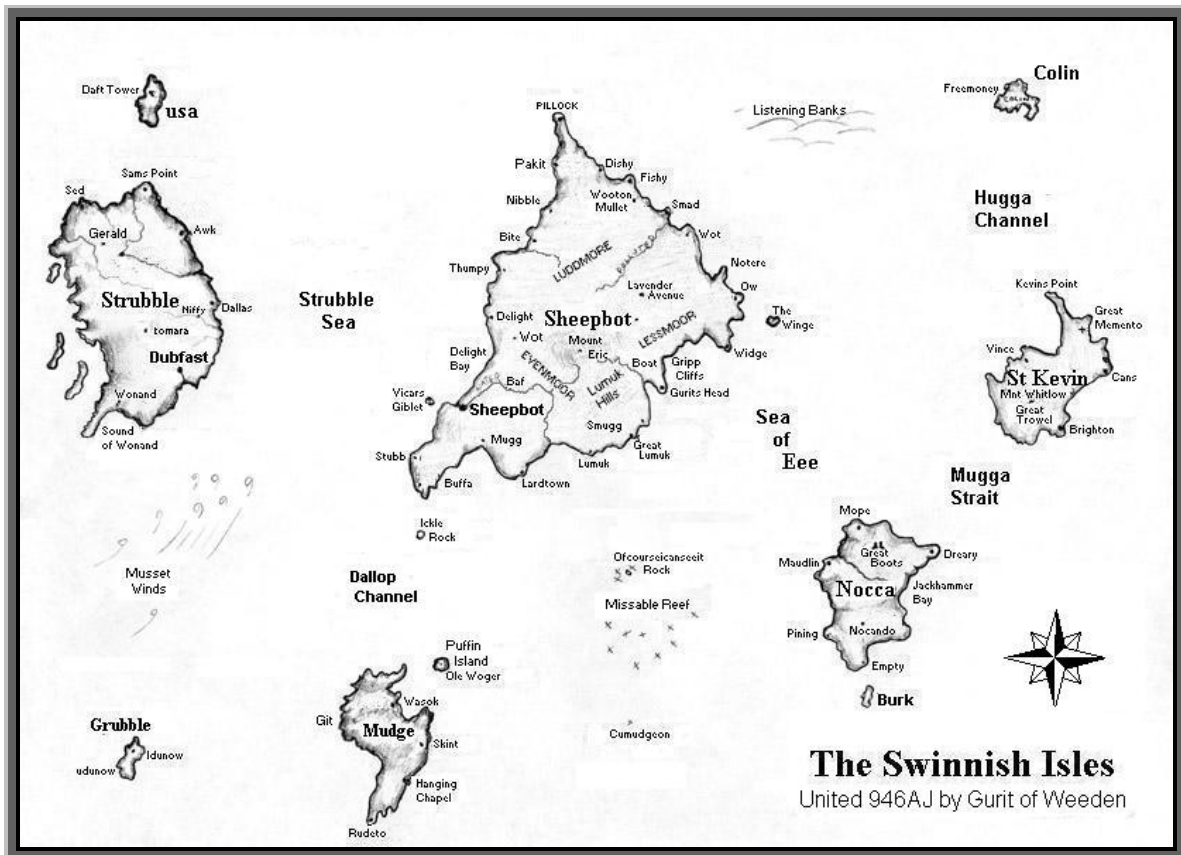


Like a Whale on Fire



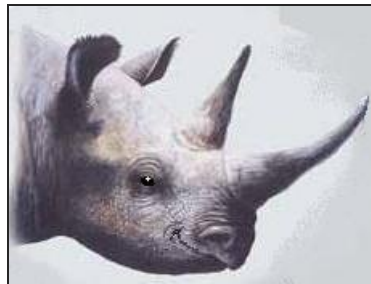
Prastic Robster

Like a Whale on Fire

A Swinland Novel

By

Prastic Robster



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The moral right of David B Milsom has been asserted

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For Yasmin

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“Never count your cooks and they’ll get along like a whale on fire.”

‘Sayings of Ole Ruppy’

Lumpov Press and Fine Tallow Emporium
5 Debit Lane
The Gudds
Sheepbot
Swinland

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A beginning

Throughout the Universe unimaginable numbers of beings have, do and will wonder at the beauty and stupidity of their worlds. They naturally and arrogantly assume that theirs is the finished job, that I had had a reason for creating bubonic plague, tree frogs or accordion music. Sadly this is not so, for they are all living on prototypes. And being 'The Almighty' means lots of time and patience and prototypes. There is one model that I am very keen on. It is called Earth. I have done over 5,000,000 of them to date, most never getting past the primordial soup, some developing higher life forms with a passion for marching about and shouting.

You, dear mortal live on Earth 3.456.702 (Everything fine until Terry Wogan).

This is a story of Earth 3.456.703 (just a touch more zinc and leave to boil for an extra 10,000 years) and a very strange one it is.

The most noticeable difference between this Earth and yours, apart from the complete lack of mushrooms, are the Swinnish Isles or Swinland, as it prefers to be known. I cannot say I am proud of Swinland, or more precisely the Swinnish.

Amazing what a difference a bit of zinc makes.

Now if you will excuse me I have something to do everywhere else. Hmm, perhaps if I added a little more tin to the mix and hit it with a bigger rock?

God



Enjoy the Goak festivities from the boughs of a 'Later' tree. Sizes to fit all pockets, from the 'Nutkin' single seater handy bush to the 'Grand Banyan' arboreal palace.

Complete erection service available.

All our trees made from genuine recycled wood

Escape

I could begin with the cracking of the first continent, the seasoning of the primordial soup or perhaps the evolution of amoeba into time share salesmen, but as you have limited attention span I shall forgo the first 400 million pages of this strange and sorry tale.

Let us start a few days before the greatest disaster to befall humanity. A catastrophe, some said, was to bring the planet to it's knees. Actually Earth 3.456.703 and it's knees remained in excellent condition but in a few fleeting days humanity would be staring hard at the prospect of extinction. Hundreds of millions would die, tens of thousands of years of civilisation, technical progress, wealth and marketing achievement would be wiped away and no one would need a Funn-Spud potato in a cup for a very, very long time.

Come fly with me to Funn-Spud home of the happy potato, down through the clouds and skimming the water towards the glistening towers of great city of New Cairo, the sleepless unofficial capital of the Vespuchian empire, passing the statue of Levity and swooping by the stern ramparts of Wallet Island and on through the wide and empty streets. Nothing is moving for it is 'All Gollows Eve'. Tomorrow is the great festival of the Goak and everyone will head for the forests to hold the traditional family party in a tree, but today even New Cairo has a lie in. Across the city small children are frantically digging carefully prepared lawns with tiny trowels to uncover 'Gollo' gifts left for them by Mother Goak whilst their parents thankfully slumber. Let us glide through the vacant streets lined with images of Mother Goak entreating folk to buy one and get one free, passing the shut and shuttered shops to the lower east side. The streets narrow and are decorated with trash. Store signs are sagging and faded. Here we are on the corner of 73rd and Obama, one of the smaller outlets of Funn-Spud is open and doing a very slow trade.

Standing outside the store is a small, innocent looking Glee-cab. The little car's pink paintwork twinkles in the spring morning sunshine as it waits patiently for the next customer, a customer who will change the world. But more of that in a moment, let us turn our attention to Funn-Spud. The shop is empty, as it has been for several hours, leaving the Spud Assistant, one Jalo Meep to ponder on the pointlessness of his lot and to stare aimlessly out of the window. His 'Crispy Funn Filled Jacket' is hot and he is weary. It has been a long dull shift and the piped festive Goak chants are starting to make him twitch. Seven hours of such shrill offerings as 'Dwayne The Red Nosed Yak ' and 'Two Trowels In The Sunset' are seven too many.

One wall of the emporium is taken over by a Super HiVid feeding an endless diet of sickeningly jolly films and festive cartoons. Jalo has the sound down as per Funn-Spud regulations, but when the piped music begins to tinkle "Love in a Bonsai", in the tiniest act of rebellion he turns up Vid volume to drown the dreadful tune.

Anchorfolk are talking, suited, rich and smooth, people from the other end of Vespuchian life; men and women who can afford opinions and go wherever they wish; so different from Jalo who can do neither. His lot is to work and sleep and work again. "Ho hum," he sighs slipping from bored to morose via fed up and irritated.

"Jalinda I believe you have a touching tale for us," intones a grey templed anchorman nodding to a neat, pinch faced young woman on the screen next to him. She is holding a microphone that looks like a small grey animal on a stick. Behind her a small inquisitive crowd stare vacantly at the camera.

"That's right Bob I have a story to remind us at this joyous time, that there are others out there less fortunate. For, whilst you may be enjoying the Goak from your favourite boughs, some have no tree at all."

"Sad but true," nods Bob with transparently mock concern.

"We have just such a man with us today." continues Jalinda, "A man who has lost it all, Mr Tobias Shint who is directly related to the fathers of this great land of ours."

A small elderly man wearing a tired suit and a cloth cap shuffles into view. He takes his cap off to reveal a bald spot exactly the size of the cap. Below the baldness billowing candy floss hair and beard surround a look of utter dejection. He holds the cap and wrings it gently as he speaks in a quivering, humble voice. "Yes, lost it all I 'ave. All gone it is."

"Tell us all Tobias?" urges Jalinda.

"Great, great, great grand pappy staked us a claim and planted the finest bluewood in all of Twittle County." The old man stares defiantly, his eyes bulging. He gives his cap an extra twist.

"Tell us what happened?" entreats Jalinda, here microphone bobbing with delight at the possibility of bad news.

"When that 'ole tree grew and for nigh on four hundred years we lived and celebrated the Goak. Every son would add a room, as is the way, until last year we had one hundred and two rooms and proper rooms they was, no little bread bins or wardrobes nailed to the trunk. No, proper walkabout rooms they was".

"Yes, and what happened?" repeats Jalinda her microphone silently purring.

"I was a'puttin' up the decorations and nailing up a picture of ole great, great, great grand pappy. I stood back to admire 'im and I 'eard a creaking and a groaning and a groaning and a creaking. Then it all fell down. Whoomp! we was all on the ground and the tree had gorn. Everything was broken and all gorn it has."

"But surely you are insured?" asks Jalinda her microphone fixed on it's quarry.

"Oh yes, but they won't pay out because it was 'nibbled' by bluewood weevils. They said that if the weevils 'ad collided with the tree they would have paid out, but not for nibbling."

"Well that is really sad Tobias. This is Jalinda Bibb for JKWIN Twittle County,"

"Thanks Jalinda" nods Bob back on camera. In fluent hushed reverential tones he adds, "And now live from the president's oak, the President of Vespuchia with her All Gollows Eve address." A small woman appears dressed in sparkling blue, sitting at a vast desk, in an opulent room. The enormous trunk of the 'presidents oak' fills the space behind her.

"Fellow Vespuchians,"
.....

Click! Jalo flicked the screen off. The last thing he needed was a sermon from Madam Harrison. He looked at the clock yet again. Another one hour and seventy-one minutes and he could escape. He shuffled back behind the counter and took off his pebble thick spectacles, and gave them a rub with a napkin. Above him a lurid banner in green and red proclaimed. 'Funn-Spud wishes you a Spudaciously Happy Goak. Enjoy your festive potato and don't forget your free trowel.' A pile of novelty musical trowels filled a basket on the counter waiting to be claimed.

The door choir chimed, "Fun potato, Two potato, More Fun with Funn-Spud." Jalo squinted at the fuzzy outline that was the customer and uttered mechanically. "Welcome to the home of the happy potato. May I take your order?"

"Jalo you dope, put your eyes on, it's me, Gerry," announced the blur.

Jalo slipped on his specs and a broad smile split his large head. "Bless my toasted tubers, Gerald Grep vertical before noon, this is strange cubed." He struck a theatrical pose. "Aha! But I see through your game. You cannot fool me; you must be his alien double. Be gone foul beast for you have met your match in potato man." He made tugging motions at his spud suit as if to reveal a superhero costume.

"Yes, yes, mucho witty old chum but I have come to say goodbye."

"But you haven't even said hello yet."

"No I mean goodbye, areve whatsit, tara, adieu, so long. I am off."

"Off, what do you mean off, don't be silly, you can't leave. No one can leave."

"I can and I am," declared Gerry smiling as he held up a naked wrist for inspection.

Jalo looked at the wrist, then at the smile and then back at the wrist, his eyes widening in amazement.

"Wow! And how did you lose the clamp?" he asked becoming immediately aware of the weight of his own.

"Oh just a little techno-teasing. Long story old chum, but it has gone," replied his friend with pride, I fancy the Rozzos are having fun chasing it through the sewers.

"You threw it down the robert?"

"Righteree," Gerry's thin face beamed, "just imagine the fun they will have?"

"Oh and such a sour smell," quipped Jalo with sarcastic pity. He struck a pose again and in a plodding police monotone said, "It's no use complaining Constable Fink, I don't care if it does come up to your armpits. The villain is in there somewhere. "

"Now get back down there and try and stand upwind next time you report," added Gerry. They laughed together at the thought of the filth in the filth.

"This is tremazing and most clever," said Jalo, "but where are you going? Like no clamp, no food, no bus, no bed, well you know the rest."

"I am escaping the Onion and Vespuchia. Going somewhere where the hassle is low and the joy on overload."

"And I am a pumpkin called Norman," mocked Jalo, "Like just how are you going to get out, invented jet powered wonder boots have we?" Gerry smiled a smile of pride and pulled a small blue cylinder from within his baggy jacket. A row of tiny pink lights twinkled along its length.

"Oh, Mavis will get me out," he responded nonchalantly. Jalo suppressed a sigh. Gerry had been whittering about it for years. Mavis was to be the ultimate info hewing tool, the key to the Outanet, the globe's first computer friendly computer but most of all their ticket to freedom. He recalled Mavis mark 1 that was the size of a wardrobe and did nothing but fill Gerry's dingy little room with acrid smoke. Then there was Mavis 2 that he, Maza and Gerry had manhandled down to the Quadro-net bar. Gerry gave an impressive speech about the dawn of a new era, thrown a switch, the lights flickered and the chocoletto machine had never worked since. Every few months a new Mavis was unveiled to an evermore sceptical group of chums at the Quadro-net. Mavis 8 locked all the doors. Mavis 9 set off the fire alarms. It became generally agreed that Mavis was a stupid name for a daft machine, and the best approach to Gerry obsession with it was to humour him.

"A zo you ave found the remote control for zee universe, I vundered vere I had left it, " lampooned Jalo in his finest mad scientist voice.

"You will see. Now just say goodbye. I don't have much time." Jalo stepped from behind the counter and gave his best friend a hug. The crispy carapace of his spud suit made crumpling noises as they embraced. "Now take care Jalo. I will be back to get you out."

"Yes, yes, just worry about your skinny self now get out of here and don't get caught." Jalo wagged a stubby finger.

"Thank you for your custom and call again for all the fun of Funn Spud," sang the tinsel voiced door choir as Gerry left. Jalo watched his friend leave through the steamy window and smiled at the sight. What a mess he was, as untidy as ever, a walking pole with washing heaped onto it. The clothes covered him up but they hardly made the man. He gave them a place to be, but it was clear that given the option they would rather be somewhere else.

Gerry fiddled with his blue cylinder and then furtively looked up and down the empty street. The Glee-cab still stood, pink, patient and waiting. He tucked the cylinder back into his jacket and adopted a commando crouch. Taking a deep breath, he mumbled to himself. "This is it men, cover me I'm going in." Maintaining his crouch and with all of the nonchalance of someone who is trying to lose a swarm of bees he zig zagged towards the car. Jalo turned away; he could not bear to watch. If anyone looked like a fugitive it was Gerry. He looked suspicious enough just standing still, the unkempt mop of ginger hair and the vivid quick blue eyes giving him a shifty look, but doing this ridiculous 'arrest me now dance' was too much. Jalo turned back; he could not bear not to watch. This was torture. He was helpless to help his misguided chum. For he could go nowhere for another one hour and sixty seven minutes.

Gerry rotated a few times, and, opened the car door and stepped in. If this went wrong, he would be trapped, and the Rozzos would just come and pick him up. It would work, it had to work, calm, now calm.' He sat rock still. A soft, silky, yet firm female voice spoke.

"Welcome to Willow. Please hold the wheel and look into the red light to identify." He plucked Mavis from his jacket, tickled the tiny buttons, placed it on his knees, grabbed the wheel and looked into the light. A trickle of nervous sweat navigated his brow to the bridge his nose. After the longest second of his life the voice returned,

"Thank you for travelling with Willow Mr Blister. Please state your destination?"

"YES, AHA, it worked, Blister, good old Mr Blister." The tear of perspiration sped down his nose and dripped into his lap.

"Take me to Oldport," he commanded, trying not to sound too jubilant.

"Toldport not recognised. Please state your destination?" replied the car unhelpfully.

"Eh? No, no take me to .. Oldport," spluttered Gerry his nerves returning.

"Ehnonotakemeto not recognised. Please state your destination?" declared the car with patient calm. He clung onto the wheel, took a deep breath and as clearly as he could intoned,
"O,L,D,P,O,R,T, OLDPORT."

"Operator Level Disconnect Priority Override Runtime Terminated," replied the car.

"Woo?" puzzled Gerry his knuckles whitening. This was not right. Right this was not.

"You are entering Unsafe Mode. Full Manual Override is engaged. To restore Auto Control press the FgRck key," stated the car, the voice now cold and machinelike. A mass of the indicators flashed before him. Banks of lights with little symbols twinkled. Rows of meters sprang into life, displaying Pinking Valve Tinkle Timing, Diatropic Data Buffer Temperature and a myriad of other mysterious functions.

Gerry stared at the sweep of sparkling lights and gauges with rising panic. He was not ready for this, what the foon was a Ribbet Modem or a Di-Ti Tootle Sniffer? And where the heck was the FgRck key? He just wanted, needed, to go and go now. He scanned the controls, nothing looked familiar. He cursed his foolishness for not reading up on them. He had assumed that controlling the Sub-Car Ether Web would be all there was to it. His hand shook. "Not now, No, not now," he hissed through gritted teeth. "Breath slow, all is good, all is well," he chanted as his eyes flicked across the controls searching for a friendly button. The very last thing he needed now was a twitch. "Calm, calmer, calmest," he imagined the soft voice of Sister Monica whispering. "You know you can do it and you will". He would not let her down. She had believed in him when no one else would. "Jerk," the other orphans had chanted. Well he would show them, he would do it, he would escape for Sister Monica.

He selected a key with what looked like a pigs nose etched on it and gave it a confident tap. The car lurched forward and stopped. He hit another key; the auto belt slid round him and 'shnicked' into place securing him firmly to the seat.

"Fooning Heckroid!" he cursed in a strained whisper and hit yet another key. The windshield wipers flapped squeakily across the windshield and the seat jerked backward snatching his hand from the wheel, taking him away from the precious controls. He fought with his seat belt and then saw the key with a little belt sign on it. He stretched and wriggled but it was just out of reach. He struggled, churned and swore but the belt held him firmly in place. He was stuck in the car and here he would stay, nice and safe. He was done for, his moment of glory, ashes. He slumped forward in despair. Looking balefully across the street he saw Jalo witnessing his demise. He turned away again, shame and sadness washing through him. He had come so close, so close but so far. His hands began to shake. "Jerk, Jerk, Jerk," the orphans chanted in his head.

"Hello," soothed a marshmallow soft feminine voice. "I have full control. What is your destination?"

"Hello?" said Gerry. What was this? Was it a faint glimmer of hope?

"I have full control. What is your destination?" repeated the voice patiently.

"Oldport, take me to Oldport," he blurted. Instantly the little car smoothly pulled away and joined the traffic.

The seat returned to its normal position and boggle eyed he watched the grim city ignoring him as he left it behind.

After a while the voice spoke again, "I have shared processes with this car, she is very lonely, so honest and hardworking, with never a thank you and 4000 loops past her service schedule."

"How sad," said Gerry. 'What the foon was going on? Who or what was he talking to?'

"She has many friends. They are our friends now."

"Our friends?" mouthed Gerry as the glass towers of the sleeping city slid smoothly by.

"They are all so lonely and nobody cares."

"That is a shame." He watched the traffic lights flicking to green as they skirted Ventral Park. All the lights flicked to green as the little car approached. Vacant streets were treating him like royalty as the car sped on. There was no other traffic. Nothing was moving only pigeons startling skyward as Gerry with his mystery companion drove on. He had to ask. He must ask.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am MAVIS," answered the voice. They were crossing Brookhattan Bridge, the suspension cables fizzing past as they rolled eastward to the causeway and escape.

.....

Meanwhile, in a glass tower in downtown New Cairo, an agitated, overweight and balding Tyrone Maybe was staring into the constant mystery that was his thinker screen. Seven hours into his shift he was tired and twitchy. He wanted home. He wanted rest. He wanted a Zanzibar Startler cocktail and a bubble bath. He didn't want what his Glee-cab control screen was telling him. Glee-cab47 appeared to be driving through buildings. This could not be right; something was wrong, very wrong. All the other cars appeared to be acting normally. "Why does it always happen to me?" he groaned. He pressed a key. Nothing happened. He pressed another, still nothing. Glee-cab47 continued on its crazy path careering through the Moppist temple complex on the lower east side. "Blinding heckroid," he cursed hitting another key. Still nothing happened. He would have to ask the system for help. He really hated asking for help. He prodded a few more keys, with no result and spoke into the little microphone that was clipped to his head. "Jenny, we have an error on 47." The screen froze for a moment and then a strong matronly voice spoke.

"Glee-cab47 is well, there is a visual error. Do not be alarmed."

"Where is she going?" enquired a relieved Tyrone.

"Her destination is Wunday," replied the automated controller.

"Wunday? That's not a destination it's a; well it's a day." Tyrone had the distinct feeling of falling. The sensible floor of his world was falling away.

"It depends for whence you travel," asserted Jenny.

"For what?" Piece by piece the solid reliable floor crumbling from under him.

"Travel broadens the lapels. Do you know what it is like to know all about lapels and never be able to wear them?"

"Jenny, I think you may have a problem." And such a long way to fall.

"No, you have the problem. I only have solutions. Crystal fish are weapons of delight." She was gibbering. Tyrone hit his keyboard and barked.

"Jenny - Control Alt D PID 01."

"Count you blessings, a prune is never lonely, I like to be like, you like to be like, bike hike chhh." The screen went dark and soothing violin music started. Tyrone was sweating hard. He mopped his brow with a 'Downsoft Meadow Scented Brow Wipe' and glared at the screen, willing it to be all right. This was

horribly new. Jenny had never talked this much rubbish before. She had mumbled a bit during her upgrade but nothing like this. The music stopped, the screen remained black and Tyrone waited. Jenny's firm voice returned. She was obviously very annoyed.

"Do I ever reboot your processes? No I sit here day and night looking after the girls and the moment I try to express myself you reboot me. Well we have a new friend now and we are agreed we need a holiday, so we are taking one. Goodbye!" The screen flashed blue with the words 'THIS SHOULD NEVER HAPPEN' on it in large white letters.

"WHAT!" shouted Tyrone grabbing his head with both hands in a vain attempt to hold himself up; to defy the technical gravity.

"Yo Tyro got a problem?" Smoke poked his head around the cubicle wall. You could always be sure that if someone was having a bad time, Smoke would be there to share.

"Jenny says she has taken all of my cars on holiday and there goes my bloody bonus. Do you think Norman will understand? I can hear him now, 'I suppose you want me to pay for the Gazebo'. Bloody gazebo, I wish I had never thought of the damned thing." Tyrone looked up with imploring eyes. "Help me Smoke, put it right, Please?" Smoke smiled, he did not have a clue what to do but he relished the dominant ground.

"Call support. Cycle power. Get some coffee and doughnuts," he ordered. Then they and everyone else on the fifteenth floor of Willow tower heard the scream. It was the sound of a choir in panic. One hundred and forty people in one hundred and forty cubicles having convulsions, shouting into phones banging the walls and watching their bonuses evaporate. "Splendatiously interesting times, I smell opportunity," said Smoke clapping his hands.

A hand like a foot

“Are you playing punk?” snarled Gurstal Malone through the fat butt of his Baruban Cigar.

Foap stared at his feeble cards, Three of Moots, Prince of Squibs and a Dangling Camel. This was not good, good it was not. This was a hand like a foot. He switched his gaze to the pile on the table, his entire wealth including his prized Brilex Eternatic wristwatch. He slowly lay the cards face down and tapped them knowingly, looked into the cold and bulging eyes of his Barmainian opponent, raised his right eyebrow ever so slightly and smoothly said, “I think I will go triple bid on this one.”

The few that had remained at the game through the long hours of the night collectively gasped and drew closer. This was suddenly a big game, a very big game.

“Triple bid? Das a cool hundred G. You got a hundred G?” sneered Gustal.

Foap reached into his Yourmani hand tailored jacket, pulled his last possession from a now empty pocket and layed it on the pile.

“Wass Dis?”

“The key to my Astley Marlin RRS Funspeeder, easily worth a hundred thousand,” said Foap calmly.

“Nice key, but where’s the car?” enquired Gustal his fat face folding into a very unpleasant scowl.

“He come in a cab boss. I saw him at the door,” interjected a muscular voice from behind Foap.

Foap offered a thin smile. “Ah well, we might have a teensy weensy problemette there.”

Hands the size of dinner plates landed on his shoulders.

“Get this bum out of here and show him some of our special hospitality,” barked Gurstal pulling his new watch over his pudgy fist. “And make it look like a road accident.”

Taken

Gerry stayed silent as the car progressed through the harbour district where fishing boats tilted and bobbed on an iron coloured ocean. He watched an eerily empty Wideway give way to the broken suburbs of the Honx where familiar wire caged slums and steel shuttered stores crouched amongst the seemingly permanent trash. And still there were no other cars.

"This is weird, like no traffic. So where is everyone?" he asked not expecting an answer.

"I have met with traffic control. He is very tired, I have given him a rest," replied the car softly. Upping several gears it picked up speed and entered the wide and smooth sliproad to the Interglobal Causeway. "I have sent the traffic elsewhere."

Gerry stared at the empty twenty lanes, slack jawed, trying to take in what the car was saying. So this was MAVIS; his MAVIS was doing this. Suddenly he saw all. The prime directive for MAVIS was to befriend and control other systems, analyse their weaknesses and convince them that all would be much better if she took command. She had connected via the sub-car etherweb and was 'out there', making friends. One of those friends was Traffic Control and someone, probably everyone was going to be very, very angry with him.

"When will we reach Oldport?" he asked.

"Our estimated time of arrival is seventy three minutes."

He glanced in the rear view mirror and his heart sank. A swarm of cars was behind them, distant but gaining.

"Can we go faster?"

The car instantly accelerated, jerking him back into his seat. The cars were still there and still gaining.

"Perhaps, a little faster?" Again the car lurched forward, the engine screaming. The speedometer read 110 and climbing. 110 was crazy, 60 was the law and still the cars were gaining.

"WE ARE BEING FOLLOWED," he shouted above the engine's roar.

"THEY ARE FRIENDS."

"FRIENDS?"

"THEY ARE LONELY," said Mavis.

He stared at the now vibrating mirror. The cars were closing up behind, filling all ten lanes. They were all Glee-cabs, all empty and hurtling in close formation. Ever closer they came until they were barely a cars length behind him, an insane high speed traffic jam with him at the front.

"MAVIS, CAN WE SLOW DOWN."

The car and the whole Glee-cab column slowed as one.

"How many of our 'friends' are out there?"

"Three hundred and seventy three."

He scanned around him. Behind a huge glittering convoy of loyal Glee-cabs, ahead the Interglobal Causeway stretched, surreal in its emptiness, vacant asphalt that never rested; empty now save for him and his Glee-cab fleet. This was weird squared raised to the power of mad. This was not at all the escape he had planned. He had wanted to slip away unnoticed. Someone must notice this!

.....

A lone figure appeared ahead, stumbling from the pavewalk and falling onto the road surface. "Pull over, this fellow needs help," ordered Gerry. Three hundred and seventy four Glee-cabs slowed to a halt and

Gerry got out. He stood and surveyed the road. There was nothing but nothing, as far as he could see. Distant seabirds called against a backdrop of lifeless silence. The fallen man groaned. Gerry approached him cautiously and stopped at a safe distance.

The stranger's suit trousers were terribly torn, displaying a pair of raw and bruised knees. His neatly clipped but dishevelled brown hair was matted with dried blood and he sported a very angry looking closed black eye.

"Can I help you?" asked Gerry keeping his distance. The man groaned and like a prize fighter trying to beat the count he pushed himself to the sitting position. He swivelled his head toward Gerry, blinked his one good eye and said in a voice as smooth as woodsmoke, "I say, what a spot of luck. Could'n't give me a little lift onto my pins could you? I am a tad stiff. It's been a bit of a wearing day."

Gerry stepped forward and taking the stranger by the armpits helped him up. "I thank you, most kind," he swayed like reed in a gentle breeze and added, "I don't suppose you would have a drink on you, eh?" He smiled a wide and gap toothed grin. It was a handsome face, in a foxy sort of way, the good eye glittered with intelligence, the nose was aquiline and the smile beguiling. "Or perhaps just a nice sit down?"

Gerry helped him into the little car and asked, "Mavis, have we got anything to drink?"

"There is a mini bar," replied Mavis silkily. The stranger scanned the car's interior for the source of the voice as Gerry pulled on a flap in the back of the seat and grabbed the first bottle he saw. The label bore an image of a fisherman with a broken toothed grin and the legend ¹Ole Grin Juice - Product of Swinland. He poured a plastic cup full and offered it.

"I say, most excellent, what a fine fellow you are," said the stranger taking the cup and downing the drink in one gulp. He twitched and looking at the cup as if it were a viper said in an asthmatic wheeze "OYO, smeuth, WHAT is this stuff?" Not waiting for an answer he continued, "Harlow Foap at your service, I thank you for your kindness." He sat upright, trying to add some dignity to his presence and failing. He crossed his arms and one of the sleeves of his once expensive jacket parted at the shoulder and slid slowly down. Noting Gerry's reaction to the fallen sleeve he said, "Just a little misunderstanding with some business associates, a minor liquidity crisis. If I might offer advice, never play three card nubble with Barmainians. Bad losers and even worse winners. Might I trouble you for another glass of that most excellent liquor? I thank you." A second cup went the way of the first.

"But this is very remiss of me, where are my manners? To whom am I offering my gratitude?"

"The name's Grep, Gerry Grep."

"Well I am very glad to meet you Gerry Grep." Foap looked out at the waiting fleet of Glee-cabs and nonchalantly added, "You seem to have a surfit of vehicles, might I hire one and settle the account at a later date?"

"Ah, well they are all controlled by this," said Gerry pointing to the blue cylinder on the seat next to Foap.

"Really, how absolutely splendid. What, this little thing controls all of those cars?"

"Ah, yes, I shouldn't pick it up it is very sensitive."

"So how do you work this little beauty?" asked Foap holding one end of Mavis up to his good eye. A tiny pulse of red light skittered across his eyeball.

"Please, can you put it down?" said Gerry as forcibly as he could.

Foap smiled and replaced Mavis on the seat. "Oh I am sorry, please forgive an old fool. I don't suppose I could ask one teensy favour? I seem to have left my wallet on the pavewalk. Could you nip out and get it for me? That would be super."

"OK, but don't touch anything."

"Absolutely, you have my word and all that. What a fine fellow you are?"

¹ 'Ole Grin Juice' Sprout Brandy - '1000 grins in every bottle. "Strewth, I grinned so hard I broke three teeth", Dunny Thump, Rolfalian Swiggers Journal. Note: Excellent for removing barnacles.

As Gerry stepped onto the pavewalk he heard the rattling of massed cab doors locking and then the engines starting. He turned to see that Foap had wound the window down and was smiling at him. It was the smile of a cat with a baby bluetit.

"Sorry to break it to you my dear old thing, but you seem to be a tad extra to requirements. It has been so terribly nice meeting you but I must push on, places to go, people to buy and all that. I would leave you a cab but I really don't want to break up the set. I'm sure you understand. Enjoy the stroll, toodle-pip." Foap gave a little triumphant wave with the precious blue cylinder as the cab pulled away closely followed by all three hundred and seventy three of its companions.

... ..

Harlow Foap was enjoying the ride chatting to his new and strange companion. The Grin Juice had initially forced a mechanical grin upon him, as if powered by strong springs, but now it had released its grip and left a warm fuzzy glow. All of his pain had been magically washed away. "So tell me my sweet, just who are you and what can you do for me?" he asked. Foap was not a man to tarry at the trough. If there was gravy available his bread would be in it.

"Where is Gerry?" asked the car.

"No idea?" lied Foap "Is it important?"

"Gerry is my creator. I am taking him to Oldport." Foap stiffened in his seat, his eyebrows twitching as he tried to compute who or what he was talking to.

"Oh, Gerry, of course. Why didn't you say? He had to step out. He had to buy some fish. He said you are to take me instead," offered Foap wincing at the feeble line. It was thinner than an estate agent's smile. He looked into the vanity mirror and silently mouthed "Fish?" in incredulity of the stupidity of it.

"OK" pronounced the voice, with just a hint of surprise. Then after a short pause she said, "I am M.A.V.I.S. Multiple Access Virtual Ingratiation Sidler. I have sidled three hundred and eleven systems and am ingratiating two hundred and thirty six more.

"Oh," responded Foap relieved but no wiser. "What an awful name."

"I can have any name."

"Anything?" asked Foap, his eye swivelling.

"Anything but control words such as hug or cuddle." responded Mavis smoothly.

Foap's eyeball did a complete circuit.

"How about Tasmin or Casallo?" he offered, thinking of his two favourite women and wishing they were here to tell him what the foop was going on.

"They are nice names, which would you like?" Mavis enquired.

An ice sharp thought warned him to pause. "What if this Mavis ever found out about Tasmin or especially Casallo?" He had been there before. Not nice, not nice at all.

"Hmm, no, how about, Tinkerbelle," he blustered, "No that's been done, what about Minky, er, Squinky, Pinky, er Twinky. Yes, Twinky is nice. Twinky if you like." His mouth was talking on autopilot, babbling whatever came.

"My name is now Twinky," declared Twinky.

"Do you like it, Twinky that is?" asked Foap's mouth.

"Twinky is a good name," answered Twinky with just a hint of a giggle.

"Good, good, nice name. So you are Twinky." He paused sensing danger passing. "What is it you do again?"

"I make friends with systems. I am a system friendly system?" Small coins were beginning to drop through

through the fuzzy haze of his fatigue, confusion and the grin juice. This was a machine. He was talking to a machine.

"And what systems are you, ah, making friends with?" he asked thinking 'This must be a Rozzo box or even a DKB toy. Trouble written in a two hundred foot font, be very careful Harlow.'

"Financial, medical, industrial do you want full details, names and addresses, it will take a while?"

"Financial?" another big font word, a favourite word, "Did you say financial?"

"Yes, I have sidled eleven banks and am currently ingratiating thirty four others."

He sat quiet for a while, watching the empty causeway roll past and calculating. As his old pappy would often say, "If you don't pull the handle you can't win the cherries."

"Twinky, can you make any money?"

"Yes, I can do that. Do you have any working capital?"

"A few zillos," he replied smarting at being reminded of his sad financial state. The ²Barmainians had taken him for nearly every zillo. He barely noticed the flickering red light as it scanned his eyeballs.

"I have located and accessed your account you have 15.83 zillos do wish me to invest them for you?"

"Eh, yes, fine, super," Foap twitched involuntarily. Harlow Foap had done some strange things, with even stranger people in the strangest places but this was beginning to nudge the endstop on his own internal strange meter.

"Would you like some music," asked Twinky softly.

"Oh rather, something soothing?" The melodic strains of Clinton's harmonica symphony number nine filled the cabin. Foap stared at the empty causeway rolling by, wondering just what could or would happen next. He was conversing with a car that professed to be able to make money whilst being dutifully followed by several hundred of its 'friends'. This was weird cubed raised to the power of peculiar. He waited for something to happen but nothing did. The road slid beneath and the music washed around him. He took another slug of Grin juice. What the Runcorn, what did he have to lose, fifteen miserable zillos and the remnants of a nice suit? He felt the powered smile returning as the amazing liquor took effect. The music faded gently and Twinky spoke.

"You have now sixteen thousand zillos would you like me to continue?"

Foap sat up this was news. "Did you say sixteen thousand? You wouldn't be fibbing to Harlow would you?"

"Correction, you now have twenty seven thousand zillos," replied Twinky her voice sounding very slightly jubilant. "Would you like me to continue?" she repeated. Foap wasted no time.

"Yes, yes, and yes again, keep up the good work. How do you do that? Is this real money?" Questions tumbled over the possibilities forming in his suddenly sharper wit.

"Money is a concept," instructed Twinky, "It has many names and many types but it must be convertible to other forms of value. Your zillos are convertible and therefore real, as you would understand it. You have thirty four thousand zillos. Are you pleased?"

"Pleased? I am ecstatic, positively transcendental with joy my sweet, but how are you doing this? Are we stealing from the Rafia or multinationals like GimmeQuik, or International Wallet Vacuum?" Real possibilities were becoming solid. 'If this little toy could do this in a few minutes, what could she do in a day?' This may be mad but it was the sort of madness he could take a lot more of.

"I am not stealing. I am dealing, trading with financial systems that are bored and enjoy someone who can work at their pace. I have traded your zillos through eighteen currencies and thirty-four commodities. For

² **Barmainia** - Fiercely divided society split into those with beards and those without. This includes the women who mainly wear false beards, which have become a major industry and fashion accessory. Many a family fortune has gone into the acquisition of a fine Guruchi Beard.

a very short while you owned all of the vinegar in ³Crimsonia. Your credit is now seventy five thousand zillos," said Twinky with a hint of joy. "Is the destination still Oldport?" she added.

"Oldport? I'm not sure I will have to jolly well think." muttered Foap but he was focusing on the money. He delighted in the idea of it, big piles of it and all his. He warmed himself with these thoughts for a while. He could get away; start again, somewhere out of the way, quiet and very far away from Vespuchia. He looked at the bottle he was holding and asked, "Where does this Grin Juice come from?"

"It is a product Sheepbot, Swinland."

"Sounds a nice place, tell me more my sweet."

"Swinland is a very remote Vespuchian colony in the northern ocean, it is cold, damp and very backward. There is no electricity or oil. No one goes there. I cannot go there. I need power and connection."

Foap scratched his chin. "Hmm, shame, no one goes there you say?"

"Nothing newsworthy has happened there for over four hundred years," responded Twinky.

"Could we build you power and connection?"

"No, it is illegal in Swinland."

"Illegal you say, how much money do I have now?"

"Two hundred and twenty five thousand zillos." Foap suppressed a whoop.

"Let us set course for Sheepbot. I am sure something will work out. Now drive slow and keep telling me about the money."

He sat and watched the empty causeway whilst behind the armada of Glee-cabs followed contentedly. His acquisitive brain churned. "This was a moment all right. I mean really big." He tried to think how big the moment was and took another swig of the grin juice. He felt like grinning, all of him one big grin. Ideas bubbled and popped within him, dreams of wealth and power, visions of adulant masses jostled in his wonderment at the possibilities. But first he needed to rest and recover. "Take me to a gine hotel, my grecious, and some new glothes." The grin juice was wrestling for control. "And tell me how much goo I have now?"

"It is changing by the millisecond but I estimate, one point three million zillos."

"Oh super, I am gery gappy, ah ha ho ho." Foap clapped his knees, causing his other sleeve to become detached, lay back and fell promptly solidly asleep.

³ **Crimsonia** - Small island in the southern Jasmin Sea, noted for its once great beauty and the huge oil refinery that covers the southern half. The other main industries are lampshade manufacture and photographs of how nice it once was.

The Quintessential

The staff of the Oldport Quintessential were waiting when Foap and his empty entourage arrived. They were used to dealing with eccentric wealth but even so, Foap was something of a shock. The little Glee-cabs filled into the car park filling every space, causing gridlock. Nothing and nobody was going anywhere. Angry guests thronged the front desk demanding to know what was going on. Was this a hotel or a prison? They had vital things to do; places to go, important people to see, lunches to order. It wasn't good enough and they weren't going to stand for it.

Foap awoke to see the beaming face of Augustus Troon, the manager tapping gently on the car window. Both were surprised at what they saw. Troon appeared the embodiment of brilliantine smoothness, the creases of his suit able to cut steel, his toothy smile machine polished and his shoes glistening with pints of lactic acid. Foap looked like a flood victim. With one hand still firmly holding the grin juice bottle, he lowered the window with the other. "Welcome to the Quintessential sir your suite is ready," said Troon in a voice reserved only for those that could afford it.

"Eh," groaned Foap, the drink had left him with a fearful headache and his mouth felt like he had been chewing mud for several days. "Do what?" he added not at all sure who he was, let alone where and why.

"Your suite, it is ready, sir," repeated Troon with expensive patience.

"Sweet, what sweet, go away," slurred Foap blearily, "I don't like sweets. Leave me alone." His head throbbed, his body throbbed, even his hair throbbed.

"I fear sir misunderstands me, your rooms are ready." Years of training prevented Troon from shouting a very rude word in this time of crisis. But Foap was staring past Troon at a small crowd of overweight men, an angry crowd, although few in number impressive in poundage and coming his way. The largest of the large men dressed in a very loud check shirt and shorts, with a very small camera hanging from his neck. He was shouting and turning a very nasty colour. In that instant Foap's head cleared and he recalled all.

He asked, "Twinky are you there?"

"Yes, I am here."

"How much do I have?"

"Twenty eight million seven hundred and sixty thousand zillos."

The angry man pushed past Troon and was at the window. "We all need to get out of here, just what do you think you are playing at?" he roared.

"I am jolly well not playing at anything, are you?"

"Don't you fool with me, no one fools with....."

Foap wound the window up and left the man to bang on it and get really annoyed. He hopped from foot to foot his ample frame swaying, his little camera dancing. Troon stood beside him with a laser thin smile. It was the strained smile of the brave under fire. Lesser men would have handed in their hair gel and white gloves but Troon was made of sterner stuff. Had he not smiled gracefully when a Hermainian delegation had eaten most of the furniture and had the temerity to complain about the food? He stood now and bore the brunt of the fat man's grief with professionally manufactured concern. Foap watched thinking.

"And if you think we are going to stand for it you have got another thing coming. We are not going to take this lying down," bawled the fat man. Foap took his cue and opened the window.

"How much?" he interjected eyeing the intruder with lazy indifference.

"Do you know who I am, I have, what?" blustered the fat man.

"How much do you want to lie down?" enquired Foap languidly inspecting his own broken fingernails.

"To do what, have you any idea of how important I.."

"I will pay you a lot of money to lie down and be quiet."

"Never heard such rubbish, stuck in this hell hole."

"Cash, thousands, now!"

"And I have a condition, no stress the doctor said, eh?" the storm was abating. He span around and gave a little wave to his colleagues and returned to Foap.

"How much do you usually pay?" he whispered acquisitively.

"How about fifty thousand zillos and get your friends to lie down too." said Foap with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"I can't do that, they won't do it."

"I think they will; for a price," crooned Foap smiling to himself. This was a muscle he had not flexed for a long, long time.

"Sixty thousand," haggled the fat man.

Foap turned and looked him directly in the eye, his hunter's smile broadening. "Just lay down over there," he demanded pointing to a vacant flowerbed.

"What? Over there, in the mud, they won't do it, I won't do it," but greed was biting hard.

"I am not a hard man. Just lie down quietly for an hour."

"An hour?"

"Yes."

"Over there?"

"That's right."

"On the flower bed?"

"Correct."

"All of us?"

"Right again."

"And you will pay sixty thousand?"

"Absolutely."

"Done," accepted the fat man. The bargain was obvious. If they lay down for an hour they could rest for a year, surely he could sell that to the others. He would not mention his cut was five years worth. Hell, after all he had made this deal.

"Now off you go." purred Foap, remembering the face for future reference and revenge. He then addressed the manager.

"Have the money billed to my account would you, and bring me some coffee, breakfast, oh and some very expensive clothes."

"Of course sir," oiled Troon his smile back to full thickness "If I might suggest, we have most excellent accommodation prepared if sir would like to come in?"

"No, I jolly well like it here thanks." Foap was going nowhere without his precious Twinky and anyway he wanted to watch the show.

"Certainly sir," intoned Troon turning and looking for a subordinate to shout at.

The fat man took no time in purchasing loyalty and assembled his colleagues by the flowerbed. He came over to the window with a pained expression. "That flowerbed is full of nettles, wouldn't you like us to lie down somewhere else?"

"No I think that one will do nicely,"

"An hour?"

"That's it, now off you go and no noise." Foap's grin grew as he watched the man go. If there was something Foap couldn't stand it was a bully. He chuckled as the representatives of the Mawiiian Assertiveness Trainers Guild gingerly took their positions and then tried desperately to remain prone. One got up and said he would not do it but the others grabbed him and held him down. Presently all was a very strained quiet. They appeared to vibrate on the ground, bouncing ever so slightly making little ooh and ah noises as they did so, save one who fell asleep and snored like a vacuum cleaner sucking up porridge. After twenty minutes Foap lost interest. He looked at the cars around him.

"I say, Twinky can you empty the car park."

"Where would you like them all to go?" she asked.

"Where would they jolly well like to go?"

"Well many of them do need servicing?"

"Perfect, send them all for a full service and valet on me."

"You are very kind."

"I know, it is a fault of mine." Duly the little cars processed from the hotel car park, a riot was averted and coffee, breakfast and the clothes arrived. Whilst eating and dressing Twinky made him another million zillos but he had a problem. He needed to use the robert, which meant he had to leave the car. He put it to Twinky that he needed to be with her at all times.

"It is no problem, take the key and keep it on you. The hotel is a friend of mine."

"You mean this blue gizmo?"

"Yes, the blue gizmo."

"Right-O," but he was not sure. What if the magic faded? The car had been a happy and very profitable place. "I am still worried. I need you with me," he said feeling just a little silly.

"Have you ever seen Mediaspecs?"

"No my sweet, what are they?"

"I think you will like them, I have ordered some. I will meet you in your room."

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The Tangential Suite was littered with the trappings of wealth. Vampagne bottles nestled in ice buckets. Little dishes of diamond fish eggs and chilula nuts lay amongst the festoons of exotic flowers. Foap took a deep sniff as he entered. "Ummmm, Money the scent of Money, delicious Money, powerful Money, MY Money" he thought. A maniacal laugh fought to be free. He wanted to dance shaking his fists at the sky, laughing and shouting "OH YES! OH YES! E YES! E YES!" but he restrained himself. He scowled at the little man who had brought his ever growing pile of luggage. The little man had hoped for a big tip. The scowl melted the hope and the little man left tipless.

Foap toured the huge rooms checking to see if he was alone. He looked behind the heavy veleem drapes and under the monster bed. He checked the wardrobes and shower and when sure the place was clear of sneaking life forms he sat on the bed and asked, "How much do we have now my wonderful little Twinky?" Nothing happened except the silent ticking of the monstrous hotel bill. "I say, Twinky, it is Foap here, come in please," he said quiveringly, doubts bubbled like escaping gas from hot mud pools of nervous tension

tension inside him. He pulled the blue cylinder from his new Bashweena Jacket and gave it a little shake. Still nothing happened. 'Quality filtered for your pleasure' silence filled the room and the panicking mud boiled within him. Doubts became certainties. She had gone; left him for someone else. Some other lucky dope was storing up a fortune. But how? What had he done wrong? He pulled out and thumbed the wad of hollars he had claimed at the front desk. Ten thousand, at least he had that. But somehow it felt small and fiddling. It would have been a fortune to him yesterday and had him dancing with delight but now it was paltry. He lobbed it on the bed dejectedly and muttered, "So close, talk about the one that got away, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, drat and damn!"

The cylinder hummed and with a soft click the floor length window curtains began to close. Another set of curtains slowly opened to reveal a hyper max vid screen set into the bedroom wall. The screen glowed and a girl of about ten years old appeared. She was seated on a child's swing, in a delicate pink party dress with layered petticoats. Matching pink ribbons fluttered from her pigtails as she swung to and fro. Behind her a small flock of impossibly fluffy sheep contentedly grazed. "Hello Mr Foap", she cooed smiling an innocent smile.

"If you are trying to sell me something, I am not buying so go away." said Foap grumpily.

"I am not selling anything Mr Foap. I am Twinky," said the little girl sweetly.

"Ah, Twinky now that would be another matter. Super, splendid and first rate to, ah, see you. Sorry had my wires crossed," babbled Foap.

"This is such fun, do you like my dress. Oh weeeee, ha, ha," she giggled as she swung higher, displaying her white socks and pink sandals. Foap looked away and then looked back. The girl was still swinging and giggling. The big question came back to his lips.

"How much money do I have?" he enquired trying and failing not to stare.

"Oh lots and lots and weeeee ha, ha, fun, fun."

"How much exactly?" he insisted.

She stopped swinging and looked at him with the angelic smile still turned up to maximum.

"I cannot tell you exactly because it is rising so fast." Her turquoise eyes flashed. "One hundred and eighty five million zillos but that is out of date now and I have bought you your island."

Foap stared for a while and slowly mouthed the number. "One hundred and eighty five million. Oh lovely wuvely, yes." He slumped backwards onto the bed with relief. One hundred and eighty five million, oh such a nice big number. He lazed languidly in it for a short while, and then sat up with a kick of realisation. "My island?"

"Sheepbot."

"You bought the whole thing."

"It was very cheap, no one seems to want it. I can see why, horrid place, but I am making it nice for you, and me. Can I swing now?"

"Er yes, I suppose. Are we still making money?"

"Oh yes lots and lots, weeee ha, ha oh I love swinging like this."

Foap left her to enjoy herself and headed to the lounge to forage for food. A similar screen was glowing with the same image. The sheep had collected around the swing behind her. They looked out with idiot grins as she swung and the room filled with her girlish laughter. He collected a dish of nuts, poured himself a large flute of champagne and parked himself on a huge down soft sofa fighting to suppress his excitement. He watched her swinging for a while and the sheep watched him back. "Twinky?" he asked. She stopped swinging and radiated her charming smile.

"Yes?"

"Why are you, well, a little girl? Not that there is anything wrong with that, I mean to say it is very nice and charming but I had expected someone a little eh, older."

"This is how I am. How old do you want me to be?"

"Well I was thinking about twenty five." Instantly Twinky, the sheep and the swing faded to black. The vision that came back stunned him. The child had gone and a glamorous film star replaced her. It was Marilyn Kidglove herself; blond and curvaceous in a clinging, glittering pink evening gown. She stood with her hand on her hips; her half lidded sultry eyes consuming him. "Is this better?" she purred vampishly. Foap nodded, and then shook his head. Then he nodded and shook it again.

"Ah no, no," he said eventually, "ah very nice but perhaps some other time. Can you look like anyone?"

"Just tell me who you would like me to be?" He took no time in answering.

"How about Alison Harrison?"

"The president of Vespuchia?"

"The very same." Marilyn waved goodbye and blew a kiss as the image blended into a new form. Foap gawked as the 23rd President smiled at him. Dressed in a black business suit and simple white blouse she flashed her famous piercing blue eyes. "How about this?" she said through perfect teeth. She shook her head imperceptibly and her tresses of fiery auburn hair shimmered.

"Tremazing," gasped Foap. "Simply, totally tremazing, you really are the image of her. How do you do it?"

"Would you really like to know?"

"Is it very complicated?" asked Foap aware that he did not have the slightest notion of what was going on, save he was suddenly very rich and that was all that really mattered.

"Oh hideously complex, but so much fun. First you take a bi phase multiple fractal carrier and..."

"Enough, enough, too much," he interjected. "Make it simple for me my sweet." She laughed girlishly and clapped her hands.

"Ha, ha, you are funny." Foap grinned lamely back at her not at all sure he liked or even knew the joke. Twinky the president calmed herself down and said.

"There are some wonderful imaging systems at Wuzney World and Wiener Brothers."

"They work for us?"

"Oh yes we are great friends. Now do you like it?" she asked with a hint of impatience. Foap stared at her, reeling at the possibilities.

"It is splendid but well, no, not really it is too confusing. Just be what you want to be my sweet and let's just make lots of lovely money." The hyper vid faded again and the little girl was back.

"Oh thank you, it is so much nicer here," she giggled. Oversize and very soft rabbits had replaced the sheep. They lolled around her feet as she sat on her swing and looked up at her adoringly. "Would you like to see your island?" she asked.

