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IN THE PENITENTARY AT USHUAIA

There was a criminal, accused of murdering a woman in Buenos Aires, who spent many years in the Penitentary at Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego. He was supposed to have killed the woman early one morning, believing she was a prostitute wandering the streets, in order to steal her financial takings. But, according to the reports, she actually worked at night as a telephone operator, and was returning to her home, where her children were asleep, needing her to prepare them to go to school.

The man, known as Rosario, denied having committed this horrific crime. He had not even been in the neighbourhood where the murder took place, and claimed never to have had unlawful, let alone murderous, inclinations. But he spent at least twenty years in the prison in Ushuaia, in a cell very small, but not as bad as many a prisoner has had to survive in, here or anywhere else, in this period or any other of human history. The window of his cell, rectangular, measuring about one foot by eighteen inches, looked over the mountains that surround Ushuaia, and the door of his cell opened into a corridor which, like the four others in the prison, led into a central, almost circular rotunda.

The design of this prison, like many all around the world, was the brainchild of Jeremy Bentham, who imagined this arrangement perfectly manifested and complemented the philosophical principles he called Utilitarianism. In the winter, the ground around the prison was covered in snow; in summer, and often also during winter, dust blew in from the nearby mountainous rocks, whose soft hue allows the continuous formation of dusty particles that settle everywhere, indoors and out of doors in Ushuaia, crunching under human footsteps in a very likeable way. Indeed, even the smell of this dust, forever in the air at Ushuaia, although the chest is caused pain by it, is very pleasant for some inexplicable reason. Surprisingly, it relieved the monotony of Rosario and the other prisoners as they undertook hard labour near the prison, breaking rocks which of course created more dust, to prepare the ground for the construction of a railway to Lapatria; and partly assuaged their craving for tobacco, which they could only obtain through arduous efforts in the prison, using both their wits and the very modest pittances they were paid for their six days a week of labour, ten hours each day, on the preparation for the construction of the railway.

Rosario had grown up in a poor area of Buenos Aires, at the beginning of the 1900s. His parents were a mixture of Paraguayan and Italian, and by no means members of the lowest strata in their neighbourhood. His father worked for many years as a street-lamp maintainer, a proud occupation in the modernising streets of Buenos Aires, with their symmetrical criss-crossing development into a new urban phenomenon. His mother worked for some time as a maid in the hotels in the city's centre, but after giving birth to Rosario's younger sister, her seventh child, she became weak, and worked outside the house no more.

Rosario appears to have been an inmate at the Ushuaia prison from 1926 to 1947, when the prison was closed, but where he went then is not known.

He may have been transported to another penitentiary elsewhere in Argentina, or he may have been released, to return to Buenos Aires or to try his luck in a different Argentinian city; or he may have stayed on in Tierra del Fuego. If he did stay, he would probably have built himself a wooden house from the trees surrounding Ushuaia, or in another, even smaller settlement. He could have earned a living from trading wood, working on fishing boats, or selling imported items to the occasional traveller who visited the island. After all, he was an enterprising man, who had learned a number of useful skills during his time as a prisoner, and could certainly have taken advantage of the opportunities available in Ushuaia in the 1940s and 1950s.

There is no information as to when he died, or where; in 1947 he would have been in his late forties, so he might have lived on for a few decades more. There is a photograph of him in his cell, taken about 1935, in his standard striped prisoner's uniform, and in this he looks healthy, sturdy, and somewhat taciturn, in the manner of a convict who has decided to live through and survive his imprisonment. Little is known about his personality, save from a newspaper article of 1926, in which he is described as a tough, hardened criminal; and the fact that for the first five years of his incarceration in the prison at Ushuaia, he was always accompanied by two armed guards when taken to work outside the prison grounds.

This brings us to the only point of real human interest of which we know, concerning Rosario. In the nineteen twenties and thirties, Argentina took a number of immigrants from Galicia in northern Spain, who were destined to work as jailors in the Argentinian prison system. One such Galician immigrant was called Pedro Ponce, and he left Spain for Buenos Aires in 1919, when Spain, in common with most other European countries, was in economic depression and facing an uncertain future. He was a peasant, who worked, like his father, on a vineyard, but he had for some years supplemented his income and contribution to his family's welfare by working as a prison guard. He was the ideal immigrant to Argentina at this time, and thus he arrived with his young wife Maria, first in Buenos Aires and then shortly afterwards in Ushuaia, where he proved an effective prison officer - well-respected by his superiors, and apparently, not greatly detested by the prison inmates, if the fact that he was never physically attacked by any of them is anything to judge by.

Now, it appears that Pedro Ponce developed a certain friendship with Rosario, who was a prisoner under his charge between 1926 and 1940, when Ponce either died, or disappeared, it is not known which. To begin with, the relationship was one of mere mutual respect: Rosario, though understood as dangerous, never undertook any aggressive action either towards his guards nor his fellow prisoners. Pedro Ponce on the other hand, seems then at least to have been a calm, down-to-earth man, not given to harsh or vengeful emotions; an earthy character of an essentially honest, tough kind, not given to humour nor wit, but decent, and apparently well-loved by his wife Maria.

As time went on, through dusty summers and snowy winters, the two men apparently began to speak to one another about certain subjects. It transpired that they had something deeply in common: Rosario felt that his mother, the only woman towards whom he remembered feeling any real emotion, had not loved him as deeply as he her. She had been caring, certainly, and he remembered the smell of perfume falling from her hair as it formed a tent around his face when she kissed him goodnight in his bed as a child. But somehow, he had always felt a hollowness, a cold emptiness that burnt over him from time to time, and he rigidly associated this sensation

with an unrequited feeling of yearning for his mother.

With Pedro Ponce the situation was more complex. He confided to Rosario, after some years of effective mutual confinement in the prison at Ushuaia, that he could not overcome a distressful emotion concerning his wife Maria, which sometimes enveloped him in his dreams, so that he woke up starting, gulping, and shouting in his bed in the quiet little town of Ushuaia, much to Maria's concern, and a little fear that neighbours might hear these strange noises, nearby as some of their houses were.

Pedro Ponce had met Maria in 1918, on the day the armistice was signed at the end of the First World War, a very troubled time he recalled to Rosario, even though Spain had not been directly involved in the carnage. At that time Maria was a girl of eighteen, but almost as soon as Pedro met her at a village dance and began to court her, she confessed to him that she was pregnant by another man, a butcher by trade who was married with a family, and lived in the same village as she and Pedro. To begin with, Pedro was calm and resolute, loving Maria as he did, and feeling that he, some six or seven years older than she, was bound by honour and maturity to understand her situation sympathetically, and to protect her. When the baby, a little girl, was born in June 1919, Pedro was quite prepared to accept her as his own, and wanted to marry Maria without further ado. But Maria was not happy about it; she felt her baby had resulted from foolishness, an attitude that was not helped by her family, who had among them two cousins in the priesthood, which caused them to think in rather traditional and harsh ways. She wanted to give the baby to the Church to be adopted, which would not have been a particularly complicated move at that time, especially as she was not yet married.

Pedro consented to this: but just as the handing over of the baby to some nuns was about to occur, Maria changed her mind, entering a state of extreme emotional excitement, crying or despairing loudly much of the time. Pedro was no longer sympathetic; angrily he insisted that Maria had agreed to hand over the baby and that now she must. In the end she did, but for many months she was not herself - she seemed to have lost her lovely girlishness and lively disposition, although these returned in time. And so, when they were married, and soon after left for South America, the two seemed as happy as any couple can be in this non-ideal world; Maria having forgiven and forgotten Pedro's temporary anger, as he had forgotten her temporary moods of depression.

The backgrounds to the two men, Rosario and Pedro Ponce, allowed of congenial conversation between them for some years, yet by no means always in a deadly serious vein. It was only in the year 1932, it now appears, that both of them came to feel intensely lonely, Rosario contemplating his entire remaining lifetime in the prison, and Pedro feeling he could not escape his guilt over his wife´s baby by the butcher in Galicia, and an anxiety over whether she would not at some time in the future erupt in regretful emotions and perhaps resentments towards him. Rosario recommended that Pedro and Maria have children of their own now they were established in Ushuaia, and indeed Maria gave birth to twin boys in 1931. Pedro was delighted over this, but strangely it did not remove his distress. Instead, he began in 1932 to believe that a trader in seal-skins living in Ushuaia, by the name of de Noort, a Dutchman, was paying attentions to his wife.

"But does she take any notice of him?" asked Rosario wisely.

“I don’t know,” was all the increasingly distraught Pedro Ponce could reply.

Some months passed, and due to the arrival of a slightly more liberal-minded prison governor from Mendoza, by the name of Gutierrez Lanterre, visitors were now permitted to enter the prison on certain occasions; and so Pedro asked Rosario if he would like to meet his wife and twin baby boys.

So, on a cold day in July 1932, Maria came to visit Rosario, in the company of her husband, but left her babies with a neighbour. It was not the first time she had walked through the cold stones, glanced into the washrooms that looked rather like byres, though they held men rather than animals in them; but never before had she entered a prisoner’s cell. There she beheld the bed, the window, and a small table on which stood Rosario’s crucifix, a tin cup, a photograph of his mother, a box of tobacco, some cigarette papers, and some torn pieces of newspaper. Pedro brought in a chair, as allowed by the new regulations brought into being by Gutierrez Lanterre, and Maria sat down, whilst Pedro remained standing.

It appears, at least according to the account given later by Pedro Ponce to a superior in the prison service, that nothing unusual occurred at this meeting that was supposed to be entirely friendly and commonplace. Evidently Maria and Rosario took to each other quite well, and discussed things like the weather in Ushuaia, questions of children and families, and the miracle of photography. This last topic arose due to Maria’s remarking on Rosario’s photograph of his mother, which prompted her to speak of photographs she had of her parents, and of the photograph that hung in her and Pedro’s bedroom in their house in Ushuaia, of their wedding-day in Galicia. After perhaps one or two hours of conviviality, Maria left the cell, and was seen to the prison gates by her husband, whence she walked the one or two kilometres back to their house.

Neither she nor Rosario appeared perturbed, according to Pedro Ponce later, by anything that had happened. But Pedro sank after that encounter into an ever-deeper moroseness. He broke off his familiar communications with Rosario, much to the latter´s unhappiness, dealing with him thereafter only in the abrupt forms that are normal for a jailor dealing with a prisoner. How life was at home between Pedro and Maria no one knows, because after her husband´s death or disappearance in 1940 Maria returned to Spain, courtesy of General Franco, and went to live again with her parents and her twin sons, now nine years old, never to speak again of her marriage nor of her years in the Argentine, at least not to anyone whose conversations with her have been recorded. All we know about these three people after that meeting on a winter´s day in July 1932, is that Pedro Ponce entered into a clandestine trade in illegal goods, including firearms, unlicensed alcohol, and certain unspecified native Indian artefacts, which by the later 1930s, when the Yahgan and Ona were becoming extinct, were emerging as items of some commercial interest amongst collectors, travellers, and certain anthropologists working for museums around the world. He withdrew from social contact with his fellow jailors, and from most of his former acquaintances living in Ushuaia, and though not apparently malevolent, grew increasingly taciturn.

The explosion came in February 1940. The Second World War had by now broken out, and one day there arrived in the harbour of Ushuaia a ship of unknown flag, though some suspected it

was from Nazi Germany.

The reaction of people in Ushuaia to this arrival was ambiguous, as the attitude of the Argentine government to the new conflict was not entirely clear at that time. But it appears that Pedro Ponce must have made contact with the crew of this ship, perhaps hoping to sell them some contraband, or perhaps to buy something useful from them.

At any rate, on the sunny morning of February 9th 1940, Pedro Ponce was seen, by dockers working in the harbour, climbing the steps into this mysterious ship. Two or three hours later there were gunshots, though whatever affray had taken place must have occurred below deck, as nothing was seen above deck. Officials from the Ushuaia Legislature arrived, and then there were more gunshots, but before the authorities were able to force an entry onto the boat, it broke anchor, and made off into the ocean. Apparently some effort was made to pursue it, but in vain, and no one knew what exactly had taken place in the ship on that day. Pedro Ponce never reappeared, and the world slipped and slithered beneath the clouds of the Second World War, with all its surprises and uncertainties. Maria, as we have seen, returned by a ship with other Spanish returnees from Argentina to Spain, departing from Buenos Aires late in 1940. Rosario, without ever again meeting Maria, languished until 1947 in the Penitentary, his fate thereafter being a matter of speculation. As for Pedro Ponce, he may have been killed in the fracas beneath the deck of the strange ship that arrived in Ushuaia harbour in February 1940. Or perhaps he lived, and sailed away in the ship to Germany or to some other place; but of that no one can possibly guess.

AT THE KING´S HOTEL

It is very curious sometimes, the way that a story comes your way which you have not yourself experienced, but which enters your mind with such clarity that it feels you have experienced it. Such is the case with the following, an account given to me one evening in a very ordinary bar in Buenos Aires, by a man who had lived in the city for a few years, after arriving there from Zurich. How he entered into his narration I cannot exactly remember; I had wandered around the junction of *Avenida 9 de Julio* and *Avenida Corrientes* for some hours, bumping into various acquaintances that I had made in the weeks I had been in Buenos Aires, and was just sitting down at an open-air bar, thinking about how Marcel Duchamp had apparently not liked this city when he came here to live for a while just after the First World War. I was thinking how silly he had been, if his reasons for not liking it had been that it did not live up to Paris or New York: for it is quite pointless to compare one place with another, or one person with another, or even quite often one experience with another.

At that moment I met Gregorio, a young man who, although he claimed to be of Swiss nationality, actually came from Russia, somewhere near the Black Sea, although I was not quite clear about this as at another point in our conversation he said he was Ukrainian, and had been born in Kiev. But that was not important at the time; he was a foreigner, like me, and had lived and travelled in various places.

He was young, dark, and quite good-looking: the type that makes you think he could be doing fine if he wasn't a little bit crazy, something that emanates very quickly from someone's facial features and gestures. Anyway, having sat down together, both of us a bit drunk, we talked of various matters, ranging from how we found life in Buenos Aires to the achievements or otherwise of Gorbachev, about which we disagreed. After some while he began to recount to me the following story. The reader must understand that I had never met Gregorio before, and when, about three hours after we met, we parted, rather more drunk than when we had met - for we were drinking Lancia the whole time, which I paid for, he being apparently very short of cash - we said goodbyes in deeply affectionate terms but never met again.

This however was his story:

"When I first came to Buenos Aires five years ago, I stayed at the same hotel as you, the King's Hotel in *Avenida Corrientes*. It was, and is, as you know, a tall building, about twenty stories high, a typical nineteen-thirties building, rather like those made in Russia at the same time under Stalin (here I had to wince a little). In the night-times, a man called Rosagio was always on duty, a useless fool who was always asleep or away from the Reception whenever I came back late at night, which was quite often. And why shouldn't I return late? I was paying for my room, without any discount being allowed for the number of nights I was staying, and the night-life in Buenos Aires is late: especially when you first arrive here. But one night when I came back, the hotel doors were padlocked so I rang the bell; then a demented young man rushed up to me in the street and pleaded for some money.

“He had lost all his valuables, he claimed. He had only the clothes on his body, and lamented that a girl whom he had believed he loved, had betrayed him earlier that evening, and helped some thieves to steal even his documents.

“I said I had no change on me, repeating a mantra I always use - in fact, like you my friend, I only occasionally give money, and then only to children or old women - but at that moment a police car drew up, and three or four policemen jumped out of it and forced the youth to stretch out against a wall, while they searched him and asked him many questions. I must say, they were not extremely oppressive - less so than in Russia, or even in London, where I stayed once for some months, working in an Armenian restaurant. But the whole episode worried me, as I did not want the police to start asking me who I was; so I rang the bell and banged the door repeatedly until the police had taken away their quarry.

“When the concierge - Rosagio - finally came to the door, I was furious. “Why has it taken you so long to come?” I roared. “Don’t you work here at all?”

“Resagio became even angrier than I. “Why do you ask me if I work?” he yelled. “Of course I do, I have worked here for thirty years!” In fact, I later found out this was more or less true, as he was about fifty-five, and had come to Buenos Aires as a young man, though he never confided from where he had come. He was a very irritable, bad-tempered, unattractive man on the surface, not to say ugly and unpleasant, but if you knew him a bit better, he could display some finer features, as when he sang some very tender love songs from different parts of Argentina, which once I heard him issuing forth.

“Once inside the hotel, he gave me my key, and I pressed the black button to bring down the lift, so that I could slowly and solemnly rise up to my fourteenth floor (and at this I nodded sympathetically, having many times by then made such an ascent). But before the lift arrived, he grabbed my arm, and said, “Do you want to understand what I am talking about?” “Not really,” I replied, wishing heartily to get to my bed and sleep. But he would not let me go; he dragged me into a side room, more like a cupboard, that led off from the Reception, in which there was a table and a chair covered with dust. The corners of the little room were filled with spiders´ webs, as if nobody ever went in there, or at least, no one ever cleaned it. “Sit down,” he shouted, so I sat on the chair, and he dragged out a kind of small sofa from behind a dirty curtain that I had not noticed before. After some while he sat down upon it, and I felt again like going up to my room and forgetting the whole episode. But at my impatience he raised his right forefinger, a thick, dark thing that made me momentarily sorry for him, so I stayed. “Look” he said, and brought out a leather case from behind the curtain, which he opened to reveal a long, curved knife. “This knife my mother used to kill chickens when I was a child,” he said. Now I was really determined to leave, but he implored me to stay. “Don’t be afraid! It’s blunt and harmless now,” he cried, and gently put it before me, so that I could touch it and tell that it was indeed harmless.

“What about it?” I asked, now no longer worried, but curious more than anything else.

“You remember that boy outside, that the police wanted?” he said. “Well one day, many years ago, his father, then a boy just like him, wanted to use this knife on his grandmother.”

"Why," I asked, "and where?"

"I never knew why," said Rosagio, "but I do know where. It was here in this room, when the boy's grandmother worked as a concierge as I do now. Her grandson, a boy who had always lived on a farm in remotest Patagonia, came to Buenos Aires to visit her, and decided to kill her.

"At that moment, before I was able to respond further to these extraordinary assertions, two men burst into the cupboard-room in which we were sitting. One rushed behind the sofa on which Rosagio was seated, the other grasped the knife and pulled it far away from us both. Then an old woman came in, and shouted in a loud, obviously drunken voice, "I've told you never to bring people in here! Get out, get out!"

"I got up to go away, making vague apologies to the two men and the woman who completely ignored me. I went to the lift area, and pressed the black buttons many times; when the first lift came and I started to get into it, I saw the three of them drag Rosagio to the hotel door, unlock it with their keys, and force him into the street. By then it was four or five o'clock in the morning, and I went up to my fourteenth floor as fast as I could, not understanding at all what had happened, and finding myself unable to sleep when I lay down on my bed.

"The next day there was a different man and a different woman at the Reception - neither Rosagio nor the two men nor the woman from the night before were to be seen. I asked no questions about what had happened the night before. A few days later I moved out anyway, as a woman I met who came from Russia offered me a cheap room to rent in her house. So that was the last I had to do with the King's Hotel, where you are staying now."

After parting from Gregorio, I went to another bar and drank some more before returning to the King's Hotel. No one I then met at the Reception remotely resembled the people he had spoken of, but I also moved out a few days later, as I, like him, found it extremely frustrating to return late at night and have to wait for ages before someone would appear to open the hotel doors.

