said Ma Bansom.

‘Marvellous. Such a relief. Is there any more good news?’

She peers into her crystal ball.

‘Not much. I see a time coming when there will be a great falling-out between you and your brother Daz, over a son yet to be born. You will call your son Little Baz. Little Baz will become both a famous jockey and a world-renowned Mad Scientist. He will ride wearing the racing colours of his sovereign, Andy One, while simultaneously attending Mad Scientist School. While riding, he will perform thought-experiments in his head and rehearse mathematical conundrums. Thus he he will solve the problem of unidirectional human time, and bring to an end the centuries of linear temporal progression, otherwise known as history, which lately has been getting on everyone’s tits.’

‘About time someone did. I was just saying to Wendy …’

‘Ah, Wendy! I was just coming to her. I see you cuckolded by your very own Dark Lady of the Doughnuts.’

‘Never!’

‘Don’t contradict me, please. And there’s more. I see you falsely accused of murdering an Oxford waitron, and I see a time coming when demented Granny Barking will be resident in The Willows. A great war looms, in which your brother Daz will distinguish himself in our country’s secret diplomatic service, and then in cutlass-play with Old Tickler on the unsconced bonces of frog-demons from Um-Ka. I see him putting it about a bit - more than a bit - among the female population of Um-Ka, who will hasten in their droves to be pleasured by the tickling arts of Madam Jojo. I see him holding a severed head – whose I do not know.’

‘Not mine, I hope?’
‘Don’t think so. Daz and Madam Jojo will return home to reap the rewards of service and sacrifice. I see First Class Honours in Ancient Hittite from the University of Oxford, and then rapid promotion for him to the highest office of state. I see the Dauphine of Um-Ka embarking for these shores, accompanied by Phlebas the Phoenician. They come in embassy to Everyman Jack and Andy One, to settle once and for all the Um-Kanian succession, through the union of our royal houses in holy matrimony.’

‘Fair do’s, the Um-Ka succession needs sorting, we’re all agreed.’

‘I see a Master’s in Doughnut Studies for you, so that’s good news I suppose, and I see myself flat on my back, or perhaps on all fours, giving you the opportunity to perform the business-from-behind ... oh, you want to do that now, okay.’

So we do, and I get another glimpse of the heavenly undies of Hardy Ma Bansom.

Fenwick’s of Bond Street is clearly the place to go for lingerie, if you can’t afford Keturah Brown. Then she carries on telling my fortune. She hums and buzzes and strokes the crystal ball. She holds it up and shakes it, then replaces it on the green-baize table.

‘Just a slight problem with reception. It’s still in warranty, so I might take it in later.’

A crackle and hum. Ma Bansom claps her hands.

‘There! Right as rain.’

She coughs, and spits into a handkerchief. She peers into the handkerchief, makes a sour face, then peers into her crystal ball and gazes in silence for a while. She sits back.

‘Beware the one-eyed merchant. She is bound upon a wheel of jellied eels and wishes to bind you also and whirl you and your family through all points of the compass. Beware Belladonna, the Mermaid of the Rocks. She only has eyes for the silver darlings. And if you visit the Inn at the Sign of the Three Staves, then watch out for the press-gang. The danger is that Barrymore Barking will be snatched and dressed in a suit of
blue, to become a most extraordinarily unable seaman. If this comes to pass - which I hope it won’t - Barry will rove over the vasty deep ocean, where he will stick his snorker in an octopus’s … an octopus’s something or other … before disappearing into an opaque white mist. Ah, there he goes … Now all sight of him is lost, and all that remains is the leathery creak and sepulchral groan of the great white sea birds, high in the darkling sky above the Sound of Sleet anent the Kentish Knock.’

Ma Bansom drapes the black cloth over the crystal ball.

‘Is that all there is to tell?’

‘That’s all for now, unless you want to try the cards or the tea-leaves or … ’

‘Go on, read my palm,’ I say and bung her another sixpence. I hold out my hand for inspection.

Ma Bansom peers intently at my palm, and whistles softly.

‘That’s odd. Here it says you will murder an Oxford waitron. What did I say before?’

‘You said I’d be falsely accused.’

‘Perhaps you’ll be falsely accused of something else. It definitely says here that the unfortunate Oxford waitron is down to you. Sorry about that, Barry. Best thing is to stay away from waitrons in general, and Oxford in particular.’

**RETROSPECTIVE**

I shifted in my chair. During the first semester of Doughnut Studies, the University of Debden Broadway had sent me to Oxford on work experience. Something happened in Oxford I wasn’t too proud of – but it wasn’t anything like murder, just caddish behaviour, more the sort of thing you could expect from Pappy Barking and not a gent like me. To cut a long one short, what happened was this :-
I had been lodging in Oxford for six weeks of Hilary Term, at the house of Balliol’s Head Proctor. I was on bed and breakfast terms - plus the gift of family supper, most nights a kipper and cocoa. Out by six in the morning and no return until seven at night. I had plenty to do in the day, relating to my project: a comparative study of waste disposal, an important part of porcine husbandry and Doughnut maintenance. So from morning to night, I researched the college latrines. I cut a dashing figure, dressed in my boiler suit and rubber apron, yellow rubber gloves, and a clothes-peg on my nose. I toted my staff of office on my shoulder – a fine handcrafted cocoaboa lavatory brush, with porcupine-needle bristles. Before me, I trundled my trolley, loaded with bottles of disinfectant, canisters of scouring powder, et cetera. Naughty scholars thirsting for ‘kicks’ sometimes tried to snatch the bottles to drink, and the scourer to snort. Each morning they ambushed me on the turn of the stairs, but I beat them off every time with my bog-brush.

‘Ouch, ouch, you bloody oik!’ they cried as they scarpered, rubbing their well-upholstered um-kas.

In the evenings, I wrote up my ‘log’, about the many lavatories I had cleaned, and reflected on my practice. I illustrated my report with photos I’d taken ‘before’ (vomit and faeces) and ‘after’ (gleaming porcelain you could see your face in and eat trotters off). The Proctor reviewed the pictures and judged how well I had performed. He stamped and initialled my ‘log’ to certify progress.

On Sundays, I was allowed to stop cleaning at half-past one to attend Sunday School (although this meant I had more puke to clean up on Monday morning). After Sunday School, to pass the time until I was allowed back into the Proctor’s house, I went to a cafe for a snack of trotters and ‘tea-and-two’ (tea and condensed milk, two sugars). My last Sunday was a cold day, with a fearful wind blowing up the High. I only had a
sixpence – enough for one cup of tea-and-two, and one small trotter. I knew I would have a hard job spinning those out until closing time.

But the waitron was particularly friendly and she was sweet on me. I told her my predicament, and she looked after me, slipping me a trotter on the sly every now and again with a free cuppa. I got in conversation with a local newspaper reporter, a bumptious young chap called Johnny Tifton. He clearly fancied the waitron, but equally clearly she didn’t fancy him, not that he noticed of course, his type never know where they’re not welcome. As it happened, she only had eyes for me. He tried it on with her, but I got up and told him she wasn’t interested.

‘Who do you think you are, giving me orders?’ he said. I pushed my chair back, stood up and leaned over him.

‘I am Googam, son of Goom!’ Not strictly true, but it shut him up – sounding, as it did, like a belch from the sepulchre.

The waitron brushed past me and whispered ‘Thanks, Googam’. She told me Johnny Tifton had been bothering her for weeks. ‘Googam, you’re my hero,’ she said and I puffed up with pride.

Toward five o’ clock, the cafe door opened and in came three sailors, home on leave and drunk on rum and waving their cutlasses about, yo-ho-ho-high-spirited and no harm in them, but a bit rowdy even for Oxford, and one of them sliced off Johnny Tifton’s ear by accident so the waitron asked them nicely if they could put their cutlasses behind the counter and they cut up a bit rough about that so I asked them politely to asterix-off and leave her alone and next thing I was flat on my back with a busted nose and a sound of glass smashing and a bell ringing and then the bowler-hatted Proctors rushed in mob-handed and trussed up the matelots and Johnny Tifton in a hundredweight of ironware. He was innocent of course, more or less, but that didn’t bother them.
‘It’s the gallows for you, messmates,’ said the Chief Proctor with a cheery grin, polishing his bowler with a black cotton bag. The sailors fell to their knees and begged for mercy. Little Johnny Tifton seemed more concerned with the immediate problem of his ear that he held pinched between a manacled finger and thumb. Downcast and abject he whined for ice, and someone to come and sew his ear back on. I stood up, tilted my head towards the light and the waitron peered into my battered phiz.

‘Like another tea-and-two would you,’ she said, wiping the blood from my snitch with a tea-towel. ‘It was good of you coming to my rescue like that.’

‘Make it a tea-and-three,’ I said. ‘I’ve had a bit of a fright.’

We looked out the window. The Lictor of Balliol wheeled up the portable gallows and the bowler-hatted Proctors saluted him and slung four hooks over the beam. The sailors didn’t seem happy. Johnny Tifton, oblivious to his fate, whined for ice and a surgeon.

‘Would you like to come outside and turn them off,’ said the Chief Proctor, ‘you being the injured party?’

‘Right you are,’ I said - anything to oblige a lawful authority - and swallowed my tea-and-three on the hurry-up.

I followed him out, with the waitron simpering and cooing and doing her best to brush up against me.

The hangees were hooded and noosed, perched a bit wobbly on the scaffold. The nooses were tied with thread in coils below the beam. The Chief Proctor, halfway up a step-ladder, read out the death sentence in a very posh bowler-hat voice, bawling to drown out the sailor on the left who was pleading and crying and moaning about ‘me old mashtub wot lives dahn Lime’ouse way which I shall never see no more forever nor my thirteen nippers – or is it fourteen? - whom I love so dear, even if I have trouble remembering all their names and which is which, who will now be left fatherless, et
cetera’, and then I heaved on the lever that slipped the bolt that dropped the trap that
opened the hole and the plank tipped, and sturdy urchins ran up, swinging on the sailors’
legs in a cheeky sort of way, grinning and jeering. Johnny Tifton was left to swing on his
own and took longer to snuff it. In his agony he dropped his ear, and one of the urchins
ran off with it, waving his trophy and shouting abuse at the Lictor who chased after him.

‘That’s them sailors sorted,’ said the waitron. She took her purple lipstick and
Googam”.

‘Thank you very much for your assistance,’ said the Chief Proctor. ‘They won’t
trouble you again. And with a bit of luck, that’s the last we’ll see of sailors waving
cutlasses in the High and people getting their ears sliced off and noses busted. Word gets
around. Hope you don’t mind me saying, but you don’t half look the spitting image of
the demi-god Daz Barking. I was his loyal scout during his years at Junior Academy. I
used to lay his fire, toast his crumpet, make his bed, and warm the toilet seat for him in
winter. What he didn’t know about Ancient Hittite wasn’t worth knowing. Such a gent -
he taught me a few words of the Old Hittite tongue, so I could talk to his prick.’

‘He’s my younger brother. I also used to talk to his prick.’

‘Then, my noble Lord, you must be the valiant Earl, Erasmus Barrymore Bazzabbubba
Barking, Lord of the Sceptre Wagglers?’

‘The very same,’ I said. ‘Except now you may add “Tartan Duke of the Bonny Isles
o’Clunge” to my titles.’

‘I thought you said your name was Googam,’ said the waitron.

‘Yes, indeed. I am His Vaunted Eminence, Googam Erasmus Barrymore Bazzabbubba
Barking, Lord of the Sceptre Wagglers, and Tartan Duke of the bonny Isles o’ Clunge.’

‘I shall call you Goo for short.’
‘Suits me.’

After ten minutes or so, the bowler-hatted Proctors took down the newly deceased and lately departed, and shunted them over to the crematorium, and I went back with the anonymous waitron to her caravan on the bomb site for a game of Let’s Pretend! (Dingwallace Rules). As you’d do yourself, I gave her a good seeing-to, carefully observing Dingwallace’s prescriptions for lawful fornication in case of emergency when you’re playing away. On reflection, a bit too energetic for the confined space of a worker’s caravan, because I bruised my shin, but it was the Oxford waitron herself who led me on and into the game, whose rules obliged me to do what I had to do, which wasn’t much, and nothing like murder.

At the moment of climax, as part of our game of Let’s Pretend!, she cooed ‘Thrill me, kill me’ - so despite my misgivings at such an odd request, I pretended to oblige with her tights. Later, when we changed the game to Hide and No-Seek, I crammed her giggling under the fold-down bed and pulled down the valance, before running off to Balliol to sup on my kipper and cocoa, and clean my bog-brush in readiness for the morning. As I ran I could still hear her plaintive cry.

‘Googam, my boy, my toy, my joy!’

A QUALIFIED PHRENOLOGIST

‘Had enough now dearie?’ Ma Bansom rubs her crystal ball. ‘You seem lost in thought. Is it something I said? I shouldn’t worry too much. Some is true and some is doubtful, and some is frankly total balls. I never know the difference myself, though perhaps I should.’

‘I wouldn’t mind …’

‘Go on, tell me, I can’t read your mind.’

‘... having my bumps felt by a qualified phrenologist.’
Ma Bansom tousles my hair and says my bumps feel fine to her. I ask her if she’ll make me a present of her tantalizing lingerie.

‘I want a trophy to hang on the wall of my bedroom.’

Madam Sosiris, aka Hardy Ma Bansom, taps her teeth with an HB pencil. Graciously she grants the boon I crave.

‘I expect you to recommend me to all your college chums, though, in return.’

And of course, I do - although I know the increase in custom and the resulting queue will turn my balls blue by the time she gets to me.

**DING DONG MERRILY ON HIGH**

Early on Christmas morning, not much past midnight, I lay in bed, with brother Daz in the bunk above. He was amusing himself translating *Silent Night* into Ancient Hittite. We were waiting for Santa Claus. At last Daz stopped humming, and I could tell by his gentle breathing that he’d fallen into a swoon.

I hearkened to the jingle of bedsprings from the master bedroom, and the shrieks and grunts of Mum and Pappy Barking in the throes of copulation. Santa always came without fail when the grunts stopped. He was too polite to come down the chimney while the rites of love were being celebrated in Hymen’s bower.

My heart ached with longing, full to the brim with what Germans call *heimweh*, a poignant yearning for the home I hoped to have one day with Wendy, the Dark Infanta of perfect proportion - my very own Madonna of the Doughnuts.

The jingles and grunts and sharp cries grew fast and shrill. I pictured the marital act in my mind. It’s true what Goody Clunge says: there is nothing so beautiful in all the world, as the sight of two married people making love.

I longed for the day when I too would perform the marriage act with Wendy my childhood sweetheart, seven nights a week with matinees Wednesdays and Saturdays,
and get it upstairs downstairs all around the kitchen come rain come shine, and not have
to make do with visits to the fortune teller’s booth, nor be forced to snatch a few sordid
minutes with an unwashed salty oyster-shucker - and sloppy seconds too, because Pappy
Barking’s coin will always come down heads even to Doomsday in the afternoon.

True, Licit was still available, but she’d gone all hoity-toity now she was working, and
when I’d had her last - a few hours ago now, on tick, round the back of the sties - she’d
sneered at my budgie-pole and said I wouldn’t even get in the door of the Domedrome
Casino with one so small. I couldn’t understand what she was on about - seven budgies
seems a generous length to me, and I was pretty sure there was no door policy on the
length of a punter’s joyboy. To be honest, I thought she was winding me up. She hadn’t
acted the same towards me since she started charging.

Pappy Barking had promised me a trip to the Domedrome Casino on Christmas Eve as
a reward for all my hard work through the year, but in the end he’d left me out and only
taken Daz to a Happy Fornicator (Pappy Barking = tightwad) for a gobble and dip,
giving the excuse that Daz hadn’t had much in the way of penile maceration while he’d
been away at Junior Academy, where the cleaners – male and female - were out of
bounds on account of their sores and chancre - which was fair do’s maybe if that sort of
thing bothers you - and anyway Pappy Barking had been collecting sex-coupons from
‘Doughnuts Today!’ , so the Fornicator was as good as free.

*But which would you rather be doing?*

Would it be:

A:- feeding mangel-and-acorn to Baco and Ham and then shagging your half-sister on
tick while leaning up against a feed-hopper in the pissing cold rain with your slurry-
stained keks around your ankles?

Or:
B:- getting yourself seen-to by an Orient Princess for minted coin, in the luxurious surroundings of the Domedrome Casino, as befits a perfumed gentleman - on production of one of Pappy Barking’s home-made vaccine chitties?

I gazed longingly at Ma Bansom’s frillies hanging on the wall beside my University penant. The beast with five fingers, my smooth and unctioned hand, began to stir and stray towards my fork. *Down, wanton, down!*

Daz called out wildly in some dream of heroic action, then swooned back into the arms of Morpheus the Greek. My mind was in a whirl. I was half-disgusted with my life. Surely the days of shagging my sister, and then beating my orphan bloater, must be coming to an end?

In the meantime, let the five-fingered beast wander where he will!

I took down Ma Bansom’s frillies and swaddled my heartache in cool satin.

**BASTE MY BLOATER**

What I craved was Wendy, my Dark Madonna, to love me and cherish me and baste my bloater, and bring forth good breed, two of each - two sets of twins, or one of quads, or four singletons, I wasn’t fussy, as long there were two with knobs on, two without.

In years to come, our happy breed might lie in the dark, ears out on stalks, straining to catch the frantic rhythm and jingle of their parents’ lovemaking, knowing the beautiful and primal truth: that it was this - the business-from-behind (or possibly the front, but not back-to-front or upside down) - which sparked their conception.

Bathed in the grace of the primal moment, they would hear the sharp cry of their soon-to-be father, the noble Lord Barrymore, as he hotly ejaculated for the umpteenth time that night and day and night, world without end, amen.

They might thrill to the satisfied moan of their blessed mother, Wendy Madonna, as she gave thanks for the drenching benison of her husband’s ejaculate.
The jingle of bedsprings would at last subside, and in would come Santa, miraculously. He would be waiting politely on the roof for the business to be finished, as indeed he was waiting patiently now.

A PRIAPIC WONDER FROM THE NORTH POLE

Post-coital parents snored upstairs, snug in the grip of Morpheus the Greek. Santa scrabbled down the chimney, and in a trice he was in our room, bringing a cloud of soot with him. I pretended to be asleep and watched through half-shut lids.

I prized the bulge in his keks. Seven budgies, at a rough guess, on a par with me. I wondered if he got much of a chance, in the land of the midnight sun, to do the business-from-behind in the manner prescribed. There was a Mrs Christmas, so they said, but she was perpetually afflicted with a headache from glue fumes in the elves’ workshop, and maybe Christmas Eve was Santa’s only chance to be off the leash, and put it about a bit. Clearly, Mum and Pappy’s devout orisons had aroused him, and he had been frotting himself in preparation for a joust to come.

Santa left a sack beside the hearth and clambered back up the chimney. I heard him crawling through the flue on the way to Granny Barking’s bedroom. A moment or two later there was a loud cackle from Granny Barking and then what sounded like the beginnings of the business-from-behind, as lovely Granny Barking stripped off her lilac drawers, got on all fours, and presented her rump to the bearded priapic wonder from the North Pole. In all my nineteen years, this had never happened before. From afar, I heard omnilingual Granny Barking shout, ‘Vidi, vici, veni’, and then a chortling, almost choking sound, as Santa Claus coughed and gasped, ‘Et ego!’

I heard ‘ho ho ho’, and ‘Merry Christmas! God bless us one and all’, and ‘Put your lilac drawers back on and make yourself decent’, and then, with a tinkle of sleigh-bells, Santa was gone for another year, back over the Ness, out towards the manifold
Doughnuts of the world, to bring joy to every child, and a generous length to many a
desperate granny.

I lay quiet for a time savouring the throb of my bloater, but when I could no longer
contain myself, I shuddered, then rose up in dudgeon to fling Ma Bansom’s saturated
frillies in the wash basket. I crossed the room to get first dibs on the sack.

‘Ahoy, turd-face,’ came the languid baritone drawl I knew so well. ‘Belay the sack
opening, there’s a good chap.’

‘Mum said we can open it when we like,’ I said, turning to Daz, who was now sitting
on the edge of the bunk with his pyjama bottoms round his ankles, caressing the hooded
forehead of Madam Jojo. Her glistening eye peeped from her cowl as if she were a shy
monocular nun. Madam Jojo gently stirred, waving like some underwater frond, a
submarine Venus fly-trap.

‘Before we open the Santa sack, there’s something you have to do,’ said Daz.

‘What’s that?’

‘Say Merry Christmas to La Jojo, haw haw.’

‘Merry Christmas La Jojo, ha-ha!’

‘Don’t be arch. Say it like you mean it.’

This sort of thing had been going on since Daz came home for good from Junior
Academy to await the results of his scholarship exam for Balliol. Licit didn’t care if I
said diddly to her snatch, but every night Daz demanded I say goodnight to Jojo, which I
did to keep the peace - and admittedly it was an education, because when we were
children Daz taught me to say goodnight to his not-so-little pet in all the languages of
the Eurasian land mass, and then some.

‘Say it in Ancient Hittite. It’s easier to fake sincerity in the monarch of tongues,’ said
Daz.
‘Twantes, Jojo, la dracu Christmas. Pahwar mekis tekusami, letiv nak-nak.’

‘Yes, that’s good - but needs improvement. We’ll work on your pronunciation later.’

‘With all due respect, being able to say goodnight and Merry Christmas to my brother’s prick in Ancient Hittite is of limited value towards my looming final assessment in Doughnut Studies.’

‘Don’t be so narrowly focused on the vocational,’ said Daz. ‘Sekweni adanzi genu ne-wet?’

‘Yukanmalai septamiya.’ You know, I think I’m getting the hang of this.’

I felt a surge of self-esteem.

‘Your ablative is screwed,’ said Daz.

Daz hitched up his pyjamas and jumped down.

‘Give it here,’ he said, pointing to the sack.

I dragged the sack over. Together we upended it and tipped out two smaller sacks, one labelled DAZ and the other HIS VAUNTED EMINENCE AND ROYAL GRACE, GOOGAM ERASMUS BARRYMORE BAZZABUBA BARKING IV, TARTAN DUKE OF THE BONNY ISLES O’ CLUNGE, LORD OF THE SCEPTRE-WAGGLERS, BY THESE TITLES HERE PRESENT, ETC.

Soon we surrounded ourselves with crumpled wrapping paper, tangles of string and crumbs of sealing wax. But as treasure after treasure was revealed, each of us became more interested in what the other had gained from Santa’s visit. The lure of our own booty palled. I fancied Daz’s monocle. He wanted my drum.

‘That drum is mine,’ said Daz.

1 “Sweet dreams, Jojo, happiness to your sheets, and have a very merry Christmas, with knobs on.”
2 “Don’t you think my little pet is handsomely endowed?”
3 “I get seven-up on mine.” (i.e. budgies.)
I fended him off with an open palm. I strung the drum around my neck, and marched across the room banging out a lively paradiddle. I turned and marched back. Daz was unwrapping a funny-shaped parcel - a glistening golden trumpet. I stood still, ceased banging, and laid my sticks on the drumskin.

‘You’ve got the horn,’ I said, a plaintive warble in my voice.

Daz pursed his lips, lifted the trumpet to his perfect embouchure and blew loud and shrill.

‘Let’s swap,’ I said, so we swapped over and Daz banged and I blew. But my embouchure wasn’t as well-formed as Daz’s and my notes were brittle and soon they cracked.

The noise woke Jip, who barked, setting off Baco and Ham, who snorted and snuffled and whined like there was a selection going on.

We must have woken Mum and Pappy Barking because the bedsprings renewed their jingle, and shrieks of ecstasy howled reverberating through the chimneys and flues of the old house, until the whole building resonated like a phantom pipe organ playing an apocalyptic fugue.

Granny Barking was part of the new soundscape. We heard her clumping downstairs in her bone clogs and into the old nursery adjoining our room. These days it was given over to storage. It boasted sacks of mangel-and-acorn, flour and sugar, jars of jam, marmalade, chutney and pickle, canned vegetables, what-have-you. We heard her rattling the jars, and then talking quietly to our old rocking-horse (also called Jojo, and very much a stallion) who lived there in retirement. Then we heard her mount up, and the creak of frantic rocking as Jojo’s rockers slid across the floor, forward and back in the limited space, while panting Granny Barking took her pleasure. She shrieked ‘Jojo,
Jojo, je me vais faire enculer par les Sénégalais!\(^4\) and we heard the neighs and whinnies of Jojo himself as he flung Granny Barking from off his back and reared over her with his broomstick pizzle rampant. Granny Barking cried out ‘Ah, mais ça suffit, Jojo, je vous en prie.\(^5\)

But Jojo was clearly in no mood to spare Granny Barking his full impact, and the next we heard was the eldritch shriek of our francophone grand’mère as she was forcefully penetrated by the circumcised and unsanded but luckily vaselined member of Jojo the faithful rocking-horse - erstwhile companion of our rosy infant hours. The rockers of Jojo slowed and fell silent. We heard fitful sobs.

‘Do you think we should go and see if she’s all right?’

Daz nodded. He placed a warning finger to his lips.

Silent we crept into the corridor. We pushed open the door of the nursery and shone our torches round the walls. Jojo’s painted rump seemed beaded with sweat. Granny Barking lay between his rockers. She was breathing fast, her chest heaving and heart pounding.

‘Are you fit, Granny Barking?’ said Daz. ‘I hope naughty Jojo didn’t force himself on you? That would be wrong and unacceptable behaviour, perhaps even criminal. He is a caution, though, isn’t he?’

Granny Barking twitched and sat up. She groped for a jar of pickled onions - with difficulty, because one of her contact lenses had fallen out in the hurly-burly.

‘I’ve lost a lens, but otherwise right as ninepins, and buffed to a shine.’ She said this with a grin, sighting carefully with her one good eye and screwing the top off the jar. The pungent smell of pickled onions filled the room.

\(^4\) “Jojo, Jojo, I intend to have myself fundamentally pleased by the Senegalese!”

\(^5\) “Ah, but that’s enough now, Jojo, I beg you!”
‘This is one of the best Christmases I can remember. First of all, I had sexual intercourse with Santa Claus. He knows how to treat a lady. Then Cunty McFuck, my invisible Glaswegian friend, kent ah wiz lang syne gaggin’ furrit⁶, and he had himself reincarcerated in your old rockinghorse, Jojo. Auld Cunty, the Warlock o’ Craigie, as they cry him in Scotia, has given me a richt sauncy seein’-tae⁷. Now all I need is a pickled onion.’

My torch played over her shining face. Tears of crypto-Caledonian joy ran down, channelled within a delta of wrinkles. I thought of the canals of Mars viewed through a home-made telescope - the sort you could easily improvise from a contact lens, the cardboard tube of a toilet roll, and the bottom of a pickled-onion jar. Face-powder dammed the flow of tears here and there. I knelt beside her and fished a cocktail stick from the jar of pickles that Granny Barking was now balancing on her head.

‘I love a pickled onion after a good seeing-to,’ said Granny Barking.

‘Yes, Granny Barking, you said.’

I scraped the powder from her wrinkles with the cocktail stick and let her joyful tears flow free.

A FESTIVAL OF LESSONS AND CAROLS

The vicar arrived on his bicycle to take the Yuletide service and rededicate the Temple of Venus Aphrodite to Cottyto, a Thracian moon-goddess of unparalleled licentiousness. Pappy Barking wanted to transfer our allegiance to Cottyto because, in his own words, ‘She puts it about more, see? She will bring us plenty cargo, and more luck with the business-from-behind. Venus Aphrodite is showing her age. I asked her for a new telly but nothing turned up, and Ham’s last litter was two shoats down.’

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⁶ “[He] knew I had been anxious to engage in sexual intercourse for some considerable time”
⁷ “a jolly wholesome ‘seeing-to’”
We had new blood in the congregation, Thoth and Theuth Tertius and others from the flying-saucer community - as well as the usual family crew. Dippy Barking and his missis were there in their Sunday best (tangerine satin frillies for the missis, and best blue-serge uniform with campaign medals and Sunday helmet for Dippy) and Wendy and her Aunt Josephine (both very fetching in lemon-yellow satin frillies, apricot lace garter belts, and sheer nylon stockings).

Daz and me pushed the harmonium over from the house so Granny Barking could pump and wheeze. For an overture she improvised a lurid fantasia on a selection of the better-known melodies from Gounod’s *Faust*. We clapped and gave her a standing ovation, so she took an encore - a medley of songs from Balfe’s *Bohemian Girl*. When we came to the carols our congregation’s singing was full-throated, with Granny Barking coming into her own as a sensitive accompanist, holding back on the poignant bits. At the crescendo, *shuh gi’ed it laldy*, as Cunty McFuck said later.

‘Dearly beloved.’ The vicar began the first Lesson. I glanced at Jip, who crouched at my feet with his tongue lolling out. The vicar went on to explain why we we’re all here, which was handy, as it’s always been a mystery to me.

Mum sang a medieval Bulgarian carol, standing in the middle of a diorama of the ancient stable where Cottyto was born. The Infanta Cotytttto lay in effigy with a Thracian swineherd, having-it-away in a manger, alongside carved representations of her original parents. According to the Breed Book, ‘*these be Baco and Ham*’. Their graven images were captured pursuing the business-from-behind in a most life-like manner. Holly wreaths adorned their snouts. In the corner, by the dung-heap, a priapic wax donkey, crowned with laurel and mistletoe, waited his turn with Cottyto.

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8 “she laid into it”
A tear welled in Pappy Barking’s vulture eye. He uttered guttural croaks as the plaintive and choking sincerity of Mum’s grating alto wrenched his heart up into his throat. He was so overcome with emotion that he unlaced his keks, the better to share his Yuletide log with her, there in the stable, among the icons of our faith. Mum kept singing on-key throughout the operation, which gained a hearty round of applause when Pappy Barking finally tipped his sack with a ghastly moan.

Licit swiftly hoisted the vicar’s chasuble, hopped on him, and with her legs wrapped round his trim waist, screwed her monstrance on his stiff pyx.

‘Naughty vicar,’ said Missis Dippy, tickling his stones with a feather from her hat.

‘You were gagging for it all the time. That’ll be monkeys in the poor box. We pay for our pleasure round here because there’s limits to what you get free, especially if you go with a pro. Give us thirty-nine, that’s the going rate for Licit, tax paid.’

The vicar groaned, ‘Diabolus fecit ut id facerem.’

Dippy unslung his truncheon, and waggled it in turn at Pappy Barking, Daz, and me, to get our attention. He pointed the truncheon at Missis Dippy, meaning, ‘Help yourselves’, so we honoured his offer and formed an orderly queue, with me taking up the rear, and then taking it bug-eyed up the um-ka as Constable Dippy, Sunday helmet tipped over his eyes, expressed the strong bonds of masculine kinship he felt towards our branch of the clan – me in particular – and then it came to my turn to satisfy Missis Dippy’s desire for fellowship, which I did in fine parade-ground style, while Daz got on with titting Mum up, and Pappy Barking put her to the seasonal.

Meanwhile, Wendy and her auntie occupied themselves with looking through the order of service. Aunt Josephine scanned down the page with a wagging finger, stopping near

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9 “Give us a hand, Satan old bean, by getting on with the business behind me”
the bottom and drawing Wendy’s attention to what it said - and then indicated Jip, who was panting patiently beside her.

Auntie winked at Wendy and then took Jip behind a convenient pillar to show him a good time.

All of which left Wendy a bit out of things, but she reached in her satchel for a copy of De Sade’s classic *120 Days of Sodom* and read in a bored manner, as if she were waiting for the dentist.

The service was drawing to a close, but not before our lawfully ordained vicar delivered a sermon on how we must heed the terrible fate of the Bansom clan, and follow the precepts of Rear Vice Admiral of the Blue, Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN, and be specially careful about smoking on the job.

We had a final hymn, in praise of the voluptuous curves and love-box of Cotytto, our Thracian moon-goddess of unparalleled licentiousness. Pappy Barking led the tribute, in the manner of a sea-shanty, with himself singing the lead and the rest of the crew shouting hearty responses.

Daz blew on his bosun’s whistle and piped the service to its *consummatum est*.

The vicar hurried outside ahead of the congregation, to take up his station by the door. He touched hands with us as we left the Temple. When he touched mine, he shuddered and wiped his fingers on his chasuble. Pappy Barking whispered ‘Jip’ in his ear, and the vicar shook his head. Pappy Barking scowled. He seized the reverend gentleman by the shoulders and forced him down on his knees to have a chat with Jip, and shake his paw, which we all thought was a lovely thing for the vicar to do. It showed real care for his flock, because a three-legged dog isn’t always high on a vicar’s priorities, especially at the festive season.
Pappy Barking put him in a half-nelson, and we frog-marched the vicar to the poor box, to donate what was left of his cash, and then he was off on his bicycle with a cheery wave, flying down the road at a rate of knots with his chasuble stowed in the pannier and his soutane flapping in the breeze.

GRUB’S UP

We gathered round the festive board. After a short grace, given by Pappy Barking, we all tucked in, except for Daz who was getting picky over his food these days and causing Mum concern. He sat there, idly cleaning wax from his ears with the tip of a bayonet and wiping it on the tablecloth.

Mum staggered from the kitchen, carrying a platter piled high with food. She put it down on the sideboard and got on with loading each dinner plate with a delicious combination of pizza, pork chop and boiled potatoes. In the centre of the dining table, she set a tureen of hot semolina sauce, shiny with a slick of butter-scum. Daz made a gagging noise.

‘Golly, Mater, I’m not eating that, it’s rancid,’ he drawled.

‘But you used to love semolina sauce slicked with butter-scum. What’s come over you?’

‘Nothing, nor nobody, has come over me, as you so quaintly put it. I may have liked semolina sauce slicked with butter-scum once, but I don’t like it now. It looks like something from Outer Space. In fact, it resembles the mashed brains of that unfortunate girl ... What was her name ...?’

‘Mobius Tertius,’ said Wendy, ever helpful. ‘From Clön.’

‘Yes, the mashed brains of Mobius from Clön - but thankfully without the maggots, there’s a blessing at least. And don’t you feel, Mater, that your combination of pizza, pork chop and boiled potatoes is syntagmatically inept? Combining pork chop with
boiled potatoes, rather than sautée or mash, is perhaps within a paradigm of possibility, even if semolina slicked with butter-scum renders the whole ensemble a trifle *de trop*. However, the addition of pizza is vulgar beyond belief. And thoroughly unseasonal. *N’est-ce pas?*

‘There’s nothing wrong with my meat and two veg,’ whimpered Pappy Barking, suddenly out of sorts.

I suspected our father was temporarily confused, and perhaps a little in awe of Daz, now that his Number Two Son, having graduated *summa cum laude* from Junior Academy, was destined for the highest academic honours, and could expect to be having his patina buffed by complaisant dons, and his lavatory seat warmed by deferential Balliol College scouts any day now. (The scholarship offer had arrived on the morning of Christmas Eve.)

If it had been me who cast aspersions on Mum’s semolina, I could have expected a clip round the ear from Pappy Barking and a double shift of gruelling mangel-and-acorn duties. Not that I would ever cast aspersions, because semolina sauce slicked with butter-scum, sliding down your gullet, is the nearest thing to heaven on earth, especially when seasoned with Mum’s love.

Granny Barking bared her lips and took out her teeth so she could drink a cupful of semolina butter-scum down in one draught without getting the sludge in her dentures. She rinsed her mouth out and popped her teeth back in, to tackle the chop.

‘I think you’re supposed to pour the semolina sauce over the pizza,’ said Daz – unhelpful, I thought. What was it to him how his Granny drank her semolina butter-scum, especially as all he was doing was sipping dainty-like from a glass of mineral water? I kept quiet but Wendy said sharply, ‘Don’t be so prescriptive, Daz, and show
some respect for age’, and this got Missis Dippy and Mum on the subject of Methuselah Bansom, the oldest of old men.

‘I’m sure he’s around somewhere,’ said Mum.

‘It’s difficult to know exactly where and when to look for the Old Man, with everything being so linear in the temporal stakes,’ said Missis Dippy. ‘If all time was eternally present to inspection, it would be a doddle.’

‘Bang on,’ I said. ‘But a solution to linear temporality is at hand. A fortune teller has prophesied I’ll bring forth good breed with Wendy, namely a son. We will call him Little Baz. When he graduates from Mad Scientist School, he will solve the problem of linear temporal progression once and for all.’

‘In the dreams of thy youth, turd-face,’ said Wendy.

I was hurt, but magnanimously I took no notice, because what’s written by Fate is underwritten by Destiny, and you can’t buck either, even if you try, and I knew – even if Wendy didn’t - that our son would solve the problem of linear temporality that’s lately been getting on everybody’s tits, especially Missis Dippy’s ample milkers.

‘A fortune-teller, eh?’ said Dippy Barking, booming out from underneath the huge dome of his Sunday helmet. ‘You used to see a lot of them around, but you don’t so much any more since we opened the crematorium over at Gravesend.’

‘Have another ladleful of semolina slicked with butter-scum,’ said Mum.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ said Dippy. He turned to his wife. ‘Missis, how are you off for semolina?’

‘I think I’m replete. What’s the next course?’

‘It’s a surprise,’ said Mum.
AN AVALANCHE OF MASHED PILCHARDS

The next course was a trencher adorned with various fragrant dishes – a swamp of meat stew in a panikin, with dumplings floating; savoy cabbage braised with onions; spaghetti wrigglers on a bed of rice and goober peas; grilled bacon and fried eggs; black puddings and white puddings; haslet and brawn; a slab of pungent headcheese; baked beans and griddled tomatoes; a Matterhorn of snorkers; a blizzard of creamy mashed potato and a pyramid of roastsies; a wicker basket of crispy chips – and, seething in an enamel basin, an avalanche of mashed pilchards for Jip.

‘I grilled some extra rashers and broiled the snorkers in case you missed breakfast,’ said Mum to Dippy.

‘Lawks, what a treat,’ said Dippy, laughing. ‘How did you know we missed breakfast?’

‘By the twinkle in Missis Dippy’s eye,’ said Mum.

HE’S NOT BEEN TO A FORNICATOR BEFORE

Our celebration feast came to an end, and we adjourned to the parlour to open the family presents under the tree.

Dippy gave the Missis some new lingerie straight from Santa’s diplomatic pouch, and she gave him a voucher for a good time, redeemable at a Happy Fornicator before the turn of the year.

‘He likes a bit of strange,’ said Missis Dippy. ‘And he’s not been to a Fornicator before.’

‘Don’t they all like a bit of strange?’ said Mum. ‘Men are such cautions. They only want one thing, bless them - and we and our gossips are sitting on it.’

‘Oh you are a one,’ said Missis Dippy, wriggling her bottom.
‘I hear glad tidings of the Fornicator,’ said Mum. ‘I’m partial to the odd bit of strange myself.’

‘Oo, what does Pappy Barking say to that?’

‘Pappy Barking approves, don’t you, love?’

He nodded and said, ‘What I’d like best of all just now if I had the chance, is to watch a gang of darkie milkmen at it with Mum, led by Goldtop Ron himself, a ten budgie man of impeccable pedigree. That would make a nice change. But I’m happy to watch anybody. Mum’s given me this lovely new spyglass, so you might see me up the tree in your back garden one of these nights.’

‘The more the merrier,’ said Missis Dippy. ‘Can’t promise any darkie milkmen, they don’t deliver round our way, although there’s talk of them starting up - but I’ll leave the curtains open, and you can score Dippy and me out of ten, according to Dingwallace’s taxonomy.’

‘I should say you, Missis, are a perfect ten,’ said gallant Pappy Barking. ‘Can’t say the same for old Dippy, though,’ he added, making mischief and coming it a bit previous as only he’s allowed to do. He nudged Dippy and said slyly, ‘Six-up, eh?’, referring to Dippy’s handicap in the budgie stakes. Dippy kept a dignified silence.

The best part of the next hour was taken up with passing presents back and forth, which I won’t go into much, except to say that Wendy gave me a back-issue of ‘Doughnuts Today!’ an edition I owned already, and a feed catalogue with last year’s mangel-and-acorn prices that she’d filched from the magazine rack by the telly. She gave Daz a first edition of Dingwallace’s *Guide to the Antediluvian Sex-cults of Asia Minor*, illuminated on vellum in the rarest precious inks by the monks of Saint Otto on the Isle of Grain, and bound in hand-tooled blue leather - which was the only book on the subject he hadn’t read, or so he said. (I think he lied to spare Wendy’s feelings.) Daz
gave Wendy a handsome framed photograph of Madam Jojo rampant, which she immediately kissed, and I gave her a handsome framed photograph of Jip squatting to do his ca-ca, which she held at arm’s length, scrutinising it down the length of her nose.

‘Thank you, Barry dear. That’s very touching. I’ll hang him in our outhouse - an inspiration for those costive moments. Would that be all right with you, Auntie?’

‘Stick it up wherever you like, so to speak,’ said Aunt Josephine, casting a lascivious eye on Pappy Barking’s enormous holstered weapon. She reached out with her claw, her eager fingers ready to clutch at Pappy Barking’s lycra-sheathed codpiece.

‘Steady on there, Auntie,’ said Pappy Barking, noticing her interest. ‘We haven’t had the Queen Mum’s speech yet. Then maybe we could have a threesome while old Dippy has a nap with his Sunday helmet over his face.’

The last gifts to be given, as family tradition required, were the tributes from her grandsons to Granny Barking.

‘I hope you like my present, Granny Barking,’ I said. ‘It’s a presentation box of laxative suppositories.’

‘Very thoughtful of you, Barry. In fact, the only gift that would make me happier is the head of that leprous syphilitic two-shekel crack-house whore, Hardy Ma Bansom, delivered to me on a plate.’

‘Funny you should say that, Granny Barking,’ said Daz. ‘Because here’s my gift to you.’ And he handed her a hatbox.

Granny Barking whimpered with expectation. She untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. Inside was a bloodstained calico bundle, tied with string. Off came the string, and Granny Barking tore the calico to reveal a severed head, wearing a dishcloth turban, and with a cigarette stuck between the lips.
‘Why, truly, ’tis the severed head of not-so-hardy-now Ma Bansom,’ said Granny Barking, happy as a dog with four legs. ‘Daz, you shouldn’t have – but I’m so glad you did.’

‘I’ve done her up the way you remember her,’ said Daz. ‘She was wearing a fortune teller’s scarf when she had the misfortune to meet me, so I restored her to her former school-inspecting glory, just for you, the best Granny in all the world. Savour the sweetness of revenge, thou Matriarch of Matriarchs.’

‘Hardy Ma Bransom’s decapitation completes unfinished business,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘But how did you manage it, son?’

‘I joined a queue. It was a bit slow moving but worth the wait. Barry knows what I’m talking about.’

Indeed I did. So that was one avenue of relief blocked off for all eternity. Who would Barry get to feel his bumps now?

‘Let’s keep the napper on the sideboard,’ said Granny Barking, ‘until it begins to turn black and fester. Then we can stick it on a pole outside the sties and let it rot down as a warning to any school inspector who has the temerity to step this way.’

‘Oh Granny Barking,’ said Mum, ‘you are a caution. But we would have the environmental health round. What I think is the best thing to do, is for Barry to stick it in the boner right away, so we can have extra pungent headcheese for Boxing Day. Then we can mount the polished skull on the harmonium as a memento of the happiest Christmas ever. I could put some tea-lights inside.’

So off I went, mumbling and grumbling, to do the business as required.

The light in the Doughnut was dim and green, on account of Christmas and us needing more power in the house, and it gave the old workplace a kind of boutique-bistro feel.
The wind blew through the tear in the skin, setting the lanterns swinging. Waves of light and shadow chased each other, playful and flirtatious, across the inner wall of the torus.

I set the head of Ma Bansom on the edge of the sluice. I sat down on a bench, facing her. One thing puzzled me. Where did Daz get the cigarette? None of us Barkings have ever been stupid enough to smoke.

‘It was mine,’ croaked Ma Bansom. Her voice was faint, but she sounded surprisingly cheerful, given her situation. ‘I’d started smoking again. I really thought I’d cracked it, but one day the college chaplain came in. The Reverend wanted to do it naughty, in contravention of Dingwallace rules, so, God forgive me, I let him ride me high while he was smoking a cigar the size of a rolled-up carpet. And that was it - I was back on the fags before you could say ‘bless-me-father’. Skull-fuck me, why don’t you, for auld lang syne? I can see you want to.’

‘Not fussed, really, without your tantalizing undies. Dishcloth turbans don’t really do it for me … oh, okay then, anything to oblige. There’s a trade calendar of a lingerie-clad lovely on the wall over there, she should get me going. Let’s see … Yes, done the trick. Let me put your cigarette on the side.’

I took it from her lips, and obliged her for old time’s sake.

‘Thanks, son. I needed that.’

‘No problem. Here’s your fag back. You’ve done me a few favours in the past. I’m sorry about Daz doing what he did to your head. And I’m sorry for your family - Grandpappy Bansom, Jed with his shredded jerusalem, and Sally and all the others, especially the nipper and his calico nappy. I didn’t want to get involved, but you know what Pappy Barking’s like. He’s difficult to refuse at any time, but when his dander’s up and feudin’ time is nigh, there aint no telling him.’
Perhaps it’s all for the best. Like you say, it was a feud, that’s all. Win some, lose
some - maybe in another life, the Bansoms will triumph.’

I have to say that’s a very generous attitude. Your decapitation has helped make
Granny Barking’s Christmas the best she’s ever had.’

I leaned close to Ma Bansom’s ear and whispered.

I’ve been a bit concerned lately that she isn’t in her right mind.’

Ma Bansom’s eyelids drooped and closed. The cigarette spontaneously ignited. Smoke
billowed from her nostrils, mouth, ears, and the stump of her neck. I waited until it was
smoked down and she’d spat out the butt. Then I whisked off the turban, grabbed her by
the hair, and popped the head in the boner. As I set the controls for headcheese, she was
muttering something from inside the drum, but I couldn’t make out what it was. I put my
ear to the boner.

‘Beware the one-eyed merchant!’

‘Yes, will do. Ta ta.’

The boner whirred and whined. I sat down to wait, with the copy of “Doughnuts
Today!” that Wendy had given me. True, I’d read it before, but you can always find
something fresh and new when you go back over. And I hadn’t done the crossword.

DON’T SPEAK WITH YOUR MOUTH FULL

Two clues short of a solution, I gave it up and went back in the house with the skull,
now nice and clean. Everyone was gone except for Daz.

‘They decided to give the Queen Mum a miss for this year. They’re out in the Temple
having an orgy.’ He yawned.

‘They’re very quiet about it.’

‘It’s bad manners to speak with your mouth full.’

I stood the skull on the harmonium, and placed a sprig of mistletoe between the teeth.
PRESENT ... TENSE

Daz shrugs. He tells me to switch the telly on. Up comes the Queen Mum, led to the A-frame by Andy One and strapped into position by Everyman Jack himself. The string quartet of the Royal Marines begins to play a selection of old English airs, accompanied by Everyman Jack on his kazoo. They finish with ‘What shall we do with the drunken sailor?’ while a file of outrageously-endowed rum-sodden matelots perform the business-from-behind on the royal sit-upon.

Everyman Jack holds an artfully distressed parchment scroll in front of the sincerely distressed Queen Mum’s face and tells her to get on with it. She clears her throat and tells us that yet another war is coming, and it is high time to sort out the beast-men and frog-demons of Um-Ka. If they aren’t sorted, we’ll all be fucked. But now that her son has put the realm in the capable hands of Everyman Jack - the best Homeland Controller this side of the Ness - everything will be sorted, and all manner of things shall be well, be well, be well. Oh, just one thing: the Royal Navy needs volunteers, so take a gander at these majestic ships riding at anchor in Plymouth Sound.