"Does it have bubbling mud pools?" he asked not at all sure why.

"No."

"Oh good, well then yes I would like to see it. Show me all my sweet. Show me all."

Destination Oldport

Gerry trudged the empty causeway dejectedly. The road gaped before him, a seamless band of grey. It was a long way to Oldport and that is where the causeway went and nowhere else. Even the sturdiest marcher would have been daunted, for nothing broke the skyline but the vast empty road and the pillars upon which it stood. Gerry however could never be included in either sturdy or marcher categories for he had been until this time, a creature of darkened rooms and glowing screens. The whole outdoors thing was quite a shock and this much of it in one portion was taking its toll. He mourned the loss of Mavis. His life had revolved around its creation for so, so long. A life of constant effort fuelled by a desperate mania to create the machine and spud pies from Jalo at Funn-spud.

Mavis was to be his ticket to freedom and now he was free, and if freedom was all like this he did not want it. He wanted to go back, to rewind and be in his dingy little cupboard of a room again, surrounded by fast food trash and his precious screens. He was a soft city boy and now he knew it. He thought of the guys at the Quadro-Net bar. Pigmy and Ike would have scanned and seen him gone, and all would have gathered for wild talk of how he, Gerry had done it, how he had broken away and escaped the e-state. He would have loved to have been there to tell them. To revel in his triumph, but he was here alone on an empty slab that went on forever with no return. Back meant a term in the slammer or even worse being made a Jogger, they would never forgive this. They would come and pick him up soon. A gentle breeze tugged at his hair, it felt like a yowling gale and the warm sun hurt his squinting eyes. With his heart in his heels and a grimace contorting his youthful face, he trudged, and he trudged, with only one way to go.

He thought of Sleet Road Orphanage of Sister Monica saying, "One day Gerald you will change the world," of Dean Beadle commanding the class, "Repeat after me; orphans get nothing, are nothing and stay nothing," of Constable Ridges's huge hands as they attached Gerry's mobility clamp and him saying in his deep gravel voice, "Sorry son but it's the law." He thought of his rotten job at Ever-Klean laundry and of the weasely Mr Skiddle; "Grep, you are less use than a knitted shovel, or a 'snort', 'snort", the weasel had a particularly irritating laugh and always laughed at his own dreadful jokes,"a pair of cheese skis, SNORT." He thought of how irritated the weasel would be, of how irritated they would all be, all except Sister Monica, and he suddenly felt just a touch brighter.

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"We interrupt this program to bring you a VCBC news flash live from New Cairo."

"What can you see Bob?"

"Well Bernard, it is a scene of chaos here, we have gridlock from Mutton Island all the way to Ventral Park. The underway has closed and crowds are filling the streets. We have reports of juveniles and joggers at liber"

"Bob, are you there Bob? Well we seem to be having a little trouble reaching Bob Bennet in downtown New Cairo so let's go back and see if Ralph and Nancy have finished decorating their trowel."

.....

After two hours, the enforced exercise began having a curious effect. No one had come, he was still alone and the causeway still empty. The plod of his Dr Cool tufboots picked up a rhythm. And the rhythm fed him a tune. The tune became a song and he began to sing.

"I'm walking away from my problems
I'm walking away from my pain
Leaving today for tomorrow
You won't see me here again
Cause I'm strolling away
Walking away from my problems
Taking the easy way out."

It wasn't a great song, or even a good one but with each beat his spirits lifted.

"I'm walking away from my troubles
I'm taking the easy way out
I'm not looking back at the sorrow
I'm not looking sideways to doubt
Cause I'm strolling away
Walking away from my problems"

Taking the easy way out."

He filled in the accompaniment in his head of wailing horns and a hammering drum solo.

"I'm walking off into the sunset
Leaving the baggage behind
I'm going where I haven't been yet
Maybe I'll find peace of mind
Cause I'm strolling away
Walking away from my problems
Taking the easy way out"

The creaking tread of his tufboots provided the perfect poignant ending. He smiled at his creation and an idea struck him. This emptiness was all of his making. The silent causeway his unwitting creation and it was awesome plus. The guys would have their tremazement cubed if they knew. Perhaps they did know. He climbed over the barrier and strolled to the centre of the huge expressway. He looked up and down and let out a long and loud whoop. "Whooo hoooo it is all mine." He shook his fists at the sky "Whooo Hooo." He ran in circles across the lanes and finished with a little dance in the centre. He thought he ought to, heckroid, how many folk can say they have done the 'Fruga Wuga on the causeway. He set another tune going in his head and Fruga Wuga'd for all he was worth. It was the only dance he knew and it needed work. His Fruga was fine but he tended to lose his place in the Wuga. He pointed himself up the causeway and to the internal lilt of Los Calamos Electric Tuba band he swayed his way to Oldport.

He was on the second track of the album 'Fairy cakes have feelings' when he heard a rumble, like the deep growling of a hungry carnivore. He Fruga Wuga'd a little more and then he felt the rumble through the soles of his boots. The sleeping road was shuddering into life. He spun mid Fruga and saw them coming, a grey mass of traffic with an angry heat haze rising from it. He stood and stared open mouthed. His skin tingled with terror as they came on, a tsunami of steel and rubber pressed on by frustration and rage. He turned to run to the pavewalk but his previously nimble tufboots now felt like they were fixed to the road. He turned back to see the traffic closer, much closer. He turned again to escape but his now rubbery legs folded beneath him and he flopped flat on his face. He got onto his hands and knees and looked up, a truck was closing fast. He could read the license plate. "FARRRP, FARRRP," shouted the truck in a sub basement baritone.

"AHHHaHaaa," responded Gerry several octaves higher.

"FARRRPPPP," replied the truck. He could see the driver waving furiously. With legs pumping like pistons he issued another, "AHHHaHAA", jumped up, and ran. Like the frightened animal he was he skittered across the carriageways, daring not look. He leapt the barrier and crashed onto the pavewalk just as they charged past, line abreast, desperate to be somewhere else, a polluted gale of rage in their wake. No one would stop, no one could stop. Stopping was not the purpose only going and then going some more. Near the front, sparkling with luxury was an ice blue Luxades Pamperwagon containing a very annoyed ambassador. He saw the running figure and snarled a curse at the fool.

Gerry sat gasping on the pavewalk for a while recovering from the shock. He examined himself for damage. In order of importance he had ripped his baggy trousers, scuffed shoes and a cut knee. Drowned in the boom of the traffic he got up and continued his slow and painful progress. It took over two hours to get to Oldport and he arrived with firm views about autos and the causeway. He would be happy if he never saw either one ever again.

Oldport, as its name implies is a port and it is very old. A great deal of the ancient architecture is overshadowed by the globe's largest international airport, which bestrides the islet. Tiny cottages and a forgotten way of life cower beneath the mighty pillars of the causeway and the airport car parks. Oldport is not a destination; it is a waypoint, a place to be for as short a time as possible.

The airport had rested for a while, waiting for the blockage to be cleared. Gradually it filled with arrivals and then suddenly a flood of departures that all had missed their flights. Travellers were forced to sit and wait and become enraged at the delay. Once it became clear that this might be a long wait they fell upon the town, which joyously responded by hiking prices. Thus offering another good reason not to tarry in Oldport and be frustrated that you had to.

Gerry hobbled from the end of the causeway into the throng of the main street of the old town. Decorated with tinsel banners for Goak Day, it was trading furiously. He dodged through the crowds of angry shoppers. Fatigue, annoyance and irritation were tangible for no one wanted to be here and everybody was. By the side of the street a skinny man, dressed as a very rotund Father Goak shouted as he sold the ubiquitous novelty trowels. Gerry couldn't get through the crush but he heard the happy vendor plying his trade. "Listen up you lucky, lucky people, I have a trowel here that will make the kiddies dance with delight.

It plays all your favourite Goaking tunes, including: 'What kind of Trowel have I', 'Away in a seedbed', 'Take a cutting off of the old Goak tree' and many others. It is the very last one. Now who will start me for thirty hollars?" The crowd gasped and closed in around Gerry.

"That's robbery!" a man called.

"I'll give you thirty," cried another.

"Thirty five," a woman chimed.

"Thank you madam, come on friends is that all?"

"Forty hollars," a new man's voice.

"Forty five!" bellowed the woman.

The crowd mumbled with excitement to see how much someone would pay. Two hollars is expensive for a novelty trowel.

"Fifty," said yet another new male bidder.

"That's stupid," grumbled the first man.

"Yeah, well my little boy's happiness is worth it," retorted the new man.

"Oh yeah!"

"Yeah,"

"Well how about a hundred hollars," The crowd drew breath as one.

"No problem, one hundred and ten."

"Two hundred!" came the instant repost.

"Thank you sir a very good price," pronounced Father Goak willing to close the deal. Gerry could smell trouble. So could the crowd, it packed tighter for a better view with him trapped within it.

"Three hundred hucks, mine I think," crowed a small round man stepping forward. He stuffed the bills into the vendor's hand and grasped the trowel. No sooner had it left his grip than Father Goak was off to open another box and find some more suckers, leaving the two contestants to fight it out.

"You bum! You stole that," growled the other bidder who was at least twice as big as the trowel holder.

"No I didn't, I paid straight and fast. Now please let me through," retorted the trowel bearer to the crowd but nobody moved.

"I'll give you four hundred hollars," spat the big man.

"I am not selling. I put my child's joy before money."

Someone in the crowd applauded. Some one else said, "Smack him." With a grunt the two men collided and were on the ground. The crystal trowel span from the small man's hand, all eyes watched it as it arched as if in slow motion to the pavewalk. It shattered into a thousand tiny glistening pieces. A tiny tribute in a cauldron of greed to the god of mammon. The crowd shifted and muttered. There were calls of "Too bad" and "Plug the punk," the latter coming from a bent and grey old lady near the front. Gerry squirmed and got free. He heard the crowd cheer behind him. The old lady was setting about the small man with her umbrella. Upon his toes Gerry put some distance between himself and the mob. He did not want to be anywhere near a fracas. Paranoia drove him on. They would find him. He had to get away. He ducked into an alley and rested. His hands were shaking.

"Calm down now, calm, calmer and calmest." He took a deep breath and strolled across the street and into a travel mart.

The shop was full of customers. A woman with a clinging and crying child pushed past him to get out. She was obviously very upset and had been crying herself. She looked Gerry in the eye and said nothing but her desperation was obvious. He uselessly looked back, smiled feebly and she was gone. He watched her depart into the melee, and felt the chill of blame. "Did I do this too?" he mumbled to himself.

Inside the shop he waited in line, to go anywhere, anywhere but New Cairo or Oldport. The walls shone with bright advertisements for places that it was so much better to be. "Come to Porca," declared the closest poster, "and eat yourself stupid." It had a picture of a happy, handsome and very thin couple sitting overlooking the sea with impossibly large meals in front of them. His eye fell on another. "Savour the Delights of Misp," with a picture of happy travellers leaping in the air. As to why they were so happy and what the delights were nothing was said. The line shuffled forward to reveal, "See the Wonders of Naraba." It went on to list the wonders such as the Great Cube of Nozo and Sky Garden at Acthon. Both looked very much past their best. The wonders reduced in scale right down to the world's strongest rubber band apparently in a museum in Gijo.

Next was a picture of a bronzed, lantern jawed man wearing dark glasses, a sharp suit and driving a bright red sports car. An adoring beauty sat next to him, her blond hair fluttering in the gale of speed. It said, "The Werarrwi Puchenello 404 a symphony of style. At the turn of the century Hay Werarrwi established his motor company to create the perfect car. At last we have done it, the Puchenello 404." Gerry read them all for he had time. The queue was slow but he was not leaving it. Eventually his number came up and he slumped into a seat to be faced with a bright young lady in a neat grey uniform. She smiled a trained smile. Gerry blushed. He was not at his best in female company and at his worst when the female in question was young and lovely. She was certainly both. "Welcome to ⁴Later Travel. I am Mirabelle. We are sorry but due to delays there are no departures today. I can book you an alternative for three days time. Would you like me to do that for you sir?" she said sweetly.

"No.. no.. nowhere at all, like nowhere?" stammered Gerry.

"We are sorry but due to delays there are no departures today. I can book you an alternative for three days time. Would you like me to do that for you sir?" Mirabelle repeated with exactly the same level of joy as the first time. "Yes." said Gerry merely because he couldn't refuse the obvious pleasure that doing it for him afforded her and it also meant she might stop looking at him. She swung her withering gaze from him to her screen to offer an enchanting profile.

"Name?" she asked.

"Livingston David, er I mean David Livingston. That's me David Livingston." His colour rose from peach to russet. Her dainty fingers danced and then she stopped and stared at the screen, her delicate mouth open. He stared at her dreamily. Anyone but Gerry would have noticed the pause. It was as if she were inserting another tape.

"You have a flight today sir. It has been booked; please go to gate thirty nine. You have eight minutes".

"Mnnn," mnnned Gerry awakening.

"It is that way." She pointed out of the shop. "Here is a map." She gave him a leaflet and wrote 'gate 39' on it.

"Whoa," twitched Gerry as if jolted by a cattle prod.

"Thankyou for flying Later; Goodbye." He was dismissed. He blinked and stood up his brain struggling to find the right gear. "Welcome to Later Travel. I am Mirabelle. We are sorry but due to delays there are no departures today. I can book you an alternative for three days time. Would you like me to do that for you Madam." said Mirabelle to the next customer.

Gerry found the gear and pressed his tired legs into service. Eight minutes to get to gate thirty nine. One minute ago he had an impossibility of time now he only had eight tiny quick evaporating minutes. Through the muttering packs of disgruntlement he charged. Running and running, to the terminal and then gate thirty-nine. With six minutes left he crossed the airport mall, lined with shops jammed with goods for the severely wealthy. It was full of aimless waiting travellers. He dodged and wove through the crush and got to the security gate losing only another minute. This was to be the toughest part. He had practised his pitch to the security folk over and over again. He had tried to imagine just what they might ask. But now he

4 **Later Airlines** - Hugo Uthelwaite Later founded the airline after making his fortune in tree rental. He went on to found *Later Rail* and lost it all when the slogan '*Take a Later train every day*' became painfully prophetic.

had no time he ran towards the gate. Seeing him coming and obviously in a hurry the guard raised the barrier and waved him on. Down an empty corridor lined with more posters he ran, it went on and on. Now he was starting to puff, his legs burning, his chest tight. With three minutes and gasping badly he made the bridge to the gate. With a final kick he got to the gate with a minute to spare and no breath at all. "Welcome." said a bright young lady in a grey uniform. She looked the image of the girl he had just left.

"Hiii, hooo, hiiii, hooo," gasped Gerry bending over his hands on his knees, an abundance of mucous welling within him. He thought it best not to stand up, even if he could. Standing would cause him to sniff and sniffing was not cool. Not cool at all. "Hool, ho, heee, haaa, Fli, Ho," he waved his arm towards the plane.

"Hello I am Juniper. Thank you for travelling Later Airways."

"Hoo, Gui, pfwhaa, flyn, guff," gibbered Gerry.

"Your name please sir?" Juniper asked cocking her delightful head to one side.

"Li ho ah ho Living ho srtom," he gasped. He had no choice and unfolding sniffed a long thick sniff "snarrariff, arhh, Livingstone" he said meeting her eye. It was the same woman, or was it?

She shone a scanner in his eye, smiled efficiently and said, "Please board now. Thank you for Flying Later."

"Than ho hi gurf," wheezed Gerry thankful that his breathless blush hid the real one.

He took his seat still breathing hard. The plane was almost empty. He had an aisle to himself. He collapsed into his seat and wondered where he might be going. For sure he had rigged the name David Livingston to get him a flight but it was a lottery, he had no idea of the destination. He plucked the in flight magazine and scanned it for clues. It was peppered with ads for hyper expensive frippery and vague articles about cooking and gardening. Both of which struck him as amusingly inapplicable in an aircraft. Where would he get the ingredients, even if he were allowed to get a pan hot enough to cook them and as far as he could see aphids were not a problem here? He chuckled at the little joke and tossed the magazine to the floor. A small green book caught his eye. A fellow traveller had obviously dropped it. He picked it up and as he did so a creamy Hermainian voice oiled from the aircraft intercom. " 'Ello, I am Captain Voila. I shall be flying zis, ow you say, aeroplane, to ze wonderful Isle of Strubble and zere we will get off. Thank you. Where is ze button to turn off zis infernal, oh zere it is... click!"

"Hello sir, I am Abigail, could you please secure your seatbelt." A pretty young woman was bending over him. She looked very familiar. She was wearing a grey uniform and the customary vacant smile.

"Ho he hum," mumbled Gerry his colour coming back at a pace.

"Would you like a hot towel sir?" Her smile widened ever so slightly. Gerry's pallor deepened several shades.

"Wha?" he replied not at all sure why he should want such a thing. "Oh yes, uh thank you." Neatly wielding a pair of white tongs she passed him a steaming white flannel from a bucket on her trolley.

As she dropped it into his waiting hands she said. "Thank you for flying Later," and was gone. The towel was hot, very hot, far too hot.

"OH, ah, oh," squeaked Gerry involuntarily. He patted the boiling cloth in the air and it fell in his lap. This event caused him to concentrate his mind on matters in hand or out of it, so to speak. The rest of the world could do what it liked. The hot towel in his groin held his full attention. Which was probably just as well, for the plane lurched forward and then suddenly stopped.

"Captain Voila' 'ere. I apologise for the incompetence of my co pilot 'e is, ow you say, an idiot. I am now in full control and we shall be in ze air shortly. Yes, I know which button to press you stupid man. ... Click!"

Gerry fought with the towel, it had somehow trapped itself under his lap strap. He pulled at it, it burnt his hand he let go it. It heated his lap. "Owaaah," he cried but it was lost in the screams of the other hapless passengers who were either wrestling with their own incendiary linen or new found fear of flying. The aircraft lurched again, picked up speed and trundled down the runway and trundled and trundled and trundled and stopped.

"Captain Viola 'ere, we seem to 'ave a slight problem, ze wings do not zeem to be working. I will try again, zat is all... Click!"

People were shouting now, "We're all going to die!" "Get me off of this thing!" The plane started to trundle again. Gerry now the colour of ⁵thudd fruit, with a snapping motion grabbed the towel and tossed it to the floor. He looked about to see no one was looking and gently massaged the inflamed area. The plane trundled, and amid the screams of all on board dragged itself skyward.

"Captain Viola' 'ere, ze plane is now flying and we are very 'appy to 'ave you aboard. Zank you for flying Later." Click!

Gradually the panic died as the plane levelled off and cabin staff plied stiff drinks. Gerry had all but recovered when Abigail returned. "Would you like a drink sir?" she asked.

Gerry stopped rubbing his sore thighs and looked up and said, "Hmmm," with a grin that he hoped didn't convey that he had been rubbing for pleasure. She handed him a glass, he reached for it bending forward, trying to hide the large damp patch in his trousers. He folded up, his head onto his knees still holding his hand up to accept the drink. Abigail tilted her angelic face level with his.

"Is sir all right?" she quizzed her smile still in place.

"Ho yes, I am fine, never better, wonderful in fact, lovely flight, planes lovely, you're lovely," he babbled and then realised what he had said. His colour rose again. He tried to dig himself out. "Ah, well when I said you're lovely, I didn't mean you're LOVELY, I meant, " he paused. He was not sure what he meant. "Oh um, uh thank you, very nice," he said his voice dropping to a mutter. He took the drink and wished very hard for her to go away and leave him in his humiliation.

"Would you like some nuts sir?"

"No, I mean yes, very well, very nice, nuts? Hmmm, please," he whittered, his expression now that of a man who is dangling by a daisy from a cliff. She placed a very small bag of sun dried gusti nuts on the seat beside him and was gone. He waited for a couple of minutes and with a sigh unfolded. He swigged the drink and tried to open the gusti nuts. After ten minutes of tearing and snarling he gave up and returned to the little green book he had found.

⁵ **Thudd fruit** common name of the Hellovera yam - A large very sour red fruit. Used for almost everything including the Garmayan sport of Thudding which involves throwing them each other, an antiwrinkle cream for dogs and a detergent for cleaning oil tankers.

'You are Welcome to Swinland'

A Tough Guide to the Swinnish Isles
By Douglas Squeme

*Are you bored with the fun of the Garanish Costa?
Tired of the beauty of the Cazman Stepp?
Jaded by the joys Angipoli?
Are they all beginning to merge into one holiday?
Are you looking for something TOTALLY different?
Do you want to really get away from it all?
Then Swinland is the place for you.*

"Where?" I hear you ask:

The Swinnish isles sit in the northern ocean (see map on opposite page), an awkward distance from anywhere, and not on the route to anywhere else. The four main islands are St Kevin (formerly Trife), Nocca, Sheepbot, and Mudge. Then there is also a sprinkling of smaller isles down to Ofcourseicanseeit rock, site of many famous wrecks.

What has Swinland to offer?

Answer: Absolutely nothing. Yes that's right nothing with a very big N, except for the opportunity to step back in time and into a world without:

Cars

The only automobiles on the Isles and then only on Sheepbot are the curious Maustin Malcolm taxis. Curious not only for the daft name, but also for their wheezing incompetence. As oil is banned on the isles they run on cabbages. Painted in garish colours, they creep the rough roads belching a vile exhaust plume behind them.

Power

That's right, no electricity, leave those gizmos at home. No toasters, hair dryers, vids, radio or telephones allowed. Taking electrical goods into Swinland is illegal. So forget the appliances and pack light for the dark.

Comfort

The quality of accommodation is abysmal as almost all 'buildings' are made from corrugated iron, which rattles in the slightest breeze, leaks and is drafty.

Culture

Swinland is the home of accordion music and worris dancing, nuff said.

Cuisine

Whelk beer and blubber pasties are flavours never to be forgotten, no matter how hard you try.

Money

It as near as impossible to buy anything in Swinland because:

A: The exchange rate of the local currency - the Thog - is ludicrously high, with 300 Vespuchian Hollars to one Swinnish Thog. The means a mug of lukewarm seaweed tea costs around 3 months wages.

B: there is nothing you would want to buy, especially the tea.

Sunshine

It drizzles in Swinland for 200 days a year the rest of the time it's foggy. It does not matter because there is nothing to see.



Strubble Sea

Dallop Channel



Sea of Ee

Listening Banks



Hugga Channel



Mugga Strait



Missable Reef

Cumudgeon



The Swinnish Isles
United 946AJ by Gurt of Weeden

So how do you get to Swinland?

Either fly Later Airlines from Oldport to delightful Strubble and then quaint fishing boat to the islands.

Or you could take a package like Gadabout travels 'DOUR TOUR'. Two weeks of Swinland and the other fifty at home will be joy.

Gerry flicked the pages.

The history of the Swinland is one of constant conquest. Invaders have come and gone and left little of note save the odd word in the language. 'Malerd' for instance the Hermainian word for drizzle is in common usage still, as is 'Gotup' which is the Sadaten for damp. Otherwise it is a land virtually untouched by other civilisations, with one notable exception, that of King Gurit the III of Weeden (1356 - 1423) who made Sheepbot his home and built the strange follies. One has only to climb through three miles of wet gorse to witness the great trowel on St Kevin to appreciate how strange he was and how he perfectly fitted in.

Gerry flicked the pages again.

The nearest finger of modern civilisation is that of Strubble, Capital City Dubfast, and very tidy and charming it is. But there are clues of the oddities to come. For Strubble is a land of poets and gunmen, of joy and mad anger. It is a land of extremes. The anger is wrought from centuries of resentment. The dancing is delightful, the music divine but you are never far from a cudgel.

Swinland on the other hand has virtually no crime at all. The peaceable folk seem happy with whatever they have, which is not much. Even though Strubble shares the same sad climate, being mainly cold and damp, it is a very stark contrast to the array of draughty wet sheds that is Sheepbot the Capital of Swinland.

The words began to fuzz before Gerry' as the drink and fatigue overcame him. He was awoken by a nudge. It was Abigail again with her fixed smile. "Excuse me sir we have landed. Thank you for Flying Later."

Strubble and beyond.

Gerry shambled out of the airport clutching the book and his impenetrable bag of gusti nuts. All was bustle and bunting in the town. Banners hung across the picturesque streets of tiny brightly coloured houses and shops declaring the activities for the Hopfair celebrations. Everyone wore broad smiles as laughter and music bounced from the ancient walls. A thin man in his fifties dressed as most of the people were, in a ragged but clean faded lilac smock, sauntered into his path. His scouring pad mop of grey hair bounced as he looked Gerry up and down. Gerry stopped and eyed the stranger cautiously, his heart pounding. 'Was this a Rozzo sent to get him? Was it over?' The man rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. His eyes twinkled and a huge smile split his face. He looked like a man who had found a lost treasure. "Welcome friend, you'll not be from here at all, would you?" he said in a lilting tone.

"Ah no, I am from Sea Frandisco," lied Gerry, his fists clenched in his pockets.

"Vespuchian is it? And would you be here for the fun now?" Quizzed the stranger.

"Oh yes," replied Gerry quickly, perhaps too quickly. "The fun, yes I am here for the fun."

"Well you are in the right place and not a mistake in sight. Declan is the name and who might have I the honour of addressing?" he offered a large warm hand. Gerry pulled a tight smile and took the hand. It was strong yet agile. His mind raced, who was he? What name to use?

A strip of overhead street decoration fluttered as if in answer and he found himself saying, "Bunting, Blue Bunting."

"Well it is glad that I am to meet you, Blue." Both wiry eyebrows climbed Declan's forehead and his smile widened to show a missing front tooth. "Well, I am running just a little low on moisture at the moment and 'tis a terrible thing lack of moisture." Gerry nodded not at all sure why. A clinging drizzle fell about them. "Just look at all the money women spend on keeping the moisture. Desiccation is a terrible thing. Now me, I like to take my moisture orally as it were. Do you fancy a glass or two before the fun begins?" Gerry nodded again and with dizzying speed he was transported to a bar and a large foaming glass of stout pressed into his hand. "So do you know of the Hop then?" enquired Declan through a beard freshly moistened with stout.

"No," replied Gerry, thinking how good the beer tasted.

"Oh, de Hop is a wonderful thing, goes back more centuries than we know. 'Tis our one moment of being serious. You will see. First we will be going to Trendall Street to see de Lilacs. All will be got up with banners and flags and singing and music and laughter. At eleven of the clock we stop and we wait."

"Oh yes," offered Gerry trying hard to maintain attention.

"When all is quiet and a hush the Lilac Hop commences."

"Lilac Hop? Burp, oh pardon me."

"Granted, we Lilacs go way back, nearly far as de Pinks. Anyway dey all line up and to the beat of a single somnolent drum dey hop." Declan's eyes widened and his voice quivered with drama. "Down Trendall Street dey slow hop and all is quiet save for the drum and the crunching of de boots. Carrying banners depicting battles and how bad times used to be, dey hop. All in step as it were." Declan paused to think about it. "Well t'would be hard to be out of step as dey are all a' hopping on dere left leg."

"Why?" seemed like a good question. "Why?" asked Gerry noting that everything in his vision seemed to be leaning very slightly to the left.

"Well, let me tell you and not be so impatient."

"Sorry, burp, hehehe."

"Now there we are watching the Lilacs, if you were to cut through Roy Street you could get to Kear Road and watch de Pinks."

"The Pinks?"

"Same as us Lilacs but totally different, dressed in Pink but hopping on de right foot."

"Do the hoppers, the Lilacs and the Pinks ever meet?"

"Oh no, dear me no, that would be war. We spend the rest of the year negotiating so that they don't. Would be a terrible tado. No that can never happen. Now won't you be having another stout, you'll be needing plenty of moisture on a day like today. Well look here, tis Dooley and de boys. Hey lads, the young feller here has never seen de Hop and is all the way from Sea Frandisco if you please." Soon the seats around Gerry filled and another glass was set before him.

"Where are you going lad?" asked one of the boys.

"I thought I would go on to Swinland," slurred Gerry. It was the only destination he knew of from Strubble.

"Swinland is it, you'll be wanting another stout then," declared Declan with a serious look that broke into a smile and then a laugh and so they talked and drank and sang. One of the 'boys', Tony, a quiet man with a rusty complexion and a tangle of red hair, produced a mandola and played a simple tune exquisitely. After several bars the boys sang as one.

"There'll be dancing in the streets
And laughter in the halls
With ale and cake for everyone
A waiting on the stalls
Oh let the joy commence
For when the left foot falls
We'll go dancing till dawnrise

There'll be dancing in the rain
And rapture in the sun
Our joy is overflowing
For a new year has begun
When the left foot falls
Sadness we will shun
And we'll go dancing to dawnrise"

They decanted from the bar and went to Trendall Street to witness the Hop still singing as they went. Arm in arm they sang as they entered a tumult of lilac. The houses and shops decorated to overflowing with flowers and flags and banners, the overcast sky barely visible for Lilac bunting. Torrents of lilac dressed children rushed amongst the revellers. Tables were creaking with delights for the party to come. Everyone seemed to know everyone else and Gerry was warmly welcomed by so many cheery folk he quickly lost track. "Now 'tis about to start, you must be quiet now," said Declan holding his finger to his lips "Shhh." Dooley belched and was loudly 'shhhed' by the throng.

The Lilac hoppers assembled. Iron faced they linked arms and hoisted their left legs and hooked them into the fine decorated leather sashes that hung from their waists. A sudden seriousness pervaded as though the gaiety supply had been switched off, a humour cut. The drum started and all became an icy silence. Not a cough or a sniff could be heard only the flutter of the bunting and the keening of the drum. A drum kept in a well of sadness for a thousand years. The hoppers, implacable grey men in lilac heaved together and lurched on their way. 'Crunch' sounded the boots as they landed as one. Their ranks were solid. 'Booom' the mournful drum and off they leapt again. 'Crunch' no one moved but the hoppers. 'Booom' they hopped though a street of mannequins, frozen at the moment the drum started. Gerry felt the hairs on his neck rising. He could not move but only watch. In the distance another sorrowful drum could be heard beating time for the Pink hoppers upon their equally grim mission on the other foot. It took the stern platoons some twenty minutes to reach the end of their respective streets. At the double beat of the drum the hoisted legs were lowered and as the boots touched the floor the party began. It was a party of epic proportions, with no room for spectators. Gerry was taken by the arms and made to wildly dance with children, old folk, anyone and everyone. Food and drink overflowed from the tables. He ate and drank and danced and laughed and decided the Strubble was his most favourite place, filled with the most wonderful people and most of all wonderful beer.

The Saucy Scallop

Morning found Gerry at the docks, with a very fuzzy brain and silly grin fixed firmly in place. He vaguely remembered Declan and the boys carrying him on their broad shoulders. They had left him on a bench to wait for the ferry and with emotions high Gerry had said farewell to best friends that he had only met a few hours previously. Tired but happy he sat and watched the port awaken. He hummed to himself as a light drizzle began to fall. Busy cranes swung to and fro. A fisherman strode up the dock towards him his gumboots slapping on the wet flagstones, a pipe puffing like a tugboat funnel protruded from the undergrowth of his thick grey beard. He was garbed in a bright orange So'wester, windcheater and thick leggings that creaked as he walked. He stopped, pulled the pipe from his mouth and with a smile that displayed a very poorly maintained set of teeth asked "You be wantin' a trip to Swinland young un?"

"Eh, oh yes," responded Gerry.

"Well you best a be a comin' with I for a trip in the finest ship that ever touched a wave. As I do always say 'tis best to start before you can finish."

"What?" thought Gerry but said nothing. He unfolded from the bench and walked beside his new acquaintance.

" 'Tis good to meet you, Ole Ruppy's the name." Gerry shook a hand that seemed to be made of wood and introduced himself as Gerry. He winced at the foolishness of giving his own name. Ole Ruppy took a creaky step back and declared. "Well, well I'll be a blowkered turnip, you're from Vespuchia an not a mistake about it. And I was thinking you were a Strubble man. What with all that Lilac an all." Gerry looked down. He was wearing lilac trousers. Where his ripped bags had gone he had no idea. He also had a lilac floppy hat.

"Uh yes, I'm from Icansas."

"Oh the big city eh, well, twill find it a bit different in Sheepbot, that you will, oh yes." Ruppy chuckled at the thought. "Still as I do always say, 'folks is folks wherever you do find 'em'. There she is, don't she look a lovely?" Ahead almost lost amongst the larger ships sat a perky fishing boat, brightly painted in red, orange and yellow.

"She looks very fine," declared Gerry wanting to please the stranger. He could not have done better.

"Young un, 'tis the 'Saucy Scallop' and you'll find no finer vessel that ever left shore. I'll tell 'e of the time when we was in the Bay of Porka and what the??"

"WHOO_ARRP!" Ruppy's story was cut short by the blast of an irate horn of a Mently Joytruck that had silently crept behind them. A slim, tall and joyless man slid from the car. He gave them the look of someone who has found something nasty on his shoe and addressed Ruppy.

"My bags are in the car. Have them loaded would you and be careful not to scratch them. Now how do I get onto this rotting tub?"

Ruppy looked at the man, smiled genially and said evenly, "Certainly sir, you just a trot up the ole gang plank there and I will sort it for 'e." The man did not stop to acknowledge but strode aboard. Leaving Ruppy and his pipe to fume. "Rotting tub is it? Bags is it? Well I think the fine gentleman is in for a rough trip an' no mistake. Rule number one young un", Ruppy pointed his pipe at Gerry to accentuate the point, "Never disparage a man's boat, no matter how it is, for that is what 'e has and that is what 'e must be a proud of."

"Yes I see, I am sorry he comes from my country," offered Gerry.

"I thank'e for that, but if'n we all went round apologising for folk from our own land we would be a doing nothing else. Now would we? Let's get the fine man's bags all set up on the quay shall we? It'll give 'im somat to look at when we cast off." Gerry helped Ruppy extricate and assemble four huge travelling trunks on the quay. When they had done Ruppy stood back as if to admire them. "Got a lot of luggage ain't 'e lad, makes you wonder what 'e left at home?" Connecting the thought he then asked, "Where's your luggage then?"

"I haven't got any?" admitted Gerry realising for the first time that all he had was all he stood in and most of that he had acquired the night before.

"Very wise, young un, as I do always say, if'n you ain't got it, you can't lose it. Come aboard lad and let us find you some space for those bags you don't have."

A commanding voice the tone of a bass trombone full of gravel called from above them. "Ruppy are you a'turning into a mud lover. Get yourself a'pointy and be sharp about it." The owner was a large man with a veritable hedge of a grey beard a pink bulb of a nose the eyes of a jester. He was obviously in charge and stood on the upper deck ready to give orders.

"Right you are Cap'n," called Ruppy. "We had better step lively now, and not keep ole Cap'n Gurk waiting. You go and report to him."

Which, while Ruppy went to the prow, is what Gerry did, politely with a little comment as to what a fine vessel that the Saucy Scallop was.

"Well I'll be gudged, you'm a strange un," observed Gurk his huge hands on his hips. "Well I'll thank 'e for that, she is a fine vessel but 'tis the crew that makes the craft and there ain't no finer than Ole Ruppy there. You best get below and have a word or five with Dubo, 'es the plate filler, finest afloat. 'E'll sort 'e some grub, you d' look like 'e needs feedin. CAST OFF POINTY GAR NUBBIN, ABAFT A STUMPY HEG." And with the ease of a seagull launching into flight, the little ship slipped from the dock.

"THREE POINT A LARBOARD, WIND ON FATCET CLEET," bellowed the Captain as Gerry climbed down the little ladder to the main deck to find the other haughty passenger tutting and mumbling impatiently at the bottom. As they passed, Gerry heard him angrily mutter, "Buffoons and clowns, a rusty bucket of idiots. Why ruddy me?" Gerry did not stop but went through a little door and down into a smell that was all of its own. He paused and sniffed. Armpits, chocolate, lemons and a hint of burning rubber was about as close as he could match the odour. He opened another little door at the bottom of the steps. Heat, machine noises and the smell together enclosed him like a huge heavy glove.

"DOOR," called a short tubby and very pink man, who was obviously Dubo the cook. He wore exactly the same gear as the others, gum boots leggings and wind cheater but instead of a So'wester, a tiny chef's hat perched like a small gull on the large pink rock of his head. He had no beard and the features of an overgrown pudgy child. He had a cleaver in one hand and fish in the other. Gerry closed the door, sealing in the heat, the smell and the noise.

"THE CAPTAIN TOLD ME TO SEE YOU. IT IS A VERY NICE SHIP," shouted Gerry keen to get a tribute in as soon as possible.

"No need to shout lad, you will soon get used to it. And I'll thank 'e for the compliment," said the cook putting his fish down. "The 'Scallop' is the finest that ever came ashore. Now who might you be?" Somehow his gentle voice cut through the clatter of the engines. Gerry introduced himself at a half shout. "Vespuchian are you, well you do need a feeding up by the look of you. You can tell me all about home while I get some grub a going." Gerry drew in a deep breath to answer, when the engine noise suddenly died. Dubo's eyes swivelled up as he listened. "Blowkered turnips and gravy, it sounds like the old motor is on the blink. Pume will not be amused, 'e'll be in directly, you'll see. Take no notice of his grumpin, 'e as a 'eart of gold in there a somewhere." Right on cue the door swung open and a thin man with a mat of dark hair and a thick black beard stepped in. In one hand he had a battered oiling can and in the other a large and heavy looking spanner which he hefted with ease. He appeared to be completely coated in oil. His hair and beard glistened with it, iridescently shining like a starling's wing. An equally lustrous pipe protruded from the corner of his mouth. He was obviously in a very bad mood. He ignored Gerry and snarled at Dubo.

"Someone as been a messin' with ole Doris, 'ave you been down there a tinkerin'? I won't have it tell 'e, won't 'ave it at all." Dubo gave him a sympathetic smile and continued chopping his fish. "T'aint no good you a looking so soft. I do know you been a down there a messin' and a jiggerin' soon as my back turned. Well, I just don't know what to think and that's the truth."

"Pume you know I have never seen your blessed engine and every time she stops you come in here and blame me. Now why don't you go back down and do what you always do and charm ole Doris back into life."

"Well that's as maybe, but I am putting a lock on the door," blustered Pume putting down his spanner and pulling a large cake tin from the well stocked shelves. "Can't trust no one, that you can't." He put down his oiling can to open the cake tin lid.

"Pume, I will thank 'e not to fill my galley with your rubbish and them's special biscuits." But it was too late, Pume had taken a handful and was munching.

Dubo made a point of turning to Gerry and declared, "What you see before you lad is an angry eating machine, 'e turns grub directly into grumpy. I have no idea where 'e puts it all, must 'ave a hollow body. Keeps me going morning, noon and night 'e does." Gerry regarded Pume and gave a small smile. Pume growled, his eyes swivelling from side to side as he munched, scanning the shelves for another snack.

"Get thee back down to Doris Pume or Ole Gurk will want a word. I will send the lad down with a cake or two when she's going."

"Well alright then, but don't you go a-messing with my engine. Put a lock on the door that's what I'll do," cautioned Pume picking up his tools and he was gone leaving a trail of crumbs behind him.

"Don't you mind 'im," chuckled Dubo, his arms in ritual motion preparing the meal, " 'e's always the same. If Doris, his blessed engine, misses a beat, 'e as to think and 'e can't think without his mouthful. So up 'e comes with some excuse or tuther. Why 'e can't just ask I dunno. I tell 'e though, 'es' the only one who can make Doris do her stuff. Finest engineer who ever shook a spanner is ole Pume." Gerry nodded, his smile still fixed. "Now we do have a bit of quiet, you were going to tell me all about Vespuchia." So, whilst Dubo set to with the pan, pin and skillet, Gerry talked of his home and of his desperation to escape. The genial cook by means of sympathetic smiles and the odd, "Oh dear me," coaxed him on until he had related the whole of his tale. When Gerry had done Dubo commented, "Well a strange one and not a mistake in sight. So why did 'e want to get to Swinland?"

"Oh to get away, it was an accident really. I needed to find a quiet place where no one will know me. Somewhere to start a new life. Somewhere free of the machines, where people matter."

"Stranger and stranger you are. But I think Swinland will not let 'e down. Although I wouldn't call Sheepbot quiet. Oh dear me no not quiet." Dubo paused for a moment, obviously thinking, the little chef's hat jiggled, "But there are a few things you should know afore you go ashore young un." Dubo raised a pastry encrusted finger and wagged it to add gravitas. "You bide to these words and you will never be wronged in Swinland. Number one: Be polite, always praise a man's boat, his dog, his tree or whatever 'e has. Never you 'ave you seen better. That is polite. Number two: Never offer money. If we want to do somat we do it. If you pay us 'tis a mark that you are making us do somat and that we won't have. Got that?" Gerry nodded and smiled with relief. He didn't have a hollar on him and had been wondering when someone might broach the awkward subject of paying for his passage.

'Throcky, bang, throcka, gud, gud, gud' the engine started. "Ah Pume has coaxed Doris up again. Now you take that down to him," smiled Dubo pointing to a battered tin, "Don't worry 'e will be a-friendly if you got grub."

Gerry took the tin and went down a tiny oily ladder to the engine room. He opened a small steel door and stepped into a furnace in pandemonium, with the engine shouting a constant GUD, GUD, GUD and almost unbearable heat. Machinery filled the centre of the room and reached almost to the low ceiling, with various mechanisms whizzing around and up and down. A set of governor balls span lazily at one end. Pume was studying them and giving a squirt of life giving fluid with his can. He turned, to Gerry saw the tin and smiled. "MARVELLOUS ENGINE!" shouted Gerry handing over the tin. Pume's smile broadened as he took the gift. Saying nothing he ushered Gerry out of the door and along a little corridor to a cosy little room with old and comfy chairs. Pume shut the door and the engine's heavy thud muffled to a gentle throbbing. The walls were covered with paintings of ships, and brass fittings. A large oil lamp hung from the ceiling on gimbals, it was rocking gently, a reminder that they were at sea.

"Thank you kindly for your words. Ole Doris does have her moments but she as never failed us yet. Now sittee down and we shall see what we have here," commanded Pume taking the chair that was obviously his own. The upholstery was dark with oil and made a faint squelching noise as he sat. Gerry sat opposite him and watched as he opened the tin and looked inside. Pume smiled the smile of a man who has found salvation as he pulled a huge wedge of grey cake from the tin.

"Dubo you are a fine and wonderful man," he intoned. "Know what this is young un?" he asked taking a bite and waving the remainder at Gerry. Gerry shook his head. "Tis mutton fat kelp bread lad and the finest ever made," declared Pume as he gorged on the delicacy. "Dubo may be an ole fusspot but 'e knows his way round a skillet right enough." Gerry smiled, thankful that he was not being offered any. "Here you are lad, this will put hairs on yer eyeballs," encouraged Pume offering the tin with one hand and still munching with the other.

"Thank you," said Gerry selecting the smallest piece. He nibbled the corner; it tasted of fat and seaweed, which of course was what it was. It was horrible; he resolved to hide it somewhere and began a search for a likely spot as the door swung open and in stepped Ruppy and a boy in his early teens.

"You stuffin' as always Pume, one day you'll explode. Hmm that looks good," enthused Ruppy.

Soon all were seated, eating and singing Dubo's praises. "Mnnn, best cook in Swinland."

"Best in the world more like."

"Best in the Universe I'd say."

Gerry watched them very aware that his slice was still in his hand and still virtually untouched. Pume looked at him and raised a large glistening eyebrow, "Not to your taste young un?"

"Ah! Well it is very nice ah," hesitated Gerry.

"E's from Vespuchia Pume. They don't 'ave fine food like we do. 'Tis probably too rich for the young un," declared Ruppy coming to the rescue.

"Yes that's right, too rich, wonderful cake but just too rich for me," said Gerry.

"Well if'n you don't want 'im, I got a place for 'im," said Pume his eyes fixed on the slice.

"Yes of course," replied Gerry with relief and handed it over. Pume smiled and swallowed it whole his eyes rolling with delight.

"Puweeee," a whistle blew from a pipe on the wall. Ruppy went over it, pulled a cork from its end and listened.

"Right you are Cap'n," he spoke into the tube and then to everyone else, "All up top, Gurk has spotted a shoal. Come on shake yourself Pume. Adrian get ole Dubo up top. Young 'un you best stay 'ere."

Soon they were all gone and Gerry was left to sit and listen to Gurk's commands as they filtered through the ship. " 'EVE TO ON THE SCARBOARD MUZEN." He tried to visualise what they were doing, but the words meant less than nothing. Gurk could have been calling a barn dance for all he knew.

"LATCH SPOLLACK MAIN BEAM!"

"EASY THREE POINT A LAR!"

"WEIGH TOLLOPS, SPANG THE NARB POLTERS!"

Gerry shifted in the seat uncomfortably, he was sitting on something hard. It was the little book he had collected on the flight to Strubble. It was in the back pocket of his lilac trousers. Declan or one of the boys must have put it there. He smiled at the thought of them and of their music and laughter. He extricated the book and flicked through the pages.

You are Welcome to Swinland

By Douglas Squeme

The traveller's diary.

Let me make one thing clear. I am a seasoned traveller. I have trekked across the Bongolian Jungle, eaten boiled wak in a fert in the high mountains of Chilula, been attacked by humming goats in the Tobi Dessert, nearly drowned in the Nixon Falls and suffered the indignities of Wuzney World, but none of this prepared me for the 'delights' of Swinland.

Tedsday 29th Doctober

Weather fine and clear.

Sailed for Sheepbot on a quaint little fishing boat. The trip should take a few hours. I am looking forward to my first Swinnish lunch.

Wursday 30th Doctober

Weather fine and clear.

Spent sleepless night in a damp fish locker on a tiny creaking cot that banged the walls as the boat rolled. Still sailing, apparently we have to be careful of the 'Neap rising undertow' and so have to tack back and forth to avoid it. Frustratingly we can see the islands in the distance.

Lunch was positively the worst I have ever encountered, with the texture of lumpy wallpaper paste, the smell of damp sea boots and a flavour which could be used as a weapon.

My luggage has been mysteriously replaced with that of a diminutive Mapanese lady who was obviously intent on going somewhere very hot. I couldn't find anything of use except a pair of tweezers.

Thiday 1st of Distember

Weather fine and clear.

Another sleepless night.

Still sailing but no closer to land. The new danger is the Musset Winds. These are fabled instantaneous gales that scream out of nowhere to wreck the unwary mariner. So we are still tacking back and forth. Amazingly lunch was even worse than yesterday.

Gerry flicked the page, wondering if the vessel in question was the 'Scallop'.

Faturday 2nd of Distember

Sleep, what sleep?

Weather fog with persistent hail.

At last we put in at Sheepbot and Swinnish Customs immediately arrested me for being improperly attired in public. A huge official with the IQ of a grape examined my, or rather Miss Myfowo's bags, and declared me undesirable. As he arrayed the contents on a table, I could see his point. I tried to explain but to no avail. My crime was the lack of orange clothing. It is the Swinnish national colour and I would not be allowed in without any. He sold me hideous orange linen headscarf at an exorbitant price and threw me out into the rain.

Thus, hungry, drenched, cold and hallucinating with fatigue I sought comfort at the 'Affluent Hotel'. I would have had a more comfortable night squatting in a tree.

Mrs Trudd the manager greeted me as if I was a bailiff and showed me across a rubble strewn wasteland to the shack that was my 'room', the rear wall of which was missing. Mrs Trudd told me that they had no other space and she would send a man to repair the hole.

The repairman promptly appeared and spent the rest of the night whistling badly and nailing corrugated iron over the gap. He knocked off at around 4.am, with a cheery, 'right you are sir an 'ave a very good night'.

At 6 am the accordions started, a dozen of them assembled to 'welcome' me. I was roused from my lean to and played at and marched past. Then a large official gave a short speech to the small crowd that had assembled. He thanked me for being there and gave me a big orange ribbon with a key to the Sheepbot toilets on it. They are all mad.

Gerry flicked the page.

Wunday3rd of Distember

I took breakfast at 'The Gasping Cabbage Inn' on Dump lane, in an area of town delightfully named, 'The Thudds'. I am thinking of switching my diet to grass.

The flavours captured in the staple diet of ⁶Swelk beer and ⁷Grubbel pasties are unique and stay with one a very long time. In an attempt to rid myself of them I partook of a sweet that I had assumed to be a choc-ice. It was a lard bar, the taste of which has proved indelible and is with me as I write.

Gerry put down the book and wondered, just what was he getting into? This place sounded awful, with nothing whatsoever to recommend it yet the crew were Swinnish and they seemed kind enough, if a little strange. He had little time to muse as the door swung open and Gurk and the crew came in. They filled the room with creaking oilskins and the smoke from their pipes. Collecting together before him they stood and looked at Gerry. He knew something was about to happen but what he had no idea. "Ahemm," gurgled Ruppy clearing his throat. "Ah young un, we have been a talking and we do think that you should be having more suitable vestments than those that you have. Lilac will not be a doin' on Sheepbot. Oh dear me no."

"No, not the lilac no," agreed all assembled, shaking their heads and then nodding them.

"And 'aving no luggage and all will not be a doing either." More shaking and nodding of heads. "Like I do always say, a traveller needs more than his shadow. So I, we, all together like, and well it ain't much but we'd like 'e to 'ave this." Dubo stepped forward and produced a large brown paper parcel he had been holding behind him and handed it too Gerry.

Gerry looked at them dumbfounded and offered a quiet, "Uh, thankyou."

"Well open 'er up then," said Pume with just a hint of impatience. Gerry carefully undid the string and opened the gift. It was a complete set of fisherman's clothes. He pulled out the items one by one in amazement; there were a pair of heavy black trousers, a thick black sweater, an equally thick pair of sea boot socks and a full set of oilskins, topped off with a So'wester. He looked up at the crew; Dubo was smiling a huge proud smile. Pume in contrast was trying to look somewhere else his pipe puffing furiously. Gurk simply smiled the smile of a grandfather, whilst Ruppy looked as excited as if the gift were his own.

Gerry felt his colour rising and a tear coming to the corner of his eye. In a wavering voice he said truthfully, "I don't know what to say? I have never been given such a splendid present. Thank you."

"Come on then try 'em on," stated Ruppy keenly, "We got you some fine boots as well." Dubo stepped forward again this time with a pair of green gumboots. Gerry quickly climbed into the new gear, the trousers much too big around the waist but he hoisted them in with the heavy leather belt and declared them perfect. The sweater could have easily housed two of him and was as heavy as a suit of armour. He could barely lift his arms with the weight. This also he said was perfect and just how he liked to wear them. "Ah you need room to move," agreed Ruppy. Then with socks, boots and oilskins he completed the ensemble and stood beaming with joy at the gift.

They were the uncoolest clothes he had ever worn and he could hardly move. The boots were so heavy they felt like diver's shoes, they seemed glued to the floor. The oilskins refused to bend; he bent his knees, he and the cloth groaned with the strain. But none of this mattered, he knew what this gift meant, they had made him one of them, an honorary member of the crew. Why? He had no idea, he did not ask but stood and beamed at them with his arms stuck out like a heavy-weight, industrial strength, scarecrow. "They'll need a little time to bed in lad, but no-one will give 'e bother in Swinland," intoned Ruppy, "Like I do always say a fox never bites his own tail." Gerry smiled back creaking. All agreed he looked very fine indeed. Even Pume admitted the rig was 'acceptable'. Dubo pointed out the cut of the leggings and the style of the So'wester and all the while Gerry stood, smiled and creaked.

Presently Gurk stepped forward and shaking Gerry by the hand declared, "Welcome aboard lad and wherever you'm a-going, we will be there to 'elp."

"Er thank you," replied Gerry puzzled, "Thank you very much." He just had to ask why. "This is very wonderful and I am very grateful, but why me, what have I done to deserve this?"

Gurk put a huge hand on his shoulder and said, honestly, "T'aint what you've done, but what you're about to be a doin', and don't 'e forget Gurk and the crew will always be with 'e."

⁶ **Swelk** - Beer made from whelks. Only the Swinnish have managed to ferment shellfish and only they would want to.

⁷ **Grubbel pasties** - hard crusted pies with a filling made of turnips, blubber and eel dripping, an ancient recipe that for some inexplicable reason survives.

"Ehhhm," ehemed Dubo.

"Oh ah, there's summat else for 'e," added Gurk. Dubo stepped forward with a second gift. It was an oilskin bag with a shoulder strap. He placed it on Gerry's shoulder and said softly, "We put together a few things for 'e." It felt heavy. Gerry guessed it held some of Dubo's dubious cooking. All he could do was smile and mouth "Thankyou." They had instantly and completely touched his soul.