SISOHPROMATEM

One morning Rogerg woke up to find he had turned into a tiny octopus. At least he thought that's what had happened, but soon he realized it had been a dream when he really woke up and found reality was even stranger than his dream. For he found himself in bed, exactly the same as he had been the night before. During all those hours of sleep, nothing had happened to metamorphose him in the slightest way. Though his mind had made stranger voyages than James Joyce in *Finnegan´s Wake*, or Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver´s Travels*, nevertheless he was still Rogerg, exactly the same as before.

It was amazing, but facts were facts. Just as one can dive twenty metres below the ocean surface, touch a most extraordinarily coloured piece of coral, and return to the surface totally unchanged, so one can dream of the Big Bang, the outbreak of Nuclear War, or of falling in love with an entirely imaginary girl, yet wake up minutes later completely the same as before having fallen asleep and entering dreams at all.

Rogerg was astonished by these realisations, but was also rather disappointed; yet paradoxically, he was at the same time quite excited, even thrilled. As no one came to his room to disturb him, he thought about these things for a long time without moving and without thinking about getting up or anything like that. After a while he began to feel tired again, so he turned to his side and fell asleep, and soon began to dream again.

ON THE RIVER PARAGUAY

Once, in Asunción, Paraguay, there was a man who decided to live near the river. The River Paraguay, as everyone knows, divides the country into two parts: to the east, the more rainfed, agricultural half, with good soils; to the west the Chaco, much of which is dry, harsh, with very poor soils. The distinction, indeed antagonism between these two worlds, underlies a great deal of Paraguay´s extraordinary history.

The man in question was a taxi-driver called Jorge, and he became a very keen enthusiast of Paraguayan history in 1987, when a new edition of Efraím Cardozo´s magisterial *Breve Historia del Paraguay* appeared.

Jorge felt that just by living close to the River Paraguay, which Helio Vera described as the "liquid spinal cord of my country", he could experience the tension between the two sides of his nation, and that he might imagine Asunción, his capital city, to be a kind of spiritual reconciliation between the two.

It was a noble thought, and a very brave move that he made; an exemplary effort of an ordinary man to do something in his personal life that merged with his broader human and philosophical hopes and beliefs.

But it did not work very well. His wife welcomed the move to the new house, and was totally committed to the project, which she felt and experienced as intensely as Jorge himself. But their daughter, Gisela, who was thirteen at the time of their move in 1989, did not like the new situation at all. She complained of more mosquitoes, a longer walk to and from school, and the fact that their television aerial in the new location worked very badly. Dissension within the family grew to terrible proportions, especially when the younger girls, twins some six years younger than Gisela, began to take sides over the dispute: one with Gisela, the other with Jorge and her mother.

But something happened in 1994 that changed everything within the family. They had not moved from their new house, although at times Jorge had wondered if they should. But when Gisela reached the age of eighteen, and was at the point of leaving school, she suddenly became very keen on a new fashion in dancing, which was supposedly based on the traditional Guaraní dances of Paraguay. She joined a troupe, that went from *plaza* to *plaza*, and from bar to bar, with a group of young men bashing out the rhythms on loud drums, while she with two or three other girls danced in the style of this craze.

They would take a collection after their performances, and sometimes were hired by an advertising company to promote a new brand of cigarettes, or a new discotheque that had opened in Asunción. She became so happy in her new mode of expression that she ceased to complain about where she and her family lived, and very shortly her parents were amazed to find everything was peaceful in the house. The younger twins so admired their older sister that they would certainly not argue any more over whether the family house was well-situated, and all the

family’s relatives and close friends were delighted and extremely surprised to find that there was no more dissension in the household over this issue.

CATULLUS

It was always difficult to know how honest Catullus was being when he described his childhood, especially as his stories always seemed to accompany justifications for one or another of his foibles or idiosyncratic turns of behaviour. One of the incidents he recounted at least three times in my presence, was an event he experienced as a child in French West Africa, where his father was briefly on the staff of the British Cultural Attaché in Fort Lamy. His family lived in a large wooden house, and had a Chadian servant called Idris, who was a very good friend to Catullus, and indeed to his parents too, who were enlightened people, loving Africa and respecting its peoples.

One day Idris invited Catullus to the house of one of his cousins, in whose large family there were several boys aged about eight, like Catullus. At the house, one of the boys, named Sedahmed, immediately took in a friendly way to Catullus, and drew him to a window-pane where flies settled and crawled around. He showed Catullus a marvellous little bow and arrow that he had made out of two twigs and a length of cotton, which really could shoot, and sometimes impale a fly on the window, which fell to the ground in solemn defeat. Sedahmed would pull the arrow out of the dead fly, and let Catullus have a try, which he did, and after a while he was succeeding in shooting flies too.

This all took place in the late 1960s, but when Catullus´ family left Africa in 1971, to live in Reading, England, Catullus never saw Idris or Sedahmed again, though he often thought of them.

Years, eons later, Catullus became a writer. Not a very successful one in the sense of having his work published readily, and certainly not in terms of earning any significant income from it, but a writer with a degree of reputation, recognized in some quarters as a creative figure whose unusual poetry and fantastical short stories grabbed the attention of those readers who were in some sense in tune with his particular soul. For although Catullus became as an adult something of a misfit, rather cynical about the world, especially in regard to careers, governments, and most supposedly worthy institutions, his writing conveyed a romantic love of the exotic and the unusual, and he always embraced the side of the oppressed, whether he wrote about Apartheid South Africa, about poor people in Inverness where he lived for a while, or about Latin America, to which he became strongly attached during the 1980s, in the course of numerous visits he made and periods of time spent in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, and later on, in Paraguay.

Catullus went to stay in Asunción in 1993. I don´t say ‘went to live’, because there was no greater sense in this case that he would stay for any particular length of time, than there had been when he went to any other country. No, he just decided to live in Asunción, from where he felt he could take trips into the Chaco, and visit surviving groups of the Lengua and Nivaclé Indians.

I never saw him again after this, having said goodbye to him one drunken night in Antwerp, shortly before he left for South America. He was with a beautiful Flemish girl, that he seemed genuinely sad to be leaving behind, and she seemed to feel the same towards him. This was in

June 1993. In August 1995 I heard that he had completely disappeared, whatever that was supposed to mean. No one - neither his friends nor any authorities - could account for where he was or what had happened to him. There was simply no record of him from after July 1994, when he had left a small apartment he was renting in Asunción. Either he was dead, or had changed identity, or had decided to slip into anonymity.

I only heard one story concerning his time in Paraguay. An Argentinian anthroplogist called Ravita Sanoja, who worked with the Nivaclé Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco, said she had got to know Catullus during a few weeks when they were both in Filadelfia, which is the centre of a Mennonite community. Ravita and Catullus were staying at the same hotel in that small town.

I met Ravita at the International Congress of Americanists in New Orleans in 1996, roughly a year after hearing about the disappearance of Catullus. I am not an academic myself, but I went to the Congress because a friend of mine was presenting a paper to a panel on the Pano peoples of eastern Peru. One evening, after one of the sessions, Ravita recounted to me the following extraordinary story. I was only with her for about five minutes, during which time she imparted it; she had to go to organize the slide-show for her own talk the next morning. This, as I can best remember it, was her story:

"I really liked Catullus, we got on very well. I was planning my next expedition to do field work, and he had just come back from a Nivaclé community near Filadelfia. He had lots of interesting ideas about these Indians, and about South American Indians generally. We talked a lot, and went drinking (as much as you were able to in Mennonite Filadelfia!), then made love in the hotel, which was a very strange place in a very strange town.

"One evening we went for a walk among some trees and bushes at the edge of the town, under a brilliant, almost full moon, and we kissed each other most romantically under the stars. Afterwards we were joking and laughing, and we made a joint of marihuana to smoke. Then Catullus simply walked a few metres away, still talking to me, and disappeared into the trees. He did not reappear, and after hours of searching for him, I returned to the town centre, and told the town police. They looked for him that night, the next day, and for many days after that, but they could not find him, and I cannot say any more than that."

So that was that. My friend had simply disappeared. Thinking back, I´m not at all sure how well I really knew him. We met at boarding school when we were both fifteen, but I saw him only infrequently after we left that dreadful prison. But I liked him, and I wish I knew what had happened to him.

LUIS SPANGLER

The trouble with Luis Spangler was that he was always trying to write a short story. It had to be a *perfect* short story, rather like the character in one of Sartre´s novels, who is determined to write a *great work*, and so can never get beyond the first sentence, which he keeps on and on changing and improving.

And so, his little room was always messed up with sheets of paper everywhere, some hand-written, some half-typed, but never anything completed. If you visited him, and picked up one of these fluttering leaves, he would snatch it from you, insisting that it was still *unfinished*, and therefore not yet ready to be read.

But his failure ever to complete anything did not seem to depress Spangler. Once when I talked to him about this, he said he was not ambitious, and did not care if he never completed any of his stories. He just liked to write, he said. But on other occasions he expressed severe frustration with his predicament, talking incessantly about how unfair and arbitrary the publishing business was, and how a new, original writer never had the chance to get going unless he was rich or had friends in the right places.

One of the stories he was writing when I visited him once in his room, was about a man who was staying in a hotel in Geneva. The idea of the story was a dual theme: on the one hand the man, whom Luis called Eusebio, was writing a novel in his hotel room where he had been staying for several weeks, while on the other hand something was happening to him in real life that was equally as interesting as his novel. Eusebio´s novel was about an exile from the Paraguayan dictatorship of the 1950s, called Ramirez, who went to live in Lima. This exile was a writer of historical novels that explored the mind-sets of Paraguay´s nineteenth-century dictators, and the mentality of individuals from different social classes in Paraguay who lived under them. Eusebio had chosen to stay in a hotel in Geneva to write this novel, because he thought nothing much would happen to him there, since he knew no one in the city and he thought life would be quiet and calm, allowing him to write it.

But after some weeks, by which time he had completed the first chapter or two, taking the narrative up to the point where Ramirez had arrived at the house of some Paraguayan friends living in Lima, Eusebio became preoccupied with happenings within his Geneva hotel. One evening, he heard a terrible quarrel going on between a man and a girl in the room next to him. He recognized the girl´s voice as that of his neighbour. He had noticed for some days that an extremely attractive girl was staying in the room next to his, but was not sure where in the world she came from. Now, in the heat of this quarrel, he could hear that she was Latin American, shouting in French with a Spanish accent; but, he realized from her general deportment and appearance that she was not from Spain, but from Colombia perhaps, or Mexico.

The argument in the next room eventually drew to a close. The man slammed out, shouting, leaving the girl sobbing and crying for a long while after he left.

Eusebio felt drawn to acting as a gentleman. He genuinely felt he should find out if his neighbour needed some help or support, without any ulterior motive in his mind. So he went out of his room, and knocked on her door, which was only three or four metres away. The girl became silent, and opened the door. Eusebio, half in French and half in Spanish, asked the beautiful girl, with long black tousled hair and wide brown eyes filled with tears, whether he could help her in any way.

Probably because Eusebio must have looked absolutely distracted, as he was, having been interrupted in the middle of his imagining the arrival of Ramirez at the house of his dear friends, also exiles, in Lima, the girl asked him into her room, and calmed down. She invited him to a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. Eusebio chose the latter, much to the girl´s obvious delight, and the two sat down to drink wine.

After a while the girl, whose name was Liliana, now much cheerier, told Eusebio of the dreadful sadness she felt about the man she had been arguing with, an Indonesian she had met in Istanbul, some months before arriving in Geneva. She said they had been very happily in love while in Turkey, but that since meeting again in Geneva things had not been going well. This Indonesian man, whose name Luis had not yet decided upon, had become very jealous and difficult with Liliana because, she felt, in Europe women are freer than in Turkey, and he had become very insecure and possessive.

All this was beginning to sound interesting to me, so I asked Spangler what was going to happen: would Eusebio and Liliana fall in love, and would Eusebio finish his novel about Ramirez? But at this point Luis ceased to talk freely. He became sullen, picked up some sheets of paper, shuffled around with them, then put them down elsewhere. After a while I started to feel tired, and as Eusebio had nothing to drink in his room, which was also really rather pokey, I felt it was time to go. If he had continued with the idea for his story I would have stayed, but the conversation was becoming moribund, so I said goodbye to him and left.

When I met him again a few weeks later, this time in the street, I asked him how his writing was going, and he was very positive in his reply. So I probed him about the story of Eusebio in Geneva, and of Liliana, and of Ramirez´s exile in Lima.

But Spangler, in his usual infuriating way, acted as if he could not even remember the projected story, and changed the subject of our conversation to a new idea of his, about a Dutchman who had gone to live in Ecuador, and had met a Shuar Indian woman, with whom he was living in the Ecuadorian jungle. I promised him I would come to visit him before long, and would bring a bottle of something, so that he could tell me about his latest brain-child. But some days later, when I went to drop in on him, I was told by his neighbours that he had moved from his room, though the landlord did not know where he now was.

I later found out he had gone to stay in a Buddhist retreat in Scotland. Years later, I met him by accident in Notting Hill, London, but by then he had stopped writing short stories, and was no longer interested in literature. He had become very involved in Buddhism, Sufism, and Theosophy, and had much to say of interest about these topics, but of his earlier obsession with literature there remained not a trace.

So I never found out what would have happened to Eusebio, Liliana, or Ramirez.

A VICTIM OF 'OPERATION CONDOR'

A few years ago I visited a friend of mine called Marcio Lafoucrière in his flat in Edinburgh. Marcio was one of those people with marvellously mixed origins, a real 'rootless cosmopolitan' as Stalin would have called him. His mother was English, his father Swiss, but he had uncles and aunts who were Brazilian, Lebanese, and Australian, whilst among his grandparents one had been Turkish and another Malayan. Marcio was a journalist and an international political activist, well known in certain circles for his exposés of human rights abuses, and his defiant condemnations of bloody dictatorships and political injustices generally.

I had called on him while I was in Edinburgh for a few days, to see some photographs he had of the Nahua Indians from the eastern Peruvian rainforest, which he had taken at about the same time that I had been with them in the 1980s. Marcio, like me, had worked on behalf of Survival International and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs at that time, in connection with the problems and injustices that the Nahua were confronting, due to the encroachments of explorers searching for oil in their territory, which had hitherto been little disturbed by outsiders.

I had not seen Marcio Lafoucrière for at least ten years, but had heard from someone I knew at Survival International that he had these photographs, so I phoned him and arranged to visit him, bringing some of my own photos from the same period.

During the evening Marcio gave an account of tragic events he had experienced in Argentina in 1977. With us in his cosy living room was a middle-aged Paraguayan lady with attractive features, who greeted me with the usual South American easy-going friendliness, and manifested great interest in the photos Marcio and I showed each other, joining in wholeheartedly with our conversation about the Nahua. I did not catch her name when Marcio first introduced her to me, but I decided to leave it till later to ask what it was.

In due course the conversation moved on to other topics, and it was then that Marcio told me the following story that had me rivetted to my chair. His visitor and I said scarcely a word for about two hours.

In 1976, Marcio went to live in Asunción, Paraguay, and while there became very knowledgeable about the dictatorial regime of Alfredo Stroessner. If he had not been a journalist, I doubt whether he would have been able to settle there for as long a time as he did, for Stroessner´s spies must surely have known the people he made friends with, who included dissidents and opponents of the regime. But, strangely, he was not in Paraguay as a political reporter, but rather as a writer on ecological matters and issues surrounding the construction of hydro-electric dams and things like that.

One of the people he had got to know was Agustín Manchuelo, a lawyer who had come face to face in the course of his work with murderous injustices perpetrated by the regime. When one client came to him because his brother had disappeared, Agustín identified the brother as a man

who had turned up dead in the River Paraguay, tied up with wire. Shortly afterwards, a woman who reported to him that her husband was missing, met the same fate, whilst Agustín identified her husband as one of a number of corpses belonging to men thrown out of aeroplanes.

With incredible, straightforward courage Agustín Manchuelo tried to expose these crimes, but found no one was prepared to risk publishing his evidence. After a few months in this situation, he came to believe that his own life was in danger, so he decided, with the full agreement of his wife, to leave Paraguay with their two children, and escape to Argentina.

Marcio was very moved that Agustín had confided to him his decision to leave the country. He decided to go with the family, if they would agree to it: which they did, Agustín´s wife Elba in particular believing it would be safer to have a foreign journalist with them.

So they left one night, very simply in the family car, and drove to Encarnación, a Paraguayan town on the border with Argentina. They had not decided whether to attempt to cross the border legitimately with documents, or whether to sneak across clandestinely. Agustín, Elba, and Marcio discussed this *ad infinitum* during the journey. In favour of the first option was that they would be legally in Argentina, and thus subject to whatever security the authorities of that country would offer. Agustín felt as well that his dignity would be greater if he left Paraguay in that fashion, rather than fleeing into exile.

But, if the border guards were expecting him, or if he was already on a list of people to be detained if they tried to cross the border, it would be all over.

Agustín´s intuition told him that he had not yet become one of the blacklisted opponents of the regime. His naive attempts to get his evidence of state murders published were not without precedent; others had usually given up such efforts after a few scares to themselves or their families. And after all, he was not a member of any political party or organization.

Marcio was very worried for his friend. Why then, if these points were true, had Agustín felt his life was in danger in Asunción? Agustín answered to this by asserting that there were different levels of the military and police intelligence agencies, and that the lower-level death squads might easily snuff out an individual before he or she entered the bumbling bureaucrats´ nation-wide black lists.

And so, with hearts secretly pounding, but not those of the children, the five of them went straight to the border post at Encarnación, early in the morning of December 19th 1976, and showed their passports. After giving replies to a few gruff but innocuous questions, they left the Paraguayan side, and reported at the Argentinian border post. Here too, they were let through with stamped passports without much equivocation, and the five of them drove into the Argentinian town of Posadas, and stopped at a bar to drink toasts to their success.

They quickly found an apartment to rent, and had settled in by Christmas Day. Marcio believed the family was safe, and was already beginning to plan either his return to Asunción or a trip to Switzerland to visit relatives. He talked a great deal to Agustín about what he and his family would do in Argentina, and how he and Agustín could best work together to publicize the abuses of the Stroessner regime.

But before Marcio had organized his departure from Posadas, an ominous and absurd event occurred. One very hot afternoon towards the end of January 1977, the whole family together with Marcio were sitting in their apartment, which was on the third floor of a six-floor building. They were talking about which school the Manchuelos´ children should go to: Rolando was seven years old, Jazmín six.

Suddenly there was a great bashing at the door, and they all jumped up, but could see nothing because the shutters on all the windows in the wall where the front door was, were down. There were no voices, only a deliberate pounding to break the door down, which of course, was always kept locked with several bolts and padlocks. Immediately on moving into the apartment they had replaced the front door with a reinforced one, and all the windows were protected with tough iron bars.

Elba and the children bolted into the parents´ bedroom, but Agustín and Marcio stayed in the living-room, with their backs to the opening into the other rooms, facing the crashing-in front door in terror. Splinters of broken wood flew, blades of axes or knives scythed through the green crumbling door, until the locked bolts and padlocks hung like useless broken tools from what remained of it. Four men lurched into the room, rushed towards Agustín and Marcio brandishing revolvers and knives; two of them smashed past them and finding Elba and the children in the bedroom, dragged them, everyone in silence, into the living room.