Cutaway to the hulls, masts, sails, and funnels of our finest vessels, with the flagships of the Blue Division and the Red (HMS Front Bottom and HMS Back Passage) riding high among them. All vessels offer berths to lads of spunk - jolly tars who will grapple with the enemy, and take their rightful share of prize money, and have all the back-passage and front-bottom they can handle, and then some.

Cutaway to happy hairy-arsed matelots on a beach, with bloodied cutlasses raised, each holding a severed Oriental head by the hair. Headless bodies, hands tied behind, litter the sand.
The Lictor of Balliol pirouettes alongside the line of cheerful executioners. He has one hand on his hip, elbow bent. His other arm juts out like a teapot spout. A handbag dangles. He holds a long onyx cigarette holder. The scrolling subtitles tell us the Lictor smokes nothing but the finest Balkan tobacco, rolled into the luxury cigarettes with the three gold bands and made specially for him by Morley of Jermyn Street. He takes the holder to his mouth and spouts twin smoke-jets through his nostrils. He waves to the Queen Mum. The Queen Mum waves back as best she can, limp-wristed.

‘I fancy her better when she’s not tied up,’ I say. Daz shakes his head, it’s all the same to him, any port in a storm. We watch telly in silence for a while and then Daz announces he’s giving Balliol a miss for the time being and going to the war.

‘Balliol will understand and keep my scholarship open.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’ve already spoken to the Lictor. On his advice, I’m joining the Royal Navy. I shall go and ’list for a sailor in the Senior Service. Basic training and seamanship first, and then into Naval Intelligence on fast-track promotion, reporting directly to Everyman Jack. What a jolly rag, don’t you think?’

As far as preternaturally-endowed, ten budgie-encrusted Daz the able is concerned, it’s neither here nor there what Brother Cain and his not-so-magnificent seven think.

OLD PISS AND VINEGAR

On Boxing Day morning, Daz sent a TELEGRAM to Balliol, to confirm he was following the Lictor’s advice, and to expect him when they saw him. Mid-afternoon, he was off, striding down the track towards the estuary, with a cheery whistle on his pursed lips, ditty-box on his shoulder, and Jip woofing encouragement at his side.
Under the indigo sky, our weeping Mum hobbled twenty paces behind him. Stacked on the shelf of her marimbas, she clutched the packed lunch he had three times refused. I followed her down to the shore. Old Sol leered through a ragged tear in the clouds.

Mum and I stood together, infernally lit in the jaundiced rays of a septic sun. I put my arm around her, and gently palpated her left marimba. Pappy Barking, Jip, and Licit joined us in the sun’s cone of light, and we dried Mum’s tears.

Daz sat perched on a lofty rock. Silent, implacable, he gazed out to sea, hand shading his brow. Porpoises sported on the horizon. Jip lay at his feet on a patch of moss, head between his paws.

The brassy blare of the marine band bruited across the water, murdering that grand ceremonial march of the Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen, *Old Piss and Vinegar*. We watched Daz skip to the jetty, tippy-toe down the steps, and mince aboard the cutter that was waiting to take him out to the salt-caked battleship riding at anchor in the channel. HMS *Back Passage* was a noble ship of the line and flagship of the Blue. She commanded the squadron of five pedalos-o’-war lurking in the Narrows, in the deep purple gloaming, where the leathery seabirds creak and groan in the vaulted sky. Signal lamps winked amber to the subaltern vessels of the Blue, hull down on the horizon, promulgating the glad tidings of Daz’s enlistment. In return, festooned among the rigging of proud mastheads, the lamps winked amber hallelujahs.

Daz was bound for Plymouth, to learn seamanship, and be imbued with the spirit of the naked cutlass - the spirit that would lead him across wastes of ocean, and as his talents were fully discerned, into the secret diplomatic service of his country, among the intrigues of the Too-Ba souk - to return at last in triumph to our Doughnut by the sea, then to Balliol College, first-class honours, and to Number 10 Downing Street to
become, arguably, the first fluent non-native Ancient Hittite speaker to hold the office of Prime Minister.

**SHALL STAY-AT-HOMES DO NAUGHT BUT SNIVEL AND SIGH?**

Daz was gone to the Um-Ka war, leaving me behind to muck-out the sties and stir the vats of mangel and acorn.

For a month or so at home it was oh-Daz-this and oh-Daz-that, more than usual, from the grieving parents. Even Jip hung around moping, with one of Daz’s old lanyards in his fangs, growling whenever I tried to take it from him. Wendy came over to visit. She was out of sorts too, which at first I put down to her monthlies, but it wasn’t that. She was pining for Daz, just like Jip.

I had never heard such a vicious tongue on her - but she was nice as pie to Mum and Pappy Barking. When Mum wept over Daz, and the sufferings he must be undergoing as a seafaring newchum - when she worried if he was getting enough semolina slicked with butter-scum, and was he keeping his um-ka clean? - then Wendy put an arm around her for comfort. She reminded Mum that Daz had lost his appetite for semolina slicked with buter-scum long since. But the Royal Navy was well furnished with snorkers, and he still liked those. As for the cleanliness of his um-ka, Wendy knew that while Daz was not always very particular in that department, he was sailing under Sir Colin Cowley-Clinker, known to his crew as *Clinkers-Be-Damned*, a bold commander and a stickler for anal hygiene. Mum cheered up at the news.

Honestly! Anyone would think Wendy was angling for a berth as Daz’s missis when he came home, rather than accepting the destiny that Fate and Ma Bansom had decreed for her, which was to be the wife of the noble Lord Barrymore and bring forth good breed, two of each - two with knobs on, two without.
Daz enlisting in the Navy was the last straw for poor Granny Barking, who got so painfully constipated, dazed, and confused, that she took up permanent residence on her seat in the outhouse, relentlessly polishing the skull of Ma Bansom, gravid in her lap.

After a bit, we had to accept the inevitable. Granny was never going to find relief here at home, so Pappy Barking telephoned The Willows, and they had the van round within the hour.

Together with the men from The Willows, we managed to prise Granny Barking from her seat in the outhouse, gag her and get the handcuffs on, and bundle her relay-style down the line until she was safely closeted in the van, with an enema tube up her jacksie. The last we saw of her that day, she was rattling her chains, with her face and manacled wrists mashed up against the back window, and her bony fingers picking at the bars like the bars were prime ribs - and Cunty McFuck screaming blue murder over her shoulder. Afterwards, I had to go and give the soothing syrup to Baco and Ham, who were upset by the whole business, almost like it was a selection going on for one of their own. I never knew they cared so much for Granny.

Funny creatures, pigs - or swine, to give them their rightful name.

**WHO-FLUNG-DUNG?**

The morning after Daz’s electoral triumph, in the afterglow of the pomp and circumstance of the victory celebrations, I was pushing a wheel-barrow loaded with dung over to the dung-heap when I heard the purring of a motorbike, from the direction of Chafford Hundred. Wendy!

The dung-fork waxed lighter in my hands as I pitched the dung with a fluid over-the-shoulder flourish from the barrow to the heap. My heart waxed lighter too. Soon my beloved Wendy would be here, in the old Barking home place, perhaps standing on the very spot where Clotho Barking popped the question to Alien Bansom the Welsh trotter-
maid (aka Granny Barking). I had the same question to ask, and I’d been rehearsing my speech all morning.

I prodded and poked the heap, and stirred the dung and straw, warping and wefting, mixing the straw well into the dung, warp and weft, the way Pappy Barking taught me, while I turned my words this way and that. ‘Wendy, will you do me the great honour …’ Prod, poke. ‘Since I was small, since I first beheld you, I’ve always admired you, desired you.’ Poke, prod. ‘Will you do me?’ Poke. ‘Will you allow me to do you?’ Prod. ‘The great honour’. Poke. ‘Of being my wife.’ Prod prod prod, with knobs on, and poke poke poke.

The dung-heap was smoking nice and rank, so everything was composting down lovely – but there was an absence of that acrid top note that betokens a heap of the first order, so maybe it could do with extra straw. I speared a morsel of dung and wafted it under my nose. Yes, more straw.

The motorbike throttled down as Wendy steered into the yard. I set the fork in the heap and stretched my back. I took a deep breath. The reek of the straw-ripened dung caught my throat, making me cough. I wiped my mouth backhanded and turned to see Wendy curbing her machine beside the gazebo, where Granny Barking used to sit in her rocking chair to sew our neighbours’ shrouds, in the days before The Willows.

Wendy was wearing a scarf, striped red white and blue. On her head was a helmet, with my brother’s ugly mug painted on it. She lifted the helmet reverently from her head, as if it were a crown or mitre. Unhelmed, Wendy shook out her raven hair. She pushed up her goggles and called to me.

‘Barry, come for a ride!’

‘I can’t. Not just now. Maybe later. Got to get the heap blended just right.’
Wendy dismounted. She stood with her legs apart and her helmet under her arm, dressed all over in black leather. Not a petticoat in sight. Jip limped up to her, wagging his tail. He licked her leather-clad leg, to get a taste of salt from the tanned hide.

‘Woof woof,’ woofed Jip. Wendy reached down and playfully cuffed his head – a bit too hard and he yelped. She knelt and nuzzled his ear.

‘Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. Good old boy, Jip. Did you stay up to watch the celebrations? Did you? Did you see Prime Minister Daz? Yes you did, you did. Good old boy.’

‘Woof.’

‘Actually, he was asleep most of the time,’ I said. I tried to lighten my voice with a chuckle but only succeeded in loading it with stone. I was lying. Jip had been awake all through last night’s coverage, dead keen to watch. I couldn’t get him away from the telly screen. He wanted to lick Daz’s face every time he appeared, and didn’t seem to mind the static shock he got each time he paid his slavering tribute. I had to get the portable down from the attic, so he could have a set to himself.

‘The atmosphere in the Domedrome was electric,’ said Wendy. ‘You could have come.’

‘I was watching with the family. I would have come, if you hadn’t been working.’

‘Yes, well, a girl has to work, to earn the money to buy the necessary items for her bottom drawer. The stocks and shares Daddy Lembit left me have taken a tumble of late. Being a petit rentier is not what it was.’

Wendy began to polish her helmet with the tail of the scarf. Daz’s mush brightened up a treat, as the dust was wiped away. I picked up my dungfork again.

‘There, such a splendid sight,’ said Wendy. ‘Premier Daz Barking. Britannia’s hope, Britannia’s glory.’
‘I voted Omo the Clown.’

‘Bit of a wasted vote then, wasn’t it?’

‘In a democracy there’s no such thing as a wasted vote.’

‘Oh let’s not get all po-faced and pious,’ said Wendy. ‘Any minute now you’ll be
telling me again that Jip should have the vote. Boring, boring, boring. Please don’t bore
me any more, Barrysnore.’

She laughed a high tinkling laugh. She flicked her scarf at me.

‘I rode over to ask you out for a picnic. There are things we have to talk about. But if
you’re forking dung all afternoon …’

‘There’s something I’d like to talk about too, but I’ll be another twenty minutes on
this. Got to fork in even more straw.’

‘Goodness, it looks quite delicious as it is, can’t you leave it? Pretty-please, dearest
Barrymore, just for me? Hop in the shower and spruce yourself up, while I talk to your
mother.’

‘Mum’s visiting Granny Barking. She’s taken the cellphone and laptop that Goody
Cavewoman said she could have. Goody Cavewoman doesn’t need them herself, now
she’s entering an Enclosed Order on the Bonny Isles o’ Clunge.’

‘Ah, how generous of Goody Cavewoman – bless! And dear old Granny Barking,
bless her too, and her imaginary friend … what’s his name, the invisible Scotch chap
who plays the mouth-organ and claims he’s the Devil … hoots mon the noo, don’t tell
me, bless him anyway, he needs it. If your mother’s not here, I’ll go in and chat to Pappy
Barking. I expect he’s over the moon at Daz being elected?’

‘Didn’t really notice.’
I thrust my fork into the dung-heap, imagining that I was a Roman gladiator and the dung-heap was Daz, my fallen enemy. No mercy. The shaft of the fork quivered, and then settled. Daz’s heart had ceased to beat.

‘There,’ said Wendy. ‘That will do for now, surely?’

I followed Wendy to the kitchen door. Wendy popped her head inside and called:

‘Cooee, Pappy Barking!’

We heard an answering shout from the yard. Pappy Barking was quitting the outhouse, smoothing down his Druid’s smock. He came over and straightway gave Wendy a hug. Wendy flinched. There was a vibrant stench coming from him. The hum was ripe, and enough to make me gag from where I was standing, but Wendy took it full in the face. She turned pale. But she’s a game girl, is Wendy, and you could see her bounce back in a moment.

‘What about last night, eh?’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Daz getting elected was the proudest night of my life. I’ve just given myself one off the wrist to celebrate. In there.’ He jerked his thumb, unnecessarily, in the direction of the outhouse.

Wendy tutted.

‘You’re about due for another one, then. Don’t let me detain you.’

‘Finest outhouse in all the Hundreds. There’s a hole in the seat for everyone in the family, even Jip.’

‘How considerate of you. It’s just a shame that visitors wishing to spend a penny have to perform in a galvanised trough at the back of the sties.’

‘Ah, well now, I hope you don’t think I’m coming it a bit previous, but I was thinking, maybe some day soon I’ll be cutting another hole in the seat for someone whose name begins with ...’
Pappy Barking joined his thumbs and flexed his fingers, making a ‘W’. He winked his vulture eye and clicked his tongue.

‘How gross. But thoughtful, too,’ said Wendy. ‘Time for a cuppa.’

‘Get the kettle on then, buxom Wendy-Wench, thou saucy fallen woman, thou.’

Pappy Barking chased Wendy through the door. He smacked Wendy’s rump and she turned and frowned, wagging her finger.

‘Don’t do that, Pappy darling, or I shall have Daz consign you to the galleys and chain you to an oar.’

Pappy Barking looked fair buggery-whipped at that. After all, now that Daz was Prime Minister, anything might happen.

A WARM CHIRPY WELCOME AND A PROPER WASH

The budgies gave us a warm chirpy welcome as we came in the kitchen. One of them was sitting at the bottom of the cage, broody on an egg, the last to hatch this season. The budgies were already excercised, fed and watered, and had their sand-tray cleaned, so no need to bother with them until tomorrow, unless Pappy Barking got paranoid about the length of his harry-pipe and needed to measure it again. He had a chart over by the dresser, where he recorded week-by-week, and sometimes daily – even hour by hour these days if he was feeling vulnerable - the length of his joyboy in budgies.

I left Pappy Barking at the kitchen table, picking his nose over the new edition of “Doughnuts Today!” clearly content for now with the length of his organ. Licit was squatting at his feet, sewing sequins and fixing appliqué on a delicious blue basque. Amber butterflies flitted over the bits where her marimbas jut out, very tasty. She was lilting one of the old songs, wordlessly, as she sewed. I hadn’t seen her so cheerful in a long while.
Wendy busied herself with the kettle and all the makings. She blew me a kiss. I picked up a towel and a bar of carbolic from the sink.

‘I’m off for a shower.’

‘Don’t be long.’

I went upstairs to have a proper wash, with soap and shampoo, determined to sluice all the nooks and crannies that swelter ripe and rank when you’ve been forking dung in a 90 degree heat. Licit’s cheery mood was infectious – not the only part of her that might be, I mused. They try to keep ’em clean at the Domedrome, but all the same I made a note, to go and get a checkup - if I could find a doctor in Chafford - before my nuptial night.

**IN YOUR DREAMS, PAPPY BARKING**

Best of friends again, Pappy Barking and Wendy sat cheek by jowl at the kitchen table with *The Marriage Art* propped against the milk jug. Licit was pouring tea into their Coronation mugs. Wendy had one of those joke mugs where Andy One’s face gets redder and redder as the hot tea heats the china, and finally he goes all pop-eyed, like he’s taking it up the keister.

Licit saw me coming downstairs. She put down the teapot and gave me ‘come to bed’ look, or more accurately her ‘come-to-the-backside-of-the-sties-if-you-have-the-money’ look. Her eyes sparkled and her tongue peeped out between her luscious glossy lips, tantalizing to me as all-get-out. I gave her a stern look of refusal, not caring whether she was offended or not. I resolved that from this afternoon I would save my precious essence for my bonny bride.

Wendy licked her finger, and flipped over the page. She nudged Pappy Barking and pointed to a queer posture, serpentine, a tangled nest of vipers.

‘Oo, there’s one I’ve never been asked for at the ’drome,’ she said. ‘A Mongolian clusterfuck. How exotic.’
‘Well, I’m asking for it now,’ said Pappy Barking, pushing back his chair and unbuttoning his flies – seemingly unaware of the local paucity of Mongolians.

‘In your dreams, Pappy Barking. Sit tight where you are.’

‘Okay, but one of these nights, I’ll come over to the Domedrome and pay for it.’

‘It’s not on our menu, I’m afraid.’

‘What happened to the customer always being right?’

‘There’s limits, Pappy Barking, even when you pay to go the whole hog.’ She turned her head. ‘Oh look, there’s Daz’s brother. We’re going for a picnic.’

‘Have you got the makings?’ said Pappy Barking. ‘I can give you a packet of fresh headcheese.’

‘Everything we need is in the pannier on the bike, headcheese included,’ said Wendy.

‘Has he finished forking the dung?’

‘Done enough for now,’ I said.

‘Okay, I’m off upstairs for forty winks.’

‘Forty?’ I said. ‘Don’t you think that’s overdoing it a bit? You just had a session in the outhouse. You don’t want to rub it down to a stump.’

‘Honestly, Barrymore darling, clean your ears out. If you ask me, the more Pappy beats it, the longer it gets. Like a veal escalope. Kiss kiss, Pappy Barking.’

‘Bang bang,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Don’t forget, one of these nights …’

‘Well, we are a bit like barristers, or taxis, I suppose. If you turn up when we’re on the rank, then we have to take you on – Mongolians notwithstanding. One word of advice, darling Pappy Barking, do try to have a wash before you come, particularly your privates, there’s a love. Licit never complains I know, but she’s wire-wool, and I’m gossamer.’

‘Ma Barking never complains.’
‘Ma Barking is used to it, and she is very resilient – for her age. No offence, cara mia, but she is a bit of a sweaty old trampoline. Now, listen - if you want the doormen at the Domedrome to let you in, you need to be spruced up nice and fresh. Back, sack, and crack. Ciao!’

**PICNIC WITH PILCHARDS**

Wendy and I went outside to the bike. No spare motorcycle helmet for me, but after considering, and rejecting, the use of an old swill-pail, I decided to ride commando. I had absolute confidence in Wendy’s motorcycle handling. She may be a bit of a tease from time to time, but she rides like a Valkyrie.

Jip limped round in circles, wagging his tail.

‘No room on the bike for you, I’m afraid, Jip old kitbag,’ said Wendy with a pout. Jip began to howl, forlorn.

‘But I told him earlier he could come,’ I said, holding up a tin of pilchards. ‘Look. Here’s his picnic.’

‘Oh well, why not, but you’ll have to put him on your shoulders and he can cling to your neck or something. Whatever – you sort it out.’

‘I know!’ I ran round to the scrap yard where we kept the carcasses of old machines and came back pushing a motor-cycle sidecar.

‘What a good idea,’ said Wendy. ‘Seems in good condition.’

‘I’ll help you bolt it on,’ said Pappy Barking, who had sidled up when we weren’t looking. He’d changed his mind about forty winks. ‘Then maybe I could come along for a ride?’

‘Any other time, we’d love of you to ride with us, Pappy Barking,’ said Wendy, ‘but I want Barry and Jip all to myself for a couple of hours if you don’t mind.’
‘Okey-dokey, back to the winking then. Or maybe Licit would like to model that new basque for me. I might try my luck. Some of us still get our hole for nixes, Barry.’

He tipped his Stetson to Wendy, and bowled his bandy-legs over to the house. He unhitched his gun-belt as he waddled.

Without Pappy Barking’s encumberance we soon had the sidecar fixed. I strapped Jip in and gave him a pair of googles so he wouldn’t get dust in his eyes. Then I jumped up behind Wendy and we were off, steering carefully out of the yard to avoid the curious chickens now flocking round.

**A MODEST PROPOSAL** ...

The spot Wendy chose for our picnic was over the lea, by Comus’s Mill, where the lazy stream meanders through lush meadowland, before tumbling surprised over the Widow’s Mere and surging into Jackson’s Fork. Here, as the name indicates, the stream divides. A burbling rill flows underground, while its twin snakes through the marsh to the estuary.

The air was heavy with the scent of the fetiscue and purple moor-grass that colonize the sheltered side of the Ness. From a distance, beyond the pinfold where the ruminant sheep were lying down in expectation of rain, came the piping of an oaten straw – a country swain making merry with his Phyllis, no doubt. Insects chirped and buzzed, sculpting a merry soundscape, as they cheerily copulated and sliced each other’s heads off.

I set Jip free to roam. Wendy opened the pannier and unpacked our picnic, laying out the comestibles on a tartan rug. We had a primus stove for making hard-boiled eggs and tea. I took my billy-can to the stream and soon had a brew on the boil.

Our feast lay before us - fresh rye bread baked with pumpkin seeds, crumpets, English muffins, a jar of honey, butter wrapped in greaseproof paper, a tiny pot of caviare, another of pungent headcheese, a tupperware box of salad, cold meats, a dish of trotters.
and brawn, a pig’s pizzle stuffed with sweetbreads and honey, cruets of oil and vinegar, a thimble of milk, and a bottle of Aunt Josephine’s elderflower wine.

‘Did you remember the cutlery?’ I asked Wendy.

‘In my saddlebag.’

I unlatched the bag and saw she had brought genuine silver from Aunt Josephine’s antique canteen, looted from Napoleon’s baggage train in the rout of Waterloo.

Truly, Wendy Madonna was fitted to be my queen and bring forth good Britannic breed.

Wendy and I settled ourselves in the cool mossy shade beneath the verdant canopy of a wise old oak. A tortoiseshell butterfly fluttered nearby. It settled in Wendy’s hair. The butterfly folded her wings and went to sleep. How I envied the butterfly, nestled in Wendy’s glossy raven locks!

A balmy breeze, a zephyr of uncommon fragrance, bearing the salty tang of ozone from the sea, gave relish to my palate. A flush of saliva filled my mouth, and I began to drool. I took my napkin and wiped my chin. I could smell a sour reek – perhaps a sudden whiff of methane from the marsh – but it only stimulated my appetite.

We began to nibble and sip, making small-talk, mainly about my dung-work. Brute hunger seized me. Grabbing the stuffed pig’s pizzle in my two hands, I crammed the swollen harry-pipe, inch by bloated inch, into my gaping maw. I belched.

‘What a vile piggy-wig, you are, my dearest dear,’ said Wendy, helping herself to a crumpet.

‘Better out than in.’

A scudding cloud sent a shadow flitting across the meadow. Wendy grew dreamy and contemplative, busying herself with a daisy-chain.

‘... loves me not. He loves me.’
Jip pricked his ears and came over for his pilchards. He seemed disappointed that Wendy served his pilchards without a napkin, on a cardboard plate.

‘There’s a nice surprise for you later,’ said Wendy to Jip.

‘Woof.’

I finished the last of the pungent headcheese, then picked the shreds of meat from the remaining trotter. Wendy was busy thumbing through a book on wedding etiquette. I stood and wiped the grease from my mouth with the napkin. I dropped to one knee and said, ‘I’ve something important to ask you, Wendy.’

‘Well, I’ve something important to tell you too, but you go first.’

‘Since I was small, since I first saw you, I have always admired you and desired you. Your essence has saturated my dreams. My night-sweats are replete with your pastel satins and frothy petticoats. I have had no rest morning noon and night, my darling Dark Infanta of Perfect Proportion - not since you first appeared in the hallowed cloisters of Granny Barking’s Dame School. Wendy, my dearest love, it’s fair to say there is no other woman who excites my amorous propensities the way you do. I would gladly eat your dung, should you bid me.’

Wendy was silent, lips pursed, staring past me, and I thought perhaps I had offended her. She pointed over my shoulder. A lone sheep had gotten loose from the pinfold and crept up on us. As we watched, the ewe turned and presented us with her maggoty rump. Her daggy tail hummed with blow-flies. She wiggled her bottom, like an ovine pole-dancer, and wandered back to her chums in the pinfold.

Wendy was no longer concentrating on what I was saying, so I reminded her that her amorous propensities excited me, and that I would gladly eat her dung.
‘Thanks, Barry. I think you made that quite clear, but really, you’ve had quite enough to eat already. We don’t want you turning into a porker. Anyway, as far as arousing amorous propensities goes, what about Licit?’

‘Licit is my half-sister. What I do with Licit is no more than animal coupling, not much higher than what Baco does with Ham in the business-from-behind. And it’s halfway to incest. I believe the love-knot you and I might tie, could prove to be one of the glories of the universe, an adjunct to our diadem of heavenly stars, and through which we might achieve sublime transcendence …’

Wendy held her hand up to check me and said, ‘Barrydrear, where is this all leading? Please talk a little more like a pigman, and less like one of those dreamy poets - like that ghastly Whitelady, the homosexual chap you’re always quoting.’

‘Wendy, we cannot buck our fate. Hardy Ma Bansom foretold that one day we would be united in matrimony, and that our first-born - the first of many I hope … the first of a tribe that will maintain the Barking hold on the Ness until doomsday in the afternoon … um, er, yes, what did she say? Our first-born will train as a jockey, ride for his sovereign, and go to Mad Scientist School where he will solve the problem of the unidirectionality of time and go on to effect the amelioration, if not downright reversal, of the linear temporal progression that’s lately been getting on everyone’s tits on account of it resulting in everyone six-foot under or up the Gravesend chimney.’

Wendy closed her eyes and moaned, as if she was about to suffer a petit mort. She shook her head. She inched closer to me and laid her hand on my brow.

‘Barry, are you sure you’re not sick? You’re talking in riddles. I know no-one – nobody at all – who is particularly worried about linear temporal progression, as you call it. Perhaps Missis Dippy, but she’s bonkers. None of the weenies at school ever bother their tousled little heads over it, nor do my Domedrome clients ever mention it when
they’re on the job. Linear temporal progression is something we all accept, willy-nilly.

*Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.* I translate: times change and we change with them. And while we change through time, we ameliorate the linear temporal progression - as you call it – every time we saddle up our memories and roam the limitless prairie of our personal past, and, through the chronicles of the tribe, the more distant historic past.

We even hypothesize the future, as you’ve clearly been doing in recent months, judging by the stains on your flies.’

‘Wendy, you know me so well. I have wandered, a lonesome ghost, through the labyrinth of mind, ambushed by fevered dreams of our future sacred union. In anticipation, I have celebrated, solo, the gymnastics of our wedding night. Which is why my trousers are stained. A ghost of passion myself, I am haunted by desire.’

I lurched towards her, with groping hands, but she fended me off.

‘Wait, Barry. Show some respect. Please don’t behave like the vile Baco. I can do without your tender words, tendered in expectation of my tender meat. Don’t be a boar, Barryboar.’

She hiccupped, and I was about to start again, when she held up her hand.

‘Wait, Barry, wait - I’ve something else to say.’

Wendy assumed her teacher voice.

‘We don’t always tell stories in the order of events. Do you remember *My Family, My Clan*, the getting-to-know-you piece you wrote for your moral tutor? And the muddle you thought you’d got yourself into with constant backtracking to fit everything in? You showed it to me, and I struck out the adjectives and adverbs it was overburdened with, but they were a trifle, for I could see the work was sound in construction. I told you its narrative structure was fine. And lo and behold: you got an A-plus, double star, with extra knobs on.’
‘Four, actually. Knobs, that is.’

‘Case proven. Memory and narrative strategies, all of these - that’s how we combat temporal linearity. Although, I must confess now, that I did have intercourse with your moral tutor, to make doubly sure of your grade.’

‘Thank you, that was thoughtful. Wendy, you’re so clever. I don’t care that you’re not a virgin. As Whitelady sang, in one of his less queer moments, “I want to be beside you, when they groom and bride you.” I ... I ... want to be the man whose marrow you lap, from the core of his patient bone. Not forgetting the dung I’m happy to eat.’

I stood up (belching inadvertently) and brushed pork scratchings from my lap.

‘Pardonnez moi,’ I said.

I dropped to one knee again and took Wendy’s hands in mine.

‘Let us live the matrimonial dream! Wendy, will you do me the profoundest honour, of allowing me to be the one who places the golden guvnor on your ha-ha?’

‘Oh Barry, you romantic fool, of course I will. Let’s be married as soon as we can. In fact, that’s why I inveigled you out here. To tell you we’re going to be married. On Daz’s orders. He telephoned me at the lighthouse this morning and told me his requirement.’

‘So Daz approves?’

‘I’d rather say Daz bids me. He explained this morning that there’s no longer any chance that he and I could become affianced - although concubinage is still a possibility. Everyman Jack has insisted that Daz must marry royally or not at all. He is to marry the younger sister of the Dauphine of Um-Ka. It’s a blow, but there you go. And although you’re sloppy seconds, I’m quite happy to oblige. Daz wants to keep me in the family.’

At the mention of family, Jip limped up and began to howl.
‘That’s right Jip,’ I said, ‘you’re ever so lucky. Wendy’s going to be your sister-in-law.’

‘Now that’s settled,’ said Wendy, ‘I’d quite like to get some sun. Spread the rug out here, Barrydrear.’

... AND A DISAPPOINTMENT

I made a bed in the bracken by stamping down the fronds. I shook the crumbs from the tartan rug and laid it on the ground. Wendy slid her motorcycle leathers from her gorgeous body, with a sinuous motion which made me think of a snake shedding its skin. I hoped to discover she was wearing romantic wispy frillies underneath, but no, she was naked.

‘And that’s something you’ll have to get used to. From now, there will be none of this hyper-feminine lingerie nonsense, no frills or flounces. Sometimes Barry, I’ve been concerned that you only desire me for my knickers.’

There may have been some truth in this. Despite Wendy being displayed before me in her pelt, there wasn’t the slightest sniff of a bloater on me, groaning or otherwise. Then memory supplied the necessary stimulus, and Wendy arose in my mind, clad in the finest frillies. Now I had to possess her, or go mad.

‘You’ll just have to go mad, I’m afraid. I don’t believe in sex before marriage. At least, not with one’s fiancé.’

‘But Wendy, I’ll never be able to get on the bike with a groaning bloater. The bumps in the road will crucify my joyboy.’

‘Barry, I know you’ve had oodles of practice in the auto-erotic arts. Go behind that hawthorn bush and play with yourself, there’s a good chap.’

So I did, and took my time. When I finished, I peeped out to see Wendy smearing the remains of the pilchards between her legs, and Jip licking his chops in anticipation.
What followed surprised me. Jip snuffled and licked, coy as a tender bridegroom. Whimpers of yearning fluttered deep in his throat, in counterpoint to Wendy’s high jagged bleats. With his sleek black fur and whiskers, and his insouciant manner, Jip put me in mind of those Brylcreemed and moustachioed matinée idols we used to see on the black-and-white pictures in the Chafford Hundred flea-pit. He came up for air, and yowled at the setting sun. His eyeballs rolled, showing the yellow-streaked whites of his eyes. He dipped his muzzle to lick up the remaining pilchards. Wendy howled in ecstasy as the ministrations of her canine slave conducted her to paradise. I resolved then and there, that when Wendy and I were married, I would study Wendy’s needs and seek to pleasure her the same way - though I wasn’t sure about the pilchards, because fish always give me gas.

Wendy lay luxuriating on her back with her hands behind her head, gently declining from the zenith of her joy, while Jip staggered around looking for somewhere to pee. He usually got into confusion at these times, because in lifting his back leg, he forgot it was his only means of support, so he’d fall on his um-ka. At last, after a couple of tumbles, he micturated. His copious yellow stream hosed down a gorse bush. He slunk back to the picnic for seconds – pilchards were still on the menu.

As I watched, jealousy rose in my gorge, a bitter bile that soured my joy. Jip was sharing himself with another. Wendy was now the sole focus of his attention. For all Jip cared, I might as well have gone to Gravesend and puffed myself up the chimney. I was tempted to go over and pull the minx away from my furry amigo, but there was never any chance I’d do that, because I’d have them both to contend with if I did.

**DOGGY-STYLE, WITH PILCHARDS**

When we got back to the home place, Mum was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea from her Andy One Coronation mug. Heated by the brew, Andy One’s phiz glowed with
orange felicity and bug-eyed pleasure. Pappy Barking was filling his pools coupon. He looked up and winked at Wendy.

‘Someone’s had a good time,’ he said. Pappy Barking has a sixth sense for that sort of thing.

‘It’s not what you think,’ I said, taking Wendy’s hand and gazing soppy as a moon-struck calf into her hazel eyes. ‘Wendy has done me the honour of consenting to be my lawful wedded wife, to baste my bloater and bring forth good breed, two of each - two with knobs on, two without – but not until after the ceremony. Wendy has Jip to thank for her current state of satisfaction.’

‘Woof,’ said Jip

‘Nothing to it, old kitbag,’ said Wendy to Jip. ‘Yes, our doggie’s amazing.’

She crouched down to play with Jip’s ear.

‘I think we could have a nice little business there, for a minimum outlay. Just a case of pilchards now and again. There must be thousands of women out here on the Ness, who’ve lost their husbands in family feuds or in the Um-Ka war, and aren’t getting it. A man without a wife can always go to the Domedrome Casino, but there’s nowhere that caters for the single woman.’

Pappy Barking nodded cautiously while he cleaned his ears with the tip of a Bowie knife. Mum said, ‘You’re so right. And don’t forget, there are those who’d like a change from their lawful-wedded whatnot, without the expense and tedium of managing an adulterous relationship. A bit of canine strange might go down a treat.’

‘It seems to me,’ said Pappy Barking, ‘that our future daughter-in-law has got something here. We could set up our brothel in the Temple of Cottyto.’
‘Let’s put it on the agenda for the next Parish Council meeting,’ said Mum. ‘Goody Clunge is sure to vote in favour. I know she’s been gagging for it ever since her husband Rancid took the nine o’clock walk.’

PEOPLE GET READY, GREAT DAY’S A-COMIN’

Wendy and I withdrew to the parlour, to discuss our wedding plans.

‘“Marry in white, you have chosen right,”’ said Wendy, quoting her bridal magazine.

‘Mum has always wanted a white wedding for me,’ I said with a contented sigh.

‘And Ma Barking shall have her heart’s desire,’ said Wendy. ‘Daz has given me the address of a tailor in Romford to kit you out. Just make sure you don’t get the urge to go forking dung on the morning of our wedding day – at least, if you must, make sure you do it before you’ve put on your white suit.’

‘What about the wedding dress?’

‘Traditionally, you’re not allowed to see my dress until I’m walking up the aisle.’

‘When the organ starts to throb and swell with the majestic strains of the wedding march, I’ll be the proudest bridegroom in Chafford Hundred.’

‘I may even wear my frillies underneath, and suspenders and stockings, since it’s our very special day. But don’t get any ideas. Remember what I said. Frillies are strictly on ration from now on. Wedding night and anniversaries only.’

I must have looked downcast, because Wendy leaned over and kissed me so sweetly on the brow, I felt I was swooning to death.

‘You’ll soon get used to it. Think of the excitement when that one special night rolls round each year.’

‘I’m not so sure, Wendy. If you’re going to give up, I think I may have to start wearing frillies myself.’
ON HYMEN’S ALTAR

In the fevered days that followed, Wendy couldn’t help letting me know in all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle ways she’d rather be guvnored by Daz, but although I was sloppy seconds I had enough confidence in the rigidity of my dada not to bother about that, or even consider Wendy’s feelings in the matter. What counted was Pappy Barking was happy as a sandbag because Wendy would no longer have an unguvnored quesquedillo and Mum got the white wedding she always dreamed of for me, and I got the chance to fulfil the Bansom prophecy and get it upstairs downstairs et cetera all through life until death us do part - and in the church vestry on the day itself while the vicar looked on bewildered as Mum whipped out his chopper to ‘Pleasure him orally, Pronto!’ (Whitelady, The Ranger’s Command) with Pappy Barking simultaneously fingerling himself and operating his new camera phone, and Wendy my childhood sweetheart (and now my bride) bent over the table signing the register with one hand while with the other she squeezed my stones as I took her from behind.

After that came the official photographer, then the reception – where Granny Barking disgraced herself by simulating the marriage act on the top table. Seized in Cunty McFuck’s embrace, she writhed like a demon sprinkled with Holy Water. She kicked out her leg, and knocked all three tiers of the cake to the floor.

Daz couldn’t be there because it was the week before the Um-Ka peace conference in Tehran. He sent a TELEGRAM saying to give Wendy a loving session of Greek 69 from him all the same, which I did on the second day of our lighthouse honeymoon, being preoccupied with giving it to her relatively straight (façon de Dingwallace: style Gauloise) through the previous night and day and night. ‘This is from Daz,’ I mumbled into her tunnel of love, while she teased the marrow from my patient bone.

The only blot on the wedding day itself was the best man’s speech.
Sentimental as I am, I had asked Jip if he would serve as best man, and of course he said ‘woof’. Most best men have two legs, while others – amputees, for example - have maybe one or none. My best man had three!

Jip managed the business with the ring, offering it to me on his panting tongue, but after the ceremony, when it came to his turn to make a speech and crack some blue jokes, he couldn’t perform because he was drunk. Someone had offered him a bucket of light ale while we were signing the register, and he’d lapped up a gallon in under a minute. So instead of ‘woof’, what came out was ‘shwuff’. After a few embarrassing minutes I shooed him off the platform and Wendy put him to sleep (not in the veterinarian sense) in an old shopping trolley that someone had abandoned outside the community centre. Later on I wheeled him home all the way from Chafford, which annoyed Wendy because she wanted to get straight off to properly consummate the marriage in private – the quick shag from behind, in the vestry, didn’t count, so she said, because I had spilled on the ground like Onan - but start as you mean to go on is my motto, and there was no way I was leaving Jip to wake up cold and alone, with a thick head, in a strange place. Wendy would just have to learn: first things first. I put him to bed, with a big bowl of water beside him, and then called a taxi to take me and Wendy to our undisclosed honeymoon destination (the lighthouse).

CREEPERS PEEPERS

On our wedding night, alone at last and safely snug at the top of the lighthouse – or so we thought – we hoped to bathe in Cynthia’s silvery tide, and frolic in the lemoncurd glory of the hornéd moon. The rutting stars blazed through the panoramic glass, rough diamonds in the deepest midnight blue of summer.

Wendy divested herself of her bridal gown and her virginal frillies in a few swift moves, like she was unwrapping a family-pack of mixed meats. I stood on one leg,
scratching my athlete’s foot with one hand, while deftly massaging my bâton de mariage in readiness for the joust ahead. I caught my breath in wonder at the sight of my bonny bride. Wendy blushed – a coyness I had not expected. I said I treasured her above life itself. She made her lemon-sucking face. Thanks a million, she said with a yawn. She couldn’t say as much herself, but she was gratified to know I felt that way, because it might make things easier in the short term. In the awkward silence that followed, we heard a scrape on the brickwork outside.

Hark! Soft, he comes?

I prayed: Please, dearest Lady Cottyto, our Thracian moon-goddess of unparalleled licentiousness, bringer of salty cargo – keep us from Cunty McFuck and his mouth-organ, this night of all nights!

But it was worse.

Draping a towel over my burgeoning bloater, I hurried to the window, pushed it open, and leaned out. The scraping we’d heard was the top of Pappy Barking’s ladder nudging the cill. Down below, lit by the Gestapo moon, I could see Pappy Barking in blackface, huffing and puffing, clambering up the ladder, hand over hand, with his best spyglass in the crook of his arm and a minstrel banjo slung across his shoulders. He wore a battered stovepipe hat. Clearly, he was intent on beguiling us, in the guise of a darkie milkman.

How tempting it was just then, to push the ladder, and send our father, the tempter, the joker, the all-seeing voyeur, the tyro banjo-playing beguiling blackface milk-pedding serenader, tumbling into the estuary. I closed my eyes and savoured the fantasy. In my mind I could hear Pappy Barking shriek, and see him falling - at the same rate of acceleration as his spyglass and banjo and stovepipe hat - beneath the great sky-born seabirds whose sepulchral ululations were a token of the moans I hoped to induce in my piranha-toothed bride before the night was far advanced.
When I opened my eyes, he was still climbing, hand over hand, rung after rung. I told Wendy he was on his way, and the murder I had in mind. Her teeth twinkled in the starlight, diamond sparks of desire.

‘No, don’t do that to the silly old sunbeam. Let him be. I’m curious. When did he take up the banjo? Let him gawp his fill, even strum along. I don’t want to start married life by drowning my father-in-law. He won’t stop me getting what I want, you can be sure of that. Close the window, drop the towel, and bring your spanking bloater over here.’

So we got down to married life, with plain vanilla soixante-neuf for starters, Wendy on top, the way I like it best. Pappy Barking perched outside on the ladder, his open mouth pressed to the window. He was attached to the glass through suction, like the mouthy flatfish on the transparent wall of the fishtank in the Chafford curry-house. With his mouth wide open, lips painted white, and his black face and ochre palms pressed against the pane, eyes wide and staring, flat as a halibut, he made me think of a piscatorial Al Jolson singing ‘Mammy’. As I came up from Wendy’s ha-ha for another gulp of air, I saw him reach for the banjo.

While Wendy and I came closer to fulfilment (right way round now, me on top) he kept time to my strokes by rapping his blackened knuckles on the banjo-skin, but soon he was forcing the pace, as if he were the drummer on the poop-deck of a Ninevah trireme, and we were the galley slaves, chained to our oars. We heard him shouting encouragement, placing his order for grandchildren.

‘Two of each! Two of each! Two with knobs on, two without!’

**PARTURITION**

‘Barry, darling. Wake up.’

Wendy was shaking my shoulder.

‘What’s up?’
‘Baby’s on the way. Quick. Go and get Mummy Barking. And boil a kettle.’

I thought this was a bit odd, as we’d only been married a week. We were paying our first visit as husband and wife to my ancestral home, and I thought that having a baby on our first night back was coming it a bit previous. What would Ma and Pappy Barking think? They’ve always been so particular about decorum, and doing things the right way at the right time. I didn’t even know Wendy was pregnant.

I was just putting a foot to the floor, when Wendy groaned as her contractions seized her. She was cramping something terrible, and before you could say ‘gynaecology’ she had the kid there and then, Little Barrymore (Little Baz for short), Mum and Pappy Barking’s first grandchild unless you count the half dozen Licit’s given birth to, and had taken away by the Corporation.

‘He’s very small, not much bigger than a cockroach,’ I said.

‘We’ll put Little Baz in this matchbox tray and keep him on the bedside table,’ said Wendy.

Little Baz was cheeping like a coalmine canary, very faint and feeble. I poked cotton wool between his legs for a nappy, and sang him a lullaby. Then Wendy and I went back to sleep, cuddled up spoonwise.

GOOGAM, J’ACCUSE!

In the night I had a dream about the Oxford waitron I might have to murder (according to Ma Bansom). Tall and slim, teetering on high heels, she looked nothing like the plump waitron who used to serve me my trotter and tea-and-two and who played Let’s Pretend! and Hide-and-No-Seek with me in her caravan. And yet, in the funny way dreams have, I knew that she was one and the same, even though she looked completely different. I opened my eyes. A ghostly waitron now hovered at my bedfoot, in a boiling
of white mist, draped in grave-clothes. She pulled back her hood. Pustules and weeping grave-sores covered her face.

The ghost pointed her arm towards me, and fanned out her fist, beckoning me with a long bony forefinger. She cried out, using the false name I had given her, ‘Googam, \textit{j’accuse}! Of murder in the first degree.’

I shivered. So she’d been murdered already!

Stretched out centuries behind her, a chorus line of the ululating dead waggled their cerements at me, high-kicking their legs and jeering. As if accusing me of murder wasn’t enough, they sang in chorus, ‘Cuckold’s horn, cuckold’s horn, you’re not the father of the baby just born!’

A leper’s bell tinkled and invited me to sup in the cloaca of Hell. I refused the summons.

‘I am the daddy of Little Baz! He is the fruit of my loins. And it wasn’t me who murdered you, if you were murdered in the first place, which I doubt, because you might just be trying it on. If it was anyone at all ... it was Daz, that’s who it was! He must have been in Oxford for his entrance exam and interview at Balliol, and come in and found you, after I made a cad’s hurried excuse and left you alive, beseeching my compassion and forlornly calling the false name I gave you before we made love.’

‘Googam, are you sure?’ she said.

‘Yes, you’re haunting the wrong Barking.’

‘Sorry about that. Come to think of it, you might be right. All you Barkings look the same to me now I’m on the other side, even Baco and Ham.’

‘The Barkings share no consanguinity with swine.’

‘No? If you say so, lah lah. I shall suspend judgment, \textit{pro tem}. I’ll go and see what the Prime Minister has to say for himself and then get back to you. By the way, the chorus
line of the ululating dead are right - you are not, repeat not, the father of the baby just
born. Whatever, whichever, the killer will join me in Hell before Doomsday in the
afternoon. It’s only fair. I’m lonely here with only these dead dancers for company,
although Auld Clootie does his best to cheer us up with the Bluebell Polka on his mouth
organ once in a while. He has a knack of holding his moothie – as he calls it - in one
hand, and rattling a tambourine against his knee with the other. A proper one-man band.
I never knew the Devil was a Scotchman, let alone musical. He will see that the crime is
paid for.’

‘It wasn’t me!’

‘So you say. Time will tell.’

She vanished into whiteness with her supporting cast. A sepulchral bell tolled the hour
of midnight. As the chimes of the bell ceased, I called again, ‘It wasn’t me! It wasn’t
me!’

Wendy shook me awake. I was in a cold sweat.

‘What wasn’t you?’ she said.

‘Tell me the truth. Am I the father of Little Baz?’

‘Legally, yes.’

‘So there’s no-one else?’

‘No. Apart from my Casino customers, of course - and they use protection, unless they
pay extra to go without. And your moral tutor, but he was a dry old stick, no jizz in him
at all, barely enough to stick a postage stamp. Then there was lusty Daz in the hayloft,
when we were young and carefree. And on my hen-night, in a moment of weakness,
Cunty McFuck. I’ve never been shagged by an invisible man before, or the Devil come
to that ... Oh, yes, now I remember, there was Smiling Dock Rampart.’

‘Smiling Dock Rampart?’
‘An old chum from the varsity. We were up at Oxford together. But he’s never had much to do with women. Only me. Chaps are more his thing, but he swings both ways on occasion. So you can rest assured that dear Little Baz is mine and yours. Well, mine at any rate.’

‘Thank you, dearest Wendy. I was worried it was all rather sudden, the baby following so soon on the wedding. When Baco does the business-from-behind with Ham, it’s three months or more before she farrows.’

‘It’s a hundred and fourteen days to be precise, before Ham pops her sprogs. Barrymore my love, we are not pigs.’

‘True, we’re not, although sometimes I feel life would be easier if we were.’

I glanced at the luminous dial of the battered old clock that had seen me through so many early risings to my mangel-and-acorn duties.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘It’s time you stuck Little Baz on your tit. I don’t want any muchacho of mine to be bottle-fed. And we need to establish a routine if we want a happy little baby.’

Wendy stretched out her hand in the dark. She knocked the matchbox tray with Little Baz to the floor.

‘O dear, where’s he gone?’

‘He must be down there somewhere.’

We got up and lit the lamp and looked around but we couldn’t find Little Baz anywhere.

‘Better keep Jip out of here until we find him,’ I said.

‘The trouble is, he’s so small,’ said Wendy.
‘He’ll make a good jockey when he grows up,’ I said, remembering Ma Bansom’s prophesy about him riding in the racing colours of his sovereign. ‘It’s best not to be too big if you want to be a jockey.’

‘He’ll probably turn up in the morning,’ said Wendy. ‘A suitable period has elapsed since my confinement, so it’s time to resume conjugal relations. Put out the light and then put me to the prick like a good husband should, and then let’s get some sleep.’

So that’s what I did, and that’s what I did, and we did.