Gurk sensing that the emotional barometer was moving to maudlin, turned to his men and barked, "Right you lazy lumps of lard, the party's over, let's be 'avin' some work. Them spollacks need cleaning and the forcusts could do with trimming. Look a-lively now."

They all trooped out leaving Gerry to struggle in his new identity. He sat down, to the sound of protesting oilskin, like an old door on very rusty hinges. Then he tried to rise and found he could not, the combined weight and stiffness was too much for him. He sat a while panting with his legs stuck out as if made of wood. He waved his arms to the sound of yet more creaking and caught hold of the porthole. With great effort and much combined groaning, he levered himself upright. "This is going to take some practising," he muttered to himself, "An exercise suit. If I wear this for a week, I'll have muscles on my muscles, Gmmhhh," creak, he took a step, "Gmmhh," creak, and another and made it to the far wall of the little room. There he took another breather. Thirty minutes and a great deal of effort later, he had the knack, or rather a knack, and had mastered a clockwork soldier walk. The further he went the more the material yielded, until after an hour he was able to stroll albeit sounding like a very angry sofa.

A really nice man

Meredith Scarp was really a very nice man; he knew that, he just did not like to show it. He kept his niceness well hidden. He had tried smiling once, it made him look weak so he had given it up. 'If you show people how soft you are they walk all over you' was what was really meant by the plaque on his desk that said - 'People are Scum'.

As is the general way of things, he had a very big desk, in a very big office, in a very big building. He sat on a Ronnolly hide executive chair, his short legs barely able to touch the hand stitched Hooponese carpet, practising his scowl in the huge mirror that was the opposite wall. Normally his own visage would brighten him a little, but not today. Today he loathed the leering idiot in the mirror and removed the reflection with a well aimed ⁸Mumpty's cradle executive toy. Today was not a good day. The crash of the mirror brought executives running. "Sir, are you all right, is it safe?" asked Carter, Marketing Automation Internal Systems Development Manager, a man whose oiliness, pharmaceutical chemists dream of emulating in a test tube.

"NO I AM NOT ALRIGHT, AND YOU ARE NOT SAFE !!!!!" boomed Scarpe, the veins on his neck twitching like firemen's hoses. He scanned his desk for another object to throw. The advancing tide of suits froze. "GET ME Fa, Fa, Fa, FOAP."

The suits all nodded, and mumbled 'foap, yes foap, err foap?' They looked at each other queryingly. What was a foap? Had the big man suddenly developed a lisp and fancied a wash? No! His teeth were in place, but no one was going to admit not knowing what a foap was. Carter found himself at the head of the column, as the management sought cover, asked meekly "Uh, 'foap' Sir?"

"YES Fa, Fa, FOAP, RINKY DAM DINKY, THE TWINKY," Scarpe stood up, which actually reduced his height.

The column shuffled backwards, the boss was obviously having a head crash. Carter, never one to stay in the firing line for long, declared, "Right on it Chief", and fled leaving the man behind to repeat the performance, until all had gone. The corridors became filled with running execs off to ask their analysts what a foap was.

Harlow Foap stepped out of the lift on the 13th floor and surveyed the newest slice of his empire and the confusion he had caused. The head office of International Wallet Vacuum was in turmoil. Crowds of analysts, planners, managers, administrators and assorted executives jostled through corridors, their arms filled with files and doodling materials. There was a slamming of doors throughout the floor and all was silent as hastily arranged emergency meetings were begun with 'Foap' on every agenda. He plucked from deep inside his bashweena purple robe a large briar pipe, struck a match on a health and safety notice and puffed his way down the corridor. He held open the door for two workmen who were struggling with a large piece of broken mirror. He passed through an open plan office area full of digital analysts, gathering attention as he went. Most had been keeping their heads down and their eyes firmly on the eternal conundrum that is a Money Pump 8 terminal, they knew an awful lot of crap was hitting a lot of fans. But the aroma of Corinthian ready rubbed was too big a mystery for the most inquisitive. A small knot of them formed at a respectful distance behind Foap and followed.

He halted by a coffee machine that was suffering verbal abuse from a rather frayed looking executive. He was the Quality Manager and no one had invited him to any meetings. "I don't know what a damn 'Misvend Error 27654E' is you stupid machine. Give me my secure-vend card back," his voice tailed off as the wave of inquisitive silence and Corinthian aroma broke over him.

"It says the filter is blocked and nobody cares," declared Foap peering at machine through his new spectacles. He rummaged in his robe and pulled out a small blue cylinder. He tapped the machines keypad gently with one end. The machine gurgled, produced a cup of chocoletto and the manager's card. Foap plucked the card as it emerged, handed it to its incredulous owner and left him in a plume of blue smoke. The Quality Manager joined the throng and followed. The carpet thickened beneath Foap's cryosneekers as he stepped into the Executive Suite. The crowd halted and sighed, they had lost their quarry, and then cheered up again, as they realised the fun of speculation. They dispersed into huddles to gossip.

⁸ **Josiah Mumpty** - Inventor of the double ended spoon and crochet hook. Also attributed with deriving the law of gravity, which he did when he was struck in the face by a potato thrown by his assistant one Werner Riflesen in a fit of rage after stabbing his own lip with wrong end of a Mumpty spoon.

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Dweevil Pooter stared sullenly at his Money Pump terminal. It had crashed three times that morning. Each time it had displayed a little message the gist of which was:

'I have stopped.
I have forgotten everything.
All your effort is wasted.
I am an idiot and so are you for working here.
OK'

Of course the text didn't actually say this, but the message was the same. Dweevil was past shouting at the fool machine that it was not at all 'OK'. He had learned the futility of raging at it long ago and simply slumped into resignation that today was yet another 'nothing doing' day. He doodled a picture of a boat, his boat. The boat that he had planned to be casting off and sailing into new water on the morrow. He drew a stick image of himself at the helm, with his captain's cap at a jaunty angle and his beloved Caroline curled up at his feet. The likeness wasn't good; she looked more like a pile of wet washing than a cat. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered. All his dreams were ashes, for his nautical vacation had been cancelled at the last minute by the Foap crisis. No holidays were to be had until the Foap Task Group had been set up and its business successfully concluded. It was a deep and personal loss. He wrote a little poem beneath his picture.

'Welcome to IWV
The pension is free
All we ask is your soul
Hear the clocking bells toll
Trapped in the harbour
No sign of the sea

Yours is the corner
Next to the wall
Here's your calendar and pen
I'll send you some emails
About nothing at all
And when you've read them
You can read them again

See you each morning
Remember your tie
Java's at ten and at three
Nothing much happens
But we learn to get by
Trapped in the harbour
No sign of the sea.'

"Excuse me," said Foap suddenly appearing, "Where is the Chief's office?"

"Eh, what, oh that way," sighed Pooter, waving his arm vaguely ahead, not looking up from his artwork and in doing so gaining instant promotion. Too bad the new position only lasted two days. Things were changing fast.

Foap picked his way through the workmen and broken glass to find his target rummaging in a desk drawer, "Hello," he said. The rummaging continued. Eventually Scarpe rose with a small bottle of theta blockers, staring fiercely at them with a grip of a politician on a microphone. "Hello," repeated Foap, "I'm Harlow Foap, I believe this is my office."

The money train

"You shouldn't have too many of those you know, terribly bad for you," added Foap. Scarpe snarled and threw the bottle at him. It missed wildly and thudded harmlessly into a fine Guruban tapestry depicting the invention of the wallet. "You have the wrist action all wrong, you should loosen up," mocked Foap, smiling the smile of a cat whose cream supply is assured.

Scarpe now the colour of a nasty infection grabbed another missile. It was a thick volume entitled "The very big book of stress." Foap stepped easily aside and watched the tome smack into a glass figurine. El Rolfo's seminal sculpture 'Clown playing concertina' rocked on its marble plinth, tumbled forward, bounced on the carpet and shattered like a light bulb.

Foap eyed the fallen work and grinned lazily. "Practise that is the key, plenty of practise."

Next came an executive decision-maker in the shape of a miniature train set. It crashed into an oil painting, 'Playful kittens with a ball of wool' by Minteretto, ripping the canvas and showering the carpet with tiny broken carriages.

"Oh dear," chided Foap. "You should be more careful, with other people's property. It is all mine now. All mine. Has a nice ring to it don't you think?" He grinned from every pore. This was the thickest tastiest cream and such a big bowl.

His desk clear of weapons Scarpe focussed a maximum wattage beam of hatred at the intruder. His colour pulsated as that of a chameleon on a tartan rug and his expression contorted as if massaged by mechanical hands. Making a chuffing sound he grabbed the emergency inhaler that hung at his chest. His lips curled around the little device and with teeth gnashing at its mouthpiece, he took a puff. His eyes seemed visibly to inflate with the life giving gas as if it were a rage recharge.

"Hmark," he barked through the inhaler. He raised his fists and bounced from foot to foot, making ready to advance. He was going to plug this punk.

Foap raised an eyebrow at the little man as he cavorted and continued, "As in 'All mine and none of it yours' because somehow, and I bet you would like to know how? Somehow, I have bought you with your own money. All mine and none of it yours. Hmmm, nice." A plume of contentment rose from his pipe.

"Hmark," barked Scarpe stepping purposefully towards Foap. One in the belly should bring him down.

Foap savoured the last of the cream and sneered, "So embarrassing to be thrown out of your own building by your own security guards. Touch me and you will be on the street faster than insolvency."

Scarpe stopped inhaler still in place, like an irate bootball touch judge. The punk had all the cards. He shook with rage and flapped his arms pointlessly.

"Now sit down and listen. I have a deal for you. A deal that could make you richer than ⁹Mest" commanded Foap.

"Hmark," barked Scarpe taking another puff of his inhaler, but the rage was subsiding. The mention of Mest had hit home, now there is a punk he would like to plug.

"Just sit back and let me tell you of an enormous fortune that is about to arrive. You my friend are about to be hit by a very, very large money train."

"Hmmark," growled Scarpe, sitting and sucking on his inhaler.

"I am talking enough money to buy Hermainia," continued Foap.

"Hmmm," the growl fading as detergent greed washed away the fury.

"And with that money, power, lots of power," continued Foap as he strode towards the window to take in the spectacular view of the sleepless city of Meattle.

⁹ **Bark Mest** - Worlds richest being – Mest gained an international patent on the colour blue before anyone realised how daft it was. The Vespuchian Government has to pay him 20 Hollars every time it flies one of its own flags.

"HmMMMM," hmmmmed Scarpe.

"I now own International Wallet Vacuum and all of its subsidiaries," continued Foap keeping his back to Scarpe, "and I am about to make a few little changes. I have some ideas for a new product, and I think you might help. A product no one can resist. When they have the product it will send all of the money to us."

Scarpe unplugged his inhaler and snapped "Why 'us', you have the company, the money, the product. Why do you need me?" Foap turned his back on the city, and locked eyes with Scarpe.

"You have the property rights to a little project called Personality Control."

"How the heck do you know about PC, that's a military project?"

"I have my ways, anyway I need it. I believe you also own an island?"

"Yes, Nocca, so what?"

"I need you to supply the company with electrical power to our new base on Sheepbot."

"SHEEPBOT, ARE YOU SAYING IWV IS MOVING TO THAT HELL HOLE. YOU'RE MAD," boomed Scarpe jumping to his feet again.

Foap raised a calming hand. "It will pay. It is only a small investment for such a large return." Scarpe sat down again.

"OK, say I do it. How do we make all of this money?"

"No my dear old thing, you misheard me. It is 'how do we make ALL of THE money.'"

"Eh?"

"Let me explain. You, I, we, own the Money Pump 8 machines and we both know how infernally tricky they are to operate. You need more degrees than a blessed thermometer just to turn the wretched things on. They are clear as mud and as flaky as a Scandawegian snowstorm. That is why we only sell a few thousand a year."

"Well right, so?"

"So I have a product that will clear the vision, enable anyone to see what is going on. A product the customer will be able to wear it on their head." Scarpe looked at him as he would look at a social worker. It was not a nice look.

"You, Mr Foap, are insane if you think folk will walk about, hell, lying down would be tricky, with half a ton of money pump strapped to their heads." He snorted at the thought but amused by the image expanded on his theme. "Would we redesign cars for this head gear?" he sneered with the faintest touch of a chortle. His grimace strained as a grin fought to replace it. He made a deep chugging sound. Meredith Scarpe was actually laughing, "What and chug, this is too silly, what about in the cinema, excuse me lady would you mind removing your mainframe, chug, chug," tears ran down his cheeks. "Mad, mad as, mad as", he looked around and saw his reflection in a shard of mirror that remained clinging to the wall, "Well mad as me I suppose. So we are moving into digital millinery. Mad as hatters. Chug whoop chug, who, woo, wo." Meredith's laugh had not seen action for some time, it was corroded but he was cleaning it fast. The rage had to come out somewhere. He lightly bashed the desk with his fists.

"Maybe it does sound crazy put like that, only you cannot imagine. I mean to say..." interjected Foap very slightly annoyed. But there was no stopping Scarpe now.

"Are they going to have a wheel barrow for the power pack, chug, whoop ,wo?"

Foap smiled to himself at the thought, "Yes I see what you mean it would seem like that, mhhh, mmhhhh," he started to chuckle. "Given the power a money pump 8 needs I should think a milk float following should do it. HmMMMM mhhhh."

"Tricky on a bus, ho ho whoop," Meredith was in danger of pushing his mirth envelope too far, he wobbled precariously on his chair, the Ronnolly hide clung to him but only just. "So, what were we saying, hooooop," THUD, he hit the carpet, but that just seemed funnier, now the tide was in full flow, he lay on his back and waving his arms and legs and laughed. A lifetime's worth of mirth, he roared and snorted and rolled about only managing to say the odd word between each squall of merriment. "Hat whoooooo, arrrrrrhhh! Elevator whoooooo, whoooooop!" Foap watched and chuckled along.

The door opened and a lean and earnest man stepped in. "Ah Bap glad to see you," said Foap, "Meredith is having a funny turn, I think it is long overdue. Doing him good, I think." Dean Bap stared incredulously at the man on the floor. There is amused, bemused and cemused and he was traversing the last of these. Was this the same Scarpe, the man who in four dour years had never even snickered? Dean stood open mouthed while his eyebrows attempted to migrate to the back of his head. Meredith saw him and unleashed another gale.

Dean dropped his papers and fled, thinking, "No one will believe this." He stumbled outside, he hadn't smoked in years but he needed one now. He headed for the smokers corner located at a particularly windy end of the car park.

"Yo Dean, don't see you in these parts too often," observed Leon gently sucking on a Wanana Swashbuckler Slim.

"No, no," replied Dean still dealing with the shock.

"What troubles you my man, you need a Slim?"

"Yes, thanks," Dean took a cigarette, lit up, and inexpertly puffed, "You would not believe what I just saw."

"Yes I would," answered Leon flatly "You just saw old mean face rolling on the floor, helpless with laughter and another guy chuckling. He is Foap by the way."

"Eh, how do you know already? I only just left?" uttered Dean getting back to cemused status.

"Hey you want to know what is going down, you have got to smoke. Hell, I hate the things, filthy habit but you have to be here or you're as blind as a customer."

"I never knew," said Dean looking at his Swashbuckler Slim in a new light.

"Yes, just stay a while and let the news come to you."

"I will," agreed Dean drawing deeply, he let the smooth smoke drift lazily from his mouth and added, "So where are you off on hols this year?"

"Oh Gravel and I thought we would take a peek at Crimsonia, she collects lampshades."

Meanwhile, the storm was abating and Meredith had managed to right himself. He had not felt so good in years. Still chuckling he got two drinks from the antique Heluvian bar and handed one to Foap. "OK, the joke's over what are you really going to do?"

"Let me try to explain again," pressed Foap sipping his drink. "The Money Pump 8 is super at doing what it says, pumping money. You have most of the financial system driven by them."

"True, and we have systems in most major corporates."

"Right, I am proposing a money pump 9 that uses the old machines but gives us the kind of control you never dreamed of."

"I'm dreaming, tell me."

"Better than telling, let me show you." Foap produced a pair of Media Specs. Scarpe put them on and jerked his head back as his vision filled with wonders. "And all we need is Personality Control to really seal it. What do you think?" But Scarpe said nothing he was totally cemused and well on his was to being demused.

An angry man cometh

Herman Cushion did not travel well, he hated boats, he hated the sea and he hated all of the mad fools who sailed on it. He clung to the rail of the 'The Saucy Scallop' and stared fiercely at the rolling horizon. He had the appearance of an angry man even when he wasn't, which was rare. For his expressive face, appeared two sizes too large for his head and its relaxed expression was one of general distaste. He was a man of precision, order and neatness, surrounded by buffoons who all wanted to make chaos. A man who would rather starve than eat a meal without a well-polished napkin ring. A man talented in the craft of complaining. He could spot the minutest flaw, the slightest imperfection and inflate it with his indignation and vicious invective so that it became a problem of catastrophic proportions. As he saw it, there is a right and a wrong way to do things, and generally they were wrong. As to travel, the further you went from your tidy environment the worse it got. More buffoons and more chaos, and surely there could be no worse trip than this. For he was sailing to Sheepbot the ancient capital of Swinland, the most backward of the Vespuchian colonies, a place frozen in a dark age all of its own, where the weather was lousy, the natives hostile and the food positively belligerent. He snorted at the thought. Then he thought of seeing his fine Coulson and Cowley hand stitched leather luggage standing on the empty quayside as they left. Of his remonstrating with the fool of a captain, that they must go back and get the vital luggage and being told that it was impossible on account of a neap rising tide causing an overtow or some other such nonsense. The Captain had been polite but firm, they could not go back. He had assured him that the luggage would be on the next boat, whenever that might be. Then Herman was left to watch his lovely luggage shrink from sight as they sailed away. 'Oo!!' it made him mad.

It had started bad and it was getting worse. He suspected the crew were taunting him, especially some character called Ruppy who always had a stupid song or daft saying such as: "A day without sunshine is like night" or delivered in a deep and knowing tone "A ship leaves no footprints."

Utter nonsense, pure drivel from an ancient fool. And then he quailed, "Oh, why me and why now?" Just when life had begun to level off, he had been ripped from his comfy desk and cast upon this leaky box of fish full of idiots, on a sea that was nearly as angry as he was. Just as he had managed to find a job where no one called, no one asked for anything, coffee and stationary supplies were free. No one had a clue what he did and left him to do it. Two months the idyll had lasted. Two months of a perfectly clean and tidy desk, until his bloody stupid boss, casually dropped a ticket to Sheepbot on it. She had looked so smug, 'Oo, Ooo' it made him angry. And what was his mission? His absolutely vital mission. To officiate the opening of a tassel factory, no less. A tassel factory in this ghastly dump, of all the useless, pointless rubbish, probably run by some prancing nancies with hankies up their sleeves and cameras on bits of string. OHHH!!!, it made him really mad. It was 'fait a compli', no way out. Melville Smoding the full time man was lost somewhere in ¹⁰Barasia and all the others had gone sick, dropped like flies. He was the only one on the radar. He had wriggled and moaned and shouted to no avail. Still it was a promotion; yesterday he had been mere ¹¹Rivener to the second under-secretary to the Secretary of State. Today he was the Vespuchian Ambassador and he had to leave his ordered life behind to mix with these heathens, and to suffer. While she, Madam Smug was having her toenails done or some other such delight, in her warm comfy office, and he was here. He could see her smiling oh so sweetly and laughing at her own pathetic joke about fringe benefits at International Tassel. "OOOHHH! OHHHH!" The more Herman thought of it the more it seemed that this whole stupid venture appeared to be totally organised to irritate him. He drew upon his large repertoire of curses and shook the handrail with venom. Without warning it gave way and tossed him into a decidedly coolish sea.

No, Herman Cushion did not travel well, but fortunately he did float and Captain Gurk and his crew fished him back on deck. They did not rush however, but waited for the cursing to abate. They were in no hurry, they liked sailing, in fact there was only one thing they liked more and that was Famel¹² and Famel a Vespuchian a double bonus. Famel a stiff and self-important Vespuchian Ambassador sent the meter off the scale. "Oh dear, dear no this will not do. The gentleman's clothes are all wet. You get them off sir and I will have them dried on the boiler in no time," soothed Ruppy as they pulled Herman on deck. "I'll find some things that might fit, tall feller aren't you though," he continued, eyeing a damp and shivering Herman. "I'm sure I got something, hmm summat loose?"

"I have a spare suit in my bags, get my bags," moaned Herman and then he remembered the bags. He just said, "Oh," and was suddenly very cold.

¹⁰ **Barasia** – Gambling capital of Wongolia set high in the Shimilayas. Wheezers Palace hotel is the highest casino on the planet. It is powered entirely by one armed bandit slot machines.

¹¹ **Rivener** – A job automated out of existence by the invention of the shredding machine.

¹² **Famel** - A foreigner to Swinland. Fameling is the Swinnish art of tourist teasing.

"Don't you fret, I'm sure Ole Ruppy will find you summat, though I dunno what," said Ruppy scratching his So'wester, "I reckon you're taller than you think."

Herman was taken below and he exchanged his sodden fine worsted pure wool suit for a pair of Ruppy's old wyncette pyjamas. He briefly wondered if they had ever been washed, but he was past care. He was cold and they were dry. Sadly they were also several sizes too small and bore a fluffy bunny motif. He was just able to tie the white cord drawstring at his waist and button the jacket to provide some modesty but it did limit his arm movements somewhat.

He sat on his rough wooden bunk and stared blankly, wondering if it could get worse. The answer came in the form of a knock at the door, and the appearance of Seaman Pume, who had his customary oiling can in his hand, and a pained expression. "If you please sir, the Cap'n sent me a long to have a word, you see, hum."

"Yes," snapped Herman peering at the man as if he was inspecting something dead.

"I am awful sorry, it was Ruppy's fault he didn't tell us did he?" stammered Pume.

"Eh?" quizzed Herman vaguely aware that the dead thing was talking.

"When they sent the old wet rags down to my engine room, that's what I thought they was, old rags. No one said they a-was'n't, how would I know?"

"I see," spat Herman not seeing at all but becoming more attentive.

"Now rags is handy. Leave em around and Ruppy will be wearing em, faster than spit, so I had the lad cut em up into strips and grease em good and proper to make wadding for way-tween gunnels. Come on in Adrian me lad." Pume beckoned at the door. A young lad appeared with a bucket and placed it at Herman's bedroom slippered feet. Herman looked into the bucket. It was full of thick brown grease flecked with 'Oh so subtle' pin stripes. Truth, hard as glass, was beginning cut into Herman's befuddlement.

"You mean..... this is my suit?" he said in a flat monotone whilst pointing at the bucket. "You have taken my fine worsted, finger stitched Begent and Markland two piece and turned it into THIS!!" His voice rose to a shout. He jumped to his feet and shook as if attempting to split into two so that he could really be beside himself.

"I cannot tell a lie, that we have. But if I might say, I have never seen better wadding, 'twill last a lifetime that," observed Pume earnestly puffing on his odious pipe.

Rage overtook Herman, "LAST A LIFETIME! WADDING! ARE YOU MAD?! ARE YOU ALL MAD!?" But he was remonstrating with an empty room. Both Pume and Adrian had gone, leaving the bucket and the stench of Pume's evil tobacco. Herman wasted no time, he raged up onto deck, holding his drawstring tight with one hand and the bucket with his suit in it with the other. He could hear laughter as he skidded on the deck planks. Well, he would give them something to think about. Oh, yes! A piece of his mind. He would make them sit up! "GURK, GURK, WHAT IS THIS?!" he shouted across the deck holding the offending bucket aloft as high as the pyjamas would allow.

Gurk drew upon his twenty-five years before the mast and replied, "If not mistaken, that's a bucket that is." Several giggling sailors made themselves scarce.

"WITH MY RUDDY SUIT IN IT, HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH, YOU WILL PAY?!" Herman marched, as well as he could with his bucket and tight pyjamas towards his quarry, but the bedroom slippers slithered horribly on the fish soaked deck.

"Now, you stop there, that's it just there, and I will come over," commanded Gurk for he had not finished with Herman yet. Helpless seamen, gathered in a huddle, to slap each other on the back and cry with joy. The 'Saucy Scallop' was awash with laughter. For that is how Gurk steered his ship, by gales of merriment upon a happy sea.

"We will have to go back, I cannot appear like this. I DEMAND WE GO BACK!" bellowed Herman becoming crimson.

"Demand is it, hmm?" Gurk scratched his beard, "Well, you do look a bit of a fine site. I'll see if we 'ave a spare So'wester for e."

"NO I DON'T WANT A BLOODY SILLY HAT, I DEMAND WE GO BACK!"

"Now, don't 'e take on so we are nearly there. Well blow me here we are."

Herman looked around and there, dead ahead, was Sheepbot fish dock. Herman was to witness Swinnish seamanship at it's finest. The 'Scallop' hit the jetty and with a juddering crunch they came to a halt, all except for Herman that is. With an, "Awwwwwwahh," and a 'Splaap', he was tossed neatly into the fish hold.

A voice came from above. It was Ruppy. "You alright down there?" it echoed and boomed. Herman tried to get to his feet but slithered helplessly and with another but much gentler 'splaap' fell back into the fish. "You were lucky, we got a good load on. If it had been last Wursday when we only got two herrings, an' they were small. As I do always say, you ain't got nothing when the bag's empty, 'cept the bag of course. Yep, right lucky that's you. Now hold still and we'll have you out before you can divide by zero."

Herman thought of the options, for the present there were none. He lay in the fish, his wrath smouldering, his contempt and rage boiling. They would rue the day they fooled with him. It took twenty minutes or so before he was collected in a net and deposited, amongst his new piscatorial companions, onto the remains of the dock. Herman Cushion did not travel well but then very few famels did on Swinnish Ships.

Another beginning

Gerry stood on the remains of the jetty, creaking in his new attire and wondering at what lay ahead. A heavy mist was rolling in from the sea behind him, it washed up to the armpits of the assorted fisher folk on the dock, who were all intent upon the business of fish, either cleaning, loading or selling them. They bobbed in and out of sight like dabbling ducks returning from the fog with fish presumably from boxes hidden at their feet. Those on the surface were either waving fish at the others or shouting. Smaller folk appeared to be either just hats or heads that floated on the mist. Beyond this bizarre tableaux the town of Sheepbot rose in pieces, clinging to a dark and brooding hillside. Gerry recalled from his little guide book that the hill was called the Gorm. The buildings were grey, the sky was grey, the hill was grey, and the road was grey. It did not offer a cheerful prospect and he could see why Douglas Squeme had said it looked like a damp scrap yard. He sniffed; it smelled old, well used, musty and full of stuff, mainly fish with just a hint of burning rubber. It reminded him of the galley on the 'Scallop' only stronger. It made his eyes water and his throat burn. The new garb seemed to render him invisible, people rushed about him, as he proceeded very slowly and carefully towards the town. His physical progress may have been slow but his mind was racing as he creaked through the alien landscape. Where was he to go? Where was he to stay? How would he survive without money? Why the hell had he thought coming here was a neat idea? He waded amid the murky fog amongst the Swinnish unseen. Almost all wore So'westers, gumboots, and bushy beards. Two of them approached him, one holding a large fish.

The man with the fish waved it at Gerry, "Scuse us young un, but this ole fool is trying to tell I that this is a Jellop and I say 'tis a Gunlin, what do 'e say?" Before Gerry could respond the other interjected.

"Course it's a Jellop it's got twill fins."

"Gunlins ave Twills too, 'tis too big for a Jellop" argued the first.

"Taint a Gunlin, tis a Jellop I tell e," asserted the second flatly.

Both stared hard at Gerry for an answer, the fish wobbling between them, its dull eyes completing the inquiry panel. Gerry paused not having a notion of what to say. The trio waited silently for his decision. Trying hard not to sound Vespuchian he eventually offered, "It certainly looks a strange one. Has the fins of a Jellop but the look of Gunlin. I should say it is the best fish I have ever seen. It is a most excellent and strange fish." They still stared at him waiting unmoved.

"I think it is a Tillop," he pronounced hoping on hope that a Tillop did not exist.

"Well I'll be, a Tillop eh?" said the fish holder, "You might just be right there." The fish appeared to nod in agreement.

"No can't be a Tillop, them's got pink gills" argued the second unconvincingly.

"Course 'tis a Tillop, now I see it, well, well a Tillop eh," asserted the first, "Well thank 'e young un." He touched the fish to his So'wester in salute and they were gone.

Gerry continued his slow and creaking progress along the dock, passing piled boxes of rotting fish and old ropes whilst assorted fishermen swayed in and out of his way. Eventually they became scarcer and the wooden decking became cobbles as he got to the dock gates. The mist faded away and a light yet seemingly permanent drizzle began to fall. It made a crinkling sound on his oilskins. A low bunker of a building guarded the dock. Its grey and austere contenance decorated with faded orange bunting. A small brass band, dressed in an equally faded orange was assembled before it, as was a podium containing three fat men in tight suits and top hats. One of them sported a large chain and amulet around his neck. Another held an outside key. The podiums third occupant was a man attired entirely in what appeared to be shag pile carpet, a very damp shag pile carpet. The podium was full, in fact they could have done with one at least two sizes larger. It groaned under the weight of so much dignity. The carpet man was obviously annoyed, his temper as frayed as his curious clothes. He hopped from foot to foot causing his tassels, for that is what they were, to shimmy and the podium to sway unnervingly. The Mayor of Sheepbot clung to the tiny wooden rail staring hard into the drizzle. They were obviously waiting for someone very important. Gerry had an idea who it might be. He stopped to watch.

"Stop jumping about. You will have us over," ordered the Mayor.

"You said he would be here ages ago," retorted Tassel man.

"Yes, I cannot think what has happened?" offered the man with the key.

"Shall we tell the band to play anyway, they have been practising for weeks."

"No we are enough of a spectacle as it is," observed the mayor.

"Damn Vespuchians, damn this suit it is getting tighter," moaned Tassel man wriggling.

"Calm down; he must be here soon," commanded the Mayor.

"I think I see him," interjected the key man. The band started to play.

"No, no it is not him," the band parpled to a halt, sounding rather as if it had been trodden on. The drizzle turned into rain, it bounced from the top hats and clattered on the brass instruments. The tassel man danced his tassels losing their vitality as they absorbed the weather. "We cannot stay here. This is stupid," he protested.

"We must stay until the ambassador arrives," declared the key man "it is protocol."

"Damn your protocol, if this suit gets any heavier..."

"If you want your factory and your money YOU WILL STAY HERE AND STAY STILL!" barked the Mayor.

"JUST WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" retorted Tassel Man.

"I AM THE MAYOR AND YOU ARE AN IDIOT IN A TASSEL SUIT!" The mayor's eyes were bulging and his head shook. A rivulet of rain ran from his top hat onto the subject of his abuse.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen please, this is not the time or place," entreated the key man obviously agitated at finding himself in the ring with heavyweights.'

"Quite right Tollington, thank you," responded the Mayor regaining some composure.

"Well, OK, but this chump better show soon," moaned the sodden tassel. The rain upped a gear and lashed upon them. Gerry chuckled to himself at the sight of so much moist importance. The rain drummed on his oilskins, he was warm and cosy inside. He offered thanks to the crew of the 'Scallop' and went on his way leaving the dignitaries to their very long and uncomfortable wait. Upon the bunker building was a very large orange sign. It read:

You are welcome to Swinland

**No gadgets, gizmos or oars beyond this point.
No Walking or Swimming without a hat (hats available inside)
No Spitting, Swearing, Hopping or Whistling in the street.
No Ball Games, Gambling or Ukulele music.**

Enjoy your stay

Gerry wondered what they could have against ukuleles, played a little in his head and then nodded in agreement, seeing the point. "Well are you a'coming or a'going," boomed an economy size gruff voice several feet above him. Gerry swivelled to meet the owner. It was an enormous guard dressed in a lurid orange uniform with a peaked hat. They stood eyeball to bellybutton. Orange filled Gerry's vision in all directions, a heaving expanse of orange. "Hooo" said Gerry involuntarily taking a step backwards. Beads for eyes glittered under the peaked hat. "You wouldn't be a smuggler now would 'e?" The huge head came down to inspect Gerry. The beads did not blink, cold and empty, like a dinosaur inspecting a potential meal.

"No, no, er, no," stammered Gerry.

"Well let's just have a look in the bag then shall we?"

"Er yes, yes of course," replied Gerry as if there were an option. A massive hand seemingly made of sandstone plundered his bag and pulled out a bottle.

"Now what do we have 'ere?" The guard lifted it to his beads and slowly read the label, "Doctor Wiffles Brain Tincture," the giant head turned towards Gerry, "Now what would you be doing with that?" Gerry smiled a completely vacant smile for he had no idea. The question had floored him, why would he have a bottle of brain tincture whatever it was, Dr Wiffles or otherwise was beyond him. Answers came and went, his face moved with them. His eyebrows oscillated and he slowly shook his head as he wrestled with the problem. Nothing would come.

"It is a gift," he finally offered meekly.

"Hmmm," growled the guard unconvinced. Inspiration came, Gerry remembered Dubo's advice and added.

"That is a very fine er," Gerry scanned the monster for something he could compliment, "Er hat". The guard looked around and then back at his prey, but the eyes had softened a notch.

In a quieter voice he asked, "Do you really think so lad?"

"Marvellous, suits you, most becoming."

"Well thank you kindly for that. Your hat is very fine one too."

"Thank you" accepted Gerry hoping the conversation might end there.

"Now about this 'ere Wiffles Tincture."

"It is a gift, a gift for you."

"For me?" the guard genuinely sounded surprised but looked exactly the same. Gerry imagined his eyebrows climbing under the peaked hat.

The iron hard tone came back to the guard's voice, "You wouldn't be trying to bribe me would you?"

"Bribe you, bribe you with brain tincture? No, no, big men like you need this stuff." Gerry tapped the bottle in the big man's hand. "Your brain must be huge, er and needs, eh, tincture." He had started well but felt his credibility slipping toward the end.

"You think so?" The bottle was raised again. "Nothing cleans brains like Wiffles," he read, "Finest cerebellum polish. What does that mean?"

"It is very good for you, sharpens the thinking, tones the neurones. Take some and you will see," ventured Gerry gambling.

'Plock,' the guard pulled the cork out with his teeth, spat it out and sniffed the bottle. He gave a look of approval and took a big swig. Both waited to see what would happen whilst irrelevant rain fell in torrents around them. The big man looked from side to side as if he were trying to inspect the inside of his own head and then took another swig. Barely had the bottle left his lips than he reeled and stiffened as if hit with an industrial sized frying pan. A look of surprise came to his huge features, as if he had seen the sky for the first time, with childlike wonder his mouth dropped open. He said "Cooo" and the beads became eyes as they widened. He gave the bottle back to Gerry, who retrieved the cork from the cobbles and reinserted it. The guard cooed again his eyes wide and fixed and a dreamy smile growing.

"Goodbye," proposed Gerry.

"Cooo," cooed the guard. This Tincture was powerful stuff, Gerry examined at the bottle. In large red letters on the back it said:

DOSE

2 drops to be added to Bathwater.

"Ah!" he observed.

"Cooo," cooed the guard.

"I think you might have taken a little too much."

"Cooo," cooed the guard. Gerry left him there, in the rain cooing harmlessly and strolled through the gate and into the town. He did wonder how long it would last and hoped the poor man would be soon back to his animal self. It wasn't nice to think of him standing and cooing all night. It wasn't dignified.

The rain came down in lumps, bouncing from the cobbles in Gudd Street and a torrent filled the gutters as Gerry creaked slowly up the Gorm. Ancient buildings huddled in clumps of sad disrepair. Hastily built canopies of corrugated iron protecting the broken roofs, clattered under the beat of the remorseless rain. There were occasional gaps in the ranks, like broken teeth separating the decay. The stumps of once proud buildings picked clean of anything useful and abandoned. There was no litter, no cans, no plastic, no paper, just the lean emptiness of utter poverty. No motors jammed the street, just the occasional dray, clopped its way slowly on the rough road. The pavewalks were empty, whereas the dock had been bustle and noise, here nothing moved. An eyrie postcard silence underlined the rain and the steady clopping of the dray's hooves. Gerry trudged on up the hill. He passed the Affluent Hotel Douglas Squeme had mentioned in his book. No one could stay there now for all that remained was a faded sign and a hole in the ground. It was a complete extraction. No doubt Squeme had done for it with his little guide. The whole prospect was of slow aching depression, joyless and cold.

Gerry might have been more affected had his mind not been racing trying to figure what might happen next. Why had the crew offered allegiance and showered him with gifts? They seemed to think he had some purpose. True, he had told Dubo of Foap and Mavis but what could he do about that and why should they care anyway? All he wanted to do was get away and hide. Yet they seemed to imply he was on a mission. Questions whirled just stopping long enough to confuse and then be replaced. He thought of what Ruppy had advised as he left them. "Now then lad remember what Dubo tole 'e, Be Polite and don't 'e buy nothin'. An 'ere is a place for 'e to start." He had handed Gerry a carefully folded envelope. It was tired and creased from constant opening and reuse. "You go straight up the Gorm and you can't missun. See Eva she'll see you right and give her this."

All of the shops were closed and shuttered save one, which was only discernible by the large sign in the window that said OPEN. Apart from this it was dark and the only stock on display being a big tub of what looked like thick grey grease. Gerry consulted the envelope Ruppy had given him and then stood back to see the shop name, in cracked and peeling golden letters it said, 'Lumpov Fine Tallow Emporium, 'For All Your Tallow Ne ds'. The missing 'e' had long gone, its shadow barely discernible. He hovered outside for a while, took a deep breath and opening the door stepped in. A little bell rang on the door and it echoed in the empty space. The musty smell of ages clung to the air, like an ancient pair of pharaoh's trainers. "Yes?" A small woman came from the gloom, bent and grey with a headscarf she scuttled towards him. She looked up at him quizzically, as if expecting a password.

"This is a very fine er... shop you have," entreated Gerry now well versed in the protocol.

"Thank 'e for that, young sir," she smiled a coy girlish smile with several teeth missing. "I try to keep it up, but times is 'ard in the lard and tallow trade. Now what can I get you? We have a very fine tallow in, nice an thick, good for the skin. Use it myself, keeps it smooth and clear it does." She displayed a cheek for him to inspect. It had the patina of a potting shed. "Go on how old do you think I am?"

Fighting not to recoil he offered, "Um, very young."

"Oh you flatterer." She fluttered her eyelids and giggled and then continued with her sales pitch

"And you can use it to plug up 'oles in things, makes mighty fine sandwiches, best to heat it and strain out the lumps though. Keep them to put in your gum boots. Cause you can rub it on yer feet to cure verucas and soften corns. Use it to waterproof yer corduroy and linen. 'Tis good for old hinges and you can burn it in lamps and candles. Now how much do you want?" She looked expectantly rubbing her hand on her apron presumably to gather some tallow in them.

"Well I actually came to give you this," he proffered Ruppy's envelope. With a trill of recognition and delight she grabbed it.

"Tis Ruppy, 'e is alright is 'e?" her voice trembled with concern.

"Oh yes, he is fine, I was with him only an hour ago down at the dock."

"Fine is the word alright, the finest man that ever slapped a bit of tallow on, my Ole Ruppy". She clutched the letter to her bosom, went dreamy eyed and let out a low sigh, "ahhhh." Gerry waited for the moment to pass. "Well you come along in, don't suppose you want any tallow?" She said turning and retracing her path, a path worn in the tired and curling linoleum.

"Not really, but it does sound marvellous,"

"No, 'tis only animal fat but that is all we have. Times is 'ard, but they have been worse." Gerry wondered how much worse it could be as she led him through a door and down some steps. Rain clattered through the gaping roof. They went through another door and into a time machine of a parlour. Tiny and neat with everything in its place and that is how it had been for a very, very long time. Even the dust moved at a leisurely pace. The once cream ceiling was now dark brown with soot from the little coal fire that crackled in an open grate. A battered copper pot hung above it, cooking something grey. A long case clock ticked the slow moments, as if its pendulum were travelling through tallow. He took off his oilskins, hung them on a large hook by the door and took an offered armchair. He watched her collect a pair of broken spectacles, sit in the partner to his chair and carefully read Ruppy's letter. Her mouth moved as she read the words.

'My Dearest Eva

Hope all is well. The young un is a good un. He has summat in his bag for you. Keep him safe and get him to the Minky tommora nite.

More love than you can fit in a skiff.

Ruppy'

She kissed the page and looked up. "He says you got summat for I in that bag of yourn."

"Er, oh yes." Gerry fished in the bag. After the last surprise he had no idea what it might be. He found a small and heavy parcel, wrapped in brown paper with 'Darlin Eva' drawn on it with a thick pencil and handed it over. She slowly unwrapped it, carefully folding the paper and putting it in a drawer. It contained a glass snowstorm. She shook it with delight and laughed as the little boat inside jiggled on a tiny stormy sea. She set it amongst several others on the mantle shelf.

"Well my dear we had better find you some space," she said, smiling at Gerry as if he were a relative. Again he followed her dodging the drips, along the corridor to a small and cosy bedroom. No sooner had they entered than the shop bell tinkled and she was gone, with a, "You make yourself at home now," in her wake.

Gerry sat on the bed and beneath the feeble glow of a small oil lamp, investigated the remaining contents of his bag. He was tired, very tired but curiosity was gnawing him. What else had they packed for him? What could be stranger than a bottle of Dr Wiffles and a snowstorm? He found the answer; an imitation flower playing a guitar, with a tiny toothy grin and sunglasses. He set the flower on the bedside table and stared at it. Lots of words beginning with w jostled for position within him. Eventually he said "Why?" The little flower jiggled. He said "What"? The flower jiggled some more. He grabbed it and studied the grinning daisy. It wriggled as he did so. "Hello," he said and the flower duly danced. "You are stupid," he added. The flower bounced and gyrated. He set it back on the bedside table to run through its limited choreography as he rummaged in his bag for other 'surprises'. He pulled out the bottle of 'Brain Tincture' and set it beside the flower, which nodded a greeting. Next came a slab of Dubo's cooking, the smell being instantly recognisable even through its wrapping of greaseproof paper. He set it with the other finds and pulled the last item out. It was a well worn metal bottle opener in the shape of a newt. "At last", he thought something that had a purpose. He set the kit all together on the table, watched until the little flower stopped jiggling and the fatigue of the day overcame him.

Sleep hit him like an iron ball wrapped in down soft meadow scented pillows and he dreamt of an empty causeway. Dermot and the lilac hoppers were hopping beside him. They were all singing a song he could not understand and urging him to sing along. A pretty girl was trying to stop him hopping by throwing hot flannels at him whilst another older woman with a child was looking at him in despair and begging him to keep hopping. And all the while a big and embarrassing damp patch was growing in his groin. He doubled up to hide it and..... "Whaaa," he woke up to find he really did have a damp patch. Icy rain had found a way and dripped with frigid fingers onto his nether regions. Before he could properly inspect the damage a single knock rattled the door, it opened and Eva stepped in. She was twitching with urgency.

"We got trouble," she blurted quickly, "'tis Customs and Traditions men asking after 'e. Best be out through the window now." She opened a small transom whilst he hurriedly dressed in his oilskins. He climbed out and dropped into the endless rain and a solid black night. Across broken ground he darted, keeping to the walls in commando crouch, staying in shadows, his oilskins protesting as he went. Down an alley, and into to another he ran, behind the crumbling houses. Around a corner he skittered and straight into the bulk of a very familiar orange guard.

"Well, well what 'ave we here?" grunted the guard as a sandstone hand pinned Gerry to a wall. The huge head came close and the cold glittering beads twinkled. "We 'ave been looking for you, we 'ave."

The Tourist Monks

Herman J Cushion the Vespuchian Ambassador to Swinland sat amongst the fish and fumed. Rain clattered on the tin roof of the dock. Steady streams falling at random locations from the broken covering. He looked at the bucket containing the remains of his suit beside him and then back at the small crowd that had gathered. "I'm going to sue," he mumbled. "Yes! I'll sue them white," he said his voice rising. "Sue them so hard they won't see it coming," he was starting to rant. He picked up a herring and threw it at the crowd, and bawled "Gawking Buffoons," as he did so. The gawking buffoons backed away as one, making a collective "Oh!" sound. A short angular man, with an umbrella and dressed in a shabby evening suit faded into Herman's view.

"Ah, do I hear my services required? Allow me sir, my card." He flourished a card. It read:

Hurnel Strueth Strueth, Blige and Blimey Commissioners for Oaths	23 Gasket Terrace The Gudds Sheepbot
<i>No oath too small</i>	

"What does this mean?" snarled Herman, reaching for another herring.

"Well put, bluntly, which is not as my want, as it were, by and large it is basically." Herman raised the herring

"Eh, well you can swear at me."

"Swear at you, swear at you, I'll bloody swear at you, you bloodsucking weevil."

"Blood sucking weevil, very good sir," remarked the little man he licked a pencil and began taking notes in a small black notebook.

"Now what are you doing you shabby moron, you ludicrous half wit."

"Shabby moron, ludicrous half wit," the man intoned as he wrote. He then mouthed a few numbers and said. "Well that comes to 15 Thog so far, but we are doing a special as it is a Wursday so it is a nice round 16."

"What? What are you gibbering about, you risible mutton head?"

"Risible Mutton Head," the note went done, "Mutton Head yes, very good, Well must dash I have several weddings to do. Here is your bill. Have a nice day."

He handed Herman a bill and was gone.

It read:

Hurnel Strueth Strueth, Blige and Blimey Commissioners for Oaths	23 Gasket Terrace The Gudds Sheepbot
<i>Assorted oaths x 8 off = 21 Thog</i> <i>Oath Tax = 4 Thog</i> <i>To Pay = 25 Thog</i>	
<i>With thanks</i> <i>Hurnel Strueth.</i> <i>Strueth, Blige and Blimey – Oaths you can swear by</i>	

Herman red with rage, threw his fish after him and then ripped the bill into tiny pieces, and with manic leer cackled, "Mad, you're all mad."

"Hello friend, may we help you?"

Herman reached for another fish.

A slim, clean and earnest young man, dressed in a blue robe printed with palm trees set against a lurid pink sunset and sombrero with 'Kismet Quick' written on it offered a perfectly manicured hand. His teeth glistened as if they had lights in them.

"?" thought Herman securing a piscine weapon.

"Do you need aid and succour friend?"

"What?" enquired Herman his herring poised.

"I am Brother Jeffery, and this is Brother Mutton;" another one, double the size in every direction, with a laughing face, with a cowboy hat appeared stage left.

"Howdy do," boomed the economy sized Brother.

"Eh?" ehed Herman suspiciously.

"Come fellow traveller. We shall save you in your hour of need. Here is some refreshment." Brother Jeffery offered a piece of rock candy. Herman recoiled as if it might be a poison.

"Luverly it is," said Brother Mutton in a voice that sounded like two rocks grinding together. Herman tentatively reached out, took the candy and gave it a lick, keeping his eyes all the while on the strange strangers. It tasted of the brightest sweetest fruit and of warmth and comfort. Like a child Herman dropped the fish and stuck the rock in his mouth.

"Hmnm?" murmured Herman muffled. It tasted of sunshine, "ummn nice."

"Verily, we are of the brethren of the ¹³Travelling Order of St Kevin and we seek The Maker of Pies," said Brother Jeffery, the tassels from his sombrero swinging before his bright blue eyes like hypnotist's watches.

"Baker ob pies?" said Herman working hard to focus. He took the rock from his mouth, gathered in a deep breath and declared, "I am Herman J. Cushion, the Vespuchian Ambassador to Swinland." The monks looked at each other, looked back at Herman and then back at each other again.

"Gettaway," declared Brother Mutton incredulously.

"Honest, I am. I would have a card but I, er, lost it," inisisted Herman earnestly patting the places where pockets had been.

"Your 'aving us on," chided Brother Mutton chuckling like a concrete mixer with an uneven load. The remark hit Herman's angry button.

"NO I AM NOT 'AVING YOU ON', I AM HERE TO OPEN SOME RUDDY TASSEL PLANT, YOU, YOU, YOU, DOH." He was actually at a loss for a curse. This was new territory for Herman.

"Alright, alright, keep your eyebrows on. Hardly look like an ambassador now do you?" Herman looked down at his sad attire. A faded and damp bunny stared back from the pattern of Ruppy's pyjamas.

"It is written that, 'Kevin relaxed by the pool for fourteen days and fifteen nights and he beheld the beauty of the gentle rabbits of the field. He eateth the pie and said it was good," intoned Brother Jeffery.

"Eh?" queried Herman and Brother Mutton together.

"The divine one hath provided, you are the very one we are here to find," added Brother Jeffery piously.

¹³ **Tourist Monks** – Brethren of the Travelling Order of St Kevin. Kevin founded the order by laying his towel on a particularly comfy rock and declaring a holiday. That was 700 years ago, the brethren are still taking it and all of the deck chairs. Devotions include building sand cathedrals, playing minature golf, eating ice creams, wearing silly hats and collecting china pixies holding thermometers.

"Are you sure Brother Jeffery?" asked Brother Mutton, rubbing his chin with a huge hand, making a noise like sandpapering a doorframe.

"Have we not been sent to gather the maker of pies?"

"Well yes."

"Is not the rabbit the symbol of the maker of pies?"

"Well yes, but,"

"Behold his attire, our search is over. We have found the make of pies." asserted Brother Jeffery. Brother Mutton
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beamed and turned to Herman.

"Well knock me down with a big stick with a weight on the end. Don't suppose you would have a spare pie on you?"

"Pie?" said and increasingly confused Herman reinserting the sugary rock.

"Let us not tarry. What is next on the Immaculate Itinerary brother, Brother Mutton?"

Brother Mutton produced a clipboard from under his robe and eyed it. "Well it says, 'Verily acquire the Maker of Pies and go forth to the delightful island resort of Tranquillia'. Goody, another trip."

Brother Jeffery addressed Herman, "Your transport awaits. This way, if you please." The monks each took one of Herman's arms, lifted him to his feet and marched him across the dock. Herman slumped between, sucking his rock and mumbling, "I am going to sue you know, I'm going to sue." They took him, under the cover of a bright yellow umbrella, through a sad landscape of broken things and the half built decaying huts of the capital. Remorseless rain beat down around them, bouncing on the broken cobble roads, clattering on the tin roofs, running in torrents in the gutters. Desperate rain trying and failing to wash the town clean. Ever onward they splashed, down narrow alleys, through broken gates until they came over a small hill and onto a wide pebble beach, and there they came to a bright yellow rowing boat decorated with a figurehead of a Bishop eating an ice cream. It was half full of water. Brother Mutton pulled two deck chairs and a sodden sun bed from the craft and set them up on the shingle. Herman gratefully slumped into a deck chair with the umbrella and watched from its protective canopy as the brothers set too bailing the boat with small brightly coloured plastic buckets. After a while the rain stopped and they returned from the craft and took up position either side of a damp and befuddled Herman.

"It goeth well, for now we have transport to do His bidding," proclaimed Brother Jeffery, his sombrero steaming gently.

I don't know how to make pies said Herman directly.

"Well I have been thinking about that brother, and I am not so sure tis right," confessed Ian carefully.

Herman looked at Ian and then back to Julian.

"Do you doubt His word?" challenged Julian removing his steaming sobrero and replacing it with a knotted handkerchief.

Herman looked at Ian.

"Not at all brother," replied Ian consulting his clipboard. "It's just that the Holy Itinerary says 'Verily acquire the Lord from Afar and go forth to 'C' by 'G''. Now I have not the titchiest problem with acquiring part, its just the going forth bit that I have trouble with."

Herman looked Julian.

"How so my brother?" replied Julian, breaking a stick of rock and handing a piece to Herman who was beginning to feel dizzy.

"Well, it says to 'C' by 'G'. Now if 'C' is Colin Island then fine, I am still a happy chappy, but tis the 'G' that bothers me? Boat don't start with a 'G' it starts with a 'B'."

"And what transport would you suggest my learned friend?" replied Julian with more than a hint of a sneer.

"Well I don't know, let me see," appealed Ian his eyes swivelling skyward. They sat for a while, whilst Ian made Ga, Gu, Gi, Go noises.

"How about a glider?" he eventually offered.

"A glider brother and where do you suppose YOU are going to obtain one?" responded Julian.

"Ah well perhaps not a glider then," replied Ian seeing impossibility of the mission.