The thugs began to tie up all five of them, after gagging them first. Then something extraordinary happened. A huge and noisy clamour erupted from outside the apartment, with clearly a large number of men and women shouting extremely loudly: “Police! Police! This is a burglary! Get the police!”

As the Manchuelos and Marcio only learned later, their neighbours in the apartment building had heard and seen the violent break-in, and assumed it was an ordinary burglary. Sometimes neighbours might be trusted to ignore such an event, but one man, living on the same floor as the Manchuelos, happened to be a policeman. Because of this, the neighbours in this particular block did not take kindly to burglaries in anyone´s apartment, so the policeman´s wife rushed out quickly to a public phone to call her husband at the nearby police station, whilst the other neighbours shouted angrily at the presumed burglars.

Evidently the intruders, of whatever agency they were, did not want to confront the ordinary police of Posadas. They dropped everything immediately, bounded out of the apartment and down the stairs into the street, then jumped into a car and drove off. But only three of them made it to the car! Just as the fourth was leaping through the broken green door of the apartment, seven-year old Rolando, with inconceivable adroitness, more than worthy of MacDuff´s children defending their mother against MacBeth´s gang of murderers, picked up his fishing rod that was leaning on the wall right beside the door, and threw it somehow like a javelin between the fleet legs of the fourth escaping man. This caused the man to trip and fall in a dreadfully hard encounter with the concrete floor outside the apartment, such that he groaned pitiably as he got up, then stumbled and hobbled down the stairs, and limped into the street to see his three colleagues make off in the car.

He had obviously hurt his legs quite badly, and probably his head, for he collapsed in the road rather than run away. Still lying face down on the stony, dusty street, the police arrived and bundled him into a police car which roared off immediately. Other policemen, including the Manchuelos´ neighbour, came into the building to inspect the damage to the door and calm everyone down. These police were clearly very angry at the vehemence of the break-in, which they also took to be an ordinary burglary, in spite of the rope lying around which the attempted kidnappers had wanted to use on the Manchuelos and Marcio.

After this, the Manchuelos and Marcio did not know whether to feel safe or not in Posadas. Clearly, Stroessner´s men knew where they were, but it was also clear that they did not want to confront the local police in Posadas, no matter what arrangements might exist between the dictatorships of Paraguay and Argentina on the clandestine level of secret intelligence agencies. The Manchuelos should have left Argentina altogether, because, as we now know, Operation Condor had been created in 1975 to coordinate, with CIA help and training, the repression of all opposition to the dictatorships in Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. Agustín had guessed these regimes were in cahoots, but he did not know the extent of the systematic repression now available to the regimes through Operation Condor.

Instead, they went to live in Córdoba, deeper into Argentina, away from the Paraguayan border, thinking they would be safer there. Marcio was not going to leave them now. On arrival in Córdoba they rented a suburban house, and life proceeded quite peacefully for several months. Agustín even began practising law again from his house, using one room as an office. The children started going to school in Córdoba, and all seemed well. Marcio turned his journalistic focus onto Argentinian affairs.

But the Big Thing was not long in coming. On September 23rd 1977, the children were at school, Elba was visiting friends, Marcio was reading in his room, and Agustín was in his office, alone, looking over some papers. Suddenly there was an enormous crash outside, and Agustín ran to the window, to see a huge rock plonked on the bonnet of his car, while a large group of young teenagers were running off down the street. He rushed outside to look at the damage, but was immediately coshed over the head by a man hiding behind a tree. Five other men appeared from a van and the six of them easily dragged Agustín over to it, in full sight of passers-by. Unfortunately Marcio´s room was at the back of the house, so although he rushed straight to the front door and out into the street the moment he heard the crash, he arrived a few seconds after Agustín, by which time the latter was in the van and the abductors were racing him off.

Agustín Manchuelo was one of many victims of Operation Condor in the Southern Cone of South America during those years. He was never seen again, all authorities denying any knowledge of him. Only in 1992, when the so-called "Archives of Horror" were released in Asunción, could it be shown that he had been kidnapped and later murdered by agents of Paraguayan Intelligence working in partnership with Argentinian Intelligence.

And so now, as Marcio came to the conclusion of this awful story, I somehow remembered that he had introduced me to the lady in his flat as Elba Manchuelo. So, she was poor Agustín´s widow, and I could now see in her face, though still attractive, lines that expressed a seething pain and grief that only the widow of a man done to death in such a way can know.

After her husband´s disappearance, Elba Manchuelo had come to live first in Holland, then Britain. Now she was settled in Edinburgh, where her children had gone through the largest part of their education. Rolando, now thirty, lived in London and worked with various NGOs, but at that moment he was with Survival International. Jazmín was married to a Belgian and lived in Antwerp.

Was it an accident that Elba and Marcio had both ended up living in Edinburgh, I asked? Yes, it was more or less an accident they agreed, but a very pleasant one.

JOANNA

When a beautiful girl knocks at the door of your hotel, and you open it, not knowing who it will be, and there she is standing with a lovely smile, what else could a man do but invite her in? Especially if this is in South America, and the hotel is quite a reasonable one; this is what happened one evening to Marcus Kitson, who was staying in just such a hotel in Asunción, Paraguay, and was resting on his bed, wondering whether to go out for a drink, at about eleven thirty one Tuesday evening in April.

He had been in Asunción one week so far, to study the history and present circumstances of popular art in Paraguay, having a particular interest in pottery, but also in textiles and woodwork. As anyone who has spent any time in Paraguay knows, he was in the ideal place, for artisanal work of the highest quality is produced here, with a rich history of development from the original indigenous peoples of the country and from the Jesuits, among other fascinating influences.

The girl who stood at his door had very bright brown eyes and dark black hair, and when she moved a fraction, her face revealed a wonderfully Indian profile, her nose and mouth strongly reminding Marcus of portraits and drawings of Guaraní Indian women done during the period of the Conquest and in Colonial times.

The girl came in, and she and Marcus sat down at his table. Was she a *chica de programa*, or had she come to his door by mistake he wondered, as he offered her a drink, which she accepted? Marcus also took a stiff drink of *caña*, neat with ice, and within a very short time they were getting on like house on fire; soon he was tempted to kiss her beautiful lips, and as she smiled so deliciously at this, he suggested they go to bed.

Many hours later, after making sweet, paradisical love, and falling asleep into luscious dreams in between, the girl got up and started to put her clothes on. She had to go, she said. Still half asleep, Marcus asked her if she would come back, and she said perhaps, but then with tears in her eyes, explained that she had some problems to sort out.

“What kind of problems?” asked Marcus. “My sister has trouble with her young son, my nephew,” the girl explained. Before continuing further, Marcus asked her to tell him her name again, realizing that he had asked her what it was before, but had forgotten it.

Her name was Joanna, and the problem regarding her nephew was that his mother, Joanna´s sister, had discovered something very bad that the boy had done the afternoon before. “What did he do?” asked Marcus, and Joanna told him all about how the boy had found a wounded bird, with a broken wing, and had thrown it into the street to get run over by a bus.

Had his mother seen this happen? Marcus asked. No, replied Joanna, a neighbour had seen it, and had told her sister. So what can you do about it now? Marcus asked Joanna. “I don´t know,” she answered, still in tears. “But I must go to see what I can do to help.”

So she finished putting on her clothes, gave Marcus a lovely kiss, and left the hotel room. Dawn was now streaking its pink and red colours outside the window, so Marcus poured himself another stiff drink, and enjoyed the dawn. Then he lay down on his bed again, and fell asleep. He dreamt of superb birds in the jungle and of flowers bursting into colour on the banks of a river. It was afternoon when he awoke, and he wondered whether what had happened was real, or just a dream.

LUDES

There was a girl who worked in a bar in Concepción, Paraguay, called Ludes, which is a Guaraní name, though she spoke both Guaraní and Spanish. She lived in a village about seven kilometres outside Concepción, with her family of four brothers and two sisters, as well of course, as her mother and father. Really they were a *campesino* family, her father working as a hired hand on an *hacienda*, though Ludes had worked for seven years in this bar, called La Victoria, since she was sixteen.

The bar was a very pleasant one, open till two or three in the morning, serving beer, caña, even wine, as well as *empanadas*, hamburgers, various grilled meats, and also olives and fried chipped potatoes. Ludes was one of those very mixed Paraguayans, partly Spanish, partly Indian, and partly African, who seem to concentrate, with complete lack of self-consciousness, the most beautiful characteristics of these three types into their being, making her an essentially beautiful girl, with apparently no pretensions nor competitive sophistications, such as one can only meet in places like Concepción, or elsewhere in semi-rural South America.

There came to La Victoria one night a man from Sandwich, England, who was making his way up the River Paraguay from Asunción to Corumbá, in order to study the Pantanal, that expanse of extraordinary and beautiful flooded land that lies to the north of Concepción. His name was Tristan, for his parents had been very romantic, unusual people, and he, though not as flamboyant as his mother had been, was a man with a grand imagination, and although he was not arrogant enough to think he could single-handedly stop the environmental deterioration of the Pantanal, he was young and idealistic enough to hope that he might somehow join in with those forces that were concerned about the Pantanal´s future, and hoped that this trip would bring him into contact with just such people.

Tristan was staying at a hotel near to La Victoria, called Hotel del Sol, and had come to La Victoria to get drunk on wine, as he had noticed that this bar, unusually, served wine, and he was most definitely in the mood to ‘drink from the divine grape’.

After quaffing two bottles of red Mendoza wine, Tristan lent back in his white plastic chair, but began to feel it was crumpling beneath him. Indeed, one leg was stretching amiss, sliding badly outwards, and he would assuredly have crunched to the ground had not Ludes noticed the problem, and come to prevent the collapse. She recommended Tristan change seat, and pulled out a different kind of white plastic chair, upon which Tristan started once again to relax vigorously. She asked him where he was from, what he was doing in Concepción, how long he had been in Paraguay, and whether he was married. When Tristan replied “No” to the last question, she asked him if he had a sweetheart, and once again Tristan replied “No”, but this time added, due perhaps to the wine he had consumed, “Would you like to be my sweetheart?”

Ludes smiled lovelily. The bar would close shortly she said, and where would Tristan sleep? Tristan explained that he had a room in a hotel that was very near. “Would you like to come

back with me?" he asked as politely as he could. "Yes," said Ludes, and after she had sorted out her affairs with the bar owner, they left quietly, and walked some yards along the quiet, dusty, hot, dark street, towards the Hotel del Sol.

The receptionist at the hotel was most friendly, and with key in hand they went into Tristan´s room. After a little talking, they went to bed and made love, very softly and deliciously. Afterwards, while resting, they heard some talking rise from the street below the room, so Tristan went to the window to see what it was, and Ludes explained that it was the hotel receptionist, with some other people, reading from the Bible in Guaraní.

"In the middle of the night?" wondered Tristan aloud. "Oh yes, they can read the Bible for hours and hours, at any time," replied Ludes. So Tristan came back to the bed, and they made love again.

A MAN FELL IN CORUMBÁ

A man fell into the water supply system in Corumbá. He was alone, working on some equipment, so no one saw him when he fell. He could not be pulled out when he was found, as he was crunched into the machinery. Some of his remains were withdrawn many weeks later in a state of advanced putrefaction.

DARK CITY

A few weeks ago I was walking, with no particular purpose in mind, around the dark area of the city. The buildings here were all large; grim warehouses and factories formed grey silhouettes against a smoky cold sky. I stumbled upon one building which held my interest especially, so that I stood facing it in silence for some time. It was a large Victorian building, which I somehow knew was a school or an institution of some sort. It is difficult to say why it engaged me so, but its sombre appearance cast an unpleasant spell over me.

I could not see inside the building, for those windows which had a light burning within had curtains drawn across them. But then I caught a glimpse of two faces which appeared in one of the dark windows; a small girl and boy were looking at me with pallid faces. In some way I knew instantaneously that something strange and horrible was being done to them in this building. Yet they stared at me hopelessly, as if I, an outsider to their world, could not help them at all.

The faces disappeared. When I turned to move on, I felt it was already decided that I must do something about the children in the building. Before long I was in another house with Marlene and a group of men I did not know, discussing the children in what now had clearly become a boarding-school in my mind. The men, four or five of them, were all thick-set with rough unsmiling faces. They behaved brusquely and might have made me uneasy had not the gravity of the situation been so pressing on my mind. Yet they all showed a sincere, solid concern for the children, for which I was most thankful.

A plan had developed in my mind, which I explained to my companions. My idea was to go to the school one night and rescue some of the children; I hoped especially to find the two I had seen in the window. We would then take them somewhere safe where we could soothe them and relieve them of their fear and unhappiness. Once our actions had come to the attention of the authorities and the public, we would demand that conditions in the school be exposed and then improved before we would reveal the whereabouts of the children. At first the men were dubious about my plan, saying it was too risky. But I persuaded them of its necessity, and preparations were made.

On the night of the rescue operation, we made our way with a heavy ladder through unlit streets to the place where I had seen the building. At times I thought I had forgotten the way, but soon we would come across a landmark that let me know we were going in the right direction. It was just as I was having such doubts, that we turned a corner and stood facing the building, as I had the first time. I pointed to it in silence, and we crept past an open gate, over an unkempt lawn, to stand under the window where I had seen the two children before, though I did not bother to check if they were there now.

We opened out the ladder, and it just reached the window sill, as I had correctly judged. In well-

controlled trepidation, I started to ascend the ladder. One step after another, almost no noise - the house did not stir. When I was half-way up I glanced down; my companions were looking up concernedly and one of them was holding the ladder secure. I continued up - past the first floor windows with drawn curtains, on to the second floor. My head topped the window sill; I looked into the black window. Two pairs of eyes flashed at me calm and unmoving. The children were where they had been the time before.

I signalled to them to open the window for me. For a second they did not move, and in that second strange ideas whipped through my mind. Perhaps they would run away and tell the authorities I was there? Or perhaps they were mentally retarded or for some reason unable to respond to me. It even occurred to me that they might push my ladder backwards before I had had a chance to get over the window sill.

But my fears were unnecessary. After a motionless second, they quickly and efficiently opened the window and helped me inside. I found myself in a musty room; the floor was of uncovered planks, coarse and dusty. Big pipes crossed the room high up, on which towels hung. Otherwise there was no furniture. I could not see what colour the walls were, but the paint was peeling off in places.

I leant outside and signalled to one of my companions to come up, which he did. I handed him first one child, then the other, and he passed them down to someone who had followed him up the ladder. The children seemed quite unafraid.

Then I went across the room to the door. I opened it. I went into a dark corridor much like the room I had left. Quietly and slowly I walked along it, warily looking around me and ready to run back to the ladder if need be.

I came across a door on the same side of the corridor as the first room. I opened it cautiously; there seemed to be no response from within, so when the door was open about a foot I put my head inside the room. It was dark, and all I saw was a bed under the window, on which four children were seated. There seemed to be noone else there, so I quickly went over to the children, and whispered:

“Don´t be frightened, I´ve come to take you somewhere nice.”

I took the hands of two of them and tugged them in the direction of the door. After a little hesitation all four of them came. I took them straight back to the first room, and decided to leave the operation with six rescued.

Back by the escape window, I handed three of the children out to the man on the ladder, but then found the fourth had disappeared. I rushed back to the door and looked into the corridor; I saw nothing but imagined I heard a sound. Without waiting to identify it I bounded back to the window and slithered down the ladder. By the speed of my descent the others guessed there was no time to lose; by the time I got to the bottom they were already in the street. I ran after them, leaving the ladder behind. We sped away as fast as we could, each of us holding and almost dragging a child, until we got to where we had a van parked. We heard no sound nor took sight of anyone following us, but once in the van, drove off in all possible haste.

We took the children to a mill in the country that we had rented in preparation for the escapade. It was a small isolated building, hidden among trees and served only by a narrow track. The children were quiet and uncommunicative, but quite compliant. We fed them and tried to make them feel comfortable, telling them about the happy things they would be able to do during their stay with us. I felt sure that, subdued though they now were, a glimmer of warmth had entered the looks in their eyes.

The following day, about ten days ago now, we arranged to have anonymous letters sent to various authorities and the press, explaining the kidnapping and making certain demands which would have to be fulfilled before we would bring the children forward. The next few days were spent caring for and getting to know the children while we waited for a reply to our letter, which was to be left posted on a public notice-board in the city where many people passed by every minute.

Three days ago, about a week after we had taken the children to the mill, I went to the notice-board, but no reply had yet appeared. When I returned to the mill, I entered to find my companions in the kitchen altogether. They looked at me with strange, stern expressions.

"The boy - what´s his name? Ronnie!" said one of them.

"Well?" I asked, standing still by the door, feeling something was very wrong.

"He´s dead. We killed him."

I looked in horror from one face to the other, but there were no changes of expression, and none of them said a thing. I rushed out of the room and went up the stairs. Half-way up I met Marlene, whose face was fearful and white.

"They´ve killed Ronnie?" I barely managed to utter. She nodded.

"It must have been an accident!" I said, but she shook her head slowly and said quietly:

"No, no."

The ghastliness of the situation hit me at last. I thought very quickly and rationally. If these men were brutal murderers, they would have no qualms about killing Marlene and me if they thought we were against them. If I was to stay alive and inform the outside world, the only way was to let them believe I did not object to their action. I went back to the kitchen, trying to seem composed. All eyes were on me while I tried to give the impression that I was still with them, but I tried not to seem overly friendly. They asked me lots of questions about what I thought should be done, obviously testing me out. I tried to guess what they had in mind, in order to answer them in ways that might convince them of my harmlessness. I gathered they thought everyone should stay indoors in the mill, so I eagerly declared how necessary it was that noone leave it.

After a day or so, I felt my position was fairly secure, and that they trusted I was with them. I

looked for an opportunity to leave the mill. I had to have a reason, as it had been agreed that we should always stay two or more in the same room, lest anyone should try to go. At last my excuse came when we needed some food, and it was realized that we had very little cash left. I have a cheque-book, so I casually suggested I go to buy food and pay for it by cheque.

For a second it seemed that my idea had aroused no suspicion, but then the children, who had sat pale and quiet in the corner ever since Ronnie´s death, quickly said:

"If you´re going out, please let our parents know we are here!"

In that instant the murderers looked at me, with terrifying suspicion and madness suddenly in their eyes. I tried to allay their suspicion by shouting at the children:

"No, I will not tell them. I don´t care a damn about you!"

But this had no effect; the murderers´ doubts about me had been prodded into being.

I pressed no further the idea of my excursion to the food shop, and they have not mentioned it, even though we have run short of certain supplies. During the last two days their suspicion of me has not decreased, and I have not been out of their sight for an instant.

I must get to the outside world before my companions kill another child. The keys to our van are on the wardrobe in a room upstairs; I do not dare touch them unless I have a real opportunity to run to the van and escape. But if I do manage to escape I will not be able to take Marlene or the children with me, because they are always in different rooms due to our companions´ suspicions. And if I get away alone, won´t they have hurt Marlene or the children by the time I get in contact with the authotities?

CHANGING ONE´S IDENTITY

It was not clear, one December morning, why exactly Douglas Crabbe decided to change his name to Johannes Schulter, yet that is what he did. He immediately proceeded to make this change official and legal, so that when he arrived at his office, on December 17th at nine o´clock in the morning, he calmly but jubilantly announced that from now on his name was none other than Johannes Schulter.