**BORN AGAIN**

Next morning we got up and had another go at finding Little Baz. I crawled under the bed and the dust made me sneeze and suddenly there was Little Baz cocooned in an oyster of snot.

‘He must have crawled up your nose in the night,’ said Wendy. ‘Perhaps he thinks he’s a kangaroo?’

‘He shouldn’t be crawling so soon. It’s unnatural. And look what’s happened while we were asleep. He’s turned black. Now he’s Little Black Baz.’

‘They do that,’ said Wendy.

‘Who do?’

‘Babies.’

‘Since when do babies turn black?’

‘All the time. Like new potatoes when you dig them up, first they’re white and then they go black. Keep your eyes open.’

I thought turning black might queer his pitch. I tried to think of a black jockey, but no luck.

‘He shall be the first,’ I said.
Little Black Baz was crying, very faint then louder and louder, so Wendy plumped up her milkers and squirted, first one then the other, until Little Black Baz was bloated and cooing, instead of crying and bleating and getting on my nerves.

‘I can’t wait for him to grow up.’

‘Looks like you won’t have to wait very long.’

Little Black Baz had put on half an inch already, mostly around his little fat black tummy.

‘If he goes on at this rate, it might be bye-bye to his dream of being a jockey of colour.’

‘I think he’ll grow in fits and starts,’ said Wendy. ‘The thing is with babies...’ But I never got to hear what the thing is with babies, apart from them turning black, because Mum and Pappy Barking rushed in just then to congratulate us and get a proper look at the nipper - the only trouble being Jip, who came limping in fast behind with his tongue lolling out, and he was straight up on Wendy and gobbled Little Baz off the tit. His meal gave him fresh vigour, and he tried to stick his chipolata up Wendy’s twanky, which was pointless really because Wendy’s built like an octopus.

‘Plenty more where he came from,’ I said. ‘Maybe next time we should try for a welder rather than a jockey.’

‘A welder would be useful,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Not that a jockey is useless, because when it comes to riding, either on the flat or over the jumps, you can’t whack a jockey - but we need a welder to fix the skin of the Doughnut.’

‘It’s been distressed for years,’ I said. ‘Why bother?’

Pappy Barking looked a bit sheepish.

‘We’ve been meaning to tell you, son,’ said Mum firmly, and I thought, uh-oh, here it comes, the grand retirement plan finally cranking into gear.
THE ADVENT OF MRS MAITHUNA

‘...so we’ve decided to get in some extra help and management know-how. It’s not the grand retirement plan, that’s a good few years off, but Pappy Barking doesn’t think we can manage, with just you and him, and all the extra trade we’re likely to have.’

‘Can’t we just stay as we are?’

‘You know very well yourself, Barry, that we have to expand or go under,’ said Mum. ‘Fees for Granny’s care in The Willows are rising week by week. Most of what Licit earns goes on corsetry. We had hopes when Daz got back from the war that he would come into the business ... Pappy Barking and Son ... but his country needs Daz in the top job. It’s left your Dad short-handed, apart from you, but you’ve gone all hoity-toity since you got your MA in Doughnut Studies. You seem to think that dung-work and mangel-and-acorn are beneath you. Pappy thinks you’re not putting your back into it, the way you used to, and I agree with him. Not to mention the competition from the tramp doughnuts that are swarming into the Ness night after night to undercut our business. Pappy can’t get round to slaughter them all, and besides, they’ve started fighting back. So we’ve decided to sell a half-share to a first-rate entrepreneur in order to maximise value.’

‘Sell a half-share? Who to?’ I said.

A bicycle bell ting-a-linged in the yard.

‘Here they are now. You can meet them yourself.’ Pappy Barking buckled on his gunbelt just in case they turned out wrong’uns.

‘Hold on,’ I said. ‘As the eldest boy, I was hoping to inherit the business, and pass it on to Little Black Baz. When he’s a jockey, the income will be useful if he can’t get a ride. It’s a precarious business being a jockey, even if you’re white, which he’s not.’
‘Barrymore my love,’ said Wendy, choking back a sob, ‘black or white, jockey or not, the dog has eaten our first born. How could you forget so soon?’

Yes, she was right. I’d forgotten. The business with the ghostly waitron had thrown me. Little Black Baz was swimming round in Jip’s sea of gastric juices, bleaching what skin colour he’d ever had. No use crying over spilt milk - best to just chin-up, eyes-down, ungird our loins, stiffen our sinews, and get on with procreating a new race of black jockeys, with the occasional white welder for backup.

We went out in the yard. A youth and a woman were dismounting from a tandem. She rode in front. The youth wore a pointy hat with a bell that jingled as he wagged his head in greeting. I recognized the youth as the TELEGRAM boy, whose trousers Jip had spunked a few years before. The woman wore a black eye-patch over her left eye, with a death’s head embroidered on it. On her head, she sported a tricorn hat with an ostrich feather plume. A Jolly Roger pennant fluttered from the handlebars.

‘Good morning,’ said the woman, very forthright, her tone brisk and businesslike. ‘I am the one-eyed merchant and entrepreneur, Mrs Maithuna, and this is my husband, Hubby Ketchup, the former TELEGRAM boy. I believe you are expecting us?’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said one-eyed Pappy Barking.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ said Mum. ‘Wendy, put the kettle on.’

‘Don’t bother on our account,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘We had tea, barmcakes, and jellied eels half-an-hour ago at the five-mile stone. Let’s get down to business.’

AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

‘The thing is,’ said Mrs Maithuna, ‘we will pay a fair price for a half-share, but unless you get a welder to fix the skin of the Doughnut, we will have to knock off a troop of monkeys from the asking.’
‘Monkeys. A troop. From the asking. And a sixpence,’ said Hubby Ketchup, waggling his pointy hat and jingling the bell.

‘We will get the work done, you have my word,’ said Pappy Barking.

‘After that,’ said Mrs Maithuna, ‘Hubby Ketchup and me can help the business comply with the Regulations. We can put in place an optimal husbanding regime - with your input of course, which we value – so together we can supply the market, and above all keep in touch with the customer and her needs. Diversify, go forth, and multiply, as the Breed Book bids us.’

‘Sounds like a good business plan,’ said Wendy.

‘No-one asked you,’ growled Pappy Barking, ‘all you’re fit for is opening your legs.’ He was out of sorts because earlier that morning, Wendy had refused to shuck his oyster.

‘Pleasing to be speaking of opening one’s legs, would one mind?’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘I have not had it since we left home, and the tandem teases my amorous propensities, especially on these rough roads.’

Without waiting for an answer, she called, ‘Here boy, Ketchup. Service.’

Hubby Ketchup had wandered off and was inspecting the skin of the Doughnut. When Mrs Maithuna called him to heel he came running back, bell jingling.

‘Be my guest,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘I’ll throw down a couple of sacks and Hubby Ketchup can do you right here in the yard if that’s agreeable. Unless you’d prefer the Temple ...?’

‘No, no,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘Here in the yard will do us fine. We will sacralize our new ground with an act of marital intercourse. Then, by means of doing the business, the business will bring forth good breed.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘It’s always worked for us.’
Hubby Ketchup stripped off his keks. He put Mrs Maithuna to the prick, in-out-in, with the bell on his hat jingling merrily, while we stood by watching. Wendy said she wished I had half the stamina of Hubby Ketchup, and I said I would try to last longer in future. Jip panted, looking for an opportunity to join in. No luck there, so he occupied himself with giving Ketchup’s keks a good rogering for auld lang syne.

Ketchup seemed a perpetual motion machine, but ten minutes into the act, he was put off his stroke by Jip who uttered a blood-curdling yelp. Jip squatted down beside the couple and tried to defecate but he couldn’t. His rectum was bulging with the strain. Then a tiny arm popped out of his back passage, waving a Union Jack.

‘It’s Little Black Baz,’ I said. ‘He’s trying to pass through Jip’s prolapsed back passage. And the Union Jack is upside down, an internationally recognised signal of distress. What shall we do?’

‘He will never make it,’ said Mrs Maithuna, getting up and stuffing a handful of straw up her twanky. Then she took out a knife and cut open Jip’s back passage.

‘There you go, gents, a healthy boy, even if he has come out the wrong hole,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘He’s a bit on the small side. I’ve never seen one this titchy before, and I’ve seen plenty. I used to be a midwife.’

‘Our first grandchild,’ said Mum, ‘unless you count the half-dozen misshapes Licit’s had taken away by the Corporation. Thank you Mrs Maithuna, you’ve saved his life.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Mrs Maithuna, fixing me with her one good eye, ‘but in future, remember, for the purposes of reproduction, each must do it with his own kind, as the Breed Book bids us. Do you hear me, young man?’

‘It isn’t what you think,’ I said. ‘I can explain.’

‘No, don’t bother,’ said Mrs Maithuna, pulling the straw from her twanky. ‘Let’s get down to business.’
So we did, each of us in turn sitting out their turn and cradling the baby, while the rest of us got on with forty shades of fornication. Little Black Baz was still waving his flag, now the right way up.

When we finished, the women shoved fresh straw up their *quesquedillos* and the men wiped their clotted jerusalems with squares of *The Times* which Mum fetched from the new dispenser in the outhouse.

Jip was yelping fit to bust all through this, and my clumsy attempts to include him by grabbing his dada and yanking seemed to do more harm than good.

‘He’s losing blood,’ said Wendy.

‘He’s got piles,’ said Pappy Barking.

‘I think it’s more like the epistostomy Mrs Maithuna gave him,’ I said.

‘Don’t be soft,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘Jip is a man not a woman. He couldn’t have one of those if he tried.’

‘I’ll get the first aid kit,’ said Mum and she came back with a bucket of boiling tar and a stick. She slapped on the tar and then tore a strip off her knickers and bandaged Jip’s back passage.

‘There,’ said Mum. ‘A good pair of apricot Keturahs spoiled, but worth it for our furry kinsman.’

‘Woof,’ said Jip, good old boy, right as rain.

‘I think we’d better stick Little Black Baz under the tap,’ said Wendy. ‘He stinks.’

‘He’s covered in dogshit,’ I said.

‘It’s hardly his fault. So would you be if you’d just climbed out of a dog’s arse.’

‘Back passage, please.’

‘Listen to him! So prim all of a sudden.’
I took the baby from Wendy and stuck him under the tap. He squallled a bit and spluttered and waved his arms about, dropping his flag. But he soon settled down when I retrieved it and put it back in his tiny fist.

Now that he was nice and clean, Little Black Baz looked blacker than ever and I felt “Horrid chills suffuse my marrow!” (Whitelady’s *Last Will and Testament*) as I grew scared of what my friends might say, once they knew I was the father of a black jockey.

‘Time to finalise the deal,’ said Mrs Matihuna. ‘We should look again at what needs doing to the Doughnut, in the way of remedials, and then we can agree a price. My actuarial calculator informs me this should be somewhere plus or minus a pony in the region of six hundred thousand monkeys.’

‘And a sixpence,’ whined Hubby Ketchup. ‘Don’t forget my sixpence.’

So we walked around the Doughnut on the outside, then we walked around the Doughnut on the inside. Ketchup checked the inventory of equipment. Pappy Barking told me to take Ketchup up the ladder, to the dome of the Doughnut - which I did, and he shouted a bit to Mrs Maithuna, and she shouted back, and he made some notes. Then we went down another ladder to the interior wall, out of sight of the party in the yard. I led Ketchup through the arch to the hole of the Doughnut, and we walked around it again, but in the opposite direction to when we were on the outside of the Doughnut. We examined the freezer, and Ketchup tut-tutted over the size, shaking his head, and making some calculations on a chart that came free with “Doughnuts Today!”

‘I am concerned by your Doughnut’s possible lack of airworthiness,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘We may wish to resite her some day. We’d better see how she flies.’

‘She flies beautiful, take it from me,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘And this site is the best in the county. We don’t need to move. Not like those vagrants you see wandering overhead.’
He pointed to the sky where, sure enough, a tramp Doughnut was wandering, in circles, spirals, and sidewise staggers, looking for a free berth.

Mrs Maithuna bared her ivory teeth. The bite sparkled with inlaid diamonds. She was a true Empress of the Doughnuts, clearly worth a fortune - minted and imperial. Whenever she dropped her dung it would be the sulphur dung of lions, very tasty no doubt just as it comes, no need even to fry it up.

‘Please to inform - have you flown her in the last year?’ demanded Mrs Maithuna. Pappy Barking said no, the year before, and that was just a bunny-hop so that I, the noble Lord Barrymore, could sweep under the skirts of the Doughnut. He hadn’t had any call to move the Doughnut since then – ‘but take it from me,’ he said with a lascivious wink, and rubbing his crotch, ‘everything is in working order.’

Mrs Maithuna whipped out a bamboo cane and rapped Pappy Barking over the knuckles.

‘Ouch, that hurt!’

‘Please to take your hand off your balls when you speak to me,’ said Mrs Maithuna.

‘Hands off balls, yes.’ Ketchup nodded, jingled, paused, and shrieked: ‘And hands off my sixpence!’

‘I’m nowhere near your sixpence, Hubby Ketchup, calm down,’ said Pappy Barking, blowing on his fingers.

‘Please to inform,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘How effective is the drainage system? It is rather wafty round here.’

Pappy Barking said the drain was working fine, the stink was him, he hadn’t had a chance to wash for months, so busy he’d been. He explained the drainage system. Evacuated waste filtered through the sluice, along the pipe to the effluent pond. The prevailing wind hustled the effluent stench over to the uninhabited area of the Ness – so
no complaints from the blow-ins, newly settled towards Chafford, and who didn’t understand our country necessities.

‘Her certificate of airworthiness is up to date,’ said Pappy Barking. He’d probably written the certificate last night when he knew for sure they were coming.

But I have to hand it to Pappy Barking, his forgeries are as good as the real thing – better, in fact, because they cost nixes. Anyway, apart from the tear in the skin – not a problem below two thousand feet – I’d kept her well maintained. She was mechanically sound. The tear came a few years back, when a particularly vicious porker broke loose by gnawing through the straps on the sledge while Pappy Barking and me were busy with Licit behind the sties. The porker kicked the side in before I got the electric prod on her.

‘We need to see the certificate, and see her fly. I take it that’s no problem?’ said Mrs Maithuna. Pappy Barking said no problem at all. He sent Jip into the house to fetch the folder where he kept all his paperwork.

Mrs Maithuna flexed her fingers. Her ruby and emerald rings caught fire in the sun. She ordered Hubby Ketchup to take a flight with me. I looked towards Pappy Barking, my eyebrow raised … yes? He nodded.

I fetched two leather flying-helmets from the hat stand in the hallway, and passed one to Ketchup. He had trouble because he put it on backwards, and his face disappeared behind a blank leather mask. Unable to breathe, he started to panic. He scrabbled at it, trying to pull it off, but suction held it firm on his mouth.

‘Like this,’ I said. I blew through the ear flap to break the suction, then deftly turned it right way round. I tied the strap under his chin, and gave it a tug. I popped his pointy hat back on top.

‘There. Right as ninepence.’
‘Say thank you to Master Barrymore,’ said Mrs Maithuna.

Jingle jingle.

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Hubby Ketchup is all thumbs sometimes,’ said Mrs Maithuna. She spat a gob of green gilbert into the dust and rubbed it with her boot.

The old ’uns got on with some rather stiff chit-chat about interior decoration and furnishings. I bowed to Ketchup and led the way to the Doughnut. Ketchup followed, shuffling his feet in the dust. I looked over my shoulder. He seemed nervous. I pulled down the cockpit ladder. I gave him a hand up. He was trembling.

‘You’re safe, no worries. I’m a qualified Doughnut pilot, first in my varsity class, with distinction, commendation - and knobs on.’

‘How many knobs?’ said Ketchup.

‘Six.’

Ketchup’s bell jingled, but I wasn’t sure if he was any the wiser. He studied with rapt attention the hairs standing stiff on the back of his left hand. He counted them out loud.

‘Four ... five ...’

I made sure Ketchup was seated securely with the neck rest in place and his seatbelt tight. I settled into the pilot’s chair, and began my pre-flight checks. I hit the R/T button, and winged my callsign – Tango Sierra - to the Chafford control tower. The Flight Captain acknowledged my call.

‘You haven’t been up for ages,’ he said. ‘I was getting lonely.’

‘As it happens, I’m up every night. Just got married. Been busy on the nest. The wife’s a real goer. You know how it is yourself.’
‘Chance would be a fine thing,’ said the captain. ‘The only time I get a bit these days, is when I go to the brothel the Fifth Monarchy Men run in Ockenden.’ He sobbed. ‘Ever since the missis ran off with the darkie milkmen.’

‘Not them again! Those darkie milkmen really are the limit. They shag anything and anyone that isn’t nailed down, and even some that is. The portable ones they stash on the milkloat to satisfy their carnal lusts whenever. But cheer up. As my old Granny used to say, it’s an ill wind, et cetera. Now you can have all the strange you want, yes? I hear the Fifth Monarchy Men run a good establishment.’

‘Not as good as the Domedrome Casino, but on my wages, I can only dream of such luxury.’

‘Maybe you could come over and do my half-sister Licit? She’s a proper grande horizontale, with a licence, and she services the Domedrome clientele - but she’s happy to work a foreigner at half-price. No overheads, see? No casino commission if you do it round the back of the sties.’

‘Oh, mate! That sounds the business! If you could put in a word .... ’

After a bit more banter, he gave me clearance for a domestic, waiving the take-off fee.

I powered up. The claws holding the Doughnut to the security ring were soon uncoupled, although one was a bit sticky. I made a note to oil it when we landed. I opened the throttle and put my foot to the verticalator. The Doughnut lurched into the sky – not the smoothest take-off I’ve ever managed, I admit. We spun a complete rotation clockwise, and then anti-clockwise, so that Ketchup could get a sense of how the home place lay snug within the lie of the land.

When you’re on the ground, you might think that all the buildings have been thrown together higgledy-piggledy, as the need arose for each one. You might think the effluent
pond had been dug at a random location. But from above, you can see the grand symmetry and the magnificent conception of the whole enterprise.

Westward on the southern bank, a column of smoke rose from the Gravesend crematorium, where the chimney was puffing away merrily like a proud father with a cigar. I asked Ketchup if he’d ever been to Gravesend, but he only grunted and clutched his guts.

**I DON’T WANT TO DIE**

I asked him if he needed a sick-bag and he said no. I threw him one anyway, and he fumbled the catch.

‘Ketchup, keep your nerve. Be strong, for the sake of your marriage and Mrs Maithuna, Empress of the Doughnuts.’

‘I love my Missis! I don’t want to die! I want to shag for ever!’

‘Remember what I told you - I’m a qualified Doughnut pilot, with proper training and a licence. You needn’t be scared.’

‘I am scared. If I’m killed, Mrs Maithuna will tell me off and never shag me again. She’ll spend my sixpence on a new eye-patch! The sixpence I want to leave to my old widowed mother, Goody Ketchup.’

‘I told you – I’m qualified. If Pappy Barking was piloting, even I would be scared. He’s never taken the test, and he’s uninsured.’

Now that we were airborne, and everything was humming nicely, I thought it would be a good idea to take Ketchup over towards Chafford Hundred, so he could see the glories of our local market town. Ketchup seemed to be feeling better now. He stopped gripping the armrests. His face lost its green tinge and was once more a lustrous black. We looked at each other, and he smiled and I smiled back. In that moment, I knew I’d found another and better brother. How I wished we had been raised together! Ketchup and me, ebony
and ivory, the twin colours of Africa, humankind’s ancestral home - rather than me and Daz, one Chafford whiteness annihilating the other.

We hit a patch of turbulence, the doughnut dropped suddenly and Ketchup spewed over the windscreen. There were flecks of his vomit on my cheek. I scraped it off with my finger and popped it in my mouth. Not bad - sort of sweet and sour. I felt closer to Ketchup than ever.

**A ROUND OF APPLAUSE AND A SQUELCH**

I got the Doughnut down without further mishap – but Ketchup’s face showed the aftershock of terror, and there was sick down his chin. Resisting the temptation to lick him clean, I reached over and wiped him with my flying scarf.

‘The freezer capacity is below current industry standard,’ said Ketchup. He was trying to cover his embarrassment with a show of bluff bravado.

‘I was going to get a bigger one,’ said Pappy Barking. ‘But now I’ve decided to sell the half-share *as is*. We can sort out a new freezer later when we’ve done the business plan.’

‘What about the welding?’ said Mrs Maithuna.

‘I mean *as is*, after the welding’s been done. I take full responsibility for that.’

‘That’s good, because otherwise we’ll have to knock off three hundred monkeys at least.’

‘Maybe more,’ said Ketchup.

‘Be *specific*, Hubby Ketchup. How much more?’ said Mrs Maithuna.

‘A sixpence.’

‘I don’t want to rush things,’ said Pappy Barking, ‘but round about now I should be putting Mum to the prick.’
‘Don’t mind us. We’ll carry on having a look around. If we’ve got any questions, we’ll ask young Barrymore.’

‘Right you are,’ said Pappy Barking. He grabbed Mum by the wrist and dragged her to the ground, putting on his caveman act for the visitors, to show them we’re no slouches in the matrimonial stakes, this side of the Ness.

I was about to give Pappy Barking a bit of a hand by titting Mum up while he got on down below, when Wendy called me back to my matrimonial duties.

‘ONE. You’re married to me now, and it’s high time you stopped titting-up your mother …’

I saw Pappy Barking give her a funny look, almost baleful, when she said this, but then in a trice he wasn’t given a chance to look at anything much except Mum’s quim as she pushed his head down between her legs.

‘TWO. You’re a father now. You have to look after Little Black Baz while I either THREE go to the Domedrome Casino or FOUR get on with my marking and preparation. FIVE Mrs Maithuna and Hubby Ketchup are our guests and if you neglect them, you neglect ME. And SIX if you neglect ME you piss all over our marriage vows and do dirt on life.’

‘I’m sorry Wendy,’ I said. ‘I know I’ll always be second-best after Daz, but if all I can be is sloppy seconds, then I will do my best to be the best sloppy seconds you ever had.’

Wendy tousled my hair.

‘Hey, that’s more like the Barrymore Barking I had to settle for rather than the Daz Barking I’d rather have had. Kiss-kiss. Bang-bang. Big hug.’

We hugged and my joyboy quickened.

Mrs Maithuna and Ketchup huddled in pow-wow. They straightened up.
‘Right you are,’ said Mrs Maithuna. ‘No more questions. We will give you two weeks to sort out the welding, otherwise the deal is off. There’s a Doughnut over on the other side of the Ness where they need a partner. We’re interested in taking a share, even though they are surrounded by tramps and it’s not as well-situated as yours. Neither does it have a boar and a sow of the prodigious breed and longevity of Baco and Ham - but it doesn’t need any welding. Do you take my meaning?’

‘I think we understand each other,’ said Wendy as Mum shouted, ‘I’m coming, I’m coming. I’ve come!’

‘Bravo,’ said Mrs Maithuna.

Pappy Barking was still on top, pumping away, his face contorted like one of the gargoyles on Saint Chafford’s church.

Mum whispered to her husband - our father, so the Breed Book tells - softly wheedling, ‘Come, husband, come.’

And Pappy Barking did as he was bidden, to a round of applause and a squelch.

SHUCKER ON SHIFT

Trying to find a welder wasn’t as easy as we thought, and it was a week before the job was done.

In the meantime, Pappy Barking seemed to be on edge with his nerves, as if he was having second thoughts about the deal. If he wasn’t pacing about the yard, he busied himself making senseless adjustments to the décor of Cottyto’s Temple - and when he wasn’t doing that, he spent hours just sitting on the shingle shore, staring out across the estuary, as if he was waiting to see Clotho, his long-departed father, rowing towards him, out of the haze, trailing a net swollen with plump herring – and berating him for sharing his patrimony with an outsider. I tell you straight - I was rushed off my feet, with the pigs and the porkers and the dung and the headcheese and charcuterie and all.
Late on Friday afternoon, Mum said she’d give me a break, and I walked stiffly down
the track (my muscles were taut and aching) intending to sit beside him and chat, and
maybe bring him out of himself.

But he was moody and had nothing much to say, beyond a few rambling remarks
about Clotho Barking, and how we’d never see the likes of him again ... how they broke
the mould, et cetera.

I tried to gee him up by suggesting a trip to the oyster sheds.

‘How about it? I’ll get the skiff and row us across.’

‘Not in the mood.’

I put my arm round Pappy Barking, but he brushed me away.

‘Suit yourself,’ I said.

We sat glumly together for a while. He shot me a sly look.

‘On the other hand ...’

So I went and got the skiff.

He cheered up a bit after that, especially when we discovered there was a fresh shucker
on shift.

He flipped his coin.

‘Your call, Barry.’

‘Tails.’

‘Sorry Barry, it’s heads again.’

I helped him out of his trousers and sat reading the horoscopes in “Doughnuts
Today!” until he’d finished and my turn came.
NO ONION JACK FOR NAUGHTY BOYS

‘I’m not sure he really wants to go into partnership,’ said Mum. ‘Bless him, he’s only doing it so he can spend more time on the nest with me. He knows I’m insatiable. Careful, watch what you’re doing, you’ll electrocute yourself.’

This last remark was addressed to Little Black Baz who was trying to push his as-yet-tiny harry-pipe into the wall socket beside the Rayburn. I picked him up, and sat him on my palm. He began to wail and beat his fists against my thumb.

‘It might work out for the best, Mum. (Shush now, baby, ... Mummy Wendy will be home soon.) Hubby Ketchup seems a nice enough chap, and a hard worker. (Here, young mithery smidgeon, stop wailing and have a biscuit.) Ketchup’s bringing in Thoth Tertius, and a couple of Thoth’s relations from the flying saucer commmunity, so he tells me. Ouch, that hurts.’

Little Black Baz was trying to stick a Chocolate Finger up my nose. He looked like a medieval siege-warrior with a battering ram. I brushed his Chocolate Finger away. He threw the biscuit to the floor, jumped from my palm, and trampled it to smithereens.

‘That’s naughty, I’ll tell Mummy Wendy you’ve been a bad boy.’

‘Want my flag,’ said Little Black Baz. ‘Onion Jack.’

‘No Onion Jack for naughty boys.’

‘Balks!’

I bent down and made as if to smack him, but he ran up my arm, and across my shoulder. He scrambled along the knotted veins in my neck. He hauled himself higher and whispered into my cavernous, wax-oozing lug.

‘I love you dearest Daddy Barking, but if you don’t give me my flag, I’ll tell Mummy Wendy you’ve been tupping the oyster-shuckers again.’
I felt proud, and slightly sick, that my son was capable of telepathy and blackmail. I took Onion Jack from behind my ear. Little Black Baz snatched it and leaped to the floor with a triumphant shout. Mum tut-tutted.

‘You’ll spoil that boy.’

‘Where’s the harm? He’s such a precocious little soul. The flag keeps him occupied. And if we get him a baton, he could join the majorettes when he’s a bit older.’

To make him a baton, I struck a match and blew it out. Little Black Baz gave a loud huzza. He grabbed the matchstick and marched across the kitchen floor, waving Onion Jack in one hand, and twirling his baton in the other. After a bit, he began singing *Hearts of Oak*. I sang along, baritone under his treble.

‘You’re only encouraging him.’

‘So what? He’s got a lovely voice and sings remarkably in tune. Anyway, children should be encouraged. Hubby Ketchup’s very good with him, like a favourite Uncle. They’ve a lot in common. They’re both black, for a start. The more I see of Ketchup, the more I like him. He’ll do wonders for this place, him and Thoth, and the other members of his crew.’

‘That remains to be seen. As long as Ketchup brings in men only, I don’t mind. Thoth is all right ... and the other mis-shapes ... but I don’t want that Mrs Tertius nosing about here, opening drawers and going through my smalls. She’ll only make mischief. She’s never forgiven us for her daughter smashing her cranium. You’d think the compensation the Corporation paid them would have sorted her out.’

‘I know what you mean. You don’t want another woman interfering in your kitchen, or washing your husband’s keks, or God forbid, shucking his oyster.’

‘Talking of shucking Pappy Barking’s oyster, what do you think are Mrs Maithuna’s intentions? I’m ever so worried. I think Pappy Barking fancies her something rotten.’
‘Though there isn’t much he wouldn’t poke, is there? I caught him trying the slit in the Doughnut the other day, just before the welder arrived. But remember, she’s a tycoon, so she won’t want to be down here on the Ness, hands-on. That’s what Hubby Ketchup’s for. Mark my words, he will be our straw-boss before long, and she will be at her headquarters in Chafford, plotting the hegemony of her Empire of the Doughnuts. We won’t see her that often, but if Pappy Barking wants her for a bit of strange up in town, what’s the problem? You can always take up with the darkie milkmen. Or maybe even Hubby Ketchup, and get your own back. He’s got a big one, a budgie more than Pappy Barking I should say.’

‘Maybe even two,’ said Mum wistfully.

‘There you go then. Cheep cheep.’

**MAMMA MIA**

Little Black Baz was still marching up and down, twirling his baton, waving his flag, and singing the same verses over and over. As yet, the only song he knew was Dibdin’s *Hearts of Oak*. As he sang, his nappy turned brown. I applauded his performance.

‘He’s done ca-ca. Clever boy.’

Mum sighed, and held out her hands.

‘Pass him to me. I’ll clean him in the kitchen, at the sink. He could do with a good wash anyway, dirty nappy or not – top and tail at least.’

*Bella Mamma Mia!*

**HOSPITAL CORNERS**

Worn out by his patriotic exertions, Little Black Baz fell asleep in his clean nappy. His chest rose and fell, and subtle snores escaped his blubbery lips. He lay by the bird-cage, where he’d been trying in vain to plant his flag within the mesh. The budgies gathered round, cheeping and crooning over their tiny visitor. It wouldn’t be long before baby
budgies were parading along his joyboy, with me proudly marking my son’s progress on the wall-chart.

Gingerly, I took Onion Jack from his fist and laid Little Black Baz in his egg-box crib, tucking him in neatly – with crisp hospital corners, and the flag for a counterpane.

THE ADVENT OF DOCK RAMPART

Two days later, Wendy was in the parlour with the blackest man I’d ever seen. He wore a three-piece chalk-stripe suit, and he radiated confidence, an alpha-male for sure. Wendy was smoking a long thin cheroot. I had never seen her smoke before, and I didn’t approve. Perhaps she smoked in secret, all through pregnancy too, and that was why Little Black Baz was so small. She didn’t see me come in.

Poor Mum picked up a copy of The Times and fanned the smoke away. Wendy turned and blew smokerings which rippled out and floated to the ceiling. Wendy gave Mum a broad smile.

‘Sorry, ducks, but I was gasping for a draw. Let me introduce you properly. This is my old Oxford chum, Dock Rampart. Dock, this is Barrymore’s mother, the infamous Ma Barking.’

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance, beautiful Madam Barking. No, please, don’t get up.’

‘Did you say Dick?’ said Mum.

‘Dock,’ said Wendy.

Mum settled back in her chair and gave Wendy a queer look. Wendy didn’t seem fussed. Seeing me, she lifted her hand casually, and beckoned with her forefinger, as if summoning a footman.

‘And this fellow, who has just sidled in, is my...my...’

She frowned. She brightened.
'Yes, my husband, worse luck ... Barrymore Barking the Third, or Fourth, or Fifth, I don’t know ... How many Barrymores is it now, Baz darling?'

‘Mmmnnndontknowmmmmnnn.’

‘What’s the matter?’ said Wendy. ‘Cat got your tongue?’

‘He burned his mouth half an hour ago on a scalding hot pig’s pizzle straight from the micro and I told him to keep his mouth filled with ice-cubes,’ said Mum. ‘Why is your friend so black? He’s not a milkman, is he?’

‘A touch of sun, Madam, nothing more,’ said Dock Rampart.

‘It must be very sunny where you come from, then.’

‘Surpassing hot, Madam.’ He took the cheroot from Wendy and inhaled deeply. He passed it back.

‘Where’s my darling baby?’ said Wendy.

On cue, Little Black Baz, now rested, came marching into the parlour, waving Onion Jack, and singing - but in some heathen jabber, not his English mother-tongue.

‘Ah, my scrumptious boy,’ crooned Dock Rampart. He bent down and scooped up the infant in his palm, where he strutted like Tom Thumb, burbling. Dock Rampart listened, with his head inclined and a rapt look on his face. He cupped a hand to his ear. He nodded.

‘Ah ... Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa, ancestral home of our species, the Motherland of us all, black or white. With a soupçon of Tok Pisin from the South Seas for spice. You’ve taught him well, Wendy my dear.’

‘Jambo, bwana, jambo. Me randy toto!’ shouted Little Black Baz, rhapsodizing macaronically, waving his flag with one hand while pleasuring himself with the other.

‘Onion Jack, number one flag, him b’long bigfella Buck House. Andy One, number one King, him bring cargo toot sweet, like Cottyto. Vodka na tonic, pronto. Chop chop.’
‘It’s Nature, not Nurture,’ said Wendy. ‘I think we have Granny Barking to thank for that. There seems to have been some upshift in the genetic line with her arrival in the clan’s breeding stock, almost a warp factor. She’s a marvellous natural linguist. Daz inherited her flair for languages, and now it appears our baby has too. Granny was a Bansom, you know. Second cousin to Hardy Ma. Granny was born in Wales and grew up there. Then she came to Chafford and the Ness, and married Clotho Barking.’

‘Ah, that explains so much. Dear Clotho, what a fellow of infinite jest he was. He had such a subtly ironic view of Britannia’s herring fishery and a cheeky way with pilchards. We shall never see his like again.’

Dock gave me a sly look.

‘Unless,’ Dock said, ‘the linear temporal progression that’s lately been getting on everyone’s tits is sorted out. What sayest thou, Barrymore, old kitbag?’

Dock Rampart winked at Wendy. He bent down to put Little Black Baz on the floor. He stood up, sniffed his palm, and wiped it on my shoulder.

‘Congratulations on a fine son, Barry.’

I knew he mocked me. Stretching his neck, he cleared his throat and began a lecture. Little Black Baz stuck his fingers in his ears and waddled off. His nappy and plastic pants were beginning to droop.

‘My understanding of orthodox linguistics, following Chomsky, is that while each of us at birth may be primed in the medulla cortex with a universal language generator, a language acquisition device or LAD for short... which makes a baby potentially competent in any tongue ... the acquisition of any particular tongue, and one’s actual competence and performance in that tongue, depend on early exposure to its grammar, including of course its phonology. The medium of transmission is one’s dear mother, the
key representative of our native speech community. Failing that, we need pedagogy, and competent preceptors, to make our mark.’

Little Black Baz dropped his nappy and gripped his growing joyboy in his two fists.

‘But perhaps that isn’t the case here,’ said Dock. ‘If so, it’s truly remarkable, and his brain would be worthy of vivisection by the Mad Scientists at Mad Scientist School, if he weren’t Wendy’s son. Prodigious.’

‘Oo, you should meet our Daz, he’s fond of big words too,’ said Mum.

‘I already have that honour,’ said Dock Rampart. ‘We shared rooms in Balliol throughout the year Daz was up. In the vacations we worked as darkie milkmen. The role comes natural to me - with rings of white slap around my eyes and lips, of course - but I helped him black-up each morning, to get the authentic look. In fact, I was the only genuine black man among the whole crew. We were both language scholars.’

‘Then you’ll know he’s top-notch in the language stakes, picks them up no sweat. He’s fully fluent in Ancient Hittite and goodness knows what else.’

Mum, bless her, was trying hard to match Dock Rampart’s patrician tones.

Wendy looked down at my trouser-leg and gasped.

‘Barrymore, darling, have you done wee-wee in your keks?’

I had put ice-cubes in my pocket, for cooling my tongue later, and they were beginning to melt. Blushing, I unbuckled, and let my trousers fall. I stepped out of them, and kicked them away. Dock Rampart took a lorgnette from his coat pocket and held the glass to his eye.

‘Do I see six or seven wee little cheepers?’

‘He tells me eight, but he can’t count,’ said Wendy. ‘Chop chop, Barrymore! Dock has been promised tea, and tea Dock shall have. With crumpets and muffins, unsalted butter and the finest honey. And do wash your hands.’
Wendy showed me her lemon-sucking face. I picked up my trousers and slung them over my shoulder. I hefted the tea-tray, and went back to the kitchen. I was beginning to feel like a hen-pecked Cinderella, but at least the swelling in my tongue had gone down. I hung my trousers near the Rayburn, and got busy making a fresh brew.

Pappy Barking sidled into the kitchen. He was walking funny, as if he had an obstruction in his trousers, which of course he had.

‘Where’s Mum? I’m gagging for it. Mrs Maithuna wouldn’t let me cop an emergency feel. Says I stink. Can’t say she’s wrong. But when does anyone ever get the chance of a wash?’

‘Mum is in the parlour, but you’ll have to wait. We’ve got a visitor.’

‘Oh yes? We’ll see about that. Meanwhile, where’s Licit?’

‘Gone to the Domedrome. It’s her afternoon shift.’

‘Where’s Hubby Ketchup? He’ll have to do.’

‘Haven’t seen him for a while. He said he was going over to Baco’s sty to vaseline his pizzle.’

‘He could do that here, there’s a jar by the sink.’

‘Baco’s pizzle, not his own. He noticed that Ham’s scratchings were playing havoc with poor old Baco’s jerusalem. Baco’s been walking with his back trotters well apart lately, because of the friction, so a spot of lubrication is needed.’

Just then we heard a trombone glissando from Baco in the sties, starting low and rising high, finishing off with Baco’s trademark hiccup. He was on the job again, good old boy! From afar, Ketchup whooped encouragement.

Pappy Barking threw back his Stetsoned head and laughed.

‘Yes siree! Sounds like the business-from-behind is getting under way. It does my heart good to hear the priapic fanfare, even after all these years. Who’s the visitor?’
‘A friend of Wendy’s from the varsity. Chap called Dock Rampart, blacker than
Elgin’s Knocker. Never seen one like him.’

‘I don’t mind darkies, as you know. Some days I wish I was one myself. I’d love to
catch a gang of them on the job with Mum, the blacker the better. And some have such
good business sense, in addition to their substantial endowments. Take Mrs Maithuna,
she’s so smart, and she has a ha-ha that would bring credit to a giant cephalopod, just
like your Wendy. I’ll bring you up to date later, on what Empress Maithuna and me have
got planned for the business. In the meantime, get your keks on, and entertain this
Rampart chap, while I waltz Mum upstairs.’

My trousers were still wet. I rummaged in the airing cupboard and found a pair of
hiking shorts. They were Lederhosen, with supple leather braces, left behind from the
time we were doing bed and breakfast, and a troop of Bavarians came, riding motorbikes
they’d hired in Chafford. They were expecting mountains, like they had back home, but
in the end they weren’t too disappointed that the Ness is mostly flat, because we kept
Licit home to attend to them for the week they were here. They didn’t have much chance
to wear the Lederhosen after that. Licit kept them constantly on the job, queuing up for
sloppy seconds the minute they were done. A nice little earner, and I made a week’s
wages in tips, clearing away tissues and the like, keeping the room aired so that it didn’t
smell too much like a spunk hospital. It occurred to me that if ever I tired of piggery and
fancied a cushy job, I might do the same at the Domedrome Casino. Maybe Licit would
put in a good word for me.

I hitched up the braces, stretched them with my thumbs, and hoisted the Lederhosen so
that they cupped my bumcheeks. While the tea was brewing, I swaggered around the
kitchen as if I was hiking over hill and dale, through valley and rill. Lederhosen suited
me, the soft leather was a comfort to my bare-naked meat and two veg and it cosseted
my um-ka a treat. As I swaggered, I sang the *Happy Wanderer*. All I need to complete my happiness was a Tyrolean hat, with a feather in the band. There was one here somewhere.

**STARS IN THEIR EYES**

I got back to the parlour with the tea-tray. Mum had gone upstairs with Pappy Barking to renew their marriage vows.

‘Pappy Barking whisked her away, on a magic carpet of desire,’ said Wendy. ‘Forty years married, and still slavering over each other. I don’t suppose we’ll be doing the same. In fact, I’ll be surprised if we last another forty minutes... Barry, why are you wearing that hat and those shorts? They look ridiculous without the proper socks.’

Wendy rolled her eyes.

‘Dock, you were saying ...? Please to repeat, for the benefit of *Herr* Barrymore.’

‘Yes - two sugars please, *mein Fuehrer*, and a mere finger of milk – Daz has invited me to create a new theatre company. As you know, Everyman Jack has tasked Daz, in this year of Jubilee, with the creation of a new Festival of Britain. It is now a hundred years since the previous festival, so another is well overdue. The company will perform patriotic and sentimental works to stir the populace and augment their growing affection for our King, and his reptilian friends across the Western Ocean, who dwell in tenements, malls, and marbled halls of surpassing loveliness. After a tour of the provinces, to iron out any wrinkles, we give a Command Performance before Andy One and his betrothed, the Dauphine of Um-Ka. Daz is sending an embassy to Um-Ka to bring her hither to her nuptials. The royal marriage will cement the fledgling alliance between our two proud nations. How sweet it is, the yoke of royal marriage, and how provoking of amity among the gullible.’

He smiled a cynical smile and continued.
‘Daz has instructed me to offer Wendy the position of *ingénue* in the new touring production of Whitelady’s *Frigadoon*. It will be the jewel in the festival crown. The company will embark on the good ship Campania Two, for a tour of Britannia’s ports – Lowestoft, Hull, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Peterhead, Glasgow, Belfast, Liverpool, Swansea, Cardiff, Bristol, and Southampton. We finally dock at Gravesend, thus completing our circumnavigation of this sceptered isle. We shall transfer to the Domedrome, and perform there, as the climax to the Festival.’

I knew *Frigadoon* well, a frothy musical, merely a *jeu d’esprit*, and one of Whitelady’s minor works. The Chafford Hundred Light Operatic Society had performed it the year before last. To my mind, it was chiefly remarkable for its “book”, devised by Whitelady’s collaborator, Rear Vice Admiral of the Blue, Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN – with the story loosely adapted from an original scenario by the Marquis de Sade. The musical score was inoffensive at best, Whitelady having composed most of it himself alongside the song lyrics. However, on the credit side, the costumes had been sumptuous, and gorgeous frillies were on display from curtain-up to close.

‘Little Black Baz will come to sea with us, of course,’ said Wendy.

‘He can’t possibly fend for himself in the hurly-burly of a touring theatre company, especially one that’s going to sea in the company of outrageously endowed rum-sodden matelots.’

‘I am his mother. I shall be with him twenty-four-seven. Access to Little Black Baz will be strictly rationed. Officers only.’

‘He’s only three weeks old. You’ll be busy with rehearsals and whatnot. I volunteer to come along and look after him. I don’t want him to neglect his education or be abused, even by officers. He needs to pass his horsey exams if he wants to become an apprentice
jockey. And then there’s Mad Scientist School to consider. The prospectus arived this morning.’

Wendy and Dock looked at each other in dismay.

‘O no, Barrymore, darling,’ said Wendy. ‘Daz wouldn’t like you coming along at all. Daz is just as keen as you to ensure that Little Black Baz fulfills each one of his ambitions – but beginning with his career in musical comedy. What do you think all that marching about, baton-twirling and singing has been in aid of? At the end of the tour, he can go on to be a jockey of colour - and take in Mad Scientist School at his leisure, maybe after he’s won the Derby.’

From below came a squeaky voice.

‘Doesn’t Onion Jack get a say in this?’

We all looked down. Little Black Baz had one hand on his left hip, and his flag in the other.

‘No,’ said Wendy. ‘As your mummy, you may trust me - and Uncle Daz and Uncle Dock - to know what’s best for you. Look, Uncle Dock has bought you a lovely new Onion Jack. Bigger than the one you have. A real fuck-off flag. Go and wave it outside, there’s a dear.’

‘Hurrah for my new Onion Jack! Three cheers for Mummy Wendy, and Uncles Daz and Dock! Balks to Daddy Baz!’ And with loud huzzas, Little Black Baz toddled off towards the sties, to annoy Baco by using his flagstaff as a pretend catheter – something I had warned him about before, having come a cropper that way myself when a nipper.

‘Dock and I are due at rehearsal,’ said Wendy.

And off went Wendy to rehearse Frigadoon in the Chafford Village Hall, with Dock in tow.
BEST NOT DO THAT, SON

Little Black Baz came back from the sties, where he’d been tormenting Baco. He said he was ‘shagged out’, but going for a ‘hand-shandy’ in his pit all the same.

‘Charming!’ said Mum, glancing up from the crossword and frowning at him. He gave her the finger, but luckily she had her head down over the newspaper again. I offered to read him a bedtime story.

‘No thank you, Daddy Baz. I can read for myself now.’

Mum and I drew our chairs close together, to mull over the events of the day. I placed an affectionate hand on her left marimba and squeezed.

‘Ow! Best not do that, son.’

‘What’s up?’

‘I’m a bit sore there and I can feel a lump. I might get Pappy Barking to take a look if it doesn’t clear up in the next few days.’

‘No offence, but if I were you, I would see a proper doctor. There must be one in Chafford somewhere.’

‘Bet you didn’t know, that years before you and Daz and Licit came along, Pappy Barking was a doctor. With proper training, and a certificate that someone else wrote for him, not one of his own.’

‘Pappy Barking, a doctor? With a certificate that someone else wrote for him? What happened to queer his pitch? Did he get struck off?’

‘Best you ask him yourself. Then, when you find out, you can tell me.’

HIS SLACK AND TORTURED ‘BROWN’

An hour or so went by. It was time we had a look at Little Black Baz, to check he was still breathing, so we went upstairs to the nursery. When we got there, his eggbox crib was empty. There was a note with tiny writing propped against the alarm clock. I found
a magnifying glass. We went back to the parlour, and I read the letter aloud while Mum did the crossword.

“Dear Daddy Baz and Nana Barking,

I do not want to make my stage debut in a work so downright queer, and simultaneously slight and vacuous, as Frigadoon. (I would rather play Prince Hamlet in drag, than impersonate Micro Disney, the singing leprechaun, in frieze and fustian.) Also, I do not relish the prospect of going to sea and being sodomised by a queue of outrageously endowed rum-sodden matelots. Not a proper fit, I trow. You can see it coming a mile off, can’t you? Best to nip it in the bud.

“Fie upon Uncles Daz and Dock and the hegemony of Everyman Jack! As for Wendy, my so-called mother, words fail me! How could she think of selling me into sexual slavery on the high seas? With such a start in life, it would only be a matter of time before I was ashore again, thoroughly damaged in body and mind, eking out a pathetic living by hawking my slack and tortured brown down the ’dilly.”

Mum looked up from her crossword. ‘What does he mean … “hawking my slack and tortured brown down the ’dilly”?’

‘He might become a rent-boy in SW1.’

‘It’s a good address, but still not the sort of thing I can brag about to Goody Clunge.’

‘Let me read the rest. Ahem …’

“Also I’m fed up with all the kids at school laughing at me because I’m only three inches tall, and still wear a nappy. They say I look like a cockroach. If you ask me, they are all racists. So I’m going to Newmarket, to live my dream of being a jockey of colour. After that, we’ll see about Mad Scientist School – or perhaps I could do both at the same time. Riding the gallops gives a jockey plenty of time to conduct thought experiments and solve the mathematical conundrums that will lead to the amelioration of the linear
temporality that lately has been getting on everyone’s tits. The School prospectus looks inviting - men in white coats with bulging foreheads and pulsating brains. They all seem to wear spectacles and have lots of pens and pencils peeping out of their coat pocket.

“But first, let me win the Derby, riding in the green, gold, and purple silks of the greatest sovereign to whom a subject ever owed allegiance - Andy One! God Save the King!

“Beep beep! There’s the taxi. Got to run. See you around like a toilet roll. Your loving son and grandson,

Little Black Baz ”

‘I didn’t know he could write,’ I said. ‘He must have learned at school.’