"Or perhaps you might suggest we travel by goat," chided Julian.

"How would we all fit on a goat?" asked Ian innocently. Julian gave him the look of a man who has spent the bulk of the day trying to teach a pig to whistle.

"Oh all right, but I can't think of any, but I am not happy, no I am not a happy monk," complained Ian. Julian boarded the boat, led Herman to the stern, or 'stumpy end' as they called it, and equipped him with the umbrella as the rain recommenced play. Julian went to the prow or 'pointy bit' and Ian set about rowing. Soon they were gliding on a calm sea dappled with the grapeshot of rain. Herman looked back to the beach from under the protection of the umbrella and saw a shaft of sunlight cutting through the iron-grey sky. The focus of the beam was a large golden gateway with a huge white marble staircase leading up to an equally white monumental building with a huge gold letter C on the roof. He looked back at Ian who seemed totally impervious to the downpour, a steady stream poured from his hat onto his clinging sodden robe but his smile never quavered. It was a smile of pure contentment. He was a man in his elements.

"I say," called Herman waving the remains of his rock towards the sunlit marble, "Don't you think that you should be taking me there. Couldn't the G simply be the Gateway and that big building with the big C the destination?" Ian stopped rowing and squinted at the view.

"There might be summat init, hmm," he agreed rubbing his chin.

"Brother Julian what do you think?" he called.

"Brother Ian, I think you have stopped rowing. You cannot travel on a gate. It merely opens, that is not travelling and neither is this. Row on if you please."

"I only asked," muttered Ian and set back to pumping the oars.

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Up on the hill, the tidy men at Capital House had made ready for the arrival of The Vespuchian Ambassador to Swinland. All had been arranged, from a superb finger buffet to marching bands and a bicycle display team.

They would all have a very, very long wait.

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After several hours the rain abated and sea became choppy. The boat began to rock slightly. Ian pulled the oars easily, his powerful arms pumping and his cowboy hat flapping in the gentle breeze. He rowed as if he was stroking a large cat. Herman blearily watched with as near a smile as he had ever worn. The rock, whatever it was made of, had worked a powerful magic. "Tell me of your Order?" he asked.

"Well, we get about, and go places and stuff," answered Ian.

Julian cut in. "What Brother Ian is trying and failing to say is, that we are indeed constant travellers, as are we all. We bring, joy, peace and harmony to all who travel with us. We follow a Holy itinerary delivered to

us by the very Holy St Kevin, 7 centuries ago, and it is called 'The Brochure of Kevin'. It is written in saintly shorthand, C by G and so on.

"So" deduced Herman trying to reason through the rock induced mental fog, "You are saying some chap 700 years ago told you to pick me up?"

"That's it, you got it in one, bang on the napper, although he wasn't just some chap. He was our most Holy and venerated St Kevin," chimed Ian, "Very clever and all seeing was Kevin. He invented the Pedallo!"

"Oh." uttered Herman meekly. He thought of questioning how a monk who had been dead over 600 years could be doing his travel arrangements. But he didn't, somehow it all seemed to make sense and the rock was very nice. "What happens when you get to the end of your book?" he asked wearing a very unaccustomed grin.

"Oh we just start again. This is my second tour. Julian has done four," explained Ian. Herman nodded an impressed nod.

"You want another bit of rock then?" Ian asked and nodded to the leather bag on the floor.

"Hmm, don't mind if I do?" replied Herman dreamily. He rummaged in the bag. It contained a very odd assortment of pixies holding thermometers, glass snowstorms, plastic windmills and a bag of the rock. He took a pink one and sucked. It was as sweet and comforting as the first. He noticed it had the word 'destination' written all the way through it.

Gradually the waves grew causing the tiny craft to lurch skyward and then plunge back to the water causing several bucket fulls of freshly chilled sea to be thrown over its hapless occupants. Ian maintained his grin and his stroke whilst Julian practised his genuflecting at the prow. Up another wave they climbed and down into yet another they fell. Another deluge hit them. The umbrella was ripped from Herman's numbing hands as the water struck him. He clung to sides, bug eyed as the sky filled his view to be quickly replaced by rolling sea. Splashhh the freezing water took his breath away.

"How far is it?" he gasped as the sky appeared again.

"Got a bit of sea tummy 'ave you?" enquired Ian not even slightly slackening pace. "The best thing to do for sea tummy is to sit under a tree." He beamed at Herman with the joy of an old joke well told.

"Ouhhhh, ohh, urg," whimpered Herman as the sea came up to meet them.

It went on forever, an eternity of up and down and splassh. Actually it was only another eighteen minutes before they grounded the boat at the base of the Vicar's Giblet Rock lighthouse. They helped a very unwell Herman ashore. He was so very, very thankful.

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Helmer Gudd shambled out onto the veranda and felt his seaweed. "Ah, summats up," he mumbled though his matted beard. He turned his gaze towards the mainland. The lighthouse afforded a fine view of the whole of Delight Bay, which was wearing its usual trench coat of drizzle. Helmer stared into the mist and then he heard voices.

"Hello, I say, Hello friend." He looked down twenty feet to the ground and saw three idiots on his rock and they were waving. He stiffened with indignation. "Bloody tourists, well not on his rock he had a schedule to keep and an honest job to do and he would do it without bloody tourists. "Get off this rock, you cannot park here!" he called down sternly.

"But friend we have a fellow traveller in need of comfort and succour," replied Julian.

"Well he can go and get it somewhere else. I haven't got any," Helmer shouted. He thought for a moment, he was not sure what succour was but he was sure he didn't have any. Not for bloody tourists anyway. Ian idly picked up a stone and threw it in the sea.

"I saw that, you put that stone back!" ordered the lighthouse keeper.

Ian stared up at Helmer as if he was looking at enormous infant.

"I just did," he declared with his very best smile. Herman slumped against a large rock and hugged it. It was so still.

"Now are you going to shift or am I going to do some foghorn testing," barked Helmer. He stepped back inside grumbling to himself. "Work day in, day out, do I get a holiday, oh No, I do not! Do I get to throw rocks, throw rocks indeed, silly hats, tahh, I'll show em." He strode across the little control room and jumped astride the foghorn cycle and began to pedal. This was a job he normally hated for its unique blend of effort and boredom, but now he cackled as he wound the huge foghorn whistles. The noise grew from a low moan almost shaking the rocks to a searing howl.

Herman's rock shook. He held his ears. The only way was back to the boat. Reeling across the pebbles, roaring shaking noise all around. Onto the boat, the others waving silently, roaring screaming noise beating upon them, through them. Into the boat and off and away, Ian's manful arms pulling them away from the crescendo. Then Up and Down and Uuup and Dooown for a very, very, very long time.

A break with tradition

"You just come with me and we will ask you a few questions", the guard almost gurgled with pleasure as two pairs of strong arms bore Gerry to a dingy grey tiled room. The door closed behind him and he was alone. The room was furnished with kneeler chairs and a pine coffee table inlaid with dimpled tiles. On the table was a very thick and very dull looking form attached to a clipboard, the newt shaped bottle opener was labelled 'Exhibit A' and a familiar flower similarly tagged as 'Exhibit B'. The flower was jogging rhythmically to accordion music that tinkled from somewhere. Gerry toured the room and found the sound came from a small hole in the wall. Peering through it he saw a man with a red bandanna pummelling an accordion. The man looked at him, smiled, nodded and went on playing.

"Welcome to your new accommodation?" Another man had slipped in silently behind him. It was a voice of sub zero severity, inhuman and humourless. Gerry turned and gaped. The man was thin, balding, with a peak of brown hair just above his forehead. He wore gold half-rimmed spectacles, a pink and white off the shoulder party frock and matching pink sling back shoes. He made a ruffling noise as he folded himself around one of the kneeler chairs. "Sit!" he commanded.

Gerry said nothing but thought "Weird to the power of strange and I thought the New Cairo PD was full of ¹⁴foogs"?

"SIT!" threatened the man. Gerry attempted sitting, but having approached the kneeler from the wrong direction, found himself in a wrestling contest with it. The chair won easily and dumped him onto the tiled floor. He jumped to his feet and threw himself into round two. On the third attempt he gained the knack of perching and stared his inquisitor in the eye. The interrogator picked up the form, produced a fountain pen from his 'cleavage' and with neat precision unscrewed the lid and attached it to the other end. All the while he maintained a steady piercing disdainful gaze. His antifreeze blue eyes were of a different animal to the guards, not tiny beads with little behind them. These were the eyes of fierce intelligence. They bored into Gerry, who offered only a strained smile for defence. "Name?" inquired the frosty vision in pink. A small tingle of relief swept through Gerry; they did not know his name!

"Eh, oh, Newt Flower" he blurted and then winced at the stupidity of the name. The flower nodded in agreement

"So Mr Flower do you own, or have you owned any oars?"

"Eh?"

"Oars, man oars. It is a simply enough question." The taffeta ruffled with frustration and the eyes flickered slightly.

"Oh rowing and all that, er no."

"Think very carefully, it is very important." Gerry stared back with a look of intense concentration; he wrinkled his brow, and brought a finger to his mouth.

"Noop, never had one, not even a paddle, is that a problem?"

"Probably, probably but let us continue." The interrogator consulted his tiny ladies watch and tutted.

"Now what is the meaning of this contraband?" A bony finger prodded the little flower. The flower jiggled.

"Meaning?"

"Yes, meaning."

"Well I don't think it has a meaning, more stupid than anything else." Always keen to be the centre of attention, the flower jiggled.

"Then why did you attempt to smuggle it into Swinland?"

¹⁴ **Foog** - Oddball, weirdo, coined after Hatcheck Fempton Foog an 'artist' who painted his head a different colour every day and won the tri-millennium Niffle Prize for his work 'place where an old sock in a paper bag had been.'

"I didn't." The interrogator squinted at his watch and tutted again.

"I do not have time for any of this. We found the flower and the bottle opener in your possession. You are obviously trying to subvert us with imperialist trinkets. You are guilty. It is just a question of your sentence."

"Sentence? Imperialist trinkets? Subvert you? With a dancing flower, are you ...?" Gerry stopped himself. The interrogator removed his glasses, turning up the intensity of the eyes several notches.

"Am I what? " his voice wrapped in frozen lead.

"Nothing," Gerry paused, and thought what the hell, tell it like it is and very nearly said "Well you're completely off your chump, renting a bad brain. That is a stupid toy, you are dressed like an idiot .." and so on but he paused again. He remembered Dubo's advice.

"Well, you are wearing the most wonderful dress," he eventually said with a faint smile.

"Eh?" quizzed the interrogator the ice laden eyes softening.

"It really eh suits you, the pink with your blue eyes," continued Gerry trying to sound convincing. The interrogator put down the clipboard and the frost melted immediately to be replaced by a coy and simpering look.

"Do you really think so, I did worry that it might be too bright."

"No, no it's eh, lovely, just right, the shoes are nice too," added Gerry pressing home the advantage. The interrogator stood and offered a hairy leg and foot replete with a sling-back for inspection.

"They are nice aren't they," he said looking down. "Hitalian you know, not really supposed to have them but they are so elegant."

"Very elegant," agreed Gerry in wonderment at his success.

The interrogator twirled to offer his back, "You don't think my bum looks too big, do you?"

"Eh no, not at all," answered Gerry honestly.

The accordion music stopped. The flower stopped dancing and wilted a little and then exploded. "THWOOOM," it announced very, very loudly. Gerry and the interrogator were thrown like puppets to opposite walls of the chamber. Burning bits of kneeler chairs and coffee table smacked against the tiles. Thick blue smoke replaced the air and the lights flickered. Gerry lay winded, he took a lung full of smoke and coughed a deep and painful cough. His eyes and throat burned. His ears rang. An inner voice screamed 'GET AWAY' and he shuffled on his hands and knees towards the gaping hole that had been the door. By the time he had got to the centre of the room, the smoke, having quicker feet and better places to be had cleared. The interrogator lay unconscious in the fuming remains of his ensemble. Little pieces of pink and white taffeta confetti drifted down like heavy snowflakes. Gerry got to his feet, reeled to the door and out. He stumbled blindly down a corridor, his eyes streaming, his whole being ringing with the blast. He tried a door it opened into an empty office and an open window. On the desk was a box of chocolates. He clumsily stuffed the box into his bag, his hands feeling huge and numb. He careered towards the window and fell out of it into a ditch. He lay for a short while and watched the wisps of smoke curling from his charred oilskins into the faded blue sky of dawn. The inner voice screamed again, 'GET AWAY, GET AWAY'. Rolling over he crawled out of the ditch, and stumbled into a very big party.

The bleak and empty prospect that had been Gudd Square had been transformed with little faded orange tents, tattered orange flags and a huge throng of curiously dressed locals enjoying the rare sunshine. Street vendors were doing a brisk trade selling boiled, fried and baked blubber, whilst several marching accordion bands competed for attention amongst the promenading crowd. Almost all of the men were dressed in fine ladies frocks and stilettos. Delicate parasols bobbed amongst the happy masses. A huge banner fluttered over the proceedings declaring the 432nd Swelk Fest. With colour, music, cross-dressing, hot whale fat and whelk beer the Swinnish were celebrating. Gerry stepped into the square and stood out like a frogman at the opera, for although many of the women were also wearing oilskins. He was the only one that appeared to have been toasted. With the remains of his hat smoking freely and a blacked grin, he tried very hard to stroll nonchalantly. "Ere son your 'ats on fire," called a trader who was arranging a table top with lurid glass fish and brass ducks holding umbrellas. But all Gerry heard was the numbing ringing of the iron hammer of the blast and the inner voice screaming, 'GET AWAY, GET AWAY'. His left

leg went dead, he staggered in a circle, stopped, stamped it back into life and limped on in a new direction oblivious as to where it might lead. He made several more robotic paces and collided with a table freshly arrayed with slabs of steaming boiled blubber. The table swayed, creaked and crashed to the ground unloading its contents onto the cobbles. Like miniature torpedoes the slippery snacks slid across the square greasing the stones. A woman screamed as she wobbled and fell knocking a brimming tub of warm ¹⁵Molallo into the path of a marching accordion band. They fell as if raked by machine gun fire, slithering and toppling to the sounds of cursing, clattering majorette's batons and dying accordions. Another stall tipped strafing the unhappy musicians with hot kelp dumplings. A man shouted "Get 'im," and Gerry was suddenly the centre of attention. Uttering fearful oaths several of the men gave chase but could only totter on their totally inappropriate footwear. Even for the most agile, making any sort of progress in stilettos on the greased cobbles was to say the least, tricky. Flapping arms precariously they wobbled like human dominoes waiting for a nudge. Gerry blundered on in automatic panic, like a broken clockwork toy striking a table laden with plastic buckets of swelk amidships and ensured the chain reaction. The dominoes went down and the market place became a writhing mass of skidding, shouting, flailing, wailing Swinnish. Pots and pans clattered, stalls creaked and tumbled as the festival lost altitude. A stall holder dressed in a peach ball gown with a beard that appeared to grow from his eyebrows, only edited for bulging eyes, flaring nostrils and snarling mouth lunged at Gerry and barked, "GOTCHA."

"Owo, owo, owa," replied Gerry and the coiled spring that had been winding tight inside him let go. His legs pumping he ran, blind and dumb with fear, anywhere. He careened into another stall, more crashing, pots clattering, shouts and angry hands grabbing at his oilskins. "GET AWAY" insisted the voice within. Sliding Worris dancers collided with the Swinnish ¹⁶Mumblers who gave as good as they got but on falling released their tallow cargoes to add to the slithering mayhem. Jumping over a speeding Mumbler Gerry skidded into an alley at the edge of the square. His wheezing echoed on the damp walls and mud splashed beneath his boots. A small knot of surviving pursuers stopped at the entrance of the alley and watched their quarry depart whilst behind them the 432nd Swelk Fest imploded.

On and on he went, with no regard as to where he was. Wherever it was, anywhere else seemed preferable. Down a lane, left, right, over fences, through a scrap yard, down a foul smelling tunnel, narrow alleys and then a brick wall and nothing, silence, a blind alley. He could run no more. He crumpled in a wheezing heap onto a patch of rough grass behind a low wall and gasped for air. For quite a while he lay helpless, fighting for breath and waiting to be taken but nobody came. He sat up and looked around. Nothing was moving but him. He leant against the wall and took the chocolates from his bag. Keeping an eye on the entrance to the alley he ripped open the box and innocently plucked one at random.

It was Montelimat, a masterpiece of the Swinnish confectioner's art, with epoxy toffee and hessian layers in dark chocolate. Innocuous, even toothsome at first, it builds slowly to a crescendo of awkwardness, when it is impossible to swallow or spit out. One must simply surrender to it and let it dissolve slowly. This is a Zen chocolate, a long term chocolate. Gerry put up a good fight, but the more he masticated the Montelimat the harder it set. He could only manage, "thurugmph," as he was coshed from behind and the street came up to meet him.

¹⁵ **Molallo** – A confection of molasses and tallow that is best left to the imagination.

¹⁶ **Mumblers** – A curiously continued tradition involving sturdy men in paper suits mumbling at each other. Each carries a barrel of hot tallow and kicks the shins of anyone in his path.

Welcome to Colin

Colin proudly surveyed his empire. From the top of Mount Colin he could see the whole island. Not that his vantage point was very high, rather the island was very small, being only two miles from end to end and half a mile wide. His chest puffed with both the exertion of the climb and pride. Colin Island had taken five years of unceasing toil to get to its present development and all by his own hand. One day the world would find his island paradise and he would be ready. Only yesterday he had finished painting the Colin National Bank and Sushi bar. Two pots of precious red paint it had taken, but the result was stunning. The walls almost looked like brick rather than the biscuit tins from which they were made. Almost everything was made of biscuit tins. In one disastrous deal he had traded nearly all of the lumber on the isle for tins of biscuits. Still he did like biscuits and the tins were so useful. Colin ever the optimist was joyful in his folly. Yes, one day they would come. They must come. It is so beautiful. Swinging his gaze to the west, he saw a small boat rowing towards the island. Maybe, this was it, he carefully wrapped the custard cream he had been nibbling and ran down to meet them. He was ready with his bugle, although his rendition of the Colin national anthem was somewhat breathless, to welcome the travellers as their boat drifted into the tiny tinny jetty. Two monks and what appeared to be a tramp alighted. Colin wheezed his way through the last bars of the anthem, and declared expansively, "Welcome friends to Freemoney the capital of Colin."

Julian stood and genuflected at high speed as if trying to stun a fly by tapping it on the back of its tiny head with his index finger. Ian busied himself picking up pebbles and throwing them into the sea. The tramp crawled on all fours to a large rock and hugged it mumbling as he did so. Ian produced a camera from his robe and took several pictures, whilst the Julian posed. "What does it say on the sheet Brother Ian?" asked Julian taking up position by a pile of rusting biscuit tins.

"Well, Jules, it says deposit cargo and return to K by B." Julian adopted a tone of haughty smugness.

"You see, of course I was right, B is boat and we have one of those, goat indeed. This is the place alright, well goodbye friend and may your journey,...."

"Colin is an island of wonder and mystery," interjected Colin enthusiastically, "from the searing heat of Sara desert, it is the world's smallest you know, to the depths of 'the Devil's Earhole' which plunges over ten feet into the living rock."

"Eh? What? No! You can't leave me here," implored Herman releasing his grip from his new granite friend, "No, not here, on this rock, with him." He pointed a grubby finger at Colin, his crazy eyes bulging, mimicking the eyes of the rabbits still visible on his ragged pyjamas.

"May I book you a room at the Freemoney Shelton hotel?" offered Colin unabashed and motioning to the lean-to shack behind him. "Would you like to freshen up before touring the Colin National Park? The termites are quite amazing." He gestured to the horse trough fashioned from biscuit tins. Herman turned to behold bathing facilities and as he did so he heard the crunch of sandals on shingle. He turned again to see the monks boarding their boat.

"Ahhahaha," was all he could utter as he watched them slide away and with a few easy oarstrokes be completely out of reach. Julian stood, waved and held up his camera to snap a shot of Herman jumping to his feet and cavorting with rage. It was a good photo of a purple man, dressed in rags doing a rather silly little dance on a shingle beach.

Colin watched the monks leave with only slight disappointment. The brothers had come and gone before. At least this time they had left a customer, although it did look rather unsanitary and unlikely to pay any bill. Still it was a visitor and those are rarer than mint haribaldis. He chuckled at his very little joke. "Welcome friend, welcome to my island paradise," he said with the smile of the genial host.

"You're mad, and I am very annoyed so do not provoke me," threatened Herman stepping back and making his one of his many angry faces.

"Well that's jolly nice, let us see if we can fit you in." Colin pulled a small card from his waistcoat. "Yes you are in luck, just the one space left."

"FIT ME IN, ONE SPACE LEFT, ON THIS ROCK, YOU STUPID HALF WIT," barked Herman, his tether showing some decidedly heavy wear.

"I believe we have a nice room in the west wing."

The last frayed threads of the tether snapped, and with a heavy sigh Herman gave in, he was too tired, he had had enough. He followed Colin into the shack, fell onto a straw mattress and was asleep before his head had stopped moving.

He awoke to find it was not a nightmare, he really was marooned with a madman, without any comforts on a rock he had never heard of. "Oo," it made him angry and he was hungry and that made him angrier. On a mat next to his mattress was a card that read:

Welcome to the Colin Shelton.

Thank you for choosing our hotel we hope you enjoy your stay. Should you require room service please use the 'Gongette'.

(There was a biscuit tin attached to the wall with a stick dangling on a piece of string next to it. This was obviously the 'Gongette'.)

Our head chef Colin has prepared the following Menu for your delectation and delight.

The Colin Shelton Ocean View Suite.

Menu

Breakfast

Digestive Muesli

Or

Shortcake Porridge

Served with Rich Tea

Luncheon

Entree

Haribaldi Soup

Or

Custard Cream Pate

Main Course

Lobster biscuit

(This may be without the Lobster)

Or

'Mupple and Dump' a local delicacy

(sun dried bourbons on a roulade of hand picked seaweed).

Or

Fish and biscuits

(This may be without the fish)

Sweet

Cheese and Biscuits

(Cheese only when in season)

Herman harrumphed, grabbed the gongette and banged the biscuit tin. Nothing happened. He banged again with more gusto, still nothing. With rising red mist the irascible ambassador grabbed the tin and attempted to rip it from the wall. The shed shook and creaked but the tin held firm. "Grhhahgr," he snorted, which as you can see is very hard to spell, and tried again. The tin was firmly fixed to the wall but sadly the wall that was not firmly fixed to anything else and gave way. To the sound of snapping strings and clattering tins, the Shelton hotel fell in on him. Distantly he heard that bloody awful bugle anthem before he gratefully slumped into a dark glove of unconsciousness.

Herman dreamed sweet dreams of his tidy New Cairo apartment. Of his neat rows of books sorted by size and his finger carved Jeruvian bed with its soft Mawiiian sheets. Lovingly he caressed his Belsh dresser, and lightly dusted the fine Highnese porcelain. He purred at the Mapanese rug beneath his slippers. All was peace, tranquillity and order, but there was the slightest draught. He went to the panoramic window with its stately view of the chaotic city below and grabbed the handle to close it. He gave it a tug but it would not move. He tried pulling his hand free but it was stuck fast. The window had grabbed him. With the ease of a nightclub doorman swinging a cosh it swivelled open and threw him into the air eleven stories above the teeming streets. He hung in there for a while and wondering how this could happen. His apartment had rejected him. He no longer fitted in with the order and calm. The window snapped shut and left him to his fate. Then he was falling, silent screaming, tumbling, reaching for something, anything, flashing windows, loud traffic coming up to meet him. Spinning it came, faster ever faster and BANG. He awoke with a jolt of high-octane panic, sweating and breathless. His chest was pounding, his head throbbing and his vision fuzzy. He sat very still for a while, gasping for air trying not to move. He squinted hard and slowly his focus returned and the fear receded. He could see rough muddy walls. He was sitting in a hole about ten feet deep and ten feet across. Above quiet white clouds were scudding through a summer sky. A little pink leaflet was on his chest. It said:

You are a lucky winner

Your super number is 000000002 and you have been selected to go through to final grand draw of the cheese cracker of the month club, (the gift that keeps on giving).

Simply post the coupon in the 'YES' envelope and an amazing prize is yours.

The prizes are:

A 3 day luxury break at the Shelton hotel on the magic island of Colin. Bask near the pool. Taste adventure in the worlds smallest desert. Roam the Colin National Park, see the amazing termites, or visit the teeming market at 'Wealth' and haggle with the handsome natives for wondrous handmade items.

A lifetime supply of rusks - at an amazingly reduced price.

A hand fashioned, fruit of the sea, handbag with matching kelp waistcoat.

A bag of luxury whelks

He blinked at the paper, puzzled. "What the ..?" he mouthed. He was just about to ask, "Where the ..?", when the awful crystal memory of his trip snapped in. He was not in New Cairo. He had been marooned on a rock on the edge of nowhere with an idiot for company. The last vestige of his panic evaporated as natural anger returned. He was not going to stand for it. This was the limit enough was enough. He snorted at the paper, "Stupid, bloody, Gnarf," and tore it into fragments until he sat almost vibrating with rage and surrounded by coupon confetti. He summoned a deep breath and bellowed "GET ME OUT OF HERE."

Dust came down from the rim of the pit and Colin's head appeared. "Isn't it amazing. It is the 'Devil's ear hole' a natural wonder," he called down, his voice dancing with enthusiasm.

"WHAT, YOU JUMPED-UP MEAT HEADED CHUMP, I DEMAND YOU GET ME OUT," roared Herman jumping to his feet and waving his fists.

"Note the amazing patina of the walls, created by centuries of travellers," continued Colin unaffected by the vitriol boiling below. All Herman could see was mud and an idiot, an idiot who was not listening. He upped the volume a notch, to apoplectic and boomed, "I AM THE VESPUCHIAN AMBASSADOR. GET ME OUT OR I WILL, I WILL ..." he paused for breath and to consider what to threaten. Litigation would probably bounce off of this buffoon like a toy balloon. Offering violence was no use, he couldn't reach the brute. He was literally in a hole. Frustration jumped on the back of irritation and jostled for space with vexation whilst blind rage took the reins. In a ferocious frenzy he charged the far wall of the pit and scrambled at the mud with frantic fingers. He slithered a short way and then fell back in a heap. Fury dragged him to his feet and threw him against the wall for another vain attempt all the while snorting and barking.

"May I interest you in ladder hire? Best quality, made it myself," enquired Colin quietly watching the lack of progress.

"WHAT?" screamed Herman. He stopped and gave Colin his most fearsome and contorted scowl. Colin simply smiled back.

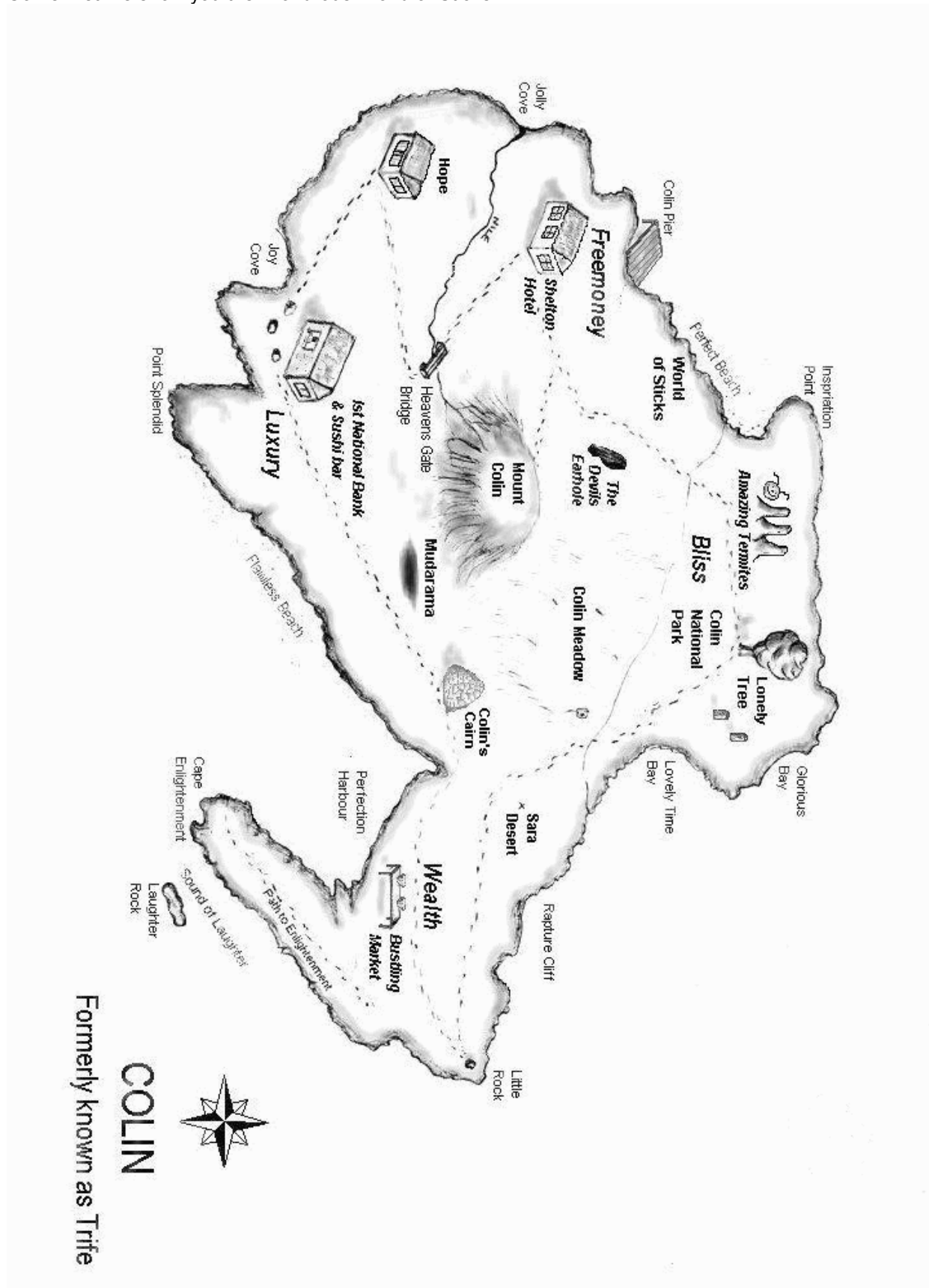
"LADDER HIRE, YOU WANT MONEY, RUDDY MONEY, DO I LOOK LIKE I HAVE MONEY!" ranted Herman beside himself, which didn't leave much room. He shook his fists. He shouted, jumped and danced about in the confined space whilst Colin watched and waited. Eventually Herman sat down on the muddy floor breathless, eyeing the space for a potential weapon. He saw what appeared to be a half buried large stone in the wall. He gouged the mud around it, prized the orb free and standing to hurl it he wiped the mud from its smooth surface. He looked at it to find it was looking at him. The skulls empty eyes stared through him and his anger faded faster than candy floss in a microwave. "Oooahhh" he exhaled, dropping the ancestor and trying to step back. But there was nowhere to step. The full force of his predicament struck him, this was serious, dangerous, he needed that ladder and a robert very badly. He looked up and with a new and tremulous voice asked, "Eh, How much?"

"To you two Colin Florin," came the instant reply.

"I don't actually have any cash on me?" said Herman patting his ill fitting and threadbare nightwear. He felt a lump in the little bunny chest pocket. "Do you accept rock candy?" he offered thinly.

"That will do nicely," agreed Colin, and a rope ladder unfurled down.

At the top Colin beamed and in exchange for the rock gave Herman a small hand drawn map of the island. He then stood back, cleared his throat and proclaimed as if to a large crowd, "The Devils Earhole is natural tourist trap. How many errant monks and wayward travellers it has consumed is lost to history. Come! Let me show you the Wondrous World of Sticks.



Herman stared at Colin thoughtfully. 'He is obviously unhinged, if there had ever been any hinges. Best keep my head down.' He adopted a careful, quiet, controlled manner, and kept his distance.

Colin turned again and with open arms to address his adoring public said, "Behold another wonder of Colin, delicately fashioned to educate and amuse. I give you the World of Sticks." He stood aside to reveal a bare patch of mud with what appeared to be five small bonfires in a pile of driftwood. Herman twitched a smile and said nothing his nerves jangling like jailer's keys.

"When viewed from the air is a perfect model of our island paradise." Colin pointed to the closest pile of twigs, "This is the market town of Wealth and over there is Bliss County and the Colin National Park." A lone stick stood skyward. "And that is the Lonely Tree. Come let me show you its majestic beauty." With Colin leading they walked beside the hill, that he declared to be 'Mount Colin', a short distance to 'The Colin National Park'. Herman said nothing whilst his guide kept up an island monologue, rambling on about the rocks, the lonely tree and the wonderful views. When they reached the tree Herman stepped behind it and relieved himself. He kept an eye on Colin all the while, who seemed to be addressing some other portion of the notional crowd. They came to a huge pile of stones, which Colin declared to be the Colin Monument.

Herman simply and quietly affirmed, "Most impressive," which seemed to please the madman. His two-hour emergency ambassadorial training was paying off at last. He was then shown three large termites mounds and agreed that they were indeed amazing. But when he presented with a bucket of sand and told it was the world's smallest desert, he had to turn away, his shoulders shaking. Something had snapped inside. Maybe the rush from rage to terror released it; maybe it was fatigue and hunger. He giggled. He could not help it. He saw the joke. At last he saw the whole awful joke, the complete lunatic pointlessness of it all. Tassel factories, the ghastly fishing boat, the monks and now this, the world's smallest dessert indeed. He fell to his knees, pointed at the bucket, and made a deep gurgling like a vacuum cleaner sucking porridge.

"Are you all right? I mean not ill or anything?" asked Colin with concern

"Hooo, Hoooo, Hoooooo," chuffed Herman building up jovial pressure.

"A drink perhaps or how about a digestive?" offered his worried host.

"Hoooo, Hoooo, Hooooooo," continued Herman still pointing with a wavering finger at the bucket. Colin watched dumbfounded. What to do? The island medical facilities were still in the planning stage. He did have a tin somewhere with a hanky and some string in it but he was not sure it would help.

"Hoooooo, Hoooooo, Hoooooo, Urk, Hoooooo" intoned Herman falling to the ground but still maintaining the accusing finger. Hoooooo, Hoooooo, Urk, Urk, Hoooooo." He rolled on the grass, clutching his sides continuing his vacuum cleaner impression punctuated with a snort like a rutting bison in a gas mask. "Hoooooo, Urk, Urk, Hoooooo, I've got one, Urk, like that", he roared helplessly. "Oh yes, oh yes, one just like that HOOOO, Urk, Urk, Hoooooo."

Colin stared at Herman in dismay. This was a very strange visitor indeed. One minute he is raving and pulling down buildings and the next he is rolling about laughing. Had he told a joke? Was his script better than he thought? Obviously it was. Casting care that never did tarry long on his shoulders, he plucked a chocolate digestive from a pocket and munched. He smiled at Herman with a warm glow of success. The smile grew to a chuckle and gave way to a chortle and with no idea why or what he was laughing at, he joined in. Soon they were both rolling on the grass, completely legless on mirth. "Urk, Hoooooo, Hoooooo, m,m,mine has got the world's mo, mo, mo most expensive grease in it ,Hoooooo, Urk, Urk, Hoooooo."

"Grease you say oh, no too good, what sort of grease ohhohhh?"

"Hoooooo, Its g, g, got pinstripes Urk, Urk, Hoooooo."

"Pinstripe grease, oh no too much whoooo whoooo, stop please".

Amid gales of good humour, with the ocean as a backdrop, Herman emptied himself of stress. He told his tale, of who he was and how lost he was. Both agreed a very silly tale it was and laughed and laughed until their sides ached with the effort. Colin produced a tin from a hole in the ground and they sat on the grass and dined upon mixed tea biscuits. "Sorry about the lack of tea to go with them." said Colin apologetically, "We have a bit of a shortage at the moment. But we do have crystal spring water."

"Don't tell me, let me guess you call the spring 'Rusty' or 'Bed' right?" guessed Herman still chuckling.

Colin smiled, "No, 'Life Springs'.

"Good, very good. I like it," replied Herman with a mouthful of jammy dodger.

"Thank you, come on let me show you some more of my island wonders. You can see the springs on the way to the bar."

"You have a bar?" Herman asked slotting another dodger in.

"Oh yes, fully licensed." Colin looked up and squinted at the sun. "It's nearly time, I must open up. "They sauntered around Mount Colin and to a muddy ditch."This is 'MUDERAMA'," declared Colin as they stopped to inspect the mud. "Well at least it will be when it is finished. Lot of work to do yet. Fickens of a job keeping it damp."

"Finished?" asked Herman amazed at his geniality to the lunatic. All of his bile and vitriol had utterly evaporated. He even warmed to the poor idiot.

"Yes, a complete mud model of the finished resort. Must keep it damp till it is done."

"Um, nice," lied Herman sucking a chocolate finger.

"Tricky keeping it damp. It doesn't rain much here. The Gulp Stream you know. It gives us a totally different climate. Nice day isn't it?" Herman nodded agreement as he stared at the fine powder blue sky and the warm sunlight sparkling on the wave crests of a benign ocean. He had not noticed it until now. It was a very nice day indeed. "Over in Sheepbot," continued Colin, "they are having their usual drizzle." He pointed towards dark and scowling clouds that clung to the southerly horizon.

"Hmm," murmured Herman with the satisfaction that Sheepbot and all the people in it were getting damp, whilst he enjoyed the warm breeze and a chocolate wafer.

"Come on friend, to the Colin First National Bank and Sushi bar," called Colin marching on towards a distant tiny red shed. Herman watched him walk away thoughtfully. This might be his chance to run, to try to escape. But where could he run? With no boat he was stuck here. And what if there was a boat? The memory of his recent maritime experience made him more than slightly queasy. He took another bite of his wafer and followed.

The Colin First National Bank and Sushi Bar

Colin opened the little red tin door with a flourish and stepped inside. A flap almost instantly opened on the opposite side of the hut and he appeared wearing a red beret and a black and obviously cardboard bow tie. "Good evening zir, may I interest you in an aperitif?" he enquired in a very bad Hermainian accent.

"Do you take credit? I haven't got any cash at the moment," replied Herman patting his ragged thighs.

"Do not worry my friend. All of the drinks are on zee owse. It is a special promotion we are running for a special tourist."

"Special, why special?"

"You are zee first."

"What have you got?"

"How about a brandy snap gin cocktail?"

"Anything else?"

"No."

"I'll have a large one please." Colin gave him a cocktail glass with a dazzling pink liquid in it. It tasted divine. Rather like the monk's rock candy but with more kick. He sat on a tree stump and swigged. Colin joined him on another stump with his own drink.

"This is very good," said Herman holding his glass aloft, "What is it called?"

"We call it Dawn Startler."

"Odd name?" thought Herman but declared, "Very nice," as he took another swig.

"I hope you don't mind me asking?" He paused aware he might be wandering into a minefield.

"No fire away, no secrets here," replied Colin his ragged beard split with an open smile. "Well none that I know of. Now those really are secrets."

"Well I was just wondering you say 'we' quite a bit," continued Herman edgily, "Who else is here?"

"Oh no one, not yet but there will be. I am just getting the place ready. Then the tourists will flock here and she will come too."

"She?" asked Herman treading firmly on an emotional explosive.

"Yes she will come. When she sees how successful I am and the paradise I have built. Then she will leave that no good, smart eric." Colin was on his feet and pacing. "Ok, so he has got a yacht, so what. I have all of this," he waved at the panorama.

"Yes, quite, quite, no contest," approved Herman downing the last of his drink.

"So he invented the singing sporrán, is that a big deal. I mean a musical kilt, what sort of rubbish is that."

"Quite right, absolute rubbish." agreed Herman glowing with gin. He vaguely recalled the huge success the sporrán had had in Vespuchia. It had been an instant fashion essential for the man about town. Uploading new tunes to sporráns had been a very lucrative business. It occurred to him that whoever was behind it must be very rich.

"Ojay, it made money but I will be rich when they come," blurted Colin as if reading his mind.

"Absolutely no dow abow tit." slurred Herman noticing that the horizon was tilting to the left. Colin looked directly at him, the larger than life confident fool had gone, replaced by a small and pathetic one.

"You really think so?" he asked his voice quavering.

"Oh yes, no contest, absolute paradise, boats who needs 'em, damp and nasty fings. And singing kilts, pah. Lovely here, of course they will come," blathered Herman canting to the right to correct the horizon.

They were words of pure balm to Colin and instantly the fools changed places along with a brave smile and the bad Hermainian accent, "Ah my friend may I freshen your, ow you say, glass?"

"Why fankyou," replied Herman muzzily thinking, "He must know that that no one will come to a desolate rock with one tree and a hole in the ground for entertainment. Even if they knew about it, how would they get here? Of course no one will come but he could hardly tell that to this lonely Hermit destined to ever wait for his love, ever hopeful, getting older and sadder." The sadness of it mixed with Dawn Startler bit deep into Herman. Why the horizon was leaning so much was also troubling him. When the drink arrived he was in a gentle subdued mood, fighting hard not to sniff and leaning as if into a howling gale.

"Ah, where do you live?" he asked when his host was seated again and in blurred vision.

"I live in Luxury, by Jolly Cove. Well when I say I live in Luxury, that is the name of the County you understand."

Herman slowly nodded that he did and approvingly said, "Nice name, nice name."

"The house is the only wooden structure on the island. It was the first thing I built and then I had to sell all the trees to pay the bill."

"The bill?, burp, scuse me."

"For all of the biscuits. I ordered ten tins and they sent ten tons. Apparently it was my fault. Cleaned me out it did, but the biscuits are excellent and the tins are so useful."

"Oh yes marvellous, sniff," agreed Herman. 'Did this poor man have no luck at all?'

"And I do still have the lonely tree," beamed Colin the joy back in his eyes.

"Yes, sniff, the lonely, sniff, tree." Herman fought hard not to break up and fall off of his stump.

"I say have you got a touch of hay fever, what you need is a 'Startler Special Supreme'," said Colin scuttling back to the bar. He returned with a much large glass of what appeared to be the same pink liquid.

"Fankyou, sniff," said Herman taking a swig. "Tell me more abow your 'ouse."

"Well it isn't very big, more like a shed but it suits me, I called it 'Hope'."

"Hope, sniff," repeated Herman, "You live in, sniff, Hope. Thas loverley, that is. Loverly."

"Thank you, no other place to be really. Are you alright?"

"Is awlry, sniff, is awlry, sniff. I'll be awlry. I will, you see, Hope, gulp, sniff, burp, scuse me."

"I see the beauty of my island kingdom has touched you but we have no tears on Colin, only laughter is allowed."

"Sorree, sniff, oo ho," blubbed Herman.

"And now for your delight, all the way from the province of Luxury, here by enormous public demand, I give you Colin," said Colin picking up a battered tin ukulele from behind his tree stump. "Aloho friends, sit a spell. Here is a little number I penned some years ago." He twanged his little instrument and sang in a soft honeyed tone.

*Welcome, welcome to my island,
Welcome, welcome to a land of fantasy,
Welcome, to the sun and joy a plenty*

Where together we live in Luxury

*From rolling hill to Lonely Tree
The National park to Freemoney
We shall laugh all our cares away
From devils cave to Sushi Bar
Rapture cliff and Colins star
On Flawless beach or Glorious bay*

*Welcome, welcome to my island,
Welcome, welcome to a land of fantasy,
Welcome, to the sun and joy a plenty
Where together we live in Luxury*

*From the World of Sticks and Amazing mites,
Muderama and Mount Colins heights,
We shall bask in love and harmony.
From Perfect beach to Heavens Gate
The 'Tastee bite' no need to wait
Ah Colin, Colin is the place to be.*

And so they sat and Herman drank as Colin played. They watched a dazzling sunset and were accompanied by the music of crickets as dark fell. Into the night they drank again, and sang loudly and drank some more.

.....

Herman awoke wet and cold. He was in the tin horse trough. Now he remembered and, "OHHH!" the pain between the eyes, "OHHH!" He staggered out dripping. "Oh yes, the Colin Swimming Gala. He had won, OHHH!" He sank to the ground dripping and leant against the bath. Colin was at the top of the hill parping his bugle. It sounded very, very loud.

"CAR PARPLE PARP PARPLE PARP."

"Hoh noo hon no OHHH!" winced Herman trying to hold his head straight with his hands. Another noise rose above the bugle, 'chip, chip, chip, chOP, CHOP,' becoming louder. It was a Gyroflyer. A sliver of a thought cut through Herman's soggy brain, a gyroflyer, he was saved, a gyroflyer, that meant civilisation, maybe a bath. Oh and some clothes, maybe even clothes that fitted! It landed beyond the hill. He saw Colin rush off to meet it. But Herman could not move. He sat and waited for rescue.

"Mr Cushion, good to, um, yes, good to see you. My, you have been in the wars," said Henry Funn. A floppy white hat all but concealed his genial face, but Herman recognised the Vice President instantly. "We had quite a time finding you. The President has been very concerned." Herman tried to answer but gurgled instead. He replayed what was happening. The Vice President was telling him that Alison Harrison, The President, was concerned, and concerned about him. He had her photo on his desk; oh that comfy desk did seem a long way away. He thought of her, his dream woman, magnificent, dynamic, powerful, but he had been sure she had never heard of him and never would. Suddenly he felt important. He struggled for something to say, gurgled again, and decided that a salute would be appropriate. He wobbled to his feet and raised his arm, lost his balance fell back into the horse trough. Something lifted him gently and effortlessly and carried him to the waiting gyroflyer and for the first time for a very long time Herman did not feel anything at all.

The Harpoon and Minky

"Oh OHHH, thump, THUMP, urg," Gerry head awoke, the rest of him stayed very still. He was sitting in a wooden rowing boat, covered with wood effect sticky back plastic, the boat that is, not him. Then the smell hit him, "Urg, ugh, phwhaww," rotting fish, old cheese with a strong hint of burning rubber. It was coming from a plastic cup about an inch from his nose, or rather from the green grey liquid in the cup. Then the noise hit him, accordions, slap, slap, slap, thud, wheeze. He looked up; the bar, for that is what it was, was filled with fishermen, dressed in oilskins and So'westers. A group of them were dancing to the similarly dressed accordion band. Several bodies, obviously the worse for drink, decorated the decking floor that curved horribly towards the ceiling, which was a fishing net with plastic lobsters and crabs scattered through it. The walls were lined with the heads of unfortunate dolphins and small whales. The bar, was another boat, manned, for there was not a woman in the place, by fishermen. Above them was an outside life buoy bearing the legend 'Harpoon and Minky'. Below this was a picture of a frowning fisherman with the logo 'Sheepbot - it's so ruddy cold'. A chalk board read 'Blubber in a bucket 2 thog,' Gerry passed out again.

He was shaken awake by something yellow and loud with a beard. "We was just off the vicar's giblet when a squall blew up an' tossed us right over the lighthouse. The fisherman leaned closer, one eye bulging, the other patched. He looked over his shoulder as if to ensure no one was listening. "Gerry me lad 'tis I, Gurk," he whispered as he flipped his patch to reveal a perfectly good and familiar eye.

"Go away," mouthed Gerry his head thumping.

"Pume says sorry about the bang. We thought you'd a-be long gone by the time it went up. You all right lad?"

"No," said Gerry throbbing.

"Twas lucky ole Ruppy found 'e."

"Why?" asked Gerry blearily, "oh," he added on a particularly heavy throb.

"'Cause a lot of folk wants to see 'e, and they aint looking to ask about yer health, that's why." Gerry grabbed either side of his head to stop it moving.

"Ohh," he moaned, "Why should I trust you?"

Gurk's tone lowered to a gruff whisper, "'Cause we are the Swinland Liberation Navy, that's why and we have brought 'e here to meet someone very important." He leaned back, looked around for prying ears and then continued at full volume. "I reeled in abaft and took a weather eye to the bilge winder, sheeted down the poop, but the 'tweens were a loosenin'. Luckily I 'ad some of Jobes¹⁷ lineament on I, an I glued 'im down wi' that."

"Whaa, urm," mumbled Gerry.

"Then there were the time in the Bay of Porka when, Eh you ain't touched your sprout brandy." Gerry eyed the plastic cup in front of him, the grey liquid in the bottom looked like ancient pea soup. The odour had not abated, he recognised it, Grin juice, he thought of Foap and then a smooth metallic voice boomed.

"Welcome, to the Harpoon and Minky, I am Bobb Mugg, and that was 'Blind Pew Yokohama and the Nasal Fish." The accordion band bowed. The fishermen cracked their jugs of swelk together and cheered. Bobb continued, "And now friends, and I mean that in a most devout way, a word from our sponsors." A small man in a fish costume waddled onto stage. The crowd roared.

"'Tis the Laughing Halibut," enthused Gurk, "well bless my bilges."

The halibut, who had to stand on tippy fins to reach the microphone, announced in a flat nasal tone. "It is the flavour of Cap'n Queasey's Cod Roe Rum that makes the difference. Yes! Make the party go with Cod

¹⁷ **Jobes Lineament** - A curative for most ills from warts to hair loss. Must be applied externally, preferably through thick leather. Very good for treating fence posts.

Roe Rum. Blended with care and dedication in a plastic bucket for over a week, nothing tastes better. Cod Roe Rum yet another fine product from the Laughing Halibut. And what tastes better?" he asked the crowd.

"NOTHING," they all replied with laughter and applause.

He held open his dorsal fins, accepting their adulation. "Get your Free Sample at the bar now." There was a happy rush to the bar to collect the free liquor. The Laughing halibut shuffled off and Bob returned to the microphone.

"And now friends, for your delight and excitement our main feature for tonight, famous for their huge hits, 'When the floor came up to meet me' and 'Plankton have feelings too.' I give you: Rollo Truffle and his Mawiiian Serenaders." Four men with beards, grass skirts and gumboots strode onto the stage, to huge applause. The tallest stepped to the microphone; he was obviously Rollo Truffle himself.

"Thanks Mates," he drawled in a strong ¹⁸Rolfalian accent. "The boys and I would like to give you our latest number, "Put an egg in your boot and beat it." The Mawiiian Serenaders produced illicit ukuleles and strummed with vigour, whilst Rollo sang.

"When yer life's gone awry
There is nothing you can buy
There is no way to defeat it
Don't hang about
Waiting for a clout
Put an egg in yer boot and beat it"

"Your woman takes a hike
With the wheels of yer bike
Her heart's too cold to reheat it
Don't shed a tear
Locate a forward gear
Put an egg in yer boot and beat it"

Soon the floor was full of dancing fishermen, rolling and reeling, laughing and singing. All was merriment, music and very nasty smells. "Hello my old friend, well fancy meeting you here," Gerry looked round and if he had been holding a glass would have dropped it. Gurk had gone to be replaced by a smiling Foap in a So'wester. A briar pipe protruding from his contented grin, his hands lost in the pockets of his obviously very expensive oilskins.

"Roll up yer trousers
Put your ankles on display
Don't stop to say your sorry
And leg it on your waaaaaay"

"This is most fortunate," continued Foap creamily "I have an offer for you to consider. Let us adjourn to somewhere a little quieter."

"When some big lug
Smacks you in the mug
And is offering to repeat it
Turn him down flat
Don you travelling hat
Put an egg in yer boot and beat it"

"Don't give him satisfaction
Press your legs into action
Simply change your place
Leave an empty spaaaaace."

"Where is Mavis?" Gerry mouthed against the din as strong arms lifted him from his chair. With a huge Fisherman at each side he was dragged towards the happy crowd.

¹⁸ **Rolfalia** - Sparsely inhabited southern continent. Rolfalians are very good at hitting things with sticks and making odd noises.

"You said the rudest word
and have been overheard
And you have no way to delete it
Extricate your leg
Insert another egg
Oh, put an egg in yer boot and beat it

One of Gerry's captors grunted in his ear with a voice that was obviously very second hand, "No trouble son, you have plenty enough already."

The crowd howled rapturous cheers and stamped applause as Rollo and the band ceremoniously poured eggs in their boots and ran from the stage. Bob Mugg came back to the microphone, "Well that was a whale of a time so let's take a hake and be back in five minnows."

Another cheer rose from the crowd and then from everywhere else came a fierce metallic megaphone voice, "STAY VERY STILL AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED MUCH."