"But why?" asked one secretary, already seated at her desk, in front of her computer.

Douglas, now Johannes, did not answer, but rather made his way to his own desk in the open-plan office.

A friend of Johannes´ (and out of respect for him we must now call him by his desired name), was fast asleep far away in Colombia, as there it was six hours earlier. This friend´s name was Ricardo, and though Johannes had e-mailed him to inform him of the name-change, he (Ricardo) could not know that his friend had at this moment declared his new identity.

When Ricardo woke up, at about eleven o´clock local time, he did not get up and rush off to work, as he had no job to go to. He lay where he had slept, in a small house in the town of Ibague, and wondered what he should do that day. Ricardo had been born on the north coast of Colombia, in a village near Santa Marta, but had come to Ibague five years earlier because he thought he could find a job there, as a chef. He was a good chef, but he had not been able to find a permanent job in a reasonable restaurant or hotel in Ibague, and he felt ashamed to return to his village empty-handed and with no success to report. And so, he was sleeping on the floor of a cousin´s flat, unsure what at all to do.

Ricardo gazed out of the window, and enjoyed the sight of a beautiful bird settling on a tree, until at last he was inspired to grasp a sheet of paper and a biro, and he started to write a poem:

O colourful bird
How happy you seem
Do you see me, weird,
Dreaming in a stream?

Ricardo started to think of his friend Johannes, so far away, and decided to go to an internet café to send him an e-mail. But as he got up, his cousin´s dog rushed at him and bit his right ankle, so he sank back upon the ground and nursed the minor wound. Once it had stopped hurting, he found another verse of the poem coming to his mind, so he wrote that down too:

O my friendly bird,
Is your life difficult?

Do you find it absurd,
Or is it just insult?

Ricardo lay back, wondering whether these two verses constituted an entire poem, or whether they were merely the first two stanzas of what should develop into a longer one.

Now Ricardo was not someone regarded by the world as a poet, but he often penned poems, and felt, because he came from a part of Colombia where great literature had been produced, that he should persist in his poetic vocation, whether anyone took any notice of his efforts or not.

Ricardo´s mother was a nurse who worked in a hospital in the outskirts of Santa Marta; his father had been a fisherman, but was now retired, because he suffered from a number of physical ailments. Ricardo had never had any money worth talking about, but he was not one of the very poor of Colombia. Rather, he was bored; bored with nothing happening, though he did not want to go to another country as many of his acquaintances did: to Spain, or England, or the U.S.A. He was quite patriotic in his way, and felt these countries would not provide the answers to his soul´s yearnings.

Ricardo had met Douglas, now Johannes, in a night-club near Santa Marta. Johannes had very much enjoyed the music being played by the band there, which Ricardo knew, as some of the musicians were his friends. He and Johannes kept in touch when the latter returned to his own country, and Ricardo hoped Johannes would return to Colombia one day.

Suddenly Ricardo had a brave thought! He pulled on his clothes, ran out of the house down to the river, and dived headlong into it. He swam under the water, and after some time he surfaced, but no longer as a man, but as a dolphin! He had turned into a dolphin, and now he knew he could stay in the river for as long as chance or destiny allowed him to stay alive; and although thereafter he occasionally felt sorrowful that he had never again communicated with Johannes, he felt much happier, though he often thought with affection about his former friend.

ANDREW DICK

As soon as I was there, I wondered why I´d come. I was in a corridor of my old school, watching the door of my fourth form classroom loom up closer and closer. In fact, I did not remember having planned, or rather having agreed to come, but I had the feeling that I was obliged to go through the door - that the people with me would never accept that I had changed my mind. Then it suddenly occurred to me that there wasn´t anyone with me, so I turned and began to walk back with a slow confident stride that I had often used to leave a situation I was terrified with.

But then one of them said:

"Oh no, you can´t get out of it like that. Normally it would work very well - a very convincing appearance of certainty and confidence, the sort of act that could get you past a patrol if you were dressed as one of their soldiers. But don´t forget, this time we can read your mind."

I turned round again as if I was unconcerned, and tried to say something to the effect that I had no intention of leaving, but had suddenly thought that the door we should have been entering was at the other end of the corridor. But it came out as an absurd babble. For a second I was comforted by the thought that if they could read my mind they would have understood what I wanted to say even though I had said it incomprehensibly. But then I realized that of course they also knew everything else that I was thinking and knew therefore that my excuse was a lie. Then I thought, can they follow my unconscious thought processes too or just the conscious ones? Because if they could only understand conscious thoughts, I could make all the undesirable ones unconscious. But then I realized I was getting confused.

I could feel I was going cold. My hands were trembling so badly that I put them in my pockets. I avoided their faces, but tried to see if I could steal a side-glance. When I looked forwards again, I found I was staring straight into the face of one of them. I immediately recognized Andrew Dick, but there was something I could not make out about him.

"Oh yes," he said, "I´ve become more like an ostrich since you last saw me." Then it was suddenly clear that he was an ostrich, and I remembered that he had begun to look like one at school. But it was strange; before I had had no recollection of this.

"Be careful with your pockets, don´t forget the material is weak." He gave a knowing ghoulish look and nodded his head repeatedly. So he realized my hands were trembling in my pockets. I wasn´t sure whether to act aggressively or submissively. Never before had the conflict been so strong.

We went into the room. I had a sudden feeling of relief - it wasn´t the classroom after all! It was

the waiting-room of a railway station in southern Germany.

“I recognize this,” I said aloud.

“It´s changed a great deal,” said Andrew Dick very formally. “Whether for the better or for the worse, is a question of opinion.” He smiled, and I laughed in a way that I meant to sound friendly, but it became very, very loud and echoed and resounded all over the room, which now seemed very high. I looked up, and saw that the roof was a dome of stained glass, and that black things were fluttering between wooden beams.

“Bats or vultures?” I asked, as if it were commonplace.

“Ah ha!” said Dick, with a single shake of his head, the sort that he would always give at school when he didn´t want to divulge a secret. I made a disappointed grimace, intended to make him feel important, desperate to placate him.

“You see, we now teach physically and mentally retarded children,” he said. I looked around. Prostrate over the floor were boys of all ages. They were moving and writhing about, all in the same way. Their arms were bent and supported their bodies like lizards. Each had one leg dangling behind him, bending the other one forward and using it as a lever to squirm along. Their heads were strained forward, joining onto twisted necks, as if impatient of the slow progress of their bodies.

“This is called the ‘salamander class,’ but the R.S.P.C.A. have demanded that the name be changed. The children must be morally encouraged,” Dick added.

“Of course! When will they understand that?” I cried, suddenly very concerned with the plight of the children.

“Things take time to change, especially peoples´ ideas,” said another of my companion guides, wearily and frettedly shaking his head.

“Surely with a concerted effort from the younger members of the staff, conditions could be improved,” I said, very anxious to change the subject though from what I wasn´t sure. The man who had just spoken kept shaking his head. He looked as if he might be a night watchman in a warehouse. He wore a cloth cap, was small and shrivelled, with a dour but not unfriendly face. He was the sort that has lived through and seen a lot, though always staying on a steady course himself. He seemed my only hope.

“You must have devoted a great deal to these children,” I said, immediately thinking it sounded contrived. I was looking right down into his face. I was so much taller than him, it was impossible to strike a friendly note. I was aware that he could only think me condescending. But his face began to show anything but a sign of inferiority. One eye looked straight into mine, the other facing in a completely different direction. The eye looking at me was glazy, but seemed to twinkle at the same time. It was haughty, seemed to sneer, and had no fear of a prolonged gaze. I tried to smile, but the eye penetrated further and further into my being; seemed to eat into my soul, to see all the weakness in it, and to see through all my attempts to

escape, to act confidently, and to placate him. I thought I had better be the one to move my gaze, to seem respectful. He was no longer an old man to whom my friendliness might be a pleasure. But I could not move it, and all the time he was entering me, and poking around in the softest, most defenceless and most undesirable part of my person.

After a long time, he swivelled round, keeping his eye inside me until the last moment. I could feel waves of tingles starting at my stomach and spreading all over my body, consistent surges of chill and heat moving up to my head and throbbing, and spreading to my thighs like a paralysing orgasm. He beckoned me to follow. He moved in big slow strides, and at each one his body sank very low and bounced up again, comic but sinister. His dipping strides seemed to work in phase with the strength-sapping waves of tingling which spread over me.

I think we left by the same door we had come in by but we entered a black annular tunnel. We walked against a continual blast of cold air. Shortly we came to a fellow who was playing a guitar under a lamp, with a hat to collect money. My two companions took no notice, but I stopped and fumbled in my pocket. I thought it would assert my independence, and the guitarist might help me. I found in my pocket first a paper clip, then a buckle for an American cowboy belt with a horned bull on it. I felt over the smooth raised horns and put it in the cap. The fellow grinned, and carried on playing. He was playing fast cheerful chords, smiled broadly and moved his head from side to side in a rather clownish way, as if the happiest man on earth. He smiled at me again, then winked, and smiled yet again. Tears came to my eyes I was so overjoyed at finding him. I wished he would stop playing so we could talk. Then I suddenly thought that this might be a tube station, and that there would be lots of people if we got on a train. So I left and followed Andrew Dick and the old man along the tunnel.

Then it was that I decided to be strong, even aggressive. I clenched my teeth to emphasize my resolution. After several minutes of walking in silence the tunnel opened out into a chamber. But there were no ticket-machines, no trains, no ticket collectors. I found myself standing between my two companions, looking at an open book with a musical score on it. It was placed on a wooden lectern.

“This is our musical class”, said Dick, “Look carefully. It’s a new method.”

Behind the lectern dark figures danced about, and shrill sounds came from all directions.

“You see, these pupils are the notes themselves. Have you had any contact with the concept of transmigration since I knew you?” asked Dick.

“Ah, I see!” I said, “No, not very much but I think enough to understand what this is about.”

“Hum”, he replied, not impressed. “If you look at the score carefully, and then at the pupils, you will see that they are one and the same.”

I did so. The figures of the pupils were flitting and prancing about so fast that I had difficulty in focusing on their bodies; they seemed to be no more than dark shadows. I could see the heads, which were black circles, like the filled-in parts of notes. They seemed to be attached now to bodies looking like strips of a black velvety material, the bottom ends of which slithered and

brushed against the ground.

“Now, look at the score, the pupils, the score, the pupils.....” I flicked from one to the other, back and forth, over and over again. Things began to get hazy. I could hear Dick’s voice come from different directions, as if he were moving around behind my back as he spoke. Soon I was not sure which I was looking at, the figures or the score. They seemed to merge, yet I knew I was looking at one when he called: “score”, and the other when he called: “pupils”. The notes on the score began to move on the paper, and the figures seemed like written notes. I tried to nod to show I understood the principle at the same time as flashing from one to the other.

“Ha ha ha!” the old man gave a bronchial laugh. “He still hasn’t caught on that he’s looking at Hell.” I turned to Dick. He gave a twisted smile, “We give our most promising pupils an introduction to all musical forms, including demonic ones. You remember the end of “Don Giovanni”, when the demons drag the Don into Hell?”

“Oh, yes, how interesting,” I said. “But we ourselves aren’t in Hell are we?”

“Oh, I thought you meant before that you knew enough about transmigration to understand the point of this”, he said.

“Oh, I probably do, but just tell me a little to put it into perspective. I haven’t had personal contact with anything of this sort.”

My companions glanced at one another. I wasn’t quite sure of the content of the glance.

“Look, don’t try to be clever. Why can’t you just say if you know about a thing or not”? said the old man.

“Well, things are never so simple or clear-cut as that. “I was trying to be honest.” I felt on trial, having my flaws picked at.

“It’ll take time to give an introduction,” said Dick. “Come over here.”

I found myself walking over grass and heather. It was like being on a moor at night-time, but there was no moon. Dick was no longer an ostrich. He was wearing a kilt. I looked at it.

“What are you staring at?” he asked aggressively, in the school- boy tone I used to know. I shook my head obsequiously to imply “nothing”. “We must have an appearance which fits the location, especially with the younger classes,” he said. I remembered how he had changed from being a rebellious nuisance at school to being very officious when he was made a prefect. “Exactly the same thing again now,” I thought.

We were on the edge of a precipice. We faced a black gaping space which stretched to eternity, the black sky presenting no demarcation line against it.

“This is Hell”, Dick said, making an affected, all-knowing gesture with his outstretched palm. “Or the Day of Judgment, or Eternity, or the Universe, or” and here he gave an insipid, gentle

smile, “or even Heaven”. How he infuriated me with his pedantic cleverness. “He didn’t fancy himself as an orator before, the illiterate ignoramus,” I thought to myself. His smile disappeared, and he looked at me with a bland expression, just as he had done the time he punished me as his first show of authority and responsibility after being appointed a prefect. Of course he knew what I had just thought of him!

Very near to us, on the edge of the cliff, was a building. A group of men in American police uniforms were outside it.

“To the police station”, said Dick, in a matter-of-fact tone. Some policemen came over, with purposeful steps. I had a very small hope that they might be coming for one of the other two, but they made straight for me.

I knew I was guilty, but of what I couldn’t remember.

“We’ll need a statement,” said one of the policemen.

“Of course,” I thought. “The buckle! The horns of the bull were gold! Obviously it’s illegal to have gold in that tunnel!” I cursed myself for not leaving it in my pocket.

“Trying to be a little bit clever with your generosity,” said Dick.

The policeman talked to me again.

“You probably haven’t had much experience with these police stations. We are so near to er....this”, and he waved to the blackness over the edge of the cliff, “that we use it instead of gaol or execution”.

“I see, I wouldn’t like to be one of the offenders!” I said, pretending to assume nothing would happen to me. I received no answer. He walked me to the building, which turned out to be a wooden shack.

“Which State are you from?” I tried to be pleasant.

“In Canada we call them Provinces.”

“Oh, are the police uniforms the same in Canada as in the United States?”

I asked actually with interest, my fear seeming to have reached its maximum so that now I was taking everything just as it came. The policeman gave me an unfriendly sidelong glance.

They took me into a room in the shack. All of them looked at me with strong resentment. I was aware that I had said something wrong. “I´m a fool,” I thought, “one has to remember to be especially tactful when with people from another culture. It’s really my fault. If I hadn’t said that they might have helped me.” But I could no longer remember what it was I had said.

I was alone in the room. I took my left hand out of my pocket, but my wrist began to stretch out

very long and thin, rather like a piece of putty being pulled at from both ends. In one part it became so thin I tried to hold it with my other hand to prevent it snapping. But too late! The hand broke off and hopped away. I chased after it around the room, behind old pieces of furniture, as if it were a mouse.

Just when I had the hand cornered, and was about to grab it, the Commentator of my Life spoke. It was no surprise to hear him, though I could not see him, and had never heard him or even known of his existence before. He said, "Why don't you escape? Where's your strength of will?" I felt full of energy and courage and jumped straight out of a window, without looking to see where I would land or how high it was. It turned out to be several stories to fall.

It was pitch dark so I couldn't see when I would reach the bottom. I felt an awful pain in my stomach as if the insides were being pulled out. So I held my stomach and waited to land.

I was very surprised to land without being hurt. I found myself on a strip of ground about two feet wide which surrounded the wooden shack. The black emptiness beyond it was all around the police station now. I looked through a window of the building. Several policemen were sitting around a boiler in a room lit by a bare light-bulb. One of them noticed me and pointed, then they all looked at me. Some of them were grinning.

"Jump into the crater to escape!" said one.

"But it's Hell!" I cried back. But they could not hear me through the window-pane, and did not move.

"If you go voluntarily into it, it's escape - freedom. If you're forced to go, then of course, it's punishment or Hell."

"That's quite true," I thought to myself. "It's the great paradox of life; Freedom and Bondage, Heaven and Hell are the same things. It just depends on your frame of mind." I was almost amused. I felt like congratulating the policemen on their intelligence, and making a remark to the effect that anyone who regarded them as stupid was very misled. "One would do better to come to them than to the academic philosophers," I felt very certainly to myself.

I turned around. The blackness was silent, damp, hollow. It seemed to draw me into it; the ground under me reeled around. I jumped.

TRUTH OR LIES?

Before the reader starts to wonder whether the story I am about to relate is true, I must admit that I *am* normally inclined to exaggerate, or embellish, when I speak to an audience about something, but not when I write; and so now, I do assure him or her that the following tale is indeed true. The reason I insist on this is that the hero of my story, Jim Cloop, is an absolutely honest person, and all his family, whom I know well, are souls of impeccable integrity; they all come from an island off the West Coast of Scotland, whose name I have presently forgotten.

When I explained recently to Jim that I was determined to narrate his story, he begged me not to, saying it would offend his family; when I questioned him as to why that might be, he explained that he did not actually come from that family biologically speaking, since he had in fact been adopted by his 'parents' at the age of two. But there is another reason why Jim Cloop did not want me to narrate his tale, and this unfortunately I only came to understand some time *after* I started to do so, quite innocently; and this was that he himself intended to write his own story!

And so I am writing this tale in a mood of extreme humility and restraint, since I do not want to offend Jim, nor those whom I have always taken to be his family; nor the reader, who obviously does not wish to read lies or fabrications of any kind at all.

My story begins when Jim boarded, or nearly boarded, or rather *tried* to board, a ferry boat from Jura to Islay. Sadly he slipped as he attempted to do this, and crunched painfully between the pier and the boat. However, I must report that when I discussed this point with him afterwards, he was emphatic that he had *not* slipped at all, but had been *shoved* by a certain member of the boat´s crew called Rory Docherty, and that this was why he had fallen into the cold sea water that day, at 4.55 p.m., ten minutes before the ferry was due to leave.

When I tried to ascertain why Rory Docherty should have pushed him in this way, on such a normally peaceful island, on a rather beautiful October afternoon under a beautiful blue sky with white gulls whirling around, he opened up to me a very sorry tale which represents however a complete digression from the main story I am trying to tell. He claimed that Rory Docherty was angrily jealous of him, because the night before Rory believed that he, Jim, had been cavorting with Rory's wife in the Blue Gull, a pub near the harbour on the isle of Jura. But, Jim Cloop insisted, nothing of the kind was true; it was merely that he, Jim, had drunk a good deal of malt whisky with Rory's wife in the Blue Gull, but nothing untoward had occurred at all.

All has reminded me painfully, if the reader will excuse another digression, of an unfortunate incident that had occurred to me around that time, at a party not far away, but this time on the mainland when I in joking, larking mood, raised a girl's skirt whilst I was dancing near her - but not with her - in order to show the remarkable boots she was wearing, which reminded me very much of some leather Stone Age boots I had seen on a television programme about a man who

had been perfectly preserved in ice, in the Swiss Alps, for more than ten thousand years.

The girl with the boots was not offended by my actions, only her boyfriend, along with his friend, and the host of the party who, misunderstanding my action completely, and thinking it represented a rather sleazy, erotic move, instantly and aggressively expelled me unceremoniously from the party.

Thus I could believe it when Jim Cloop said his friend Rory Docherty had completely misunderstood his behaviour the night before he fell into the sea; but this of course would not affect the truth or otherwise concerning whether he was pushed or simply slipped.