‘I didn’t know he was going to school,’ said Mum.

‘Neither did I. He must have gone to school while we were out at Chafford market buying the mangel-and-acorn. As it happens, I didn’t even know he knew he was black. We’ve never said. Wendy and I were in agreement on that. His self-esteem seems to have taken a knock. He doesn’t look in the slightest like a cockroach – not any more. It must be the bullies at school. Racists, like he says. Anyway, all babies look like cockroaches at first, don’t they?’

‘For a while, yes. You lasted longer than most.’

Just then, Wendy and Dock Rampart rushed in.

‘Where’s Little Black Baz? The charabanc has arrived to take us to the good ship Campania Two.’

‘Sorry Wendy, you’re too late,’ said Mum, taking charge of the situation. ‘Little Black Baz has gone to live his dream.’

‘It’s his dream to go on the stage.’
‘No, Wendy,’ said Mum, ‘the stage isn’t his dream, it’s your dream. I admit, when he was smaller, he was fond of majorettes and marching bands, baton-twirling and flag-waving. Be that as it may, his true desire is to become the first black jockey to ride wearing the green, gold, and purple colours of his sovereign and to win the Epsom Derby for His Majesty the King.’

Dock Rampart fell to his knees, raised his hands to heaven and cried:

‘A black jockey to win the Derby, in the colours of our sovereign, oh joy! Perhaps, after all, this happy elopement is for the best.’ Tears coursed down his cheeks.

‘Oh, for goodness sake, be practical,’ said Wendy. ‘Now we need to find someone to play Micro Disney. If we don’t have a singing leprechaun, Daz and Everyman Jack will consign us to the galleys.’

Dock Rampart leaned close and whispered in her ear. Wendy nodded.

‘Right,’ said Wendy. ‘There’s nothing for it, but to have Barrymore play the part of Micro Disney the singing leprechaun.’

‘But I’m six foot two.’

‘A mere detail,’ said Dock Rampart. ‘Frigadoon is not a piece of theatrical realism. It’s an Expressionist work, a subtle blend of light and shadow, back-projected film, smoke and mirrors, and cabaret songs. For good measure we can doctor the lines to suggest radioactive mutation caused by a crashed flying-saucer at the time of Cromwell. Macro Disney the Mutant, rather than Micro. No-one will think your height is odd.’

‘Sorted,’ said Wendy. ‘What about the lyrics of his signature song, “I’m a wee wee man, with a big big heart”?’

‘Transposition of epithets. “Big big man, wee wee heart.”’

‘Dock, you are a genius.’
‘First class congratulatory honours, my dear, with knobs on. Finest first of my year, barring Daz. What else would you expect?’

**A RAW TALENT FOR MUMMING**

And so began my career in the musical theatre – a career all too brief, as you shall see.

In the meantime, I was not entirely surprised to find I had a raw talent for mumming. My singing voice has always been a good strong baritone – too broad and deep for playing a standard leprechaun, but needs must when the devil drives, and Dock said I could inhale helium for the shows, which would make my voice go high and funny, and so make a nice comic contrast with my height. As to ‘business’ I was astonished to discover how much I had absorbed over the years by watching the performance of the ‘stars’. Gawping slack-jawed at the actors in all those matinees with a bag of pork scratchings in my lap at the Chafford Alhambra over the years had paid off, and rehearsals went swimmingly.

The main thing with acting, as Gervase Whitelady rightly opines, is not to interfere with the pale and tender chucklewit boys you find hanging round the stage-door (they are kept warm for Gervase himself) nor do the business-from-behind on any other cast member - unless it’s scripted, or after-hours when it’s any port in a storm.

**EFFING EFFER’S EFFING FUCKED**

I shouldered my dittybag. The charabanc was waiting to take me off to Harwich where the good ship Campania Two was berthed. The driver was in a lather. He strutted round the vehicle, kicking the tyres and screaming at his mate.

‘The fucking fucker’s fucking fucked!’

‘I s’pose a fucking fucker’s fucking fucked it,’ said the driver’s mate.

‘I’ll well and truly fuck any fucking fucker who fucks the fucking fucker.’

His mate looked askance.
‘Sorry, chief, you wouldn’t get away with it - fucking the fucker who fucked the fucker like that. Neither the Breed Book, nor The Marriage Art covers such a contingency.’

The driver took off his peaked cap and scratched his head, as if he could rake up a solution from his scalp.

‘Your mate is correct,’ I said to the driver. ‘Rear Vice Admiral Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN, is most particular about it. A particular fucker might get fucked, but you can’t seek retribution by turning the tables and fucking the fucker – the original fucker who fucked the fucker, I mean.’

‘No one asked you, you la-di-da short-eyed nonce.’

‘Sorry I spoke.’

‘You will be if you don’t shut your cakehole. Have I fucking got to fucking spell it out in fucking letters six foot fucking high? It was Goldtop Ron, the fucking Head Honcho of the fucking darkie milkmen - the fucking fucker who fucks the charabanc boss’s fucking daughter.’

‘Who? Goldtop Ron? That fucking fuck of a darkie fucking milkman’s honcho? Nah! Wouldn’t have fucking thought it was him,’ said the driver’s mate. ‘If you were to fucking ask me, I fucking think it was fucking well the other fucking fucker, the one who fucked the fucking fucker so it was fucking good and proper fucked the last fucking time it was fucking—well truly fucked.’

‘Sorry to interrupt this fascinating discourse, but I have to get to Harwich.’

‘Fuck off, toe-jam. Not Goldtop Ron, then? You mean the other fucking fucker? Him who fucked the fucking fucker so it was good and proper fucked? You’re fucking havering. “Awa’ tae fuck,” as old Cunty used to say. Go and fuck yourself in fucking Fuckland with the other fucking auto-fuckers. It couldn’t have fucking been him who
fucked the fucking fucker, ’cos he’s over the other side of the Ness fucking that old fucking fucker with the tasty lingerie, the fortune telling woman, the one who used to be a school inspector.’

‘If he’s fucking fucking Hardy Ma fucking Bansom, he ought to be fucking ashamed of himself at digging her up. Headless-but-Hardy Ma fucking Bansom has been fucking dead for the past five fucking years.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘Do you mind if I butt in? I have to get to Harwich. Any chance the problem, whatever it is, will be fixed any time soon? I have to be in make-up by half-past four.’

‘Fuck off, you fucking fuck,’ said the driver’s mate. ‘No fucking chance. The fucking problem is the fucking fucker’s fucking fucked, as you might have fucking gathered by now. And we don’t take kindly to short-eyed nonces who mince around the manor in make-up, unless they really are bona-fucking-fide fucking fuckable fucks we’d like to fuck, or they intend to put out as if they fucking were, even though they’re fucking not, if you get my drift, know what I fucking mean?’

‘Not sure. But I have a ticket for the charabanc, the unfortunate fucking fucker which you say is fucking fucked.’

‘For fuck’s sake! The fucking fucker is fucking fucked. You can poke your fucking ticket where the –’

‘- darkie milkmen sling their fucking pudding, yes, I know, but as I said, not so long ago to Cunty McFuck, I doubt there’s room.’

**AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE STANDS ME IN GOOD STEAD**

‘You don’t know him!’ The driver’s mate took a step back, clearly astonished. He whistled, and slapped his knees. The driver gave me a queer look.

‘Do you really know old fucking Cunty?’
‘Do I know old Cunty McFuck? Of course I fucking do. He shags my Grandmother.’

‘Put the fucking fucker right fucking there my old fucking kitbag,’ said the driver’s mate, thrusting out his grubby mitt. The driver cocked his head and twanged his braces.

‘Cunty McFuckingFuck, well fuck me,’ he said. ‘Best charabanc driver we had, back in the days when charabancs were in their prime. Drink and the burrs was his downfall, of course.’

‘That and the broon, as he used to call it,’ said the driver’s mate. ‘Cunty were a reet canty booger for the broon, uncanny lad, as Elsie Marley used to say.’

‘Don’t talk daft, he were a Scotchman, not a Geordie. Being invisible didn’t help with the Inspectors, of course, so they had to put him out to pasture at last. No sight nor sound of him for ages, and then it was us had the honour of taking him off to The Willows with that dear old granny who lived round here.’

‘They were inseparable by then,’ I said. ‘Auld Granny Rattletrap was his pet-name for her, but she was really Granny Barking, and before that …’

‘Spare us the fucking genealogy, squire. That was your granny, you said earlier? Righty fucking right, it’s all coming clear now. He was shagging her, was he? Lucky fucker. Wouldn’t mind a bit myself. Cor, lummy, she fucking knew how to fucking swear she did, in all the post-Babel languages of the European Union and some beside. Fair turned the air blue, she did. Comanche too, weren’t it? A bird who palavers Comanche gets me horny every time.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ said the driver’s mate. ‘Depends on the dialect though - and what was that song ... the Arrapahoe ditty she used to chaunt?’

‘The one about stuffing straw up her yawning snatch and setting fucking fire to it, and the Red Indians all standing around breathing in the smoke, to make sure the peace treaty with General Custer was ratified by the United States Government?’
‘That’s the one! Very catchy tune. And Cunty’s party-piece was the ancient French chanson about the nonce who climbs up and buggers the bloke swinging on the gallows. You know the one ... yes, you do, don’t shake your head. The nonce who’s never satisfied.’

‘Oo, get her,’ said the driver, flapping his wrist and pointing to his mate. ‘Not a fucking fuck in his entire last fucking utterance, the bleedin’ la-di-da nonce with his fucking chanson akimbo.’

‘The chanson your mate refers to sounds like Whitelady’s Beau Geste du Pendu,’ I said. ‘The French Foreign Legion adopted it as a marching song. Granny Barking used to play it on the harmonium, for Cunty McFuck to sing along. A jaunty melody but the words lack charm, one feels, although they have a certain swagger which must appeal to Legionnaires. However, not Whitelady’s finest strum of the lyre, and Cunty McFuck never seemed to sing quite in tune.’

‘Don’t you fucking slag off Cunty McFuck!’ screamed the driver while the driver’s mate danced another frenzied jig, crying, ‘That’s right! Don’t you fucking dare come the old acid with Caledonia’s finest junk-tracked specimen, or you’ll be well and truly fucked yourself you fucking short-eyed fucker of a fucking nonce.’

He stopped dancing and wagged his nicotine-stained forefinger at me.

‘And don’t you go fucking slagging off Gervase Whitelady neither.’

‘I wasn’t about to.’

‘I should fucking think not! He was a cunting poet for the fucking working chap, our Gervase.’

‘Even if he was a short-eyed nonce,’ said the driver.
I WERE FRIT I WOULD MISS YOU

‘There you are! I were frit I would miss you.’

Aunt Josephine guided her bicycle to a stop.

‘You would have,’ said the driver, ‘if the effing effer hadn’t been effed.’

‘Well and truly you-know-whatted,’ said the driver’s mate.

‘You want me?’ I said. I was surprised because Aunt Josephine had never taken much interest in me once I was grown.

She lifted her goggles.

‘Keep your nozzle in you trousers, boy, and don’t get too excited, you’re never man enough for me. Nor my niece, it seems. Do you know Wendy is making the two-backed beast with a black man?’

‘Look, thanks for the advice, but time’s getting on and I have to get to Harwich. Black or white is all the same to me. What is it you want?’

‘Don’t be so pompous, Barry. I wiped your um-ka as a baby.’

‘Thanks for that. It was nice to have someone bother.’

‘A pleasure. I have come to inform you that Daz is aware of the effing effedness of the effing effer, and has offered to give you a ride to Harwich in his helicopter milkfloat.’

‘What about Wendy and Dock? They were coming in the effing effer too.’

‘Wendy is riding her motorbike instead, all the way to Harwich Quay. You can hear her setting off now. Dock is riding pillion.’

Wendy’s motorbike streaked past in a gust of wind. She raised a leather-gloved hand in salute. Dock’s arms were clasped tight around her waist. The bike disappeared round the bend of the Harwich road. The exhaust left a cloud of oily blue smoke. It tasted ashen and bitter on my tongue - the abject tang of cuckoldry and shame.
OLD SLEDGE

Goldtop Ron piloted Daz’s helicopter milkfloat. He sat in the driving seat, fixing his blackface slap in the rearview mirror. As I boarded, he turned in his seat, upthrust his thumb, stretched his livid lips to O, and gave me a cheery wave. I shouted back, over the din of the engine and rotors.

‘Good to see you again, Ron.’

‘Baz Bud! Long time we’m not have blast.’

‘Book you now, Goldie, for laters.’

‘Laters, yeah’m.’

Daz and I sat in the back, among the milkcrates, and played a game of Old Sledge with a greasy pack of cards, for old times’ sake, which gave me a chance to renew my acquaintance with Madam Jojo.

‘How’s she looking?’ said Daz.

‘Bonny as ever. Nice new merkin, too.’

‘She was complaining about looking too butch since she was circumcised. So I had the King’s merkin maker make her a merkin. What do you think?’

‘You spoil that prick.’

‘Yeah, I know, but …’ Daz shrugged and smiled ruefully. ‘Harry-pipes, eh? Can’t live with ’em, can’t live without ’em.’

We finished our game as Harwich came in sight.

‘That’s sixpence you owe me,’ said Daz. I got out my purse.

‘No, pay me another time.’

‘Not sure I’ll remember.’
‘I never forget,’ mouthed Daz. ‘Or maybe I could get it off Hubby Ketchup – but I’d have to kill him before I could prise it from his cold dead fingers. Here we are. We’ll drop you off just outside the harbour – it’s only a short walk from there to the quay.’

‘Fine by me.’

Goldtop Ron brought the helicopter to a steady hover above the car-park of an old inn. Daz threw a rope ladder out the door.

‘That’s it for now, Barry,’ said Daz. ‘Just shin down the ladder and you’re there.’

‘There’s so much I’ve been wanting to ask you …’

‘No time now. Hope to make it to the show next month, maybe when you dock at Kingston-upon-Hull - so we can have a catch-up then. By the way, how’s your Ancient Hittite coming along? Still having trouble with the ablative?’

‘Sorry to say I’ve neglected it in recent months. Not much call for it around the Doughnut.’

‘Never was,’ said Daz. ‘That was one of the reasons I had to leave home. Now that you’re on the way to a theatrical knighthood – I’ve had a word with Everyman Jack, and he’s squared it with Andy One - you might find Hittite comes in handy. The Old Hittite tongue has become a sort of lingua franca among the theatrical profession. Keeps outsiders on the hop, so to speak.’

I shook hands with Goldtop Ron, every wife’s best friend around the Ness – shook hands with Daz and counted my fingers - and kissed Madam Jojo good bye. She was weeping salty tears, sad to see me go. Then it was out the door and down the ladder.

**THE INN AT THE SIGN OF THE THREE STAVERS**

The inn was heaving with trade, most of it rough, although here and there I recognised islands of gentility. The Lictor of Balliol sat with three students in a shabby booth, conducting a tutorial over pints of foaming English ale, holding forth on the subject of
the long years of diplomacy Daz had spent in grinding to chaff the question of the Um-Ka succession. They were a long way from Oxford and I assumed this was all part of an attempt to extend the University’s extra-mural work. I got a tea-and-two from the urn and asked if they minded me sitting in?

‘I’m the brother of Prime Minister Daz,’ I said, bumming my chat. ‘You four seem among the only normal people in here, most of the others are rather nautical and not to be trusted with an actor’s brown.’

‘You can sit with us and keep your bottle tight,’ said the Lictor, ‘so long as you get rid of that disgusting collation that stinks like the effluent outpourings of the Gravesend crematorium. What is it – tea-and-two?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so. That muck is responsible, if anything is, for the decline of Britannia as a world power. Have a proper English drink.’ He pointed to one of his students, a serious-looking, long-beaked young man, in a polka-dot bowtie and heavy owlish glasses. ‘You … you disgusting blister of pus … go and get Mister Barking a pint of foaming English ale, and fetch me a schooner of Nelson’s Blood while you’re at it.’

‘Yes sir, your Lictorship, straight away. One thing – what’s Nelson’s Blood?’

‘Rum, boy! Rum! Get a jildy on, or I shall thrash you with the cat-o’-nine when we get home to Balliol. Your Lictor craves rum! Rum and bum!’

The youth tugged his forelock, slid out of the booth and struggled to the bar, wincing as outrageously endowed rum-sodden matelots tapped his arse at every step. I poured my tea-and-two into a wilting aspidistra. The plant perked up straight away.

‘Let me introduce you,’ said the Lictor. ‘These two relics sitting opposite are what we laughingly call students. They don’t have half the talent of the young chap I sent to the bar, but they are triers, I’ll give them that. No need to bother with their names, you will
never remember them. I shall allow you to think of the chap called to the bar as the Owl, and this one here as the Pussycat …’ (The effeminate young man blushed as the Lictor jabbed his finger at him.) ‘And this ugly abortion, squirming like he’s squatting on a cauldron of haemorrhoids … Lord knows who he is, some working-class oik Everyman Jack foisted on me … What’s your name, laddie? How about Cockroach? Will that do, old chap?’

‘We are here on a day-trip,’ mumbled Cockroach. ‘Taking education to the masses. They don’t seem too keen. Not like us.’

The students lapsed into bashful silence. I got the impression they were grateful for any sort of attention from the Lictor, even abuse. They were content to remain pseudonymous and silent for a while, but overjoyed and almost loquacious when the Lictor introduced me with my full name and titles.

‘Gosh, the Tartan Duke of the Bonny Isles O’ Clunge!’ said Pussycat, eager to make conversation. ‘Aren’t you the chap who cleaned the lavatories a few years back in Balliol? My brother was up when you were in residence doing your work experience, and he told me that he tried many times to ambush your trolly, but you always beat him off, trouncing him and his confederates with your porcupine bog-brush.’

‘One and the same,’ I said. ‘Naughty scholars thirsting for kicks always got short shrift from me. No-one drinks drain-fluid or snorts Ajax on my watch.’

‘Our lavatories were never so clean,’ said the Lictor, ‘as when Erasmus Barrymore Barking was in charge.’

The Owl came back from the bar with our drinks.

The Lictor tossed off his rum in one swallow. I sipped the ale.

‘Don’t sip, man, drink drink drink!’

I took a hefty draught.
‘That’s better,’ said the Lictor. ‘Not so nancy, if you please.’

‘If you don’t mind me coming it a bit previous, Mister Lictor, when I saw you on the telly a few Christmases ago you seemed somewhat ... how shall I put it?’

I couldn’t think how to put it but the Lictor obliged with the *mot juste*.

‘Camp is the word you’re looking for. That was me in the old days. Now I find that a crusty inkling persona will serve much better. Don’t be alarmed, women are still very much not my thing, not my thing at all, even though I was married for forty years to a body who claimed to be one. How about you?’

‘Let’s just say I have had my disappointments in the marital stakes. And relations with my pet dog Jip are not what they were.’

‘Cuckolded by a blackamoor, eh? Daz told me. Still, your new career in musical theatre should be some consolation. And being cuckolded by Dock Rampart must bring you kudos in the long term, because that man is on the rise, destined for a peerage. As for the dog …’

He chuckled and wiped his lips. ‘ …no doubt Jip will renew his affection for you in good time.’

He went on to hold his students in thrall with a digression on the subject of *Frigadoon*, the show I was embarking on.

‘Critical opinion varies as to the worth of Gervase Whitelady’s final play – incidentally, it was his first venture into musical theatre and his only collaboration.’

‘Gosh, what a versatile author,’ said Cockroach.

‘Some see *Frigadoon* as very much a minor work, wretched and abject - a sad footnote to an otherwise solidly mediocre career as the middle-ranking poetaster of a Silver Age. Others, myself included, regard it as a masterpiece, one to bind the laurels around Whitelady’s brow through the ages to come.’
‘I wish we could hear it played!’ chorused the students.

‘Tickets are on sale at the bar,’ said the Lictor. ‘Dock Rampart – nine budgies, and the finest First of his year after Daz ... a ten by the way - plays the lead role of Dick Rampart, a pornographer suffering from writer’s block. His first song, delivered moodily at the desk in his study, is “I need a new word for prick.” Of course, he can’t find any new synonyms at all, beyond the few the hoi polloi already know. He has exhausted that particular seam and his career has come to a full stop. When the next scene opens, we see Dock – I mean Dick – down and out in Trafalgar Square, where a chorus line of jovial cockneys, dressed as Pearly Kings and Queens - thumbs twanging their braces - do their best to cheer him up by milling about the stage, bumping each other with their bottoms, and singing the first big production number of the show – “How’s Your Sexlife?”

‘Not so good since Wendy left.’

‘No, you addle-brained twerp,’ said the Lictor. ‘That’s the song.’

‘How does it go?’ asked the Owl.

‘Something like this,’ said the Lictor. He jumped on to the table top, grabbed a megaphone from the megaphone rack on the wall, and began singing, at the top of his voice, the kind of melody you might hear grinding from a barrel-organ.

‘HOW’S YOUR SEXLIFE?’

The matelots in the pub ceased tapping arses and sniffing each other’s browns and began to perform the number then and there, impersonating the cockney chorus. The sailors stripped off their uniforms in one smooth movement to reveal pearly jackets, trousers and caps.

The Lictor jumped from the table, and moved among the Pearlies, megaphone in hand, geeing them up. The choreography was superb, and the performance even better than our
own company. Matelots bounced around, bumping into each other on purpose, nudging each other with an elbow and singing the feed line “How’s your sexlife?” - eliciting a series of responses.

[N.B. - for clarity, the lines in ‘single speech marks’ below are ‘sung solo’ by various individual Cockneys; the lines in BOLD CAPS are sung by the Cockney chorus; while (the utterances between brackets) are spoken solo. Italics are stage directions... ] Thus :-

‘How’s your sexlife?’
‘All right!’
‘How’s your sexlife?’
‘Twice a night!’

Twangs braces.
‘How’s your sexlife?’
‘Oo, it’s hard.’
‘How’s your sexlife’
‘By the yard.’

(By the yard? Whass’ee on abaht?)

**MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR SEX LIFE IS MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR – SEX LIFE!**

‘How’s your sexlife?’
‘King Kong!’

*Extends tape-measure to arm’s length.*

(Glad to hear it. Wish I could say the same.)

‘How’s your sex-life?’
‘All wrong!’

*Hangs head in shame.*

(All wrong?)
ALL WRONG?

‘Take a butcher’s at the state of my dong!’

*Forlorn, he pulls out his crusty weeping penis and waves it like a lariat.*

(Oo, get her, with her septic tool akimbo!)

**MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR SEX LIFE IS MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR – SEX LIFE!**

‘How’s your sexlife?’

‘Okay.’

*Shrugs.*

(Lovely hot chestnuts, get your chestnuts here!)

‘How’s your sexlife?’

‘Every day!’

*Makes pumping motion with forearm, suggestive of coition - buys bag of chestnuts.*

(Mind the pigeons don’t shit on your nuts!)

‘How’s your sexlife?’

‘Very rich.’

(Would you like to be my bitch, Rich?)

(Room for one more inside, where the darkie milkmen sling their pudding!)

(Cheeky!)

**MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR SEX LIFE IS MY SEX LIFE IS YOUR – SEX LIFE!**

‘How’s your sexlife?’

And so on ...

The Lictor returned to our booth amid a huge round of applause from the company. He acknowledged the praise with a casual wave of his hand, hung up the megaphone on the megaphone rack, and sat down. Pigeons flew around the bar, shitting on everyone. The
hot-chestnut seller packed up his cart and went outside to work the quay. The sailors put their uniforms back on.

‘Gosh, now I wish even more I could see the whole show,’ said the Owl.

‘Like I said ... tickets for the opening night, are ON SALE at the bar,’ said the Lictor. He stressed his words, and spaced them, like he was talking to a masturbating idiot, which of course he might well have been - it was difficult to see what the Owl was doing with his hands under the table.

‘It’s a dockside performance,’ I said. ‘We open here in Harwich, and then sail on to Lowestoft.’

‘And what part do you play?’ asked the Pussycat.

‘Micro – sorry, *Macro* Disney, the giant leprechaun, light baritone and hangman’s apprentice in Cromwell’s army.’

The Lictor nodded. He polished his glasses with a piece of chamois leather.

‘It is an established fact of history that during Cromwell’s reign of terror in the Emerald Isle, a flying saucer exploded over Drogheda, County Louth.’

‘Established fact? Who says?’ Drunk and leery, and more than a wee bit chippy, Cockroach exposed his oiky origins. The Lictor sighed (no doubt regretting the relaxed entrance criteria foisted on Balliol by Everyman Jack) and gestured towards Cockroach with his specs.

‘Established fact, according to Gervase Whitelady. And Whitelady should know - because he was there, as a Cornet-of-Horse in Barrell’s regiment. Told me so himself, at Balliol’s recent gaudy night – what a rare time of feasting we enjoyed! He is an old exhibitioner of the college, you know.’

‘What did he exhibit?’
'Mainly his predilection for boy scouts. Anyway, the saucer’s nuclear reactor went critical, causing massive genetic mutations amongst the DNA of the local leprechauns. Only one lived beyond childhood - Macro Disney the Mutant.’

‘Now you mention it, I’m sure I read about it somewhere,’ said Cockroach. ‘If I read it somewhere else, it’s corroboration from another source, isn’t it? So please may I have my degree?’

‘Not yet,’ said the Lictor. ‘You have a lot more to suffer before you can clasp your parchment to your filthy working-class bosom – or bum. Ha ha ha!’

The matelots didn’t seem to want to abandon the show. They formed a conga line and snaked around the bar, singing the ‘hook’ of the song, thus:-

“My sex life is your sex life is my sex life is your...

**SEX LIFE!**

We sat for an hour or so, while the Lictor forced beer after beer on us all, and drank enough of Nelson’s Blood himself to transfuse the crew of the *Victory*. I felt somewhat squiffy. At the far end of our booth, a window gave a good view of the approach to the harbour. As yet, no sign of Campania Two, but a large Royal Navy ship, its grey funnels tooting smoke, was backing up, ready to moor at the quayside.

‘That noble ship is HMS *Back Passage,*’ said the Lictor. ‘I would recognise the cut of her jib anywhere. I served in her myself when she was first commissioned, and I began my national service. The Admiralty tried to draft me into HMS *Front Bottom,* but I held out for *Back Passage,* being much more to my taste. Luckily, my uncle is Rear Vice Admiral of the Blue, Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN, renowned author of *The Marriage Art.* He thoroughly approved my choice, and pulled ... strings, I think they were ... on my behalf.’
‘Now that she’s closer,’ said Owl, ‘it looks to me, as if she’s suffered recent battle
damage. How can that be, when hostilities between Britannia and Um-Ka have been
suspended, and the Dauphine of Um-Ka herself is on her way to marry Andy One?
Would you care to give us your opinion?’

The Lictor was about to speak, when the giant television screen above the bar burst
into life with a synthesised bugle call. The matelots sprang to attention. The face of
Everyman Jack filled the screen.

‘Hear ye, hear ye! The perfidious frog-demons and beast-men of Um-Ka have broken
the provisional treaty between our two proud and puissant nations by having their shore
batteries shoot at HMS Back Passage as she prepared to take on board the Dauphine for
her marital embassy to Britannia. Heavy casualties are reported, consequent upon a shell
exploding in the larder of the Petty Officers’ mess. Reports are coming in of heavy
damage to canned goods and bottled preserves. A stray pickled egg carried away the
right buttock of the Dauphine of Um-Ka. Bit of an own goal, eh, what-what? His
Majesty can’t possibly marry her now that she’s been interfered with. I regret to inform
you that once more a state of war exists between this country and Um-Ka.’

The matelots shook their fists at the screen and cursed.

A Geordie seaman fell to his knees and blubbed.

‘My bestest marra is aboard Back Passage. I hope the canny lad lives yet, and hasna
had his jerusalem shot aff, else there’ll be nae stuffing for me come Christmas!’

Everyman Jack allowed the anguish to subside before continuing.

‘Once again, the King’s Navy needs stout-hearted men of manly vigour. No milksops.
No-one with less than four budgies on their knob may enlist.’

‘You mean fewer than four budgies, on his or one’s knob,’ said the Lictor. ‘Pardon my
pedantry, but standards must be maintained, especially in wartime.’
'Your point is noted,' said Everyman Jack from the tellyscreen. ‘Thank you, Lictor for
your correction. May I continue?’

‘Please do,’ said the Lictor.

‘All four-budgie men and above, throughout the Britannic Kingdom of Andy, must
report to the nearest naval recruiting office to sign on for the duration of the conflict.
Those who do not volunteer will suffer the indignity of the press-gang. So if you want
your choice of ship, sign on before the cullies grab you by the balls. You don’t want to
find yourself in Back Passage if what you really want is Front Bottom - and vice versa.’

I felt sick. How was I going to escape my manly duty? Across the country, any man
who fancied neither ship must be shooing budgies off his knob and oiling the hacksaw in
the shed in preparation for some homestyle surgery.

‘Well, that lets me out,’ said the Lictor. ‘I’ve always been a three-budgie man. Shame,
but there you go.’

‘Moi aussi,’ said Owl. ‘I barely scrape a two.’

‘And me,’ said Pussycat. ‘In fact the last time I went for a wazz, I had to light a match
to find it. What a relief. Those sailor suits are dinky, but far too louche for my taste.’

‘I’ll just see if I qualify,’ said Cockroach. He sidled out of the booth and headed for
the self-service automated budgie vending machine in the corner by the billiard table. He
rummaged through his pockets, but all he could find were banknotes and a sixpence.

‘Anyone got change? It says sixpence a budgie. I’ll need more than one.’

‘I can take a look, if you like, and save you a few bob,’ said a friendly matelot with a
tape measure, pulling down Cockroach’s trousers. ‘No, you’re a definite six, if we use
the British Standard Budgie as a guide. Welcome aboard, shipmate.’

‘Glad to be of service to my country,’ said Cockroach. ‘Keep my college place for me,
please, Sir Lictor.’
'No probs,’ said the Lictor. ‘You can re-enter on a veteran’s scholarship, maybe a week next Wednesday. Should be quite a short war, this one.’

I didn’t particularly care whether the war was likely to be as short as a winter day on the Ness, or as long as Dock Rampart’s harry-pipe. I had no particular desire to fight the frog-demons and beast-men of Um-Ka. Now that I had smelled the greasepaint I craved the roar of the crowd – and all the perks: starlets, limelight, and bouquets of gladioli, deferential room-service, and free shampoo.

‘Shame,’ I said. ‘I can’t go either. I’m in a reserved occupation.’

‘And that is ...?’ said the Lictor, gazing down his nose at me, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘The stage. Although I was once a pigman, I am now an actor, as you very well know.’

The Lictor took out his cellphone and scrolled through his messages.

‘Ah, Barry, I’m sorry to have to break the news to you ... according to Daz, the latest version of the Frigadoon script shows that the part of Micro – Macro – Disney has been cut. Constraints of time, so I’m told, and a copyright problem with changing the lyric of your signature song. But over and above that, the leprechaun business is regarded as just too whimsical. The bitter truth is - had you stayed a pigman, you would have been in a reserved occupation. The Navy needs its snorkers, fat chines, and black pudding.’

‘It’s not fair. I only saw Daz an hour ago. He might have warned me. He must have known what was coming. This is all his doing.’

‘Cheer up, Barry, it’s not all bad news,’ said the Lictor, tapping the his phonescreen with his fingernail. ‘Little Black Baz has just won the Derby, on Beezlebub the Nomad, so he should be getting round to Mad Scientist school some time tomorrow. I had a hundred monkeys on him at ten-to-one. Cheers! Have another drink on me, one for the road, so to speak.’
‘Don’t mind if I do, under the circumstances. Nelson’s blood, please, with a cointreau float. Can I have one of those green umbrellas in it?’

‘It’s my shout,’ said Cockroach. ‘Soon we’ll be messmates, Barry. What a sex life we shall have with our comrades!’

A SEX LIFE ON THE OCEAN WAVE

The Chief Petty Officer in command of the pressgang balanced the tip of his cutlass against my chest.

‘Call me Chiefy.’

I stared down my nose at the cutlass. I lifted my chin and looked him in the eye.

‘Glad to meet you, Chiefy. Would you mind …?’

He shouldered his cutlass and drew a bayonet from his belt. He threw it for me to catch. I jumped aside, and the bayonet flashed by, to embed itself in the fence behind.

‘Scared of sister steel, are we, lad? We will make you cherish her and serve her and wield her on the end of your firestick until your enemies quail before her darting kiss.’

‘Thanks, I’m sure the bayonet will come in handy, if there’s a bit of a rough-house overseas. Be that as it may, might I have a word about the boat? You seem a grand crew of matleots, but I’m not sure I fancy Back Passage, I’m more the other way inclined.’

‘Boat? She’s a ship, you maniac. And you seek a berth in Front Bottom? Are you some kind of pervert? Answer me, on the double.’

‘No, Chiefy, no sir, neither a maniac nor a pervert. Just more inclined to watering our country’s ladygardens than irrigating her posterior wastes. Front Bottom would seem to be the ship for me - if I have to go to sea at all, which it seems I must.’

‘Pshaw! You’ll get used to Back Passage soon enough. But why didn’t you join up of your own free will? That way you could have had your choice of ship.’
‘I tried to join up in the last lot, the Christmas war, but I had septic lesions in the crack of my sit-upon, so I couldn’t go. My um-ka got infected because Uncle Dippy Barking mistook my bottom for a huge plum pudding and he hoped to find the festive sixpence. Daz went instead.’

A voice boomed out from the quarterdeck, a rich Devonian burr, wreathed in salty lingo and I couldn’t make out a word of it.

‘What’s he say?’

‘Show some respect, boy. That’s our Captain, old Clinkers-be-Damned. He says he doesn’t want anyone on his ship with a barnacled bottom. Septic lesions, you say? We’d better take a look. Down with your keks and bend over.’

I did as he said, and a bored gum-chewing sailor shone a torch up my glory-hole.

‘You’ll have to keep it smarter than this in the navy,’ said the Chief Petty Officer, wielding his clippers and making my eyes water. ‘But from what I can see, any lesions have healed. Clean as a whistle from that point of view.’

His voice sounded nasal and muffled, because he’d pinched his nose between his fingers.

‘When was the last time you had a proper shower?’

‘Last night.’

‘We shower morning noon and night in the Navy. Wait there, Barry, while I attend to this other young chap. What’s your name, son?’

‘Cockroach.’

‘We’ll shorten that to Cock for starters. How many budgies?’

‘Six.’

‘Right you are, Sixcock. Here’s a ration of millet for them. Draw further rations as required.’
The press-gang Number Two clapped us in irons, in case we lost our patriotic fervour.

The Lictor, Owl, and Pussycat, came out to see us taken aboard.

‘Do be careful, Barry,’ called the Lictor. ‘Send us a postcard. Plain prose, please, no verse.’

‘Will do. If I am killed, please make sure my dog Jip is loved and cherished and his bloater basted as and when.’

‘Jip will want for nothing. I shall tend his groaning bloater myself, if need be.’

‘That’s a comfort. Who knows what Fate has in store? Jip and I were together from my cradle days. I always said that if the wandering scapegoat, Barrymore Barking, ever fights a duel with Heaven, as seems increasingly likely, then Jip would be my second, good old boy. Now Barrymore must face the future alone.’

‘Frankly, I wouldn’t give the future much thought if I were you - your chances of surviving combat are slim, with or without Jip. As for your three-legged furry amigo, Daz has arranged for him to become Balliol’s mascot starting next term.’

‘He never said.’

‘The war took us all by surprise, Barry. Cheery-bye, both!’

Handsome matelots escorted Sixcock and me aboard Back Passage. Carpenters and artificers swarmed over her superstructure, repairing battle damage. She was already getting up steam to return to her war station.

Sixcock was taken one way by Chiefy, and me another by the Quartermaster. Sixcock went for’ard and I went aft, down to the orlop deck, where there was a uniform store, with sweet little sailor suits draped on hangars.

‘Take your keks off and put on these dinky bell-bottoms,’ said the Quartermaster, releasing me from the cuffs.
‘Right you are.’ The bell-bottoms were a perfect fit for length, and snug around the waist, but a bit itchy on the inside leg.

‘You’ll get used to that,’ said the Quartermaster. ‘What we do is smother our privates with vaseline - stops them chafing against the calico.’

‘Then please may I have some?’

The Quartermaster handed me a jar and a swab of cotton-wool. I hitched the bell-bottoms down to my knees and began swabbing my crurals.

‘That’s the ticket, get the jelly inside your foreskin and slide it back and forth. Back Passage men are always quickest on the draw. Navy champions, and we beat the army every time at the Royal Tattoo, even the King’s Own Uphill Gardeners.’

Good enough for me! The jelly felt cool and slithery.

‘One thing I recommend especially - and that’s to smear some round your back passage. Some shipmates chafe a bit the first time.’

‘The first time for what?’

‘You’ll see. It’s a treat.’

I dropped my bell-bottoms to my ankles. I squirmed and stuck my head between my legs, in a futile attempt to get a look at my brown.

‘Hang on a minute, use this,’ said the Quartermaster, handing me a shaving mirror.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘It’s difficult to see what I’m doing round the back.’

‘Not a problem, shipmate,’ said the Quartermaster, parting my cheeks.

‘Maybe if I had a pair of underpants, that might help with the chafing?’

The Quartermaster’s laugh bugled up my um-ka.

‘Didn’t Granny Barking tell you about underpants in the navy? I’m sure she did, although she might have got some details wrong. We don’t wear underpants in the navy any more. They breed infection. When you’re wounded, gangrene can rot your joyboy.'
Better to let the air circulate around your meat-and-two-veg, and your brown ... Come on, you can do better than that - really bend over. Good boy, good old boy.’

The Quartermaster gave me a good swabbing.

‘Oo,’ he said, ‘it’s still a bit ripe down here. Maybe you should have a proper wash. Tell you what, we’ll run along to the heads and get some shit-shower-and-shave, then come back and finish the job.’

The Quartermaster showed me the luxurious bathroom accommodation in the heads. I was looking forward to a good sprinkle with my new shipmates.

‘Ahoy there, new shipmate!’ shouted a friendly matelot, blowing me a kiss.

‘Let me give you a hand with soaping your back passage,’ said another matelot.

‘I saw him first,’ said the Quartermaster.

‘It’s difficult to see what goes on back there so I’m much obliged, whoever wants to help is very welcome.’

The water hissed and steamed and my new shipmates took it turns to wash my back passage. The Quartermaster unscrewed the Vaseline. He pulled a duster from his pocket.

‘I’ll just buff up your brown with this piece of cloth torn from Nelson’s ensign.’

‘Oooo! Ouch!’

‘Stop squealing, nearly finished! There you go - the cleanest and softest back passage in His Majesty’s ship Back Passage.’

Time to crash the old swede, said my shipmates, so we left the heads and went along to our messdeck.

‘Sling your hammock here, next to Alphonse the Frenchy,’ said the Quartermaster.

‘He’ll be back later. He’s out on the rent, hawking his brown up the Mission.’

I fumbled with the strings, trying to get my hammock slung.
‘Come here, spunkfingers, get out of the way, and let a salty sea-dog show you how it’s done.’

In a twinkle, my messmate had my hammock neatly slung between the stanchions.

‘There you are, Barry, all nice and cosy. If you’ve got any pictures of home, you can put them on top of your locker.’

I opened my wallet and took out the picture of Little Black Baz I always carry, along with a comical snapshot of Jip with his nose stuck in a tin of pilchards.

‘Is that Little Black Baz?’ said a tough matelot with snakes, skulls and daggers, and ‘Mother’ and ‘Satan’ tattooed all over his face and neck.

‘No,’ I said. ‘That’s Jip. He’s only got three legs, although you wouldn’t know from the angle of the shot. The other one is Little Black Baz.’

‘Right you are, only joking. I put a monkey on Little Black Baz to win at Epsom, and he romped home on Beezlebub the Nomad at ten-to-one. The racing commentator said that now he’s established himself as the most successful black jockey of all time – at least, on the flat - he plans to go to Mad Scientist School and dedicate himself to the problem of the unidirectionality of time.’

‘It’s about time someone did,’ said the Quartermaster, butting in and taking over the conversation. ‘I don’t know about you, but this bastard linear temporal progression is getting on my tits. It always seems to end up the same way – six foot under, or rocking and rolling in Davy Jones’s locker. It was that bastard Hegel who started it, with his bastard dialectic.’

There was a general murmur of agreement. After getting Um-Ka sorted, everyone concurred with the notion that the biggest priority facing the nation – and humankind - was fixing the problem of time only travelling straight forward towards death and the end of history at the manifestation of the godhead – ‘If there is a godhead,’ said a
cynical sailor. ‘Of course there is, you heathen,’ said another – but everyone said that if anyone was the boy for the job, it was Little Black Baz.

‘He was always a good son to me, in the short time he was at home. Bit of a shock at first, the missis giving birth to a black jockey, when I was expecting a welder who might fix the tear in my doughnut skin. Now I feel nothing but pride.’

‘You can stick a photo of your missis up on the locker if you like. We’re quite tolerant round here.’

‘I haven’t got a portrait of Wendy Madonna,’ I said. ‘Wait a minute though, I’ve got something else.’

I pulled out a pair of Wendy’s silk knickers. I stuck my nose in the crotch and had a good sniff. ‘Maturing nicely,’ I said. ‘Like a good cheese.’

‘What’s that stain in the crotch?’ said the Quartermaster.

‘That’s as nice a blend of me and the missis as you could wish for. She didn’t take her knickers off for a week, she was so busy rehearsing. Lucky I persuaded one of the surviving Bansoms to filch them for me before Wendy ran off with Dock Rampart.’

My shipmates passed them round and had a good sniff.

‘There’s more than one shipmate’s cargo in these,’ said the Quartermaster, clearly a connoisseur.

‘Are you saying that my Wendy went with some sailors?’

‘More like a music-theatre company, by the hogo on ’em,’ said the Quartermaster.

‘But they’ll look nice beside the photos. You won’t mind if us shipmates have a sniff from time to time to stimulate a spot of self-abuse?’

‘Sniff away and abuse yourselves all you like,’ I said condescendingly, waving my hand in a lordly manner befitting my rank.

‘Thank ye kindly, you’re a gent.’
'I’ve just had a thought. Is it all beating your bloater round here or is there ever a chance to ... you know, do the whassname. I can’t say the word because I’m shy.’

My tattooed comrade laughed at my simpering.

‘Aint you the coy one? We take care of each other in that respect – when there isn’t a girl about. Which there rarely is, when we’re at sea, apart from the occasional mermaid which we never touch because the scales play havoc with our joyboys.’

Footsteps rang out on the companionway above our heads.

‘Attention, officer on deck!’ bellowed the Quartermaster, standing up smartish as the Captain bustled down the ladder.

The Captain picked up Wendy’s knickers and wafted them under his nose.

‘Quel mélange! Quite a medley of aromas. Who wears these?’

‘I do, sir. When my wife isn’t wearing them.’

‘Well, let’s see them on. What do you say, men?’

‘ON ON ON!’ shouted my shipmates.

‘Lawks, such sexy drawers! Keturah Brown, I’ll wager. But they’re a bit on the small side for you, such a strapping matelot as you are. Better get them off before they split.’

‘OFF OFF OFF!’ cried my shipmates.

‘Welcome aboard Back Passage, in which we serve and are served in turn. By Jingo, I’ve only just noticed. You’re the image of our beloved Prime Minister, Daz Barking. You must be his brother Barry, and by a process of deduction these frothy apricot frillies must belong to Wendy.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We say “aye aye, sir” in the navy, not “yes”. You’re not a landlubber now.’

‘Yes, sir, I mean aye aye, sir!’
‘Capital, capital. Let me just say, you’re a lucky tyke being married to Wendy. Were I a heterosexual chappie – which thank the Lord I’m not, sir - I could be up her tunnel of love like a coastguard’s rocket.’

‘I know, sir. But I’m not. Married, I mean, to Wendy any more. Well, I am, but it’s not doing me much good. Permission to explain, sir.’

‘Permission granted.’

‘I always knew Wendy Madonna, the Infanta of Perfect Proportion, would rather it was Daz who put her to the prick night and day and night, world without end, amen, but when all’s said and done, I’m the one who clapped the guvnor on her ha-ha. I am her lawful-wedded. Unfortunately, she has run off with a chap called Dock Rampart, and I can no longer offer to eat her dung.’

‘Capital, capital. All the better for you, then, when it comes to being a dutiful shipmate - if you see what I mean?’

‘Aye aye, sir! The Captain means I shan’t be inhibited by any shorebound heterosexual attachments.’

‘Outstanding! Keep up the good work, and make sure you get your clinkers clipped every night. Barnacles on a brown make it rough on a chap’s chopper.’

The Captain went off to continue his rounds. He said a loving goodnight to his matelots, making sure no-one was left unsatisfied. Before he left the messdeck, he paid me another visit.

‘Chiefy tells me you’re an eight budgie man. Jolly good show.’

The Captain went back to the bridge. His parting remark had aroused interest among the shipmates who hadn’t been in the shower at the same time as me - especially Alphonse the Frenchy, who was just now squeezing on board through through a porthole.
‘Zut alors,’ said Alphonse the Frenchy, picking himself up from the messdeck, and flapping his hands across his bell bottoms to dust himself down. ‘What a coincidence, mes amis. Our new messmate, Ordinary Seaman Barking, Lord of the Sceptre Wagglers, has eight budgies stowed on his ’arry-peep - and I too have eight of these curious antipodean creatures clinging like limpets to my zob. They swarmed about me as I was leaving the Mission to Discharged Seamen and I have not been able to shake them off.’

‘Wait your turn, Alphonse,’ said the Quartermaster. ‘I agree it sounds mighty convenient, you matching our new messmate budgie for budgie, but I’m an eight budgie man myself, and an Englishman must be satisfied first, before any Frenchman, even if the Frenchman has eaten the King’s snorkers and is true to the King. Barry has been thoroughly soaped and vaselined, ready for initiation. Go to the back of the queue.’

Alphonse obeyed the order without complaint.

A voice sang out from the porthole, where another, even fatter shipmate, was trying to squeeze through. Chiefy was in no mood for argument about precedence, after a fruitless evening spent roaming the dockside taverns for trade.

‘Belay that scuttlebutt! I am senior in rank on this messdeck, so I get first crack at Barry’s brown.’

He forced himself through the porthole - plop! The head of the press gang Number Two appeared.

‘And I’m second in line,’ gasped Number Two, squeezing through. Plop!

‘No, you’re not, I am,’ said the Quartermaster. ‘I’m a Petty Officer. You’re only an Able Seaman.’

‘More able than you, that’s for sure, you syphilitic nonce,’ said Number Two.

An argument broke out, and it looked like it might turn ugly, with fists clenched and studded belts wrapped round knuckles. Time to take the initiative.
‘You two shipmates toss a coin for second and third dibs after Chiefy, and stop your squabbling. Look! Everyone else has formed an orderly queue. If Alphonse the Frenchy can wait his turn, so can you.’

‘Zut alors! He speaks words of wisdom beyond his years, our new bel ami.’

‘Okay. We’ll toss for you.’ Number Two spun a coin in the air and slapped it on his forearm, covering it with his palm.

‘Heads,’ said the Quartermaster.

Number Two uncovered the coin and showed it to me.

‘Heads it is.’

I addressed the assembled company.

‘Now we’re all friends again, I shall bend over this shot-locker, and you can get on with the business-from-behind.’

‘Good idea. You’re a true-blue shipmate.’

So that’s what I did, and they did, and thanks to the lubrication the business-from-behind didn’t chafe at all. Drowsing in my hammock later that night, with a messmate’s hand on my harry-pipe, and a gallon of cargo sloshing round my colon, I reflected on how I had sorted out the quarrel. I had displayed leadership! Promotion to Admiral of the Fleet could not be long delayed.

**MY HORNY FEET**

I woke in darkness feeling dirty.