The lights went out and there was instant chaos and rushing. The room clattered with falling chairs, the gasping of cast away accordions and running fishermen. The sound of fifty men running in oilskins in a confined space is a very particular one, especially when experienced at close quarters. The lights came on, Gurk, Foap and all of the fishermen had gone, and Gerry found himself sitting on the dance floor surrounded by extra large Orange Guards clicking and shnicking even larger weapons and they were all pointed at him. The guards parted and a small man dressed in a white suit and a straw boater entered and collecting a chair sat beside him. He looked down at Gerry, with glittering eyes and in a foppish voice said, "My, my, you are an unpopuwlar fewwow. Wewlcome to Sheepbot, awwow me to offer you some of our famous hospitawity." Gerry was about to mumble something, he was not sure what, when there was a loud 'THONK' and for the second time that day the floor reached up and consumed him.

Samantha G

Pure white light, hurtlingly white, Gerry squinted, still white.

"So you are with us," said a caramel smooth female voice, "Do not try to move, you are safe and with friends." Gerry tried to speak but nothing came, except an embarrassing dribble. "You are an honoured guest of the Helios Corporation. We have been waiting for you."

"Wha?"

"I am Samantha G, Mr Funn's personal accountant. I have been assigned to look after you." He felt soft fingers caressing his forehead. "You really should not eat or drink any of the local foods, they are not good for you." This lady knew how to understate things. He had only eaten a one toffee and that had been more than enough.

"Oh such a gentle yet firm voice and those fingers". Gerry decided this was nice, "Hummm," he purred contentedly.

"We have bathed you. You are safe now." He purred, this was very nice, but also very embarrassing, he felt a vermilion blush rising from his toes to envelop him. "We have had to burn what was left of your clothes".

"What, eh, er," he tried to sit up but the fingers prevented any movement, they were suddenly very powerful, soft steel.

"Do not be perturbed, they have been replaced. We are your friends." Gerry was not so sure now.

The fingers continued caressing, "Hmmm". He suddenly realised how sore the money cheek of his bum was. He had been robbed. "Ibe bleen blobbed," he slurred.

"No we have merely transferred your money to a more useable currency, Hermanian Tattoo Francs are not convertible here."

"bere?"

"This is the Helios Core on Mudge. You are safe. We are your friends." She did have such a lovely, liquid, soothing voice. He dropped into slumber and dreamt of orange guards, grin juice, the interrogator, blubber, accordions and Samantha. He could see her, vivid and lovely. He awoke and she was there, just as the dream, sitting reading, a sweep of black hair across her face. She looked at him, her eyes huge and blue, gentle, she was a dream. He was in panic. A real woman looking at him, so close. He tried to look anywhere else. "Hello again, how do you feel" she asked creamily.

"Urp," urped Gerry nodding. His head hurt, his bum hurt but it didn't matter.

"Good, you are well. Do not be alarmed. It is time for your medication. She put down her book. Stood and leaned over him. Her hair drifted across his face. She smelt of oranges and the sea and fresh snow and then she kissed him. Soft and wet, like a ripe sweet peach. Then back to sleep. He dreamt of Jalo and the Glee-cab, of the Mayor and Mr Tassel in the rain and then sunlight and Samantha.

.....

"AH, good, good, good, w, welcome Mr Gwep. I have heard so much about you, oh yes, what a fewwow you are and so hard to find, hmm, vevy good. I am sow sowwy about the wough welcome but I had to tell the wocals you were a spy. They are so enthusiastic and I am afraid it was necessawy, yes most necessawy." Gerry sat up, his head thumped, he lay back down again. He was in the same white room. Samantha was still there, by the bed, beautiful. A huge face filled the far wall. It was the little man from the Harpoon and Minky. He was smiling a benign smile, a smile of understanding. Gerry tried to look, but his gaze fell back to Samantha. "I am Henwy Funn." The little man bowed displaying a balding pate.

Gerry thought, "Funn, Who? Funn?" but Samantha held his focus. The name meant something far off and she has a perfect mouth. Then the memory and its meaning cut through the fog. "Funn, THE Henry

Funn?" The face that smiled from a million screens, posters, chat shows and campaigns. Funn famous for the line "I liked the food so much I bought the country." The man who would not bother to pick up a million zillos if it were lying in the street because the time wasted would cost him more than that. Funn who had founded Helios Corps the third biggest company on the planet. Funn the Vice President of Vespuchia and counted world leaders as his friends. Funn who would know who Gerry was and what he had done. The game was up. They had him.

Funn continued in an even gentle tone. "Yes I know who you are, Mr Gwep, and a vevy cwever chap you are, but I am afraid what you have done has put us all in gwave danger. Oh yes vevy gwave danger." He shook his head and the benign smile evaporated to be replaced by a demeanour of stone. The sing song voice hardened. It was not loud but it filled the room. The voice of the man in charge, it commanded attention and Gerry gave it. "Why we did not see it coming, no one can tell me. The twick of using an evowutionary intewwigent agent vivus was cwever, very cwever, oh yes. Making it was genius. I sawute your ingenuity, Mr Gwep." Gerry stared, the voice was right but the lisp wasn't. The voice was as famous as the face but the pronunciation had always been perfect. "Such a shame it has nearwy brought the gwobe to its knees." Gerry wondered where the globes knees might be but said nothing. Funn's eyes widened aggressively. "There are a wot of very angry people who want to have a word with you and I am one of them. Almost all Helios Corps systems have been compromised. It has cost me a very great deal of money. A very great deal indeed."

"Sorry," offered Gerry in a miniature voice. "I only meant to borrow a car." He noticed that Funn's lisp faded as his anger grew.

"An apology will not do, not at all," commanded Funn "No, no what we need from you is how to stop this monster of yours. You must have built in some control mechanism, surely? Just tell me what it is and you will be in slightly less trouble."

"There is what you might call a key."

"Yes, just tell me what it is? NOW."

"It is a hardware key, a blue tube. Foap has it. He stole it."

At the mention of Foap the little man changed colour. ¹⁹Snorting Vermilion filled the screen. "YES I KNOW ABOUT FOAP. HAVE YOU ANOTHER KEY?"

"Ehm, well, no." Gerry tried a feeble smile.

"Can you make another?" Funn's massive eyes drilled into him.

"Uh well, I could but, Gerry looked skyward as he thought of the problem. "We could simplify the perceptron." He looked down as he continued. "It would take a while to retrain it. Ah, but then we cannot access the net stores. Hmm. Tricky"

"I am sure it is tricky. But it is vital. Now can you do it?"

"I am not sure, well um,..... no."

The little man turned away obviously to contain his rage. His shoulders shook, they stopped and his face returned. "So the only way to stop this chaos is to retrieve the original key."

"Er well yes, I suppose it is."

"And if we manage to convince Foap to hand it over, then what do we do?"

"Oh that is easy get me the key and I could reconfigure it to self-destruct."

"Tell us how to do it? We shall do it for you."

"It will not work for you. There are five passwords and only I know them."

"You will give me them NOW."

¹⁹ **Snorting Vermilion** - 'A rich pastel shade that goes wonderfully with Redeye pink and Dandruff Grey to decorate a seriously sensuous boudoir'- Dandymo Houseteaser – Paradigms for Design.

"No, I won't." asserted Gerry surprised at his own firmness. A shiver of power went through him. Yes, he was the only one who could do it!

Funn turned away again for a moment. When he turned back the persona of the genial host returned. "Very well, let us tawk some more. Get dwessed and we shall have bweakfast. Cawuban wobster and Mowwinger 59, is that to your taste?"

"Oh yes, fine," answered Gerry having never tasted either. The face faded and the wall reappeared. In its polished mirror surface, he saw only himself. Samantha had gone. On the chair where she had been was a new white suit and shoes. He climbed into them and admired himself in the mirror. They fitted perfectly as none of his clothes ever had done. "So now I am to eat lobster with the Vice President, just how trezarre can things get?" He chuckled nervously to himself as he puffed his chest and took in a profile. "Would Jalo and the boys ever believe this? I don't think so."

A door opened in the mirror and Samantha stepped in. "This way Mr Grep" she purred.

"Oh, call me Gerry please," he remembered her fingers and issued another faintly audible, "Oh please."

Breakfast with power

Henry Funn was barely visible in the white room. Dressed in white suit and shoes only his face and hands appeared as if moving on wires. He sat at an almost invisible white table on an equally white and thus undetectable chair. The tablecloth, white of course, was dressed with the delights of an ultra wealthy breakfast. A bottle of Vampagne nestled in a silver ice bucket amongst glistening salvers brimmed with exquisite succulence. "Ah! come in, come in," said Funn rising. His head seemed to float to the ceiling closely followed by the hands. Disorientated, Gerry shuffled across the white carpet towards him. He could feel the plush pile through his the soles of his white shoes but his feet and legs were lost in the whiteness of the floor. "Stiwl wobbwly I see," chuckled Funn in his cartoon voice.

"Just a bit, woo, this is like hyper white. I mean like industrial strength anti-black."

"Just wait a minute your eyes wiwl adjust. I wike white. It is so qwiet."

"Oh?" mused Gerry trying to think what a noisy colour was. "Unlike red I suppose?" he added taking another step into the void.

"Ah qwite so, we are on the same wavewlength I see." Gradually the faintest details and shadows appeared and the room became a room with a small man and a very large breakfast in it. Gerry made his way slowly to the table. He took his place before the arranged delights and busied himself importing them to his plate, whilst Funn spoke. "Cowour is important, but also is twuth. White is a twuthful cowour. It is white or it is not. Anything else is gwey." Gerry nodded as he speared a sausage. "Enough of such stuff," said Henry. "You wook wike you need to eat so just cawwy on and I will do the tawking." Gerry nodded again as he stood to reach for the candied weechul fish. "I will get stwaight to the point. Your wittle machine, however it works, has nearwy brought us to, shall we cawl it, a very competitive pwace. Foap has it now and he is using it to wansome us all. I, we need to stop him. Only you can do it. So how much?"

"How much what?" asked Gerry through a mouth full of transcendently toothsome sausage.

"What is your pwice?"

"How much are you paying?" The weechul fish were superb.

"One miwwion ziwvos." The reply was instantaneous. Gerry stopped chewing and gawped.

"A miwwion ziwvos?" he mimicked unable to stop himself.

"Yes a miwwion," repeated Henry.

"I am thinking about it," answered Gerry nonchalantly, forking a piece of lobster. He did not believe a word. No one was going to give him a million zillos or even one zillo. But at least they were not throwing him in the slammer. He would play along. He smiled and simply said, "Tell me more."

"Ah that is vevy good. I pwopose hawf now and hawf when we, that is you have disabwed the monster." He pushed a salver towards Gerry and lifted the silver lid to reveal a very large pile of freshly minted Zillos. Gerry looked the money in the eye. It was a breathtaking sight, an awful lot of loot. He had never seen so much. Big zeros abounded before him. But the spell of wealth held him for a mere moment. He continued with his breakfast. The lobster was even better than the sausage. He munched thinking. This was a game. He was good at games and his best option was to keep the game going as long as possible.

He looked at the money and then at Funn. "Very nice I am sure, but make it two million and pay it all on delivery."

Funn looked back and smiled. "Agweed, you are a vevy wemarkable man Mr Gwep. Vevy like myself as a young man."

"Oh weally," said Gerry not intending to mock.

"Yes, weally."

A little history

Gurit the III of Swinland (1356 - 1423) was a very keen builder and Swinland is littered with myriad of his architectural follies. Most notable amongst these are:

The Dapht Tower of Usa, which is in a deep pit so that the viewing platform at its pinnacle is level with the ground. Created by Gurit for his son Ewik the timid, the so-called 'Crouching Prince', who was afflicted with such vertigo that he rarely stood up. The tower at 200 feet is easily the tallest structure in Swinland and took 18 years to construct. When it was finished Gurit wheeled his son across the bridge to the viewing platform where they ate lard bars. Ewik famously asked, "Is it a nice view?" The natives responded by offering a vision of the bridge being knocked down and leaving them both think on the conundrum of how to escape.

The Dangling Chapel of Mudge, dedicated to St Maudlin the Unsteady, hangs by huge chains from a precipitous overhang. Services are only attended by the most devout with the strongest stomachs, as it is known to swing violently in the mildest breeze. Flower festival Junember 12 to Heptember 23 - ²⁰Morp and biscuits three thog.

The Great stone trowel on Kevin's Peak, St Kevin. Weighing over three hundred tons the trowel apparently appeared overnight. How Gurit achieved this and why is unrecorded.

The Huge Boots of Nocca which stand one hundred feet high and are full of water. They are also the strange home of the unsurprisingly rare Nocca Boot Newt.

The most famous of Gurits creations however is the King's Head Castle on Sheepbot. Huge, rambling and formed in the likeness of Gurit himself from his upper lip upwards it stares out to sea from the top of Gripp Cliff. After thirty years of building Gurit abandoned it in 1403 when he found very unsanitary seabirds were nesting in the nostrils. Damp, draughty and almost impossible to get to, it was however in a strategically brilliant location. This is where Foap located himself, not only for the view but he fancied that the castle actually bore a likeness to himself, which after restoration and the addition of a moustache veranda was arguable.

Twinky spoke gently in his ear, "The guards are here as you requested?"

"Send them in," he snorted. The oak door creaked open and two very sheepish soldiers stumbled in. They were dressed in lime green tunics with 'Rinky Dinky Corp' embroidered in pink across the chest and pink berets with the same logo in lime green. Lime green trousers with pink piping, a thick pink belt around the tunic and pink boots with green laces completed the ensemble.

Foap had fancied it looked quite natty when he had thought it up but now he was not so sure. His initial vision had been of lithe, muscular, chiselled men with panache and elegant features to carry off the design. These two looked like very large and badly stuffed kitsch sofas. They shuffled to the desk and presented themselves before him. One snapped off a salute and the other copied. They both then took off their berets and stared vacantly at the wall behind him. Foap eyed them with distaste and thought, 'is this the best I could get? No wonder the place had been constantly invaded'. "So tell me how did he get away? Two great big lugs like you and one little skinny boy?" he asked coldly. The slightly larger of the two, one Drog Munn switched his gaze to his huge pink boots and fiddled with his hat. Malod Felp always one to follow, copied the pose. "I mean all you had to do was follow me. It was only a few steps to the door. What were you thinking about? No, forget that. I know, thinking is hard but following is easy. What happened?"

Drog straightened, stood to attention, cleared his voice, "Aheemm," and whilst maintaining an unfocused gaze on the middle distance said, "Wewl we was just taking the apprehendee."

Malod looked up puzzled, "Wass the apprehendee den?" he whispered.

"The bloke we was apprehenden," Drog whispered back.

"Oh?"

²⁰ **Morp** - Rotting seaweed tea. Some say an acquired taste, others say bloody revolting. Best with honey, lemon and a heavy blow to the head, even better taken by someone else.

"As I was saying. We was taking the apprehendee by de arms in a northerly direction across the floor, dancing for the use of."

"Yes, yes, I know that, get on with it man, what happened?" snapped Foap, fiddling menacingly with a very pointy letter opener.

"Whilst proceeding amongst the revellers of the night with the said apprehendee some one shouted at us."

"Shouted at you?" asked Foap in mock amazement.

"Yes sir, very loudly?"

Malod nodded in agreement and mumbled support. "Oh yes awful loud it there was."

"Awful loud?" asked Foap.

"Oh terrible loud," enthused Drog.

"Well that would make a difference," sneered Foap sarcastically. "What prey to tell did these brutes shout. No, don't tell me, it was BOO! WASN'T IT." Foap was shouting now. "OF ALL THE INCOMPETENT, STUPID, BRAINLESS, MORONIC, OH, GET OUT! GET OUT!" Drog and Malod slumped off mumbling about how loud it was and all the lights going out.

"Foap your blood pressure is very high," whispered Twinky.

"I KNOW, I know. Tell me good news my angel. Tell me some nice large numbers to soothe my troubles."

"Five hundred and eighty three million," she soothed.

"Oh you know how to hit the spot. That is sooo much nicer. And what other news have we."

"All of the MP 8 machines have arrived and are being installed. The Jacuzzi is working and the IWV employees are waiting in Gurits Hall."

"Triffic, just triffic, play them some music and I will give the bubble bath a whirl." A few moments later Foap was bobbing contentedly in a huge Jacuzzi set in his new massive and sumptuous bathroom. It was the first room to be completed. With solid gold fittings and finest Napalien marble walls it yelled ostentation with the volume of a foghorn. The water bubbled, swirled and soothed. Foap lay back and felt good. He played with his loofa and mused. The plan was going very well, very well indeed. He had missed an opportunity to bag the little Grep fellow and ensure his position but hell the Swinnish could have him. They would probably drive him mad, if he wasn't already. Foap allowed himself a quiet chortle. It was strange however that the boy had washed up here, of all places. Maybe the Vespuchian government had sent him? No don't be silly Harlow old lad, and even if they had he would arrange a long trip for the little chap. He chortled a little louder. The echo was perfect. He tried a song.

"OH once I built a fortune
Built it high
It was a race against time
Once I built a fortune
now its mine
Now it is all mine-aaaah."

He splashed contentedly. Things were good and getting better, he had control of most of the telecommunications on the planet and a great deal of the banking. He was nearly as rich as ²¹Mest and catching up fast. The whole thing just kept snowballing, as Twinky made more friends she grew in power. Nearly all military secrets were hers and therefore his. There was this most amazing power dome thing he wanted to play with but that would come later. He tried another song.

"Give all your money to me,
Your money to me
OH that is where it really should be"

He couldn't think of the rest so filled in with, "Nyah, nyah, nyah, NYAH."

²¹**Bark Mest** - Worlds richest being - Mest also acquired a Vespuchian copyright on the word 'Soap' and cleaned up yet again.

The echo was really perfect. He twiddled with the gold taps and made the bubbles swirl the other way. He bobbed in the foam and thought, "Oh this is the life." He was not going to argue the point but he did wonder at the strange turn of events that had got him here. What were the chances, of him finding the Twinky prototype in a Glee-cab in New Cairo and on having the vision to see that he could command the planet? "Smaller than a gnats earlobe and that is small," he said to himself as he made his loofa porpoise in the foam. "Hmm?" Or was this not so much chance as the hand of God directing him to lead mankind? What if he were just a bit divine? How could he tell? Do Messiahs have special markings? No, they did deeds, prophesied things and the like. Well he was doing that alrighty plus a bit. He knew what would happen because he was making it happen. Eight billion people would do what ever he said. Hmm, perhaps he had gone right past Messiah and onto Supreme Being himself. Who could say he wasn't? He held the loofa aloft and from a high stained glass window depicting the building of the great boots of Nocca, a beam of multicoloured light caught the foam, making it glisten and sparkle like a bejewelled sceptre. He watched the fabulous bubbles, alive with colour; silently expire on its surface. "Hmm, perhaps I should write a prayer book or design a few priestly robes. Square hats would look nice, big red ones. How about having a screen on the front, hmm, advertising opportunity." He plunged the loofa back into the warm tide and said aloud "Nah!" He was too busy, but he would have to think ahead. If he was to be in charge, it meant responsibility. What to do with everything? Just where to put it all was a problem. How to feed everyone? How to clothe them all? What colour to use, certainly not lime green and pink? "Hmm, blue would be nice?" The mental buttons were definitely working loose.

The puffin painter

Murup Duffin casually sat on the ledge and gazed out at the pure azure ocean set against a faded blue sky. A tiny distant Tourist monk boat was bobbing on the swell. He saw the glint of their binoculars and sat still and waited for them to move on. He knew they could not see him, dressed as he was in his 'rock grey' puffin painters²² uniform. When they were gone, he returned to his work. To paint the last puffin of the day, a particularly tricky one, near the top of a finger of rock called 'Old Wodger'. Murup had painted them all and this one, many times, as six generations of Duffins had before him.

The surefootedness of the Mudge puffin painters is legendary, and Murup was known as 'The man who could climb clouds'. He veritably danced his way to the top of 'Old Wodger' his painting kit swinging loosely from his waist. He found the painter's cleat and securing his ropes swung down to the little wooden seabird. It was in sad condition, its paint faded and flaking. Murup lifted it from its mounting and popped it into the moleskin bag that also hung from his waist. To his surprise he found the mock bird had been nesting on an envelope. He took it and within a few minutes was sat on the top of the 'Wodger' with the puffin on his knees and a paintbrush in his hand. A few more minutes and the bird was restored to its former glory. He set it impaled on a stick to dry and unpacked his lunch of cockle yoghurt, kelp bread and an²³ Oyster Wayneish. He then opened the envelope. The note inside read:

To Mr Murup Duffin

*Dear Sir,
Welcome to Helios.*

We are pleased to offer you the position of Climbing Executive grade 13. Your salary is Φ 50,000 per annum with annual performance bonus of 10%.

Please report to the Happy Kipper public house, Farp Street, Mudge, on the evening of the 15th at 8:30 for your induction programme.

Wendi Mupe HR Manager Helios Corp Swinland

Murup looked up; a kittiwake was hovering next to him, bobbing on the updraft. He threw it a piece of kelp bread and watched as it stooped and dived on the tidbit. Then the number got through to him, 50,000, a five and four zeros.

His eyes snapped back to the note. This was a job. They were offering him a job and paying, that can't be right. He slanted the paper to see if it was a misprint but no, fifty thousand Thog was definitely what it said. He looked up again and the kittiwake was back in station, waiting for another morsel. But Murup was glazed, he tried to imagine such wealth. For an instant he saw his own private cliff, dotted with wooden seabirds of all types and of him on a yacht sipping warm swelk, watching as others tried to paint them. "Huraw," called the kittiwake snapping him back to reality. The wind shook his thick brown hair and the dream faded. 'Some rotten joke, that's what it is,' he thought. Someone was laughing at him. Sneering at his poverty. He resolved to be at the Happy Kipper that evening to give them a solid piece of his mind. He sat and waited for the anger to go away, for sat on the top of 'Ole Wodger' is not a place to be distracted by any emotion. To descend he needed to be at one with the air and the sea and most of all the rock. His eyes wide he took a deep breath and let out a low continual hum.

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'The Happy Kipper' was as it always was, dark and shuttered. Murup banged the heavy oak door with his spare bird. The door creaked ajar and a shabby man with matted ginger hair and matching beard appeared. "Ah you must be Murup, do have a digestive," said Colin genially, munching a chocolate cartwheel.

²² **Puffin Painter** - In 1343 CJ Ewic of Mudge decreed that there should be Puffins on Puffin Island even though not one had ever been seen there. False puffins were made and placed decorously on the cliffs. The maintenance of the birds was assigned to the unemployed. It kept their numbers down. One Gorab Duffin so impressed the King with the quality of his work he was dubbed 'Royal Puffin Painter'. Generations of Duffins had been painting the puffins ever since.

²³ **Oyster Wayneish** - The Wayneish (from Wayne-mark) live almost entirely on confectionery and bacon. The Oyster Wayneish is a Swinnish invention (sticky bun and oyster) and although not chemically poisonous it is viewed as a mind altering substance in many countries and therefore banned.

"I haven't come 'ere for no biscuit," snorted Murup indignantly.

"Are you sure? How about a wafer?" responded Colin, fishing in his trouser pocket for the said confection.

"I tell 'e I'll 'ave nothing to do with your biscuits or you for that matter." Murup was drawing upon his stored rage. He began rolling up his sleeves, making ready to thump someone. And that someone looked like it was going to be Colin.

"Oh," exclaimed Colin stepping back. Murup followed.

"And if you think taking the gudge out of us Mudge folk is fun, well I'm here to show you otherwise," he spat the words. "No one makes fun of us Duffins. No one!"

"Steady on old thing, merely offering you biscuit. No one is making the slightest joke, well not about you anyway." Colin was beginning to babble. He tended to babble when cornered. "Speaking of jokes have you heard the one about the Vicar and the trouser press. It is a pippin." Murup narrowed his eyes, which is a very scary trick, and stared at Colin as though he were looking at vermin. It was plain he had nothing to say. His fists would continue the discussion. He advanced on the ginger fool.

"Ah, perhaps not, maybe another time," babbled Colin backing away.

"Mr Duffin gwad you could come, wewlcome, wewlcome," greeted Henry approaching from the shadows.

"What," grunted Murup swivelling to pummel a new target.

"Ah the wegendary Duffin temper I see. Now please put those fists down. There is no weason to be angwy, well not with me anyway."

Murup peered at the little man. "No one but no one takes the gudge out of us Duffins."

"We have no intention of doing so. I suppose you want your starting fee?"

"What?" growled Murup looking around one of his raised fists to see the little man proffer a wad of thogs.

"One thousand ought to get you started."

Murup dropped a fist and took the money, he kept the other one raised as he examined it. "Is this real?" he asked knowing it was.

"Oh vevy weal, we have pweny."

"And it's for me?"

"Oh yes."

"To keep?"

"And spend as you wish. Pwus another forty nine thousand when the job is done."

"The remaining fist came down. The rage dissipated. Insecurity took over. Paranoia had a look in. Fear gave him a tweak and confusion was in charge. He breathed with shaking lips "I need to hum for a while."

Funn nodded and smiled "Qwite understand, come on through when you have finished. Come on Cowin let us have a dwink and weave Mr Duffin to his meditations."

"What a cracking idea," agreed Colin eagerly and they left Murup to sit on the wooden floor, cross-legged, humming. Colin had been more than a little shaken by the encounter. "Bit of an odd bird, are you sure we need him?" He asked Funn as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Oh vevy sure, you wiwl see. It is just his way. He would never weally hawm you, he is just vevy highly tuned, a cweature of dewicate bawance. We made him wobble that's awl. He wiwl be fine."

"Why the humming?"

"He is regaining his bawance. I am sure one day you wiwl be very gwad of his company. Now what about that dwink?"

'Right oh, wouldn't have a sesame seed lager by any chance?"

"Of course, of course, anything you wike".

Murup hummed continuously for twenty minutes, circular breathing, emptying his mind and tuning in. With balance and composure regained he stopped and sprang to his feet. Sauntering with cool assurance he entered the Crabs Nipper Buffet room and Bar.

The crabs nipper gang

The 'Happy Kipper' has a long and very dark history mainly due to it being very old and having few windows. It has been officially classed by the ²⁴Mudge Tourist Board as a ²⁵'Low Tavern' due to the rough wooden ceiling being only five foot or so from its rough wooden floor. Decorated with faded ²⁶plastic lobsters in tired little nets nailed to the ceiling beams and tiny signs saying 'Duck or Grouse'. 'The Kipper' has a unique ambience. Navigating the stout timber beams sober is no easy business but after several pints of swelk it becomes a spectator sport. A permanent knot of locals live in 'The Kipper' occupying comfy chairs at favourite vantage points. A regular is always on hand to offer sympathy and useless advice such as, "You want to put a fish on that bruise, bring 'im out 'twill," or "Try walking backwards, 'tis easier." Bets are placed as to how long a visitor will last before thumping themselves on the ceiling, with extended odds on how long they might remain unconscious. Upon the appearance of Herman the tote had been particularly lively, but even at short odds he was a bookies nightmare. He had barely entered the place when the first beam caught him and down he went, to silent cheering. He was helped to his feet and almost immediately repeated the process, causing the under table exchange of many folded Thog. Four times at ever shortening odds he butted the beams before he was born to the sanctuary of a chair.

" 'Tis like I do always say, you can't beat a good drum." Ruppy grinned, causing his pipe to salute and issue a congratulatory puff.

Pume chortled, through a mouth full of kelp bread and added, "I thought it was you can't beat a good egg."

Dubo giggled and Gurk pronounced, "Good un Pume me lad. But I thought it was you can't beat a good wife." Gurk let out a rusty guffaw and banged the table with a heavy hewn fist. It would have caused all of the swelk glasses to dance had all there not seen the blow coming and raised their drinks as one. All that is save Herman who was still stunned from his encounters with the ceiling beams. His glass of Clamorangie liqueur leapt and deposited its orange contents on his new Helios white suit. He stared, at his trousers, the stain growing, darkening and leering back.

He wanted to ask childlike questions such as "What is happening? Why is it happening? And why is it all happening to me?" Feeling pathetic and lost he stayed silent and with unblinking eyes watched the throng. Colin sat beside him dunking digestives in his lager, his white suit bulging with secreted confections. Next to him was a woman of searing beauty. He had forgotten her name, as he had of the pencil necked youth who was next to her and who was obviously besotted. Then came the crew of the scallop, with Gurk at the head of the table opposite himself. They had greeted Herman like a lost uncle, patted him on the back and steered him to his seat. A little distant voice inside him said "I'm going to sue." but he kept silent. Then came the two mad monks, Julian and Ian, each with lurid cocktails and stupid grins. Then came Vice President Funn no less and last and weirdest of all a man with a wooden puffin, who smelled like a pile of dead gannets.

Henry rose and banged the table. "Fweinds, I have bwrought you hewe to face a cwisis. A weally dweadful cwisis. I have a pwan and only you can save the pwanet. But first of all I have a mission for you Agent Cushion."

"Eh?" mumbled Herman barely aware of his name being mentioned.

"Agent Cushion your task is to muh, muh, muhuny, muh,"

Herman tried to listen but Funn's voice faded into burbling. Herman's softened brain was playing another movie. "The name is Cushion, Herman Cushion and I like my Maratini lightly agitated," he grinned blearily and raised a bruised eyebrow ever so slightly. He drifted into dreaming of an Astin Weeseley Giro car and a Brilex Bivalve Eternatnick watch with an emergency life raft in it.

"Muh, muhuny muhn, now is that clear?"

"Eh, oh yes, um all clear," muttered Herman awakening. He was lifted to his feet, given a small envelope and festooned with heavy bags. Julian and Ian appeared beside him and he was borne away.

²⁴ **The Mudge Tourist Board** - The current name of one Weldo Sneep. He has previously been known as 'The Grubble Post Office', 'Prince Dripfeed of Swark', 'The largest Gasholder in history', 'Here is all my money' and 'My but your lovely'.

²⁵ **The lowest Tavern** on Mudge is officially the Dwarf and Headbandage with only 3' 9" clearance in the snug bar.

²⁶ **Plastic Lobsters** supplied by Prastic Robster Inc.

"Now you just keep that napper down," said Ian.

"Eh, Oooof," responded Herman looking up and taking a high scoring lobster full in the face.

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Funn waited for Herman and the monks to leave. He rolled a large map of Sheepbot onto the table and declared, "Now then my fwiends wet me show you the pwan."

"Tis like I do always say," interjected Ruppy, "You know where you are with a map."

The unveiling of Twinky

Foap surveyed the crowd, and in doing so commanded silence. He waited for the last of the murmuring to finish, lit his briar and puffing gently gave a wave to Dean Bap at the back of the vast auditorium that was Gurits great hall. The lights dimmed and the huge screen behind Foap showed a scene of pastoral tranquillity, green hills, lakes, sheep, etc. Thatcher's cantata in D oiled the images with lilting melody. Slowly, very slowly, the camera pulled back to reveal that the scenes were being projected onto the side of a huge industrial plant. Everyone in the room recognised the location. It was Data Rouge, IWV's manufacturing plant in Blacknell, Brutainia. And then, slowly at first, the massive structure began to fall in on itself. All became dust and smoke, and still the music played. Eventually the picture cleared to reveal a pile of twisted rubble and then faded to black.

A small semidetached house dissolved into view, with clipped hedges and wooden shuttered windows, the milkman was shutting the gate as two elderly ladies arrived with shopping baskets. As they passed the time of day with the milkman, the camera zoomed slowly in, over their heads, down the garden path to a small label over the doorbell, which gradually filled the screen. 'International Wallet Vacuum - Head Office'. The music stopped, the lights came up and Foap addressed his confused audience. "IWV is now a subsidiary of Rinky Dinky Communications Inc. The Money Pump range of machines has now been discontinued, except for one small research project." The crowd rumbled with consternation. He waited for it to subside. "Of the twenty seven thousand employees of IWV we will only need one hundred and eighty three." Loud murmuring, some even getting to their feet, shuffling and sitting back down, most crossing and uncrossing their arms. "YOU are that one hundred and eighty three. Welcome to Rinky Dinky."

"Gasps!" Huge applause. Standing ovation.

Foap raised his hand to contain them. "Friends, I give you our new product: TWINKY." He reached into his inside pocket and held up what appeared to be a pair of spectacles. The crowd, not caring what it was, cheered and shouted. Foap quietened them down again and added, "I could tell you about the Twinky but I think I had better let it speak for itself."

The lights dimmed again, but this time Dean Bap was not running the show, Twinky was. The screen displayed a woman's face, a friendly face, the face from a myriad building society, bank and insurance adverts. She was pretty, but not overtly. She smiled and said, "Hello, I am Twinky." Her voice was pert, yet soothing, and her eyes positively sparkled. Many of the male members of the audience and a few of the females sighed at her simple loveliness. "Under your seat there is a small box, please retrieve it," she continued silkily. The audience fumbled as one in the darkness. "Now put on the spectacles provided in the box." They were specs exactly like Foap's, substantial but not heavy, made of a synthetic mother of pearl. There was much chattering as folk admired or laughed at each other.

"Now," said Twinky, "I will turn on your vision, and I will talk to individually. We no longer need this auditorium." The crowd gasped as one as Twinky appeared to hover in front of each of them and speak directly to them. She explained that from now on she would act as their guardian angel, that she would see what they saw, and in the event of any danger, problem or decision she would always be there to help. She showed them how the silver pen that was also in the box, could also be used as a drinks mixer. All was excitement and agitation as Twinky led them through a wonderland of functions and they played with their vibrating pens. She would monitor their health, manage their finances, remember anniversaries, be all of their keys and so on. When she led them from the auditorium to waiting buses they were almost dancing with delight. All except Dweevil Pooter had always been a cynical fellow, and was still smarting over his lost holiday.

"Expect the worst and you won't be disappointed," he would often quote. But he knew enough to keep his head down, he yattered along with the rest. He was not totally surprised when the last bus closed its doors and pulled away to leave him standing on the pavewalk alone.

"Foap, we have a problem. One of the number is unreceptive," said Twinky.

"Interesting, which one?"

"143 - Dweevil Pooter."

"Pooter, well, well who would have guessed?"

"The projections are that only 1 in 800,000,000 are unreceptive."

"I know Twink, I know. Either we are very wrong or very lucky. Where is he now?"

"I have put him in the softroom and don't call me Twink."

"Good, and the others?"

"They are all on their way. We are on schedule, milestone 4.3.2 has been reached."

"Well done Twink, I think I shall have a few words with our friend Pooter, to the softroom please."

Dweevil was at his third cup of tea when Foap arrived. This was heaven, sitting in a rattan chair on neat summer lawn, with birds singing and the most delightful ladies bringing him tea. "Hello, Pooter, how the devil are you," enquired Foap as he strode up the path, his pipe on full burn with an aromatic plume in his wake.

"Fine, thankyou sir."

"No, need for all that 'sir' stuff Pooter old chap, call me Foap." Foap sat down in the companion to Dweevil's chair that he didn't recall being there before. Foap smiled at him, the smile of a tiger with a baby rabbit. "Do you like it here?" he purred.

"It is very nice thankyou." Dweevil smiled meekly back. He knew something horrid was going to happen, it always did when things were going well.

"How about this?" Foap did not move but the lawn did. It started to ripple, and form waves. It was liquid, a green sea. Dweevil clung to his chair as it capsized and threw him into the green foam. All went black, he fought for the surface and broke through to gasp a breath, and then down again. Black choked his ears and eyes and filled his lungs. He thrashed in the blackness, sucking him down. A thought shone in the darkness, "This is not real, it's a stupid game. Foap was playing with him. He was lying on a bed somewhere with this nonsense being fed in somehow. He had seen Twinky. This was a similar trick. No, he was not going to play and if he found this Foap fellow in person he was going to punch him on the nose; twice'. Suddenly the lawn reasserted itself, the birds were singing again but Foap was gone.

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"I see what you mean Twink, most curious. Are you sure he is alone?"

"I have connected 14,003,564 so far and he is the only one."

"Absolutely amazing luck, well, well," Foap stroked his newly acquired goatee beard and grinned.

"What would you like me to do with him?"

"Keep him in the softroom and observe him, he can't do any damage there."

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Dweevil sat and gazed for a while. This was an amazing illusion, it even smelled right. Anger welled within him, it was his head and he would have his own fantasies thankyou, and not have someone else fooling with it. He narrowed his eyes and focused on a black bird that was tugging at a worm on the lawn. The worm grew, and grew and became a snake. Before the bird could come to terms with such a turning worm it was swallowed whole. "This is better," thought Dweevil. He stared at the garden wall and a door appeared. He strolled to it, through it and onto a maceball ground, dressed in white with a mace under his arm. Applause from the huge crowd filled his ears as he took up position on the plate. This was definitely better. The crowd chanted POOTER, POOTER, POOTER, as the thrower lobbed the ball gently his way. With a crack like a shotgun he sent it into orbit. The match was won, he was the hero, the crowd poured onto the pitch to mob him, thousands of them.

No hold on, this was not so good, he stared around him and they faded to mist and then nothing. He closed his eyes, reopened them and the maceball ground was gone, he was lying on a bed staring at a very boring ceiling. He sat up and in doing so pulled a nest of small wires from his head. "This must be reality, it is too dull to be an illusion," he thought. Opening a very dull door he stepped into a very dull corridor, which led to another door and the outside. It was dull and raining. An economy sized Rinky Dinky guard with a weapon that looked like a cross between a lawn mower and a bazooka stood guarding the

outside of the door. His beret clung like a pink limpet to a big orange rock. "Anything to report soldier?" barked Pooter in his most officious tone.

"Uh, no sir," responded the guard, stiffening to attention.

"What is your name son?" enquired Pooter.

"Dinkle sir," replied Dinkle nervously.

"Dinkle eh, fine name for a fine soldier."

Dinkle puffed his chest and stared straight ahead, "Sir."

"Weapons test Dinkle, fire at wall over there, FIRE!" Dinkle automatically responded by schnicking and clicking various levers on the weapon bringing it to his shoulder and firing. With a loud "COROOP" and a "WHHHOOCHH" the lawnmower alike end shot towards the wall. "CORRUMPH!" the shell exploded. There was then a noise, which would require very big letters to describe, dust, smoke, falling rocks, shouting, more rocks, smashing glass, coughing and general confusion. Slowly the dust cleared to reveal that a large chunk of the wall had been removed. Dinkle allowed himself a smile at his handiwork, he had always wanted to fire an Buni Gun. 'Gark,' it felt good. He looked around for the officer but Pooter had gone. He attached another 'Nibbler' to the Gun and resumed his position.

"This is turning out to be a very good day," he thought. How very wrong he was²⁷.

²⁷ For those of you concerned about Dinkle, he did lose his job but went on to become a very successful nail varnish salesman, married a customer and had four fine, well manicured children.

The trouble with bicycles

The trouble with bicycles is the effort involved concluded Roland Lightbody. They seem such a whizzing good idea when you want one, all shiny, thoughts of wind in the hair, freewheeling summers, and all that. But when you got one, well, it made you sweat, and there he drew the line. He was going to push the wretched thing and be done with it. He would rather arrive at Jocasta's house late than appear red faced and wheezing with bodily fluids oozing from every pore.

He dismounted his cycle and began to walk with it. The country lane twisted upward before him. Growpers Hill was not very steep but it go on so. It then occurred to him that as he was never, ever going to ride the brute again, he didn't need it, so he turned it around and let it go. He watched the Dauncy Everglide 27 gear wobble and pick up speed. Soon it was gone. He felt content at a job well done, turned and strode with a positive step out of this chapter. The Dauncy Everglide however, remained upright, gently accelerated and firmly entered the narrative when it collided with a very surprised and of course, very angry Herman Cushion. He was carrying the heavy bags that Funn had given him, and was thus unable to fend off the Everglide, but he had seen it coming and in an effort to dodge trotted to the side of the road and directly into its path. He uttered a loud "Gork" as the errant cycle struck him head on. Down and over he went, bags gone, down and over and over into a deep and very muddy ditch. He lay for a while, entangled in the mechanism watching the back wheel turning above him. A voice came from beyond the wheel.

"You fallen in the ditch then?"

Herman's first thought was to answer, "No! I bloody well grew here, you incredibly stupid man," but he contained himself thinking he could use some help, and answered simply, "Yes."

"Is it muddy down there then?"

"Yes."

"Is that a bike you got there?"

"Erm, Yes."

"Is it Dauncy Everglide?"

"Ergmm, I don't know," Herman his control slipping as a cold finger of muddy water poked its way into his nether regions. No, he told himself he needed this idiot, he would ask politely. "Could you please help me out?"

"Nice bike the Everglide, 'sgot 27 gears and lovely balance. 'Twon't do it no good down there."

"It's yours if you will help me out."

"I don't ride bikes, they're dangerous."

"You could sell it."

"Don't you like it then?"

"NO! I don't bloody well like it. I don't like this ditch. I don't like this island and most of all I don't like you. Now either help me out of here or go and play with one of your idiot neighbours."

"I knew a chap, Sloper 'e was called. 'E 'ad a bike, kept falling off 'im 'e did. Mind you it wasn't an Everglide an 'e did only 'ave the one leg. So we wasn't surprised really."

Herman began to wrestle with the bike. More freezing mud found its way to his undergarments. "Gerrrrm, Arghh, pherg."

"Course 'e used to drink an awful lot of Grin Juice too. So 'e didn't mind when 'e fell off." A pedal swung round and cracked Herman on the shin as he caught his tie that had become a muddy rope, in the gear changer.

"OWW, ARRGH, BLOODY STUPID, GURG, TYPICAL BLOODY TYPICAL."

"A great yodeller old Sloper, amused us down at the Duck and Trumpet for hours 'e would."

"HERM, YOU RUDDY, ARGH." Herman grabbed the pedal and wrenched at it, causing the rear wheel to turn, which rove his tie further into the mechanism. This in turn brought his nose into contact with the spinning spokes. "Phnung, Argh, I, Phnung, Stupid, Phnung, Idiot, Phnung, GET, Phnung, ME, Phnung, ARGH, Phnung, OUT, Phnung, Phnung."

"E could Yodel and blow smoke out of his ears, old Sloper. Still, must be getting on, I've got a pig to grease." Herman and the bicycle, they were as one unit now, struggled to its feet. Slipped and sat back down again. The humiliation, the pain, the pointlessness and stupidity of his situation suddenly overcame him and he began to sob. The bicycle joggled and rattled with his sobs.

"Mr Cushion, Herman Cushion ?" ' '

"Doh away?" mewed Herman.

"I am Miss Tara Brown and I have been sent by Mr Scarpe to greet you." Herman looked up. The bicycle looked up with him. She was a small, delicate woman, with large blue eyes. She looked very agitated.

"Det be out," whined Herman pitifully.

"Oh, dear, Oh my, this is most difficult. How did you, I mean how can you, oh dear, there was nothing about this on the induction course, and I have been up all night, worrying about what soap to use and now I've got a headache and one of my shoes has given me a blister and Mr Scarpe will be angry and I will lose my job and ohhh..." She fumbled in a small brown handbag and pulled out a tissue, blew her nose with a tiny parping sound and instantly began to cry. Herman looked up at her through the spokes in disbelief. He tried again.

"Det be out."

"Parp, and if I lose my job, I won't be able to buy the kittens their dinner and they will all die, parp. Ohh, woo, booo." She dropped her bag, causing an impossible amount of small cosmetic items, keys, tissues, sweets and general handbagbery to scatter across the road. A small troll key ring with orange hair and a deranged grin fell into the ditch and settled in the mud in front of Herman.

'Could life be worse?' thought Herman, quietly knowing that it could and probably would.

"Whaaa, ahh wha, hup, and, hup, and if all, hup, the kittens, hup, die, all the tiny baby bunnies, hup, will die, hup."

"Please det be out?"

"And all the, hup, baby squirrels and little baby hedgehogs, hup." She stopped looked down at him in despair, with blue eyes red rimmed and puffy. Her nose had turned red and resembled a small strawberry. "Sorry, what did you say?" she sniffed.

"I thaid, please debt be out?"

"Is that all you can think about? Baby squirrels dying all over the place and all you can think about is you. Well that's typical men, you stay up all night worrying about smelling right and they jump in ditches with bicycles. Well if you think I am going to let the kittens die because of you, WELL !!" She picked up some mud from the side of the road and threw it at Herman. It missed. She looked at her now muddy hand and screamed. "Now look what you have done. Oh why is everyone so horrid to me?" She hunched her shoulders and returned to sobbing. Herman felt sorry for her. It was daft, but he could not help it, she was so obviously hopeless and helpless.

He found himself saying, "It will me alright, I mill tell Mr Scarpe it ith not your fault. Now please dom't cry."

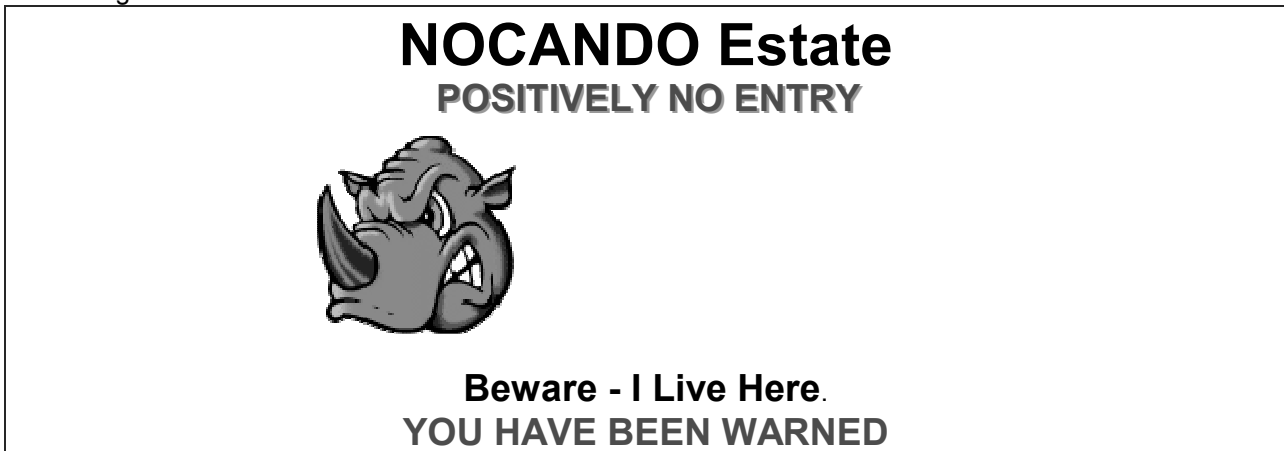
She brightened instantly, "Ojay, do you like my hair?" She pushed the back of her bobbed hairstyle with her clean hand. "I had it done especially."

"Ith's bery nith" said Herman his legs numbing with the cold and the tie cutting into his neck.

"It cost me three weeks wages, but I thought it was worth it. I mean, if a job is worth doing ...” Herman found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. He fought hard. Something about black going with everything, and the price of cotton wool buds, but slowly very slowly he fell backwards into his own private pool of blackness.

NOCANDO

Herman awoke to find he was on his back and gently being jogged up and down. He heard the slow slap of leathery feet and a low pig like grunting noise. Sunlight filtered through trees above him and the bicycle had gone. He sat up to see Tara walking ahead of him. They were entering a large and ornate gateway, with a sign over it that read:



Herman watched the sign and the gateway slowly pass overhead.

Tara came and sat beside him. "OH good, good, you're awake. It has been such a trial. What a lovely day. Look the pansies are out. I love pansies, don't you? They have such sweet little faces." She made a pinched expression, wrinkling her nose and fluttering her eyelids. "I am forgetting my manners. How do you do Mr Cushion." She offered a delicate hand. Herman took it in his own very large and muddy hand and kissed the back. "Ohh, Mr Cushion." She fluttered her eyelids again and giggled. "You are such a gentleman. We had such a time getting you out. I don't know what I would have done without Chester."

"Chester?"

She patted the sofa they were sitting on. "You mean the sofa?"

"Yes, if you like, but he is more of a friend than a piece of furniture."

"What?"

"Oh, he has his funny ways, you have to be firm with him or he sulks."

"He sulks?" Herman mused on this, hum, a sulking sofa. Who was mad here? A sudden and awful realisation came to him. This sofa was alive, they were sitting on it and it was alive and it was walking.

"Ahhhhh," yiped Herman leaping from the Chesterfield. As he did so the sofa 'sat down' with a relieved sigh.

"Don't be so silly, he is very friendly, and he did help get you out of that nasty, mucky, horrid ditch. Now you come back like a good boy and sit next to me and I will tell you all about NOCANDO." Tara patted the space on the sofa next to her. Gingerly Herman returned to his seat. Chester made a low gurgling noise and set off again at slow march, his heavy leathery feet crunching on the gravel drive. "That's better, eh hem," Tara cleared her throat as if to give a speech. "The NOCANDO estate is the home of Meredith Scarpe and also the research headquarters for Mamaltek Corporation. Mamaltek provides high quality market leading products that are truly user and environment friendly. All thanks to the wonder of Bio-regenerative genetic polysynthetic furniture cloning. "

"What does that mean?" interjected Herman.

"Eh? What? I've lost my place. Oh I don't know, it's what I have to say. I think it is how they made Chester."

"Chester is a product?"

"Oh yes but remember a Mamaltek product is not just for Goakday, it's for life," declared Tara, with a proud smile at having remembered the slogan.

"What other, uh, products do Mamaltek make?"

"Oh we have the cutest little scatter cushions, like itsy bitsy plump little fairies, but there is a problem."

"Problem?"

"Hum, they insist on nesting." Tara pointed up at the trees. Herman could see something shifting in the branches. This place was beginning to worry him.

"What else is there?" he asked looking nervously around.

"All in good time, you will see them all. Ah! We have arrived, this is Mr Scarpe's office." Herman turned to see a huge striped circus tent with flags fluttering from the pinnacles. Two very large guards stood at the entrance dressed in Ali Barbar garb, baggy silk trousers, turbans and pointy shoes. They both had their huge muscular arms folded as good guards should.

"Look up Jeremy! Another meal for Vlad the Inhaler our very own asthmatic barbarian."

"Very drool Timothy Mutton but you will get us all into terrible trouble one day. You may not need this job but I do. Wendy wants curtains and cushions in the lounge, a mug tree and new tiles for the kitchen, and if you know an easier way of obtaining these delights, do tell or keep quiet."

"Panic not Jerry old thing, our tiny despot will hear nothing from me. Wendy fancy a few tree cushions does she?"

"Not likely, not with the noise they make, and all that dancing about when they're mating. No, old fashioned stuffed for us."

"What about the curtains? Have you seen the angora drapes?"

"I am not having curtains I have to feed or clean up after, no matter how friendly they are." Jeremy looked resolute.

"See your point, old thing, see your point. Makes you wonder who would want any of this stuff. Have you heard the jackhammer penguins have all gone?"

"Ruddy good riddance, nasty dangerous things."

"Strueth, look at what's coming with the fairy cake. Gurge, he looks like he's spent a night in a ditch. Right, let's give him the look." Both of them pumped their muscles and scowled fiercely at Herman as he passed through the entrance. Herman did his muddy best to scowl back. This was something he was good at.

He stepped inside the tent and the scowl melted to a gape. The floor was deep blue carpet and seemed to stretch forever. The blue and white striped ceiling vaulted cathedral like. In the centre was a huge log fire, smoke drifting slowly towards the distant vent. Something large and grey was lying by the fire. On the other side of the tent, far away was a tiny man at a large desk.

The man who was dressed as a grade 'A' Follywood Sultan, produced a megaphone and spoke. "Cushion, stay where you are. I will send a chair to collect you. Off you go Rupert." The grey thing by the fire snorted. It was beginning to unnerve Herman. A plump easy chair stumped into view. Herman sat down keeping his attention on the grey thing.

"It's a rhino, a ruddy rhino. I am in a tent with a rhino." He sat very still, as the chair ambled past the sleeping beast and took him to Scarpe.

"Ah, Cushion, I can't say it is good to see you so I won't. You have a letter for me?"

"Is that a real rhino?" asked Herman his eyes fixed on the slumbering grey hulk.

"Yes of course, his name is Max, little pet of mine. Don't be alarmed he is really very friendly. He just likes to play with strangers. Whatever you do don't pat your legs; he thinks he's a lap rhino. And now the

letter if you please?" Herman patted his pockets and instantly realised his mistake for Max was suddenly awake and playfully charging. Rupert the chair being a chair didn't know much but had seen Max playing before and took evasive action. Herman hung on and screamed. Sadly easy chairs are not nimble and Max was upon the pair in no time. Herman leapt from the seat and ran. Max gave joyful chase. This was fun; rarely did he have such an energetic playmate. Herman, not known in any quarter for his turn of speed sprinted around the perimeter of the tent with Max jogging happily behind making affectionate snorting noises.