The important point from Jim Cloop's point of view is whether it was an accident or not when he clomped into the sea that afternoon. Let us accept his version of the event: that is, that he was pushed. So far as my tale is concerned it matters not: he went down there in the freezing sea, though he was quickly hoicked up by some other crewmen. The only trouble that remains now, is that in the version of the story Jim Cloop is determined to give to the world, he was then taken into the office of the ferry service, to warm up, dry out and change his clothes. Whereas in the version I would give, because it is what I honestly saw, he *had* no clothes on after he was dragged from the water; by whom, it really matters not at all to me!

But these differences also matter little; I only include them for the sake of exactitude. After his extraction from the cold sea, according to my memory and observations as honestly as I can recall them, Jim Cloop grabbed a boomerang that was lying on the ground, and threw it into the sky. It hit a large blackbird, which was deflected from its flight, but not grounded. The boomerang landed on a Hot Dog Stall, owned by one Stizziperiati, who complained only little, as it did not seriously threaten his business.

"The world is a complete fucking pain", yelled Jim Cloop. It is precisely because I was inclined to agree with him at that moment, that I continued to follow his story from then on: this I *must* now narrate even though Jim disagrees with me about so many details of what happened.

For the sake of justice, I must inform the reader that Jim Cloop's account will shortly appear serialized in the *Times Literary Supplement,* so that the reader can compare his account with mine, and make up his or her own mind as to which, if either, is true.

A few days after these events Jim Cloop went to a dentist. He received several anaesthetising injections and after his treatment took a taxi home. Once at home he slouched into a couch and went to sleep. He dreamt that on most of his body great worm-like warts had grown, in groups like bushes of horrible soft corals, falling in ghastly formations especially from his thighs and backside. These foul growths itched and crawled until he felt he had gone mad. He could not wake up, for all that he tried, until in time he forgot that what he was experiencing was merely a nightmare.

He could never ever wake up again. Any solution or clarification of his predicament could only be *within* this dream, never outside of it. He would have to make his peace, kiss a crucifix, and accept that he would die while still in this condition; there was no longer any alternative. He looked at a photograph of himself taken only a few years before, and he imagined a battleship

crashing him up against an ice-berg off the coast of Greenland. He imagined he was the explorer James Bruce, telling lies about his journeys in Abyssinia, so uncertain was he of his experiences.

He remembered driving into the entrance of Robert Graves´ house in Deya, Majorca, the tyres throwing up gravel in the drive; the taxi driver had known where Graves' house was, though the poet had been dead some years by then. Jim had got out of the taxi, shaken hands with Robert Graves´ widow Beryl, and talked to her for some while about poetry. Beryl told him how Graves had been off his rocker at the end of his life, constantly imagining himself back in the trenches in the First World War. She showed him Graves' study, in which over many years he had written his poetry and prose. He drank a beer with her, and eventually left.

Then he found himself in Stalingrad, as a Russian in a special sniper squad. He climbed up a tall tower of tumbling bricks amidst the ruins, with several bottles of vodka and some loaves of bread. He was perfectly suited to waiting quietly, drinking and occasionally eating, up there in cold silence, waiting for some Germans to appear, then to snipe off just one, waiting for a day or two before doing it again. He could never have managed it as an ordinary soldier taking orders within a normal troop.

At the top of another pillar stood Simeon Stylites, in very holy manner on one foot, whilst nearby Jack climbed up his Beanstalk to find the Giant, who fell clumbering down to the ground, where Jack cut off his head.

Jim felt very sad, as if he was in love with someone who was far away, and could hear Schubert's last String Quintet being played over and over again.

I hope I have told this story of Jim Cloop properly, and that I have not falsified it nor exaggerated the truth. I realise now that he cannot correct any errors of mine, because he can never wake up from his dream; but I feel confident that I have at least told part of the truth honestly.

JOSEPH BLEIMER´S ARRIVAL

Joseph Bleimer was hesitant about the whole idea of coming to South America to study pre-Hispanic gold work, but he was the ideal person to do this, as he was an archaeologist, an expert in metallurgy, and he had a Ph.D in philosophy, for which he had produced a notable, though extremely abstract thesis on the place of the visual arts in ancient, traditional societies.

Joseph was a British citizen, born in Plymouth and educated at Exeter and Oxford Universities, but his grandparents had been Jewish émigrés from Nazi Germany, who arrived in England in 1937. His mother and father, who had known each other as children in Berlin before their parents escaped to England, married in 1953, and Joseph was born in Plymouth in 1958. He was the second son of the Bleimers, and grew up very much as an English child, though extremely aware of his German Jewish origins.

Joseph, from his infancy, had always been a balanced boy, very successful at school and University, and always able to make friends, apparently in any context. Perhaps the only facet of his personality that struck others as unusual, and which worried his parents to a certain extent, was a degree of nervousness that entered his demeanour whenever he was faced with difficult choices. If, for example, he was torn between going out to meet friends somewhere on the one hand, or staying at home and finishing a chapter of the book he was reading on the other, he could become extremely anxious, in ways that manifested themselves oddly. Once for example, when he was eighteen, Joseph had found himself in exactly such a dilemma. It was a Saturday night, and he had settled into a comfortable armchair in the family home to read Spinoza, when a friend from his school telephoned to invite him to a party, at which his friend promised he would meet a lovely girl called Sophia. The difficulty he found in deciding what to do, caused his left eye to twitch, and though in the end he did not go out, he could not read another word of Spinoza that night.

His mother had been rather worried about him on that occasion and urged him to go to the party, since staying away did not seem to settle him down. But he did not go; rather he merely paced around the living-room, until finally he went to bed and slept badly.

But Joseph was extremely clever in the intellectual sense and obtained a very good degree in Archaeology at Exeter University, some years after which he went to Oxford to do a Ph.D. In between, a strong practical bent in his personality had led him to learn, and practice, a great deal about metal-working, which knowledge he was able to apply to what was otherwise a rather theoretical education. This made his mother and father particularly proud of him; the fact that he had both a Ph.D in philosophy *and* could make beautiful gold jewellery, seemed to them to represent a wonderful convergence of artistic and practical abilities, of the masculine and the feminine spirit, in a noble, sensitive synthesis of character.

And so, after spending a good number of years as a Fellow of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, tutoring in the Philosophy of History and Archaeology, tongues among influential people wagged, so that the Catholic University in Bogotá, Colombia, invited him to come and join an international team of researchers working on the pre-Hispanic arts of Colombia.

Joseph Bleimer, as already stated, hesitated for some weeks. But the encouragement he experienced from his colleagues and superiors at Cambridge, not to mention his parents, caused him to say: "Yes." And so, one afternoon in March 2003, he stepped off a plane and was met most politely and friendlily by a group of archaeologists, philosophers, ethnographers, and linguists from the Catholic University in Bogotá.

He was immediately taken to some very comfortable lodgings in the University; before even unpacking his bags he clicked on the television that offered a very wide range of channels. Quickly he found himself tuned into BBC World, on which the latest news about war plans against Iraq were being announced. What Joseph heard shocked him profoundly. Of course he knew there was talk about War, and had been cat-and-mouse diplomacy for months; but suddenly he was hearing that War was really beginning, now. He found this incomprehensibly horrible: why, how, for what could this be necessary?

Joseph was not a 'political' kind of person; rather he looked at things more in philosophical and ethical terms. But now, here on this television screen, it was being announced that the two most powerful military states in the world were starting to attack Iraq, a Third World, Arab nation, that was unfortunate enough to labour under a clapped-out, hateful dictator.

Something gave within Joseph: perhaps he was very tired from his journey, perhaps he was suffering from jet-lag, or perhaps such news seemed particularly surreal, hearing it as he was, here in Bogotá, so soon after arriving, before even having had time to get to know anything about the place. But it was deep and horrible what happened within him; and so, after saying goodbye to the friendly hosts who had brought him to his rooms, he quickly phoned his mother in Plymouth, once he had found out the code for calling the U.K. from Colombia.

His mother was as shocked and horrified at the news as Joseph was, but had little to say either in explanation, defence, or criticism of it. This was an aspect of her kind, equable, and placid nature: she was no opinionated iconoclast, nor even was she inclined to support any particular political party with any consistency or strength of conviction. She was a gentle soul, but strong indeed in her own way, and very determined to live a good, happy life with her husband and children, each of whom she loved passionately.

So that after speaking to his mother, Joseph was not calmed at all, but all the more agitated and unhappy. But what could he do? He found to his amazement in the next few days that most people around him in Bogotá knew or cared little about the whole issue of War with Iraq. Some of the University people were knowledgeable and concerned about it, but generally their fatalistic, indeed despairing psychological orientation toward it, and their feelings of impotence in the face of it, were far greater even than his own.

AN UMBRELLA IN GUATAVITA

There was a chief of the Muiscas, known later as a *cacique,* who stumbled upon his beautiful wife in bed with one of his warriors. In his fury he killed the warrior, and then at a banquet he ordered the lover´s genitals to be served to his wife on a silver plate. His beautiful wife, the *cacica,* in her terror, pain, and sadness jumped up, and grabbing her son, ran very fast to the Lake of Guatavita, where she plunged with her boy deep into the waters, never to appear again. According to legend, she lived thereafter at the bottom of the lake, which because of her became sacred, forever.

But her husband, the angry *cacique,* was struck with dreadful regret when he heard what had happened, and consulted with his religious men to ask them what he should do to retrieve his beloved wife from the bottom of Lake Guatavita. They told him he must sail out to the centre of the lake in a raft covered with gold, and throw offerings of gold pieces, superb carvings, and statues of gold into the water to bring her back.

But this did not bring the *cacica,* nor his son back; in his grief and remorse, he was advised by his religious men to repeat the ritual of throwing gold offerings into the lake every year, on the date of his wife's disappearance. And so he and his successors repeated this act for many centuries in deep penitence and endless search for a pardon from the beautiful *cacica.*

Many centuries later, there was an Englishman called Robert Glib, born in a suburb of London to lower middle-class parents, who went to a Polytechnic to study anthropology and archaeology. After graduating he was accepted into the Sociology Department of a London University to do a Ph.D. His research topic concerned the survival strategies of the poorest strata of people living on the outskirts of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. He was determined to live with and understand the very poorest people there, those at the very bottom; the most extremely marginalised, miserable, and forgotten sections of society.

So he went to investigate a place where the people scratched their living from a huge rubbish tip, a mountain of stinking, rotting waste, from which they could pick out bottles, cans, and bits and pieces which they sold for recycling; also at times they might find an armchair, a stove, or a broken lamp, which they could restore in order to sell, renewed, somewhere or other.

The first, immediate conclusion that Robert arrived at, was that if at least these people - children, women, and men - had some kind of protective clothing, and very simple masks over their noses and mouths, then at least they would be less exposed to the unhealthy germs and infections emanating from the rubbish within which they toiled day after day. He found that many of

them, especially young children, suffered from terrible rashes, spots, and skin infections, which might have been less prevalent if at least they had some minimal protection. He suggested, in a preliminary account of his research findings, that only a modest grant from an international agency dedicated to combating poverty could provide such clothing and masks, and would make an enormous difference to the lives of these people, whom he had come to love and respect more with every day he spent with them. He found they were extremely cheerful people and remarkably friendly; in particular he became very good friends with one family, the father of which was called Guillermo and the mother Maria. Two of their sons were called Bibo and Hernan. Hernan in particular he found very congenial company, for when Robert went to visit the family from time to time in their very crowded but friendly wooden shack, Hernan was sure to challenge him to a game of chess, or talk to him about poetry, for he had read poems printed in newspapers from time to time, and wrote poems of his own on scraps of paper, always extremely romantic, about the moon and the stars, and about ideal love in all its forms. He could not read or write well, but he had spent two years at school when his family had lived in a small town near Bogotá, before the father, Guillermo, had lost his job as a furniture repairer for the hotel in this town. Both Guillermo and Maria were strong enthusiasts of education, though they had had none themselves, at least in any formal sense at all; Maria in particular being a great lover of local myths and legends, one of her favourites being that concerning the *cacica* of Guatavita. This story she had told her children many times, always in slightly different ways, but always with great passion and sensitive drama, and Hernan had grown up to love it, almost to breathe it, so that as an adolescent, when he met Robert Glib, he could convey its essence with marvellous intensity. Robert had heard the legend before, but only when Hernan narrated it to him with his youthful fervour did he feel the full strength of its tragic poetry.

Robert was not surprised at this family's grandness in survival, its intense honesty and spiritual strength in the face of deep poverty and material hopelessness, for he was an imaginative young man, deeply engaged in political philosophies of justice and emancipation; and in any case his own life had not been that easy, though certainly it did not compare in difficulty with the family of Guillermo and Maria. But he was impressed, even overawed by them, in a way that affected his being and his feelings so that he knew he would never forget them.

One day Bibo and Hernan invited him to go with them to another home in the *barrio*, where two babies seemed to be dying of indistinct illnesses. Their little bodies were covered in spots, and they were screaming all the time. The brothers had brought Robert there to meet the uncle of these babies. He was called Pedro, and he was a fantastic musician. He played the *quattro* and sang *llanera* songs with such intensity that a listener could turn crazy. He wore an exhausted, huge black hat, was dirty and unshaven, but when his voice burst out with passion, and his eyes flashed in inspired intensity, you might think he was some kind of god of music, a shaman of the primaeval soul, an artist of the deepest emotional vocation.

Robert Glib had spent ten months in this *barrio* to the south of Bogotá. One day he received an e-mail that he picked up in an internet café, from a Colombian girl that he had met in the few weeks he had stayed at the *Universidad Nacional* in central Bogotá, before starting his 'fieldwork.' Her name was Norma, and in her e-mail she asked him to please give her a ring, or drop in on her at the Department of Tourism at the University.

Robert was dying for a break from his existence in the *barrio* where he was conducting his

research; and he had found this girl Norma most attractive; so indeed he telephoned her. She suggested they go to the village of Nueva Guatavita, near the sacred *Laguna de Guatavita* the following weekend, which was a national holiday.

Robert jumped at the idea, and so he met Norma and they left the next Friday, to stay the weekend at a hotel in Nueva Guatavita.

Already in the bus on the way there, Robert started to fall in love with this girl, whom he had felt very warm towards before, but had not yet felt in love with. Once in Nueva Guatavita, the two relaxed in their hotel in a state of blissful, honeyed love. On the Sunday of the weekend there was a torrential downpour with crashing thunder, forking lightning, and harsh pounding hailstones. As they were planning to leave the hotel for a walk, the kind Señora at the hotel offered to lend them an umbrella, and off they went into the rain.

After walking around the town, they sat down in a café from where they could see a stupendous sunset, with a dark, imposing heaviness of clouds in the blue-black sky, with streaks of soft, terrifying, intense pink and orange colours, such as anyone could understand might cause 'pre-scientific' people, living virtually unprotected from the elements, to believe in wild, capricious, angry, bizarre, ferocious gods and spirits.

After drinking a few bottles of beer, they left the café and walked back to the hotel. Norma rang the bell, and started to kiss Robert in a typically delicious Latin way while they waited for the Señora to open up. When the Señora came to the door she immediately asked how bad it had been in the rain. Robert started to answer that it had not been bad at all, as the constant change of colours had made everything a miraculous experience. But before he could finish speaking, Norma suddenly remembered that she had left the umbrella behind in the café, and cried out, "Oh dear, I'm sorry, I forgot the umbrella, Señora!"

A CASE OF SOME MISPLACED UNDERPANTS

Jook absolutely could not understand what had happened to his pen when he arrived in Libano; he knew that he had had it in his shoulder bag, but as soon as he tried to snatch it out to catch an 'inspiration', it was gone. He had wanted to write a short story called *Drunk Chicken, Or, Whatever Happened To The Underpants*, but he equivocated about that title and wondered whether the story would not be better called *How Everything Went Pear-Shaped In Libano.* In the end however, he settled for the title *A Case Of Some Misplaced Underpants*, as the reader can see for him or herself.

Jook's name needs to be explained. As an adolescent, he had had a deep infatuation, if not an obsession, with 1950s juke-boxes. When he reached the age of twenty-one, he decided to change his name, by Deed Poll, to Juke, but he changed his mind and came to feel his relationship to a juke-box was too simplistically expressed by that name, whereas Jook still held a reverberation with juke-boxes, but was looser, more casual, even crazier he thought, so he chose Jook as his name when he came to change it legally. He had thought he would name himself Jook Charia, but ended up dropping Charia; for why should he have a separate first name and surname? Thus he came to know himself, and became known by others as Jook, and felt very happy with this name whatever vicissitudes overtook him in his life thereafter.

Jook was often overtaken by a sense of purposelessness in life; he was not an existential nihilist by any means, and rather despised those kinds of philosophy as metaphysical exaggerations, and as egotistical self-pitying displays of inverted self-importance.

It was merely that, when he stayed in a small town or village in South America, where people simply lived and survived, without any of those delusions of 'progress' and 'advance' that overtake the much drearier cultures of the North, he was so struck by the thought that life really leads nowhere. But why should it, he also thought? Lead where? It was not a question of whether all people should attain some sense of profound self-fulfilment; that was clearly impossible, and in any case even people like prophets, Julius Caesar, Tony Blair, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, Director Generals and assorted Great Men and Women; what had even they ever really achieved, either for themselves or for the people they loved or who loved them, or for their countries, or for Truth, Justice, Equality, or Freedom?

Life was just something to live, like a chicken in the back-yard of a friendly house in Libano; laying eggs and squawking far too early in the morning, just as the streaking dawn begins to play its magic among the sky's miracles. There was nothing depressing about this directionlessness; on the contrary it was wonderful, and if people could only accept it, wars would be less likely to occur, with all their attendant absurd ideological justifications. Jook had been reading about the 'War Of One Thousand Days' that engulfed Colombia between 1899 and 1902 in barbaric and

unholy violence, in which many participants scarcely knew for what they were fighting. Priests preached from pulpits that to kill Liberals was a great service to God, and Jook remembered his father parading in the family kitchen with a lavatory brush when he was a child, shouting both orders from officers and responses from the men in an imaginary army, because he had suffered and experienced such deep emotions and intense sensations in War.

Before coming to Libano, Jook had stayed many months in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, studying pre-Hispanic Colombian history, learning how the extreme geographical and climatic diversity of the country had prevented the many wonderful cultures - Quimbaya, Tolima, Muisca, Tairona, San Agustin, etc. etc. - from uniting or being conquered into a unitary state as had occurred in Peru, especially under the Incas. One night, he had been drinking rum in a bar with his girlfriend Claudia, who had previously gone shopping and had filled her bag with tomatoes and a lettuce. When they left the bar, Jook and Claudia took a taxi back home, and presumably in the back of that taxi Claudia's mobile phone and wallet had fallen out of her bag. The two of them got home safely, but after the tomatoes and lettuce had been safely deposited in the refrigerator, Claudia realized she did not have the phone or her wallet, with all her important documents, identification cards, and addresses scribbled onto torn pieces of paper.

However Claudia, with great wherewithal, knew the number of her mobile phone and called it from their ordinary phone in the apartment; the taxi-driver answered, and admitted he had both the phone and the wallet. He said he would give them back for an agreed sum, so Jook went to meet the man at a crossroads at six o'clock in the morning.

Unfortunately Jook thought the man would be waiting for him on foot, but in fact he turned up in the back of his taxi with someone else driving it, and did not open the window widely enough for Jook to snatch the wallet. Jook offered the agreed sum, but now the taxi-driver wanted more; his appetite had obviously been whetted by the sight of a man willing to pay an extortion fee for Claudia's possessions. The encounter ended unsuccessfully; the taxi thrust forward and a bemused Jook was left waving sixty thousand pesos into the polluted dawn air.