My luminous chronometer showed 3 a.m. The ship was strangely quiet. The thrum-thrum of the engines had stopped. When I went to sleep the night before, my hammock had been gently swinging amidst a clutch of hearty mariners, but now there was no pitch and yaw to be felt, and in the ghastly green quarter-light I could see I was alone. All the hammocks, except mine, were unhitched, folded, and stowed neatly in the racks. I
guessed what was going on - my messmates were playing a joke on me, part of my initiation into the rituals of shipboard life.

‘Come out come out wherever you are!’ I sing-songed to the mess.

I rolled out of my hammock and slipped into my bell-bottoms, and put on my vest. No shoes - shoes were not part of our everyday wear, because, as Chiefy said, ‘Monkeys don’t wear no shoes, and you need to be a monkey to clamber up the rigging.’ I looked in my shaving mirror and adjusted my cheeky little porkpie sailor’s hat as best I could in the twilight - at just the right rakish angle, as I’d been taught to do before presenting myself to a superior. Surely there must be at least a petty officer about somewhere who wasn’t in on the joke?

The messdeck was steady beneath my horny feet. The ship had no motion at all. I looked through the porthole at the starry night, perfectly reflected in the glassy calm of the orient sea. No sign of life, not even the creak and groan of a leather-winged seabird. I turned round, to catch a friendly *peekaboo!* face, but the joke was still on me.

I opened the hatchway door and climbed up through the silent ship. When I reached the maindeck, I shouted for the Quartermaster, for Alphonse the Frenchy, for Chiefy - even Clinkers-be-damned. If the Captain heard me call him by his nickname, I would have been keelhauled, but at least keelhauling would have shown someone cared. As it was, all I heard in reply was a glum squawk from Chiefy’s pet albatross, perched in the crow’s nest.

I paced the deck from fore to aft, port to starboard, but the ship was deserted. Apart from Chiefy’s albatross and me, the ship’s cat was the only other living thing on board. Her eyes glowed green in the starlight. She watched me for a moment, opened her jaws in a silent miaow, turned and ran. I heard a splash, as she threw herself overboard.
Thin wisps of luminous vapour rose from the smokestacks into the night sky. I climbed to the bridge. The Captain’s nightglasses stood on the binnacle. I lifted them, and turned the screw until the offing came in focus. Silvered in starlight, a pirogue came paddling towards my ship.

Three dark figures on the pirogue were making ready to launch what looked like a colander mounted on a stick. As they raised it above their heads, starlight poured through the holes.

I leaned out, over the guard-rail of the bridge, as far I safely could.

‘Ahoy, shipmates!’

No answer came back. I looked around for a megaphone, but none was handy. The darkling wraiths dipped the colander in the water, holding it under. They began a mournful chant. I recognised the language from its muscular melody straight away, but I strained to make out the words. The pirogue drifted closer to the ship.

‘Yukanmalai septamiya. Yukanmalai septamiya.’

They chanted until at last a subtle glow appeared in the ocean depths, faint at first, rapidly growing brighter. The wraiths cooed with delight and grasped the colander. Heaving together, they scooped a golden ball from the ocean.

The colander cradled a miniature moon.

Water streamed through the holes in the colander, rivulets of silver-mingled gold. The darkling wraiths gently jiggled the colander, draining the last dregs of iridescent saltwater.

The tiny moon sat snug within its cradle, plump and delicious as a ripe peach, or a baby’s hairless head boiled in a demon barber’s basin. I called to the wraiths.

‘Ahoy ahoy, whoever you are! Shipmate or foe, attend my words!’

10 “I get seven-up on mine.”
Still no response. The only thing to do was to rack my brain for a half-remembered gobbet of the monarch of tongues, and try them with it.

‘Sekweni adanzi genu ne-wet?’

The three wraiths turned towards me, craning their bony necks and sniffing the air, searching for the source of the cry. Beneath my feet, Back Passage lurched as she took a list, going down by the head. The ventilator shafts belched stale air, as the inrushing sea churned below.

Abandon ship! I hurried down to the main deck, hoping to find a liferaft. The ship began to roll over. She was sinking fast. I lost my footing and slipped down to the water’s edge. I tumbled overboard and splashed into the sea, just a short distance from the pirogue. Bony arms pulled me to the surface and dragged me inboard. Slumped in the pirogue, I looked back at my ship. She towered above us, dark and threatening, water streaming from her bilges. The darkling wraiths slapped their paddles on the water, to take us clear of danger.

My eyes were fixed on Back Passage. Down by the head, her stern rose to the vertical. For a sublime moment, she poised in perfect balance, her motionless screws pointing to the sky. Then with a groan, her bulkheads gave way. Furniture and equipment, crockery and cutlery, broke loose with a clatter. She sank, going down fast, taking with her my precious souvenirs of happier times – my photos of Little Black Baz and Piz, and what was worse, Wendy’s Ketrah’s, apricot silk and lace, ripe as gorgonzola.

A COLANDED MOON

‘Don’t cry, sailor boy. Plenty more back passage where she came from. Or perhaps you like front bottom better?’

‘Neither just now, thanks all the same. Maybe I could manage a bit later on.’
Lecherous fingers plucked at my sailor suit, and pulled aside the waistband of my trousers.

‘Cushti!’ said another darkling wraith. ‘Get ’em off, pronto! Let’s have a butcher’s at your famous meat.’

The third of the darkling wraiths was silent, her face hidden under a cowl. She held up my sailor’s clothes and spat on them, before feeding them into the colandered moon, where they were consumed in a cold flame of fire. Sparks and cinders flocked upward. She cackled and turned towards me, sweeping the cowl from her face.

‘We meet again, Barry. Or is it Googam?’

Before me stood the ghostly Oxford waitron. Despite the warmth of the tropical night, I shivered.

‘Don’t fret, Barry. I know now it wasn’t you who murdered me. In fact, I wasn’t murdered at all. I succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heater. I blame the Lictor of Balliol. He was my landlord, and I often complained to him about the stove in the caravan. It wouldn’t draw properly and oftentimes, sitting before it, I felt drowsy and headachey. But he wouldn’t listen. That’s manslaughter by negligence.’

‘Sounds to me like you have a case for compensation.’

‘It’s a bit late for compensation, Barry. What keeps me going these days is the memory of our hour of love. I showed you a good time, didn’t I, Barry?’

‘You certainly did.’

‘I could show you again, if you like.’

‘Is that allowed?’

‘Why not? I’m on parole from the infernal regions until the cock crows for dawn, when I have to cross the burning plain and get back to Hell in time to fix Cunty McFuck’s porridge.’
‘What about your pals?’ I jerked my thumb at here fellow wraiths.

‘I wouldn’t want to leave them out, Barry. We could form an orderly queue, me first, because I never did like being sloppy seconds.’

**CAMP STROPPY-WOMAN**

‘Fate has something else in store,’ said the Oxford waitron, lighting a post-coital cigarette.

‘It wouldn’t include a pair of underpants by any chance?’

‘Only these, I’m afraid. They’re about your size.’

She handed me an unappetizing pair of drawers.

‘The elastic is a bit slack, but it’s the best we can do.’

‘Calico?’

‘Calico, shoddy grade, pre-owned by Hardy Ma Bansom herself, unwashed, with added sweat and crotchly reek - and faulty elastic. And here’s something else for you, a letter from Licit, your sister, once a grande horizontale, and now serving time at hard labour in Camp Stroppy-Woman for dereliction of duty.’

‘How can Licit have sent me a letter, when she can barely speak, let alone write?’

‘The sisters she’s met in Camp Stroppy-Woman have tried to expand and raise her consciousness – a tough job, admittedly, in Licit’s case, and with patchy success. The sisters run classes in basic literacy and political education. Everyman Jack sees no harm in indulging them, since there’s no chance they’ll ever be released although your Licit seems to have delusions about that. Read her screed now, while there’s still some light from the captured moon. Cynthia’s on the turn.’

The Oxford waitron held Cynthia, the colandered moon, above my head while I read Licit’s letter by her waning light.

“Dear Barry
“Hoping this finds you as it leaves me - in the pink. I am making great progress with my reading scheme and am now on Billy Brown Hat and Chums, book three. Lawks, the capers Billy gets up to with his sailor friends in Chatham, letting each of them try on his Brown Hat in turn! Fair make me goggle-eyed, they do. If Billy charged for renting out his Brown Hat, he could make a tidy few bob. As it goes, he seems quite happy to put it about for nixes. Perhaps there’s a lesson for me there?

“As for writing in my own hand, I can only do my name just now, but a kind sister is scribing this letter for me, at my dictation, until I learn to write for myself. I also enclose a letter from your son – my adorable nephew - Little Black Baz, which somehow got misdirected. Apologies for opening it, but I assumed it was for me.

“I am currently imprisoned in Camp Stroppy-Woman, as the darkling waiths have probably told you. My sentence is life at hard labour.

“It’s all been a big misunderstanding, really. First off, the management at the Domedrome Casino told us the menu was being reprinted, and in the meantime they were having to chalk up daily specials on a blackboard in the foyer. They included some really kinky stuff without consulting us – as they had every right to do - and we began getting requests for all sorts of new positions. Punters wouldn’t take no for an answer.

‘If it’s on the blackboard,’ they said, ‘you have to do it.’

“So that explained the new octopus tank in the Rest Room of the Casino, and the Mongolians they’d recently taken on, who were always wrestling each other, tying themselves in knots in huge scums and asking if we wanted to join in.

“Management has every right to manage, of course. But in contradiction of that sacred tenet, we went on strike for better conditions. For a while the strike was solid. All across the Ness, needy gentlemen were mincing o’er hill and dale, blue-balled and cross-legged
for want of relief. Such suffering - and all through my vanity. I am ashamed now of the misery I caused.

“Thankfully, Mrs Maithuna saw a new business opportunity and spoke to Everyman Jack. She broke the strike with blacklegs - a battalion of horizontals from the flying-saucer community – not particularly grande, but any port in a storm. Thoth arranged that Mrs Tertius be first in the octopus tank for girl-on-octopus action because apparently it’s quite a common practice where they come from, the planet Clôn, that lies beyond Campaspé, several parsecs to the right of Mölqbar. If only I could have displayed such flexibility.

“We poor deluded girls picketed the Domedrome night and day for a week, and then, without warning, when Sunday came, Constable Dippy Barking rode up on his bicycle and arrested us. He would have arrested us earlier in the week, but his bicycle chain kept coming off, and as you know, it’s the devil’s own job to fix by the roadside. The chain wasn’t properly sorted until the early hours of Sunday morning, and of course he then had to go back home and swap helmets or he would be improperly dressed and any arrest he made would by nullified. His Sunday helmet is huge and it doesn’t seem to fit properly and keeps falling down over his eyes. It’s amazing he can steer his bicycle so well under the circs.

“Dippy Barking would have been well within his constabulary powers to seize our heads to adorn the picket fence around his cottage, but he was in a good mood because his missis had won the jackpot at the bingo the previous night - so he booked us into Camp Stroppy-Woman instead. Luckily, the camp had vacancies. Thanks to Constable Dippy, we now have the opportunity to make amends – although our guilt can never be fully expunged.
“Our prison camp is attached to the Gravesend Crematorium. Luckily, when I was a nipper, and before you and Daz were thought of, dear Granny Barking taught me to play the harmonium. She said it might come in handy some day, which it has, because I have quite a cushy number, playing in the chapel for the funerals. Other sisters aren’t so lucky and have to service the dusty oven-men, who quite frankly are low-class and frightful. Every other word is ‘eff this’ and ‘eff that you effing c-.’ The chaplain told me, in my darkest hour, ‘Remember Licit, that thou art dust, and if thou dost not keep pumping away at the harmonium – and indeed, pumping away at my organ - forsooth thou shalt service dusty oven-men, until thou thyself return to dust and thy hinderparts be clogged with ash, yea verily.’ I think I get his gist, so I practice every chance I get.

“The chaplain is the vicar who took the Christmas service all those years ago at the Temple of Cottyto, when Aunt Josephine tickled his stones with a feather to ‘bring him off’ (as Billy Brown Hat puts it). If you remember, the vicar was kind enough to shake paws with Jip. I miss old Jip, as I suppose you do, being cast away as you are.

“I pleasure the chaplain once a week, on Sunday after the service, although my comrade sisters say I shouldn’t. He always brings me a tin of pilchards, so it’s hard to say no, even if I wanted to, which I don’t, as it’s my one chance in the week to have a good wash beforehand, and he’s ever so nice under the religious gloom and doom, once he gets his keks off.

“Please can you have a word with Daz, or Everyman Jack, if you see either of them any time soon, and ask if I can be released? I know I don’t deserve it, but I would like it all the same. You can say I have learned my lesson and I promise I will never be a stroppy-woman again, and will work for food and lingerie if I can get my old grande horizontale job back. I’ll even wrestle the Mongolians in a proper clusterfuck, no holds barred. But not octopuses, if poss, although they’re not a deal-breaker.
“My scribing sister has just said she’ll let me get away with all my sycophancy and sucking-up to the authorities, because she doesn’t believe in censorship. However, she says, quite sternly, I really do need extra consciousness-raising classes. My attitude is too subservient and accepting of the norms of patriarchy, so she says. Lingerie is a badge of slavery. I should aspire to dress like a janitor, not a harlot.

“Your chastened half-sister,

Licit Barking”

Before I had a chance to open my other letter, the darkling wraiths vanished into the sea, dragging the colandered moon along with them, leaving me in darkness.

My sail was slack from lack of wind, but the pirogue ran steadily through the night, borne on a powerful current. The stars that shone so brightly early in the evening were now blotted out, except where one solitary star twinkled faint and feeble just above the horizon, as if heaven itself had suffered a stroke. The ocean was calm, but a heavy pelmet of cloud draped the sky. I feared a squall. If I capsized and drowned I might join the Oxford Waitron in Hell, taking my turn at making porridge, and filling in the numerous forms that Cunty McFuck, aka Auld Clootie, would surely require before I could properly be inducted and lodged within my infernal cell.

**SIX ORGANISMS ON THE TROT**

Soft, he comes.

‘Your suspicions about paperwork, pal, is correct, *one hundert percento*. The jobbie’s no’ finished till the paperwork’s done.’

‘As I feared.’
‘Right you are. Can’t stop long … got to be elsewhere, to attend my marital duties. Auld Granny Rattletrap keeps a body at it, night and day and night, world without end, amen. Arthritis, constipation, piles … insanity … nothing scunners her oats.’

‘So you got married at long last? Chafford Hundred Registry Office, was it, with nibbles in the Scout Hut afterwards?’

‘Correctemento. You were right about no’ inviting Gervase Whitelady, as it goes, but the blushing bride insisted he be best man. What is it with him and boy scouts? Many’s the nonce’s buttocks I’ve scarified with a ladle of hot coals, but none I’ve seen to match his unbridled licentious appetites. He rogered a whole patrol of them before we’d uncorked the champagne or even snorted the broon.’

‘Pale and tender chucklewit boys are his catamites of choice, but he goes for tanned and muscular outdoor types from time to time.’

‘Aye, variety is the spice of life!’ He cupped his hand to his ear. ‘Uh oh, I can hear Granny Rattletrap bellowing for service already, and I only just furnished her with six organisms on the trot. Nice chatting to you, Barrywhore, got to run. Oh, make sure you read the letter from Little Black Baz, when daylight comes. I’m no’ sure it explains very much, but it might give you a handle on the shape of things to come.’

‘Will do. Thanks for dropping by, Citizen McFuck. I suppose we’re related now, since you and Granny Barking got spliced? It’s nice for families to keep in touch. Maybe catch you later?’

But he’d already gone.

A DOUBLE-YOLK DAWN

I trailed my right hand in the water. The pirogue bobbled along on the warm current, running ever faster towards the low-hanging star. I dozed, I dreamed, I woke to a clap of thunder to see Wendy’s face, sketched in forked lighting. I shuddered, and wished the
Oxford Waitron back on board. At the thought of her, my harry-pipe teased me by giving notice of an erection – a notice soon withdrawn. (I swear I heard laughter down below.)

Oh, for a full and groaning bloater to pass the time! One that would allow me to get a two-handed grip and demonstrate who is master in this sublunary world. Me or my joyboy? But with my bâton de mariage shrunk to the length of a betting-shop pencil, even a solitary one-legged amputee of a broken-down budgie would have difficulty hopping on, in my current state of detumescence. I pined away, savouring the memory of my last rousing bout with the Oxford waitron and her pards.

Morpheus the Greek saw I was fretting, so the generous god swooped from heaven, to throw sand in my eyes. I tumbled headlong into a dark and dreamless sleep.

When I woke, my guiding star had set. The sun rose, perfectly reflected from sky to ocean. A double-yolk dawn cracked the horizon. My tongue rasped in my parched mouth. I leaned over the side and cupped my hands, scooping the water to my lips. I knew saltwater might bring madness, but I drank all the same. There was enough light now to read the letter from my son.

“Dear Daddy Baz

“I am pleased to inform you that His Majesty the King has seen fit to dub me a Knight of the Realm, a reward for winning the Derby on his behalf, riding Buzzlebub the Nomad. Henceforth, you must address me as ‘Sir Little Black Baz’.

“I completed my PhD at Mad Scientist School a few minutes ago, so on certain occasions – formal dinner at High Table, for example, in the unlikely event you should ever be invited - it will be more fitting to address me as ‘Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz.’
“There is talk here at MadSci of my taking the chair of Temporal Linearity, if I can fit the duties in with the flat racing season. (Shouldn’t be a problem, the trainer I ride for is very understanding.) When this elevation occurs, you must say, ‘Professor Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz’ on first meeting me, ‘Prof’ after that. (On any one occasion, that is. If you meet me on the day following, or even on the afternoon of the same day, you must start over with ‘Professor Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz’ and take it from there.)

“Every Man Jack has tasked Uncle Daz with finding me a safe parliamentary seat – preferably the one on the Ness contested by Omo the Clown, as he only ever gets one vote (… yours, I believe, although there’s talk of a special Bill going before Parliament to extend the franchise to Jip. To give Omo more of a chance, I suppose …) and upon my election to the House, Daz proposes to secure my membership of the Privy Council. Thenceforth, if all goes as I have predicted, you should address me as ‘The Right Honourable Professor Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz, Member of Parliament and Privy Councillor.’

“There has been some scuttlebut in White’s, the Garrick, and the Reform Club, hinting that I am certain to be appointed to the Order of Merit and also become a Companion of Honour. I am unsure how you should address me when that time comes – but be advised, I shall keep you up to date, as soon as my inquiries to the Lord Chancellor’s office, with reference to titles and styling, have been answered to my satisfaction.”

Tears of joy streamed from my eyes, and for a while I could not read on. My son, who started life as a humble jockey of colour, was now embarked on a glittering career, a parasite within the belly of the beast! I sniffed, and wiped my eyes.

“You will be pleased to know that the problem of temporal linearity (lately getting on everyone’s tits, including the magnificent embonpoint of my mother Wendy) has been
solved – in theory, at least. We have not yet put my solution to the test. Here’s a brief sketch of how the application might work …”

At this point, the letter continued with page after page of abstruse, not say arcane, symbols, having something of the Cabbala about them.

“So there you have it, hope you can understand all that, it’s quite elementary – but, of course, you are cognitively challenged. To summarise: the key to subverting the linear temporality that’s lately been getting on everyone’s tits, is to reprogramme the diorite cyst. What in tarnation is that esoteric artifact, I hear you ask? I shall do my best to answer your question. However, please do not interrupt me, and save any supplementaries for the plenary session.

“The diorite cyst is an ancient stone of enormous power – in fact, nothing less than the foundation stone of the universe. Locked within its flinty core, is the fundamental energy of the cosmos, the energy that provoked the Big Bang. The stone generates the force field that causes all animal, vegetable and mineral time to unfold in linear fashion. Without the stone, there would be no sequential time at all, but a mere chaos of moments, proceeding now like a sidewise crab, now like a salamander devouring its own tail in a vicious circle. (We can consider the desirability, or otherwise, of the stone’s temporal governance, in the light of our certain knowledge that linear temporality is getting on everyone’s tits.)

“From the time it was first identified, quarried, shaped, and polished, the cyst was kept in the custody of the priests of the tabernacle of Seth at Hakkan’am, in the Old Hittite kingdom. At the turn of the year, on the shortest day, to ensure the rebirth of the sun, the Hittite priests would take the stone from the tabernacle, and lodge it within an ark of cedarwood, gopherwood, and walnut veneer, inlaid with ebony and ivory, four cubits in breadth. The shortest day was the most important feast-day in the Old Hittite calendar.
On that day, the sable-stoled sorcerers of Seth used to bear the diorite cyst in procession, within its worshipped ark, through the streets of Hakkan’am; accompanied by the timbrel’d anthems of an orchestra of flutes, hautboys, shawms and trembling bells - so that the plain people of Hakkan’am might venerate the stone that causes the sun to be reborn and time to be kept on track. To the plain people of Hakkan’am, it seemed a species of religious magic. In fact, the priests of Thoth were in possession of ancient wisdom, a species of vernacular scientific knowledge that only the ignorant call ‘magic’.

“The upshot of all this, is that I believe I am on the point of recovering the diorite cyst, which will give me the opportunity to put my theories into practice. Can’t tell you any more just now – I might have told you too much already. I suspect that there are forces at work against me, people and institutions that have a vested interest in keeping time on the straight and narrow. Not everyone is sincere when they claim that linear temporality is getting on their tits.

“Beep beep! There’s the chauffeur-driven limousine, to take me to my latest investiture - got to run. See you around like a toilet roll,

Yours aye,

Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz (as I must sign myself for the moment, until my titles are augmented)”

**OH, FOR A MEGAPHONE!**

Full daylight disclosed banks and shoals of mist adrift on the sea. Out of a faraway cloud of green fog, whose heart pulsed with a pale lemon fire, came a galleon head-on. The figurehead on her prow was a mossy skeleton, partly shrouded in purple.

The vessel flew no flag. I counted her masts - one, two, three - as she swung round to present her port broadside to me. She had cannon on the upper deck, and a row of
gunports below. One by one, I saw the gunports open, and heard the lower-deck cannon run out.

The current was taking my pirogue straight for the ship. Black smoke billowed from the leading gunport and the crack of a cannon followed on the instant. For a second I saw the cannon-ball black against the grey sky and then it whooshed over my head, splashing close to my stern and throwing a geyser of water over me and nearly swamping the boat. At the risk of capsizing, I stood up, tore off my calico underpants and waved them above my head.

‘Halloo halloo! Ship in distress! Cease fire!’

The second cannon lobbed a ball towards me, this one plunging just a few yards ahead, and again drenching me with spray. The pirogue tipped and took on water.

‘In the name o … whatever, you fill in the blank … do not shoot.’

My voice was feeble, my tongue swollen with thirst. My words were more of a whispered prayer than a cry for help.

I grew ashamed of my bare forked nakedness and put my drawers back on. Oh, for a megaphone! Two balls had now bracketed my pirogue. Death would ride bareback on the third.

I was tempted to lie in the bottom of the pirogue and curl up like a hibernating hedgehog. But I was still one of His Majesty’s matelots, and although I was the most ordinary of ordinary seamen, a long way from able, and marooned in the deadliest of situations, I had eaten His Majesty’s snorkers and was true to the King.

Over and above my patriotic fervour, something in my naval education now stuck to me – a carapace of flinty resolution that constrained me to die like a man. (Considering my naval education had been mostly conducted up the back passage, my bearing was truly remarkable.) For the first time in my life, I now knew what it was to be a proper
man – not a pigman; not an envious squab cowering in the shadow of paraclete Daz; not the cuckolded husband of Wendy, nor the dupe of half-sister Licit and the slave of tyrant Pappy Barking. No, a man - a jolly sailor - a tall and proud Jackie Tar - free to choose death over a coward’s life. This being so, I couldn’t be seen dead in calico drawers, even by Davy Jones of locker fame, so I pulled off the drawers once more and threw them in the sea.

I stood proud in my nakedness, upstretched to full height, a warlike seaman. Surrender was not my gift to give. I opened my arms wide, offering body and soul for crucified sacrifice.

I tensed, waiting on the next shot.

**NO SHOT CAME**

No shot came. The current carried me closer and closer to the strange ship. A flag ran up the rigging and broke above the topmast gallant. The Black Flag of anarchy, with the skull and crossed bones of Jolly Roger himself.

The captain on the quarterdeck leaned over the taff rail, speaking-trumpet in hand.

‘Friend or foe?’

‘Very much a friend, especially to pirates,’ I called. ‘I think pirates are super, although much traduced, maligned, and misunderstood.’

Now there was a chance of life, I determined to seize it and fan its spark. Resignation in the face of death is dandy, so long as there’s nothing to do but die.

My pirogue bumped the ship’s side. A seaman threw down a rope and I made fast. A rope ladder followed and I scrambled up the salt-caked timbers to the pirate’s tarry bulwarks. The morning sun had softened the tar into blisters. I reached out for a handhold. The tar blackened my fingers. Rough piratical hands grabbed me, to bundle me over the side and throw me down on the smooth holystoned deck. Behind me, I
heard the pirogue being hauled inboard. I got to my knees, and shaded my brow against
the sun, now shining fierce above the mizzen mast. A fantastic figure hurried down from
the quarter deck. I recognized her as one of Granny Barking’s gossips from home –
Goody Clunge. Mum had said Goody Clunge had gone on a cruise, to get over the death
of her husband Rancid – as I understood it, her voyage was to be one long round of
pampering by tanned masseurs, each with a six-pack solar plexus; four squares a day,
with a gin and tonic stirred and ready at four in the afternoon; champagne cocktails
before a gourmet dinner at the Captain’s table; the occasional game of deck quoits, and a
conjugal visit from her personal trainer each bedtime. Looking at her now, I could see
Goody Clunge had clearly come a long way from such a sybaritic lifestyle. One could
only wonder at the circumstances that led her here.

She wore tanned leather trousers fringed with buckskin - and a tricorne hat, a dainty
confection of beaver pelt and peacock feathers, trimmed with lilac lace. Her eye-patch
was black satin. A handsome Jolly Roger had been tattooed on her right cheek –the work
of a master. Her bone clogs clattered on the deck, striking out the rhythm of the Sailor’s
Hornpipe. I bowed low, sweeping off an imaginary titfer.

‘Give ye good day, Mistress Clunge.’

‘It’s Captain Clunge to you. It’s Captain Clunge to each and all. I assume, Barry, you
want to stay aboard, and go on the account with us and sign our articles of association?
We guarantee all the doubloons you can fill your seaboots with, and a hearty wench in
every seaport from here to Callao. If wenches are your style, of course. It hasn’t escaped
my notice that you have spent some time in Back Passage.’

‘What might be the alternative to a piratical career?’

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11 The opening words of which are: ‘Do your balls hang low? Can you swing them to
and fro? Can you tie them in a knot, can you tie them in a bow?’
Captain Clunge pointed towards the mainmast, where a clutch of pirates were preparing to run out a plank from the ship’s side. I peeked over the bulwarks. A shark’s fin cut the water.

‘Where do I sign?’

‘First things first, Barry. We don’t take just anyone. Our personnel officer will interview you and conduct a psychometric test. Third gangway on the left, past the shot-locker, hang a right at the cutlass rack, down the ladder, and it’s first door on your left. You’re expected, so just knock and go in.’

YOU WERE STICKING MY HEAD IN THE BONER

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘But you look strangely familiar. The last time I saw you …’

‘You were sticking my head in the boner. Yes, it’s me again, Hardy Ma Bansom, brought back to life through the agency of Cunty McFuck. I don’t suppose you fancy giving me a good seeing-to, do you? Captain Clunge is very particular about no sex on board, but I’m gagging for it, and I know you’re a lusty young devil. Come on, help me shove this butt of sack against the door so nobody can get in.’

‘As it happens, I could do with a bit. It’s been a while. How’s the lingerie situation?’

Hardy Ma Bansom pulled off her sea-boots and her tarry trousers.

‘See, Barry? Apricot silk and lace, by Keturah Brown, 85 Regent’s Park Road.’

‘That’s been her address since ever I can remember. They’re lovely, and remind me of Wendy.’

‘Go to, shipmate. Shiver my timbers.’

So I shivered her timbers, and she returned the favour, and after a more languorous spell of love-making, we sat together in a companionable way, leaning against the butt of sack, while Hardy Ma Bansom smoked her pipe and picked at the pith of a pomegranate
with a sliver of whalebone. I couldn’t help feeling we were old campaigners, messing together in the lull of battle. All of a sudden there came a furious knocking at the door.

‘Open up! I know what you’re doing in there. And it isn’t psychometric testing. Filth and perversion, that’s what it is.’

‘Ohmigod,’ said Hardy Ma Bansom, ‘it’s Captain Clunge.’

Indeed it was, and she was furious. I could see now that her husband Rancid had been well off out of it when Rumbold stretched his neck.

‘Master at arms,’ she said, ‘clap these fornicators in irons, shackle them to the mainmast and cat o’nine them. When they’ve tasted the barbed tongues of the cat, commence the death of a thousand cuts … that’s a thousand each, and no remission for keeping a stiff upper lip … in fact, cut their lips off first … then afterwards, feed the remains of these varmints, gobbet by bloody gobbet, to the sharks.’

‘Sounds like fun – but might I suggest you just set us adrift in Barry’s pirogue?’ said Hardy Ma Bansom. ‘I’m grateful to you, Captain Clunge, for the internship, and all the trouble you’ve taken with my induction, but I don’t really think that personnel management in the pirate industry is the life for me after all. A quiet severance might be better than an orgy of blood-letting.’

‘Ha!’ sneered Captain Clunge. ‘You want to go back to the school-inspecting, don’t you? I should have known - never trust a pirate wearing Keturah Brown.’

‘The school-inspecting might be a good idea, so thanks for mentioning it. Barry can come with me, and train as my assistant. You’re better off without us.’

‘You don’t have enough fire in the belly for a pirate’s life. Fainthearts will only impede us. Apart from that, the last training day you set up, you got negative feedback from the crew. “No pemmican jerky at breaktime,” they said. Hardy Ma Bansom, you
make me sick … Get your drawers back on, make yourself decent, and get up on deck. Away with you - out of my sight.’ She turned to her Master at Arms.

‘Tell the bosun to put a cask of water and a tub of ship’s biscuit aboard the pirogue. Let them have a compass, and find the young man a suit of clothes. This Casanova and his Jezebel have a long voyage home.’

**HOMEWARD BOUND**

The night was starry, with a gentle breath of wind. While Hardy Ma Bansom slept off the effects of her latest seeing-to (half an hour ago against the pirogue’s single mast) I studied the constellations overhead. Looking at the stars, and checking with the compass, I saw that the wind and current were taking us on a bearing toward the Narrows and home to the Ness.

I hoisted the sail and set the jib. I sat in the sternsheets with my hand on the tiller. All was quiet, except for the burbling of water under my keel, soothing me into slumber.

I was on the point of nodding off, when a lonesome harmonica wailed like a low-bawling calf. I snapped awake to see a possee of ghostly riders loping slow across the night sky, with a thousand head of cattle. At the back of the herd rode Granny Barking, side-saddle on a buttermilk mare. She was riding drag, with a bandana across her mouth to shield her from the dusty trail. She carried a whiplash, to whip the dogies back into line. Ahead of her rode the outfit’s ramrod, Cunty McFuck, tooting his mouth organ to keep everyone cheery. He wore a checked shirt and waterproof jerkin, with leather *chaparillos* over blue denim jeans. His spurs gleamed in the starlight. Riding at the head of the outfit was the trail-boss himself, Methuselah Bansom, looking no older than the nine hundred and sixty-nine years he’d boasted when I saw him last. Trotting at his horse’s tail was his faithful hound, Rin-Tin-Tin. And there, creeping in from a cloud of interstellar dust was Jip, surely interceding on my behalf in the starry court of destiny,
good old boy. True, Jip’s idea of intercession was to initiate the business-from-behind on Rin-Tin-Tin, who yowled the minute he was mounted – whether in pleasure or distress, I couldn’t tell. Methuselah screwed the top from his canteen and threw water over Jip in a vain attempt to discourage him.

Methuselah Bansom saw me looking up. He grinned at me and winked.

‘Mighty fine dog you have there,’ he called. ‘He can roger my chaps any time.’

Jip took him at his word and clambered up his leg. Jip’s eyes rolled yellow in his head and his ecstatic yowl cracked the sky. Methuselah leaned down to pat Jip, and Jip licked his hand.

‘Good boy, good old Jip.’

Methuselah Bansom straightened up and flourished his ten-gallon hat to indicate the trail ahead.

**HAPPY TOGETHER**

As above, so below. Our rag-taggle outfit crept towards the Deeping Banks, anent the Kentish Knock. Three times a day, we had to furl sail and drop anchor, while the possee overhead stopped to light their cookfire in the sky, prepare a mess of bacon and beans for the riders, give the horses their oats and water, and open a tin of pilchards for Jip and Rin-Tin-Tin.

During the last halt of the day, just as the sun was hissing into the sea, I heard the siren song of Belladonna, the mermaid of the rocks. Seated before her looking-glass, Belladonna teased her long blond hair with an ivory comb. Seduced by her song that listed all the *pros* of congress with her and none of the *cons*, I set my foot on the bulwark of the pirogue, ready to leap into the ocean and swim to the rock. Hardy Ma Bansom grabbed hold of my shirt-tail and pulled me back.
‘Don’t jump, Barry. Remember my warning. Beware Belladonna, lady of the rocks. Her scales will play havoc with your joyboy.’

‘That’s all very well for you to say, but she’s got me going. Look at my bloater, she’s fit to burst. I’m desperate for a ride, scales or no scales, and if I can’t have a smooth one, rough will have to do.’

‘Silly boy! Don’t I know best how to take care of your bâton de mariage?’

‘That sounds almost like a proposal. Are you popping the question?’

‘Yes. It’s a leap year, so my privilege. We could be happy together, Barry.’

‘I’m still in love with Wendy.’

‘You’ll soon get over Wendy, once you’re shackled to me on the treadmill of marriage. I promise to spend a good portion of my income at the house of Keturah Brown, and wear sumptuous frillies every day of my life. You’ll never stray, I’ll have you at it day and night.’

‘Give me time to think it over.’

From above, strewn by the generous hand of Methuselah Bansom himself, came a confirmation of silvered confetti, sparkling in the starlight. A young cavalry-bugler-turned-cowpuncher - a pale tender chucklewit boy - put his horn to his lips and bugled the ancient melody, “Come to the cookhouse door, boys”. Hearing the invitation, Gervase Whitelady appeared, riding an Arab steed. He rode alongside the bugler and put his arm around his shoulders.

‘Ow, none of that, get off, you bleedin’ nonce.’ (Better luck next time, Gervase.)

Cunty McFuck’s mouth-organ vamped the Wedding March.

‘Okay,’ I said to Hardy Ma. ‘If Methuselah Bansom and Cunty McFuck are in favour, you’re on. The minute we get back, I’ll file for divorce. I take it Methuselah Bansom will give you away?’
A thunderclap and shower of golden rain gave token of Methsualeh’s agreement.

‘Few unions can have had such propitious auguries at commencement,’ I said.

‘It’s Zeus and Danaë, all over again,’ said Hardy Ma Bansom.

**BURIAL AT SEA**

Guided by the celestial pilot and his possee, we safely navigated the channels among the sandbanks of the Kentish Knock, where many a ship has come to grief and seaman lost his life. We steered for the Narrows through the starry night. Distant in the west, the orange plume of the Gravesend Crematorium drifted across the sky, borne on the prevailing wind. Across the estuary, at the tip of the Ness, the lights of the Domedrome Casino twinkled.

‘D’you know,’ I said to Hardy Ma Bansom, ‘I’ve never been to the Domedrome.’

‘Now you’re betrothed to me, that’s an establishment you’ll never patronize.’

‘How about a bit to keep me going?’

‘I was just thinking the same myself.’

We hadn’t been at it for more than ten minutes, when I felt a lash across my buttocks.

‘Ow!’

‘Tend to your proper business.’

I looked up to see Methuselah wielding his comet’s-tail whiplash. ‘No fornication until you and Hardy Ma is properly spliced. We don’t hold with wedding night rehearsals in the Bansom clan.’

‘Great-great-great – you get the idea – grandpappy is right,’ said Hardy Ma. ‘Just squeeze me the last few drops, he’ll never notice, and then we’d better call a halt until after the ceremony.’

I squeezed, pulled out, and scooped a handful of seawater over my harry-pipe.
Hardy Ma Bansom began to scream and rage at my ablutions – ‘Do you think I’m a whore!’ - and I had to employ all my arts of seduction and conciliation before I could calm her. Reassured at last that I had the highest respect for her chastity, she purred contendedly, snuggling against my shoulder to whisper sweet nothings in my ear, making one-sided plans for the new family of bairns she was sure we would have. Hearing her ramble away, I began to think I wasn’t cut out for married life. What if she reverted to crimplene and calico once we were spliced? I pondered the likely terms of a cast-iron pre-nup and how they might be enforced.

While burbling a selection of names for the babies she wanted us to have, Hardy Ma Bansom fell asleep, and her breathing grew quieter until she wasn’t breathing at all. I checked her pulse. Oh, dear. It looked like Cunty McFuck’s resurrection magic had worn off. I squinted at the sky. Methuselah Bansom had fallen asleep while he rode onward. His head nodded over his palamino’s withers, and drool dribbled from his open mouth.

Now or never. Gently I rolled Hardy Ma Bansom over the side. Her body relaxed into the sea. As she sank, her body turned face up. I heard, bubbling from the deep -

‘Beware the one-eyed merchant – Mrs Maithuna.’

‘Yes, will do. But she’s a pussycat, so no worries. Ta-ta for now.’

‘What do you think of Shadrack and Abednego, if it’s twin boys?’

‘Fine by me. Like I said, ta-ta for now.’

‘If it’s triplets, we could call one of them Meshek and have a full house.’

‘Missing you already.’

RETURN TO ITHACA

Where we live, we’re out of the way, but that’s looking at it from the landward side. Sailing up the Narrows, keeping the rocky outcrops of the Ness a safe distance to
starboard, a voyager can see we’re right in the swim of things. Passing the oyster beds, in the grey light of dawn, I saw a tasty young shucker, new to the game, run from her shed. She waved and shouted a ribald greeting, inviting me to stop by for a dozen oysters and a good shucking.

‘Maybe later,’ I called back, ‘when Pappy Barking gets the horn. Thanks for the offer.’

‘My mum says she hasn’t seen Pappy Barking in a dog’s age.’

The young shucker lifted up her sackcloth apron to give me an eyeful of her considerable charms, and for a moment I was tempted to haul the tiller round and make a landing. Instead, I let the pirogue continue a straight course, until Barking Reach came in sight. I struck the sail from the pirogue’s mast, and paddled the vessel towards the tidal inlet.

The tide was running full. Borne on the surge, I beached the pirogue on the shingle, close to the track. Our family skiff lay further up among the dunes, half-hidden among the reeds. No wonder Pappy Barking hadn’t been out to the oyster beds for some time. The derelict skiff was in need of serious renovation.

A sweet nostalgia welled up in me – a sentimental hanker for the days when Pappy Barking and I would row out to the oyster beds and shucking sheds and take our turn with a salty shucker, me going sloppy seconds because I know now Pappy’s coin will always come down heads, until Doomsday in the afternoon.

Home again on dry land, my sea-legs had gone all lubberly. I staggered to the skiff. I parted the reeds and saw straight away this wasn’t Pappy’s boat. She was broader in the beam. A dirty tarpaulin partially covered her boards. I pulled the tarp aside, and found herring tackle stowed neatly in the stern. The door of the shindle-locker was askew, hanging from one rickety hinge. The other hinges had rusted through. I tugged at the door and it came off in my hand. I threw it into the dunes.
I stuck my head into the gloomy interior of the shindle-locker, and caught a whiff of rotten fish. Undeterred, I rummaged among the stinking detritus. Among a jumble of mouldy old clothes, I found a yellow sou’wester, a rusting tin of pilchards, and a damp copy of *Doughnuts Today!* - with the subscription coupon filled-in and half-torn out. Inside a plastic lunch-box topped with an ill-fitting lid, a raw herring’s head had rotted into slime. I threw the box as far as I could into the dunes. I examined the sou-wester. A name-tag in indelible ink read *Clotho Barking, Esq.*

I squatted on my heels, pulled a reed from a nearby clump, and sucked on it. Here was Clotho Barking’s skiff, which had been cast ashore so many years ago at the foot of Lembit’s lighthouse, and then snatched back by the powerful tide of a greedy sea – only to return once more, vomited up by Davy Jones.

Heavy rain had fallen not long since. From the skiff, footsteps in the wet sand led towards the track, striding towards home. I hurried, as best I could on rubbery legs, to follow them.

**GOOD FOR WILDLIFE**

A little way inland, some distance from the home place, the track twists and drops, and becomes a sunken road, dark and gloomy between high overgrown hedges that haven’t enjoyed a billhook since Adam was a boy. Good for wildlife, though. I mosied along, hands in pockets, enjoying the birdsong and not minding the gloom.

I came up from the twilight of the sunken road, into full daylight. Here was a novelty. A red and white striped pole barred the track, with a sentry-box on one side and a shack on the other, for all the world like a customs post.

Hubby Ketchup stood to attention in the sentry-box with a spear over his shoulder. He was naked, apart from his pointy hat. His greasy body glistened. Ochre stripes were painted across his muscular thighs. He didn’t notice me at first. Drumbeats began
pounding out from a loudspeaker in the shack - Ketchup’s cue to step smartly from the
sentry-box. He swivelled on his heel and began to march on the spot, in time to the
beats. An electronic voice – strangely Japanese - bellowed ‘hayfoot, strawfoot, hayfoot,
strawfoot’. Ketchup pounded his feet on the muddy track. The bell on his pointy hat
jingled merrily. At last he saw me and screamed.

‘Halt!’

Hubby Ketchup advanced with his spear at the ready.

‘Who goes there? Who dares interrupt my marching practice?’

‘Don’t be daft, Hubby Ketchup, it’s me, Barry Barking.’

‘Papers!’

I had no ‘papers’ as such – I needed no passport to go to sea in Back Passage. But
rather than disappoint my unhinged inquisitor, I handed over Licit’s letter. Hubby
Ketchup gave it a cursory glance.

‘More papers!’

I handed him Little Black Baz’s delirious tract.

‘Now give me sixpence.’

‘I haven’t got sixpence. I’ve been cast away at sea.’

‘Give me sixpence. Give it now.’ Hubby Ketchup’s voice started in low growl but
soared to a whine as if he were imitating Baco’s trombone glissando.

‘Look, have you a pencil? No? Right, let’s see …’

I picked up a jagged flint from the track and used it to scratch an IOU in the woodwork
of the sentry box - *I, Barry, OBU Hubby Ketchup, sixpence only.*

‘There. Will that do? As soon as I can, I shall bring you a fresh-minted sixpence, all
shiny and new, to redeem my pledge.’

Hubby Ketchup traced the IOU with his fingers, as if he was reading Braille.
‘Good. If Barry doesn’t redeem the pledge, he dies by my spearthrust.’

‘Fair enough, no worries.’ I scratched my head. ‘Just a minute,’ I said. ‘Hasn’t Clotho Barking passed this way recently? Look, you can see his sandy fotprints. I’m sure he didn’t have a sixpence on him.’

‘Clotho Barking was expected, and enters for nixes,’ said Hubby Ketchup, lifting the barrier. ‘Clotho comes home to fulfil the prophesy foreshadowed in the eighteenth haiku of Gervase Whitelady.’

‘I was afraid you might say something of the sort. Remind me how the eighteenth haiku goes.’

Hubby Ketchup cleared his throat and recited.

‘The bright herring moon shall wax and wane
E’er Clotho he be seen again.’

‘Sorry to tell you this, Hubby Ketchup, but that’s not strictly speaking a haiku, and I doubt very much if it’s by Gervase Whitelady. It might have seventeen syllables, but it’s unbalanced, a solecism he’s never been guilty of. His prosody is always spot on. Also, I don’t suppose you’ve noticed, but it seems to have limited predictive value, worse than Nostradamus. It’s merely banal. Even taken as a couplet, it’s rubbish.’

‘Mrs Maithuna told me it is haiku.’

‘Mrs Maithuna has many talents, but literary criticism is not one of them.’

Hubby Ketchup gave me a suspicious look.

‘Mrs Maithuna has a degree in comparative literature, specialising in Konjaku Monogatarishū, and signed by Pappy Barking himself. I bought it for her, last birthday.’

‘And you paid how much? No, never mind an answer, I have to get home.’
Hubby Ketchup muttered ‘sixpence’, shouldered his spear, and took up his position in the sentry-box. I carried on down the track. Behind me I could hear him puzzling over his ‘haiku’, turning the words this way and that, and becoming increasingly desperate.

‘Stop!’ he shouted. I looked round to see him running towards me, waggling his spear.

‘Yes, Hubby Ketchup, how can I help?’

‘Show me a real haiku, so I know.’

‘Very well. Here’s a true haiku. Whitelady’s seventeenth, as it happens.

“Seventeen sly strokes -

Masterful hand spends treasure -

Pearl on golden sand”’

‘I get it now!’ Hubby Ketchup’s face broke into a broad grin. ‘Haiku tells of masturbation. Poetry is jism.’

‘Not quite in every instance, no. We can talk about it later.’

‘Okay,’ said Hubby Ketchup.

I PONDER MUTABILITY

The old home place came in view, and as I paused, hands on hips, to take in the panorama before me, I saw there had been many changes. The compound seemed less cramped. The higgledy-piggledy look had given way to a landscaped space – less homely and more clinical. Mrs Maithuna had been busy.

The Doughnut itself had been moved back some distance. A circle of withered grass showed where it used to be. Huddled on its flanks, a gaggle of smaller Doughnuts was each connected to the original by a galvanised walkway. The new arrivals looked like tramp doughnuts to me, tarted up to make them presentable but tramps all the same. Misshapes in white overalls passed along the walkways, carrying whole sides of pig, pig’s head, spare ribs, fat chines, trays of yellow-crumbed ham, and black pudding. I
wasn’t happy about the way the raw and the cooked were being handled. Too close for comfort. You should always keep them separate.

From our old Doughnut came the whine of the boner.

Driven by Dock Rampart, a forklift truck beetled up, to hoist a newly loaded pallet of headcheese and add it to a stack. I was surprised to see him in such a menial job – no doubt he had some ulterior motive.

The sties were in their old location, as was the outhouse. But the sties had been extended, and so had the outhouse. Pappy Barking must have been kept busy with his circular saw, cutting holes for an alphabet’s worth of new names. I wondered how Baco and Ham were coping with the new regime. They had been sole progenitors for so many years, that competition in the business from behind must have taken some getting used to. As I pondered mutability, Baco’s trombone glissando was renewed. In my mind’s eye, as if I were a small boy again and raised up by Mum and Pappy Barking on my pneumatic high chair, I saw Baco hauling himself on to Hams’s bulk, sheathing himself among her scratchings, holding his trotters tight on her flanks and whimpering to his mate - tender words to bring forth tender meat.

Some things never change.

**DISCREETLY AT THE BACK**

Cottyto’s Temple had been dismantled and rebuilt in a new location, closer to the road.

On the temple roof a revolving neon sign advertised the days and times of worship. A service had just ended, and the congregation were filing out.

Granny Barking’s prefabricated Dame School had gone, replaced by a bandstand. Up on the stand, dressed in smart blazers and full minstrel makeup, the banjo band of the Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen was getting ready to perform. Banjos of all sorts – piccolo to bass - were arrayed on tiered seating. Musicians shuffled their sheet
music, swapping wrongly attributed parts, and cracking sly cynical jokes to each other at the expense of their conductor in the manner of jobbing musicians everywhere. A banner draped across the front of the bandstand was emblazoned with the coat of arms and royal warrant of the Worshipful Company. A sign revealed that the guest conductor for today would be Professor Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz.