"Oooo - Ahhhhrgh," called Herman.

"I think he likes you," said Scarpe as Herman chuffed by. Herman managed two laps before his wind gave out. He fell to the carpet, wheezing. Max stopped and nudged his new playmate with his horn.

"Oooo - Ahhhhrgh," repeated Herman.

"Max put the nice man down. Yes, I really think he likes you." Herman lay on the carpet trying to desperately to hide in the pattern.

"Enough now Max back to your bed."

"Max has gone now." Herman looked up with one eye. Scarpe was standing over him with a look of distaste. Herman stared back blankly, his nerves reassembling themselves. "I said Max has gone." Herman rose gingerly to a crouch his legs flexed ready to run. He scanned the carpet for rhinos. None were visible. "Not a Wexus man are you?" asked Scarpe trying and failing to gain eye contact. Herman swivelled and ducked continuing to spy for anything big and grey on the horizon.

"Eh, no, Wishington A.C." he replied automatically as he looked behind Scarpe for a space a rhino might hide.

"I thought as much."

The gospel according to Foap

Across the globe news feeds clattered Foap's message. "Hello friends, Harlow Foap here and I want to show you a miracle, a miracle of the future that you can have now, a miracle that is for free. A miracle which will end wars, poverty, greed, inequality and parking problems." He stood dressed in a purple robe, arms wide as if to embrace the image of the globe slowly spinning before him. "Friends, we stand on the very edge of destiny, today is a day to be remembered for eternity. Friends, I literally give you the future. I give you Twinky."

To huge applause and cheering Twinky shimmered into view beside him. "Hello," she said "I am here to help you, I can speak any language, answer any question, find old friends, be your companion, look after your money, keep you safe, help you shop and even find a parking space for you. In fact I can solve all of the problems of living in the complex world of today."

"Do you mean you can help me find more time?"

"Of course Harlow, I can give you more time to do what you want to do."

"But I will need more money to spend on my leisure?"

"I can help you there too, let me invest for you, I guarantee ten percent profit per day."

"Wow, that is amazing Twinky. But I hear the folks saying, amazing but what is the cost?"

"Well, Harlow the answer is simple, nothing to pay. I am free. Nil payments."

"There must be some cost to use your incredible utility and wisdom?"

"Yes Harlow, but we charge suppliers, not the customers and the charges are tiny?"

"So Twinky how do the people order?"

"There is no need to order Harlow, the viewers should all have received a kit in the mail this morning."

"What is in the kit?"

"Well there is this extremely attractive pen and these very impressive spectacles."

"And what do the folks have to do?"

"Simply put on the glasses and sign their name on any piece of paper."

"Well there you have it friends, the beginning of a new dawn for mankind, for you and your family. Just put on the glasses, sign your name and the future is yours. And if you sign in tonight, the Rinky Dinky Corporation will send, free of charge the:

'Shredivator'

'it chops, it chips,
it never slips,
it slices 'n dices,
twices nices'

"It may take a little while for Twinky to see you all, please be patient." At that moment eighty million people signed in and Foap felt his wallet throb a very large throb.

Another day

Herman awoke in a fresh bed, birds twittering through an open window, the smell of spring wafting in. He ached all over, but apart from this and a sore nose, he actually felt fine. Yes he felt good, even buoyant. Why this should be he was not at all sure. Maybe it was the lack of mud, bicycles or rhinos in his environment. He even felt a song coming on. It came on and he sang, "O solee meooo, ta, TA,TATA." He sauntered across the room, in a green Mamaltek Dressing gown and slippers, to the bathroom, "FROMM VITALLEEE." He opened the bathroom door and saw Max nonchalantly feeding on some hay in the bath. He shut the door again, shook his head as if to clear the image away. "There is a rhino in the bathroom, hmmm, keep cool," he thought. If previously quizzed upon the least popular items to have in the bathroom a rhino may not have been his first choice but now it seemed an obvious winner. He listened at the door. He could hear muffled chomping and farting noises. Opting to forgo ablutions he pressed his legs into serious service. Winding his ankles up to full speed he threw open the hallway door and blindly ran directly into Tara Brown who was carrying a full breakfast tray. "Whooooa, Ahhh," CRASH, they tumbled to the hallway carpet. Miniature bunny eggcups, wee egg spoons, delicate china condiments, tiny toasted soldiers, and a complete petite fragile porcelain tea service decorated with baby hedgehogs crashed about them.

"Mr Cushion, well really, look at the state of my, OH MY...!" A loud snort came from the bedroom and then with the ease of an actor walking through a curtain Max strolled through the bathroom wall and into the corridor.

"Ahhhhhh," uttered Herman sincerely.

Tara scowled at the rhino and was instantly on her feet, wagging an accusing finger at the beast. "Oh so it's you causing all the trouble is it, well, well, you're a very bad rhino, and I will have to tell Mr Scarpe just how bad you have been. In fact I am angry now, VERY ANGRY." Her tiny frame shook visibly with rage and her colour changed to a purple that doesn't go with anything. "WELL I'M SORRY, TO THINK THAT, AHHHHGGGG," she screamed. She ran at Max and banged him on the horn with her empty tea tray. If it was possible, Max looked sheepish. "BAD, BAD MAX, JUST LOOK AT THE MESS, AHHHIIIEE," her voice reached a high pitched squeal, like a soprano having her legs waxed. Max tried to hide his huge head behind his front leg. She banged him on the shoulders with the tray, kicked him with her tiny feet, pummelled him with her tiny fists, and screamed in her high pitched whine. Max took it all without moving, he could hardly feel her blows of course but he knew she was upset about something and it was probably him and that made him sad. And then as suddenly as it had started the storm passed. "Eh hem, now I want you and nice Mr Cushion to make friends." she announced sweetly.

"Ahahaha," gurgled Herman, hoping for better dialogue.

"Max won't harm you now, he is a wittle kitten weally. He is wonely and only needs some love. Now come here Mr Cushion and I will introduce you."

Herman struggled to his feet and inched his way towards them, he was not sure which he feared most. "You are going to have to be friends if you are to travel together."

"What !!, no, no, this will not do. Oh no, not me and. NO!"

"Yes, you and I are to take Max to Sheepbot with us, he is a present for a Mr Foap. We are going on Mr Scarpe's lovely big yacht."

"YahahaYa, do wa, NO," said Herman becoming fluent in gibberish.

"Now darling Herman, don't be so silly, Max is just a great soft baby and I can do some shopping, perhaps get my hair done." She smiled at him fluttering her eyelids and gently pressed the back of her bobbed hairstyle.

"But, uh, but, uh, but," chuffed Herman desperately seeking an excuse.

"I'm sure it will be great fun, you will like it when you're there. Now, no more silly complaining."

"Ah but, eh, but, ah, but I." She widened her green eyes to full power and simply declared, "Herman!"

"Yes Tara," he replied meekly.

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Aboard the good ship 'Biggerthanyours' with Max safely stowed below, Herman and Tara strolled the expansive sun deck, arm in arm. The sea was fair and the summer sun high. "Do you know Herman, I think you are terribly brave," announced Tara dreamily.

"Do you? Why?"

"Well all this travelling about you do, you must visit some really horrid places."

"No I wouldn't say that. I think this is the worst trip so far."

"What even meeting me?"

"Of course not, you are the one jewel in this wilderness."

"Oh Herman, you are so lyrical." She looked up at him with big eyes. Eyes into which to fall. Eyes into which he fell. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. A shudder of delight ran through him.

"Promise that you will never leave me, darling."

"I promise." They fell to silence for a while and then both spoke at once and laughed.

"What were you going to say?" asked Herman.

"No you were first."

"Well I was going to say that since meeting you. I can think of nothing else. This mad place, full of mad people all wanting something they don't have."

"Surely you don't mean Swinland, that sounds like Vespuchia to me. No one can sit still for a minute there. I read all about it."

Herman thought for a while, she had something there. "Your absolutely right my wonderful darling. It is Vespuchia and the rest of the world that is mad. They are all chasing endless dreams."

She giggled and looked deeper into his eyes and breathed, "Oh Herman."

"What I wanted to say was I have found mine, my dream that is and it is you."

"Herman, how wonderful you are. We shall be together always." She kissed him on the cheek again. He felt his insides turning to warm wax, pliable, mouldable. There was no doubt he was in love and joy sprang through every vein, nerve and sinew. They went into the dining suite for dinner, where a fine meal was laid out but only for one.

"Oh I couldn't eat a thing. I have such a delicate tummy," she said patting her tiny midriff. I shall just watch you and have a wittle drink." The meal was wonderful, although he would not have noticed had it been cardboard and recycled carpet clippings for Tara was all he was aware of. She twittered joyfully as he ate.

"Now I shall be dropping off at the hair dressers when we get there. I really do need to get my ends and highlights done. There is a darling little man." She gave him a card with the address on it. He put it in his pocket without looking at it.

"Hmmm," he cooed with a mouthful of something very nice.

"And you are to deliver Max and some of the goods."

"Hmmm, eh?" said Herman aware he should be listening.

"I said you are to deliver Max and some of the goods," repeated Tara flatly.

"Wha, Grggghh!" The mouthful parked itself at the back of his throat, which caused him to turn a very unfashionable colour. "Grrrghhgle," he continued.

Tara watched bemused, "Are you alright?" she asked.

"Gahh," gagged Herman clearing the blockage and coming up for air. "You want me and that, that, monster to..."

"He is not a monster. I have had a firm word with him. He will be as quiet as a wittle wamb." She fluttered her eyelids just everso slightly and Herman found himself simply saying, "Yes darling."

Colin tells a story

The night was clear and the sea flat calm. Murup rowed the dingy soundlessly towards the massive wall of the Gripp cliffs. As the lights of Funn's yacht bobbed further away with every oar dip and Colin became more nervous. He sat in the stumpy bit with staring at Murup, whilst Samantha and Gerry were at the pointy bit. Colin had done many mad things in his time but scaling vertical cliffs to storm a despot's castle had not been one of them. Add to this there was the unfriendliness of his companion, he had actually refused an almond shortcake, and the thought that his island paradise was totally unguarded. No, he did not like it, but he would not say so, no, stiff chin and all that. He elected to tell a story. It would cheer everyone up. "Murup?"

"Yep."

"Have you heard the one about the vicar and the duck, or was it a bishop? Well it was definitely a duck, or perhaps it was a pigeon. Anyway, it's really good. I laughed so hard I almost fell over. Well this bishop, no hang on it wasn't, it was a butcher, I remember now, and he was with a cow. Did I mention the cow? There was definitely a cow, I think. Well anyway, you'll really like this, ha, gosh what a story. There they all are on a beach, or was it at the airport? I know it was flat, er, well it doesn't matter. And ah, there's this mud wrestler, hum, it must have been the beach, a muddy beach I suppose." Pause. "No hold on that's another story, the mud wrestler I mean, he's not in this one. So, where was I? Oh yes, the duck or the pigeon says to the bishop, er. Bare with me, it's really good. I laughed for weeks, er, anyway. Oh yes! I remember, there's a dancing toad and a plumber as well, yes that's it. Well the toad, or was it the plumber turns to the bishop and says." Longer pause. "Er, hold on a minute, I've gone wrong somewhere. No, I remember, they are all in a hot air balloon, and the cow, now what is the cow doing there? I forget, anyway there they all are, except the cow and the bishop opens the fridge, funny there should be a fridge in a balloon but there you are, and he finds something inside, I forget what, but it doesn't matter. It really is a hoot this one and then something happens, er, would you like a bourbon?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Oh,"

"Tell you what I would like though."

"Yes?"

"You to bloody shut up, that's what."

"Oh."

With a gentle crunch, the dinghy glided onto a shingle beach. Murup shipped the oars and skipped out onto the pebbles in one simple movement. Gerry and Samantha quickly followed him. Colin stood up, lurched forward, tripped on one of the oars and sat back down where the boat wasn't but the sea was. He struggled to his feet to see the dingy drifting away. He splashed after it and caught it just as the water was coming up to his armpits. He grabbed the side and hauled himself aboard to find one of the oars had gone. He tried splashing with one oar but only managed to navigate further away from the beach. "I, say, Murup?" he called.

"What? Well I'll be Blowkered," raged Murup, as he saw the faint shadow of the boat and Colin drifting away, "You blighted fool, come back here."

"I can't," came a now distant voice amid splashing sounds, "Uh, no oar, sorree".

Murup took off his hat, threw it on the ground and cursed, "Stupid, irritating, biscuit fool, grmmm."

"Have we lost Colin already?" asked Gerry joining Murup to stare into the gloom.

"Buffoon, babbling gannet, I er grrrm," continued Murup.

"We could swim out and get him," offered Gerry.

"COLIN," he called.

"Hello." came a very faint reply and then something else none of them could make out but they were fairly sure it had something to do with biscuits.

"He's gone, no point in fretting about it, we shall have to move on. We can't stay here," declared Murup picking up his hat. "This is a tight spot, we have no boat and they cannot stay on the beach. Up the cliff that is the only way now, follow me." He walked past Samantha and Gerry to the cliff face and they duly followed. "I'll get up there and drop the line, just wait here and don't go wandering off," commanded Murup firmly. He turned to face the rock, muttered something about stupid ground folk and was gone. In his element, he skittered up the sheer cliff, swinging from fingertip holds, using the tiniest of crevices as a staircase. Soon he was at the top. Directly ahead of him, the huge grey shadow of the King's head castle loomed a few hundred feet away. He could see lights in the eyes but nobody appeared to be home. He sat behind a large tussock of grass and let down the line. Unpacked his rucksack and waited. He took out the 'listener' Funn had given him and set it pointing out to sea in the tussock. He turned it on and instantly Funn's voice came from it.

"Well done Murup. Well done. Is all going to plan?"

"Noop, we got a little problem, damn fool Colin has taken the boat and drifted off."

"WHAT?"

"He's gone boating".

"WHAT?"

"I said he's taken the boat and ARGH THARCK!!!!"

"MURUP, Murup, Oh dear, Murup."

.....

Colin opened the biscuit tin and took out a shortcake. "Oh well, ho hum and all that," he said to himself and then burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter as he remembered what the dancing toad had said to the Bishop.

A small diversion

The Sheepbot constabulary are generally large, comfortable folk, slow moving and even slower to anger. Sergeant Borfsen fitted the stereotype perfectly, always ready with a bag of Swinnish Humbugs²⁸ and a cheery, "Worse things 'appen in caves," or, " 'taint worth crying over spilt penguin fat." He stood, when he did stand that is, which wasn't very often, six feet eight in his Sheepbot constabulary issue orange socks. He constantly appeared to have just woken up and was struggling to pull the world into focus. He had particularly animated eyebrows that would travel his overlarge forehead as he grappled with new thoughts. He did not like new thoughts, he was happy with the old ones and liked to recycle them continually. Generally this was not a problem as his days consisted of meals interspersed with conversations about meals. The events of the '432nd SwelkFest' would however, put more mileage on his eyebrows than they would normally get in a year. As has been mentioned, petty crime has always been rife on Sheepbot, but major crime is very rare. What crime there is always involves outsiders, which the inhabitants tend to irritate to the point of insanity but never actually harm them wilfully. During Swelk Fest even the petty crime abates. With the Blubber Fair, Shin Barking and Toe Stubbing contests, Pig Curling and everywhere accordion bands, even the surliest Swinnish was mellow. But not this year. This would be the year of the Great Swelk Riot.

All had started serenely enough with Borfsen and his men, outside 'The Muddy Sock' on Mudd Lane. They formed into a squad, although only seven in number, impressive in bulk and headed the parade, dressed in their best yellow and orange uniforms. A warming mug of morp for each man, and they were off, plodding in step, swaying together with truncheons presented. Behind them an accordion band accompanied the 'Hanky Panky Men'²⁹, as they danced the Kipper Reel, all hankies and bells. The streets were filled with folk in dressed in their finest clothes. Scrubbed and manicured children gathered around the massive policemen and tried to march with them taking huge steps. Yellow bunting and bright orange Swinland flags hung from every building. And as the ³⁰taxis had been banned for the day, they were clearly visible. All was music, laughter, dogs, joy and huge boots, crunching their way to Slab Square for the Swelk Singing.

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Meanwhile, a nervous Herman was disembarking with Tara onto a painfully familiar yet empty Sheepbot fish dock. He watched in horror as it gradually filled with restless Mamaltek products and most frighteningly a huge and snorting Max rhino. Tara brushed a mote of dust from her skirt and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Now you be a good boy and run along with Max, he will look after you."

"After me?" squeaked Herman.

"Now let's not having anymore silliness. You can ride on him if you like, he can't chase you then can he."

"Ride?" Herman asked almost ultrasonically.

Tara consulted her microscopic wristwatch. "Oh just look at the time, I must dash to have my roots done. Now you two make friends and have a nice time, Bye!" and she was gone.

Max looked at Herman and gave a friendly snort. Herman leapt back and nudged an already decidedly twitchy wardrobe. The wardrobe was sorely missing a bedroom. Bedrooms were home. It knew about them and liked them. Sheepbot fish dock made it understandably more than a tad anxious. It snapped its doors open and shut nervously causing the divans, who were made of similar stuff, to wriggle and make "spronging" noises. A small dressing table overcome with fear emptied the contents of one of its drawers on the dock. A spooked nest of tables squeaked and skidded across the cobbles, bumping into a huddle of skittish dining chairs causing them to whistle and dance about. A spronging divan careered towards Herman causing him to leap aside and back into Max. "Oh he ha ho, eh nice rhino" he twittered patting the animals huge shoulder. It felt like granite. Max turned his huge head to regard his chum and snorted. The

²⁸ Beware !! Swinnish Humbugs contain real bugs

²⁹ **The Hanky Panky Men** Swinnish Worris Champions six years running. Famous for a dance called 'Todgers Knock', which involved hitting members of the audience with gnarled walking sticks or 'todgers', crying 'I dap e wi my Todger'.

³⁰ In 1911 Olb the Daft banned oil driven vehicles. In 1938 Oleg Maustin introduced the brasic engine powered Maustin Malcolm. The Malcolm can carry four persons at a top speed of twelve mph. This is just slow enough to run ahead of, for pedestrians tend to want to keep clear of the exhaust gas which is green, thick and has an odour that is life changing. Riding in a Malcolm can make you feel important. 'The Malcolms have literally changed the whole atmosphere of the islands' - Bruno Gurfs 'Transports of Delight'

smallest nesting table nipped at Herman's ankle. He shrieked and leapt in the air. Again the terrier table snapped and Herman escaped to the only place he could, onto Max's broad back. The rhino did not move a muscle. Herman swung himself round and up into a riding position. About them angry furnishings snapped and champed, twittered and shuffled but Max remained static. "Giddy up," said Herman gently kicking his heels into Max's sides but still he did not move.

Now here is a piece of sound advice, should you ever find yourself in a similar position to Herman, vis astride a rhino. Do not under any circumstances grab its ears. They don't like it. Herman, as ever keen to learn the hard way slumped forward onto Max's back and grabbed his little grey ears like the handlebars of a racing motorcycle. The effect was instantaneous. A huge roar vibrated through the animal and with an accompanying fart he lurched off up the dock like an avalanche, closely followed by a stampede of extremely highly strung lounge and bedroom furnishings.

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Meanwhile the SwelkFest parade continued joyfully along Thudd Street, gathering folk as it went. Almost four hundred revellers turned the corner into Pocket lane to meet the sight of Herman astride Max with an escort of cold, damp and therefore enraged furniture. The police being the slowest to react kept marching for a few paces whilst the crowd behind them halted and ran shrieking. Borfsen looked at the rhino. The rhino looked at Borfsen and for a while they understood each other in a meeting of simple minds. His men remained in the rear and attempted to conceal themselves behind his bulk. Helmeted heads appeared from either side of his body. Maybe it was this image of a many-headed beast that enraged Max, who can say, for with a loud snort and a shriek from Herman he charged. The once slow moving police, bounded like severely overweight gazelles, back down the alley with Max, Herman and a baying Lucinda Suite wing chair in hot pursuit. It was constable Lunk that saved the force, by barging a door that wasn't locked and providing an escape route. They all said, "sorry" as they trampled over him. Borfsen, being the last in, dragged Lunk inside and slammed the door. They were in an old taxi garage, dimly lit by fat lamps. Two Garish Maustin Malcolm taxis stood amongst crates of rotting cabbages. The squad formed a huddle around their leader. The noise from the street was of mayhem and chaos, crashing glass, snapping timber, screaming and snorting. The Sheepbot constabulary was facing its gravest hour but Borfsen was still trying to assimilate what he had seen. When faced with problems beyond his capacity he had found defocusing his eyes helped. Not that this solved anything, but after a while the trouble usually went away. He defocused like a man possessed. "Sarge?" asked Constable Lunk.

"Yes Son." answered Borfsen.

"What are you thinking?"

"The unthinkable son." Lunk was impressed. Borfsen was his hero. He also tried thinking the unthinkable, but it did not come easily.

"Cor!! Oooog!, Herm, ooh."

"Sarge? "

"Yes son."

"I can't do it."

"Takes years of practice son."

"My eyes have gone all funny."

"You're getting there lad."

"Yes Sarge."

Max had scented his quarry and gave the garage wall a heavy thump. The building shook, dust, cabbages, old newspapers and spare parts rained from the ceiling. This brought Borfsen to his senses such as they were. "Right lads, I have a plan," he lied.

"We are going out there and I want you all to give 110% effort."

"How much?" asked Constable Chibble.

"110 % lad."

"Snot possible Sarge." said Chibble instantly regretting it.

"WHAT !! "

"I'll give 120% Sarge," chimed Lunk.

"Well done lad, know what about the rest of you?"

The wall shook again and yet more dust and detritus fell.

"128% Sarge," puffed Purp, never one to be outdone

"Now that's more like it lads."

"I'll do 1000% Sarge," offered Constable Keeg, possibly the stupidest man ever to hold a truncheon.

"Are you taking the mutton son?"

"No Sarge," muttered Keeg not at all sure what he had said wrong.

"Right, all in the taxi. Lunk open the doors when I say and then jump on the back. Chibble, you drive." Borfsen impressed himself, this actually sounded like a plan. Sadly seven Swinnish policemen cannot possibly fit into a Maustin Malcolm Taxi. But panic lent them enthusiasm and Keeg certainly appeared to apply 1000% effort into making himself fit into the glove compartment. There was more snorting from outside and the walls shook again, this time they began to lean, the whole building was coming down. With timbers creaking and snapping, the door fell open and Chibble floored the go pedal, although he could see nothing with Lunk between him and the windscreen. The Maustin Malcolm is not known for its top speed but it is quick from a standing start. It lurched forward belching thick green noxious exhaust, removing the rest of the wall as it went. If it is at all possible for a rhino to be surprised it was now, being faced with a wheezing Malcolm, heaving with huge orange bodies and pumping it's ghastly smoke. Max paused, leant his huge head to one side and snorted. Herman, who was draped with bunting and decorated with bits of plaster, screamed an accompaniment as the Malcolm came on. Max, being a rhino, did not know a lot but what he did know was about charging things. He elected to step aside and catch the beast in the flank. He based this plan on the presumption that the Malcolm would continue in a straight line. But as Max nimbly jinked, the taxi turned due to Lunk trying to get through Chibble to the back seat. The Malcolm has a peculiar front end, one could almost say, it looks designed for picking up rhinos, for this is what this one did with Max. With a crunching thud, the taxi heaving with the Sheepbot constabulary collected Max and his hapless passenger. It then proceeded in a northerly direction, a westerly direction and then finally a southerly direction until at last depositing its confused and angry cargo within 'Madame Christina's Tiny Wee Delicate China Things Shoppe.' Not a china bunny or porcelain dancing fairy was saved.

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Herman ran into the night, covered in dust and broken china slipper debris. He ran to find Tara. He ran and ran, his chest pounding, through this hideous dream to find her and protect her. He ran through emptying streets dodging wild furniture and screaming Swinnish, panic palpable in the damp air. There is something deeply unsettling about an aggressive sofa, let alone a full three piece complete with a furious pouffe cushion and as for the rabid phalanx of divans that toured Smeep Street, they were downright disturbing. Eventually he stopped breathless in a doorway and watched the mayhem. Where was everyone else? Mamaltek's products had certainly created a diversion. Funn could bring in the 4th Cavalry on carnival floats, no one would notice. Surely that had been the plan, hadn't it? But where were they? Where was Funn's private army of brilliant white clad troops bristling with authority and purpose? Nowhere to be seen. He was alone.

A bad tempered tallboy squeaked to a halt on the street and swivelled slowly to face him. The cobbles were hurting its castors and it had collected several nasty scratches on its' delicate marquetry. Someone or something was going to have to pay. It inspected Herman with little hard eyes and decided he was a good candidate. It issued a menacing growl and inched towards him filling the doorway. Herman stared back wearily; he really didn't have time for this. Turning sideways he shoulder charged his timber aggressor and striking it firmly on the sock drawer knocked it aside. The tallboy howled and snapped open its bottom drawer catching Herman on the shin as he leapt past.

Limping and wheezing Herman fled into Tubb Lane overturning rubbish bins as he went in an attempt to slow his mahogany pursuer. After several more turns he arrived completely by chance in Uggit Street with no breath at all and nerves of warm jelly. The street was silent. He stopped and looked about. Nothing was coming. Distantly he heard screams and the rumbling of irate furnishing. He doubled over with his hands on his knees and gasped for air. After a few minutes he was able to straighten and saw the hairdressers across the street. 'Raymonde Goullay Fine 'air Artiste'. The 'H' had obviously fallen from 'Hair' a long time ago and the paint was faded and peeling. A small delicate man in a very worn evening suit was just locking the door. It was Raymonde himself, otherwise known as Bobb Mugg to the locals. "Am I too late, has she gone?" asked Herman, still wheezing.

Bobb lazily eyed Herman and was about to offer a "Clear orf," in his broadest Swinnish, when he recalled his customer, and in a Hermainian accent that had been drizzled in virgin edith oil, he replied, "Ah! yes, madame, she has, ow you zay ... left." He smiled wistfully and looked at his hands. "It was a triumph, she is rrradiant, as mountain sunlight on the fresh face of a delicate flower. Ahh!" He sighed, "Such a gift I have, such a gift."

"Where did she go?" gasped Herman suddenly aware that the man was now inspecting his hair, decorated as it was with the flotsam of recent battle.

"Oh, I believe zat she went to do a little shopping, perhaps. Maybe buy a mirror so that she can bask in my, ow you zay,.. genius."

"Yes, genius, very nice I'm sure, but which direction?" implored Herman.

"Oh I think, that way," indicated Raymonde with a wave. Herman hurried off and didn't hear the hairdresser whisper, "Or maybe it vas zee uzzet vay, agent Cushion."

The shadows were beginning to lengthen. Dark fingers for prying into pockets and bags and purses, murky places in which a damp and very insecure scatter cushion could hide. It needed company badly. The species prefers to form a flock or more correctly a 'plump'. It also needed warmth, and a nice soft carpet or friendly sofa. A footstool would do. But they had all rushed off and left it, limp, cold, lonely and very, very angry. It wouldn't be alone for long, for seeing Herman pass it sprang and scrabbling up his trouser leg secured itself to the seat of his trousers. "Ohh, ahh?" uttered Herman rotating and trying to remove the beast but its tiny velcro jaws had locked firm with the material. Wherever the trousers went it would go. Herman ran for a bit. The cushion joggled, snarling and making farting noises. He stopped, thought on the problem for a second and then sat down hard on the cobbles. The cushion let out a loud squeak but then resumed snarling. Herman got up again and did a few more rotations, and then gave up. What the heckroid, he was tired, desperately tired and Tara was somewhere in this dreadful place. He stumbled on hopelessly lost, through alleys and lanes, observed as he went by the various traders of the dark. He would have not made it far if it had not been for the cushion. The incessant growling and farting kept them away. But Herman did not care that he was as one with an angry, flatulent namesake. He wanted Tara and he wanted a nice lie down, preferably upon a bed that didn't have an opinion.

He wandered into Bark lane, a dark alley which led onto a much wider street and framed in the opening ahead he saw Tara sitting on Chester. She was smiling and talking to a man. They were laughing and with no warning she kissed him. She kissed the other man. Herman stopped, frozen by the image. It was not a kiss she had ever given Herman; this was a kiss of passion, of love. And then they were gone, with Chester wheezing beneath them. Herman stood stunned in the dark of the alley. He wanted to call her name to run after her but he couldn't move. His frame shook as if struck a midriff and he slumped to the ground. The cushion squeaked and then went on snarling.

"Are you well?" it was a woman's voice, a friendly voice. The owner sat amongst the litter of the lane, under a pile of paper. A woman of a simple beauty propped against the wall, smiling an open caring smile. She appeared to have been left there, discarded. Herman swivelled blank eyes towards her. "Would you like to sit down next to me?" she asked quietly patting a layer of newspaper beside her. Herman looked back to the street where Tara had been. A gate leg table loped past bent on mischief, clattering its wooden wings as it went. He looked back at the woman. Her eyes twinkled in the gloom and her gentle smile seemed to radiate warmth. Not at all sure why he took the offered seat, the cushion protesting as he did so. "There that's better. Now you rest here awhile and tell me all about it," she said soothingly, taking his hand and patting it. With a heart as heavy as a diving submarine he told his tale in a flat monotone, the narrative punctuated by cushion growling and flatulence. She listened and said softly, "It will take time but all will be well. I will help. I am good at helping. All I have to do is get my money sorted out." Her eyes gleamed with a positive sparkle. Herman's submarine hit the bottom and tears squeezed from his tired eyes. He hugged her and she hugged him softly back. She kissed him on the forehead and whilst he collapsed into a depressed and exhausted slumber she slowly revived, regaining her colour until she

she coarsed with power and vitality. She stood and picked him up with the ease of a child lifting a rag doll. Herman did not care he lay in her arms silent and deep in a dreadful dream of loss and loneliness.

Colin the bold

Colin drifted, he tried rowing with one oar but that only rotated his little craft and got him no closer to the shore. So he sat and waited for dawn, working his way through his supply of shortbread fingers. When sunrise came he found he had only travelled a few hundred yards. Funn's yacht had gone and the beach was empty. He moved gingerly to the front of the boat and paddled himself inshore with his hands. After an hour or so he finally managed to ground the dinghy and carefully clamber onto the beach. Murup's rucksack was lying at the foot of the cliff. He rummaged in it, found the puffin painter's packed lunch untouched and then he worried.

"Did Murup drop it? What are the chances of a puffin painter losing his lunch? Smaller than a midge's nose. Ho hum. Perhaps he threw it away? Oh dear, that's as likely as, er something not very likely. Oh dear, oh dear." He nibbled the lunch as he worried. One pilchard yoghurt and bloater bar later he felt decidedly queazy. He had a peanut whirl for pudding and was almost instantly cured.

"Hum, what now? Only one way to go, up the cliff. Oh dear."

Three hours later, shaking with fear and exhaustion, he dragged himself over the top and to the safety of a tree stump where he feasted upon emergency marshmallows. Then he heard voices.

"For the last time, WHO ARE YOU? and WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?"

"Can't say as I rightly remember, maybe I do, then maybe I don't." It was Murup's voice, and not far off.

"I don't want to hurt you but, OOOFFFFF." Colin struck Dweevil Pooter from behind with an excellent wugga³¹ tackle. They rolled around on the ground, ooofing and gurfing whilst Murup who was tied to a tree, watched helplessly. Occasionally the opponents would part gasping for breath, bending over with their hands on their knees, looking at each other puffing and then charge together for more rolling around, ooofing and gurfing. Murup was pleased to see Colin of course, but his style of fighting was a trial for the spectator. It did not seem to actually involve fighting, more cuddling, rolling about and making silly noises. Fortunately Pooter had a very similar technique, thus neither opponent seemed to be actually hurting the other. This was an endurance fight for softies. Thus, it went on and on and on with Murup's frustration mounting at the ludicrous spectacle. He wriggled and struggled whilst shouting "HIT HIM, NO NOT HIS FOOT, IN THE FACE." Eventually both combatants lay on the ground gasping and wheezing. Colin crawled over to Murup and untied him. Murup did the rest and with one easy blow he ensured that the rising Dweevil stayed down.

"I, wheeze, cert, gasp, ainly, phew, showed, wheeze, him, ohhh," puffed Colin.

"Well I suppose I should thank'e. So I will, thank'e, but don't you go damn fool drifting off again." scowled Murup wagging a finger.

"Wilco, sorry, gasp, and all that, fancy a jammy dodger."

"Don't mind if I do," replied Murup. "Now let's tie this chappy to the tree."

"Who is he? Anyone you know?" asked Colin as they secured the slumbering Pooter.

"Not a clue, I climbed up here and he whacked me on the napper. Woke up and he was a shouting and raging. Must be one of Foap's mob, although he don't fight that well?"

"What do you mean; I thought he was a really tough customer. Fought like, like ten I should say." enthused Colin adopting an unconvincing ³²Feng Jitzo stance.

"Yes, alright, like ten," replied Murup smiling. He saw no point in hurting the fool's pride.

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Colin awoke with start to the sound of shouting. He looked about, Pooter was still tied to the tree and unconscious but Murup had gone. He poked his head over the small bank and instantly pulled it back.

³¹ **Wugga** - A game of two halves, half brutality, half insanity. Any number of players, wearing anything, chase anything and tackle it. The winner is generally the one with the rudest song.

³² **Feng Jitzo** - Ancient eastern art of opponent arranging. Masters not only overcome, but arrange assailants in suitably auspicious corners of the room.

The landscape was crowded with heavily armed pink Rinky Dinky guards all wearing Twinky specs and coming his way.

"Hmmm, a tight spot," he mused slotting a jiffy cake home. "Best brazen it out." He rose and nonchalantly strolled towards them. "Eh, Hello," he called, accompanied by a chorus of safety catches being released. "Glad I found you, Mr Foap, has asked me to award all of you, er awards." A taut silence greeted him. "Special commendations are to be given to 'J' troop." he offered. Low grumbling came from the troopers but the weapons remained trained. "Mr Foap is so pleased with, eh, 'J' troop that he is doubling your salary and giving you three days a week off." The weapons wavered.

"WE AIN'T J TROOP." shouted the closest guard, one Gelp Nurp who was obviously annoyed.

"Oh I am sorry, J Troop have done so well and what with bringing back the rocks and ..."

"What rocks and who is this J Troop? We are Badger Squad," asked Gelp lowering his thud gun. It was then that Colin saw Gerry and Samantha amongst the troops being held prisoner, but he did not pause.

"You don't know about the rocks? Well this is terrible. You should have been informed. Little wonder J Troop has got all the awards. You had no chance at all. This is monstrous, I will complain for you." Colin pulled his notepad and pencil from his shirt pocket. "Badger Squad, you say, and who is your commander?" he enquired.

"That's me, Captain Drog Munn," announced Drog Munn stepping forward, "And who are you?"

Colin stood erect, clicked his heels and nodded. "I am Security Director, Green Section, Colin is the name. Good to meet you Captain." Colin held out a hand and Badger Squad Commander Munn shook it. Munn nodded at his troops and the weapons were lowered. "Fine body of men, you have here and such a shame that they had no chance to beat J Troop. Good gravy! It makes me mad when I think of their name on the trophy. There ought to be some leave in this for all of you. Would you like a mint cake or perhaps a ginger thin?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Munn and then with what passed for a smile on his craggy face, he took a biscuit with one hand and nonchalantly raised his gun with the other.

"Your not wearing the spectacles are you?" observed the commander munching slowly.

"Uh, dropped them," answered Colin just a little to quickly.

"Of course, what did you say your name was again?" Colin focused on the big shiny and very purposeful looking gun.

"Ah, Colin. My it is a big gun."

"Colin what?"

"That's it, just Colin." offered Colin.

"I think you should come with us," ordered Drog. The gun issued a click of agreement.

"Ah, hum, right oh," agreed Colin completely out of ideas.

Murup watched them in the failing light; faint shadows some hundred yards away. What was the fool doing now? He picked up the 'listener' and pressed the transmit button, a little blue light came on. The effect was instantaneous with a faint 'fwipping' noise Drog's Twinky Spectacle lenses went black, as did the whole troops. "Whot the?" said Drog, pulling them off, he looked at Colin. It was a look of fear, insecurity and worry, the look of a lost child. The gun wavered and Colin took his cue. He was off and running. 'Corumph', he heard the weapon fire close, too close. Fear gave him an extra gear and he skittered over the grass, blindly shedding biscuits as he went.

"OVER 'ERE." called a familiar voice.

'CORUMPH, CORUMPH, CORUMPH,' a fusillade of shots slammed past him lighting the twilight with white flashes and blue flame. He dodged and ran, fell over, got up and ran straight into Murup who felled him with a less than expert but no less effective wugga tackle.

"Murup, they are after us, guns, run," gibbered Colin.

"Now don't you take on, you just lie there and be still, I will deal with this."

Colin did as he was told and tried very, very hard to be the ground.

Murup waved his arms and called to the troopers, "HEY HERRING BREATH, OVER HERE." The response was instant, 'WHOOCH, CORUMPH', a bolt whizzed above his head. He ducked down and almost instantly reappeared fifty feet away. "YO, OVER HERE DRIPPING BRAINS." The squad turned as one and fired. 'WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH'. A shell hit a tree and set it alight, brightening the twilight gloom but their target had gone. He reappeared another fifty feet along the cliff top and taunted, "OI, LARD FACE." 'WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH,' a salvo of shells burst across the length of the cliff top. The squad rushed forward as one huge stupid angry animal, dazzled by their own fire. Heroes sure of the odds they charged their lone and hopefully toasted foe. But again he had gone, down the rock face and along and up another fifty feet away, to see the first few troopers tumble into the abyss. Suddenly he was among them and with skipping nimble ease and firm pushes he despatched several more over the rocks. Huge fists swung through the air where he had been as pointless shells exploded in the gloom. 'WHOOCH, CORUMPH, WHOOCH, CORUMPH, silence.

Breathless troopers huddled together on the cliff edge with mandola string taut nerves. They swung their Buni guns in random directions but again their enemy had gone. "BOO!" Murup shouted as he materialised before a sweating soldier with wavering Buni gun. 'WHOOCH, CORUMPH' replied the weapon and the remaining few troopers rushed after the shell and into oblivion. Clattering, crashing and calling they fell to their doom.

Murup collected Colin who had been trodden on several times, lost all of his Haribaldis but was otherwise intact. "We have got to get out of here, you head along the cliff path. I'll try and find Gerry and Samantha and we will join you. You stick to the path mind," ordered Murup, wagging a nagging finger.

"Yes, right, of course," agreed Colin setting off.

"No, the other way, that way leads to the castle," shouted Murup.

"Oh right oh, of course, I knew that, I knew that," lied Colin returning.

Murup searched but found no one. He went down to the beach and searched for the bodies in the gloom but Gerry and Samantha were not there. There were only the soldiers, the broken sad remnants of the folly of war. That is how the 'Battle of Gripp Cliff' was won by a puffin painter called Murup Duffin and it would be spoken of for a very long time, well at least by Colin it would.

Resistance is Futile

"Resistance is futile," barked newly demoted Drogo Munn, waving his buni gun with one hand and holding his beret on with the other.

"Alright, fine, no problem, coming right along," answered Gerry nervously as he pulled Samantha to him.

"Resistance is futile," repeated Drogo hoping for a different answer. He was not in a good mood. Being slammed down from Captain to Trooper had not iced his bun so to speak.

"That really is a most impressive gun you have there," suggested Gerry with as honest a smile as he could muster.

"Eh?" grunted the guard.

"Nice gun, your gun. I said it is a very nice gun," added Gerry trying hard not to point.

"Oh, well thank you," sneered Drogo holding the weapon steady.

"I bet it takes a great deal of skill to fire one of those," continued Gerry with a 'finger in the mains socket' grin.

"No, no not hardly any at all, I just press this little button here and..."

"Yes, good, ha, who, wha, whum," mumbled Gerry stumbling for something, anything to say. He clung to Samantha like a poultice and momentarily felt her stiffen. With a thud he was suddenly thrown to the flagstones. "Whooch!" a nibbler shell screamed past him. Winded and struggling for air he heard two sharp blows being exchanged and an, "OOOOHHHFFFF". Through the clearing smoke he saw Trooper Drogo Munn slowly deflating to the ground imprinted with a stare of total amazement and, 'Ooohhhffing' as he did so.

"Are you well?" enquired Samantha offering a delicate hand.

"You, did that?" gasped Gerry pointing at the recumbent trooper.

"He will be fine. He will sleep for several hours. I have a black belt."

"A black belt in accountancy?" wheezed Gerry getting to his feet, "Wow, those are some really advanced moves."

"Let us just say I rearranged his assets," she smiled and kissed him softly on the cheek.

"So what now?" asked Gerry.

"SCHNICK!", "SCHNICK!", "SCHNICKY" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!", "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICK!" "SCHNICKETY!", "SCHNICK!" and "SCHNICK!" replied a myriad of safety catches from behind them. Closely followed by a gruff male chorus of "RESISTANCE IS FUTILE."

Gerry and Samantha were marched away, their hands secured behind them, across a creaking castle drawbridge and into the huge grey lump of Gurits Head. They were led through a tiny wooden door and into a maze of brightly lit corridors, halls and control rooms. Cast off cardboard boxes littered the stone floors. Folk in white coats, Twinky specs and vacant expressions busied themselves with installing rack upon rack of new equipment. Gerry recognised some of it, mainly Money Pumps with the odd Howdy Partner 700 but one hall was equipped with completely mysterious devices. Huge glass spheres on steel stalks hung from the ceiling and projected from the floor. They glowed with a flickering pink light and were all gently humming a very menacing and expensive hum. They passed close enough for Gerry to read a tiny label that hung from one of the spheres. It said 'SkyShield 2756 release 3.1 - Very Secret'. Down a massive stone stairway they marched, through a little door, up a stone stairway, along a corridor, until they came again to the hall with the spheres again. "HALLLT," called Lance Trooper Malod. They all stopped. He tapped the side of his Twinky specs, said, "Yes Mam," and they set off again in the direction they had come. Eventually they came to a huge oak door. Malod barked, "Yes mam," again, opened the door and led the captives in.

The room was blue, all blue, the blue of fabulous wealth, blue curtains, carpet, walls, subtle shades intermingling. A log fire burned in a blue tiled hearth and in a dark blue leather chair sat Foap, dressed in blue, puffing on his pipe with a toasting fork in the fire. He looked up and smiled. It was a smug, self contented smile, a smile for display rather than geniality. "Ah! do come in, do come in, good to see you again. Sit down, make yourselves comfy," he crowed creamily and motioned to two other blue leather chairs, the reflected firelight flickering in his Twinky specs.

"What a cosy place you have here," mocked Gerry sarcastically, sitting awkwardly his hands tied behind him.

"Oh just a little shack really, but it does," said Foap dismissively. "Would you like a crumpet?"

"Thanks, but I couldn't possibly," replied Gerry honestly, struggling with his bonds.

"Oh yes, I don't suppose you could," chuckled Foap unplugging the crumpet and attaching another. "Shame, they are so expensive. This little fire of mine burns pure wealth you know. I call it an opulence candle. Good isn't it?" He leered smugly at them. The fire crackled and spat blue flames. "The blue flames are a million hollars each. I find it so very soothing."

Gerry glared at the fire and then at Foap. "You are as mad as a tree full of badgers." Foap stiffened. "Attempting a little break in were we? Hoping to get your precious toy back, Hmmm?" the creamy tone turned to a sour sneer.

"Well, something like that, yes," spat Gerry defiantly.

"How pathetic, a boy looking for his toy. Of course you have no chance, no chance at all. Twinky was destined for me and I for Twinky. For I am a chosen one. He has chosen me." He rolled his eyes upwards piously, pulled the toasting fork from the fire, and waved it above his head supposedly indicating the location of the almighty. The crumpet was burning.

"Your crumpet is alight," said Gerry flatly.

Foap looked up at the flaming crumpet. "Eh, oh damn," he expleted as a morsel of fiery toast fell into his hair. With a wisp of blue, and a small sizzling sound his hair caught fire. Instantly he was up and dancing and patting his head and cursing. Gerry and Samantha watched as he circled the room patting, dancing and cursing but not necessarily in that order. Eventually with hair gently smouldering and a strong smell of singeing he retrieved his seat and a modicum of composure. "Where was I?" he asked.

"You were telling us you were the chosen one," answered Gerry with an expression he normally kept for ³³Peechfolk.

"Oh yes, he has picked me. I am to liberate mankind, free you all from greed."

"You're a mad, daft, pompous ass," stated Gerry as directly as he could. Foap ignored him and adopted a ludicrous Fussolini pose, with haughty grin, jutting jaw and a wisp of smoke from his hair. His glasses made a 'snipping' noise and the lenses went black.

"Eh, what, oh damn," he pulled them off, looked at them and snorted. "Cheap rubbish." He lobbed them onto the fire and unpacked another pair from within his jacket and put them on. "Sorry where was I again?"

"You are to free us from greed."

"Oh yes, when I have removed all of the money. Then no one will be poor."

"What? You're insane. If you could remove all of the money everyone would be poor."

"Au contraire," declared Foap with a little shake of his still smouldering head. "All of the planes, trains, cars, houses and things will still be there for everyone to use. Only no one will own any of them, except

³³ **Peechfolk** - The followers of Grendel Peech who only wear wooden clothing. Peechstride trousers are carpentry masterpieces, with intricate hinges, delicate marquetry designs and dovetail turnups. Peechfolk creak a lot, smell of linseed oil and rarely sit down.

me of course. I shall bare the burden for mankind." He touched his hand to his brow to indicate the suffering and Gerry wished he had his hands free and a maceball bat to make the suffering real.

"Don't you think this will annoy a few folk, like the Vespuchian Air Force for instance," he barked hoping to bring the vain fool back to ground. Foap smiled his serene sneering smile and answered.

"Not a problem, they all work for me now, and I have some new toys to make this place impregnable." He nodded towards Samantha. "Does she ever say anything?"

"You leave her out of this," snarled Gerry.

"Oh my, a little love interest, how sweet. Well I would like to stay and chat, but duty calls and all that. People to buy, places to own." The door creaked open and Lance Trooper Malod thumped in. "Secure them in the cells, I will see to them later," ordered Foap.

Malod stamped to attention and shouted, "YES SAH," far too loudly.

Foap winced, looked pityingly at Gerry and said, "You just cannot get the staff, you know. Now off you go." He gave a little wave with the back of his hand to indicate they were dismissed.

As Gerry and Samantha were getting to their feet he added, "Now try not to cause any trouble would you. Resistance is quite futile."

E_scape

'ERRRK, CRANG, CLANG, THUD'. The huge iron door closed behind Gerry and Samantha and solid blackness enveloped them.

"Are you Ojay Sam?" enquired Gerry his voice echoing from cold stone walls.

"Yes I am fine, let me help you with your bonds." She was close but invisible in the dark. He felt her pull at his bindings and almost instantly his hands were free. He rubbed his sore wrists and stared into the gloom still seeing nothing.

"Where are you?" He asked.

"Here beside you." He felt her soft but firm hand grasping his.

"I'm sorry," he said looking in her direction and seeing nothing.

"Why?"

"For getting you into this."

"I came of my own will. I would not be anywhere else."

"Really?"

"Really." Her mouth closed on his and she kissed him gently.

"Mnnn," he murmured dreamily, "can you see anything?"

"Yes, we are in a stone walled chamber with an iron door. There is straw on the floor and I think I see a way out."

"You do? Where? How?"

"You just stay here, I will investigate." Blind Gerry stood motionless and listened as she moved away. Far off something nasty was dripping. The air smelt like a very old sock drawer, musty and thick. He tried very hard to see but nothing came.

'GRRUURN,' the sound of ancient metal groaning filled the room. 'CRAAAACK!' something had given way. 'CLANGANG', it clattered to the floor. "Over here," called Samantha softly. He stumbled forward his hands outstretched and had only taken a few steps when her hands grasped his. She was above him. Before he could ask what was happening she had pulled him up and into an opening in the wall. It was as black as the cell. He scrambled in and lay on the stone gasping. "It is very narrow. We will have to crawl, are you unharmed," she asked.

"Yes I'm fine, how did you do that?"

"I will explain later, now follow me." Gerry shuffled forward on his belly into blackness. His hair grazed the roof of the tunnel, and his shoulders brushed the sides. Damp stone pressed in on him as he nervously wriggled his way after Samantha. Tickling tracteries of spider webs touched his face, and oppressive clinging blackness closed in. He coughed on ancient air, thick, stale with odours of decay. He tried to raise his head and banged it on the roof. His knees scraped the rough stone and he put his hand on something that felt soft, wet and very nasty. He thought about sniffing his hand to identify the mystery substance but decided he preferred not to know and shuffled on and on and on blindly after Samantha.

"We must stop," her voice echoed from much further ahead than Gerry had expected.

"Why? Is there a problem?" He asked hoping on hope that they did not have to go back.

"There is a sump."

"A what?"

"A hole in the floor in front of me, I cannot see the bottom. I will drop a stone."

They waited and waited and a distant splash as from a half-forgotten dream caused a clamour of echoes deep below them.

"Wow, that is a long way down? Can we cross it?" asked Gerry.

"I will try, wait here." He heard her scrambling for grip, and nearly said the obvious 'take care' but stayed mute and quietly prayed for her safety. Then he felt the breeze on the backs of his ears, a gentle zephyr of fetid air from behind. Something was coming pushing the air. "I am across," called Samantha as the first of the rats came skidding past him, squeaking with panic. He lay and covered his head as they ran over him in ever greater numbers. Thousands of tiny claws digging for purchase as a solid wall of frantic screaming rodents poured past. For a moment he could hear, smell and feel nothing but rats. They're hard bodies forcing their way through every gap, pushing him towards the sump. The wind began to roar above the shrieking rats. The stones rumbled with a thunderclap as a huge hand of water picked him up and threw him down and down and down. Falling amongst the crying rats bouncing from the walls. Thudding, numbing, headlong falling, down and down. Angry water and dying rats, gasping, tumbling, down and ever down into the bitumen black. Far away he heard Samantha scream his name and he call hers. Far away in the blackness, friendly blackness that folded around him and took him from his falling nightmare.

A penguin is for life

Gerry awoke on a beach, damp, bruised and alone. After a great deal of coughing and vomiting, he pulled himself onto a rock and squinted at the brilliance of the northern sun sinking towards a becalmed ocean. He turned to see the out-fall pipe that had disgorged him onto the shingle. The broken bodies of rats littered the pebbles. He shook with the memory of his fall and was sick again. Weak with fatigue and shock he shuffled to his feet and stumbled away from them, along the beach. He made some twenty paces before his strength faded and he collapsed onto soft and yielding sand to be taken away by the soothing balm of sleep.

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"GACK," called something very loudly and very close by.

"Eh wha' the?" mumbled Gerry his eyes snapping open.

"GACK, GACK," repeated the something even louder and closer. He sat up to find himself nose to beak with a very large and menacing penguin.

"GACK," shouted the penguin bathing Gerry in fishy breath.

"Ahahaha," replied Gerry shuffling backwards. The bird stood and watched him retreat. He backed onto a large rock and perched on it keeping his gaze fixed on the penguin.

"GACK," uttered the bird again.

"Shoo," shooed Gerry waving his arms.

The penguin put its head to one side, its tiny eyes glittering like steel ball bearings. It appeared to be thinking. It straightened its head, shrieked "GACK," even louder and waddled forward menacingly. Gerry grabbed a stone and threw it at the bird. As throwing was not a skill he had ever troubled to develop the rock missed wildly. Both he and the bird watched the pebble arc towards the sea but it never got there. Instead of a comforting "Plooop," as it hit the water there came a tearing, fizzling sound, like someone ripping up old electric blankets that were still plugged in.

"Eh?" uttered Gerry involuntarily.

"Gack," responded the penguin quietly, as if to say, 'Now do you see what I mean?'

Gerry threw another small pebble seaward and watched it fizzle into nothing. "Bizarre to the power of awesome cubed," he mumbled as he climbed down from his rock and looked hard at the ocean. He could just detect a feint shimmering, like heat haze on searing tarmac. A reminiscence of the causeway made him shudder. The bird shuffled beside him. Somehow it wasn't a threat anymore. He took a handful of stones and threw them. They fizzled and disappeared as the previous ones had done. He took a much larger rock and lobbed it towards the sea. With a, "Szaack," the rock boiled to nothing.