Shortly after this experience, Claudia and Jook took a bus to Libano. It was a fantastic journey, through the most grandiose mountain scenery, the road plunging down into valleys and grinding up to massive heights where the views were breath-taking and awe-inspiring; rivers flowed their silvery or brown ways along valley bottoms, mists encircled and bewitched the mountain-tops, the greenness was beyond imagination's grasp, as the bus growled its way through the wild mountains, along the twisting roads sometimes paved and sometimes earth-tracked, until they entered dusk and early night, in which a huge full moon revolved and burned in a dark-blue, cloud-scattered sky, the sound of the engine warming the heart as this small group of human beings groaned along into the growing night.

How strange when they arrived in Libano! It was night-time, and Don Martin kindly accompanied them to the house of Claudia's mother. Jook was introduced to the very friendly mother, shown where the lavatory in the courtyard was, and then they sat down to drink *aguardiente.* Jook had often wondered why it was that people who lived in quiet towns and villages so often drank more heavily than people who lived in exhausting, chaotic cities; and here he found another example of this enigma. Two of Claudia's brothers joined the throng, and within a few hours everyone was extremely drunk and jolly. One of the brothers challenged

Jook to stand on his head, and the other was taken by a great desire to balance Jook's Spanish-English dictionary on his shoulder while he danced extremely competently.

At length the conversation turned to theological matters; Claudia's mother believed fervently in satanic bats that frequently flew about at night. At a certain point, one of Claudia's brothers told Jook jovially that he would cut his balls off if he treated his sister badly, to which Jook retorted in a pleasant way that he would do the same to the brother if he treated his own wife badly.

Finally, everyone retired to bed; a few hours later Claudia woke up and was told by one of her brothers' wives that Jook's underpants had been found on the floor of the mother's bedroom. Furious, Claudia woke up Jook, flicked his ear hard, and demanded an explanation for this extraordinary, untoward eventuality. But Jook, in all honesty, could only remember collapsing into bed when the night of drinking had come to an end.

Jook was therefore greatly offended at what he took to be Claudia's suggestion that he had behaved improperly. He jumped from the bed, still drunk, pulled on his clothes, and staggered out from the house. He intended to find a bar where he could relax and collect his confused thoughts, but Claudia would not allow him to roam around alone in Libano in the bright, sunny dawn, so she followed him and eventually persuaded him to go with her to visit another of her brothers who ran a shop near the centre of the town. There they went; and amid the horseshoes, ropes, saddles and baskets, they were seated warmly at a small table, and served glasses of pure rum or *aguardiente*. Everyone spoke of poetry, music, and the beauty of nature in the Andes; Claudia's brother declared that love was the most important thing in life, all else signifying nothing. Jook stared out from the shop at the horses, the old colonial-style houses in the sun, and the mountains that gloriously ringed the town. He was inclined to agree with this third brother of Claudia's, and turned to kiss his girlfriend.

"Do you love her?" asked the brother.

"Oh yes," replied Jook, and once again felt wonderfully happy.

SPLIM TOCHTER

The thing Splim Tochter simply could not understand when he asked Silviana if she wanted to go back to their room, was that instead of answering yes or no, she jumped into the middle of the road and began to dance. They were in Honda, one of the oldest towns in Colombia, which had been a major port and centre of communication in the *Nuevo Reino de Granada,* full of winding cobbled streets and white houses, bridges and storehouses, with an atmosphere steeped in history and fascination, surrounded by mountains where Indian tribes had once lived, until they were crushed, murdered, and suppressed by the Spanish, not without fighting until the bitter end, so resolute that their women aborted or killed their babies so that none should become slaves to the cruel conquerors.

Their heroism some historians say, ensured that for many decades Spanish colonists did not dare to enter the wild mountainous terrain even after the Indians had been exterminated, as if for generations the Spaniards continued to fight with the shadows of the Pijaos and Panches, who had not accepted conquest or enslavement, preferring death to such humiliation and living misery.

But a few moments later Silviana jumped back from the middle of the road, and in a gesture of exaltation and awe opened her arms to the Andean stars; then, grabbing Splim Tochter's hand, she dragged him forthwith to another bar, run by one Anaximander whom she had known years before; where they sat down to drink another bottle of rum.

Silviana came from a village near Honda, where she had learnt to ride a horse from an early age. She knew all the herbs and fruits of the region, and danced magnificently. She and Splim Tochter drank rum in Anaximander's bar till dawn, when the bright sun filled the green mountains around Honda with glorious light. A small boy asked Splim Tochter for money, but Splim preferred to buy him a packet of biscuits, so he asked Anaximander to give him one. A teenager came over to snatch some of Splim Tochter's rum, while another tried to lean over Silviana and make erotic suggestions towards her.

The *Vallenata* music started up again loudly and triumphantly, until Slim Tochter and Silviana were moved to stumble back to their room, in which the fan was mercifully still turning, as without it the room would have been sweltering. Before leaving the bar, Anaximander shook hands with Splim Tochter, and invited him to go fishing in the Rio Magdalena a little later that morning: a slightly unrealistic prospect given the drunken state of all concerned.

A dog, and then a chicken, stood in the way of their entry into the house where Silviana and Splim Tochter stayed. In the room at the bottom of the broken-up house an old man was watching a television, and Splim Tochter could tell it was an American film about the Vietnam

War, with soldiers talking in short blurts about their girlfriends back home, arguing about a rough dog one of them kept, with a sergeant to remind them of the real reasons they were all there, heroically fighting something bad in Vietnam. He stumbled up the few stone steps with Silviana to their room, where they collapsed on a broken bed and fell asleep, half staring out of a cracked window at the Río Gualí, on the banks of which fluttered and croaked some gorgeous ugly vultures, presumably looking for dead fish, or perhaps even a dead rat, or cat.

VANESSA

Vanessa invited Joaquin to her flat one Sunday afternoon, ostensibly to discuss with him some wall-painting she wanted him to do for her, but really her intentions were quite different. Joaquin was a Colombian asylum seeker, a political exile residing in Glasgow and earning his living doing various kinds of work, and had been introduced to Vanessa by Nadia and Orestes, who lived in the flat below her. Orestes and Vanessa had been neighbours for several years, and as far as Orestes had been concerned, they were quite good friends. But Vanessa was now sixty-two years old, had been abandoned by her husband, and had only a highly unsatisfactory and irregular, fluctuating relationship with another, alcoholic man.

Nadia was also Colombian, and had come to Glasgow with Orestes only a few months before. The two had met in Colombia, and were very much in love.

On that cold, dark, wet December late afternoon in her flat, Vanessa solemnly announced to Joaquin that she was worried for Nadia's future. Orestes was much too old for her, she stated imperiously, standing in the middle of her living-room, and was a mad, bad, eccentric man, who was moreover not in good health, as he had confessed to her that he needed to take various kinds of medication, ranging from heart tablets to anti-depressant pills. Joaquin should come to Nadia's rescue, as an innocent young girl and a fellow Colombian, and open her eyes to the fact that she was with a man wholly unsuitable for her. Joaquin found it all most uncomfortable, especially as Vanessa's ex-husband and her occasional new partner were sitting on a sofa across from his armchair while Vanessa was delivering this verdict on Orestes. But he repeated to Nadia what Vanessa had told him, and the effect of this on Nadia was seismic.

She rushed out of Orestes´ flat and went to stay with a girlfriend called Dana, a young Czech lady whom she had come to know in Glasgow. Dana suggested Nadia travel with her the very next day to the Czech Republic, as she was anyway going there to stay a couple of weeks with her parents who lived in a small town near Prague.

So Nadia went with Dana, but something terrible happened in Prague, before they had even arrived at Dana's home town. Dana introduced Nadia to a very handsome man called Stepan. Because Nadia was somewhat ´up in the air´, she accepted an invitation to go to a nightclub with Stepan in Prague. But she never arrived at the nightclub; Stepan locked her in a van with two other women, all gagged and bound, and started to drive the van out of and away from Prague, where to, Nadia could have no idea.

Meanwhile, Orestes had come back to his flat in Glasgow to find Nadia had disappeared. Joaquin explained to him what had occurred, and in desperation Orestes made immediate plans to fly to Colombia and go to Libano, Nadia's home town, where at least he could be with her anxious relatives and would be able to garner any news that might arrive about Nadia's whereabouts.

Orestes felt that Vanessa had wholly misjudged and misunderstood Nadia and himself, as well as the relationship between them. Nadia was not a child at thirty years of age, even if she was considerably younger than he. And there were many different ways of viewing madness and craziness in human beings; and anyway what constitutes ´normality´ in a crazy, mad world? Her interference and deliberate attempt to wreck the relationship between him and Nadia was wicked, malevolent, and malicious.

Soon after Orestes arrived in Libano, he received a distraught letter from Dana in Prague, explaining that Nadia had disappeared, full of guilt and remorse and begging that she might come to meet him in Libano, where together they might track down Nadia. Orestes wrote back, accepting Dana's suggestion. When Dana arrived in Libano she brought further news: before leaving Prague she had heard that Nadia was probably on her way, gagged and bound in Stepan´s van, to somewhere in Tajikistan, from where Stepan controlled a trade in women to various parts of the world.

Orestes resolved now to search for Nadia in Tajikistan, though he had no idea where to start in that huge country, about which he knew scarcely anything. So he and Dana set out on their new journey, not knowing that by now Nadia had been shipped to a villa near Rome, where a gang of rich mafia crooks hid out, immersed in and surrounded by a bevy of captive women available for their pleasure.

Orestes heard in due course, in a sorrowful letter from Vanessa, that Nadia had died in Rome from an unknown cause. He and Dana had got as far as the Azores, on their way to Tajikistan, when they received this letter from Vanessa, which Orestes regarded as a hypocritical pretence at remorse. He was utterly devastated, and Dana feared he might kill himself.

But the news of Nadia's death turned out to be untrue. Nadia had not died, but had rather escaped from the rich gangsters´ villa, and found her way to Rome. Apparently she believed Orestes was looking for her there, and hoped he would find her. She had come to believe that Vanessa's warnings were spiteful and false, motivated only by jealousy and resentment.

Orestes hoped he might at least be able to trace the place of Nadia's death in Rome, and perhaps her grave. Dana returned to Glasgow, broken-hearted at having to accept that Orestes did not love her as she hoped he might. Orestes went to Rome alone, and miraculously he met Nadia there, in the oldest part of the city. Standing outside a small jewellery shop, on a thin cobbled street, they embraced and kissed each other, without speaking at all for quite a long time.

JILRON AND THE FOUR CHICKENS

For good reasons, Jilron could not get up that day. He had looked at a Victorian picture, part diagram and part photograph, the day before, and this had led him into a most strange experience. As he focused on one of the second-floor windows of the building in this picture, the shutters seemed to open, and he saw into the interior life of a family who were in some disarray. The father, a young man called Samper, had enrolled in a mercenary brigade that was due to set sail the next day for Labrador; the wife, called Ginebvre, was a French-born lass who was pummelling her husband on the chest to persuade him not to go. One of their children, Charles, was playing dangerously inside an empty barrel of cider; another, Slippy, was a very tall girl of thirteen years who was chucking some fish-bones into a dirty sink, refusing to obey her mother who was telling her to throw the bones out onto the rubbish heap outside the house.

It was not clear to Jilron *why* he had been invited, so to speak, into the hearth of this poor family's life and problems. But he had not shrunk away from the experience; he had watched it through, until something abominable in his own life had broken his concentration and dragged him irrevocably from his voyeuristic involvement.

His mother, who did not normally live in the same house as him, marched into the room where he was looking at the picture-photograph and snatched it away from him; shouting angrily, she then threw it into a burning fire, so that Jilron could never follow up on the strange adventure he had begun. Instead, he had to cope with his mother's wrath, make her some cocoa, and put her to bed in her preferred bedroom; which was just one of several in his house, which he was obliged to maintain for his mother, though she only rarely came to stay there.

And so, the day after these peculiar events, Jilron decided to stay in his bed, and think about things in a philosophical sort of way. He came to the conclusion, by about two o'clock in the afternoon, that it really made no difference what one did in life at all, in terms of how people thought about you; that is, whether they liked you or not. If you tried to be kind, people were bound to dislike you; if you were bad-tempered and horrible, they would probably think you were a fine person. If you tried to do ´good things´, you would undoubtedly be distrusted and despised, while if you were foul, you might well become well-thought of!

However, Jilron found absolutely no satisfaction in these thoughts. It was as if he would have preferred to arrive at different conclusions, but could not, and so he constantly bounced from one rock of thought to another without finding any resting-place for his mind, which just rolled on and on exhaustingly.

At length, as he finally fell into a deep sleep, Jilron began to feel there were four poles to existence: north, south, east, and west; intuition, intellect, sensation, emotion; fire, water, earth, and air. And so, although obviously nobody outside could record this very subjective experience, Jilron dreamed himself into some tranquillity. But a most extraordinary aspect of this partial peace that Jilron found himself participating in was that the four poles in his mind came to take

on the form of four *chickens*; and these four fowl squawked very loudly, making a noise that could have raised the dead in the village where his mother normally lived!

And so at last it was with great relief that Jilron faded away from everything here narrated, into a very different, relaxing dream of water-lilies, peacocks, and giant lizards.

STAP THE DREAMER

Funnily enough, Stap Izrog had never wanted to go out at all that day. The friends he was staying with lived in what for him was a rather dreary, suburban house, with all the usual comfortable ´mod cons´, but he found it boring, and outside the street and local shopping centre were even worse, as far as he was concerned. He had always preferred to live slap-bang in the centre of a city, or else far out in the countryside, preferably in a remote tropical rain forest, or if possible, in Antarctica.

And so, he consoled himself with a cup of Nescafe, and sat in a plush sofa, from which he viewed CNN on his friends´ wonderful television.

After a little while he fell into a deep sleep, in which he heard someone shout to him quite desperately:

"Stap! Can you hear me? I am in a deep cave now, but I want to say something to you in case I die of suffocation in the next few minutes. I was too young to join the army in time for the War, like your father, but I was living in Streatham when the bombs fell, and I knew your father's family quite well, and often said hello to his sisters, your aunts, as they hurried along the streets to school in the mornings, jogging their satchels up and down on their backs, yapping away one to another, about what I was never quite able to catch.

"This is my last chance to say it, but please listen to me! You must believe that the people who lived in that area of London were very fine people, and had many quiet, heroic characteristics, which were quite born out when the War came and the bombing began. Never forget that!"

Stap was utterly confused by this outburst. He had never had a negative view of people who lived in Streatham anyway, but so far as ´heroism´ was concerned, he tended to think that people everywhere, and in any period of history, became brave when under threat, when challenged or attacked, and could not see why Patagonians or Lithuanians or Taiwanese people should be assumed to be any more or less ´heroic´ than anyone else when the chips were down. It was all down to the nervous system, synapses, and chemicals carried in the blood he thought, not nationality or ideology.

At this moment in his reverie however, Stap Izrog was prodded back into a waking, conscious state by a ring at the door of the dreary, suburban house in which he was slumbering. He went as quickly as he could to the door, at which stood a newspaper boy, delivering a copy of *The Daily Blot* to the house, which Stap gratefully received. Before he had even returned to his sofa however, his attention was caught by a story on the front page, which spoke of a community of *campesinos* living in a village in the *Cordillera Central* of Colombia, where there was an epidemic of some unidentified illness, that affected only old women and young boys. Old women suffering from this affliction experienced severe neck pains, whilst young boys were struck down

by a curious kind of paralysis around their knee-bones, which prevented them from running or even walking normally.

On page five of *The Daily Blot* there was a story about a teenage girl in Lima, Peru, who had written a story for a Lima magazine, but had not been paid for it even six months after its publication. Her parents had reacted furiously to this lack of honesty, but a neighbour was quoted as saying the girl was very lucky to have had her story put in print at all, and had really no reason to complain.

Stap Izrog put the newspaper down onto a coffee table, and chose a CD from his friends´ collection. He picked a piece by Borodin, and sat down to listen to it. Whilst listening, he sank into a daydream, and started to think about a story his mother had told him once many years before, about a boyfriend who had been driving her home after going to the cinema, and who made a mistake at some traffic lights, and put his foot on the accelerator rather than the brake, and had nearly crashed the car against a concrete wall. But Stap did not wake up from this reverie; rather he found himself utterly transformed into a Jordanian frog, flopping about in a desert puddle, and after a while seemed no longer to possess any coherent consciousness at all.

RATS, WEEDS, AND COCKROACHES

Mary Cockroach hatched from a cockroach egg in 203,000 A.D. She died a little over ten years ago, having laid many thousands of eggs in her lifetime. She merits now an account of her life.

Human beings have long since disappeared from the earth, being among the first wave of species to become extinct during the Ecological Holocaust that took place between 10,000 and 80,000 A.D. The Ecological Holocaust, like one earlier mass extinction in the history of the planet, wiped out as much as 90% of existing species and biomass. The striking difference between this most recent mass extinction and the earlier one, is the great rapidity of its exterminations of life, over a mere 70,000 years, by comparison with the millions of years involved in the earlier one. Besides Man, all the other primates, and all large mammals became extinct. Only small mammals, mainly rodents, survived the Ecological Holocaust. I, of course, am a rat, and my name is Rhetorix Flute, if the reader is not yet aware of that. We rats were one of the groups that benefited most from the Holocaust. Like other survivors, rats expanded into the newly available spaces, and adapted to myriad new niches. Biological evolution became infinitely more rapid than it had been previously, as conditions became totally different, and were moreover, continually and rapidly changing. Numbers of species from the surviving groups proliferated and multiplied. In the case of we rats, certain species like my own became very large. My own rat species developed a normal size about as large as the extinct rhinoceros, and a brain several times larger than that of the extinct *Homo sapiens*.

There are at present five main theories about what brought on the Ecological Holocaust, but naturally many rat-scientists believe there must have been a combination of causes. The five basic theories are: 1) A huge meteorite collided with the earth; 2) The earth witnessed an epoch of massive and widespread volcanic activity; 3) There were changes in the earth´s tilt; (4) There was one or more Nuclear War; and 5) There was an escalating, anthropogenically-induced spiral of planetary ecological destruction.

Gradually, around 160,000 A.D., my species developed consciousness and intelligence, and since then, we have greatly changed the environment in yet again entirely new ways. The majority of plant groups and species that survived the Ecological Holocaust were what human beings had termed weeds, and these had evolved prodigiously by the time we became intelligent. After that we cultivated, bred, and shaped the most useful species in our environment in the same way that human beings had long before created wheat, oats, maize, vegetables, fruit trees, and so on from their wild precursors. A large part of the earth is now taken up with fields and groves in which nutritious plants and trees are grown.

And just as human beings domesticated, bred, and moulded to their own advantage wild birds and mammals to produce cows, sheep, pigs, chickens and so on, which obviously all disappeared with human beings, their masters and creators, we took our cousin species of rat and mouse, and turned them into excellent food-machines, some of them as large as the extinct cow.