Little Black Baz stood on the conductor’s podium, dressed in white tie and tails. He brought the band to attention with his baton, gave the downbeat, and the band was off and away, hurtling through a jaunty ragtime melody.

I had arrived just in time for the concert, but so as not to make a fuss, I took a seat discreetly at the back. Other late arrivals, decamping from a charabanc, were less considerate, pushing their way to the front and taking up vacant seats in the middle of the front three rows, making those already in place rise to make way for them. (‘Sorry, sorry … d’you mind? Thanks a million.’) One of the charabanc party, shyer than her companions, hung back and slipped into the vacant seat beside me. She wore a domino mask. As she settled herself, I heard the rustle of satin and organza, and the gentle creaking of what sounded like the finest whalebone corsetry.

The newcomers had been delayed by their charabanc breaking down. (‘The effing effer’s effed again,’ my new neighbour explained daintily, smoothing down her organza skirt.) The chatter of the delayed patrons and the scraping and banging of chairs, along with the crackling of crisp packets and scrunching of pork scratchings, threw the principle tenor banjo off his stroke, making him miss a beat. Little Black Baz threw his arms wide and gestured ‘Cut!’ to the band. The music came to a sudden halt.

‘We shall continue the concert,’ said the conductor, addressing the audience, ‘when we have your full and undivided attention. May I point out that we have been rehearsing this performance for months? Please show respect to the musicians and their conductor -
that’s me, Professor *Herr Doktor* Sir Little Black Baz - and above all, show respect to our esteemed guest, my great-grandfather Clotho Barking, lately returned from Davy Jones’s locker, and in whose honour this concert is being given.’

He gestured with his baton towards Clotho Barking who sat enthroned on a dais. Clotho was flanked on the one hand by Mum, seated in her wonted state in the Big Mamma armchair - which had been dragged from the house for this special occasion - and on the other hand by Pappy Barking, who sat perched on a pile of back numbers of *Doughnuts Today!* Pappy Barking wore a clean eye-patch and a freshly-laundered smock, and Mum had taken a steam-iron to his Stetson. I had never seen him look so smart. In contrast, Clotho looked a mess. His long hair and beard were matted, and his clothes were in tatters.

Pappy Barking whispered in Clotho’s ear. Clotho grinned and nodded. Pappy Barking leapt to the podium. He patted Little Black Baz on the head and took the microphone from its stand. He tapped the mic with his finger.

‘Testing testing … If I might just say a few words before you carry on with the performance, Professor *Herr Doktor*?’

‘Please do. A few choice words might help establish the proper tone. By the way, for the moment, it’s Professor *Herr Doktor* Sir Little Black Baz. Please acknowledge my full entitlement.’

Pappy Barking bowed to the conductor. He put the microphone to his lips and spoke to the crowd.

‘The bus company have said sorry for the charabanc breaking down, and also for the delay in sending out a substitute vehicle.’

‘Shame on them!’ came an angry cry.
‘Yes, as charabanc companies go, they’re certainly among the least reliable. However, Everyman Jack has assured me that Prime Minister Daz … who, if I may digress, I’m proud to say is the fruit of my loins and the loins of Ma, and the fairest of fair copies, with ten budgies up on his harry-pipe and all of them cheeping away merrily, not like that ingrate Barry who could only muster seven on a good day, what a useless lump of filth he always was, couldn’t even fork a decent dungheap, I should have strung him up to the slaughtering block when I had the chance. Another thing about Barry …’

Mum tugged at his sleeve and put her finger to her lips. *Bella mama mia,* sticking up for her firstborn son!

‘Don’t worry Ma, he’s lost at sea many years since …’ uttered Pappy Barking in a loud stage whisper, before continuing, ‘Daz tells me he has earmarked the issue of charabanc performance as his number one priority now that the issue of the Um-Ka succession is sorted once and for all.’

A bolshy figure in the front row was on his feet and shouting. ‘Who gives a toss about Um-Ka? Or bloody Barry, if it comes to that. When are we getting a decent charabanc service? And what about this linear temporal progression that’s been getting on everyone’s tits? When is Daz going to sort that?’

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd.

‘About bloody time he did,’ said my neighbour, whispering behind her hand. ‘How do you feel about it?’

‘It’s scandalous,’ I said. ‘If all time was eternally present to inspection, and this linear caper put to bed once and for all, we could be happy. As it is, it’s just one damn thing after another and only the Gravesend Crematorium to look forward to.’

‘I don’t want to be cremated,’ said my neighbour. ‘I’d rather be buried alive than cremated.’
‘Me too,’ I said. ‘Um, er … I know we’ve only just met, but it looks as if the concert won’t be starting again for some time. Pappy Barking is busy fielding questions from the audience. I don’t suppose you …’

‘Seize the day, and strike while the iron is horny,’ said my companion with a sly grin.

‘How many budgies did Pappy Barking say you can muster on a good day?’

‘Seven … no, eight … well, maybe seven. I’ve lost count. Perhaps you could help me clarify the situation?’

‘No problem. Do you have a room?’

‘This is my home, where my heart is enshrined amidst the rosy hours and happy memories of a fragrant childhood. We can use the nursery, if we creep round the back and up the ladder. My old rocking-horse, Jojo, will be glad to see us.’

‘Can we do it on a mangel-and-acorn sack?’

‘I don’t see why not. We always had mangel-and-acorn sacks for counterpanes. And you can do it with Jojo the faithful rocking-horse too, if you don’t mind an unsanded pizzle. He’s not fussy either, just so you know. Follow me, and we’ll scarper while everyone is busy.’

‘Right you are. Call me Domino.’

‘Domino – fine by me. You can call me his Vaunted Eminence, Goodam Erasmus Barrymore Barking, Lord …’

‘…of the Sceptre Wagglers, et cetera. Yes, I know, I’ve been stalking you for years. My deceased sister was a waitron in Oxford, I think you know her.’

‘Yes, a tragic case. Regulations on faulty heaters should be tightened up. It’s scandalous.’

As we crept away, hand in hand, the audience began shouting for the concert to start.
‘Who wants to listen to you, Pappy Barking, you monocular vulture-eyed poltroon?

Bring on the banjos!’

Pappy Barking ducked as coins, cans, and bottles began flying towards the podium. To forestall a riot, Little Black Baz gave the downbeat, and the band struck up the vigorous strains of *Old Piss and Vinegar*, the grand ceremonial march of the Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen.

THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE

Domino and I finished the business from behind, upside down, and back to front.

‘All done?’ she said.

‘That will do for now.’

We exchanged phone numbers, signs of the Zodiac, and such tokens of enduring affection and commitment as we felt constrained to muster.

‘That was nice for a first joust, but I’ve had better,’ I said, opening the door to the yard.

‘Same here,’ she said, blinking at the sunshine. ‘Although you are a clear seven, you’re not up to snuff in performance and a bit of a disappointment, but you’ll do for now. Are you sure you’re normal? You taste very salty.’

‘I’m as straight as the next man.’

We went back to join the throng. The first half of the programme had given way to the intermission. The band took advantage of the pause to take on the new-arrival banjoists, held up due to their milkfloats having been blocked by yet another broken-down charabanc. Goldtop Ron was busy putting the finishing touches to his slap, while one of his minions tuned his banjo for him. Ron was due to take the plectrum banjo solo in the choice item *Darkie Milkmen on Parade* and he wanted to look his best.
The audience grew, as news of the concert spread across the Ness. They hurried across the fields and meadows, from Comus’s Mill and the Widow’s Mere, from Chafford, Thorp and the surrounding Hundreds. A lorry arrived from Chafford Hundred with extra seating. Tanned and muscular boy scouts jumped down and unloaded the lorry. They began rearranging all the chairs in the auditorium. Gervase Whitelady bustled among them, dressed in Scoutmaster uniform – crisp ironed shirt, with kerchief and woggle, khaki shorts and Smokey Bear hat. A cluster of pale and tender chucklewit boys tugged at his shorts, holding up theatre programmes for him to autograph. An antic thought, sired by the imp of the perverse, seized me.

‘Excuse me, Domino, I’ll be back soon.’

I returned to the farmhouse, with a fell purpose in mind. The door to the kitchen was open. I went inside, to be greeted by the chirruping of a new generation of budgies making merry in their cage, variously pecking at cuttlefish bones ... admiring themselves in their mirrors ... sitting broody on their eggs ... and now and again giving each other a chirpy seeing-to. Licit crouched by the Rayburn, gurning at them and mimicking their cheeps.

‘Licit! You’re free!’

‘No thanks to you,’ said Licit. ‘Luckily I was released in honour of the Jubilee that Everyman Jack declared to celebrate the return of Clotho Barking.’

I gave her the thumbs-up and went into the parlour. Daz’s old tambourine, one of his spoils of war, lay dusty and neglected on the turkey carpet that once was fine, but now trodden flat and khaki with pig-muck and straw. The genie tattooed on the tambourine’s skin winked at me. I spat on my horny thumb and caressed the goatskin, smearing spittle across the genie’s belly. As I smeared, my thumb made tiny involuntary leaping movements, skipping across the hide like a skimming stone.
Hear the taut ripple of sound!

I gathered my thumb to my fingers, mustered a fist, and rapped on the goatskin, once, twice.

‘Fuck me sidewise!’

Summoned with the ancient words of command, Gervase the Genie stood before me, arms folded, head tilted to one side, his light-brown moustache surmounting a quizzical smile.

‘I give you good day, my master. At your service, despite you dragging me away from what looked like a promising afternoon. I am … you know who I am … genie, poetaster, dramatist, part-time window cleaner to the gentry, scoutmaster and tender companion of pale young chucklewit boys. What will you have, master, what will you have?’

‘Merely for devilment, not for gain, I want the amelioration, if not the downright reversal of the linear temporal progression that’s lately been getting one everyone’s tits, especially mine.’

‘It shall be so, master, it shall be so. Professor Herr Doktor Sir Little Black Baz has given the diorite cyst into my keeping and urges me to use it for good or ill. My mischievous nature inclines me towards ill. Is there any particular period you wish to inhabit – or will you take pot-luck?’

‘Wherever we go, I must take my vengeance on Daz.’

‘An ignoble motive, master. Daz has had your best interests at heart – on occasion. But your motivation is not my business. Let me show you the sights.’

The parlour shimmered and grew dim before fading into limbo. The floor fell away from my feet. For minutes, days, months and years, I felt myself rolled widdershins in earth’s diurnal course. A cacophony filled my ears, an atonal choir of yowls, screams,
exhortations, sobs, pleas for mercy, and erotic supplications - a whirlwind of dionysian splendour within a maelstrom of ecstasy and terror.

When I came to solid earth again, I was seated on a stone bench within a dank tunnel. Ahead, an iron grille barred the way to the outside world and high summer. Spangled sunshine played across the ceiling, floor and walls.

A bronze helmet sat tight on my close-shaven head. The helmet’s crest was a leaping salmon. Leather-thonged sandals adorned my feet. A thick leather apron sewn with discs of iron covered my private parts. Otherwise, I was naked. My muscles ached. Cuts and weals had striped my skin, tokens of combat.

A swarthy Egyptian armourer applied fresh dubbin to my sun-baked apron and thongs. ‘There you go, nice and supple.’ He stood up. ‘Here you are Barrymus Minimus, my old mucker - cop hold.’ He tossed me a short sword. I caught it by the hilt and tried the edge of the blade with my thumb, drawing blood.

‘We’ve sharpened your gladius and given you a new shield. Dock Rampart the Nubian tore your shield up good-oh before you finally slew him.’

‘You mean I have to fight again?’ I said. ‘So soon? That’s four on the trot. I’m worn out. Dock Rampart the Nubian nearly did for me. Who’s next?’

‘Last match of the day, and it’s a novice from the conquered province of Nessia, your part of the world, I believe? His name is Dazimus Maximus Barking – any relation? - and it’s his first fight. Make sure it’s his last, eh? You’ve done well so far. Every man you’ve met has been a straight kill, no messing. But don’t kill this one straight off – disable him, and let him beg for mercy first, so we get a bit of drama into the show. The crowd will love you for that, they get a bit narked if it’s slaughter slaughter slaughter all the way and no doubts about the outcome. Dazimus Maximus is a game boy though, so
watch yourself. The armourers have clubbed together and bet two thousand sesterces on you, to go right through the card this afternoon. Don’t let us down.’

A trumpet summoned me to the arena. The armourers turned the windlass and raised the portcullis. I hefted my sword and shield. My Egyptian put a dipper of water to my lips. I drank, and tasted the bitter waters of Styx.

The crowd cheered my entrance. I raised my *gladius* to acknowledge their support. The portcullis clanged shut behind me. I strode to the centre of the arena. My opponent - my hated brother, Dazimus Maximus - stood a spear’s length away. We saluted each other according to custom.

My enemy, my brother, began his warm-up exercises, stretching his legs and arms to relax his muscles and tendons. He might be a novice but he showed no fear. He was armed with a net, a trident, and a dagger - my second *retiarius* of the day. Like any *retiarius*, his head was bare, unprotected by a helmet. As he stretched and flexed his muscles, the ribald catcalls that had greeted him turned to murmurs of approval and shouts of encouragement. I sensed the fickle crowd had already grown tired of me. I could see from the wigwag arms of the tic-tac men that the bookmakers had shortened Daz’s odds to win.

The Emperor Caligula sat on high, enthroned in purple and gold. He was eating a ripe quince. The juice ran down his chin. Flies buzzed around his sugary lips. His favourite concubine, newly arrived, sat next to him in the place of honour with her hand up the back of his toga as if she were working a ventriloquist’s dummy. She looked familiar, like a succubus from a wet dream. The Emperor finished sucking his quince and handed the core to the concubine who popped it in her mouth. Caligula raised his hand to command silence. A slavegirl held a speaking trumpet to his lips.
‘Citizens, subjects, freemen and slaves – ladies and gentlemen - to conclude this afternoon’s programme we have a very special bout for you. You will readily see that the *retiarius* in the arena is the spitting image of myself – your beloved Emperor. The resemblance is uncanny. In fact, some of you may suspect that by sleight-of-hand we have substituted each for the other, and it is truly I, Caligula, who paws with sandled foot at the bloody sand of the arena, while Dazimus Maximus Barking sits enthroned in the Emperor’s box. Will you ever know the truth? Let the race be to the swift and battle to the strong! Begin.’

We saluted the Emperor in time-honoured fashion and went to work.

No matter how game he might be, no matter how many poncy warm-ups he might do, a novice *retiarius* is no match for an experienced swordsman, even if he does have more budgies on his harry-pipe. I tried to spin things out, to keep the crowd amused by feinting, but within minutes I severed the guide-string of his net. The net fluttered to the sand. I slashed again and cut his trident in half. The *retiarius* bellowed defiance. He drew the dagger from his belt and lunged. I sidestepped, parried, and knocked the weapon from his hand. He stood panting before me, prodding away with the stump of his trident. I reached down and picked up his torn net, flicking it towards him so that it wrapped around his legs. I tugged and he fell to the ground.

‘Mercy, Barrymus Minimus, mercy!’ His voice cracked with terror.

I looked towards the royal box. Caligula raised his hand and jabbed his thumb downward. I hefted my sword and sliced through the windpipe of Dazimus Maximus.

I place my foot on the chest of my fallen enemy and saluted the Emperor. The crowd booed and jeered. Caligula laughed and laughed until his face turned as purple as his toga.
‘Oh dear,’ said my Egyptian armourer, as I sat on the stone bench with my head in my hands. ‘Oh dear. You got that wrong, didn’t you? I thought we’d explained everything so clearly. *Thumbs down* means spare his life, *thumbs up* means finish him off. As it is, the umpires have disqualified you, and me and my muckers have lost two thousand sesterces. No more sharpened swords for you, my lad. In future they’ll be as blunt as they come.’

I spluttered and moaned. My Egyptian put his hand over my mouth to silence me.

‘Yes, I know, Barrymus, dear heart. Throughout the empire all the dimwits think it’s the other way round – thumbs up means life, down means death … but really, for an experienced *gladius* to get it wrong, there’s no excuse.’

He shifted uneasily, lifting his head to stare at the ceiling and whistling the way you do when you’re trying to encourage yourself to pee at a public urinal.

He was working up to something.

‘I’m afraid that’s not the only bad news, Barrymus Minimus Moronus. You have slain the Emperor Caligula. The silly sausage was a bit of a practical joker, and he always wanted to have a go in the arena. The arrival of Dazimus Maximus, his spitting image, was too good an opportunity to miss, so he ordered the swap – with consequences fatal to himself. Instead of you all settling down to enjoy his joke over a rich banquet of fermented asses’ milk, stuffed thrushes, bull’s testicles, pig’s pizzle and sheep’s clunge, followed by a good spew in the classiest vomitorium in Rome, we’re going to have to pretend nothing untoward has happened. This means Dazimus Maximus will now impersonate Caligula for the rest of his days. Luckily, he has the gift of tongues. As well
as Ancient Hittite, he speaks Latin like a native. He might turn out to be more like Caligula than Caligula himself. Not sure if that’s a good thing or not, but time will tell.’

‘What will happen to me?’

‘Can’t say. But whatever it is, it’s sure to be horrific at the worst, faintly unpleasant at best. On average, it’s life chained to an oar in a trireme. In the meantime, here’s the tambourine you arrived with. It might cheer you up while you’re waiting to hear your fate.’

‘Fuck me sidewise.’

**WEEP WEEP WEEP**

‘No, dearie, you’re not my type.’

‘Gervase!’

‘True, Barry, you’re more tanned and muscular since you took up gladiating. Even so, tanned and muscular types ring no bells for me just now. Might I interest you in going halves on a pale and tender chucklewit boy – or perhaps a poor wee orphan chimney-sweep, who cries *weep weep weep* and walks the streets of Regency London?’

‘Not really, but I’m happy to hold your coat while you get on with whatever it is you do with them.’

‘Pass the tambourine and I’ll see what I can conjure.’

**A SURFEIT OF BUDGIES**

‘You got that wrong, didn’t you?’ I said, grunting the words through clenched teeth as I pulled on the oar I shared with nine sturdy rowers.

‘You shouldn’t have dropped the tambourine,’ said Gervase. ‘I think that’s the root of the problem. Look on the bright side. We’re billeted here on the upper tier, so we get more fresh air and light.’

‘True, but the oars are longer.’
‘But it’s ten to an oar up here, and only four on the bottom, so it’s swings and roundabouts.’

‘I’ve never been keen on sitting with my back to the direction of travel,’ I said.

‘Look,’ said Gervase. ‘If you’re going to moan all the bloody time, I’m going to ask for a transfer to the bench up front, next to Alphonse the Gaul. His oppo Sixcock died last night of a surfeit of budgies. He’s the life and soul of the party, is Alphonse, not like you, you miserable git.’

‘Okay, if you can find yourself a better billet, bloody well go to it and stop mithering me with your optimism.’

‘No scuttlebut on the benches!’ shouted the chief overseer, laying about our sweaty backs with his rhinoceros-hide whip. ‘In out in out, that’s the ticket. Work up a lather and be worthy of your salted beans and water.’

So we belayed the scuttlebut and got down to our duty, while the drummer drummed, majestic on the poop deck, varying his time to keep us amused, and once an hour beating out a lively paradiddle to work us up to ramming speed and keep us honed for the battle to come. Throughout the torrid afternoon and into the cold starry evening, we pulled our oar – and pulled each other’s puddings in the odd slack moment - and otherwise pulled our oar, pulled our oar, world without end - propelling our trireme towards the distant shores of Um-Ka.
FAIR GAME FOR THE WHOLE HOG: CELEBRATING ABJECTION AND PUERILITY IN A COMIC NOVEL

1 The Genealogy of a Novel: the Empirical Author speaks

1.1 At the risk of generating an author’s anecdote, inviting you to share an ‘intentional fallacy’, I may as well begin with a train ride I took on a sweltering day in May, in the year 1988, from Barking, an outlying London borough, to Grays, in Essex. The line skirts the north bank of the Thames, heading east towards the estuary, and passes through a landscape of industrial towers and tanks, pipelines and hoppers, mostly dedicated to oil refining, cement production and other heavy-duty work involving minerals.

From one side of the train, when I had a clear view through the lattice-work of piping, I saw the broad sweep of the Thames at full tide and the traffic on the river in a shimmering haze. On the landward side, now and again, beyond the hoppers, towers and tanks, I saw meadows in bloom, reed-fringed ponds, and marshland teeming with wildfowl.

I was familiar with the tropes of industrialisation, and I well knew that ‘dark satanic mills’ could abound among the hills and meadows of the countryside. I had served time, twenty years before, working as a clerk in a foundry – a terrifying place, even for penpushers, where fettlers’ fingers were lopped off at the fettling machines and men burned to death when the chains of the huge ladles failed and molten metal poured down on them - but ten minutes’ walk after work took me to the beginning of the Sussex Weald, then undisturbed by the highway of the M23, and a fine and private place of bracken-swamped hollows, mixed deciduous woodland, and Forestry Commission conifer plantation – altogether a mixture of wilderness and cultivation.

As well as from personal experience, I knew industrial and pastoral tropes from painting, photography and film, and books - especially books. In some ways, despite first-hand experience, I seemed to know the score of the industrial/pastoral counterpoint better from art than life. The tropes of representation came pre-digested, as it were; and assimilated into my imagination, they were available to be combined, fractured, refashioned, played with. But on that day in 1988, the industrial/pastoral world around me seemed new and clear, almost Edenic – not innocent by any means, but not a fallen
world, either. The Machine was in the Garden\textsuperscript{12}, but the Garden seemed unthreatened by the Machine. In short, I had no \textit{designs} on the world before me, no intention of transmuting experience, and the world, into ‘art’.

I say I had no \textit{designs}, but I did have my binoculars with me – small, but of powerful magnification. In those days, I often carried them, just in case they came in handy. I have always been hampered by a lack of visual awareness – the sighted equivalent of being tone-deaf - and the binoculars were a way of training myself to look closer at the visible world, to focus on detail, to see connections and patterns. I believed then that writers do well to cultivate their sense of sight (\textit{pace} Borges) and I thought of myself as a writer - although I was heading for a job interview to become the teacher I had recently trained to be.

Among the patchwork landscape of meadow, industrial plant and mill, were occasional dwelling-houses of various ages – some of a modern build, and others older, black and dilapidated, some close to the riverbank, and others more distant out among the meadowlands. (One such at Purfleet became the lodging of the vampire Count in Bram Stoker’s \textit{Dracula}.) What was missing, though, was the sight of any person out on business or recreation. Even the carriage I was in was deserted, travelling widdershins against the rush-hour stream. The industrial plant might have been deserted too, although the smoke and steam and the rattle of the hopper belts showed that a mechanical life was going on, directed from somewhere within the belly of the beast.

The train slowed and stopped – an ‘Adlestrop’ moment perhaps, had I been shackled to a lyric muse. But I was anxious about making the job interview on time and I began to sweat. No word of explanation came from driver or guard. The birds of Essex tweeted and trilled, getting on my nerves. In an angry surge of paranoid megalomania, I detested their indifference.

I roamed about the empty carriage, seeking diversion, burning off my anxiety through hanging by the arms and swinging from the luggage rack. (I had supple joints back then.) The train began to move, slow and creaky, made a few yards, then stopped again. I lifted my binoculars, went to the window, and leaned out.

The train was halted on an elevated section of track before a red signal. Below, a dirty stream, choked with weed, and tattooed with slicks of oil shining red green and blue

\footnote{\textsuperscript{12} Leo Marx, \textit{The Machine in the Garden – Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America} (New York: Oxford University Press 1964).}
under the sun’s diffraction, flowed sluggish towards the Thames. I hefted my binoculars. On the bank of the stream was a peculiar structure, clearly a family dwelling of some kind – there was a child’s tricycle in the yard and a slide – that seemed to have been put together by an admirer of Gaudi, architect of the surreal, or constructed perhaps by one of those vernacular builders you used to come across in the flatlands of the USA, who styled their home-built dwellings and highway burger-stops and gas stations after the imagery of space-opera – flying saucers and rocket ships. It was built partly of breezeblocks and partly of timber and metal. The roof was made from sheets of corrugated zinc and asbestos. What was most curious to me, was the wide bore metal tubing that curved around the demesne, seemingly for no other purpose than to mark a boundary. This was a shanty dwelling, put together from industrial extrusions and cast-offs, a reclamation of the abject, and one that would give a building inspector the vapours. How had they got away with it? I had recently had my own travails with the building inspector, that found me chasing decades-old documentation through local authority archives, and it was clear to me that the structure below me now was the haunt of outlaws, people who didn’t give a damn for rules and regulations.

I heard hammering from inside the tube, and then a young man appeared, wearing a welder’s mask pushed up over his forehead. He dropped down from a hatch in the torus: the very image of a spaceman descending from his interplanetary vehicle. A dog began to bark. The man unlatched the door of a kennel and out staggered a three-legged dog. The man threw off his visor, dropped to the ground and wrestled with the dog, nuzzling the stump of the amputated back leg. The dog yowled in a way I could only think of – at the time - as the ecstatic cry of a martyr on the cusp of immolation. The train began to move, we picked up speed, and the man and dog were gone.

I got the job, and worked among the asthmatic teenagers of Grays/Thurrock for almost a year. Then I scarpered, for a job nearer home. In the meantime the image of the man and the dog followed me, nuzzling at my imagination. One night, I could not sleep. I rose up, went downstairs and wrote in a notebook:

‘The night we hanged the Paki, Jason came home on leave.’

1.2 I wrote for a few months, keeping the opening line for its shock value, playing with a story that involved an Essex family – a somewhat dysfunctional family, in that the father was a hangman, disappointed in his métier by abolition, who had carpentered his
own gallows and dug an execution pit out somewhere on the fringe of the marsh. There was a youth – Barry Barking, my narrator - and his brother, Daz, home from the war. The Falklands War was most recently in mind, but unspecified in the text, apart from a reference to his return from ‘the South’. The exact war is irrelevant, given war’s ubiquity in our ‘island story’.

The family’s mindset might be described as racist, if the reader focuses on the derogatory term ‘Paki’ - except that in the original conception the family wasn’t particularly fussed who they selected for hanging, among the wayfarers in their lonely marsh. Race, creed, colour, meant nothing to them, so long as the bodies could be processed into meat pies, sausages, and headcheese, to be sold at the farmers’ market.

Apart from ‘the meat’, as the family styled it, the family’s other business – and recreation - was dog fighting; their three-legged dog was the veteran of a scrap that put paid to his fighting career forever.

Several intertextual elements were in play, then. One might say: *The Story of Sweeney Todd* meets *Cold Comfort Farm* in a remake of *Lassie, Come Home*. Later on, this syntagm turned into my current pitch: H.E.Bates’s Larkin family meets the Marquis de Sade in the director’s cut of *Carry On Sailor*.

1.3 To return to my proto-Addlestrop moment when the train stopped and I saw the man and the dog: can I describe this minor literary skirmish as the origin of *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*? No, not the origin – perhaps an inciting incident at best. Origins, outside the linear patriarchal genealogies of scripture, are hard to trace and harder to defend as such; perhaps even for a work of fiction, non-existent as a hors-texte: what Christine Brooke-Rose has called ‘the myth of origin, the always already there’. 13

I am haunted now by the ghost of the book that might have been, had *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* not taken shape in the form I sculpted it. I think now that if the ghost had become incarnate, it might have been quite tasty - like a fine and pungent headcheese, with the bloom of healthy mould on it that betokens a brawn of the finest quality. However, the world is full of tales of murder, incest and cannibalism – Sawney Beane, whose exploits are recorded in *The Newgate Calendar*, being the funniest of them - and

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anyway, as Rushdie’s *Shame* tells, ‘All stories are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been’.  

However, as Melville’s narrator notes, in *Billy Budd*, ‘the might-have-been is but boggy ground to build upon’. With that in mind, let us move towards the story as it eventually came to be designed and written. However, before we do, let me clear some conceptual ground.

2  **A schema for analysis**

2.1 In the analysis that follows, I will posit a dynamic model of relations between text, reader, and author, borrowed from Umberto Eco, but owing a debt to the work of Wolfgang Iser, and other scholars working in the area of reader-response criticism. My Econian dynamic model of text, reader, and author will serve pragmatically as a tool for analysis. It is not intended to be a definitive summing-up of critical debate about relations between these terms (or entities) – if such a definitive summing-up, or last word, were even possible in this field.

Writing of Eco’s model, Stefan Collini, in his *Introduction to Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (the book which came out of the seminars conducted around Umberto Eco’s 1990 Tanner Lectures at Cambridge University), states (by way of discussion of a reader possibly ‘exceeding the bounds of legitimate interpretation’):

In [Eco’s] argument the provocative notion of *intentio operis*, the intention of the work, plays an important role, as a source of meaning, which, while not being reducible to the pre-textual *intentio auctoris*, none the less operates as a constraint upon the free play of the *intentio lectoris*. […] drawing upon his own earlier distinctions between the Empirical Reader, the Implied Reader, and the Model Reader, Eco ingeniously construes the notion to suggest that the aim of the text must be to produce the Model Reader – that is to say, the reader who reads it as it is in some sense designed to be read, where that may include the possibility of being read so as to yield multiple interpretations.  

To deal first with the ‘reader’: we must differentiate between the ‘empirical reader’ and the ‘model reader’. The ‘empirical reader’ is the flesh-and-blood subject who reads

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15 Umberto Eco (with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose), Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp.9-10
the book (or perhaps even buys it, thus becoming part of a marketing demographic).

‘Model reader’ (or ‘implied reader’, following Iser; or ‘ideal reader’, following the practice in media studies) means the reader constructed by the text and its structures of significance, in so far as these structures of significance might or might not admit a multitude of model readers each of whom has, by virtue of individuality in terms of life history and personal reading strategies, a different interpretation of any particular text — pace Leavis and his notion of criticism as ‘the common pursuit of true judgement’. Any ‘empirical reader’, in becoming a ‘model reader’, might on different days or through subsequent re-readings of a text, become any number of ‘model readers’. Eco puts the distinction like this:

A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the ‘only right’ conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of reader postulated by the text.16

All this raises the question of whether or not there can be limits to interpretation, or if there can be infinite ‘play’ in the interpretative act or process. If ‘a text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures’ what could be the criteria for testing valid against invalid conjectures, or are all conjectures valid? It is Eco’s view that there are limits to interpretation, limits governed by what he calls the intentio operis (the intention of the work). In my later analysis of Fair Game for the Whole Hog, I will playfully test the scope of interpretation and overinterpretation in relation to the text.2

2.2 Reader-response criticism has a long, even ancient, history, but has flourished particularly in the years since Wolfgang Iser’s The Implied Reader (1974) appeared in English translation, two years after its original German edition — although Eco claims he came early to the party: ‘In 1962 I wrote my Opera aperta. In that book I advocated the role of the interpreter in the reading of texts endowed with aesthetic value.’17

Reader-response criticism is not a unified field, neither in historical nor contemporary terms. There has been no single ‘reader-response’ position in terms of espoused

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16 Eco, Ibid, p.64
17 Ibid p.23
theoretical approach or methodology. Writing in 1980, Susan R. Suleiman described the variety of reader-response critical approaches:

We may distinguish, for the sake of the exposition, six varieties of (or approaches to) audience-oriented criticism: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychoanalytic; sociological and historical; and hermeneutic. These approaches are not monolithic (there is more than one kind of rhetorical or hermeneutic criticism), nor do they necessarily exclude each other.\(^\text{18}\)

It is the case that Iser’s work has been founded in the philosophic tradition of phenomenology, that systematic and close ‘reading’ of experience – which in Iser’s project becomes particularly the phenomenology of the reading process.

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This why the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.\(^\text{19}\)

We may characterise Iser’s phenomenology as ‘hermeneutical phenomenology’, one of the seven chief categories of phenomenological investigation, \textit{viz}:-

Hermeneutical phenomenology studies interpretive structures of experience, how we understand and engage things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others.\(^\text{20}\)

Iser’s approach and his positing of the ‘implied reader’ emanating from the text is essentially idealist, having nothing to do with what may be deduced about the structure of the experience of reading that might be gained from experiments with ‘empirical readers’. Such studies have been carried out (with the ‘reader’ generalised to ‘audience’). The materialist turn implicit in such studies is away from an approach centred upon the idealised reading subject towards a more empirical approach governed

\(^\text{19}\) Wolfgang Iser, ‘Interaction between Text and Reader’, \textit{Ibid} p.106
\(^\text{20}\) ‘Phenomenology, 4. The History and Varieties of Phenomenology’, \textit{Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy} - \url{http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/} - 4
by the positivist methods of sociology – using questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and other tools of quantitative and qualitative research - to compare ‘audience response’ among groups differentiated by nationality, and further differentiated by social class and gender. Jacques Leenhardt\textsuperscript{21} has described such a project, aimed at providing data which might allow us to decide empirically between competing claims for ‘meaning’ as it might be inscribed in the codes and conventions of the text itself and ‘meaning’ as produced (not ‘reproduced’, which would imply one canonical ‘meaning’) in the interaction between reader/audience and text. (Such empirical studies are in themselves of interest to the ‘empirical author’, and also for the way in which they might be assimilated to the techniques of ‘market research’ …)

Also at stake in Leenhardt’s work are the social facts of class, education and acculturation, expressed succinctly through the notion of the ‘learned reader’ as opposed to the ‘nonlearned reader’. Leenhardt makes this distinction without condescension towards the ‘nonlearned’; rather, he makes the distinction alongside a jaundiced view of self-referential fictions requiring the assistance of the ‘learned’ in their exegesis and interpretation.

Some critics […] find their self-justification in their status as intermediaries between a writing that wanders in the labyrinths of its own devising, and a reader who is asked to play with the text but who, unprepared to do so properly, is more than ever dependent on the knowledge and ingenuity that characterize this generation of critics. The determination to transform the reader into a real “producer” contradicts, furthermore, the codes of reading forced upon this very reader by the educational system, which is not in the least ready to encourage plays-upon-meaning and, even less, plays-upon-narrative elements. Such as we find in Ricardou’s theory – ‘meaning is what is best able to annihilate the text’ - the refusal of any concern with meaning in textual practice […] leads necessarily, albeit unwillingly to the exclusion of nonlearned reading. Among its very limited public, this kind of text will ultimately organize a permanent exchange of ingenuity in which a given cultural heritage will always play a dominant role. The reader to whom this literature is directed is thus an academician bristling with erudition.\textsuperscript{22}

It is not clear from the context of the above quotation what particular texts Leenhardt may have in mind. However, I infer that he is talking about essentially non-realistic

\textsuperscript{21} Jacques Leenhardt, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading’, in Suleiman and Inge (eds.), op. cit. pp.205-224
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid pp. 208-209
(although not necessarily anti-realist) fictions which might be assimilated to the problematic categories of ‘experimental’ or ‘postmodern’ fiction – terms which must be understood in their relation to ‘modernism’ as a historically located category of artistic production and reception. However, given this, it is still the case that even ‘realist’ texts of the nineteenth century can present difficulties to the ‘unlearned’ reader of today. There are examples of pre-existing texts being ‘simplified’ in vocabulary and grammar as pedagogic aids for second-language learners, and also for native speakers of English who are either young or otherwise challenged by stylistic complexity.

Umberto Eco’s approach, while sharing Iser’s idealist notion of ‘implied reader’ (which he terms ‘model reader’) seems to me to lie between the idealist approach of phenomenology and the empirical approach of social science, and as such is a form of pragmatics. This approach comes out of his contingent background as a semiotician, in the tradition of praxis initiated by the American semiotician and pragmatist, C.S. Peirce – rather than Eco’s necessarily partaking of Iser’s phenomenological idealism. However, it seems to me that both critics share the notion of understanding, as conceived by Heidegger:

Understanding, in Heidegger’s account, is neither a method of reading nor the outcome of a willed and carefully conducted procedure of critical reflection. It is not something we consciously do or fail to do, but something we are. Understanding is a mode of being, and as such it is characteristic of human being, of Dasein. The pre-reflective way in which Dasein inhabits the world is itself of a hermeneutic nature. Our understanding of the world presupposes a kind of pragmatic know-how that is revealed through the way in which we, without theoretical considerations, orient ourselves in the world. We open the door without objectifying or conceptually determining the nature of the door-handle or the doorframe. The world is familiar to us in a basic, intuitive way. Most originally, Heidegger argues, we do not understand the world by gathering a collection of neutral facts by which we may reach a set of universal propositions, laws, or judgments that, to a greater or lesser extent, corresponds to the world as it is. The world is tacitly intelligible to us. The fundamental familiarity with the world is brought to reflective consciousness through the work of interpretation.23

We can conceive of the ‘world’ itself as a ‘text’ (the world being ‘everything that is the case’ in Wittgenstein’s famous opening to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus). Stephen

23 Hermeneutics, 4. The Ontological Turn, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/#Turn
Dedalus conceives the world as a text of signs when walking on the seastrand on the morning of 16\textsuperscript{th} of June 1904, while testing the limits of his intuitive understanding of this world/text.

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy.

Bald he was and a millinaire, \textit{maestro di color che sanno}. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.\textsuperscript{24}

It is through Heidegger’s ‘work of interpretation’, a dialectic process between the text as created by its empirical author and the realization of the text by the reader that the literary work (or indeed world) comes into being. Iser puts the case this way:

The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text […] the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two […] The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.\textsuperscript{25}

Therefore, Iser and Eco are not after all so very far apart – Iser being perhaps more idealist and less pragmatic than Eco, who is, after all, not just a critic and a theoretician, but a practising novelist.

There is a paradox here, in so far as Heidegger’s ‘understanding’ would seem to be general to humankind, innate in the human subject’s consciousness – the human subject being \textit{in} and \textit{of} nature, while being acculturated and assimilated to the cultural codes and conventions available to it as subject. However, those codes and conventions (as it might

\textsuperscript{24} James Joyce, \textit{Ulysses}, (London: The Bodley Head, 1960), p.45
be of ‘reading’) have to be learned (‘learned’, but not necessarily ‘taught’). Following from this, we may infer what common sense already tells us: that some readers are more ‘learned’ than others. This paradox might be resolved by turning to a fully pragmatic frame of reference, in which we will see texts not as having intrinsic ‘meaning’ which it is the reader’s task to construe, but as having different uses and gratifications. For me: *Ulysses* and *Lycidas*; for my next-door neighbours: *Bravo-Two-Zero* and anything fictive by Katie Price.

3   The Genealogy of a Novel: the Work in Early Progress

3.1 A key element in the generation of *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* was a previous novel of mine - *High John the Conqueror*. Its influence on the new novel can be analysed in two strands: reception of the typescript of *High John* as it circulated among agents and publishers; and, perhaps more importantly, lessons I felt I had learned through writing it. My view is that both of these strands represent influences, or pressures arising, that are external to the writing of the new novel – as opposed to the internal pressures that comes from the imagination, from the pressures of the subject or idea. As for these internal pressures, Henry James wrote in *The Art of Fiction* [1884], ‘We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his *donné*é: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.’

Yet the first of these strands – reception of an unpublished typescript – is more easily categorised as external than the second. And this is surely because ‘lessons learned’ through practice become internalised very quickly by the writer, and operate on different levels, some of which are even unconscious and unavailable to introspection during the process of composition, but manifest themselves in the fruitful solving of ‘problems’ as they arise in the process of composition – practice becoming praxis.

To divide the second strand – lessons learned - roughly into two: the symbolic domain on the one hand, and ‘craft skills’ on the other. By ‘symbolic’ I mean here anything to do with *representation* broadly conceived; and by ‘craft skills’, I mean the sheer bloody slog of paying attention to the composition in the structuring of its micro and macro

elements – its total grammar - from phonology through lexis through semantics to discourse over the line and length of the developing text. These divisions are somewhat artificial and provisional, and are offered here as an aid to analysis, a means of navigation, rather than being themselves a final destination.

3.2 In his Introduction to the 2003 edition of William S. Burroughs’s *Junky*, Oliver Harrison writes: ‘ … writers must, at some level, remain mysteries to themselves in order to write at all…’

Prompted by Harrison’s words, I must briefly digress, but digression for a purpose, as indeed the digression on Church government is important to the understanding of Milton’s *Lycidas* at the thematic level, even while it disrupts the ‘unity’ of form in the poem.

The difficulties writers have, and the problems they raise, in commenting on and offering exegesis of their own work, are well attested: ‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.’ So Lawrence wrote, and his words have gone viral in lectures, seminars and cyberspace, sometimes unattributed, unanchored from their context. The context is (in part): ‘Truly art is a sort of subterfuge. But thank God for it, we can see through the subterfuge if we choose […]’ The artist usually sets out – or used to – to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tail [*sic*], however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist’s and the tale’s. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. […]

Can a reader believe me, therefore, if I were to claim (as the empirical author, but not posing as the model reader) that *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* points no moral at all, not possessing even the merest scrap of a protective fig-leaf (badged with irony and satire, for example) to cover its abjection and puerility? Should an empirical reader believe me, the empirical author, if I assert the tale is all adornment, all artifice, a ‘camp’ structure containing a hollow space? And if I were to further claim that this structured emptiness and its lack of moral instruction together are the novel’s chief strength, will the empirical reader entertain my suggestion that I have achieved what Pater suggests is

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29 Ibid
the goal of art, the unity of form and content? (If at the cost of abolishing content as a separate entity, but with the consequent securing of the Holy Grail of modernism: writing about nothing – “un livre sur rien”, as Flaubert wrote to Louise Colet.)

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style […] a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter …. 30

A quarter-century after Flaubert’s letter to Colet, Walter Pater famously put the question of the relation of form and content like this:

*All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.* For while in all other works of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, its given incidents or situation; that the mere matter of a picture, the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape, should be nothing without the form, the spirit of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter; - this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees. 31 (Italicics in original.)

An image comes to mind: *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* is like a surrealist cathedral, after the manner of Gaudi; or to use a more homely simile - *Fair Game* is like a free-style version of the Taj Mahal made from spent matchsticks in some hobbyist’s garden shed or padded cell, a Taj Mahal so distorted and fantastic as to be the equivalent of a space-age vernacular building, constructed from dizzy tropes and abject entities (spent matches in this case).

And yet it is the text we must interrogate, rather than then empirical author, if we are to pass a judgment on these putative claims for the status of the work of art as a camp confection, light and hollow – and perfect. A contradiction arises: a cathedral, no matter how surreal its architecture, contains a sacred space, a locus for the reciprocity of love.

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between the divine and human spheres; and the Taj Mahal is by reputation a monument
to earthly love, and perhaps no less sacred for that. The implication is that *Fair Game*
will mean different things to different readers (even meaning different things to its
model reader who might be trying out conjecture after conjecture); and that the text may
be shot through with an essential ambiguity as the sacred and the profane interrogate
each other in the play of the text. The empirical readers who encounter the text may
resolve any ambiguity in different ways – one method of resolution, indulged in by me
as disappointed reader of others’ novels from time to time, being to hurl the book into a
corner, and so evade the issue of becoming a model reader altogether. The issue is what
the intention of the text might be (in Umberto Eco’s phrase) and what the model reader
makes of any such ‘textual intention’. However, this is where Eco’s dynamic model
becomes unstable, by begging the question: how can a text’s intention square with
ambiguity? Sure, ‘the text might foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite
conjectures’ and therefore the model reader, possessed of infinite patience, (and thus,
‘ideal’, in the truest sense), may well in time resolve ambiguities. But it seems to me,
that such a possibility serves to undermine to a degree Eco’s notion of ‘intentio operis’.
However, as I have previously said, my use of Eco’s dynamic model of
author/text/reader is only provisional – a tool with limitations, but useful nonetheless.

Thus ends the current digression. In the meantime, let us pursue the twin tracks of
external influence: reception of the typescript of *High John the Conqueror* and the craft
lessons its Empirical Author felt he had learned in the process of writing it.

3.3 *High John* has a long pre-publication history. Begun on 1st May 1985, and
published at last in May 2006, the first complete draft was finished in January1987.
Thereupon followed my attempts, through subsequent drafts, to rouse the interest of
agents and publishers. Back in the late 80s, early 90s, I attracted some interest. My very
first letter (1987) provoked an invitation for a chat with the Jonathan Clowes Agency, to
be (as it seemed to me then) condescended to. (Actually, they gave me good advice, but
I was too stupid to pay attention.) Later, various publishers were complimentary, and
gave encouraging comments about style and ‘sustained narrative drive’. But no sale.

When, around 2003, after another rewrite, I renewed my attempts to sell *High John* (still convinced of its genius!) the market situation was worse than ever. Not a flicker of interest.

I was on the point of giving up. However, I was angry, and my anger fertilised the seed of *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* (fifteen years on from my ‘Addlestrop’ moment on my stalled train, this was now the title of my new attempt at an everyday story of Essex folk). My feeling at the time was not exactly irrational - although there was perhaps a trace of madness in it – but I wanted to address the world and say: ‘Okay, you won’t take that, so you can damn well have this’, and I began to enact what I can only describe as a desire to widdle in the world’s eye. So, perhaps I was irrational. Writing a book as a kind of vengeance on the world’s indifference is daft, especially as my intention at the time was to produce something so outlandish that nobody could seriously contemplate publishing it. Who did I think I was addressing? Round about this time, my wife began to refer to my writing as ‘a hobby’ and ‘a kind of therapy’, and that stoked the flames of anger even higher, although with hindsight, I can inhabit her point of view. She also said that the early pages of *Fair Game* read like ‘the work of a lunatic’, a judgment I will not comment on.

3.4 If anger was the impulse that prompted me to resurrect my Essex tale, then I soon realised that anger at my neglect by literary gatekeepers could not sustain me through a long fiction. Some detachment was needed - the famed objectivity of the artist – and the only anger that could be admitted would not arise from my personal situation but from my view of English society and culture. Such externally directed anger ought to result in satire. Later, I will deliver on my earlier promise to consider whether *Fair Game* fulfils the conditions of satire. For the moment, I shall examine the second strand of my analysis – the craft lessons I felt I had learned from writing *High John the Conqueror*.

3.5 Of course, by the time I was embarked on *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*, my situation as a writer had changed. *High John* had been taken up by a reputable literary agent, sold to a reputable publisher, and then reviewed fairly favourably at reasonable length in *The Guardian*[^33], *The Times*[^34], and elsewhere (although the anonymous

[^33]: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview25](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview25)
reviewer for *What’s On in Leeds* found it confusing). Somehow, I had managed to be taken seriously by cultural gatekeepers of London, if not Leeds. My anger abated.

At the point of first publication, the novelist (if he wishes to publish again) has to consider what the ‘difficult second novel’ will be. In addition to *Fair Game*, by this time I had two other proto-novels on the stocks, all three of them very different in genre, style, and manner of narration, each of them promising a fresh challenge. Each of them engaged my imagination. I was committed to each. However, a choice had to be made: which to finish first?

I chose *Fair Game* partly because of its long gestation - and I believe that long gestation (perhaps even procrastination) works for me as a novelist - and also because I wanted to write a comedy, purely in comic mode with no admixture of tragedy, as a trigger for a reader’s laughter, and I wanted to achieve this in the form of a novel, rather than write in any other genre or medium (for example, comic book, radio or television comedy). For better or worse, I am a novelist. This is the form I choose to work in, because it is the only form I *can* work in with any degree of artistic success. Also, I felt I had unfinished business. Writing *High John the Conqueror* had been a long process of trying to solve problem after problem: problems of genre, structure, of tone, characterisation … I was ready for a new experiment and to try to simplify my practice. In this attempt to simplify, I was myself mentally rather ‘simple’.

3.6 *High John* had begun as a serious tale, in the realist manner, and it was originally based on the activities of teenage resisters in Germany in World War 2 – particularly the group known as the Edelweiss Pirates. In drafting and redrafting, the story lost its realist grip, as it shifted its focus from Germany to England – a kind of hyper-real England, not past, not present, not future – and in the process it became a hybrid work. In mode it was part realist, part anti-realist; part satire, part tragedy, part sardonic comedy. Was *High John* then a tragicomedy? No, as I saw it, the comedy had strangled the tragedy, and there were problems of consistency of tone and genre. The book did not quite ‘come out’ (to use a metaphor from the card-game ‘Patience’).