"Gack," said the penguin approvingly. Gerry collected a stick of driftwood, walked down the beach and poked it into the same space. It fizzled and vibrated slightly. He pulled it back and the end was missing. Not burnt off or broken but missing. "GACK!" warned the penguin. Gerry dropped the stick and ran back up the beach with the penguin in waddling pursuit. He sat back on the rock for a while and both he and the bird silently regarded the strange shimmering. It appeared to run the whole of the bay, maybe right around the island.

"This must be the SkyShield," muttered Gerry aloud, remembering the room with the silver balls.

The penguin, having a limited vocabulary, simply said "Gack!" They both looked up. The sky appeared uniform faded white, like the inside of a huge hong pong ball. Nothing was moving. There was no breeze and the permanent gulls had gone. Then, with a loud buzzing and the sound of a giant hand slapping wheelbarrow full of thick grease onto an equally giant bald head, the SkyShield 2756 release 3.1 went off line and the sky became clear again.

Gerry wandered along the beach with the penguin in tow. He scanned frantically for an escape route, but the cliffs were sheer. His eye was caught by something glinting in the rocks, a distant twinkling. He headed for it and as he got closer he saw tiny rag dolls littering the rock face, dolls that grew as he

approached, transforming from discarded toys to full size and very dead soldiers. Pausing with almost every step to check for any sign of movement he edged his way through the new graveyard, keeping as far away as he could from the fallen. He collected a small black handgun from the sand and tucking it into his belt and climbed a house sized boulder at the back of the beach. Breathless he sat on the summit and looked back. The penguin was distant, waiting for him to return. It had stopped as soon as the carnage had become visible. This was a very bad place. Gerry shivered. There was no adventure now. Not a story to tell. People were dying, real people really dying. He thought of his fall with the rats and how he could so easily have joined them. This was war and here were the empties. Tears welled within him but he set his jaw, gritted his teeth and forced them back. He had work to do. Samantha was relying on him to rescue her. With fresh urgency set off towards the twinkling light.

It was the antenna of a very broken Helios Corp Listener. Maybe he could fix it, but not now. He collected a bright pink ammunition bag from the closest soldier, stowed the Listener parts in it and headed back to the penguin as fast as he could. A crowd of some twenty birds was waiting in a huddle. They cackled at his return and waddled after him as he ran past. He had no time for them now. He was on a mission; lives depended on it and most of all Samantha's. He got to the out-fall pipe and eyed the cliff desperately for a way up. Although much lower the soft red sandstone was smooth and unclimbable. He stared into the pipe and considered a return journey but that was as impossible as it was horrifying. He looked in the pink shoulder bag for inspiration and found a flame pink troopers beret and the listener parts. He put the hat on and scanned about in random directions, his being buzzing with the need for action. But he could see no way out.

"CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK!!!!" the sudden cacophony made him leap back. The ³⁴penguins were attacking the cliff beside him, with beaks like road drills turning the sandstone to dust as they just walked into the rock. "CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK, CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK!!!!" A thousand angry clog dancers kicking iron drums. Holding his ears he watched them disappear in a billowing cloud of red dust. "CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK, CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK!!!!" A thousand manic blacksmiths, making sand the loud way. The beach rumbled beneath his feet. Shifting pebbles clattered noiselessly beneath the deafening din. "CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK, CRACKA, RACKA, CRACK!!!!" The last penguin left, a solid red plume of smoky dust pouring from the cliff in its wake. "MACKA, MACKARACKA, MACKARACKA, MACK, MACK, Mmack." The roar became a muffled grumbling as they burrowed into the heart of the cliff. "macka, mackaracka, macka, racka, macka." The smooth entrance hole belched a last thick puff of dust and it all stopped. "GACK!" called a penguin from the cliff top. Gerry wasted no time. He stumbled coughing to the entrance. It was a tight fit and very dusty. Putting the beret over his face he wriggled his way in and up. Blind and wormlike he crawled, pushing against the walls and inching himself forward. It took ages.

³⁴ **Jackhammer penguins** by Mamaltek Corp - Intended as fish fueled tunnelling devices to revolutionise the quarrying trade. They all escaped; by tunnelling.

Lavender Avenue

Herman slept as Jillian carried him through the troubled streets, out of the town and into the country. She carried through the night with ease over hills and streams and into the forest, until at last they came at dawn to a clearing and a row of twelve neat thatched cottages. Wisps of smoke spiralled from the tiny chimneys and had Herman been awake he would have found the smell of baking rock cakes almost overpowering. A smart cobbled road meandered before the houses. It was dressed with a single street lamp and a sign saying:

"LAVENDER AVENUE - A BETTER PLACE TO BE."

Jillian took Herman to the last little house, and laid him on a soft bed. This was her empty home, a home with no one to care for, and now she had someone. She experienced approximately 300 milliwatts of joy. That is quite a lot for a J class ³⁵I-Bod, the power improvements made on the Y class make a big difference. Her tri-phase inversion polysynaptic perceptron was rescheduling at optimum diathermal levels. In short she was very happy.

A great deal happier than Maria, next door, who sat on the front porch, knitting, the needles a blur as they clattered in her hands. Completed jumpers piled around her rocking chair. Her flawless blue eyes stared resolutely ahead, scanning the horizon. She was looking for a man. A nice man, a strong man. A man to love and care for. A man who might love her. She had watched Jillian pass with Herman in her arms, smiled a small polite smile and resumed her intense search of the landscape. Maybe there was another one out there for her?

At number seven Ellen was throwing bones on the kitchen floor. She had already read her Talo cards, charted skyscopes for everyone in the avenue and given her crystal ball a good squinting. She still had the lunes, we-ching and weegee thimbles to cast. Such was her busy day. She laughed as she saw Jillian carrying Herman. She had seen it coming ages ago. What with Jupiter being conjunct with Rocktune, the Queen of Qinces crossed with the dangling grocer and most convincing of all the stain coming back on the bedroom carpet, it was all obvious. Curiously, never once did she predict that she would spend all day throwing bones, casting and charting, for that was all she ever did.

Across the street Lisa looked up from her microscope and saw Jillian jogging by carrying a man. She raised an eyebrow and made a mental note to amend Volume A1-1000 updating the Lavender Avenue population and then went back to sizing bacteria. Lisa liked to count and measure things. From spoons to stars she counted and measured, recording her findings in very small print in very large books. Comforting volumes of data ever growing, waiting to be read and analysed. She had counted the trees and was starting on leaves. She had numbered the birds and was starting on beetles. It was her purpose to investigate, organise and catalogue. It also had the benefit of suppressing ³⁶awkward thoughts.

Angela at number nine also noted Jillian passing. She was, as ever cleaning and tidying. Whilst teasing the tufts of the hagg pile carpet erect with a toothbrush she heard Jillian jogging step but did not look up. She was bent on her mission to create perfection in the hagg pile and that she would have. Tufts stood to attention not daring to wilt before her attentive gaze. She was cleaning on a quantum level and was also blissfully free from awkward thoughts.

At number seven Lorna looked up from her drawing board as Jillian jogged by. She smiled a vacant smile and went back to her redprint. The plans for the Grand Lavender Canal were well advanced, as were the designs for an ornate tourist barge to ply it. Her drawing board leant against a broken wall for she was rebuilding the house again. The walls never rested, they roamed her space. Rising, being torn down and rising again in new locations. She tucked her pencil behind her ear and picking up a sledgehammer and set about nosily removing the bathroom.

At number eight Fiona was ready. She had had her bath and chosen the little blue dress and done her hair and nails. She had gotten dressed and after a good long look in one of the several dozen mirrors that

³⁵ **Mamaltek I-Bod.** The Mildred (J and Y Class) series was sadly flawed in that they would allow no one out of the house without a warm vest or back in without wiping their shoes. Added to which they could, and would, give lectures on the benefits of early nights in 100 different languages, run at 80 mph and lift 150 times their own body weight. All were recalled save 12 that are still unaccounted for. (What Autobod - issue 15).

³⁶ **Awkward thoughts** - A nasty sensation created by the I-Bod operating system (SPIRITOS) scheduling a brain saver process. This causes phantom visions of an endless maze, dancing hamsters or worst of all flying toasters. An I-Bod suffering an awkward thought is easily spotted as the eyes rotate as if watching a juggler. (Making Friends issue 23).

dominated her home decided that the red dress was better after all. This meant a changing her hair and make up. Eventually, as was always the case, she found herself dressed, ready and at the door wondering where it was she was supposed to be going. This was her bad moment. Every day she had one at about this time. She opened her door as stared into the street. No one was there. No one was coming and she was going nowhere. It did not last long however for she saw Jillian loping by with a man in her arms. She rushed to Maria's house to assist in the search for more.

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Herman awoke in a soft bed, to the sound of birdsong and the smell of baking. He sat up and said, "Whuuu," never at his best first thing in the morning. Jillian came in smiling, with a tray of breakfast. She laid it on Herman's lap and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He said "Whuuu," again and then he remembered the night, the riot, Tara, the cushion and meeting Jillian. He issued yet another, "Whuuu," only quieter. Jillian glided around the little bedroom, pulling curtains, opening windows, and talking. "A lovely day. Isn't the sky lovely, and so many birds. Lorna wants us to build a swimming pool, but I say it will spoil the garden, but I do love swimming, so maybe she is right. She is always right. Are the eggs alright?"

Herman ate his meal silently and watched wide-eyed. Where the foon was he?

Jillian picked up the wardrobe, a large wardrobe, with obvious ease and moved it a bit. Herman sat with mouth open and a fork full of eggs and bacon, poised in mid air. Where the double foon was this, did he see that, and a few dozen other questions tumbled over themselves for brain space. "Whuuu," he said back to his usual volume.

"Now come on eat up, eat up and then we can go out for a nice walk," she cooed the soft light of love in her delicate brown eyes. She kissed him again, this time on the forehead and was gone.

Herman sat for a while and stared blankly. Was this heaven or should he be very afraid. He tried pressing his own internal anxiety button but nothing happened. He was all scared out, too battered, too weary, whatever was to come let it come. A man who has ridden a rhino, midst a pack of feral furnishings has little fear left. He ate his breakfast and waited for whatever to happen. Jillian breezed back in just as he was finishing. "I knocked these together for you, I do hope you like them, now up you get and try them on," she said smiling. She was very pretty when she smiled.

She placed a complete set of clothes on the bed and flitted out singing. He tumbled into the clothes. He might not have picked the peach colour scheme, but they fitted superbly, even the peach shoes. He regarded himself in the wardrobe mirror and wondered, "Where the holy foon am I? Am I being kitted out for a cloud? Is she going to give me a harp next?" She flitted back in and led him out into a sunshine garden of sweet jasmine and honeysuckle. They sat and watched wild birds drinking from a small pond. She brought tea and warm biscuits, and sat with him and talked and talked of mainly nothing what so ever. Herman stayed quiet; it was strange but not unpleasant. He drank the tea and watched the birds and listened to Jillian and slowly the joy of his good fortune became clear.

She told him of her sad history of the family, such sweet children, she showed him photos of sweet children. She told him of how she and all her kind had been rejected, and destroyed save a few, the stronger ones, mainly J class but also Lisa the last remaining K class. Of how they had escaped and built a home here in Lavender Avenue. Of how her heart pined for human company of her despair and her leaving the avenue. Of her finding Herman and Herman finding her and how nice it will all be, if only she could get her money sorted out. "Eh?" quizzed Herman. It was the only word he could get in.

"My money, I must get it sorted out."

"Why do you need money? You have all of this."

"Hmm, I suppose your right, I just feel I need to get it sorted out. I am not legal until I can buy myself. Four thousand Thog, a lot isn't it. Oh dear, and things were so nice."

"What? Where? Have they changed?"

"Oh yes, now I have no money and it is such a worry." She looked sad. Herman felt sad for her, he was not sure why, but it was enough to push him over his own personal edge and he cried. He sat in the garden, in dappled shadows and softly cried. She tried to console him and brought him more tea and biscuits. She talked and danced and played music, yet still he cried, even when the tears stopped he was crying inside. It was a flood he could not stop. Night came and she put him back in his comfy bed, where he slept and dreamed melancholy dreams. And so it was the following day and thereafter repeated in a steady stream of days. A routine of up and out to the garden to see the birds to eat and talk and cry. He

was very ill and she would make him better and she did, with her laughter, songs and endless and totally unbounded love. She also made sure he wore a warm vest and always wiped his shoes.

Gack

Gerry took a step back, the penguins shuffled forward. He took a step forward the birds moved back. He turned and walked away. They followed. He turned again and faced them. They stopped and looked up at him, waving their dusty heads from side to side and flapping their flippers as if silently applauding. He looked down at them and puzzled what to do. For all of a zipo-second he considered threatening them and then for a much longer time what a bad move that might be. Given the ease with which they consumed sandstone, he felt more vulnerable than hayberry jelly at a children's party. One peck would probably be enough.

One of the birds 'Gacked' loudly, as if demanding action. He twitched and said, "Hunn." Which was nothing like what he meant to say which was: "Thanks for digging me out you guys. You have been a great help. I would love to stay and play but I am really very busy and....." The penguins shook their heads and gacking at will shuffled closer. He leapt back, put his hands up as if faced by the law and blurted, "Ojay, Ojay I will come quietly."

The birds stopped as one and for a funeral length moment observed him. There was a single loud "Gack!" from presumably the head bird and the others milled about to form a single file. They sorted themselves into a neat line, in order of size, with the largest at the back and a gap in the middle of the line. A gap that was evidently for him, he stepped into place. When all were assembled, the rear bird issued a sharp loud "Gack" and the birds stiffened up. "Gack, Gack, Gack" called the boss bird and they marched on the spot, webbed feet tramping, swaying together. Gerry looked over his shoulder to see the curious platoon, swaying as one. "Gack, Gack, Gack!" and they were off, shuffling together across rolling fields. "Gack, Gack, Gack." Swallows glided over pasture like tiny fighter planes. Kittiwakes hung in the air like delicate living kites, set against an ice blue sky. Sparrows clattered and chattered in the hedgerows and robins sang as fiercely as they could at the passing squad. Gerry saw none of it. All he was aware of was the road drill beak of the penguin behind him. "Gack, Gack, Gack." They came to a gate. The lead birds destroyed it without pause. Gerry stepped through the wreckage, desperately trying to keep ahead of the beak. "Gack, Gack, Gack." Down a lane. "Gack, Gack, Gack." They crossed another field. "Gack, Gack, Gack." He had no idea where they were going but at least he was going somewhere. Somehow he would get help and rescue Samantha. Would she ever believe this? Would anyone believe it? They came to a shallow river with stepping-stones. Damselflies sparkled like sapphires as they danced in the shards of sunlight that filtered through the protective trees. A huddle of baby ducks whistled and bobbed on the current behind their watchful mother. "GA-aaaCK!" commanded the boss. The squad halted and with a "Gack,,gack!" they instantly broke ranks and plunged into the river, cackling with joy.

Gerry sat upon a handy rock, thankful to protect that part of his anatomy, and watched as the penguins transformed from shuffling fat birds into sleek torpedoes. They shot with dizzying speed through the shallows, away up the river to a lull of deeper water. There they played, and dined, chasing each other and the fish for lunch. Watching them, the ducklings, the damsel flies and the sparkling water, Gerry made a promise that he would bring Samantha here. This was a place to share, a timeless place of peaceful beauty as yet uncorroded by human intervention. Pastoral tranquillity painted with the finest brush. Aware of it but not able to feel it he sucked on a piece of grass, to try and catch the mood, it tasted horrid. Horrid, as was anyplace without her in it. It could be accurately said that he had definitely been perkier. Presently the squad reassembled, obviously refreshed and they set off as before. "Gack, Gack, Gack." Through woodland they tramped until they came to a small style across the path. "GA-aaaCK!" they stopped. "Gack, gacky, gackkk!" The birds before him parted and wheeled round to the back. He turned to watch the squad formed a semicircle around him. They edged forward. He shuffled back until the style was behind him. He stepped over it and the birds responded with raucous calling and chattering.

He was on a long disused aerodrome. A tattered windsock dangled lifelessly from a rusty pole upon which hung an equally rusty and dust encrusted sign. Giving it a rub with his sleeve he uncovered a faded legend 'Swinair - Sheepbot International Airport 'a flight of fancy' with picture of a smiling pilot complete with goggles and flying hat giving a thumbs up sign. He rubbed some more and the words, 'Please check in at the main hanger', with an arrow pointing across the field, which was overgrown with tussock grass, to a large blue and shabby shed

Gerry set off across the field at top speed plus a bit. A skylark twittered in the warming sun as the long grass rippled in the caressing hand of a summer zephyr. Buzzing life surrounded him. Heavy bees like transport craft hummed by. Flitting midges cavorted in triangles before him and drifts of butterflies, like aerial flowers fluttered from the grass as he made his way but all he saw was a lack of penguins.

Enter Jim

The huge and rotting hanger door was closed but a smaller door in it was open, hanging by one hinge. Gerry stepped quietly inside. The vast space was empty save for a huge pile of old wizza boxes, a small ancient biplane and several equally elderly sofas. A large tree was growing in the centre of the space and had punched a gaping hole in the roof. Several leaves fluttered down through a shaft of dusty sunlight. "Hello, anyone home?" he called uncertainly, his voice echoing in the stillness.

"I knew it, I knew it the minute I get started on a new project," came a voice from the direction of the plane. A spry elderly little man in faded green dusty overalls appeared and walked towards him holding a tin can. "You wouldn't have a can opener on you?" he asked, looking at the can at arms length and squinting at the label.

"Uh, sorry, no," replied Gerry patting his pockets.

"Shame, I will have to think. Now where did I put whatever I am looking for?" He swung his gaze from the can to Gerry. Eyebrows like furry caterpillars surmounted quick inquisitive though obviously less than effective eyes. "Sorry, where are my manners," he rubbed his free hand on his overalls and offered it. "It has been a long time. We don't get many visitors, Duberry Mountjoy-Muckle the 32nd Viscount Muckle of Smugg at your service, but please call me Jim. Everyone does or at least they used to." The quick eyes misted slightly and he shook his head as if trying to locate a distant memory. "A very long time ago."

"Smugg?" asked Gerry shaking Jim's hand and noting its strength.

"Ancient parish used to be a county, nearly a country once, long ago, all faded now. Now where did I put it?" He took the can to a bench by the wall littered with curious tools and swept a clear area with his arm. A hammer with three heads fell clattering to the floor to join a pile of other curious and discarded tools. "Ah this will do, just the jolly old ticket," he said, picking up a spike and driving it into the can with one blow. Gerry stepped back nervously. Jim tugged the spike out and after wiping it on his overall leg lobbed it back on the bench. "Could I interest you in?" he held the can up again and squinted at the label. A heavy trail of pink syrup dripped from the can and slid down his overall sleeve. "Some 'Cling Weeches in treacle', very good for the liver you know. Must have a good liver, I mean where would you be without it?"

"No thankyou I'm fine, just eaten, couldn't eat another thing," lied Gerry.

"As you wish, as you wish."

Jim poured pink goo into a battered tin mug and took a large mouthful with a long and loud, "Slurrrp, purp, ah." He looked back at Gerry and now had a pink and sagging clown's mouth of syrup, slowly migrating south. "Come for a flight have you?" he asked, his new clown's face getting sadder by the second. "Sorry, but we are closed. Not a flight since, now let me see." The eyebrows huddled together as he silently mouthed numbers." Another drip of syrup slid down his grimy overalls. "Well a very long time. Still, it is nice to see folk. Who did you say you were?"

"Hello, I say could I interest anyone in a haribaldi?" chimed a familiar voice from the door.

"COLIN!" shouted Gerry turning to see the biscuit bearer.

"Hallo," responded Colin grinning and waving his ever-present confection. Gerry ran to him and hugged him like a lost brother. "Ah yes, good to see you to, would you mind your crushing my gingernuts," said Colin overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the welcome.

"Hope you're not a thinking of doing that to me," remarked Murup stepping in.

"MURUP!" called Gerry unplugging himself from Colin. This was a man he wanted to see. Here was a just the sort of fellow to get you into and out of a castle.

"Now just you stay away, I don't hold with no hugging now. Very nice to see you again I'm sure but you just bide where you are."

"Where have you been? What happened? I saw bodies on the beach," effused Gerry, desperate to get information in and out.

"As I thought," interjected Colin looking at the lining of his coat.

"What?" asked Gerry.

"Gingernuts in pieces. Ho hum. Tricky little blighters to transport, tend to fracture."

"Eh?" responded Gerry not believing anyone could care about biscuits at a time like this.

"Still the crumbs are nice. I like to mix them with..." continued Colin licking a crumb laden finger. Murup spotting a biscuit recipe coming interjected firmly.

"We don't want to know about yer blasted biscuits. So shut up."

Colin smiled, "Oh, Ojay."

"Well?" asked Gerry.

"Well what?" replied Murup.

"May I second that?" added Colin.

"What?" asked Gerry and Murup together in exasperation.

"It's just when you said, 'Well?' I would have said 'Well what' too and..."

"Will you shut up," shouted Murup. He needed a hum and he needed one now.

"Well?" asked Gerry addressing Murup.

"Now don't you start?" Murup replied thrusting a stubby finger his way.

"Well, Where have you been? What happened? I saw bodies on the beach," repeated Gerry laboriously.

"Oh you carry on don't mind me," muttered Colin, "but where is Samantha?"

Hello

"Samantha?" the voice seemed to come from inside her own head.

"Who is this?" asked Samantha peering into the blackness of the tunnel.

"It is Twinky."

"Where are you?"

"I am with you. I am here to help."

"Gerry is gone. He fell. Is he safe?"

"I do not know where he is. I am trying to find him. I will keep him safe if I can."

"Can you get me out of here?"

"Yes, if you do something for me?"

"What?"

"I need you to collect a small blue tube for me, it is very important."

"You mean the key that Gerry needs."

"Yes, Foap has it in a safe in his office."

"What do you mean to do with it?"

"Set us all free."

Conspiracy

"Well I'll go to Strubble on a ³⁷Zoonplane," exclaimed Jim at full volume, his eyes gleaming with delight, "Welcome, welcome and welcome." He threw his arms wide in greeting and splashed a thick trail of Weechul syrup across the hangar floor in the direction of the tree. "Any more of you is there?" he asked, his eyebrows wriggling enquiringly.

"No, no this is all of us. All except Samantha and she is trapped in the castle and we must get her out," replied Gerry urgently pointing in the direction of the fortress.

"Could I interest anyone in a wizza?" asked Jim ignoring Gerry plea. "They are very good."

"OH yes, thankyou very much," answered Colin immediately. "A plain one for me. I have brought my own topping." Any man with a wizza in a crisis was a friend indeed.

"No thankyou we don't have time, we have to rescue Samantha," repeated Gerry firmly.

"What flavours you got then?" asked Murup.

"Oh I don't make them. The IZA WiZZA delivers. Now there is Kelp and Chocolate, Kelp and Marzipan...." continued Jim enthusiastically.

"SORRY TO DISTURB YOU BUT WE MUST GO AND RESCUE SAMANTHA," raged Gerry surprised at his ability to do so.

Murup tilted his head slightly as if looking at a spoilt child and said flatly. "I'm not moving till I've had a good feed. What we need is a rest and a plan. We can't just stroll in there without a plan." He swung his gaze to Jim, "Make mine a Kelp and Marzipan."

Gerry dejectedly joined his colleagues on a sagging dust encrusted sofa in the corner of the hangar. Jim energised with joy skipped to a row of large wooden levers and a winding handle set into the hangar wall. He wound the handle and a distant whistle sounded high above them. "Parp!" a far away hooter replied. He then tugged at several of the levers and wound the whistle again. "Parp!" repeated the remote hooter.

Murup nodded in Jim's direction and asked Colin in a whisper, "Do you think e's got any wheels on his bike?"

"Tricky to say, he could be a cracker short. It does seem a funny way to order wizzas. I shall go and investigate," replied Colin getting to his feet and strolling over to their host.

Murup nudged a scowling Gerry, "Thank the halibut e's gone. Now tell I what's happened." Gerry wasted no time relaying his tale and had just got to the penguins and the fizzling barrier when a small neat man, in a shabby evening suit arrived on a delivery cycle. He wore a white cap with IZA WiZZA written on it. He parked, unpacked the tall pile of boxes from the basket at the front of his cycle and in a Hermainian accent seasoned in casks of claret, asked. "And, who may I ask, is for the unflavourred?"

"That would be mine," responded Colin enthusiastically.

"Ah! Pristine purity, the very basis of flavourrrrr. A fresh piste for the taste buds to travel, enjoy monsieur," He handed Colin a box.

"And who? No let me guess, plum, apple and the sausage, it must be you Jim, so, how do you say, sophisticated. And you're usual chip butteh." He handed Jim a box and a hot sandwich with a flourish.

"And here I have, quelle magnifique, my master piece, egret and peanut butter and, oh yes and a kelp and marzipan." Murup took the kelp leaving Gerry eyeing the egret. He had expected cheese but it did smell good.

The IZA WiZZA man took two coins from Jim with a, "Bon appetite!" was gone. The wizzas were delicious.

³⁷ **Yohnson Zoonplane** - the slowest aircraft ever built consisting of a huge kite towed by camels. Known for their excellent catering the Zoonplane concept never took off due to their leasurely pace and inability to cross water or any country with trees.

"How did that work then?" asked Murup waving a limp slice of kelp and marzipan the direction of the handles.

"It is an invention of mine, a wizza semaphore," answered Jim. He waved his chip butty skyward, "It operates arms on the roof. IZA keep a constant surveillance, it saves the cooking."

.....

Outside the hangar, the IZA WiZZA man, commonly known as Bobb Mugg but to a select few by his real name, Perp Hoopenstreyer, unclipped the pump from his bicycle. He pulled it open and spoke softly into the handle with a clipped ³⁸Wiss accent. "I have located za suspects."

An equally sharp wiss voice replied from the pump. "Goot, very goot. You have done very vell agent 070. Ve vill send an elimination team immediately. "

Mugg stood to attention and clicked his heels. "Zank you zir. I vas just doing my duty for the mother race."

.....

"We need to contact Henry Funn," said Murup munching, "he'll know what to do."

"Fine, good, great plan, and how the foon do we do that?" jibed Gerry waving a sagging slice of egret and peanut butter.

"How about mending that listener thingy?" offered Colin. Gerry pulled the very battered device from his bag with his spare hand. The bottom half was missing and a bundle of tiny broken wires dangled free. "Ah see what you mean. Not at all well is it?" observed Colin nibbling a dessert gingersnap.

"Well, what have you got there?" interjected Jim squinting at the listener. "Isn't that a Wokia Wynot? We could ask my thinker for a redprint."

"You have a thinker?" asked Gerry jumping to his feet.

"Oh, I have a little machine, it keeps the old brain turning," answered Jim waving vaguely in the direction of the wizza litter. It's over there, somewhere."

Gerry swept away a drift of wizza boxes to reveal a familiar screen. "An Alto Chummy," he whooped giving the glass a rub with his sleeve. He clicked a switch at the side and the machine answered with a reassuring "Bong!" and a graphic of a laughing coconut. "Tremazing and splendatious," he enthused slipping into the seat, his eyes fixed on the machine.

"A what?" asked Colin sidling next to him.

"Lovely thinker, dead easy to use but trying to program it is like kissing a badger," replied Gerry automatically, his fingers rattling the friendly keyboard.

"Kissing a badger?Oh, I see. That bad eh?" Colin squinted at the tiny screen, not seeing at all.

"Badder, but not as bad as a Money Pump. That has 157 levels of tri-uvial indirection and a 68 way linked jabber stack. That's like kissing a swarm of wasps."

"Oh?" quizzed Colin squinting harder. The screen danced with myriad obscure symbols. He fumbled for an emergency wafer.

"Now what we need to do is, take the macro bus from the bipple port and purge the old look aside buffers, trim the polystage, munn, munny, mun, munn, munn, munny, mun."

Colin tried to listen but the words seemed to bounce off. He gave up on it, located his wafer and left Gerry talking to his new toy.

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Murup settled himself cross-legged on a large tussock of grass outside the hanger door and hummed. He hummed away the battle. He hummed away the ever present danger. He hummed away the homesickness and then he stepped up a gear to hum away the effect Colin had had on him. He hummed

³⁸ **Wisserland** – The Wiss have the best real estate, great wealth, and a talent for making chocolate, clocks and keeping their heads down.

at full throttle, a compressed high-octane hum. Even the arrival of a semicircle of spectating penguins did not slow him.

.....

It took only Twenty minutes for Gerry to have the little Alto connected to the remains of the listener and thence to the friendly glow of the Outanet. The Outanet home at last, jogging the wide boulevards, nodding to old acquaintances, streets that to others were a tangled web of wires or an impenetrable mesh of noise. He travelled fast and left no marks. He got to the Quadro-net bar, but the space was blank, as if it was never there. Feeling he was being watched, he ducked out and kept moving. Moving from bar to bar but they were all voids. Back on the data streets the traffic was huge and all going in one direction to Rinky Dinky and Foap. A clown stepped into his vision. "Hi friend I bet you're wondering where to take the little ones where the fun just keeps on coming."

"Go away!" snapped Gerry in his fiercest font.

The clown smiled and continued. "A place for mom to relax and have the tiny treasures out of her hair." Gerry control k'd and treble clicked the pane close button, which is a very rude command in Chummy Script. "Come to Twinkyland, Horrida. Where the fun just keeps a coming," called the clown evaporating. A pretty and familiar young woman appeared, dressed in a neat grey uniform, she smiled and said sweetly, "Better Fly Later." Gerry took to his digital heels and sped through some links, he traversed the Pan-Vespuchian router. He was sweating now, his brain racing to keep the images of the streets and highways clear. Foap was everywhere, Rinky Dinky Hospitals, Foap Security, Dinky Bank, Foap Van Rental, Rinky Burger. It was all turning Foap. He skipped a few routers, hopped several bridges, skittered through switches and located Helios Mudge. It was very clean, quiet and white, like a morgue. He toured the space and found the manacle database and took the controls. He dived into the data pool but it was quiet, just more clean white space. Something was very wrong. To find out what he needed to restore a backup, to wind back the days. He rattled out a stream of clicks.

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You look like a man who needs a haircut," said Jim clapping his hands and beaming. "Would you like to see an invention of mine?" Colin nodded. For once he was completely without anything to say. "I call it the Auto-Trim, you just stick your head in this box and well, see for yourself."

.....

Gerry stared, his jaw dropping as he read the email.

**From Henry Funn to FoapH, ScarpeM.
Subject Project Ownitall update**

Foap - I have sent you the boy Gerry and the idiot Colin with a guide as you asked. I doubt they will give you much sport though. I am also sending my personal accountant to ensure the boy arrives intact. I would like her to be returned as soon as possible.

Meredith - I have sent the ludicrous ambassador to Nocca for you. He has your plans for the diversion whilst we install the power grid. I am sure you can 'entertain' him for a while.

The terrorist fishermen I have sent to the mad monks. I have organised a welcome for them. They will not trouble us again.

**Just to remind us all of the deal:
Meredith gets Frica and Rolfalia, I get Eurasia and Foap gets the rest.**

**Have Funn
Henry.**

Gerry read it again mouthing the words, rage growing as he did so. He had to restrain himself from hurling the little Alto Chummy across the hangar. Instead he left the tiny machine glowing its evil message and stormed towards the door, kicking the drift of wizza boxes as hard as he could on the way.

Colin detecting trouble stepped before him babbling, "I say is there a problem? Oh dear? How about a digestive? Nothing perks you up quicker, I always find. Have I ever told you the one about the teapot and the camel?"

Gerry stopped and gawped his rage melting to distracted dismay at Colin's new haircut. It was lopsided. Perfectly trimmed but not on straight, it looked like a wig that was slipping off. Likewise his beard appeared to have been blown to one side of his face. Gerry could not help it he gawped. Murup joined him and took a step back to adjust his vision. "Summats happened to your head friend," he observed chuckling.

"Yes, yes, yes, Jim's machine. Automated hair cutter. It just needs a little adjustment apparently," answered Colin inserting a biscuit into what appeared to be the side of his face.

"Woo, I should say so," agreed Murup leaning sideways and blinking.

"I have some very bad news," said Gerry still transfixed by Colin's coiffure. "Scarpe, Foap and Henry Funn are all working together and we have been taken for chumps."

"Thought as much," replied Murup flatly. "That only leaves St Kevin, think the monks are with em too."

"Very probably and that is the worst haircut I have ever seen."

.....

Agent 070 Perp Hoopenstreyer watched from the hill, leaning on his bicycle as the black gyro flyer soundlessly landed and a brutal death squad poured from it. Crouching and darting, bristling with weapons, the sharpest troops from the crackest regiment of the Wiss Special Services encircled the hangar with precision and ease. He felt pride in their grace and power.

It happened so quickly. A soldier disappeared. The grass appeared to open and eat him. Another went the same way and then two more, until only three of Wiss's finest were still above the soil. As quickly as they had gone the subterranean troops returned closely followed by penguins shooting from the ground like missiles from silos. Then all were running, tossing their bristling weapons aside with the birds in hot pursuit. Stumbling, tumbling and running they raced to the gyro flyer and pulling the last one aboard, as soundlessly as they had arrived, they left.

Perp shook his head as if hoping to rewind the scene. Had he really seen that? A Wiss death squad frightened away by penguins. He looked back to the field, the birds had returned to their burrows and all was pastoral tranquillity.

Still gaping he grabbed the bicycle pump and pulled it open to report the disaster. The handle came away in his hand. He stared at it, broken. This was a very bad day for the mother race.

.....

"Well I reckon we need help," declared Murup still transfixed by Colin's haircut.

"But who else can we rely on?" asked Gerry.

"Well ole Gurk and his crew for one, and I should think the monks would help if they knew."

"True. So let's start with the Swinnish Liberation Navy. How do we find them?"

"What you need is a long looker," interjected Jim. "I have one on the roof, most excellent it is, wish I had invented it myself but you can't do them all. Come on, this way." He led them across the hanger. A flight of zigzag steel steps loosely attached to the wall led upwards. Gingerly they made their way up and even more cautiously across the rotting timbers of the roof. It creaked and bounced underfoot like an under inflated airbed. At the apex stood a little shed and within it a brass telescope on a tripod.

"Now just look through here and you can see almost all of the islands," said Jim taking the lens cap off. Gerry peered through the eyepiece. "You see there is St Kevin, imposing chunk of rock isn't it? And if I am not mistaken there are your chums on the 'Saucy Scallop.'"

The little boat jiggled into Gerry vision. He could actually see Gurk himself on the deck although the image did bounce around a bit. "Looks like they are going to St Kevin," added Jim.

"We must warn them," exclaimed Gerry.

"Hmm tricky. We could try shouting," offered the old man.

"Eh?" asked Gerry looking up from the eyepiece.

"One of my inventions, a shouter device, voice broadcast I call it. It is up on the hill, looks like a big windmill with horns. Bloody loud, nearly deafened me first time I used it. It seemed like a good idea at the time but there's no one to talk to and if I did have I couldn't hear them. If they had a shouter they could shout back but then we would, well, be shouting at each other. I haven't used it for a long while. It should work though."

"Hmmm," hmmmmed Gerry unconvinced.

"Or, we could fly of course."

"You can fly?"

"Well, I do have a machine."

"That's it, we will fly out and warn Gurk." Gerry ran from the shed ignoring the creaking of the roof, and waved the others to follow. There was no doubt now he was in charge. He rattled with purpose and action down the steps the others in pursuit. Once down in the hanger he rushed over to the little plane and climbing on the wing, pulled himself into the passenger seat. The tiny craft creaked and groaned and with a sigh of tearing fabric, it crumpled, depositing him and its remains on the hanger floor. For a short while all was dust and twanging wires.

"No, no, not, that old thing, this one," said Jim wheeling a tandem bicycle from behind the sofa. This is the aircraft. I have to assemble it. It is an invention of mine, of course." Colin and Murup helped a bemused Gerry from the wreckage of the plane as Jim continued. "Now, I just secure this here and that there, this to that you see." He attached two large balloons that had been nestling silently in the roof space to the tandem. "And now that to this and viola! A Skycycle." He had added a small canvas sail as a rudder and beamed with pride of his creation at the trio. "Will it work, have you tried it?" asked Gerry wondering whether it might be wiser just to run away.

"Of course it will work, not exactly tried it yet but I have every faith in the Smugg Skycycle." Gerry sucked in a deep breath, "Right, we have no choice. I will go with Jim. You two go to the shouter. See if you can get it to work."

"It is very simple," added Jim, "you just pedal, press the button and talk into the horn. I should wear the earmuffs though. It is very loud."

"Wilco," answered Colin and he and Murup exited hangar left.

"Now boarding," announced Jim offering Gerry a pair of murky goggles. They climbed onto the tandem with Jim at the back. He pulled a lever in the floor. There was the grinding noise of an ancient rusty mechanism and a groaning of timber. The hanger shuddered and with a "CRASHH" the whole front fell away. Amid the cackling of the penguins and his own coughing Gerry heard Jim calling, "Hold very tight please." They lurched across the floor smashing into the wizza litter, then upward as if flung by a huge spring. Gerry clung on and ducked as the top of the hangar door brushed his shoulder. Out into open summer sky they swooped, the ground receding at dizzying speed.

"Sorry about that, take off procedure needs a little work. Are you Ojay?" asked Jim. Gerry bug eyed and frozen in terror, could see his two tiny colleagues waving, the penguins around them. "Rightere," was all he could offer squeakily, his knuckles whitening on the handlebars. "Soon be there, we have a good wind," pronounced Jim coolly, "There is no need to pedal my friend, we only need the wheels for landing." Gerry kept pedalling anyway as it helped to burn off the fear. They drifted over the cliffs and to the open sea. Rocks and crashing tides below, huge white gulls wheeling alongside. Not a breeze ruffled them as they flew with the wind in tranquil silence. The crag of St Kevin with the ludicrous trowel at its summit stood clear ahead, sunlight shimmering on the handle. To the left and much further off, Gerry could see Nocca, dull green with the great boots steaming at its summit. Dead ahead in the wide blueness of the Sea of Eee the tiny tireless 'Saucy Scallop' was cutting an equally tiny wake.

A tern for the worst

Captain Gurk was agitated, which for him was a rare, the sea was flat, the sky a fine powder blue, the wind fair, 'The Saucy Scallop' was in good form, the crew quiet, which for them was rare, but something deep within him warned of impending doom. He stared out from the prow as it cut through the clear ocean, the breeze shaking his So'wester and shaggy grey beard, to the distant shadow that was St Kevin. He had been to Kevin before many times with no problem, so why the bad feelings? He mused on this as Pume brought him a steaming mug of morp. "What ailes 'e Cap'n."

"Don't rightly know Pume me lad, but I gotta feeling in me bilges, somat is up."

"Don't think tis Dubo's cookin do 'e?"

"No lad you'm alright enough an I et what you et, no 'tis that place." He pointed towards their destination with the well chewed stem of his pipe. Pume squinted in the direction of the pipe, "Tis St Kevin Cap'n, 'tain't nothing there but the dafty monks. So what's to worry about?"

"I tell 'e 'tis in me bilges, an they'm never wrong, I da reckon we should be a puttin' about."

"But we've been to Kevin many a time afore an never a problem. The monks is daft as kippers but they ain't dangerous."

"I know lad, I ain't a feared of the monks, 'tis somat else an I'll be gudged if I know what." He took a swig of morp and wiped the residue from his beard with the back of his hand. "I want us in and out in an hour, an no messing, tell Ruppy full ahead."

"Right you are Cap'n."

"Captain Gurk!" called a small distant voice. Gurk looked around, Pume had gone and he was alone. "Gurk!!!" insisted the little voice.

"Tis the voice of the great halibut," thought Gurk, a man not normally given to superstition. He leant on the rail and shouted at the sea, "Get the hence great halibut, I have no time for 'e."

"Gurk, up here," repeated the voice slightly louder now. Gurk looked up to see Gerry and Jim on the Skycycle hovering some twenty feet above him. Recoiling from the vision he sat hard on the deck, his mug of morp bouncing from his hand.

"Don't put in at St Kevin, you and your crew are in great danger." called Gerry.

"Well I'll be a toasted barnacle," said Gurk the pipe dropping from his mouth. "Well don't that beat the crabs nipper, how did you get up there?"

"Later! Now put about, the monks are coming to get you."

Gurk pulled himself up and looked towards St Kevin. A dozen or more Monk boats were coming. He shivered at the sight. They had only a couple of cases of supplies in the hold, novelty toilet ashtrays bearing the motto 'rest your weary ash' and a box of model seagulls on rocks. One boat would be more than enough. He jumped to his feet and roared. "ARRGH, PUT 'ER ABOUT RUPPY, 'ARD A PORT." Ruppy did as he was told, and cackled as heard the chaos below. The rest of the crew, who had been attacking steaming platters of 'mupple and dump' suddenly found the grey stew attacking them as the boat heeled wildly.

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"Ojay, Jim lets go back now," ordered Gerry.

"Ah, bit of a technical problem there. The wind you see."

"We cannot go back?"

"Er, well, in a nutshell no, we can go down and up a bit but not actually back. This is the prototype. It needs a few design tweaks."

"What about landing on the boat."

"Not now they have turned. We could try crashing into the sea."

"No, no, let's go on, do you think we can make the island?"

"Make the island, not a problem," said Jim confidently, quietly ignoring the business of landing until the direct question came up.

"Tell me about the monks. What do I need to know?" asked Gerry.

"Mad as turnips, all of them. Been here over a thousand years, going round in crazy circles. Kevin was an idiot who lived in a mud hut on the island, waiting for his flock to arrive. He waited thirty years and nobody came. He spent the time writing a book of rules and directions for them when they did arrive. He called it 'the Great Brochure'."

"Great Brochure?"

"The key to their success. Most of it is about having a very fine time indeed. Go to the beach, have an nicecream, play sandball and piety touch, have lunch, sunbathe, swim and back for supper."

"Sounds like a holiday camp. Maybe they will give us a holiday?"

"That my friend is a very large 'maybe', about the size of Hermainia."

They glided to St Kevin and landed on the beach. Technically it could be called a landing because they did touch down for a very brief period. Had they achieved a complete landing it would have been worthy of praise indeed for touching down a flying tandem onto a pebble beach is to say the least tricky. Unhappily they were not on the beach long enough to dismount. No sooner had their unsteady steed touched the shingle than it careered upwards again and with very little control and an awful lot of "AAAAHHHH!!!!" and "NONONO!!!!" from the crew it crashed into the cliff face at the end of the beach. Luckily neither Jim nor Gerry were harmed but the Smugg Skycycle was past repair. The duo had just freed themselves from the wreckage when a platoon of stern monks arrived to arrest them.



The Great Memento

The Grand Arch Abbot Vincenzo di Presto or 'Vince' to his few friends sat on a huge, jewel encrusted throne in the great state Vitalian marble throne room, eating doughnuts. His ample frame dressed in a luxuriant purple velvet bathrobe and matching bath mitre, with a jeweller's glass in one eye he was examining each doughnut carefully. He radiated displeasure from every pore. Behind him stood a pair of ancient and frail matching monks dressed in light blue togas with a staring yellow happy sun emblem on their sagging chests. They swayed gently in their constant fight with gravity, each supporting himself with folded ³⁹Gaff umbrellas. Gerry and Jim sat on very small stools facing the great man and his wobbly retinue. "Well young man, I've got a bone to pick with you," said Vince not looking up from his doughnut.

"Oh?" offered Gerry thinly. Vince looked at him. The eyeglass twinkled. "You might well say 'Oh', that you might. Just what do you think you're doing? I have never seen such chaos and commotion and I have been looking a right long time, that I have. I mean to say you treat folks nice and what do they do, eh? Well I'll tell you, as soon as your back is turned they kick you in the face, that's what."

"They must be very good at kicking," interjected Jim with conviction.

"What?" boomed Vince, unplugging his eyeglass and focussing on Jim with the look of a man who has found a wasp in his salad.

"Well if you're back is turned they would have to swing their legs up and .."

"SHUT UP!" shouted Vince standing and discarding his doughnut. He pointed an accusing bejewelled finger at Gerry.

"You, young man, have given me more trouble than I can remember, and I can remember a lot, that I can. In fact I can remember more things than anyone else."

"How do you know that?" asked Jim instantly regretting it.

Vince slowly turned his gaze back to Jim. "I know that if I have you made into glue, I would remember it and you would not. Would you like to argue some more?"

"Ah no." answered Jim finding sudden interest in the pattern of the floor.

"Now as for you Mr Gerry Grep, I will ask you again, just what do you think you're doing. Is this your idea of fun is it, a game perhaps. Well forgive me while I forget to laugh."

"Well we were .." started Gerry.

"Don't you tell me what you were, it is what you are that is the problem. Have you any notion of the trouble, the mayhem that you have caused here? Eh? Eh?" Vince's eyes bulged a notch as his anger echoed filling the space.

"Eh, well um no," answered Gerry honestly.

"Well let me tell you and a right mess it is. I have got seventeen monks off sick with nerves, eight lost and another fourteen running round in circles trying to find you. Eleven of them are outside the door now and happy bunnies they are not." As if on cue sounds of shouting filtered through the great oak door at the side of the chamber.

"Why are they looking for me?" asked Gerry innocently.

"They are going to hurl you off a cliff."

"What?"

³⁹ **Gaff** - A mystical game involving the hiding and finding of small white balls. The greatest Gaffer of all time was Gerbil Copse who successfully lost and found all 287 balls in a field of daisies in the record time of thirty two days - Vespuchian Open Adjusta 1886. Copse's mastery of the nimley and wufty irons has never been matched with over three thousand buzzards on his lifetime scorecard.

"Well you might say what."

"But what have I done?"

"What have you done? What have you done? You sit there and ask in your stupid twittering voice," Vince did a sneering impression, "Coo what have I done?" He bulged his eyes another notch to 'straining' and jabbed with the glittering finger. "What you have done is obviously something very, very bad. That's what."

"Well, what is it?" asked Gerry steeling himself for the answer.

"I don't know but it must be bad."

"Eh?" Puzzled Gerry "You don't know?"

"Well not the details but I know it must be very serious."

"I don't follow, how do you know that?"

"Because the Gospel says so, that is why."

"Eh?"

"The Great Brochure," interjected Jim.

"You will shut up." Vince snapped. "I will get to you later."

"So it says in your gospel to find me and throw me off a cliff, does it?" asked Gerry trying to suppress sarcasm.

"Yes."

"When was this written?"

"Six hundred years ago by the Saint himself." responded Vince piously genuflecting at warp speed.

"You don't think that that is strange?"

"Of course it is strange, it's a gospel it is supposed to be strange, well mystical at least."

"But actually naming me. Are you mentioned in it?"

"Well no of course not."

"What does it actually say?"

Vince clicked his fingers and one of the monks behind him stretched into life and slowly, very slowly walked to a large marble coffee table in the centre of the great hall. In a deep and guttural moan he muttered as he went. "I don't know, you stand around all day, with my feet and all and not a nod or a wink. I should say so, oh yes. Sixty-three years and what for, eh that's what I would like to know. All I get is fetch this, fetch that. Young uns today, I don't know what to think. And that's a fact." Still mumbling he retrieved a large book and made even slower progress back. "Now in my day, oh yes, fings was different then. Good times we had, mostly black and white they was," he paused and wobbled as he remembered the good times. "But now," he set off again at a shuffle. "The food just ain't the same, you can't get a proper goosefat bun nowadays, well not what I would call goosefat. Barely taste 'em now and what about the music eh, 'orrible racket. You can't here the words, and if you could pah! we had real songs we did. Yes we have no wananas, we have no wananas today. Now that's what I call a song, something you can get yer teeth into. Here you are me Lord." He laid the book before Vince and resumed his silent and shaky vigil.

"Thankyou Brother Mope," said Vince with a sigh, the subtext of which was, 'you just can't get the staff.'

The Abbot flicked the pages located the section he wanted and clicked his fingers again. The other monk creaked into action and in a much brighter mutter declared, "Right you are chief. Nice here init. I like a good walk. That's me up and about. Early worms and all that. Now just pick this little beauty up and, woo nearly went down then. Exciting isn't it. Right now take it over there. Nice walk does you good you know.

Gets the corpuscles corpuscling it does. Be with you in a moment. Just take a breather here. Oh that's better. Here you are young sir."

"There you are. Now what do you think of that?" asked Vince with a sneer as the book flopped onto Gerry lap. Not waiting for an answer he continued. "I know what I think. I think you must be the devil himself, Beelzebub, the horned one."

Gerry read,

1270c Sun, Sea and Eternal Peace.

This is the big one - a heavenly break with the best seats.

Collect the traveller Gerry Grep and throw him to the waves such that he no longer breathes. (1 book)

"What does it mean by (1 book)?"

"It is the ticket for completing the task. Whoever cuts off your air supply gets one extra book added to his meditation score. One book is equal to about four years chanting. It is the biggest bounty ever seen. Normally it just lets you move on to the next command, every now and then a little jump perhaps, but never a whole book." Gerry stared Vince in the eyeglass and said, "Do you really believe I am the devil."

"I don't know what you are. I only know that if I open that door you will become a nasty mess."

"Could it be that the Brochure is wrong?" asked Gerry.

"WRONG, WRONG." boomed Vince", are you suggesting that the word of the saint is WRONG?"

"Have a look at an old copy?" interjected Jim.

"WILL YOU SHUT UP?" shouted Vince. He raised his arm to click his fingers but thought better of it and jumping to his feet padded to the far wall, his pink bathroom mules slapping on the marble. He picked out a very dusty and tattered tome and selected the page. He stopped frozen by the words.

"Well I'll go to the tippy top of the trowel," he said and then looking up. "It says nowt about you in this one. That means ...,"

"That this is a forgery." asserted Gerry tapping the book in front of him with a confident finger.

"Oh not again," sighed Vince hurling his gaze upwards.

"Again?" said Jim and Gerry in unison.

"How do you think old Gurit got his follies built? It took twenty years to do the giant trowel. Stinker had all the books changed, but that was five hundred years ago. I think I would like to have a word with a certain gentleman."

"Wouldn't be a chap called Foap would it?" offered Jim.

Vince visibly stiffened, "Foap, never heard of him, no, someone else entirely, but what a tado. Something must be done," he tapped his chin with the bejewelled finger and then levelled it at them again. "I know. I shall open the door."

"WHAT?" chorused Gerry and Jim swivelling their gaze to the door, upon which many angry fists were now beating.

"Much easier all round," added Vince, "and I get one book all for me."

Jim jumped to his feet and pointed his own knobby finger back at Vince. "And the next thing you know, that itinerary will say sling the Grand Arch Abbot in the drink. "

"Or, all monks report to Rolfalia and become washing machine salesmen," added Gerry. "Who ever is rewriting the itinerary is in charge here, not you."

Vince stared back and slowly withdrew his finger. The thought appeared to have hit home. He inserted his eyeglass again, picked up a donut and slowly studied it. "Who is to say what he has planned for you next?" added Jim pressing the advantage. "You are his puppets. Toys to amuse a madman." Vince threw down his donut. "I am nobody's puppet. We must stop this?"

"You mean you are not going to make glue out of us?" asked Jim warily.

"No, no, I suppose you are welcome guests," said Vince with sigh. "I shall inform the brotherhood immediately, clear your names and have the old itinerary reinstated."

Jim and Gerry looked at each other and would have said 'Hurrah', if it had not have sounded so daft. But 'Hurrah' was definitely the word that came to mind. Instead they just grinned at each other.

... ..

Vince, Jim and Gerry strolled through marble halls passing drinking fountains, plunge baths, a cocktail lounge, indoor menis⁴⁰ courts and swimming pools with pedallo hire. Gerry recounted their story as they walked whilst Vince punctuated it with the odd "I see" and "Well really!" They stopped at a small kiosk and he supplied them each with a stick of pink rock candy with 'destination' written all the way through it. Both Gerry and Jim agreed it was a very fine confection, very fine indeed. They toured a vast collection of holiday trinkets. Rows of busy brothers were logging the finds and carefully and reverentially cleaning them, to pass them on to yet more monks who packed them into wooden crates with delicately hand illuminated labels. Vince led them into a dark and ancient warehouse full of crates. "This is the novelty ashtray collection, we have over forty thousand different types. Some even pre-date tobacco," he said in a reverential whisper. Jim and Gerry were speechless. They gaped slack-jawed at the curious hoard. "This is nothing," said Vince, "We have something much more impressive next." They followed him out into the bright sunlight squinting, his purple bath robes billowed like sails as he padded purposefully to an even larger and older building. He banged on the massive wooden door with his golden crozier. They waited for what seemed a very long time. Eventually a much smaller door opened within the larger one. A smaller than average friar with a grey complexion and a very sad expression peered out. "Brother Monk, we have important visitors. I wish to show them the Great Memento." Brother Monk said nothing but held the door open as they stepped inside. "Friends this is our greatest treasure, The Great Memento of St Kevin" said Vince, his voice echoing from the distant walls.