After reaching a unique status on the planet as intelligent beings, my species of rat began to understand that we could study and learn from what human beings had left behind. We realized that we could read human books, rather than merely nibble or gnaw at them. It was thus that we discovered the calendrical and chronological systems used by human beings, and adopted the Western dating system, referring henceforth to dates in terms of numbers of years A.D. But although many of our professors study human religions with great intellectual interest, we rats have no practical use for any human religions. We do not have the same fear of death or its aftermath that human beings evidently did. Perhaps this is a legacy of our preconscious evolution, which involved strategies very much more short-term than those displayed by the immediate precursors of hominids and humans. Neither does it matter to us in the same way that it did to human beings, how the world originally came into being – again, such speculations are of great scientific and philosophical interest, but if they all remain forever mysterious enigmas, then so be it. We feel no need to invent fanciful explanations in order to assuage irrational fears and yearnings.

We had of course developed a number of languages of our own long before we reached the stage of studying human books. But when we did study these books, we found the human languages represented in them absolutely fascinating, so we adopted some of them for our own use; including French, English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi.

But I must return to Mary and the cockroaches. After the Ecological Holocaust, cockroaches went through a massive expansion in numbers of species and individuals. Now, as already stated, the Holocaust eliminated about 90% of all flora and fauna among invertebrate animals as well as among all other groups of living organisms. But as the invertebrates, in particular the insects, outnumbered so dramatically all other groups on the planet before the Holocaust, so did they afterwards as well. This issue underlies one of the key areas of research among our rat biologists. As I am not a biologist, but merely a writer – though I hope I am one who is fairly well-versed in the biological sciences – I will not attempt to go deeply into the matter here. Suffice it to say that after the Holocaust the most successful group of invertebrates – indeed the most successful group of any animal with the exception of the rats – were the cockroaches. With them it was somewhat similar at first to the way it had been with the rats. Some species grew to the size of the hens that human beings used to keep, whilst others grew to the size of prehistoric rats. Gradually, one species ´overtook´ the others evolutionarily speaking, and became very large and quite intelligent. Mary was a member of that species. She was about the size of the turkeys human beings used to keep, and her intelligence, in keeping with her species, was at a level somewhere between *Australopithecus* and *Homo habilis*. Thus Mary´s species has rudimentary language skills, considerable practical abilities, demonstrates impressive capacities for learning, but cannot be said to have reached the levels of culture, art, or religion.

And nor do we intelligent rats really want them to. The planet can take only one intelligent being at any given time. Before *Homo sapiens* there was none, and we are only the second such being to appear in evolution. It would not be a good idea to allow Mary´s cockroach species to become

any more intelligent, and we will not allow it; if necessary we will prevent it through genetic engineering.

Nevertheless, we rats admire the intelligent cockroaches. They are very useful to us, as they are extremely easy to tame and train. We use them to eat scraps of waste, rotting organic matter, certain vermin whether alive or dead, and even simply other animals we do not like. And we make a delicious soup from cockroach carcasses, which we call "Cream of Cockroach."

Mary Cockroach achieved some fame in her lifetime for various reasons. When young, she roamed the west coast of the continent that human beings called South America, but which today is called Gloofnyma, performing an anonymous service to farmer rats on whose lands she used to eat vermin. Perhaps because she enjoyed a rich diet for a number of years, she laid huge numbers of eggs, and because of this some cockroaches referred to her as "The Cockroach Whore" in their cockroach language. But then something happened which projected Mary into the public eye of rats.

One of the plants that survived the Ecological Holocaust, which human beings had previously regarded as a weed, was the stinging nettle. Human beings never discovered anything useful in this plant, but long after the Holocaust stinging nettles had changed greatly. There were now huge forests of tall stinging nettles, the only animals that could endure living within them being those that had developed effective defenses against their ever-strengthening poisons. When we rats – from now on when I refer to ´rats´ without further qualification I will usually be meaning my own species, just as when I refer to cockroaches I will mean Mary´s species – had launched ourselves into an epoch of plant and animal domestication, we found the then existing stinging nettles to be very useful indeed.

Poisons could be extracted from them and used for all manner of things. When treated in certain ways, the harmful effects and bitter tastes of these poisons could be eliminated from the nettles, rather as human beings learned to treat bitter manioc before eating it or using it to make alcoholic beverages. We rats found that the treated poisons of the stinging nettles, mixed with the young leaves of the nettles that did not yet contain poison, could be fermented into a delicious wine, which remains to this day with us rats a most special delight.

The stems of these nettle trees provided wood suitable for many purposes, and the seeds, after centuries of selective breeding became large, tasty, and nutritious.

Millennia after the original cultivation of stinging nettles, a rat-pharmacologist discovered that the substance which had always been used to treat the poisons – extracted from the ovaries of giant mice – was a chemical that was much more abundant in the stomachs and bowels of cockroaches. It was found that if the poisons were eaten by cockroaches – and this did not harm them in any way – the cockroaches´ excreta contained the very chemicals, purged of poisons, that were needed to ferment our precious wine. Of course, these had to be separated out from other substances in the cockroaches´ faeces, but this was a relatively easy task. The great advantage of using cockroaches in this way was, firstly, that cockroaches did not have to be killed, but could be used over their whole lifetimes to produce the chemical that was named "cocknet". A female mouse that had been kept in captivity for months after its birth, producing hitherto nothing of economic value, had to be killed merely to extract a few centilitres of the vital

chemical from its ovaries. Not only could cockroaches of both sexes be used until they died of natural causes, but they did not need to be bred purposely, as they were and still are extremely numerous in the wild in most parts of the world.

This was one of the most important discoveries made in the period of emergence of Rat Civilization. For wine was and still is a most vital ingredient in civilized life, as well as a very important article of trade.

But there was to be, very recently, another great advance in the production of "cocknet". This is where our Mary comes in. A very large wine-fermenting establishment was located on the same coast where Mary was contentedly chewing vermin on rat-owned farms. Periodically worker rats from this establishment went on cockroach collections in the area. On one occasion Mary was rounded up with perhaps another five thousand cockroaches and taken back to the wine establishment.

Once back at the wine-producing establishment, which was situated next to a nettle forest, the cockroaches were unloaded from the wagons onto which they had been thrown. They were led to a series of huge barns, lined all along their sides with troughs containing the nettle poisons in a kind of sludge. The cockroaches were lined up with their mouth-parts over the troughs. Periodically rat-wine workers brought in another set of troughs and set them down exactly below where the average cockroach's anus would be positioned. The excrement was then periodically collected, and taken off for further treatment.

As I have already explained, these cockroaches are quite intelligent – the only animals to have achieved such a degree of intelligence other than Man and his hominid and hominoid predecessors, and we rats ourselves. Before being led to positions at the trough, the cockroaches were given clear instructions in their own language that some skilled rat-workers had learned for the purpose, combined with gestures and sign-language. They were informed about the production process, told not to defecate unless the troughs were under their anuses, and assured that they would be required to spend only fourteen hours out of twenty-four eating and drinking from the poison troughs. Of the remaining ten hours, they would spend two more at the troughs, with the poisonous sludge now replaced with more varied food. This latter included ground-up fish-skins, rat faeces, and insect larvae. After this, the cockroaches were moved to the centre of the barn to sleep in a huddle for eight hours.

Mary lived in this way for perhaps two years, and was now a very fat, mature female cockroach. Then one day something remarkable happened. A female wine-fermenting rat-specialist called Vomistaga Anallo was carrying out a routine inspection of Mary´s barn at defecation time. She examined the faeces of each cockroach, but when she came to Mary´s faeces, she noticed green patches in it that she had never seen before in such cocknet-producing barns. She took a sample from the faeces with a syringe, and after completing her round, went to a laboratory only a few metres away.

The specialist analysed Mary´s faeces in many ways, using all the available techniques, and came to the conclusion that it contained a new, extremely condensed and powerful type of super-cocknet. She immediately tested her hypothesis by separating those chemicals from the rest of the faeces, and set them to work on the other ingredients necessary for making Stinging Nettle

Wine, in the usual proportions and under the usual conditions. Within two weeks she realized she had made a discovery with implications as immense as the original discovery of cocknet, millennia before.

This new, super-cocknet produced wine far superior in quality to that ever known before, in far larger quantities, and in a much shorter time. Subsequent research has increased the first two, and reduced the last, even further. Mary was quickly taken from her barn, and examined in all sorts of ways. Vomistaga Anallo concluded there was nothing superficially observable that was unusual about Mary, but that she was certainly a very fecund cockroach! She laid more eggs than the average female, and, due probably to a simple, chance, lucky genetic mutation, her biochemical system produced a hitherto unknown super-cocknet.

Soon numerous other rat-scientists and specialists came in on the investigation. They all agreed on one thing: it was better not to kill Mary, but rather to analyse her organs while alive. It would be best to collect her eggs, hatch them, and the moment a male super-cocknet producer was discovered among her offspring, have it breed with Mary.

All this was done, and within a few years Mary´s super-cocknet-producing offspring numbered several million. The whole thing brought about a revolution in the wine industry.

It is very difficult to know to what extent, if at all, Mary Cockroach understood the important revolution she had opened up, or indeed if she was ever able to fully recognize that she was the centre of such interest. Most of our scientists believe the intelligence of cockroaches should not be underestimated: they are not as intelligent as was Neanderthal Man, but they are more intelligent than were dogs or chimpanzees. Some have argued that they do not really possess a proper language, only a system of sound signs such as human beings discovered in whales and dolphins in their own epoch, or which they could teach to chimpanzees. Some human scientists went further however, and claimed that chimpanzees could actually learn a real language. It is all a very difficult question, and I leave conclusions to the scientists. All I should say, is that most of them today are convinced that cockroaches have rudimentary symbolic languages, not merely sign systems. One argument they present is that different groups of cockroaches, located in different geographical areas, have distinct languages.

After being used to make this momentous revolution in agricultural and genetic techniques, Mary was left to live a few dignified months until she died on the 102nd day of 203,007 A.D. She spent her last months in a cage of honour, which was moved from place to place and was looked at with great interest by very many rats.

Now Mary´s story does not end here, as during the important years of her life, when super-cocknet was being discovered and developed and when she was known far and wide, there were many rat-intrigues surrounding these research breakthroughs. The most celebrated intrigue concerned a group of scientists who, while they had been working with Vomistaga Anallo, took unlaid eggs and samples of cells from many parts of Mary´s body without telling Vomistaga or any others on the team. They did this at various times between 203,005-7 A.D. Extraordinarily enough it seems to me, as a non-specialist who nevertheless cannot help holding a point of view, the others on the team, including Vomistaga Anallo who made the initial discovery, did not take samples until a few minutes after Mary had died. After a while they came to think this had been

an enormous mistake, because according to some authorities cellular breakdown begins immediately after death with cockroaches, and proceeds very rapidly. Others deny this, asserting that the cells of cockroaches break down no quicker than the cells of any other animal species, and that the process has certainly not gone far in only a few minutes after death. For these experts, the real source of the conflict was that the renegade group of scientists managed to develop their research in advance of Vomistaga Anallo and the other scientists on the team. Having ´stolen a march´ on the others, the renegade group were able to sign a lucrative contract with a rat-house construction company.

In time the scientists loyal to Vomistaga Anallo started to hear rumours about the renegade group who been more astute than them, as well as scheming and dishonest.

To understand the implications of these rumours and the factional divide among the scientists that now opened up, we need to look at some simultaneous agronomic developments that were occurring on the continent human beings had called Europe, but which is today known as Skuk. Of all areas of the world Skuk was probably the worst affected of all by the Ecological Holocaust, very few species of any kind surviving. The soil left behind after the Holocaust was and still is a whitish-grey powder, of extremely poor quality, lacking almost all nutrients in any quantity. The only plant that has been able to live in it is the dandelion that has evolved in leaps and bounds over the last one hundred and twenty thousand years. The dandelion has become a huge tree, its average girth at its base now being between fifteen and twenty metres. Its average height is three times that of the tallest trees from the pre-Holocaust era. It is thought that the reason these trees are so huge is that the energy required to extract and retain water and nutrients from the very poor soils is relatively less at that size, than it is in smaller trees.

The dandelion tree has lost its yellow flower, but has retained its rings of leaves along with their characteristic shape; however, the ring at its base has disappeared, but there are numerous enormous rings of leaves at about 15-20 metre intervals along the length of its trunk. Each leaf is about twenty metres long. Just as the leaves have the same form as pre-Holocaust dandelions, except that they are now in giant dimensions, the huge trunks are still green, and are fairly smooth and straight, like the slender dandelion stalks they descend from.

These forests extend over perhaps ninety-five percent of the entire territory stretching from what was once called Ireland by human beings, up to what they called the Urals and beyond. There is little rain but the sky is perpetually covered by low-hanging, whitish-grey clouds. The weather is permanently dim in light, and cool. The region of Skuk is virtually uninhabited by intelligent rats, and of very little interest to us, except scientifically.

The fauna that have adapted to these forests consists of many thousands of insect species, mostly black, nearly all flightless, and all small; none are bigger than 2-3 mm. in length. They crawl on the trunks, branches, and leaves of the dandelion trees, chewing the surfaces or sucking juices. They are eaten by many kinds of worm that have adapted to crawling on the trunks and in the canopies of the dandelion trees. These worms very in length from one centimetre to ten metres. They are all of them various shades of green, which begs the question: why are the insects not also green? The only answer given so far by scientists is that the worms are always so close to the insects, and have developed such excellent sight, that the insects´ colour is not very important in terms of camouflage, especially as they often almost completely cover the trees. It is also

rather unclear why the worms themselves should all be so uniformly green, as there are no birds in our world, not one species having survived the Holocaust. The only predators of these worms are a kind of mammal descended from the only bat-species that survived the Holocaust. They vary in size from about half a metre in width, half a metre in length and about six centimetres in height, to a size some twenty times larger, but with the same proportions. They have lost their wings and hence their ability to fly. The largest ones wrap themselves around the trunks and branches of trees. Their normal colour is black.

As they crawl up and down the trunks, along the branches, and on the huge leaves, these animals look something like skates, the fish that date from pre-Holocaust times. They have retained the ancient habit of sleeping upside down.

The only other important animals that live in these forests are the numerous species of rats and mice, all quite small that live on the forest floor. They feed on the skins falling from moulting insects in the canopies above. Many of the insect species there have larval phases and as they metamorphose into adults, their skins fall in clouds, like dust, ash, or mist. Often the forest floor is completely carpeted by the rats and mice, so that an intelligent rat-intruder finds him or herself unable to move without standing on and squashing them at every step. In addition to moulting insect skins, the rats and mice on the forest floor eat dead skate-bats and worms when these die and fall from the tees.

As we have remarked, intelligent rats have found no use up till now for any of the flora or fauna in these gloomy, sombre, and monotonous forests, perpetually silent but for the squeaking and squawking of the rats and mice. But about a year before Mary Cockroach died it was discovered that if whole dandelion trees are chopped up and ground down almost to a powder, and are treated with certain chemicals, they render a substance rather like soft clay or plasticine, with which handsome buildings can be constructed. After some weeks or months, depending on the climate, this substance solidifies, and leaves a very strong and also attractive structure.

Now, some chemicals that have the desired effect on the dandelion tree powder have been found in the mouths and anuses of certain lizards. Others have been manufactured in laboratories. But when the group of renegade scientists started to explore the properties of different samples of cells from Mary Cockroach's body, they found that a chemical taken from cells in her anus, which could be allowed to multiply, worked on the dandelion powder far better, and far more efficiently, than any of the rival chemicals so far tried. As mentioned above, the renegade scientists signed a contract with a leading rat-house construction company. They now produce enormous round balls of the multiplied cells, with diameters of twenty metres. These are coloured with streaks of white, red, and grey. They are transported to a number of factories set up in Skuk by the company. The cell-balls are transported by flying heli-rat balls, bubbles that can be produced to almost any required size. The surface container is entirely transparent, and is made from a mixture of glass, plastic, and amber. It has a rotating propeller above it, and thick spokes pointing behind it, and it runs on hydrogen fuel.

Production of the soft clay-like substance, called "dandehouse", began about four years ago, and has been extremely successful, technically and commercially. What happens is that the chemical extracted from the anal cells, in liquid form, is poured over a conveyor-belt of dandelion powder.

The huge balls of cells can produce the chemical for a very long time, if maintained under appropriate conditions.

When the rat-scientists grouped around Vomistaga Anallo became aware of all this, they were furious. They had hard-rats assault and sequester three of the renegade scientists while they were going about their business outside their homes, and had them treated to the Big Punishment.

In this widely known and frequently used punishment, the victim is tied up and rendered unable to move, while four extremely big and tough rats charge into him or her. First two charge one from each side, then the other two charge, one from the back and one from the front; then the first two charge from the sides again. Each time a pair of rats turn round after their charge they whip the victim as hard as they can with their tails. This will go on for as long as the rat in charge commands that it should. The hard-rats are like charging rhinoceroses, only without horns!

The reason the four hard-rats don´t charge all at the same time, is that they hurt themselves if there is no means for the charged-on rat´s body to expand, either breadth wise or lengthwise. As the reader may imagine, if the charged-on rat bursts or explodes, it is extremely uncomfortable and quite disgusting for the punishing rats.

Things got worse after the much-publicized applications of the Big Punishment. Attacks and counter-attacks between the factions led to the deaths of three out of the nineteen rat-scientists on the original team. One of them was Vomistaga Anallo herself, and her death led to demonstrations of grief and rage all over the world, as for most rats she had made the discovery that made their sacredly important wine better and cheaper.

After a few years it was realized that Mary Cockroach´s cells were irrelevant anyway, as everything that could be done with them could be done equally well with the cells of cockroaches descended from her, so long as they held the particular, crucial parts of her genotype. In effect the renegade scientists had hoodwinked the rat-house construction company into believing that Mary´s anus cells were unique.

At this point dear reader, I will take my leave of you, as I believe I have now fulfilled the objectives I set out for myself when I started to write this tract.

Rhetorix Flute
The 79th Day of 203,018 A.D.

HANS, THE LAST MAN

There was a man who had been forgotten, and lived on a huge leaf floating in an enormous lake. Because he had lost his memory he did not know how long he had been there, how he had arrived there, nor who had left him there alone, although he knew with certainty that he had once been with other people there.

This man´s name was Hans, which was one of the things he had not forgotten. At night he would ponder his fate as he stared at the stars, but in the day he was too busy trying to catch a fish, a lizard, or a bird to think beyond his immediate needs.

He sometimes talked to himself out loud, and a great deal of the time he was conscious of a two-way conversation going on within his mind. This ensured that he never imagined he was the only human being who had ever lived, even if he was the only one still alive now.

Hans often wondered, at night, what kind of personality he had. Was he kind or obnoxious; gentle or ferocious; trusting or untrusting? Because he was never in the company of other human beings, and could not remember those times when he undoubtedly had been, he was never able to test himself, so to speak, against other people.

Strangely, he was fairly aware that his lack of human company prevented him from thus knowing himself, though being a solitary person permanently surrounded by nature, he was assured of an extreme awareness of his existence as the only conscious being in the universe, at least as far as his experience could bear that out.

For a long time, though he could not remember for how long, he had wished some people would come to his leaf and find him. But in time he ceased to wish this; this was at just about the same time that he had begun to keep records of the movements of the sun, moon, and the stars, and could gauge the passage of time.

He started to feel a sort of dread of what would happen if people did arrive, and so he did absolutely nothing that might draw attention to himself on his leaf. In fact he thought it unlikely that there were people within thousands of miles, if people still existed at all; but still he was mindful that if a ship or aeroplane were to pass close by, people inside might notice a fire, or any kind of disturbance of sound or sight, and so he adopted a mode of living that maintained as low a profile as possible.