My view at that point, as critic of my own work, was that the realist and anti-realist elements (thesis and antithesis) pushing against each other like tectonic plates had

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resulted in an imperfect synthesis. Another view might be taken: the synthesis arising from the dialectic between realist and anti-realist modes is responsible for whatever originality the novel might lay claim to. (However, this latter view is perhaps wishful thinking on the empirical author’s part.)

*Fair Game for the Whole Hog* became my attempt to work purely in an anti-realist manner, to simplify my practice, as I have said. What I had in mind were the stirrings of a novel that would celebrate the abject and the puerile; that would embody the spirit of carnival, of misrule, of slaves turned masters, of Dionysian excess. All these elements were present in *High John*, but there they were subsumed within a *bildungsroman* narrative structure, where Lingus McWhinny, the protagonist, bows out at the end of the narrative having learned and grown. (Although this ending was intended to be read ironically – Lingus becomes an unwitting acolyte of the Devil.) I was resolved, in writing *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*, that no trace of redemption, however ironically it might be read, should be discerned by my implied reader.

Why have I been, and still am, so antipathetic towards ‘redemption’ in and through fiction? Perhaps my attitude arises from my early religious conditioning in the Catholic Church – a kind of disgust with the idea that redemption can be achieved through secular means. The substitution of the consolations of fiction for the consolations of revealed religion might strike me as blasphemous, were I still a communicant. However, despite there perhaps being some faded trace of my early conditioning at work here, more important is my contempt for the ‘uses and gratifications’ of fiction as constructed through the cosy complicity between the various actors in the marketplace – writers, editors, publishers, publicists, audience ... above all the audience, although I should not be too hard on the empirical readers who make up that marketing construct. In my ‘deep heart’s core’ I feel there is something irredeemably childish - something partaking of ‘magical thinking’ - about taking literature as a *vade mecum*, or charm, against the absurdity of the Universe and the madness of society, history and politics and economics - the world as ‘everything that is the case’. Although, God knows, one might take comfort where one can.

And there you can see a prime example of such ‘magical thinking’ in me too – in my use of Yeats’s phrase ‘deep heart’s core’. A crutch for a sad cripple, hobbling through the ‘rag and bone shop of the heart’. There I go again! Perhaps Rimbaud, in his
renunciation of poetry in favour of the mercantile life, was one who truly freed himself from the illusion of literary redemption.

3.7 At this point, I must return to the subject, the idea, or donné of Fair Game, which I have so far been rather coy about. If I have mischievously suggested that the text is a camp artifact, a hollow structure, a book without a moral, I cannot deny that it has a subject: and that its subject is sex, or more particularly the hyper-sexualization of our contemporary English culture. I could go into a routine (in William Burroughs’s con-man sense) about how I was/am disgusted and made angry by the endless parade of sexual images in our culture’s media – I could give anecdotes about taking a small child to school and passing billboards of sordid explicitness (and this in the suburbs, not in Soho) and how it seems to me that anything sacred is being drained from human relationships and our most intimate feelings commodified; and how we ourselves become alienated from ourselves and each other, as commodities in a ghastly process of reification (in the Marxian sense) in which the processes and transformations of late capitalism are profoundly implicated. And there would be an element of truth in such a prim and proper routine. However, such sexual objects - although lathered in my anger and disgust and while they might challenge me as a citizen and provoke me to writing to newspapers, my Member of Parliament, and the Archbishop of Canterbury - actually have inspired me as an artist. I feel no shame in this, except in so far as I might have – inevitably – fallen short in not achieving my artistic aim.

My response to a hypersexual culture has been to write a novel where the consciousness of the narrator, and the objects of his consciousness, are saturated with sex and desire for the abject to such a ludicrous degree that what our culture has become is illuminated in grotesque comic relief. Of course, the danger in this approach is that the work becomes complicit in what it is representing, even if that representation is hyperbolic. I will return to the question of complicity later.

However, sex is not the whole of the idea behind Fair Game. Linked with the sexual narrative, is a narrative of neo-colonial adventurism: the war on the strange country known as Um-Ka. This stands for all the neo-colonial adventures the United Kingdom (Britannia in Fair Game) has participated in during the past fifteen years or so – chiefly the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, acts of state which I regard as criminal and that make me very angry indeed. Acts that make me angry as a citizen, of
course, and force my attention on how powerless I am, beyond my angry letters and the protest marches undertaken; signing petitions; and assisting in the crafting of motions to be sent up and then ignored by the party conference - all the illusions of a democratic constitution.

As an artist, engaged in constructing *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*, my imagination insisted that my treatment of the theme of war and violence should be undertaken in the same spirit as the treatment of sex, with the same tone. Both sex and war would be represented as essentially ludicrous. The effect I was aiming for was the comic and grotesque. Sex and war are linked early in the text:

‘Did you meet any nice girls while you were overseas and East of Eden, son?’
‘A fair few. More than most shipmates, not so many as some. Madam Jojo saw a fair bit of action. Budge up, and give a sailor a berth.’

Daz sidled in beside our ample Mum. It was a squash, but neither seemed to mind. They cosied up and concentrated on the telly. The screen was fully in focus now, alive with bodies writhing and screaming in ecstasy and terror. Daz had his arm around Mum’s shoulder and his hand on her left marimba.

‘Did you put many to the sword while you were abroad and overseas, son?’ said Mum, putting her hand over his, and pressing it down towards her heart. She kept her eyes on the screen.

‘A fair few, East of Eden. More than most, not so many as some. Old Tickler saw a fair bit of action,’ said Daz. [5]

Within a page or two, onward from this passage, the reader knows that ‘Madam Jojo’ is explicitly Daz’s penis and that ‘Old Tickler’ is explicitly Daz’s cutlass. If the reader has missed the implication first time through, then textual co-reference provides the anaphoric link. At which point, ‘reading back’, the reader can see that penis and cutlass are brought together in the above passage through repeated syntactical and discourse structures. ‘Tickler’ itself is ambiguous, belonging to the semantic field of sex. Thus sex and violence are intimately linked in this early passage and continue to be so throughout the course of the novel.

The reader learns that ‘Madam Jojo’ is an ontological entity, with an existence and consciousness separate from Daz himself, although the reader never inhabits Madam Jojo’s point of view, and always learns of her moods and foibles through the words of the narrator and his brother.
The bedsprings jingled and the dusty cobwebs that festooned the chandelier wafted to and fro. Daz put down his book and stood up, unbuckling to let his trousers fall.

‘Say hello to Madam Jojo.’
‘Howdy, Jojo. Comment ça va?’

Daz sat down and we huddled together for a while in silence, staring at Madam Jojo and her one glistening eye. Just like old times, except Daz had been circumcised while he was away at the war and Madam Jojo now looked sullen, bald, and brutal.

‘She’s in a bad mood,’ said Daz. [9]

The text at no point offers a reason for the gendering of Daz’s penis as female. The gendering is an anti-realist detail, whose purpose (or textual intention?) is to alienate the reader from the dominant ideology of patriarchal masculinism, still the prime ideology in our society, and also from its embodiment in Fair Game itself. It is a signal to the alert reader, the model reader, that the text invites their participation in a game of playful ironies.

The model reader will note that this cross-gendering is hardly subtle, at least in its immediate representation. Nor is it particularly original. Cross-gendering has been used to comic effect in many artistic forms, such as the pantomime’s Principal Boy and Dame. Here, as empirical author, I can say that the direct inspiration for Daz’s female penis are lines by Tennyson, in the song from The Princess that begins: ‘Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white’. This deconstructed Petrarchan sonnet (4-2-2-2-4, with the sestet split and enfolded in the split octet) often anthologised (and ripped from its context), is structured around ambiguities of gender:

Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

The ‘milk-white peacock’ is actually a peahen, if we take the pronoun ‘she’ as its co-referent. The alert (or learned?) reader of ‘Now sleeps …’ will seek to reunite Tennyson’s song with its context and, when she does so, will hear that the voice of hyper-masculinity, with its seductive intent and phallic symbolism – is the speaking (or singing) voice of a woman. The song enacts the mutual enfolding of male and female identity within one body whose gender is ambiguous.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts, in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake.
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

In *Fair Game*, penile cross-gendering arises through a synecdoche. The penis, part of Daz’s body, stands in some respect for Daz himself. Synecdoche, as a rhetorical figure, allows Daz to be simultaneously and separately male and female rather than have both genders enfolded into a gender-undetermined body. The body in Tennyson’s song unites male and female; neither is abject or counterposed in respect of the other; boundaries are dissolved. Whereas, with Daz, the boundary between objects (body/penis) allows each to be abject in terms of the other, as ontological outcasts to each other while being yoked together as physical entities.

*Fair Game* enacts the relationship between abjection and gender identity/confusion and later I will develop an analysis of how the ‘intention of the text’ invites the complicity of the ‘model reader’ in that enactment.

4 The genealogy of a novel: precursors in the anti-realist ‘tradition’

4.1 ‘Every book creates its own precursors’ is now a commonplace critical remark. I first encountered it in the 1970 Penguin edition of *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, by Jorge Luis Borges, in his short essay ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, where he discusses what we might call intertextual echoes within Kafka’s work, *viz*:- ‘Zeno’s paradox against movement’; ‘an apologue of Han Yu, a prose writer of the ninth century’; selected ‘writings of Kierkegaard’; ‘Browning’s poem Fears and Scruples’; and a story each, by Leon Bloy and Lord Dunsany. Borges writes:

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This second fact is the more significant. In each of these texts we find Kafka’s idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words it would not exist. [Browning’s poem] foretells Kafka’s work, but our reading of Kafka perceptibly sharpens and deflects our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we do now. In the
critics’ vocabulary, the word ‘precursor’ is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotations of polemics or rivalry. The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. In the correlation the identity or plurality of the men involved is unimportant. The early Kafka of *Berachung* is less a precursor of the Kafka of sombre myths and atrocious institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany.\(^\text{35}\)

Interrogation of the apothegm ‘Every book creates its own precursors’ brings us to the domain of epistemology and the field within it that deals sceptically with the problem of causation. (I am reminded of Karl Popper’s proposition: ‘History is affected by discoveries we will make in the future.’)\(^\text{36}\) In essence, applied to literature, what it means is that while we cannot see and predict where literature is going, we can see where it has come from. The idea relates to the concept of intertextuality (although intertextuality is a broader and more comprehensive notion) and implies no determinism with respect to any particular text, except perhaps in so far as the nature of the text might partake of the distinguishing features of a genre. Thus a commercially successful tale about a school for witchcraft (*The Worst Witch*, by Jill Murphy) may inspire other similar tales dealing with the pedagogy of wizardry (the *Harry Potter* series, by J.K. Rowling). A tale of Special Air Service (SAS) derring-do (*Bravo-Two-Zero*, by Andy McNab) will inspire others in the same ilk.

So, with regard to *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*, what precursors can we cite?

4.2 Before dealing with particulars, we should note that the book is in an ‘anti-realist’ tradition whose lineage goes back even further than the foundation of realism itself - although not further back than the principle of mimesis, because a work may be anti-realist and still be mimetic of the world to a greater or lesser degree. ‘Antirealism’ itself seems to imply reaction to an already established ‘realism’. However, it is usual, in accounting for this anti-realist lineage in European prose, to cite works of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Sterne, as the precursors of the books by writers who refuse the realist gambit. Further to the east, the Arabian tales of The Thousand Nights and One Night are also included in the broad field of precursors of anti-realist fiction. All of these texts,


\(^{36}\) David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) p1. Epigram to Ch.1
however, predate the establishment of ‘realism’ as the dominant mode in the novel in the
nineteenth century, so they can hardly be a ‘reaction’. John W. Tuttleton, in his
introduction to John Kuehl’s study of postmodern anti-realist American fiction cited
below, antirealism is a ‘countertradition older than the novel’. 37

What general features of anti-realist fiction does Kuehl himself propose as
characteristic of the genre? He structures his analysis in three parts, through the
categories: the author as god; the universe as madhouse; the future as death. Further
subdivisions within each constitute the individual chapters of the book, \textit{viz}:-

Part I, \textbf{The Author as God} – Ch 1 \textit{Reflexivity}, Ch 2 \textit{The Ludic Impulse}, Ch 3
\textit{Maximalism versus Minimalism}; Part II, \textbf{The Universe as Madhouse} – Ch 4
\textit{Fragmentation/Decentralization}, Ch 5 \textit{The Grotesque and the Devil}, Ch 6 \textit{Imaginary
Landscapes}, Ch 7 \textit{Absurd Quests}; Part III, \textbf{The Future as Death} – Ch 8 \textit{Fictitious
History}, Ch 9 \textit{Conspiracy and Paranoia}, Ch 10 \textit{Entropy}, Ch 11 \textit{Nightmare and
Apocalypse}.

To what degree does \textit{Fair Game for the Whole Hog} conform to the above categories
and sub-categories of anti-realist fiction as delineated by Kuehl? I confess here that until
recently the question never entered the consciousness of \textit{Fair Game}’s empirical author,
that author never having made any extensive survey or close reading of very much
‘postmodern’ anti-realist fiction. In writing \textit{Fair Game} I was proceeding by intuition
rather than any carefully wrought plan, and it came as a surprise to me, in the aftermath
of the novel (when I discovered Kuehl’s work), to find that the \textit{Fair Game} can indeed be
parsed using certain (not all) of his analytic categories. I would not wish to make too
much of this connection, especially in the relation of \textit{Fair Game} to postmodern anti-
realist fiction, since a number of Kuehls descriptive categories can be found in the
literature and drama of previous ages. For example, ‘absurd quests’ abound in the
prototype of all anti-realist novels, Cervantes’s \textit{Don Quixote}; ‘imaginary landscapes’
appear in medieval allegory, in particular ‘dream vision’ poetry such as \textit{Pearl} (by the
\textit{Gawain} poet), and also in Coleridge’s \textit{Kubla Khan}, and \textit{The Rhyme of the Ancient
Mariner}; ‘apocalypse’ appears in the Book of Revelation, which itself can be seen as a
nightmare. The ‘grotesque and the devil’ appear in certain ‘gothic’ texts, the devil being
sometimes disguised through \textit{doubling} as in Hogg’s \textit{Memoirs and Confessions of a

\textsuperscript{37} John Kuehl, \textit{Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Anti-realistic American Fiction}
*Justified Sinner*, or Poe’s tale *William Wilson*. Even in a later example such as Stevenson’s *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*, where some kind of scientific (and thus secular and rational) explanation can be found for the doubling or transformation, the possibility of the devil having a hand in human affairs can be entertained by the model reader.

Notwithstanding the wide broadcast of these anti-realist seeds among the historic furrows of literature and drama, it is possible to see within *Fair Game* examples of their flourishing. A question that intrigues me – and to which I have no answer – is how come certain of these features do actually appear in the novel, given that no particular plan has been formed in advance? There was never any attempt on my part – speaking now as empirical author - to emulate any particular anti-realist postmodern fiction either in detail or generic feature. Rather, the impulse of the book lies within my own present dissatisfaction with realism itself and my disgust with the sheer boredom of realist fiction. (It has not always been so with me, and I am aware of my current moral deficit with regard to the realist novel. *Mea maxima culpa.*)

This boredom for me, as a reader, lies not only in the dreary realist texts themselves – in my capacity as the very model of an unideal reader – but also for me, as a writer, in the exhaustive labour of composition entirely within the realist mode. Like William S. Burroughs, I have ‘a technical and temperamental difficulty with sustaining realist narrative’38; and if I cannot entertain myself while I write, then what is the point of writing at all? This question must lead us – but not yet – to a consideration of the intention of the text and the conjectures of the implied reader; if only to try to distinguish between empirical author as writer and empirical author as reader of his own text.

A nagging worry arises (apart from self-accusations of laziness). My work conforms to certain categories to be found in anti-realist fiction without conscious effort on my part because, in some way I cannot fathom, I am – to put it in an old-fashioned way – myself the product of the *zeitgeist*. Or, to give my predicament a more modern (or postmodern) cast, my text is a patchwork of intertextual echoes, most of which I am unconscious of until after the fact of writing. Either way, as an author, the truth is I am myself being ‘authored’ and determined even while, perhaps in the grip of paranoid delusion, I feel

38 Oliver Harrison (ed.), *op.cit.* p.xvi
myself to be freely creating work of startling originality. This is a common delusion of those authors who have a paranoid cast of mind. William Burroughs puts it this way, in his introduction to the 1985 edition of *Queer*: ‘While it was I who wrote *Junky*, I felt that I was being written in *Queer*.\(^{39}\)

World and text become uncomfortably close in this crisis of faith; and free will, always a problem, becomes an illusion, subverting any ontological security I might have as an individual, let alone a writer. I become a slippery sign in the eternal discourse of the empire of signs. One consolation though, in this eternal discourse of signs, is that ‘anxiety of influence’ in respect of any particular famous author living or dead must be attenuated by the idea that there is a fine democracy in operation, in so far as we are all ciphers and signs. One might console oneself in the notion that however unsuccessful (commercially and artistically) an author one might be, the play of signs will work out as a postmodern version of fortune’s wheel and deliver posthumous success.

What was it I was complaining of earlier? Redemption through literature? It seem I am as much of a child as anyone in this regard.

4.3 Which among Kuehl’s categories are especially relevant to an understanding of the tropes that appear within *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*?

The **Ludic Impulse** (subsumed within Keuhl’s *The Author as God*) is a strong element in the novel, given that hardly any feature of the text can be taken at all seriously, certainly at a first reading. The mixture of genres (for example, pastiche of the Western in the episode where the Bansoms are slaughtered; pastiche of the orientalist tale, in the story of Daz Pasha told by Gervase Whitelady - genie, poetaster and part-time window cleaner - is an indication that the ludic impulse is at work, as is the mixture of linguistic registers. The surface of *Fair Game* is all ‘play’, in tone and in the structure of events.

_Pace_ Kuehl, I would hesitate to think of myself as a God-like author, even a playful one, given that I see no need to identify with the supernatural creator of a world, when any author of fiction, realist and anti-realist, might claim the same. But playful is a description I admit to, joining my literary efforts to the universal cultural attributes and

practices of what Johan Huizinga termed *homo ludens.* After all, the novel is intended as a comedy, a laughter-making device, and there can be no true comedy without play.

Examples of the ludic impulse occur page by page, and I would certainly exhaust the patience of the present reader by extracting them. However, several examples might suffice, *viz:*

**Example the First**

In the episode entitled “Feudin’ Dudes” that recounts the massacre of the Bansom clan by the Barkings, Pappy Barking and Barry (Baz) set out on their murderous mission wearing their hoods, which might serve as a disguise were it not for the fact that their names are embroidered above the eye-slits. They have taken Granny Barking’s hood with them, as a spare for Barry’s uncle, Constable Dippy Barking, who they are sure, will want to join them in their murderous spree.

Dippy poked his hooded head, embroidered GRANNY B, through the cottage window and shouted to the Missis that he was going off to help kill the Bansoms.

Also keen on joining the murder gang is the family dog, Jip.

Just then we heard ‘woof-woof’ behind us. I turned to see Jip loping along the dusty road, his own hood dangling from his fangs. He’d guessed what we were about, and run limping hell-for-three-legged-leather to catch us up and join the fun, good old boy.

‘Bless him, he’s game for the whole hog,’ said Pappy Barking, reaching down and snatching the hood from Jip’s fangs. Jip growled a bit, just for show.

‘Here boy, climb up here, good old boy, handsome Jip. We shouldn’t have left you out.’

But Jip had trouble climbing up so high because of only having one back leg, so I got down and bundled him into the back of the cart. Pappy Barking handed me the drool-sodden hood to put over Jip’s head. I waved it about a bit to let it air and then settled it on his head, making sure the embroidered JIP was straight, and he could see out of the eye-slits, good old boy, and that his nose was comfortably poking through the corresponding hole.

The idea that Jip would have his own monogrammed hood, is ludicrous – but then, the idea that any of the Barkings (even Granny?) would have a hood embroidered with their name is already ludicrous. The ludic element in this episode arises from the flouting of

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common sense. More sophisticated authors might play with form and typography, but there is nothing ‘formal’ about my efforts here – except in so far as narrative elements are combined to comic effect.

Constable Dippy Barking wears a hood misidentifying him with ‘Granny B.’; and this sets up the situation where, later on, Jed Bansom mistakes Dippy for Granny Barking (calling him ‘old-timer’). While there is an absence of subtlety here, at least a narrative connection is established, allowing the model reader to refer back to the first description of the hoods. The combination of cataleptic and anaphoric co-reference serves to generate cohesion in the text, and allows the model reader, at the climax of the Bansom massacre, to experience a comic estrangement from the act of murder.

Example the Second

In the episode “A Priapic Wonder from the North Pole”, Santa, as part of his yuletide duties, has sexual intercourse with their Grandmother.

Santa left a sack beside the hearth and clambered back up the chimney. I heard him crawling through the flue on the way to Granny Barking’s bedroom. A moment or two later there was a loud cackle from Granny Barking and then what sounded like the beginnings of the business-from-behind, as lovely Granny Barking stripped off her lilac drawers, got on all fours, and presented her rump to the bearded priapic wonder from the North Pole. In all my nineteen years, this had never happened before. From afar, I heard omnilingual Granny Barking shout, “*Vidi, vici, veni*”, and then a chortling, almost choking sound, as Santa Claus coughed and gasped, “*Et ego!*”

I heard “Ho ho ho”, and “Merry Christmas! God bless us one and all”, and “Put your lilac drawers back on and make yourself decent”, and then, with a tinkle of sleigh-bells, Santa was gone for another year, back over the Ness, out towards the manifold Doughnuts of the world, to bring joy to every child, and a generous length to many a desperate granny. [94]

Example the Third

Barry changes career from pigman to musical theatre artiste. He believes himself to be embarking on a ship-bourne tour of seaside towns, playing Macro Disney the Leprechaun, in a production of Gervase Whitelady’s musical comedy, *Frigadoon*. Unknown to him (despite having been warned by Hardy Ma Bansom) he is about to be press-ganged into the Royal Navy. While waiting in the dockside tavern, *The Inn at the Sign of the Three Staves*, Barry gets in conversation with the Lictor of Balliol. At the instigation of the Lictor, he sees the patrons of the inn perform the opening number of
Frigadoon. He does not think this coincidence is in any way odd. His dimwittedness is a necessary characteristic, to allow the free play of the ludicrous.

The Lictor speaks:

‘[…] When the next scene opens, we see Dock – I mean Dick – down and out in Trafalgar Square, where a chorus line of jovial cockneys, dressed as Pearly Kings and Queens - thumbs twanging their braces - do their best to cheer him up by milling about the stage, bumping each other with their bottoms, and singing the first big production number of the show – “How’s Your Sexlife?”

‘Not so good since Wendy left.’
‘No, you addle-brained twerp,’ said the Lictor. ‘That’s the song.’
‘How does it go?’ asked the Owl.

‘Something like this,’ said the Lictor. He jumped on to the tabletop, grabbed a megaphone from the megaphone rack on the wall, and began singing, at the top of his voice, the kind of melody you might hear grinding from a barrel-organ.

‘HOW’S YOUR SEXLIFE?’

The matelots in the pub ceased tapping arses and sniffing each other’s browns and began to perform the number then and there, impersonating the cockney chorus. The sailors stripped off their uniforms in one smooth movement to reveal pearly jackets, trousers and caps. [187]

Fair Game is inspired by the ‘ludic impulse’, at least in respect of character and events, and generally in its style with its mix of genres and juxtaposition of registers. An example of juxtaposition of registers can be seen when Barry is reading aloud from Little Black Baz’s letter of farewell:

“Fie upon Uncles Daz and Dock and the hegemony of Everyman Jack! As for Wendy, my so-called mother, words fail me! How could she think of selling me into sexual slavery on the high seas? With such a start in life, it would only be a matter of time before I was ashore again, thoroughly damaged in body and mind, eking out a pathetic living by hawking my slack and tortured brown down the ’dilly.”

Mum looked up from her crossword. ‘What does he mean … “hawking my slack and tortured brown down the ’dilly”’?

‘He might become a rent-boy in SW1.’
‘It’s a good address, but still not the sort of thing I can brag about to Goody Clunge.’ [173]

In this passage we have an archaic phrase (‘Fie upon’); the use of a formal term from Gramsci’s political thought (‘hegemony’); argot from the subculture of Piccadilly homosexuals (‘hawking my slack and tortured brown down the ’dilly’) where ‘brown’ means what the French call the ‘trou du cul’ and ‘rent-boy’ is a cant term for young male prostitute; and another mention of Granny Barking’s old gossip, Goody Clunge (where ‘clunge’ denotes vagina).
*Fair Game* does not share in any way the formal playfulness of many other anti-realist fictions, where typography might be played with, where lipograms might be employed (as in Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*) and other formal devices arranged to unsettle the model reader and provide an intellectual challenge at the formal level, similar to the decoding of plot in a detective story, with its clues and red-herrings. While the narrative of *Fair Game* is not strictly linear, and employs memory and flashback and tales within a tale, formal trickery goes no further than these. The invention and variety is all within the various strands of representation, such as the *grotesquerie* of character, events, objects and situations, and embedded within the nature of the language itself.

Speaking of language, a playful example from *Fair Game* is Daz’s fluency in Ancient Hittite. The various lines delivered in Ancient Hittite are based on fragments of the grammar and vocabulary of the Old Hittite tongue[41], but they are essentially macaronic, being a mixture of Hittite and what I might as well call vulgar Esperanto. The creation of absurd languages is a feature of some anti-realist texts, according to Kohl; and in *Fair Game*, Ancient Hittite is used as a *lingua franca*, whose purpose is, in part, to allow Barry to converse with Daz’s penis, Madam Jojo (a somewhat one-sided conversation).

‘Twantes, Jojo, la dracu Christmas. Pahwar mekis tekusami, letiv nak-nak.’
‘Yes, that’s good - but needs improvement. We’ll work on your pronunciation later.’
‘With all due respect, being able to say goodnight and Merry Christmas to my brother’s prick in Ancient Hittite is of limited value towards my looming final assessment in Doughnut Studies.’
‘Don’t be so narrowly focused on the vocational,’ said Daz. ‘Sekweni adanzi genu ne-wet?’
‘Yukanmalai septamiya.’ You know, I think I’m getting the hang of this.’ [96]

4.4 Before we leave the ludic impulse in *Fair Game*, I must draw your attention to the ghostly presence of Ludwig Wittgenstein within the text.

The philosopher Wittgenstein is a reference point for certain novelists, dramatists, and film makers; perhaps because of the mystical quality of much of his thought and teaching, so strangely combined with ruthless logical analysis; perhaps because of the intensity of his character and the drama of his life. Wittgenstein’s polymath abilities in

[41] Silvia Luraghi, *Old Hittite Sentence Structure* (London: Routledge, 1990). Fragments of the Old Hittite tongue, appearing in *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*, have been gleaned from this work.
aeronautics, engineering, mathematics, philosophy, and architectural design (to mention some of his areas of interest) are a source of intriguing anecdotes, perennially on the cusp of being parlayed into legend. Iris Murdoch, Terry Eagleton and Derek Jarman are among the creators who have referenced and explored Wittgenstein in their work – Jarman and Eagleton in film\textsuperscript{42}, Eagleton in a novel\textsuperscript{43}, and Iris Murdoch in a number of novels, sometimes indirectly, but here directly, in the very first word of \textit{Nuns and Soldiers}:

\begin{quote}
‘Wittgenstein - ’
‘Yes?’ said the count.
[…..]
‘It was his oracular voice. We felt it had to be true.’\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Wittgenstein’s life and work can inspire wonder – not least for his physical and moral courage in war and peace. He can also provoke loathing, not least from some professional philosophers, some of whom, like Karl Popper, have seen Wittgenstein’s dogmatic insistence on the nonsensical status of philosophical problems (such as induction and causation) as fundamentally threatening to their enterprise. Wittgenstein’s view that there are no philosophical problems, only ‘puzzles’ arising from our ‘bewitchment by language’ can seem like a megalomaniacal attempt to undermine the whole philosophical enterprise of the West from the Pre-Socratics onward. This iconoclasm is part of his appeal to artists. In their account of the controversy between Karl Popper and Wittgenstein, \textit{Wittgenstein’s Poker}, Edmonds and Eidinow (the latter a sceptic’s name if ever I heard one!) write, citing Perloff:

\begin{quote}
In her book on twentieth-century poetic language, \textit{Wittgenstein’s Ladder} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), the American critic Marjorie Perloff instances eight novels and plays, twelve books of poetry and some six performance pieces that are directly about or influenced by Wittgenstein. And, chronicling the paradoxes of Wittgenstein’s life, she comments. ‘It is, no doubt, one that lends itself to dramatic and fictional representation, to the making of myths. For Wittgenstein comes to us as the ultimate modernist outsider, the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Terry Eagleton and Derek Jarman, \textit{Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script, the Derek Jarman Film} (London: BFI, 1993)
\textsuperscript{43} Terry Eagleton, \textit{Saints and Scholars} (London: Verso, 1987)
changeling who never stops reinventing himself.’ To put it another way, Wittgenstein can be what we want him to be.\(^{45}\)

Well and good, but what significance attaches to Wittgenstein’s subliminal presence in *Fair Game*? Alas, very little in the way of elucidation of his thought and nothing at all of a biographical nature. However, the jackdaw empirical author can claim that a famous example of Wittgenstein’s thought on language and communication has been plundered from the philosopher’s posthumously published *Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations)*\(^{46}\). In the opening of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein addresses Augustine’s influential nomenclaturist account of language – an account in which ‘individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names.’ According to Wittgenstein’s view of Augustine’s account, a picture of language is created where ‘we find the roots of the following idea. Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.’ Wittgenstein proceeds by noting that Augustine ‘does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word’. The Augustinian position is based on nouns, including proper nouns, and only secondarily is concerned with ‘the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.’\(^{47}\) Moving on from here, Wittgenstein posits an artificial ‘primitive’ language:

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, “beam”. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language.\(^{48}\)

\(^{45}\) David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)p.18  
\(^{47}\) *Ibid* 1. p2  
\(^{48}\) *Ibid* 2. p3
A model reader of *Fair Game* will see this example in play within the section where Pappy Barking and his helpmeet Granny Barking are building the Temple of Venus Aphrodite.

Beyond the onset of puberty, and well into my teenage inferno, I used to lie wheezy in my bed in the late summer evenings, with eyes gummy and red from my allergies, and ears runny with yellow discharge. I would hear Pappy Barking shout to Granny Barking: ‘Block: Pillar: Slab: Beam.’ In the morning I rose, to clean my ears with matchsticks and scrape the crusted yellow matter from my eyelids. As I peeped through the chinks in the nursery curtain to check the weather, I could see Pappy’s blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams – but whether arranged to an original purpose or some other or none, I could not tell. [54]

It might be the case that the model reader, on reading this episode, will then examine the relation between language and ‘the world’ as represented in *Fair Game*, and indeed, within the novel itself. What further conjectures - on language and its role in constructing a fictional anti-realist world – a model reader will make is beyond the capacity of the empirical author to guess. However, it may be prudent to suggest that the model reader will at least set the primitive language of ‘block, pillar, slab, beam’ against the richness of the novel’s language – thus reinforcing the otherwise banal point that language is not merely instrumental, but a labyrinth of polysemy and ambiguity. This reader will know of Wittgenstein’s predilection for ‘language games’ and extend to the *intentio operis* the courtesy of recognising the language games of the novel itself.

And yet, it may be the case that all that this rigmarole can claim to be – on the level of *intentio operis* – is a nod and wink to philosophically literate readers, to allow them a smile of acknowledgment; perhaps to flatter them and ingratiate the empirical author to them. After all, we may note that self-congratulation is an important trait to encourage in readers, binding them, as such encouragement may do, to complicity with the *intentio operis*, which is a cynical view but true enough in respect of certain novels. Perhaps the detective - or mystery - genres and sub-genres are the supreme example of this particular authorial game, with the reservation that if such an author makes it too easy for the reader, then the game is void.

And what of the reader who does not recognise the reference to Wittgenstein’s philosophy? Does it matter very much? In other words, is it necessary for a model reader to exhaust the interpretative possibilities of a text in order to be the model reader? I suggest not, otherwise there would be no such thing as a fresh re-reading. All that is
necessary, is that the model reader shall make conjectures – not necessarily in accordance with the empirical author’s reading of his own work, and not exhaustive; but to make conjectures at all, to be bound in complicity over the line and length of the novel, is all that the empirical author can hope for.

And yet, despite this self-abnegation, I want to suggest that there is an accessible subtext in this episode that does not depend on detailed knowledge of, or even passing acquaintance with Wittgenstein. At stake here is the notion of a primitive form of communication, using a limited vocabulary, but capable of producing a tangible result: in this case, the building of the Temple, the raising of which stands in some way for the whole authorial enterprise of *Fair Game*.

Primitive communication, using ‘restricted code’\(^{49}\), shows up later in the section ‘Effing effer’s effing fucked’:

I shouldered my dittybag. The charabanc was waiting to take me off to Harwich where the good ship Campania Two was berthed. The driver was in a lather. He strutted round the vehicle, kicking the tyres and screaming at his mate.

‘The fucking fucker’s fucking fucked!’

‘I s’pose a fucking fucker’s fucking fucked it,’ said the driver’s mate.

‘I’ll well and truly fuck any fucking fucker who fucks the fucking fucker.’

His mate looked askance.

‘Sorry, chief, you wouldn’t get away with it - fucking the fucker who fucked the fucker like that. Neither the Breed Book, nor The Marriage Art covers such a contingency.’

The driver took off his peaked cap and scratched his head, as if he could rake up a solution from his scalp.

‘Your mate is correct,’ I said to the driver. ‘Rear Vice Admiral Sir Lionel Dingwallace, VC, RN, is most particular about it. A particular fucker might get fucked, but you can’t seek retribution by turning the tables and fucking the fucker – the original fucker who fucked the fucker, I mean.’ \([177]\)

The inspiration for this cross-talk act, carried on for a number of pages, is my recollection of Anthony Burgess’s reminiscence about his war service, where he encountered a Royal Army Service Corps driver who, when asked the reason for his lorry’s breakdown, said succinctly: ‘The fucking fucker’s fucking fucked.’

Such an utterance goes a long way to showing the power of syntax to generate meaning with minimal lexical resource – and also the redundancy built into human

communication. Comically extended, as in *Fair Game*, it attempts to reclaim the linguistically abject and puerile for comic effect. As for *meaning*, there is none, other than the reader’s laughter or glum silence. The model reader will take their cue and laugh.

4.5 So much for the ludic impulse. Let us turn to Kuehl’s category, *The Grotesque and the Devil*. Firstly, what do we mean by the *grotesque*? Historically, the term has its origin in ‘a specific art of the grotto’, the discovery in the fifteenth century of wall paintings in the Emperor Nero’s palace, following the excavation of the baths of Trajan and Titus. John R. Clark writes:

> The bizarre wall paintings … represented elaborate knots and festoons of floral decorations, designs oddly transforming into snakes, satyrs, mythological animals, as well as human figures or parts of human appendages. Hence, an art that unconsciously mingled and interfused human, animal, vegetable and mineral in eerie and nightmarish fashion became but one more exotic mode or style - *la grotessca*. The style flourished in the work, over the years, of Bosch, the Breughels, Raphael, Velazquez, Hogarth, Callot, Goya, and Dali.

The grotesque, however, does not merely come down to us from the eerie etchings in Nero’s house. Much evolves from early Roman dramatic and public practice – in mimes, in the Saturnalia – that celebrated nonrationality and laughter and was thoroughly incorporated into the medieval period in popular folkways stressing ambivalence, jollity and release. Mikhail Bakhtin terms it the “carnival grotesque”.

Kuehl cites Fritz Gysin’s study *The Grotesque in American Negro Fiction* (Bern: Francke, 1975) and in particular Gysin’s analysis of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* where Gysin describes Ellison’s treatment of the grotesque:

> Figures, objects, and situations are rendered grotesque by means of distortion, animation, and alienation […] The grotesque figure is a human being that appears dehumanized because of physical deformity, incoherent behaviour, the assumption of extraneous traits from the animal, vegetable, mineral, or mechanical domain or from the domain of death […] The grotesque object is part of the mineral, vegetable, animal, or mechanical realm [that] appears to have become animated […] or to be the instrument of an ominous force […] The grotesque situation is a state of affairs in which the incongruity of various factors

51 *Ibid* p.18
evokes a concrete image of an estranged world [...] above all the disturbance of cause and effect may create grotesque situations ...\(^5\)

‘Figures, objects, and situations’: we will take these in turn.

Pappy Barking is a grotesque figure, akin to Jarry’s id-driven Père Ubu. Pappy Barking has been blinded in one eye, and his other eye is a ‘vulture eye’. The ‘vulture eye’ connects the grotesque figure of Pappy to the ‘domain of death’ and assimilates his sons, Barry and Daz, to that domain. The eye of the vulture feasts on carrion, and so the *intentio operis* in the early pages of the novel is to establish Barry, the narrator, as carrion – a primary object of abjection. As empirical author, I can say at this point that the detail of the vulture eye and its feasting on abjection is taken directly from Edgar Poe’s story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where the unnamed narrator fears the ‘vulture eye’ of the old man he eventually kills; such an eye renders the narrator doubtful of his own ontological status: is he dead or alive? Alternatively, if alive, is he alone in a universe of his own creation, a solipsist? (This is my ‘model reader’ response to the *intentio operis* of *The Tell-tale Heart*.) The narrator of Poe’s tale commits murder to test these questions, but only succeeds in rendering himself even more abject. Barry himself is an arch solipsist, in the colloquial sense of being selfish and fixated on primary drives, and yet his consorting with the figure of the Devil, in Cunty McFuck, leaves open the question of his ontological status.

Cunty McFuck, another grotesque figure, enters the narrative first as Granny Barking’s ‘imaginary friend from Glasgow’ and then becomes, according to Barry, ‘less imaginary and more of a fiend with each passing day.’ After a time, Cunty asserts that he is the Devil, and ruler of the sublunary world. In his dealings with this self-styled Devil, Barry puts his ontological status at stake for the model reader. Is Barry dead or alive? A model reader may be reminded of the narrator of Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, while recognizing that the question has no particular import within *Fair Game*. The question is not one that Barry poses about himself, although there are times in the novel where he is fairly blasé about the ontological status of others – in particular, Hardy Ma Bansom. For example, when Barry is told to take the decapitated head of Hardy Ma Bansom (still crowned by its dishcloth turban) to the boner to strip away the meat and leave a clean skull, Hardy Ma’s head (smoking a roll-up) speaks to him.

\(^5\) Gysin, pp, 29, 30, cited by Kuehl, *op.cit.* pp.144-145
'Skull-fuck me, why don’t you, for auld lang syne? I can see you want to.'

‘Not fussed, really, without your tantalizing undies. Dishcloth turbans don’t really do it for me … oh, okay then, anything to oblige. There’s a trade calendar of a lingerie-clad lovely on the wall over there, she should get me going. Let’s see … Yes, done the trick. Let me put your cigarette on the side.’

I took it from her lips, and obliged her for old time’s sake.

‘Thanks, son. I needed that.’

‘No problem. Here’s your fag back…’

There is hardly a figure in *Fair Game* that isn’t grotesque. The animals – Jip the dog and Baco and Ham, the boar and sow - are all grotesque, especially in their longevity. They seem to outlive most humans.

As to wisdom and age: Jip, who has been in the family for generations, is older and wiser than any of us. Except maybe Methuselah Bansom, Granny Barking’s Great-Great-Great-Great Great Grandfather. [18]

I let myself believe that when I came to man’s estate, I would claim Wendy as my bride. She would be my Queen of the Doughnuts, enthroned by my side while I waggled my sceptre and grew the business-from-behind and bought more swine like Baco and Ham (although their longevity and prodigious breeding would be hard to match). [27]

Barry’s half-sister, Licit, is grotesque, firstly by virtue of her name, denoting her as ‘legal’. While there is an incest taboo within the Barking family on Ma Barking’s sons having full carnal knowledge of their mother, there is no such taboo attached to Licit, as we see from Cunty McFuck’s conversation with Barry:

‘[…]And that sister of yours …’

‘Licit. She’s my half-sister.’

‘Aye, Licit. She might be a half, but she’s a hole. Whit’s the score there? Can a gentle body dip his wick?’

‘The Domedrome Casino is good money, so that’s where Licit does it most, except when she’s doing it elsewhere and free for friends and family, like with me or Daz or Pappy Barking, or me and Daz or me and Daz and Pappy Barking. And Jip too, bless him, but he’s never been much use to Licit, only when Pappy Barking smears mashed pilchard over her snatch, good old boy. But you’re almost family now yourself, Cunty, so dip your wick to your heart’s content. Just make sure you leave Mum alone.’ [20]
Barry, above, refers to the Domedrome Casino being ‘good money’. This is where Licit works as a ‘fallen woman’ or ‘grande horizontale’, when she is not being abused by male family members, including Jip the dog.

Coupled with Licit’s illiteracy and seeming inability to speak (at least until late in the novel when her consciousness is raised by a feminist ‘sister’) the grotesque representation of Licit (and by analogy, sex-worker women and survivors of family abuse) puts the empirical author and his text on dubious moral ground, the terrain of misogyny. The *intentio operis*, it seems to me, offers at least two ways of reading the figure of Licit, neither of which fully contradicts the other: the comedy arises from the satirical treatment of her, as a victim of patriarchy and misogyny; while at the same time the comedy is complicit with tyranny through provoking cruel laughter at her plight. Licit herself seems sublimely unconcerned about her occupation and lack of speech, and when she does have her consciousness raised and learns to read and write, and present her case, her intention seems to be that, through conformity to the will of Everyman Jack (the mysterious political ‘fixer’), she will be forgiven for taking part in the sex-strike; released from Camp Stroppy-Woman; and be restored to her previous occupation of *grande horizontale* in the Domedrome Casino. Perhaps it might be possible to read the figure of Licit as a satire on so-called ‘post-feminism’, where women believe themselves empowered through free choices and see no need to combat the patriarchal order, itself regarded as a moribund monster, easily defeated by the heroic individual who needs no more communal solidarity than an efficient personal and professional network.

All this begs the question: what can a model reader make of it all? And, once again, the empirical author is not best placed to hazard an answer. Perhaps the only security of interpretation, if not meaning, lies in the scales of paradox, where one reading balances the other; where ‘equalities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either’s moiety’, as Gloucester says in *King Lear*.

To return to the grotesque figure of Cunty McFuck: Cunty, who claims to be the Devil, is represented as a Glaswegian ‘hard man’, an alcoholic (or as some say in Glasgow, “I’m not an alcoholic, just a steady heavy”) and abuser of heroin. His ‘junk-tracked arms’ testify to his intravenous drug-use. He is ‘chemically dependent and mentally impaired’ (a standard and common diagnosis for ‘street drinkers’).
Fragments of a dream flicker in [Daz’s] medulla cortex, glimpses of his faraway home place, where the track turns to the river, drops, and disappears into the estuary water or estuary mud depending on the tide. Where a steady drizzle, as it might be the fertile seed of Heaven, drips on the heads of his mother, father, and brother, his half-sister Licit, and the ancient family retainer Jip - but not, of course, his Granny, who lies snug as a bug in The Willows, in the junk-tracked arms of Glasgow’s finest citizen, Cunty McFuck. According to his own testimony, Cunty isnae an alky, he’s deet a steady heavy, wi’ a taste fur the broon, a man you don’t meet every day - et cetera - but even so, his familiars soon discover he is not only chemically dependent, but mentally impaired to boot.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding, his fellow Scotchmen love him all the same, by virtue of his being a reliable guide to their sad country’s historic misfortune, a cultural bell-wether. Auld Cunty, the Warlock o’ Cludgie - as they cry him in Scotia - is the last of his clan, unless he elects to go with a lassie more nubile than Granny Barking.

But it’s those lace-trimmed lilacs bind him in thrall. They put hard lead in his Caledonia pencil. Citizen McFuck has recently achieved a sticky coitus with his aged paramour, and now she sweetly sleeps, while his spermatozoa rummage glumly through her withered parts looking for bargains.

In this passage, the dreaming mind of Daz generates the motif of fertility (‘a steady drizzle, as it might be the fertile seed of Heaven, drips …’). Set against the motif of fertility, Cunty McFuck (a.k.a. ‘Auld Clooty’, or the Devil) is the ‘last of his clan, unless he elects to go with a lassie more nubile than Granny Barking’. But while Cunty may be fertile – and the reader has no way of knowing - Granny Barking’s days of procreation are over because of her ‘withered parts’. Even so, Cunty is ensnared by the erotic charge of Granny Barking’s knickers (‘it’s those lace-trimmed lilacs bind him in thrall’). Here we see a division between Cunty McFuck and his own spermatozoa, which are endowed with a consciousness separate from Cunty’s own (a realistic detail perhaps, now I come to think of it) but which parallels Daz’s ontological splitting from his penis, Madam Jojo.

The Devil’s libido is directed towards Granny Barking by virtue of her lilac drawers, and in this infatuation with a woman’s underwear, he is like Barry, who obsesses about lingerie through the course of the book. This parallel leaves open, for the model reader, the possibility that the Devil may be written as a projection of Barry’s mind. However, this might be an interpretation too far, one of the ‘infinite conjectures’ that the intentio operis foresees the model reader postulating – and then rejecting.
Towards the close of the novel, the Devil is tamed through marriage with Granny Barking (or Granny Rattletrap, his ‘pet name’ for her) – a variation of the old folktale and ballad (Child 278, ‘The Farmer’s Curst Wife’) where the shrewish wife goes down to Hell and beats the Devil and his progeny so that she is ejected from the infernal regions: “It’s true that the women are worse than the men/For they go down to Hell and get kicked out again”, as one current version of the ballad puts it, in an assertion of woman’s power over man (and Devil), albeit from a misogynist perspective of fear and, possibly, loathing.

However, Cunty McFuck, as Devil, seems resigned to his matrimonial fate and in no mood to send Granny back home. Adrift on the ocean, Barry encounters Cunty who says:

‘Right you are. Can’t stop long … got to be elsewhere, to attend my marital duties. Auld Granny Rattletrap keeps a body at it, night and day and night, world without end, amen. Arthritis, constipation, piles … insanity … nothing scunners her oats.’

‘So you got married at long last? Chafford Hundred Registry Office, was it, with nibbles in the Scout Hut afterwards?’

‘Correctemento. You were right about no’ inviting Gervase Whitelady, as it goes, but the blushing bride insisted he be best man. What is it with him and boy scouts? Many’s the nonce’s buttocks I’ve scarified with a ladle of hot coals, but none I’ve seen to match his unbridled licentious appetites. He rogered a whole patrol of them before we’d uncorked the champagne or even snorted the broon.’

‘Pale and tender chucklewit boys are his catamites of choice, but he goes for tanned and muscular outdoor types from time to time.’

‘Aye, variety is the spice of life!’ He cupped his hand to his ear. ‘Uh oh, I can hear Granny Rattletrap bellowing for service already, and I only just furnished her with six organisms on the trot. Nice chatting to you, Barrywhore, got to run.’