The leaf Hans lived on was rather like a huge Victoria Regia lily leaf, except much larger, much thicker, and of a much darker green. Other things grew and lived upon it: small plants,

mushrooms, small mammals and reptiles, amphibians, and of course numerous invertebrates, especially insects. The leaf contained a complex ecosystem, from which Hans could supplement his main diet of fish and birds. Birds came and went from the leaf, Hans could never know where from or to, as there was no other leaf within sight and the banks of the lake were out of sight. Yet he knew he lived on a lake with banks, but did not remember how he knew this fact, and so while it was not a mystery that these birds came and went, he did not know exactly where they went to or where they came from.

Sometimes Hans felt a terribly strong desire to speak to the birds and find out what lay beyond the water that surrounded his leaf. Occasionally he achieved a dialogue with particular birds, after he had ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms or the secretions from certain frogs that inhabited his leaf. From what the birds sang and told him, the banks around the lake were forever moving further away, and although there were other leaves like his within the lake, they were all of them always moving away from his leaf, rather like the galaxies after the Big Bang; and anyway, the birds assured him, none of them had a man living on them. As for the banks of the expanding lake, the birds told Hans clearly that they sheltered no human beings at all, and that he was the only human being they had ever come into contact with.

“Have you really never seen another human being?” Hans asked them once.

“Not we, no, but our parents and grandparents used to see them,” replied the friendly birds.

“Where?” Hans persisted. But he could never get a clear answer from even the most lucid and articulate bird on his leaf.

Eventually, of course, Hans became old. He realized he was going to have to die. He found himself wondering at night, under the shimmering stars and miraculous moon, where on his leaf he would best die. But in time he came to decide that this conjecture was ridiculous: how could he know exactly when he was going to die? He might lie down in some chosen spot, then not die; or he might happen to be on a part of the leaf he did not want to die on, and then, lo and behold! He could die exactly there.

So he stopped thinking about when and where he would die. Funnily enough, once he stopped thinking or worrying about this, he found he was not dying at all. In fact, Hans has been on this leaf so long now that he sometimes wishes he would at last die. But he does not; he just lives on and on and on. The author of this account is quite sure he will himself die before Hans does, and thus be unable to record his death. For this reason the author has decided it is time to conclude this narrative, but respectfully hopes it has informed the reader in what he or she obviously wanted to know about Hans, the last man, living and not yet dying, upon his leaf in a gigantic lake.

ANT-AND-DOG FARM

Tamikrin was travelling up the Río Yavari in a motor boat he had hired in Tabatinga, which lies on the Brazilian border with Colombia and Peru; eager to see dolphins, turtles, monkeys and parrots. He had with him his wife Charita, and their guide Huaco. Otherwise in the boat there was Sergio the *motorista,* and the latter's seven year old son, Chico.

"Four and a half in a boat!" joked Tamikrin, and in the first two days they saw monkeys, many birds including parrots, but not yet dolphins or turtles.

On the third day, Huaco informed Tamikrin and Charita that they would pass, at about midday, an ant-and-dog farm, on the Peruvian side of the river.

"A *what*?" cried Charita, unsure if she had heard Huaco correctly.

Huaco explained: "An Austrian woman with her Peruvian husband and a Russian friend have run an ant-and-dog farm there for the last seven years, but it has not yet been opened to the public. They have been breading ants all these years to get larger, and dogs to get smaller, until at last they hope to bread a dog with an ant, but nobody knows if they have succeeded yet."

Tamikrin was inclined to ignore what Huaco had said but Charita was troubled by it, although she had no idea whether to take the story seriously or not.

The boat chugged along the beautiful river, and Tamikrin enjoyed seeing many superb birds flying across it, until, at midday almost exactly, he and Charita were shaken by a strange, perturbing sight. Swimming out from the Peruvian side of the river was a most disturbing looking animal. It was about the size of a stoat or weasel, with a head shaped somewhat like a dog, except that instead of ears, two waving antennae protruded out from it. It had not four, but six legs paddling away, and its body was divided into a thorax and a much larger abdomen, joined by a very narrow waist. Every few moments it made a noise like a cross between a bark and a kind of hissing, shivering sound. It had a short tail that lashed against the river´s surface behind it. It was a reddy-brown colour, and seemed to be making its way towards the motor boat.

Tamikrin and Charita were utterly mesmerized, if not to say terrified, but neither could speak; whilst Huaco, Sergio, and Chico looked at the animal quite unmoved.

The boat began to turn towards the right, just heading off the swimming animal, and made towards a group of wooden buildings by the side of the river.

“No!” screamed Charita, but Sergio continued to steer the boat towards the bank.

“Why are you going towards those houses?” shouted Tamikrin, and Sergio replied:

“Because we need more fuel for the motor, and also water and other supplies”
Tamikrin thought this was probably true, so he said nothing more.

They drew up alongside a wooden jetty, and Tamikrin and Charita stepped warily off the boat. All was quiet and peaceful, and there was no-one to be seen.

The five of them walked up to the first house. Huaco rapped on the door, but just as a white-haired woman appeared, several ant-dogs rushed out from behind the house and leapt on Chico, who was quickly brought to the ground. The gnashing teeth, the hideous saliva, and the stinging poisons of these vile animals soon silenced the young boy, and with the help of a number of other animals who quickly gathered round the kill, Chico was completely devoured; bones, skin, and all.

Tamikrin and Charita were utterly speechless, but Sergio spoke up presently:

“This happens sometimes,” he said. “We must accept it as the Will of God.”

Tamikrin and Charita were shown to the cabin where they would be staying. They quickly shut and bolted the door, and waited for nightfall. In the heat they sweated, and in their fear they were immobile and unable to speak more than a very few words to one another.

“When will we leave?” asked Charita eventually.

“I don’t know, tomorrow morning I hope, answered Tamikrin.

Night came, and with it the usual noises of the jungle completely surrounded them. Insects, frogs, and birds filled the air with their incessant sounds. Later on they started to hear the hideous bark-hisses of the ant-dogs, rising up above the jungle orchestra. They held hands, coldly, throughout the night, but at five o´ clock in the morning Charita realized that Tamikrin was dead. She got up quietly, and opened the door of the cabin.

Outside it were dozens of the creatures, pressing their snouts and antennae close up to her, but they did not, for some reason, attack her. Instead her mind gave way, and she collapsed. She never regained normal consciousness, and today she is in a psychiatric institution in Manaus, on the Río Negro, in the Brazilian Amazon.

THE CIRCULAR FATE OF JULIUS/BRODBIN

Julius began to think about which portraits of people important to him he would choose to have on his walls, if, that is, he had a house with walls to hang them on. He decided: the portrait of Shelley on the front of Richard Holmes´ biography of him; the portrait of Mozart on the front of Hildesheimer´s biography of *him*; the portrait of Beethoven in the Oxford Companion to Music; the self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci that everyone knows, in pencil with his long grey-white hair; and Rembrandt's last self-portrait as an old man.

He was on the point of leaving his room in a lodging house in Dubrovnik, putting on a light jacket to go outside, when these thoughts came into his mind. As he went down the stairs that led from outside his room into the street, he began to remember things that had happened to him when he lived in Iquitos, Peru, and he was still musing over these memories when he arrived at his local bar, and sat down to drink a beer.

Images of palm-trees along the river-front on Malecon came flooding into his mind. He saw a bar in his mind´s eye that he had often frequented, with strange, surrealistic paintings on its wall, of naked medusan ladies, mermaids, seductresses, and also of fishermen in canoes spearing fish, and flocks of amazingly-coloured birds flying over the river from one side to the other. The Amazon was covered in such deep purple and black clouds, the sky shook when the thunder began, and when lightning burst out and broke the sultry peace with streaks of electric fire.

In his room in Dubrovnik, Julius had a comfortable, though very old and torn leather sofa; a nice but very scratched and weakened mahogany table, and two wooden chairs that were also quite comfortable, on one of which he always sat when he was writing at the mahogany table. He was presently writing a kind of circular novel, that went from Dubrovnik to Iquitos and back again many times over, pursuing the experience of its hero, an aspiring, struggling composer whose music was deeply appreciated by certain small minorities but who somehow never managed to break into a wider circuit. This character was called Brodbin, but Julius was quite prepared to accept that Brodbin´s personally was drawn from himself to a considerable degree, in a concentrated, condensed, unbalanced, and uneven way, and that Brodbin´s fate was most certainly in many ways a reflection of his own, as best Julius could interpret that illusive, shifting, deceiving, manipulating, and cheating phenomenon.

Drinking at his local bar just a few strides from his lodging house, Julian returned to his thoughts about portraits. The portraits of painters, a poet, and composers that he had included into his imaginary collection were not the only ones he would have liked: but there exists no authentic portrait of Dante or Shakespeare, while Van Gogh´s self-portrait painted after he cut off his ear is

too sad, too much a tragic work of art in its own right to treat as simply a portrait. Rembrandt's last self-portrait is also tragic of course, thought Julius, but Rembrandt had at least known better times, whereas Van Gogh never had.

Julius knew of no really powerful portraits of Tchaikovsky, but he had seen superb portraits of Dostoyevsky and Mussorgsky when he went to Moscow a few years before. He wished he knew portraits of Tu Fu and Li Po, for by no means did Julius consider that great artists of infinite soul came only from Europe. He would have loved to know a portrait of José Silva for example, the great Colombian poet. But of such later artists, poets, and composers as Mahler, Richard Strauss, Shostakovich, Baudelaire, Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Jackson Pollock, Ernest Hemmingway, or William Burroughs – all of these he knew too well in photographs for him to yearn for their portraits. As for Wagner and Bruckner, he knew very good portraits of both great composers. But for some reason he would not have wanted them in his special, imaginary collection.

Brodbin, the hero of Julius´ novel, had started to compose music seriously at the age of twenty-four, just at the time he became engaged to marry the daughter of his father´s best friend, and just as he was completing his final exams in engineering and design. Musical thoughts simply squeezed themselves into his mind, so he left Dubrovnik and went to Peru, where after some years of wandering he ended up in Iquitos, on the Amazon in the eastern rainforest. There he composed a good deal of music, for a great range of instruments both Western and traditional Peruvian, and for voice. Friends of his in Iquitos organized concerts of his music at various venues, both public and in private houses, but after several years Brodbin found his situation more and more frustrating, especially as he earned no significant money from his work. He was always in debt, and only scraped enough money to live on by giving occasional German lessons, except when he received money from one kind, sympathetic aunt of his who lived in Zagreb. This aunt loved Croatian Impressionistic music, and imagined that her nephew, although he wrote music in a different style from that which she most loved, was in some sense an heir to the movement she had believed in so devotedly in her youth.

And so Brodbin returned to Europe, and lived in Dobrovnik again, eking out an existence teaching German and designing posters for shops and restaurants. Julius felt that Brodbin represented something symbolically important in the historical and cultural interaction between Europe and South America, and planned to have him return to Iquitos in his old age. But as time went by Julius began to feel tired, and worried whether he could in all honesty have Brodbin return to Peru. But something happened to stir up his enthusiasm once again, in the most unexpected way.

In the bar where Julius was drinking beer, there sat at a table near to him a woman with a black imitation leather hand-bag, and Julius found her rather pleasing to behold. She looked about forty, while Julius was now fifty-eight, and so her few wrinkles were rather attractive to Julius, as were her large but shapely thighs, easily seen as her skirt was pulled up as she sat, apparently alone, at her table drinking a glass of white wine.

Somehow or other, as the evening moved along and people came and went, Julius found himself sitting at the same table as this woman, whose name was Eva. Quite effortlessly conversation commenced between them, and one thing led to another, Julius and Eva parting late that night

and agreeing to meet again the following evening. A liaison evolved between them, which changed Julius´ feelings about life and himself very profoundly.

Eva lived quite comfortably with her sister, and so neither she nor Julius changed living arrangements, though they would stay at one another's home several nights a week. Julius felt something like a rebirth of his soul.

Then there came about an extraordinary coincidence. Eva worked as a part-time secretary in a Dubrovnik-based Import-Export company, that had offices in various parts of the world, including South America. One office was in Iquitos, on the Peruvian Amazon. One day she was asked if she would like to work in that office as she could speak Spanish reasonably well, and so she brought the matter up with Julius. Julius thought it was a wonderful idea, and encouraged Eva to say yes. He imagined he would go with Eva to Iquitos.

Over several months Eva and Julius discussed and planned their future in Iquitos. The exact nature of Eva´s appointment; what Julius would do in Iquitos; how long they would live there, or if indeed they would ever return to Dubrovnik. As the months passed however, a certain unease took hold of both Julius and Eva about the project. Julius began to feel that perhaps he would not be able to pick up the threads of life again in Iquitos now he was older; even though, or perhaps because he would be with Eva. Eva wondered what would happen if Julius was unhappy there, and whether she would feel pulled between completing her assignment, and returning to Europe. After some heart-rending nights discussing the problem, Julius decided he would not, after all, go to Iquitos with Eva. Perhaps he would join her later, after some time had passed. They could easily communicate while she was in Iquitos and he was in Dubrovnik.

So Eva went alone, flying from Dubrovnik to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Lima, Lima to Iquitos. Once she was there, she easily sank into the tropical life-style and mental state that Iquitos induced within her, while Julius grew into a somewhat fatalistic, sullen state of mind, his heart-strings pulling away from the memory of Eva and returning with full thrust to his novel about Brodbin, which he had provisionally entitled "Brodbin´s Circles".

Julius had Brodbin return to Iquitos instead of himself. In the novel, Brodbin met a commercial trader in tropical fish in Dubrovnik called Katchuk, who, on finding out that Brobdin had spent many years in Iquitos and spoke good Spanish, suggested he should work in Iquitos as Katchuk´s agent. Brodbin loved fish, and dying to return to the rain-forest, accepted Katchuk´s offer. He went to Iquitos by the same flights that Eva had taken: Dubrovnik-Frankfurt-Lima-Iquitos, and was delighted to be back in his beloved Iquitos, now without the crippling financial anxieties he had suffered before; as he now received a salary from Katchuk´s firm.

One evening, shortly after Brodbin´s arrival in Iquitos, the Peruvian secretary in his office invited him to a party in a friend´s house at which Brodbin was told there would be a number of other foreigners. Brodbin went; and who should he meet, but Eva? Brodbin and Eva, able to communicate in Serbo-Croat, talked and danced all night, drinking Peruvian rum mixed with various fruit juices all the time.

Eva and Brodbin clicked emotionally, culturally, erotically, and in every other essential way. Within a year they got married, and lived in a modest flat in Ricardo Palma, a street in the centre

of Iquitos. With tears in his eyes, Julius finished this part of his novel one Friday evening at about ten o'clock. He put down his pen, and went out to his local bar, where he drank beer for several hours until he almost collapsed.

He was helped back to his room by two of his regular drinking partners, and slept soundly for some fourteen hours. When he awoke, he immediately realized he must go to Iquitos as soon as humanly possible. Out of his window he saw the superb towers and spires of Dubrovnik spiking into an azure sky, and dreamt ahead in thrilling anticipation of even more azure skies above Iquitos. He became obsessed with the urgency of arriving in Iquitos before Brodbin´s marriage with Eva had settled into a complete certainty. From that moment on, Julius could not move well, though the doctors at the municipal hospital of Dubrovnik were unable to explain why; he could only walk slowly, hunched, and for little more than a hundred metres at a time.

It took Julius some while to organize his trip to Iquitos, the biggest problem being, inevitably, obtaining the necessary money. His aunt in Zagreb, now very old indeed, sent him some money, but her notions of money's value were locked into a distant past, when a large sausage cost the same as a single stick of chewing-gum costs today. Once he was able to buy an airline ticket and had spoken to his landlady, Julius suffered some kind of nervous breakdown, but was lucky to be taken to a psychiatric clinic run by a kind and clever woman called Gabrielle Mishka, who had read some of Julius´s essays and poetry, and greatly admired them. Julius´s mind gave way completely after several weeks in the asylum; in his last vivid memory he was in Iquitos with Eva, looking out over the River Amazon from a bar on Malecon, composing a chorale; both the words and the music were his, in a remarkable blend of Croatian-Bosnian and Peruvian musical opportunities. It was a very beautiful memory, a dream in which all traditions mingled in deep wonder and equality, the sky blue as a deep ink-well, with the sun pelting down, the brown-crazy river drifting lazily and magnificently and muddily along its strange Vishnu-dreaming way.

When Julius came to, so to speak, some twenty months or so later, he was extremely clear-minded, exceptionally sane, and precise in his mind´s focus. He got dressed, kissed Gabrielle on both cheeks, and left the clinic. At the doors of the hospital, can you imagine whom he saw? There, walking towards him, in a modest but shapely dress, full-breasted and radiant in warm, milky middle-age, was Eva. He stopped in his slow steps, as Eva approached him; they hugged each other in some form of beautiful, happy union and then kissed a little very gently.

The clouds gave way, and the eternal sun streamed and streaked its rays through the radiant air, and Elizabeth's Prayer from *Tannhauser*, or something close to it, flooded from the upper spheres of truth down unto the sweet kisses that passed between their tender lips.

"When did you get back from Iquitos?" asked Julius eventually.

"I didn't get back" replied Eva, "because I never went there."

Julius was bemused, but felt it better not to pursue the question. Later, Eva explained that at the last minute the arrangement, according to which she was to have gone to Iquitos, had been cancelled.

"Why didn't you tell me then, if you were here all the time?" panted Julius.

“Why should I have done, when you wanted me to meet Brodbin anyway? exclaimed Eva.

“How on earth did you know that?” continued Julius.

Eva did not reply, but months later Julius did at last go to Iquitos, concerned finally to find out whether Eva had been there or not, and if so for how long; and also, what she had done there.

When Julius arrived in Iquitos, he spent the first few evenings drinking in bars on the riverfront. He detected no evidence that Eva had been there. At first he felt very bad and guilty for having distrusted her. But in time, as he gazed over the warm green stretch of *varzea* that spreads out between Malecon and the river, whose bank is nowadays far out, Julius started to feel relaxed; bur at the same time he was entirely confused emotionally about Eva.

Meanwhile, Eva went to visit Julius at his lodging house in Dubrovnik, only to hear from his landlady that Julius had gone away, for good, as far as she could understand.

Eva had all this time been living with her sister, but now she decided to move into Julius´s old room, as she found his former landlady quite congenial.

Meanwhile, Julius spent several months in Iquitos, but then decided to return to Dubrovnik. On his return he began to feel he should call himself Brodbin, having spent so many years pursuing and shaping Brodbin´s fictional life. When he went to the flat in which Eva and her sister had always lived in the past, he rang the bell, and Eva´s sister, called Tanya, opened the door. Julius, now called Brodbin, was invited in by Tanya, a middle-aged woman equally as attractive as Eva, though of a different hue and flavour. Brodbin entered, and on that very night a relationship between him and Tanya began to flower.

Brodbin and Tanya have stayed together until now, whilst Eva, once she heard of her sister’s and Julius´s treachery, immediately pressed her boss to send her at last to Iquitos; she went there, and met a Peruvian man called Cesar, and the two of them soon started to live together. At the present moment, Julius/Brodbin lives with Tanya in Dubrovnik, whilst Eva lives with Cesar in Iquitos.