The grotesque treatment of the Devil - through the figure of Cunty McFuck - serves to humanize him, and make him a figure of fun. When the universe itself is a madhouse (as in anti-realist fiction, according to Kuehl’s view) there is no need for a towering Miltonic Satan. Such a heroic and epic representation of the Devil would offer too much comfort to the model reader by suggesting there is a meaningful structure to the universe; possibly a struggle between the poles of good and evil, light and dark, carried on in warfare between the demiurge creator of a fallen world of corrupt matter, and a godhead who is the principle of transcendent illumination. This meaning would be essentially Gnostic in character, and related to the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. In
Moby Dick, Herman Melville explored this cosmic warfare through intense irony and metaphorical correspondence, in an effort to match the epic sweep of Paradise Lost. Instead, Fair Game presents an absurdity – the Devil who plays the mouth-organ and tambourine, who lusts after the lace-trimmed lilac drawers of a nonagenarian granny, and who is chemically dependent and mentally impaired. The universe of Fair Game is ruled – ineffectually it must be said – by the Devil, or perpetual Chance, or perhaps the two of them in cahoots; but there is no sign of an omnipotent God anywhere.

The Worshipful Company of Darkie Milkmen – a mixed crew of genuine black milkmen, and white milkmen in ‘minstrel blackface’ – are grotesque figures who drift in and out of the story, playing banjos, siring offspring on their female customers, and occasionally delivering milk. Their priapic power stems from the myth of the black man’s sexual potency, a myth subscribed to by the novel’s white ‘wannabes’ who seek to emulate their black colleagues. Pappy Barking is willing to black-up (or wear his black hood if it’s raining) and help deliver the milk.

Pappy Barking helped their worships on the milk-round over Chafford from time to time when they were short-handed, and if it was raining he wore the hood to save himself blacking-up - otherwise the burnt cork ran streaky. Having the name so clearly displayed was handy too, in cases of disputed paternity – the milkmen being notorious for their licentious appetites and never firing blanks. [36]

Grotesque situations arise through the absurd elements of the story, including events, character interaction and background. Alienation and distortion are fundamental to the representation of grotesque situations. Alienation is offered to the model reader through a mix of incongruous tropes and genre miscegenation. Science-fiction motifs of flying saucers, and extra-terrestrial visitors (Thoth and Theuth Tertius), occur alongside images from a cosy English past that is simultaneously absent and present. When we first encounter Barry’s mother, she is sleeping in her Big Mamma armchair, with the mantelpiece clock stuck permanently at ten-to-three, and a jar of honey beside her – allusions to Rupert Brook’s celebrated poem ‘Grantchester’. However, while asleep, she is ‘making television’ – a detail stolen from Jerome Bixby’s marvellous 1953 story It’s a Good Life.

The telly flickered with vague-out-of-focus pictures of copulation projected from Mum’s sleeping brain […]Daz sidled in beside our ample Mum. It was a squash,
but neither seemed to mind. They cosied up and concentrated on the telly. The screen was fully in focus now, alive with bodies writhing and screaming in ecstasy and terror. [5]

Offering alienation to the reader in this way is perhaps a risky gambit. The anti-realist author who practices alienation is in danger of seeming callous towards the reader’s legitimate desire for narrative gratification by his refusal to tie together details of scene, character, and plot into a consistent world picture within a recognisable genre. Is *Fair Game* a science-fiction story? Hardly, despite its plundering of sci-fi motifs. Will the reader willingly accommodate the disjunctions of promiscuous genre miscegenation (sci-fi story, western yarn, or tale of a sentimental education) – or will the text encounter reader resistance to its spell, despite the *intentio operis*? The empirical author can only trust to his model reader to make the necessary accommodations with the ludic nature of the text.

The vessels of the Royal Navy in *Fair Game* are an example of a grotesque object that serves to alienate the reader from any tendency towards reading through a realist frame. On the first page we learn that the ship that brought Daz home has ‘dropped him by his door’ – a favour possible on a coach trip, one imagines, but unlikely in a naval context. Later, the reader learns that the Royal Navy is reduced to two capital ships – *HMS Front Bottom* and *HMS Back Passage*, one ship for heterosexual sailors and the other for homosexual sailors (all sailors being men in this world). The two capital ships are supported by ‘pedalos-of-war’, which are all that remains of Britannia’s once-mighty fleet. Despite the paucity of her naval resources, Britannia is determined to pursue a neo-colonial policy towards Um-Ka – perhaps a heavy-handed satirical detail that undermines the anti-imperialist stance of the *intentio operis*; the sub-text might suggest that all Britannia needs is a proper navy to undertake its neo-colonial adventure, and be presenting a nostalgic view of the country’s imperial might. If the ‘model reader’ discerns the possibility of this interpretation, will the reader: a) reject it politically; b) agree with its premise; or c) accept it is an inconsistency in keeping with the ambiguity of the text and its incoherent nature (in so far as the novel is in satiric mode at all).

Lingerie, while not necessarily grotesque in itself (not to speak of Agent Provocateur and Ann Summers – Barry’s taste and mine tend more toward the sumptuous creations of Keturah Brown) is turned into a grotesque object by certain characters’ obsessive attitudes towards it – mainly Pappy Barking and Dippy, and Barry. Barry’s
consciousness is saturated with lingerie as an object of desire in itself; it seems a female body is merely an excuse for lingerie. When Barry and Wendy go on a picnic:

Wendy slid her motorcycle leathers from her gorgeous body, with a sinuous motion, which made me think of a snake shedding its skin. I hoped to discover she was wearing romantic wispy frillies underneath, but no, she was naked.

‘And that’s something you’ll have to get used to. From now, there will be none of this hyper-feminine lingerie nonsense, no frills or flounces. Sometimes Barry, I’ve been concerned that you only desire me for my knickers.’ [131]

Constable Dippy Barking is another lingerie aficionado and he and Pappy Barking spend time in the run-up to the Bansom massacre discussing the relative merits of calico drawers and lingerie. Dippy ascribes the animus the Bansoms feel towards his wife to jealousy of her lingerie.

[Dippy] clucked his tongue. ‘The reason them Bansoms is always setting fire to the wife’s lingerie is because it’s top-drawer satin and lace in a range of pastel colours, created by Keturah Brown, sewn by almond-eyed helots, and imported straight from her new Paris salon in the diplomatic pouch. Them Bansoms is eaten up with envy of my wife’s panties and they covet my Masonic links with the Paris gendarmerie – links which allow the missis to be lingerie cynosure of Chafford Hundred, the Ness and beyond, even to the Russian steppes.’ [42]

For Pappy Barking, the ‘calico drawers’ favoured by the womenfolk of the Bansom clan, signify the apogee of the abject.

‘Where is Hardy Ma Bansom?’ shouted Pappy Barking.

‘Her gone up Lunnon, for to buy sexy lingerie, at Fenwick’s of Bond Street,’ Jed called out, in a thick, trembling, dry-mouthed yokel voice. ‘The Marshal tell her she got to ante-up in the lingerie stakes if she want to cut a caper as a school inspector. Seems like some no-good varmint told on her for wearing calico drawers.’

‘I don’t figure Hardy Ma Bansom needed no telling on,’ shrieked Pappy Barking, ‘with that washing-line of Devil’s drawers a-fluttering and a-flaunting their calico for all the world to see.’ [45]

Another grotesque object is the Doughnut – a torus made of gleaming metal – which serves as the centre of the Barking family’s pigmeat business. In the Doughnut, swine are slaughtered, butchered, and ‘parcelled up for dainty eaters’. Doughnuts are flying machines, and serve as mobile workstations. Pappy Barking is anxious about
‘renegades’ landing their ‘tramp doughnuts’ and poaching his business – but he has a solution.

On the way back to the house, I took a detour, past the hulk of the tramp doughnut we’d snuffed the week previous. Tramps sometimes tried to land to stake a claim, but Pappy Barking was always ready for them with his flamethrower. This particular gang of renegades had barely made it out of the hatch before Pappy zapped them. I kicked a fire-blackened skull. The skull shattered. I trod the fragments under my heel. [7]

Beyond figures, situations and objects, the grotesque in *Fair Game* arises from epistemological quirks and disjunctions. Cause and effect become increasingly distorted and detached from each other as *Fair Game* proceeds and ontological categories become unanchored from ‘reality’. After a seemingly rapid period of gestation, Little Black Baz is born, then swallowed by Jip, only to be ‘born again’ through Jip’s rectum, waving a Union Jack flag upside down (‘an internationally recognised signal of distress’). The subsequent career of Little Black Baz – jockey of colour, graduate of Mad Scientist School, and conqueror of the ‘linear temporality that’s lately been getting on everybody’s tits’ – is grotesque, and is intended by its empirical author as a mockery (and exploitation, via *reductio ad absurdum*) of the ‘prodigious baby’ figure to be found here and there in anti-realist fiction (most recently, to my knowledge, in Nicola Barker’s 2007 novel, *Darkmans*).

4.6 Imaginary Landscapes and Absurd Quests

Barry’s homeplace is situated in Essex, on the Thames estuary, close to the town of Chafford Hundred. Gravesend and London and Oxford are also recognized as ‘real’ in so far as the names correspond to settlements listed in any gazetteer. However, their ‘reality’ is circumscribed by their role in the story. Gravesend, with its crematorium, is a sinister place in which the model reader might infer some sort of genocide is going on:

‘A fortune-teller, eh?’ said Dippy Barking, booming out from underneath the huge dome of his Sunday helmet. ‘You used to see a lot of them around, but you don’t so much any more since we opened the crematorium over at Gravesend.’

‘Have another ladleful of semolina slicked with butter-scum,’ said Mum. [105]
London, while recognized as a centre of political power, is chiefly celebrated for being a major source of high-class lingerie (from Keturah Brown, and Fenwick’s of Bond Street). And Oxford, rather than being a city of dreaming spires and lost causes, is where Barry undertakes work-experience in the lavatories of Balliol, and where he meets the Oxford waitron, whose ghost dogs him in his latter days.

The land of Um-Ka (east of Eden) is an imaginary landscape, depicted through motifs of the oriental tale, itself a subset of the Gothic and grotesque in nature. However, as we have seen, in *Fair Game* there is an admixture of genres. In the passage below, motifs of science-fiction are blended with orientalism:

Daz is surprised by what he sees. He has been expecting a stained couch strewn with greasy rags, and the dull, rusty crescent blade of the snicker-snee, wielded by a hysterical eunuch. These are present, of course - the eunuch’s hell-cackle is particularly trying in the wet heat - but around him also are shelves of gleaming hi-tech equipment whose purpose he can only guess at.

He guesses, correctly, that they are computing machines whose task is to predict the exact date of the end of the world. The prediction will allow the timely transfer of the population of Um-Ka in a fleet of gleaming silver ships to the planet Clön, two leagues beyond Campaspé and three parsecs to the right of Mölqbar in the belt of Orion - if the technology which might exist at the doom-time should allow. [75]

In its ‘orientalist’ representation, Um-Ka is grotesque enough, but the effect is further magnified because its name serves as a euphemism for ‘arse’ in Ma Barking’s lingo. (‘Steady on, Pappy Barking,’ said Mum. ‘At this rate, we shall have nothing left to wipe our um-kas with.’) The ‘ludic’ becomes even more ludicrous. In soldiers’ argot – and the cant of tabloid political commentators - the depiction of real-world countries as ‘the arse-end of nowhere’ is common. So the signs composing the ‘imaginary landscape’ are in fact anchored tightly to the real-world countries of Iraq and Afghanistan, allowing the model reader to intuit a satiric tone in their imaginary transformation within *Fair Game*; or, in tandem with the ambiguous representation of the status of the Royal Navy (with regard to available resource and neo-colonial enterprise) the model reader might entertain the idea that the *intentio operis* is suggesting that anywhere outside Britannia really is the ‘um-ka’ of nowhere.

Given that Barry ‘Baz’ Barking is the narrator, the model reader might expect that any questing to be done, absurd or rational, would be carried on by him; although perhaps under one of the many variants of his name that he offers throughout the novel. An
argument might be made, on the premise of the names, that Barry does have a quest of his own to undertake: finding his identity; from which stems the various absurd stylings he gives himself. Daz’s old Balliol ‘scout’ (a college servant) shares his reminiscences of Daz with Barry.

‘Such a gent - he taught me a few words of the Old Hittite tongue, so I could talk to his prick.’
‘He’s my younger brother. I also used to talk to his prick.’
‘Then, my noble Lord, you must be the valiant Earl, Erasmus Barrymore Bazzabubba Barking, Lord of the Sceptre Wagglers?’
‘The very same,’ I said. ‘Except now you may add “Tartan Duke of the Bonny Isles o’Clunge” to my titles.’
‘I thought you said your name was Googam,’ said the waitron.
‘Yes, indeed. I am His Vaunted Eminence, Googam Erasmus Barrymore Bazzabubba Barking, Lord of the Sceptre Wagglers, and Tartan Duke of the Bonny Isles o’ Clunge.’
‘I shall call you Goo for short.’ [89]

Perhaps to the disappointment of the model reader who is trying to guess the future progress of the story, Barry turns out to be an ineffectual quester. He cannot even manage to play Cain to his brother Daz’s Abel, surely a well-worn fictional track for a disgruntled brother, and easy enough to achieve in either realist or anti-realist mode. CuntyMcFuck shrewdly assesses Barry’s abilities in the fratricidal game.

‘Tell us – amn’t I no’ correct in thinking ye dinnae like your brother?’
‘Not over-fond of Daz, no. I’m Cain to his Abel. Or I would be, if I had the gumption to take my chance.’
‘That’s what you need, boy. Gumption. I spy the lack of it by the nancy cut of your jib…’ [21]

Little Black Baz is the true heroic questing figure of Fair Game. His quest is to find the means of diverting (or perhaps reversing, or sending into a spiral, or ‘penning in a gyre’, as Yeats might have it) the trajectory of Time’s arrow. In the early pages of Fair Game, Time itself seems to be stuck, locally at least, stuttering forwards and back:

The clock on the mantelshelf, though broken, was still making tick-tock. The hand that ruled the seconds rocked forward and back - tick-tock, tock-tick - not making time. The minute and the hour were stuck at ten-to-three. [4]
But Time is ‘stuck’ only for Baco and Ham, and Jip. In fact, they are outside Time, and as eternals, they are immortal. All humans in *Fair Game* (with the possible exception of Methuselah Bansom) are borne away on ‘Time’s ever-rolling stream’, and their mortal human condition worries them. Concern about the linearity of time is given voice by Barry, but also by minor characters, such as Barry’s shipmates and Missis Dippy:

‘It’s difficult to know exactly where and when to look for the Old Man, with everything being so linear in the temporal stakes,’ said Missis Dippy. ‘If all time was eternally present to inspection, it would be a doddle.’ [105]

As prophesied by Hardy Ma Bansom, in her fortune-telling role, Little Black Baz takes up the challenge of the linear unidirectionality of Time. By correctly divining the significance of the *diorite cyst*, the sacred crystal of the priestly caste of the Ancient Hittites, he is able to subvert Time.

“*The diorite cyst* is an ancient stone of enormous power – in fact, nothing less than the foundation stone of the universe. Locked within its flinty core, is the fundamental energy of the cosmos, the energy that provoked the Big Bang. The stone generates the force field that causes all animal, vegetable, and mineral time to unfold in linear fashion. Without the stone, there would be no sequential time at all, but a mere chaos of moments, proceeding now like a sidewise crab, now like a salamander devouring its own tail in a vicious circle…” [218]

It seems barely necessary to note that, from a scientific point of view, this is unsound, hardly worth subjecting to Popper’s test of falsification in respect of valid scientific hypotheses.\(^{53}\) However, within the world of *Fair Game*, it might seem to the model reader to be about as plausible as anything else that has occurred, or might occur. By the time the model reader has reached this point (and how many unlucky empirical readers have dropped by the wayside?) they can take this mumbo-jumbo in their stride. Throughout the novel, we find that science, philosophy, human relationships, politics, religion, natural history, literature, whatever might be treated rationally or with reverence in the ‘real’ world, are all levelled into one paradigm of absurdity.

And this is not the absurdity of the existentialists, who can regard the absurd universe with an assumed indifference, while using its very absurdity as the basis for building a humanist morality. No, it truly is the bottomless pit of meaninglessness, from whose

base no glittering realist superstructure can arise – only the superstructure of ludic language and language games.

4.7 Given the general anti-realist lineage, what particular anti-realist precursors can be brought to account?

My primary stylistic influence in the opening phase of the novel - and from its earliest draft - is Alfred Jarry, and the Ubu plays. Both characterisation and the fantastic events of the story owe much to the influence of Jarry:

Pappy Barking stood naked in his cowboy boots and stetson. He walked bandy-legged to the sideboard and sawed slabs off a loaf to make a sandwich. He licked his fingertips and dabbed them in the moist breadcrumbs scattered on the board, bringing his coated fingers back to his tongue. He took up the knife, slapped on the scrape, and piled up the ham and piccalilli. Pappy Barking gave us both a leery wink over his doorstopper.
‘Either of you boys fancy a bit?’
‘I’m easy,’ said Daz.
‘No thanks.’
‘No sloppy seconds, Barry?’ said Pappy Barking.
‘Good of you to offer, but no.’
He was talking about us having a poke at Mum, not a chomp on his sandwich, but we knew if we went any further than fondling Mum’s marimbas, sly Pappy Barking would have us hoisted on the slaughtering block toot sweet. What a joker our father is, leading us into temptation. [8]

In the passage above, the mad priapic patriarch, Pappy Barking, voraciously sexual and potentially murderous, builds a huge sandwich, using it as a pretext to tempt his sons into incest.

What we have here is the figure of the ogre, the ugly and menacing ‘other’, the bogeyman born of nightmare, nurtured in our dreams, and mediated to us through folklore and fairy tale and previous literary examples – such as Gargantua, and Père Ubu. With respect to the influence of Père Ubu on the characterisation of Pappy Barking, later the reader learns that Pappy Baking, like his precursor, is not only an ‘idiot full of sound and fury’, in Macbeth’s phrase, but is on occasion pusillanimous:

Pappy Barking chased Wendy through the door. He smacked Wendy’s rump and she turned and frowned, wagging her finger.
‘Don’t do that, Pappy darling, or I shall have Daz consign you to the galleys and chain you to an oar.’
Pappy Barking looked fair buggery-whipped at that. After all, now that Daz was Prime Minister, anything might happen. [121]

I have spoken previously of not writing ‘to plan’, and on being the plaything of the zeitgeist, but in respect of conscious influences on my writing, such as Jarry, there is a deliberate attempt to borrow (or steal) certain aspects of his work – and not just the absurd ogre figure of Père Ubu/Pappy Barking. In the earliest phase of the work, I was influenced by the subsequent stage productions of Ubu, and their cartoonish representations. It was the treatment of the figure in production design, as much as the figure of Ubu himself in the original script, that caused me to see Fair Game as a kind of literary cartoon – which brings me to what I referred to earlier as my current ‘pitch’ for the novel: H.E.Bates’s Larkin family meets the Marquis de Sade in the director’s cut of Carry On Sailor.

What I am asserting here is that Fair Game is a kind of ‘mash-up’, or bricolage, of generic and stylistic elements, and the syntagm offered above as shorthand for the novel’s structure, presents the diabolical Marquis de Sade sandwiched between two icons of English coziness – the Larkins and the Carry On series of films, each of which may be regarded as drawing the poison from the middle term of the syntagm: de Sade.

Now we can call this a failure of artistic nerve, or we can gloss it as an attempt to ‘have one’s cake and eat it’. Or we can view it more charitably as a deliberate artistic choice, arising from the moral code of the empirical author.

The empirical author’s ‘truth’ of the matter is easily expressed. De Sade is often very funny – whether he intends it or not, I cannot guess, nor is his intention discoverable or even relevant if it were (due to our rightful abhorrence of the intentionality fallacy). But slapstick comedy abounds in de Sade, especially in those sections of The Philosophy of the Boudoir where notionally consenting adults engage in increasingly complex and astounding sexual feats (although the idea of consent in de Sade’s mechanistic universe is problematic at root). However, de Sade is a dangerous writer when he represents the sexual torture and murder of children. There I will not follow him, and I ask you to believe me, your empirical author, when I say that my decision springs from my moral sense, attenuated and ragged as my conscience might be. It is not a failure of artistic nerve, a trahison d’auteur that halts me in my footsteps - although perhaps the ‘intention

54 In particular, David Hockney’s design for Ian Cuthbertson’s 1966 production of Ubu Roi at The Royal Court Theatre.
of the text’ is that a jury of ‘model readers’ will convict its empirical author of that crime.

4.8 So it would seem that precursors of *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* are not so much individual anti-realist novels, but rather particular stylistic and structural features that occur within Jarry’s *Ubu* plays, Bates’s Larkin family stories, and the *Carry On* series of films, all seasoned with a sprinkling of attenuated and pasteurised de Sade. All of these sources (with the possible exception of de Sade) – the leaves, twigs and branches that make my *bricolage* - have drawn inspiration from ‘popular’ culture and have in their turn been assimilated to it. In the case of Jarry, it is the culture of puerile humour to be found among schoolboys (authorship of a kind of Ur-*Ubu* being communal among Jarry’s schoolfriends who together created a fantasy world around a particular teacher, who became the model for Jarry’s protagonist)\(^{55}\). The Larkin family is a modern myth, based around the figures of the honest outlaw doubling as the loveable rogue, the hero of numerous folktales and popular ballads, who stands representative of the individual against authority, a myth originating in a feudal age where reciprocity of obligation was breaking down, and having greater resonance in a modern England where the individual is increasingly subject to bureaucratic control.

The *Carry On* … films have been the subject of academic and pseudo-academic studies, but my favourite is Gilbert Adair’s April-Fool spoof Barthian ‘take’ on what Adair/Barthes terms (mock-pretentiously) the ‘cycle’ (‘The *Carry On* … cycle is Utopian cinema *par excellence*’) published in the Spring issue of *Sight and Sound*.

Towards the end of the ‘essay’, we find this:

> And there we are, finally, at the question of sex. For what the *Carry On* … series is most notorious for is being ‘naughty’ – a word, yet again, also applicable to children and their misdeeds […] To an amazing degree, the sexual practices and fantasies which recur throughout the series are those first ingested in the nursery: scatology, voyeurism (the term in English for a voyeur, ‘Peeping Tom’, even sounds like the protagonist of a nursery rhyme, notably ‘Tom, Tom, the piper’s [or peeper’s?] son’); and the fad for genital self-measurement (‘What a fuss to be making over such a little thing!’ one of the nurses in *Carry On, Nurse* teases


poor Kenneth Connor, terrified as he is at the thought of having to strip in front of her).\(^{57}\)

Scatology, voyeurism, and genital self-measurement are all to be found within *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*. Some examples:

**Scatology**

‘Here, boy, sit next to me,’ she said. I shook my head. My lips were tight and my Adam’s apple bobbed with fear.

‘Mmnonono,’ I buzzed. No way could I usurp Pappy Barking’s berth on the crapper, below his nameplate, next to Granny Barking. What was Granny Barking thinking of? Did she want me hauled up on the slaughtering block, as surely as if I’d tried to go further than titting Mum up? Pappy Barking would make no allowance for my tender years. Terror seized me and my bowels turned to water. I dropped my keks, squatted in my rightful place, and let fly.

The griping in my gut faded. I reached out for the squares of the *Times*, strung on a line above our heads. I wiped my um-ka, checking each sheet to see I was getting clean. [59]

**Voyeurism**

Barry and Wendy have retired to the lighthouse, to pass their wedding night. Their nuptials are interrupted by Pappy Barking setting a ladder against their window. He intends to witness the consummation of their marriage.

Draping a towel over my burgeoning bloater, I hurried to the window, pushed it open, and leaned out. The scraping we’d heard was the top of Pappy Barking’s ladder nudging the cill. Down below, lit by the Gestapo moon, I could see Pappy Barking in blackface, huffing and puffing, clambering up the ladder, hand over hand, with his best spyglass in the crook of his arm and a minstrel banjo slung across his shoulders. He wore a battered stovepipe hat. Clearly, he was intent on beguiling us, in the guise of a darkie milkman. [137]

[In passing, I must honour, as source of literary plunder, the work of Erskine Caldwell, and in particular his 1932 novel, *Tobacco Road*. Within this hilarious novel, you can find Jeeter Lester (another Pappy Barking/Ubu figure) climbing up a ladder to watch his son Dude having sex with his new bride.]

**The fad for genital self-measurement**

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\(^{57}\) *Ibid* p.132
Male characters in *Fair Game* are obsessed with the length of their penises, and measure them using the ‘budgie standard’ – that is, how many budgies can perch on the erect member. A man will speak of another man as ‘a ten budgie man’ (although this figure is mostly reserved for Daz and Goldtop Ron, head honcho of the Darkie Milkmen). The origin of the ‘budgie standard’ lies within the domain of folklore. My use of it arises from my being impressed by an article in the *News of the World* – whose date I no longer recall - where the actor (and one-time stand-up comic at the *Windmill* theatre in London) Fred Feast told his tale shortly after being ‘let go’ by the producers of *Coronation Street* (in which he played barman Fred Gee) in December 1984. Mr. Feast claimed in the article to be a ‘five budgie man’ and popular with ‘the ladies’ as a consequence of his endowment. Other standards of penis measurement have been used by boastful and vainglorious men – half-crowns, threepenny bits, half-pint beer mugs with the penis threaded through the handles … A moment’s thought will show that the measures are neither standard, nor even compatible – perhaps an anomaly the British Standards Authority might address at a future date. Of course, an international standard will be more difficult to achieve, given worldwide cultural and anatomical diversity.

Here, Barry looks forward to measuring his son’s member as the child grows.

Worn out by his patriotic exertions, Little Black Baz fell asleep in his clean nappy. His chest rose and fell, and subtle snores escaped his blubbery lips. He lay by the birdcage, where he’d been trying in vain to plant his flag within the mesh. The budgies gathered round, cheeping and crooning over their tiny visitor. It wouldn’t be long before baby budgies were parading along his joyboy, with me proudly marking my son’s progress on the wall-chart. [162]

5  *Bricolage*: a method for writing anti-realist fiction

5.1 *Bricolage* (as the process of construction) and *bricoleur* (as the one who constructs) are French terms difficult to translate pithily into English. For my understanding of the terms, I rely on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (La Pensée Sauvage).\(^{58}\) If I were to offer a translation for *bricoleur* I might suggest ‘bodger’.

Lévi-Strauss seeks to reclaim ‘the savage mind’ from the condescension of anthropologists and others who might term that mind ‘primitive’ in its methods of classification and combination of the categories and objects of knowledge in its world (‘all that is the case’ for its human world, represented within its own ‘logic’ or ‘science’). He posits a notion of savage epistemology as ‘prior’ science rather than ‘primitive’ science (much as we might speak without condescension of ‘pre-scientific’ modes of natural inquiry, such as alchemy or astrology). In the words of Lévi-Strauss, it is ‘the science of the concrete’, rather than the abstract or hypothetical.

[Its] principal value is indeed to preserve until the present time the remains of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type: those which nature authorised from the starting point of a speculative organization and exploitation of the sensible world in sensible terms. This science of the concrete was necessarily restricted by its essence to results other than those destined to be achieved through the exact natural sciences but was no less scientific and its results no less genuine. They were secured ten thousand years earlier and still remain at the basis of our own civilization.  

The ‘savage mind’ can therefore be interpreted in phenomenological terms. ‘Understanding’ is its ‘mode of being’, to paraphrase Heidegger, and its reflection on nature is a consequence of that understanding. Lévi-Strauss goes on to describe the consequence of its ‘observation and reflection’ and its construction of objects and categories of knowledge, as bricolage. Originating in the semantic fields generated by ‘ball games and billiards […] hunting, shooting and riding’, the term bricolage:

[…] was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own time the ‘bricoleur’ is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’ …

59 ibid, p.16
60 Ibid pp.16-17
It is my contention that *Fair Game for the Whole Hog* is a work of ‘bricolage’, precisely in its method: a patchwork of allusions and motifs, tropes of the abject and the puerile, ungrounded in any realist or naturalist (or scientific) method, and put together from whatever fragments of culture (high or low) are handiest. For the ‘bricoleur’:

[…] the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or deconstructions.61

Here, Lévi-Strauss might as well be talking of intertextuality. We may regard the composition of *Fair Game* as an assemblage or collage of cultural allusions and intertexts that operate beneath the surface level of any satirically treated themes of hypersexuality and neo-colonialism. The search for ‘meaning’ in such an assemblage or collage is futile, since their juxtaposition is essentially contingent rather than necessary and subordinate to some artistic scheme. I will return to this point, but in the meantime direct you to Barry’s own abilities as *bricoleur* and suggest that Barry’s thoughts and actions here mimic the method of *Fair Game* itself. His grandmother’s face reminds him of the canals of Mars, and this prompts Barry to speak of *improvising a telescope from ‘abject’ material* – the cardboard tube of a toilet roll. With a *used* cocktail stick, he cleans the ‘canals’ to let her tears flow unimpeded.

My torch played over her shining face. Tears of crypto-Caledonian joy ran down, channelled within a delta of wrinkles. I thought of the canals of Mars viewed through a home-made telescope - the sort you could easily improvise from a contact lens, the cardboard tube of a toilet roll, and the bottom of a pickled-onion jar. Face-powder dammed the flow of tears here and there. I knelt beside her and fished a cocktail stick from the jar of pickles that Granny Barking was now balancing on her head.

‘I love a pickled onion after a good seeing-to,’ said Granny Barking.
‘Yes, Granny Barking, you said.’
I scraped the powder from her wrinkles with the cocktail stick and let her joyful tears flow free. [99]

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61 *Ibid*  p.17
5.2 I assert that there is no ‘meaning’ to be found in the above passage, beyond a flow of coherent propositions, leading one to another by a process of associative catalepsis – for example, ‘My torch played over her shining face’ invites the reader to move forward to what Barry saw in his grandmother’s face. The purpose of the propositions is to move the model reader forward from one to the next, but there is no destination to be reached, no secret to be revealed, nothing in the ‘content’ at all – even if the model reader goes forward (and backward) through the text to embrace the satire on neo-colonialism and hypersexuality (a satire which is essentially a *surface* feature of the novel). There is no moral compass provided for the reader. Yes, neo-colonialism is a fact of *realpolitik*, and yes, civic society is saturated with hypersexuality - and persons are abused through both. Much as I, Jim Citizen, deplore these states of affairs, *Fair Game* says: “So what?” The text offers no political solution. Things are as they are, in the civic world, and in the fictional world of *Fair Game*. Whether these worlds are the *worst* of all possible worlds (*pace* Leibniz) I leave to the model reader.

What is the *intentio operis* in respect of the model reader and social meaning? I am reminded of a cartoon by Don Martin in an early sixties edition of *Mad* magazine. Two ‘street drinkers’ discover a cache of cleaning fluids – Drano, Brasso, and the like – and mix themselves a cocktail in a trashcan. They drink deep, chortle, light cigarettes, and explode - the mushroom cloud above their pyre resolving itself into the slogan: “Wake up America! Abolish drug addiction!” The ‘message’ of *Fair Game* with regard to social meaning, such as it might be, is about as cynical and flippant as Mr Martin’s inspired surrealism.

What is important in *Fair Game*, then, is the ‘form’ of the writing, as embodied (partly) in its structure of catalepsis, hustling the model reader forward. It is not the ‘content’.

Of course, remembering Flaubert and Pater, previously cited, we might entertain the idea that ‘content’ must be abolished, leaving the field clear for style.

At this point, it may be useful to quote Susan Sontag, who critically discusses, in her essay *Against Interpretation*, Freud’s distinction between *manifest* content and *latent* content:

> The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs “behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. The most
celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to an elaborate system of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation. All observable phenomena are bracketed, in Freud’s phrase, as *manifest content*. This manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning – the *latent content* – beneath. For Marx, social events like revolutions and wars; for Freud, the events of individual lives (like neurotic symptoms and slips of the tongue) as well as texts (like a dream or a work of art) – all are treated as occasions for interpretation. According to Marx and Freud, these events only *seem* to be intelligible. Actually, they have no meaning without interpretation. To understand *is* to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it.  

What Sontag counters, in the last sentence above, is the notion that a work of art might be paraphrased – as Woody Allen’s speed-reader said of *War and Peace*, ‘it’s about some Russians’. To return to Eco’s notion of the *intentio operis*: Eco believes that the text’s intention can limit the reader’s interpretation, and that to go beyond the *intentio operis* is to overinterpret. The question then is, is interpretation, as conceived by Eco, a matter of *latent* content or *manifest* content – or both? I have no answer, but I am not seeking to deny the possibility of sub-text in works of art. However, I am suggesting that *Fair Game* is a text whose ‘content’, such as it is, is manifest, and hardly subject to interpretation at all. In other words, it is all surface, and no sub-text – at least, no *meaningful* sub-text, nothing latent that might be attributed to the *intentio operis*.

Take, for example, the religious allusions in *Fair Game*.

Pappy Barking wears a druid’s smock, and the curriculum offered in Granny Barking’s dame school offers religious instruction in ‘theology and druidic liturgy (according to heterodox doctrine and rites)’. Baco, the boar, is named after a (supposed) druidic deity. A reader, model or otherwise, might expect these druidic references to be developed in some way – but if so, she will be disappointed. Instead they appear alongside a mish-mash of allusions to Christianity and pagan religion: Barry undergoes a form of ‘scourging at the pillar’, one of the Stations of the Cross in Catholic liturgy; the family build the Temple of Venus Aphrodite, later reconsecrated to Cottyto ‘a Thracian moon-goddess of unparalleled licentiousness’. Pappy Barking offers an explanation for the switch:

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Pappy Barking wanted to transfer our allegiance to Cottyto because, in his own words, ‘She puts it about more, see? She will bring us plenty cargo, and more luck with the business-from-behind. Venus Aphrodite is showing her age. I asked her for a new telly but nothing turned up, and Ham’s last litter was two shoats down.’ [99]

The reference to the bringing of ‘cargo’ aligns Pappy with the so-called cargo cults of Melanesia. Religion seems to be a matter of material self-interest and also an aid to sexual excess.

Mum sang a medieval Bulgarian carol, standing in the middle of a diorama of the ancient stable where Cottyto was born. The infant Cotyttto lay in effigy with a Thracian swineherd, having-it-away in a manger, alongside carved representations of her original parents. According to the Breed Book, ‘these be Baco and Ham’. Their graven images were captured pursuing the business-from-behind in a most life-like manner. Holly wreaths adorned their snouts. In the corner, by the dung-heap, a priapic wax donkey, crowned with laurel and mistletoe, waited his turn with Cottyto. [100]

The ‘priapic donkey’ is crowned with mistletoe, a shrub reputedly sacred to druids. Religion, then, in *Fair Game*, is constructed as a *bricolage*, made out of motifs from a number of sources, torn from their contexts and rendered abject as a result, and stripped of any sacred significance they might once have had.

Speaking, as we were, of the possibilities for ‘overinterpretation’ in *Fair Game*, I should like to redeem my earlier promise and offer a playful example of such a possibility. The passage in question is:

I turned and saw Jip, his tongue lolling and breath steaming in the night air, cold now the moon was up. He had a bloater, good old boy, so I took him by the collar and hauled him over to the dunes, among the reeds. I knelt down and flipped him over on his back. He yielded a ghostly whimper, like he was in love with me. [6]

A model reader, some way through trying her ‘infinite conjectures’, might assume that the sexual act of pleasuring Jip orally has been elided, but is nonetheless there, its ‘absence’ heightening its ‘presence’. Such an assumption would result in a ‘thumbs-up’ from the empirical author, and would be confirmed by the text through Barry’s later zoophilia. However, if she went on to see Jip, in this instance, as an avatar of Christ on the Cross, at the moment where Christ yields up his spirit, despairing of God the Father,
but consumed by the love for humanity that demands his sacrifice (‘He yielded a ghostly whimper, like he was in love with me.’) – then the empirical author might say ‘ingenious, but wrong’. But who trusts the teller of the tale, after Lawrence? What might the intetio operis be? If the text offered, even latently, a coherent use of Christian symbolism and linked it some way to a ‘theme’, our reader’s Jip-as-Christ interpretation might find support. However, such allusions as there are, are mere fragments, incapable of being yoked together, of fitting one inside another to make a state of affairs. They have been rendered meaningless, rendered abject.

Perhaps the references to death show more cohesion over the line and length of the text. I have previously offered an interpretation of Pappy Barking’s ‘vulture eye’, with its connotation of feasting on carrion, and by extension the symbolic treatment of Barry and Daz as ‘dead meat’. Despite the novel’s insistence on the possibility of immortality for certain figures (Baco and Ham, Methuselah Bansom), the novel is saturated with death. As W.E. Henley put it, in 1877, ‘Madam Life’s a piece in bloom/Death goes dogging everywhere:/She’s the tenant of the room,/He’s the ruffian on the stair.’

And yet, while it provides plenty of opportunity for the display of the abject, particularly through the ingenious uses the Barkings find for the decapitated head/skull of Hardy Ma Bansom, we find that far from being threatened by the dead (in their status as corpses) the living (in the figure of Barry at least) are happy to converse with them, and even have sexual congress with them. This is not true necrophilia, because the dead sometimes seem to survive death, at least in the sense of being able to speak and interact physically with the living – Hardy Ma Bansom, and the Oxford waitron both have sex with Barry after their deaths. When we see Hardy Ma Bansom for the last time, as she sinks beneath the waves babbling about the children she and Barry may have some day, we cannot be sure that it is the last time she will appear – although we can but hope.

Gervase Whitelady, despite being dead for four hundred years or so, has no trouble popping up from time to time, as he follows his ‘portfolio career’: genie to the gentry; poetaster of the middle rank in a Silver Age; dramatist and part-time window cleaner.

The overall effect, then, is the undermining of the abject nature of the corpse, of death itself. Rather, it is a celebration of continuity and communion between the living and the dead – a celebration we recognise from vernacular (or ‘folk’) ceremonies in
communities around the world: the Mexican Day of the Dead; the graveyard festivals of the Southern Appalachians.  

We are a long way from Kristeva’s notion of the corpse as the ultimate signifier of the abject, worse than dung; for dung is expelled from the body that the body might live, whereas:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that, which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death […] the most sickening of wastes […] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

*Fair Game* reclaims the corpse, reclaims the abject, and transforms it into reassurance (communion with the dead); or allows its characters to create an artwork out of it, albeit an example of *kitsch*: the decorated skull of Hardy Ma Bansom.

In a dark corner of the room, on the harmonium, was a relic of yesteryear: a skull (female Caucasian) with tea-lights burning green inside. Boneyard shadows flickered within the hollow sockets. Alongside the skull lay a naked cutlass, the blade engraved *Old Tickler* above the bloodgutter. [7]

6. Last words: on realism and knowledge

6.1 If a reader wants to find ‘meaning’ in the manifest and latent content of a text, we had better leave *Fair Game* alone and seek ‘meaning’ elsewhere - in fiction constructed according to the rational procedures of realism, and its later development, ‘naturalism’. Say we wish to know all about a particular industry – as it might be, coal-mining - and the relations between men and women, between colliers and employers, between social and economic classes; and the distortions and conflicts engendered within such relations in a particular historical moment. Then we can take up Zola’s *Germinal* to have our curiosity satisfied, and be pleased while being outraged, within the security of an

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authoritative narration granting us the gratifications of character, plot, and authentic background – the precise lie of the land, the diet of the working poor, their inadequate housing. Or we may take up a historical study of the period and be satisfied in much the same way – depending, of course, on how the historical study is structured; whether it is written in a style which encourages empathy with a bygone time and people, in which case we enjoy the uses and gratifications of narrative; or whether the study is a species of ‘cliometrics’, with its emphasis on data, tabulation and measurement, in which case the audience will be more specialised, and the model reader more learned to begin with, as against the general reader, the layman.

So, the realist or naturalist text (fiction or non-fiction) aspires to the condition of justified positive knowledge, and belongs to the domain of epistemology. We find the bones of epistemology embodied in all manner of realist and realist novels. (And sometimes in gothic fantasy, too. Poe’s The Pit and the Pendulum enacts the narrator’s attempts to find out the topography and measurements of his dark dungeon, and reveals how wrong he has been, thus encouraging scepticism about our grasp of the foundations of knowledge.) Modern popular texts – realist in form, style, and address to their audience - are sometimes the most blatant in their designs on their model reader. Michael Crichton’s Airframe, for example, gives a convincing account of how a new airliner is built (within a satisfying ‘action’ plot, which the description of building an airframe actually enhances). Tom Clancy’s The Hunt for Red October gives its readers copious information on how a nuclear submarine operates.

At this point, I must say, with reference to my previous petulant scorn of realist fiction, that I am sometimes beguiled by this kind of novel. Such books seem to me unpretentious, and I find the industry detail intriguing. The psychological aspects of character also please me, with their simple, no-nonsense treatments, their depictions of power and violence, subservience and dominance, and, often, a Manichean view of the political world – a long way from more ‘literary’ forms of realism, such as Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way, where characters constantly make fine moral distinctions and carry on their lives as if they were still involved in an earnest Cambridge tutorial. Realist characters may well be represented as being, as Cristopher Nash puts it, ‘unstable and caught in a world of contrarieties’; positive knowledge might be seen as finally unattainable, the nature of ‘reality’ always provisional; and the moral status of a
character ambiguous, as in life; and yet the manner of narration itself might still be ‘positive’ in character.

Anti-Realists speaking about this [realist manner of narration] argue only that there is an overwhelming (indeed overweening) deception lodged in the gap between a *histoire* concerning such characters, for whom existence may be as problematic as you please, and a *discours* that is as clear cut and reassuring as you could imagine. [...] The narrative is, in a philosophical sense, ‘positive’. The reader would have ‘said’ the same things had he/she been there, and he/she *would* have been there only the narrator makes it his business – and the reader counts on him – to get there first. It is a compact between reader and narrator to the effect that the latter will declare what is ‘truly’ happening and the former will go – will be carried – along.\(^{65}\)

It may be objected that this makes no allowance for the ‘unreliable narrator’, but it seems to me that the very fact of a narrator’s unreliability reasserts the hegemony of the ‘real’.

If realism and naturalism depend on a rational, investigative, method of inquiry, seeking to establish knowledge about the human, the physical, social, and moral worlds of individuals and groups - if it is indeed a form of epistemological inquiry, and one which allows for uncertainty - then what can we say about the status of anti-realism? Is it necessarily the case that in being anti-realistic, such fiction sets itself up as a model of out-and out scepticism, embodying the notion that reality itself is a social construct, and not a ‘given’, a natural fact?\(^{66}\) Trying to oppose one mode to the other in such stark terms may result in a false clarity, not taking account of what is common among them; any such commonality being inimical to neat definitions and oppositions. As it is, in Nash’s view, the question is not one so much of the epistemological status of ‘reality’ itself within each mode, but of the manner of narration, the realist narration being ‘positive’. I can imagine a novel, related in a convincing realist manner, where the bulk of incidental detail is wrong – for example, the wrong colour of a tram ticket in Manchester in 1890, the wrong time of high tide at Purfleet on 21\(^{st}\) October, 1983 – and yet the narration might still be thoroughly convincing, given that the reader herself might be unaware of the true state of affairs with regard to the colour of tram tickets, and

the detail of tide tables, and not be bothered to check. The logic of realistic narration holds, even where details are ‘wrong’. This seems to run counter to the principle of mimesis – until we recall that mimesis can only be effected by representation, and it is through representation that the process of degradation of reality begins. Plato was an early critic of art in this respect. His Theory of Forms posits a transcendental realm of pure and perfect form, of which the sublunar world is a shadow. ‘Forms’ are ‘special entities’ that ‘exist outside of spaced an time and that are both the objects of knowledge and somehow the cause of whatever transpires in the physical world.’

The chair I sit on is imperfect in relation to the transcendentai chair – the Form of all chairs. How much more imperfect, then, would my description of a chair be, or my attempts to paint or even photograph the chair. Each representation would be made from a limited point of view. Even if I followed Cubist praxis and presented simultaneous multiple views of the chair, I would still fail in this essential respect: nobody could sit in it. (I leave aside the conditions that would need to pertain before I might ‘sit’ on the transcendental Form of the chair.)

6.2 Rather late in the day, I must point out that ‘realism’, both as discursive artifact and body of work, is a house with many mansions – indeed, something of a moveable feast (to switch metaphors from Jesus’s account of his Father’s heavenly house to the Christian liturgical year). I think we may agree that the highwater mark of literary realism may be traced to 19th century fiction, and our beloved (or otherwise) Victorians. The beginning of my problems with realism can be found in my teenage reading. Before I had tackled Middlemarch, War and Peace, and such, I read Ulysses. Ulysses effectively spoiled me for any 19th century realist novel. What I saw straight away, aged 16, and what I have had confirmed to me since (by Gabriel Josopovici among others) is that Ulysses had exploded the stability of realism, and reconfigured the literary game. (Of course, it can be argued that Sterne got there first, with Tristram Shandy.) However, the ‘spirit of the age’, 1922, and the onrush of modernism and modernity, allowed Joyce to be the great avatar of literary modernism, the great iconoclast. And of course he was as much maker of the wave as rider of it. I remember the chill of discovery as I read

within *Ulysses* and thought: ‘this is written as if it were a film’, only to discover shortly after, from Ellmann’s critical biography of Joyce, that Joyce had been instrumental in opening the first cinema in Dublin, in 1909.

If realism in literature, in its manner and method, is a species of epistemology, then modernism did not drop knowledge as its concern - knowledge of the world, of people, of institutions - although these were certainly problematised. We can see this in Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, where the story is effectively fragmented and needs to be reconstructed by the patient reader. The *discours* challenges the reader to construct the *histoire*.

6.3 I know that a writer can be caught out in matters of fact. I was rebuked by an ornithologist on account of a woodpecker’s unseasonal ‘hammering’ in *High John the Conqueror*. I resorted, in reply, to the excuse that my narrator was so drug-addled that he was mistaken. But notice that I made an excuse. This is because, despite its fantastic characters and bizarre incidents, I regarded, and still regard, *High John* as a kind of ‘realist’ novel, at least in the way the story was told. In this, I was supported by the opinions of readers who saw it as set ‘in the future’. As it happens, *High John* was eventually set, or was intended to be set, like *Fair Game*, in a parallel time and space and it was no part of the empirical author’s intention, nor of the *intentio operis* (in so far as I understand it) to stake such a claim for ‘prediction’ of a future state of society. Nevertheless, I made the *manner* of narration as realistic as I could, and there, I think, lurks the trigger for my readers seeing the book as a kind of dystopian forecast. (I remind you here of my previous remarks on the genesis of *High John* in a realist treatment of a historical subject.)

With regard to the mating rituals of woodpeckers and other embarrassments, I have no such fear of being found out in the detail of *Fair Game for the Whole Hog*. I cannot foresee any reader – let alone a model reader - tapping me on the shoulder to take me to task for imputing immortality to Baco and Ham and the unlikelihood of the Royal Navy dropping a sailor by his door on the voyage home. To repeat, it is the manner of narration, along with bold anti-realist gambits with regard to ‘what is the case’ in this particular fictional world, that establish the tone of the text, and the attitude the model reader should take towards the portrait of a world being unfolded.
Out in the estuary, in the deep purple gloaming, we traced the shadow line of his darkened ship.

A signal lamp winked amber. Up from the river, out of the shadow, Daz came bowling toward us, free hand raised in salute.

‘Proper job,’ said one-eyed Pappy Barking, ‘dropping you right by your door.’

‘Britannia owes me,’ said Daz. [3]

Here, the concise narration, along with the insertion of the anti-realist detail into dialogue (‘dropping you right by your door’), attempts to establish the credibility of the anti-realist world, preparing the way for even more outlandish features. The model reader, in fact, does not have to pay attention to oppositions between realism and anti-realism, but does have to be seduced by the manner of the story-telling.

As I have said previously in this paper, some readers will fall by the wayside and pitch the book towards the waste-bin. Others will stay on board for the ride. However, yet another nagging thought occurs: why be concerned with establishing the credibility of the Fair Game world at all, if realism is not at stake? Surely, entertainment will be enough? Perhaps it is not so much a case of encouraging in the model reader the suspension of disbelief – rather, the intentio operis must encourage the suspension of belief itself. Perhaps the epigram to Fair Game should be: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

***
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