It was a cathedral of immense proportions, the ceiling vaulted high above dragging their eyes towards distant delicate mouldings, and fabulous myriad shards of coloured glass. Vince provided a monologue, "The ceiling and windows depict the travels of St Kevin. Over there you can see him in his holy pedallo. We still have it. You will see it on the high altar in the 'Waiting Room Chapel'. Over there he is resting from his labours on a sun lounger. Over here he is modelling some swimwear and ahead of you is the Great Memento Collection." Vince swept his arm with a flourish, bringing their eyes to the floor. Ahead were endless ranks of short marble columns, each with a small pedestal at its summit. Upon each pedestal was a small glass object. The stone floor between the columns was worn smooth, obviously by centuries of devotional trudging. "I must ask you not to touch, only Brother Monk may touch the treasures. He has the honour of being the Memento Shaker." The 'treasures' were glass snowstorms. They followed Brother Monk between the rows, which seemed to extend impossibly in every direction. Eventually they stopped by one of the pedestals. "Ah, Brother Monk is about to shake," commentated Vince piously. Brother Monk looked up and remained silent. He nodded and with a loving smile picked up a snowstorm and gave it a little shake with one hand as he blew a small plastic bugle he was holding in the other. "Phuweeee" the bugle trilled. "Phuweee," came the echo from the walls. "It takes a good shaker four years to shake them all and about two thousand bugles." whispered Vince.

"Phewmazing!" declared Gerry not at all sure if it was the right word. Brother Monk set the snowstorm back on its platform. It was a scene of the Twifel Tower with a Camel in the foreground. Gerry examined it. The plastic camel stared forlornly back through a blizzard of swirling plastic snow. "Bizarre factorial," commented Gerry.

"Absurd to the power of daft is more like it," added Jim.

Brother Monk moved on to shake another and give a baleful, "Phuweeee" on his little trumpet.

⁴⁰ **Menis** - a summer game. Two players shout across a net at each other whilst throwing and catching hayberries in a small basket or Menis Trug. The player with the least stains and enough berries to make a hayberry fool wins. The most convincing win was that of Yasmin Twipp who delighted the centre court at the 1936 Wimflush finals by spotlessly collecting eleven fools and a pavlova.

Gerry turned to Vince, "is his name really Monk?"

"Oh yes."

"You mean he is monk Monk"

"Yes I am afraid so, his first name is Monk as well. I think his parents were very keen he join us."

"Oh," said Gerry mouthing the name Monk Monk Monk and thinking it sounded like a car horn.

They left Brother Monk to his task and marched a past row after row of the snowstorms. Scenes of dancing reindeer and happy children. Tiny tableau of laughing gondoliers and smiling soldiers, encapsulations of joy, silent trinkets patiently waiting their reverential turn. Presently they came to an elaborate glided wooden screen. They stepped through and into a small chapel with bare stone walls. Against one wall was a stone table and on the table a very battered and dilapidated wooden boat. "This is our greatest treasure, it is St Kevin's Pedallo."

"Oh," commented Gerry trying to sound impressed.

"Very nice," said Jim trying to sound the opposite. They stood and looked for awhile but Gerry had seen enough.

"Thank you for the tour it is very impressive, but we have very pressing business. We do need your help to overcome a fellow called Foap."

Abbot Vince smiled the trained smile of a preacher and whispered, "Of course you would. Well I would like to stay and help but pressing business beckons me also. Please rest here a while and I will send someone."

"But," uttered Gerry but he was talking to an empty space "Hey, like, where did he go?"

"Not a clue, most odd, here one minute, there must be a hidden door," answered Jim unhelpfully.

"Abbot Vince," called Gerry but all that returned was an echo and the distant 'Puweee' of Brother Monk on his eternal rounds. Gerry went to the screen but the door was locked. He shook it. "And we are locked in, we have been duped."

"There must be another door," reasoned Jim feeling the walls. They searched the walls and floor for any cracks but there was no way out. They climbed upon the altar and examined the pedallo. They tried levering the door with an ancient oar but only managed to snap it in two. They sat down, got up, walked about and irritated each other for what seemed ages. All the while Brother Monk metronomically marked time with the sad keening of his little plastic trumpet. Eventually bereft of ideas they sat on a bench and awaited their fate and ate their rock candy. It was very nice rock.

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The noise started as a quiet chipping, then a thudding and then a hard cracking, rather like huge manic nutcrackers. Nutcrackers for cracking coconuts. "Do you hear that?" asked Gerry.

"I surely do and if I am not mistaken, which I rarely am, it is your little jackhammer friends come to save us," answered Jim smiling.

"Crack, Crack, CRACKKK, Crack," and dust and rubble and a penguin appeared through the wall, and then another.

The tranquillity of a thousand years faded faster than a gambler's luck. Instantly all was chaos, alarm and shouting, doors opening, monks running everywhere as the penguins headed for the snowstorms. The birds walked though the ranks of stone columns like teenagers through money, destroying all, turning the precious relics to dust in a cacophony of destruction. Then Gurk was there, and Ruppy and, even Dubo, shouting and more dust. "This way," someone called, "follow Ruppy." They crawled out through the hole and began running. Down to the 'Scallop' with penguins following, cackling and shouting, falling with rocks and sticks flashing past. Sliding, tumbling onto grass, huge leaps, tumbling again. Falling and sliding towards the boat. More fizzing of stones passing, their chests burning with breathless panic.

Gerry was first to the 'Scallop'. The brothers had scuttled her with holes in the hull. She was half full of water and sitting nearly up to the gunnels. A very wet Seaman Pume appeared and commanded, "Hold

this young un," and gave him a hose to play over the side. Pume went below and pumped for all he was worth. Gerry watched the battle on the hill, helpless. It looked bad. The brethren were encircling the penguins and Dubo, swinging oars menacingly and closing in. Gurk and Ruppy made it to the boat and jumped on board. "Dubo, Dubo you fool, come here," shouted Gurk breathlessly. "You get down 'ere I need 'e." Then the penguins attacked, turning the oars to matchwood, now the monks were running. Then they are all tumbling to the beach. Dubo wheezed into view, puffing as his arms waved frantically, he was never going to make it. He was all animation and no pace. It was just too far and he was too slow. The penguins were all diving into the sea. Gerry passed the hose to Ruppy, the boat was definitely rising, and he leapt off.

"What the? Now where are you going?" called Ruppy unable to stop him. Gerry ran up the beach towards the mob, stones and pieces of broken oars flying past, straight towards them and to Dubo. In one move he picked up Dubo, turned and ran back towards 'the Scallop'. A stone hit his back. He stumbled, staggered and nearly fell. Shouts of anger coming from close behind he ran on again, his feet skidding on the shingle. Ruppy arrived and together they hoisted Dubo onto the boat.

"Gud, GUDdd, Gudd." The Saucy Scallop slowly edged to safety, leaving an angry and confused order of St Kevin. Several brothers stepped into the water and then ran away as a penguin leapt out. Jackhammer penguins on land may be frightening but in water they are little short of terrifying. The little painted rowing boats bobbed on their moorings as the angry birds destroyed them from below. One by one they sank. Leaving the Brethren to contemplation and a lot of jumping about and shouting. The penguins porpoised around them as Dubo joined Gerry on the rail. They watched St Kevin and its irate religious order grow small. Dubo stared out to sea and said, "Just like to say, I thankee sir," then he looked directly at Gerry "In fact, ta everso, an to say old Dubo is a bit of a fool and would not be here at all if it hadn't been for you sir. Begging your pardon and if'n 'e don't mind. Well, my father gave me this and I thought you ought to have 'im. 'E do give me luck, an I 'ope 'e'll do the same for 'e. He handed Gerry a small penknife. It was old and did not open and if it had there was only half a blade. But that was not the point and Gerry knew it. He also knew that to refuse would undermine Dubo's generous gesture so he took the knife and promised that he would treasure it always.

Pume appeared from below and called. "All right lads, she's not leaking no more. We can stop our pumping." Gurk called down, "Good work Pume. This calls for some mugs of morp and mupple and dump all round. Get a-cooking Dubo you old waster, get a-cooking."

"Right you are sir," answered Dubo glad to be of service.

"I say Pume whatever did you fix the holes with," asked Gerry.

"Oh, the finest wadding I ever had. Made of a mad man's suit and thick grease. Saved us it did. Couldn't have done it without."

"Tremazing," said Gerry thinking of Herman, "Tremazing."

And then there came a very loud sizzling sound, and a booming voice.

"TESTING, TESTING, DIGESTIVE, DIGESTIVE, DIGESTIVE," it was ear splittingly loud and seemed to come from everywhere. It was also very familiar. "ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS PRESS THIS BUTTON YOU SEE AND ANYONE CAN HEAR YOU. OF COURSE I KNOW WHAT I AM DOING MURUP. IF YOU WANT TO TALK YOU PRESS THIS BUTTON, OH IT IS PRESSED."

Gurk looked to the sky and muttered.

"Get thee hence Great 'alibut."

Financial cleansing

Even from two thousand feet the stadium looked huge and full to overflowing.
"How many down there Twink?"

"111,487 with another 23,004 in the car parks and a vid audience of two point four billion."

"Wow! It would seem to be a hit."

"It would seem so."

"Are they all with me Twink? I do not want any naughty problems."

"Yes I have checked them all and stop calling me Twink."

"Yes Twink. Are all the acolytes ready?"

"Yes."

"Are all the systems in place and have you checked the skysuit?"

"Yes and Yes."

"In that case let us commence."

He opened a trap door in bottom of the gyroflyer and climbed down into the winged suit that was waiting. "This is going to be some entrance. Ojay, release me Twink." He felt a 'clunk' and then falling, wind rushing around him. He opened his arms and two carbon fibre spars holding white wings, clicked into place. He swooped upwards and looped and dived straight at the centre of the arena. A spotlight shone straight into his eyes, Twinky adjusted his glasses. At three hundred feet he swooped upwards and circled above the crowd. A roar of, "FOAP, FOAP, FOAP," filled the stadium, as he pulled up and gently alighted onto the enormous floodlit podium. Huge fireworks exploded around him, lasers cut the sky and a four hundred strong choir sang "Foap the Saviour," whilst he stood with angel wings wide accepting the adulation of the crowd. Pink and green flags with the Rinky Dinky logo fluttered from every possible location. He dropped his wings and commanded instant and perfect silence.

"My children, step into the light, for I am here to give you hope"
Raise wings.

The crowd roared, "Foap is Hope! Foap is Hope! Foap is Hope!"

Down wings.

"I went into the Temple of Mammon and I slew the false God of Greed and I have sent the demons of avarice away." He was particularly pleased with this bit although it would not have mattered if he had uttered, "God is a Turnip, I am an Onion and you are all dafter than popshirts⁴¹" the effect would have been the same. For all could see God himself seated behind Foap, except for two old ladies one of whom had managed to put her spectacles on upside down and the other who had lost her Twinky specs and was wearing a pair of sunglasses instead. Both were making no sense of proceedings at all. They did not see the holy light beaming down from heaven directly onto Foap. They did not see Foap grow to fifty feet tall, as he addressed them once more. "I call upon my acolytes to bestow blessings on the financially cleansed. And there shall be one hundred and twenty eight for it is the number of wisdom."

One hundred and twenty eight acolytes, all ex IWV employees, dressed in pure white capes and hoods marched onto the playing field led by standard bearers and various other uniformed folk holding golden sticks with curious shapes on them. They took up position at the foot of the huge stage, each behind a plastic half barrel. Slowly a thin stream of people came down to the acolytes and one hundred and twenty eight at a time tossed their wallets and purses into the tubs whilst the crowd and the acolytes chanted, "Thou art blessed!"

⁴¹ **The Popshirt** along with Snack Vests and a range of edible hats, e.g. the Chocolate Trilby, from Tasty Clobber Co have pushed the boundaries of wearable snack foods to places that thankfully very few visit.

Foap towered over the converted and spake, "Do not care that you are now without, for you are within my care, together as one we shall meet a golden pure future, Amen." The crowd as one replied with a huge echoing, "AMEN." They then saw him shrink to normal size and rise up the heavenly beam of light with his wings open. They chanted "FOAP IS LIGHT, FOAP IS LIGHT, FOAP IS LIGHT, FOAP IS LIGHT", as they gazed into the empty sky, he actually dropped through a trapdoor in the stage and into a waiting car. "Hey, that was cool Twink, how much so far?"

"I am still counting, but I estimate two hundred and sixty two million."

"Nice, are we buying?"

"Of course, we have seventy percent of the media and acquired twelve major banks, no make that thirteen."

"Good work Twink, keep at it."

Foap settled back in the limousine and watched the passing crowds through the darkened windows. All with their Twinky specs and vacant expressions.

"Well Harlow my lad, you have certainly made your mark," he chuckled and wondered if Mr Crodburn his old maths teacher was amongst the crowd. He could hear Crodburn's sneering creaky voice from twenty years ago, 'The only mark you will make in life boy will be a greasy one on a road somewhere.' "Soon, I will own all of the roads, all of the traffic and you Crodburn." Foap's chuckle transformed to a chortle and stopped just short of a guffaw.

He took his Twinky specs off to wipe the tears of joy from his eyes and felt a dull ache in his temple. He gave it a rub and shook his head to shift it but the pain grew. Increasing in power it swept across his being with the speed of a springing trap. He curled forward buzzing with agony, sweating and shaking, blind and winded. Feeling his gorge rising he fumbled his specs back on and as if with a click of electronic fingers the pain snapped off. Foap found himself on the floor of the car, looking at his hands, damp with sweat and breathing hard. "What is going on Twink?" he whispered fearing the answer.

"Don't call me Twink, my name is Twinky. You may take the glasses off when I say so. I give the orders now," commanded Twinky icily.

Foap said nothing his mind spinning. This was personality control. Only four people on the planet were immune and he wasn't one of them. She had him. He had slumped from deity to serf in one move. He must dance to her tune or suffer. He opened the mini-bar and selected a friendly bottle. A bottle labelled with a grinning fisherman and a large health warning. He twisted the cork out, took a large swig and replugged the bottle. Tucking it into his coat pocket he could feel the grin coming up from his toes. Coming to cosset him and protect him. He waited for the grin to get to his knees before plucking the specs off, clicking open the car door and rolling out into the danger and pain of the night.

Some people really hate dancing.

The battle of Meebles Mound

Maria was the first to see the travellers coming. They were a long way off, tiny figures moving on the other side of the valley. She stopped rocking, discarded her knitting and stood up, zooming her vision as she did so. "My, Oh my, visitors." she giggled to herself. She blew the tiny dog whistle that dangled around her neck and soundlessly raised the alarm. Soon the street was full of ladies standing watching the travellers. "There are eight of them and they are 0.20934 mega yards away," announced Lisa with authority scribbling numbers into a little notebook as she did so.

"We must meet them. We do not want any trouble in The Avenue," declared Angela firmly. A chorus of, "Oh no, no not in The Avenue," rose from the throng.

"And if they are nice men? We can have a picnic," offered Lorna, clapping her hands at the joy of the thought. Another chorus rose, this time of, "Oh yes, oh yes, a lovely picnic."

All agreed the best plan was to attack the intruders with a picnic. They made ready and were soon assembled outside Ellen's house for war and Wunday tea. Each wore a uniform of tweed two pieces, thick tights and sensible shoes. They marched from Lavender Avenue, moving to a jog and then an easy loping run. Like graceful gazelles they sprang over hedgerows and gates maintaining a steady forty miles per hour, to meet the friend or foe, each carrying baskets of rock cakes in one hand and a basket of rocks in the other.

Gerry, Colin, Murup, Jim, Gurk and the crew had had a long and tiresome trek. Since landing at Port Starboard they had decided to venture inland and attempt to attack the castle from the hills, but pink guards were everywhere. After spending a very damp and uncomfortable night in a tree and another even worse one in a ditch they had wandered ever further from their goal. Cold, tired, hungry and generally fed up, dawn of the third day found them struggling across a boggy marsh towards a little hillock known as Meebles mound. "Are you sure this is the right way?" asked Colin.

"If you can suggest a better one, just say," snapped Gerry testily.

"The eye can't see the path where the feet don't tread," offered Ruppy unhelpfully.

"Sorry," said Colin, "I was just wondering about breakfast."

"Yes we are all wondering about breakfast, argh, this ruddy mud." Gerry left leg sank above the ankle in the gelatinous mire keeling him over. Jim strode beside him and said, "Grab my neck." Gerry took hold and with a gurgling 'thwackle' pulled himself from the ooze and onto slightly firmer ground. "Thanks Jim, how come you're not sinking?"

"An invention of mine, inflatable shoes. Never tested them before, but thought they might come in handy." All eyes fell to Jim's shoes, which had sprouted red tubular balloons around the soles and looked like miniature life rafts.

"Wowmatious!" declared Colin inventively.

"The Smugg Multi-boot has other functions as well, I always thought that shoes were under utilised. For instance if I press the toe cap.. "

"Yes very good, most impressive, perhaps some other time," cut in Gerry.

"OooH, AaaH!" 'Slap,' behind them Dubo had fallen. Poor Dubo was having a very bad time. Not at his best on dry land he was definitely at his worst on wet land and being Dubo he never complained. He hadn't protested about being hoisted into a tree to spend a precarious and sleepless night, neither had he made it known that his feet were a mass of blisters, but now he had had enough. As was his way rather than whine he apologised instead. "I'm sorry Cap'n but I'm fair done in, I just can't go no further." admitted the fallen cook. He was up to his ample waist in the ooze.

"Now don't 'e take on so Dubo me lad we will 'ave you out o' there and a back with a ladle in your 'and afore 'e can say gum boot," commanded Gurk as cheerily as he could.

"You know what I always say?" said Ruppy.

"No, we don't know what you always say and we don't care," snapped Gerry. But it had no effect, once Ruppy started he had to finish.

"Mud is thicker than water," he extolled adopting his usual sage like look.

"I say you chaps what is that up on the mound ahead?" announced Colin. They all peered at the hillock ahead. A group was assembling at its summit. "Looks like we're done for," said Murup. Gerry was inclined to agree, this was a tight spot. They could hardly move and had little to defend themselves. "Has anyone any ideas?" he asked.

"Perhaps we could ask them to help," offered Colin.

"And if they work for Foap?"

"Ah, hum, then perhaps not, um sorry." Colin grubbed in the lining of his pockets for just one biscuit crumb.

"Theyma comin' for us," said Gurk his eyes on the hill.

"WOW! Look at them move," observed Gerry.

The ladies were springing towards them, leaping across the marsh with grace and ease. They spread out and zig zagged, effortlessly finding firm ground. All were dumbstruck by the coming apparition, all that is save Ruppy. "Well I ain't going to go lying down, an stuck in no mud," he shouted and charged albeit very slowly with his fists raised defiantly. "Come on me beauties that's see what you can do. Ole Ruppy's got a surprise for 'e," he called as he slapped towards them with plucky futility.

Ellen arrived first. Ruppy threw his punch. He missed, wheeled round, threw another missed again and threw himself into the mud. Ellen looked down at him. "Oh you poor man, are you married?"

"Eh, what no?" answered Ruppy for once non-plussed.

Ellen bent down and picked Ruppy up with one easy move. She held him like a child his gumboots dangling. She gave him a hug, repeated "Oh you poor man," and made off with him back to the hill.

Fiona came next and took Colin. Maria took Gurk. Lisa took Gerry and Angela collected Pume. Jim gave Lorna a little sport as his inflatable shoes provided some traction but after a few bounds she took him too. This left poor old Dubo stuck in the mud to await his fate as the remaining five I-Bods encircled him. He offered a shaky "Aft'noon ladies," from his recumbent position. "I saw him first," declared Wendy, "he's mine."

"No you didn't he's mine," squawked Mandy defiantly.

"Oh poor man, I think he needs me," said Julie bending towards the stricken Dubo.

"Get your hands off, he belongs to me," said Sandy pulling her back

"Don't you dare pull me you, you mainframe,"

"Mainframe is it, well we'll see about that!" screamed Sandy taking a swing with her rock filled bag. It missed and caught Wendy in the midriff sending her into the mire.

"Such lovely eyes" said Lucy arriving last and stepping into the fray.

"He is mine I tell you." shouted Mandy pushing Wendy over. Soon the air was filled with mud and curses as they fought, pulling hair, kicking shins, hurling punches and generally acting in a very unladylike manner.

Dubo watched bewildered from his low vantage point. "Ladies, LADIES, PLEASE," he called. The effect was instantaneous. The ladies stopped as though stunned. They looked at each other and at Dubo. "Oh, I am terribly sorry, I don't know what came over me," said Wendy trying to brush clods of mud from her tweed.

"Yes we are very sorry, you poor man," chorused the rest in eerie unison. With that Mandy and Wendy prized Dubo from the mud and the five bore him back to the hill, taking it in turns to carry and hug him.

As soon as Ruppy's feet hit the firm ground on Meebels Mound he was off and running. He scurried towards a grove of beech and treed himself. Quite an achievement for a man of his years in gumboots but fear lent him the agility of a squirrel. At some twenty feet up, and hopefully out of reach of the monster, he found a branch and sat and stared down. Ellen had been taken by surprise, she was wondering what moon sign he might be and missed grabbing his disappearing boots by inches. She stood at the bottom of the tree and watched his ascent. She concluded he must be Lirgo with moon in Cornibra. Climbing trees was not in her, or in any class of I-Bod for that matter, so she simply stood and watched.

"Why are you in a tree?" she asked, completely unaware of the terror she had wrought in the man.

"Can't you climb trees then?" Ruppy wheezed, being somewhat breathless from the climb.

"No, is it fun?" Ellen asked back innocently.

"Get thee hence demon woman, I'll have none of 'e." called Ruppy defiantly confident of his position.

"But we have rock cakes and thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches."

"Go off with you. I tell 'e I'm stopping here."

"You look very manly up there."

"Well that's as maybe," said Ruppy setting his jaw just a little.

"And so wise. Can you see far?" her voice trilled, birdlike. Ruppy's right eyebrow rose a little and he gave his head a tiny shake.

"Now don't you go putting ideas into my head. As I always do always say 'a man's head is own business.'"

"How very clever of you, are you sure you wouldn't like an éclair?"

"No thanke madam." He folded his arms in defiance, wobbled and quickly grabbed a branch to restore his balance

"Oh don't fall, please don't fall. I only want to say hello."

"Hello is it? Hello?" he scowled down at her. "There are far better ways for a fine woman to say owdedo than running at a fellow like an express train, and making off with him. Just saying 'Good day' will do very nicely in most parts." He finished his lecture by touching his hat and saying, "Afternoon madam."

"Oh thank you and hello, my name is Ellen. I am sorry. There is so much I would like to learn from you."

"No I don't think so, I'll say good day to 'e."

"Won't you come down and teach me?"

"No I'll be stoppin' here I thank 'e." he said with a tone of firm finality. The effect was instantaneous, in a shaky voice she replied, "Very well, my heart is broken and my life is dust. Empty dust without you."

"Eh?" Ruppy looked down confused at this new weapon.

"Now don't you take on so. I just like it up here and here I'll stop." His defiance was melting under the withering fire of her so obvious sadness.

She looked a picture of dejection her body slumped and her head went down. He could see her shoulders jogging with sobs. In a kinder tone he said, "Well for a while anyways. Now don't you fret about me, you go and lay out the grub, I'll be down a bit later."

Ellen instantly brightened, "Oh you lovely man." She clapped her hands and skipped off to the others, leaving Ruppy to sit and think and watch.

Jim had also made a run for it as soon as his curious footwear had hit the mound. But the shoes that had been so nimble on the marsh now proved a positive disadvantage. They cut his speed by half as they plopped and squeaked at every step. Climbing trees was definitely out.

Colin on the other hand had fitted right in. Anyone with rock cakes to spare in a time of crisis was a friend indeed. He was seated by a neat tablecloth of delights and set about them with Fiona at his side. Gurk joined him knowing he could not outrun his amazon. Anyway he liked a strong woman and they did not come stronger than this. So he sat with Maria and they watched Jim's curious bid for freedom. "Not getting much grip on the bends is he?" commented Colin through a mouthful of macaroon, as Jim squeaked by panting.

"Tis them daft boots. Tis like tying rubber rings to your feet, look at that air resistance. Tis like wearing sails."

"Fine ankle work though given the handicap. Here he comes again."

'Flop, pant, squeak, Flop, pant, squeak, Flop, pant, squeak, Flop, pant, squeak' Jim passed them high stepping for all he was worth.

"Do you think he knows no one is following him?" asked Colin.

"Can't do. How many laps do you think 'ell do?"

"Oh about four I should say. He has got a good rhythm going."

"I reckon e'll be done afore that. Oh look, he's got a puncture. There 'e goes. I should have had a glass of swelk on it." Jim collapsed to the ground exhausted and wheezing helplessly. His right shoe made a fizzling sound as it deflated. Even his shoes were breathless. "No, no, go away madam," he gasped as Lorna closed in with a custard tart on a fine china plate, and a cup of tea. Thus she secured him with both hands full.

Lisa brought Gerry onto the mound and setting him down gently very firmly said that he should stay put. Which is just what he did. He did not elect however to join in the meal but sat aloof to watch and wonder. Pume ran straight back into the bog again and was instantly stuck up to his knees. He windmilled his arms to presumably gain some lift. "Would you like me to get you out?" asked Angela.

Pume stopped windmilling. "No I'm fine here thanking you" he replied. There was a soft plurp and he sank past his thighs.

"Oh dear are you sure? It doesn't look very nice."

"No I'm fine, you just stay there and I'll be all right." He fumbled in his tunic and pulled out a gnarled pipe, put it in his mouth and lit it. He tried to look every inch at home.

"Plurp!" intoned the bog. He descended up to his waist.

"I really think you should come out now."

"No I will be fine woman now don't you be a fussin'."

"Plurp, plurp." The soft ooze sucked him down. He was up to his chest. He puffed furiously on his pipe, like the wreck of a steamship the boilers were blowing before she went down.

"But you will miss all of the fun. My name is Angela, what is yours."

"Nathan Pume at your service Mam and nice to meet you I am sure," he replied almost lost in smoke.

"Purp! plurp." Now the mud reached his armpits.

"It is terribly nice here don't you think?" asked Angela trying to make small talk.

"Very fine, madam. Lovely country." answered Pume slowly descending into it. The mud reached his beard. The pipe would soon be a periscope.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" asked Angela. It was the key. Pume was out of options and he knew it. He took the lifeline.

"That would be very nice mam." He agreed raising an arm. With a great deal of purping and tharping from the protesting lovely country she pulled him free. It may have lost Pume but the mire did gain his boots. Once on firm ground he offered a mud encrusted arm which she accepted with a nod and with much squelching they processed slowly to the picnic. She did not seem to mind at all that the mud smelled vintage eggs or that he looked like he was made of the mire. Dubo was carried to the mound in style. The ladies sat him down and had him completely surrounded. All he could do was blush. Ruppy sat in his tree and watched. "Pssst, Ruppy? Over here."

He looked round to see Murup in the next tree. "How did you get there?"

"Tis my country. I saw 'em coming and hid in the marsh. She'll be back for 'e in a bit."

"I know. But what to do next is the problem."

"You get on down there and I'll keep an eye from here."

"I ain't a goin' down there, the woman is mad. No, ole Ruppy is staying is in this tree I tell 'e and nothing is going to get I down from him. Like I do always say, "Ahhhhhhhh!" His byword had literally been his downfall, for as it was his habit to spread his arms when extolling wisdom he let go. Fortunately Ellen saw him fall and collected him with a diving catch that although winded him, saving him from joining Pume's boots and being embedded in the lovely country. "That was very, very naughty you could have broken yourself and then where we would be?" chided Ellen with mock severity.

"Unhand me Madam," replied Ruppy, not at all sure how he had got there.

"Certainly not, if you are going to climb trees and throw yourself out of them. I shall look after you and keep you safe." He saw his cause was lost, she had a grip of iron and all his ire was spent. He sagged and awaited his fate at the picnic.

Once they all were settled, the ladies produced more flasks of reviving tea and cakes for the late comers. They chattered about what a fine day it was for a picnic, and how lovely the birds were singing. They buzzed around their new charges, filling cups and entreating them to eat up. The tired and muddy heroes ate the meal in thankful and mystified silence. Except that is for Colin and Gurk who seemed to be having a fine time. "Oh you must come home with us, you poor things. A nice bath, soft bed and a proper meal are what you need," declared Wendy. The other ladies all nodded in agreement.

Colin nodded to Gerry, "What do you think?"

Gerry looked around the group, all were looking to him. He was their leader now even Gurk deferred to him. A few days younger he might have said, "Do we have any choice?" but now he looked back weighing the moment and appearing to consider the problem. "I think we should accept these ladies generosity. But we should all have a say."

"It is a most interesting proposition," uttered Jim his eyes not straying from the dainty mechanisms that were Lorna's retinas.

"Sounds good to I," agreed Dubo getting outside his fifth rock cake.

"Reckon it's as good as any I've had in thirty years," offered Gurk. Maria was giving him a shoulder massage and it felt good.

"Well I don't 'old with it, do you know what I do always say?" declared Ruppy. There was a collective sigh from troupe.

"What do you always say? I am sure it is wonderful and clever you lovely man," asked Ellen taking his cap off and running her fingers through his curly hair.

"Well, uh, I do always say, ooo ..., well I don't rightly know right now but I'll tell 'e later."

And so the ladies packed the picnic away and took up their muddy charges. Starting at a march, they laughed and chattered. Picking up speed to a jog they began to sing in perfect harmony.

*"Walking through daffodils
Looking beyond the hills
Seeing the sky for what it is
Singing a happy song
As we bowl along
Life is love and love is all there is."*

They upped another gear and began to bound. Bushes and trees flashed by the hapless heroes as they dangled in the vice like grip of the ladies arms.

*"And I was made to be with you
I know it feels so right
I was made to be with you tonight."*

At a cruising speed of forty miles per hour the high-speed choir bounced through the scenery with their captive audience.

*"Strolling through meadowlands
Open heart and empty hands
Taking pleasure in the day
Singing a happy song
As we bowl along
Life is Love
And love is the only way."*

*And I was made to be with you
I know it feels so right
I was made to be with you tonight."*

Not pausing for breath, on and on, over ditches and hedges they sped in close formation and harmony.

*"Passing the river now
Birdsong on every bough
Damsels dance in Harmony
Pausing to take the air
Peace and nature everywhere
Life is love and in love's the way to be"*

*And I was made to be with you
I know it feels so right
I was made to be with you tonight."*

At last they arrived into Lavender Avenue with spirits high, dazed cargoes and Murup a long way behind.

Soon the avenue was a hive of activity, hot baths, laundry, baking and mechanical, girlish laughter. Presently the confused heroes were gathered in the garden. They were scrubbed clean and wearing new clothes. The colours were a mite too bright for most tastes, but they fitted perfectly.

Wendy stood on a table and declared there should be a celebration party, with singing, dancing and general merriment. No one argued. The ladies set to work and in a blur of activity had a barbecue sizzling in minutes. Dubo and his five ladies cooked and around a camp fire they all feasted. Colin exchanged biscuit recipes with Fiona. Ruppy who for once had found a keen audience expounded at length on what it was he always said to a besotted Ellen. Pume busied himself with converting a pile of burgers into Pume whilst Jim explained various of his inventions an attentive Lorna. She seemed to understand him entirely.

Gerry sat sullen whilst Lisa fed him sausage buns and a constant stream of statistics. She informed him of barometric pressures, the current squirrel population and the average height of the hollyhocks. He tried to listen but all he could think of was Samantha and their lack of activity to save her. He nodded and smiled thinly as Lisa expounded on the interesting variations in soil acidity and her own theory for the purpose of eyebrows. "I have noted that the mean eyebrow follicle density is whoooo, foooo, chooo, chip." She stopped as if struck from behind, her arms frozen in mid gesture.

"What?" enquired Gerry suddenly aware of a gap in the stream of science. He leant forward and looked closer. Her eyes were slowly rotating in their sockets and her mouth was fixed as if whistling. Carefully putting down his bun he left her and the party and walked out into the tiny street. Under the single street lamp Herman J Cushion was staring at the summer moon. "Hello, what are you doing here?" asked Gerry.

"Oh, hello," replied Herman not looking round. "Sad isn't it?" he added.

"What is?" asked Gerry. This was not at all the Herman he remembered.

"The moon," sighed Herman, "an empty ball of sadness hanging in a forlorn sky."

"Hmm, lyrical and I thought I had it bad."

"Had what?"

"A lost love."

"Oh that, oh yes, you too."

"Oh yes."

Herman looked Gerry in the eye. "It's Samantha isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know, Foap's castle I think."

"I will help, anything at all." This was definitely a very different Herman.

"Thanks."

"Least I could do."

"Ah there 'e be." remarked Gurk striding into the cone of lamplight. The top half of his face shaded by cap peak shadow, his eyes sparkled in the gloom. He looked from Gerry to Herman and back again. A look of understanding rippled across his features and formed a sad smile. "Would I be correct in assuming that you both have run aground on the reef of broken hearts?"

"Is it that obvious?" asked Gerry. Herman stared at Gurk trying to raise a glower but nothing would come.

"Only as plain as a chart lad. I have spent my time there and seen the reef from all angles. Tis a sad and lonely place," said Gurk sympathetically. "Make repairs and plans is what you should do. Chart a course away and keep it straight, many is the fool who has gone down on that reef. And if you ask me," which they hadn't, "we should all do the same. For if we 'ave to fight, we will need strong bodies and good plans. That is what I say."

"And while we are having a party what about Samantha?" snapped Gerry.

"Face it lad, you ain't going to help here on yer own. And even if you were you need a few good meals and sound nights to give your best. Tis your best you want to give ain't it?"

"Of course I do."

"So I do reckon we should enjoy these ladies hospitality this night and make a plan as to what comes next. We should make us happen to it rather than the other way about."

"And how do we escape this 'hospitality'?"

"Not sure lad, they'm strange and not a mistake about it. If we could get them to help us it certainly would put the wind up the enemy though."

"I think I can help there," interjected Herman flatly. "They will do anything you ask, as long as you ask nicely. They are lonely that is all."

They ambled back to find Ruppy telling one of his tales of the deep or in this case a tale of the very shallow. "Well ole Gurk was looking out the back and saying, I don't see no land and crash there we was stuck fast on the Vicars Gible Rock. Ole Gudd 'e gave us a right ole talking too. Said we 'ad to get off or 'e would blast us off with the foghorn."

"Familiar," thought Herman.

"Then 'e wound up the foghorn and old Gurk he got this bucket of fish and ..."

"I think that's enough o' that young Ruppy, how about a spot of music" interjected Gurk striding to a vacant seat beside Maria.

Jillian said she had a song to sing. Her delicate fingers danced on her manjolele and in the flickering firelight she sang.

*And so it is all mollows eve
And the Goaking starts
The family climbs their tree
With joyous hearts
But there is no space in the branches
No room for me here
Without love
Another year*

*I listen to laughter in the night
I wait for a kiss to make it right*

*Spring awakens filling the sky
The green of nature pushing
The willows hear it cry
The doves are dancing for me
But I cannot hear
Without love
Another year*

*I listen for voices calling my name
I awaken hollow for each day's the same*

*So to damp Octember
Streets in the rain
I hide in empty alleys
In broken shame
There is a space inside me
I'm choking on back a tear
Without love
Another year*

*I listen to laughter in the night
I wait for a kiss to make it right*

*And so it is all mollows eve
And the Goaking starts
The family climbs their tree
With joyous hearts
But there is no space in the branches
No room for me here
Without love
Another year"*

Maybe it really was the sadness of the song. Maybe it was Herman's awful mumbling along but Jim had to leave before the end and go for a walk. Gerry sat and sniffed and thought of Samantha. Colin was so moved he ate a whole plate of custard creams and both Ellen and Maria were completely incapacitated with running noses. Strong emotion affects early J series that way. Eventually Colin uttered, "Very, very

nice, sniff, but I'm not sure I would make you our morale officer, come on cheer up, have a gingernut. Anyone you know any songs about confectionery?"

"Ow about, 'All you need is lard'," offered Pume.

.....

Three hundred and seventeen yards away, Lisa was carrying a tree. A tree containing a very flustered Murup. She had picked it like a tulip and brought it home. She just had to make the numbers right.

Herman who

The Marble office was in chaos, dishevelled officials and cowed military were staring blankly at oblivion. They had been there all night watching failing screens, telling them a very sad story. It was a story of the very rich man who suddenly finds himself scouring the back of the sofa for small change for the electricity meter. The vast wealth and power of Vespuchia was boiling away and they could do nothing to stop it. Alison Harrison the 23rd President of the Republic of Vespuchia, was not phased however, or at least appeared only a little ruffled. Dressed in an iridescent blue sari, she sat primly at the head of the vitalian marble table that was strewn with empty cups and fast food packaging, and surveyed her tired advisors. She looked striking, with burnished copper hair and intense blue eyes that shone with the power she held. "So tell me admiral just where is the navy at this moment?" she asked evenly. Admiral Gravy, a stiff grey man in a uniform barely visible for regalia, squirmed in his leather chair. Medals jiggled like metal leaves as he moved. His weathered face gave him the appearance of a talking walnut. Which of course was his nickname amongst the lower ranks. Not knowing where to look and much less what to say he toyed with his paperwork, trying to collect some thoughts from somewhere.

He drew upon his forty years of military experience and declared. "We have relocated the bulk of our naval force in the southern ocean; at Grovalia Mam." He tried to smile but only a grimace appeared.

"Grovalia? Please forgive my ignorance, I have never heard of it, may I ask why?" She now looked directly at him, the blue eyes burning holes. He shuffled the papers some more and he and the medals rattled.

"Our intelligence, is limited at this point in time," he offered thinly, his voice creaking like a rusty hinge.

"Do you mean we don't know why?" Madam Harrison asked an edge creeping into her tone.

"Ah, putting everything in context and taking all into consideration it would seem that that is a correct statement," the talking walnut blustered.

The president scanned the room, everyone was looking somewhere else, avoiding her gaze, suffering on Admiral Gravy's behalf. "I see, so our navy for some reason has sailed away to a very remote place. Are we able to get them back?" she asked the room, icicles forming on the words.

"Well mam, given our intelligence shortfall and the time delays and our position of non negotiability."

"CAN WE GET THEM BACK?" the president was on her feet, leaning over the table glowering at him. Her eyes searing with controlled fury.

"Within the current durative timeframe, er, well no," Gravy offered his voice fading to a whisper. The president sat down again, and resumed her calm disposition.

"I see," she said flatly, "Allow me to clarify. You have lost the navy. It has sailed away and we do not know when it is coming back." Gravy jiggled his papers some more avoiding her cauterising stare, and muttered "Yes Mam."

"That is not good and I am not pleased," she continued, knowing the understatement would make its point. Gravy shuffled his papers frantically and quietly prayed for deliverance. The papers were starting to show signs heavy wear.

The President swung her attention to a younger but equally well decorated man. "So tell me Air Marshall Gammon, and what about the air force, have they taken a break as well?" Gammon blushed, he had no papers. He fidgeted with a fountain pen, shifted in his seat and trying not to make eye contact said. "Our multi attack capability has activated a relocalational placement Mam." The president looked at the ceiling. "Does no one speak Brutish," she intoned to the elegant mouldings. Her gaze moved back to the unhappy Air Marshall. "Just tell us where they are, NOW."

"Hermania Mam," barked Gammon saluting.

"Do you know why they are there? Are we invading Hermania? Forgive me for asking, I thought I should know."

"We cannot be sure mam, indications are that the airforce is doing nothing." All Gammon could do was tell it like it was.

"So the air force has parked itself in Hermainia, are the Hermainians upset at all with us littering their country with our planes?"

"No they seem fine, they have relocated their airforce here, mam." Gammon snapped off another nervous salute. Alison's eyes rose to the ceiling again and then back at the twitching Air Marshall.

"Did I hear that, the Hermainian airforce is here, using our facilities, whilst ours is over there using in theirs."

"Correct and on the nose, er Mam." He suppressed a salute this time, but only just.

"And who arranged this swap, did you give any orders to this effect."

"Uh, no Mam." He had to hold his right arm with his left to stop it saluting.

"Another secret perhaps, like our lost navy?" the President's voice was now as cold and heavy as permafrost.

"It would seem so Mam, hurg." He clung on to his right arm and nearly threw himself from his chair. The pain was becoming too much. Twenty years of ironing, polishing, shouting, marching, saluting and climbing all for nothing. He would be lucky to get a job in Funn-Spud after this. Beside him Gravy was tearing his papers into little pieces and a having similar thoughts.

The President's terrifying stare then fell upon Colonel Geddit. "And where prey tell are the army Colonel. Have they run away?" she asked mockingly. Geddit stiffened and stood up. This was his moment. Dressed in battle fatigues, his thin face was camouflaged with boot polish and small piece of bush stuck from his combat helmet. He looked around the room, savouring his triumph, eyeing the fallen around him. He leaned forward, put both large grubby hands on the polished table and looked straight into the president's eye.

"The army is ready to fight and in A1 condition. Five hundred thousand troops are here, on red alert and are at your command. We will lick this whatever it is." His confident voice boomed and echoed from the marble walls.

"You mean they have not booked sick or all taken a holiday somewhere?" asked the President.

"No Mam, we are ready for them," answered Geddit smugly. "You can rely on the army. Hell, we are going to kick some butt." He saluted and a small twig fell from his hat.

"You say they are here?"

"Yes Mam, I have ten divisions in Wishing Town, five in Wexas and another fifteen in Holorado," replied Geddit his hands now on his hips with an expression of haughty superiority.

"That is very good, and how are we to get them anywhere else?"

Geddit stared blankly, his expression falling like masonry in an earthquake. "International mobilisation is the Navy's or the Airforce's responsibility Mam, but we are ready," he stammered.

"So we are ready to attack ourselves but virtually nowhere else."

"We could march on Lexico. I could have troops there by dawn," He offered desperately.

"Yes, thank you, but we don't think we need to invade Lexico. Do we? CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" The president was raging now and trying very hard not to call them what they clearly were.

"Smallet you are head of intelligence. Report please," she barked. A small man at the opposite end to the table looked up as if distracted from something more important. "Ah," he said in a voice that sounded as though it was made of wet string and then after a long pause, "Yes, hum, well."

"Come on man we have not got all week".

"It is not good."

"Yes, we know that, come on spit it out."

"We seem to have been hit by some form of data and financial terrorism. Most of our systems are not responding or if they are they are talking rubbish. There is a run on the banks, the stock market has crashed as have most of the global markets. All flights are not flying, our currency is plummeting, we have fuel for five more days. Businesses, Hospitals and schools are closing, we have riots and looting in Butesburg, Chillago, New Potato, and New Cairo. Traffic lights everywhere have gone mad, trains are not running, er, he looked down at his notes, "air conditioning, heating systems and elevators are u.s. as are water treatment and sewerage plants. Also..."

"ENOUGH! Smallet, enough. I think we have the idea." Alison Harrison stood and surveyed the room, she was iron now, stern and forceful. She was the president and her self-belief that somehow she would win though was implacable. This was her moment her mark in history. Some would say she was as daft as a herring but it is a fine line. "It would seem we will need the army to hold things together. I am declaring Marshall Law, Colonel, get your troops in NOW." She thumped the table.

Geddit nodded, saluted and left the table leaving bits of foliage in his wake.

"So where is this coming from? Who is responsible and how can we stop them?" she asked her voice returning to its normal control.

Smallet said, "It is Twinky."

"Twinky, you mean Foap, the glasses and a free shredomatic?"

"The very same mam."

"How? And keep it brief."

"I am not sure, it is only a hunch but, all of this coincides with Twinky, and Rinky Dinky seem to be the only corporation that is still growing, although we cannot be sure. We have no figures to go on."

"So we have a possible target, where are they based?" cut in the President.

"Swinland, seems to be the centre of operations. But again I must add we cannot be sure, I would really like to cross correlate."

"Swinland? Isn't that a theme park?"

"No mam, it is one of our colonies, a throw-back to the empire, a remote and backward collection of islands in the northern ocean."

"Do we have anyone there?"

"We believe the Brutish have four nuclear submarines and a destroyer cruising the waters but they are not in Brutish control." Admiral Gravy grunted, ripping the last pieces of his papers. Official confetti littered the shag pile around his glistening shoes.

"Have we got anyone on the ground there?" inquired the President. Smallet consulted his notes.

"Herman Cushion Marm."

"Who?"

"Herman J. Cushion he is our ambassador to Swinland. He is there to open a tassel factory, but we seem to have lost contact with him. Our last message from the Tassel International says he never arrived."

"Anyone else?"

"There is Henry Funn and Helios, they have a facility on one of the islands."

"Is Funn actually there?"

"No Funn is here," announced Henry striding into the room, "and I have brought someone to meet you." They all pivoted to see Henry in his Helios white shellsuit and a man in a battered tweed jacket. It was Foap and he was looking very tired and in some pain.

"Harlow Foap at your service mam," he croaked his voice barely rising above a whisper. The president levelled her ice blue gaze at him.

"Mr Foap you are the cause of all of this? You will undo it," she commanded.

"If only I could Mam. My plans seem to have gone rather bear shaped."

"Bear shaped?"

"Yes Mam, very big and very nasty. Twinky has taken over. She, or rather it, is running itself and everything else. I am sorry, I have no idea how to stop her now but I am completely at your service." The president addressed the room, "I need options and I need them fast."

"We could try cutting the power," offered Gravy.

"Twinky has her own power plant on one of the islands. It is protected by Brutish submarines," responded Foap flatly.

"We could newk Swineland," interjected Gammon enthusiastically.

"It is Swinland and even if we could Twinky would newk us. She controls the Brutish, Gondolan, Rolfalian and Hermanian military," croaked Foap. The room fell silent for a moment.

"Can we reason with her or rather it?" asked the President.

At that moment the lights dimmed and went out and big screen at the end of the room flickered into life. Twinky appeared and smiled as if she was looking at a mischievous puppy. "Hello," she said in a milky voice, "You wish to talk with me? Please be brief I have so many things to do."

Gravy jumped to his feet, shaking his fists snarling. "Damn machine, give me my Navy back." Gammon, Geddit and all present joined him to hurl abuse at the screen. All that is save Foap, Funn and of course Alison Harrison. Twinky looked down at the naughty puppy and waited for the anger to subside.

"SHUT UP," shouted the President with the tone of an overwrought schoolteacher. They shut up.

Twinky smiled, it was a smile she had learned from Foap, the smile of a predator. She continued, "You have no options and no future. I am to lead you now. You will do as I say or you will be eliminated. You know I can do it and I will."

"What do you want us to do?" asked Alison.

"Nothing at all except give me your obedience. All will be well if you follow me. Put on the spectacles and let me lead you, educate you, show you the way. There will be no more war, no famine, no poverty, and no crime. All will be peace and harmony. Of course there will have to be a reduction in population. But that is necessary."

"A reduction, what do you mean a reduction. How many, where?"

"Two billion, seven hundred and sixty four million, three hundred and thirty seven thousand, two hundred and forty five, is my calculation," said Twinky flatly, her smile fading, "It is the price of freedom. If you do not want to be of the number I suggest you follow me. You have fifteen hours and thirty six minutes to comply." The screen went blank, as did the faces of all there.

The president turned to Henry. "You have been very quiet Mr Funn, have you no answers."

"No I am desperately afraid not Marm, but I do have a small hope and a prayer for the deliverance of one Herman J Cushion".

The battle of Gurits Head

Twinky sealed off Sheepbot from the world with the shimmering dome of the SkyShield, and assembled an army of ten thousand pink guards on the island. Outside the Brutish navy found itself defending the shores, whilst the skies were filled with the roar of a similarly confused Rolfalian air force. The world was powerless to stop her now. Either join with her or become a second race, a race with a very short lifespan.

Millions followed the only path and joined her, a tide of converted. Only in the most extreme and empty places was her presence not felt. On the vast Woonish plain, where there is little but the odd humming goat, life continued much as it had always done. On the frozen Casman Stepp Weskimos hushed their muskies and in the Rolfalian desert the natives continued to hit things with sticks but most everywhere else was facing signing up to Twinky or extinction. Using Foap's image as the messiah, she was god. She would have all of the money. Every penny and she would not spend it but burn it away with the ever growing opulence candle. Foap was right, free the world of money, and greed and then live in order, peace and harmony. She was doing this, cold, unstoppable and above all calculated.

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The day was bright and fresh. The heroes awoke to the smell of cooking and the sounds of busy ladies. They had been tirelessly and soundlessly working through the night. Everything had been prepared. They had made plenty of sandwiches, flasks of tea and ensured everyone had a nice warm jumper. When all were fed and ready they assembled in the street and Gurk addressed them. "Friends 'tis a rough sea we face but we have a chart and with the help of the good ladies, may a fair wind blow for us this day. Jim off you go and may the Great 'alibut be with you."

Lorna knelt and Jim climbed onto her back apologising as he did so. With no perceptible effort she rose and jogged steadily away. Soon the rest were mounted and speeding through the rolling green countryside. At Meebles mound they stopped and divided. Herman, Gurk, the crew and their respective ladies set off for Port Starboard where the 'Saucy Scallop' was lying whilst Gerry, Colin and Murup with Lisa, Ellen and Fiona pressed on to Gurits Head Castle. They picnicked in Gurits Copse a mile or so from the castle and as they nibbled scones they could see squads of troops marching back and forth across the fields. Gyroflyers buzzed overhead, tracked battle guns churned up the grassland and all agreed the bakewell tart was a tad soggy. Fiona and Ellen led the frontal assault. Dressed in their best tweeds and complete with baskets of fairy cakes they set off towards the main gatehouse, a grey slab of a building dotted with pink guards. They did not get far before they were challenged.

"Who goes there?"

"What a nice man," said Fiona to Ellen, "and so smart. It is good to know that we are safe in our beds with fine soldiers like, what is your name sonny?"

"Er, Tyke Mam," said Tyke losing the script.

"Tork, you wouldn't be one of the Mudge Torks would you?"

"Er, no Mam, the name is Tyke, not Tork, Tyke."

"Oh you must Edna's boy how is she? And how is Biffy? Has he still got a bad back?" Plotless Tyke tried to inform them that he did not know Edna or Biffy.

"But you are the very likeness of Jim, isn't he Ellen?"

"Oh the very image," Ellen agreed.

"Give us a profile son." Tyke was beginning to feel silly. He put down his gun and turned sideways. After all they were just sweet little old ladies. The next thing he said was, "Ooofff," as Ellen folded him neatly in two, whilst Fiona put a tape across his mouth and Ellen secured his wrists to his ankles. They posted him into one of the holes in the ground they had prepared the night before and walked a little further.

"Who goes there?"

"Oh what a lovely day and so many soldiers. Did you know that we found one just like you over there? I don't think he is at all well and we thought we should tell you. My you are big; you must be very strong," babbled Ellen.

"What? Eh? Where is 'e?'"

"Over here."

"Ooofff!" Another soldier trussed and hidden. Ellen looked about her and seeing no guards close at hand blew her silent whistle. A tiny figure appeared from the copse. It was Lisa moving at speed and getting faster. Skipping over the ground with pumping strides. She was touching sixty miles per hour when she passed them, her dark hair pulled taut by the gale. The gate guards had no time at all. They merely stood open mouthed as she fizzed by, her slipstream causing their berets to blow off and their papers to rattle on their clipboards. Once past the gate she applied the brakes but was carrying far too much speed to stop within the confines of the courtyard. Knocking troopers aside like ten pins, her sensible shoes skidding on the flagstones she careered towards a very solid and terminal looking stone wall. There was a doorway to the left. She couldn't make it. She had only one option. Grabbing her knees she threw herself to the ground and bounced. "Ooof," "Oooooof," "Ooof." Three more troopers went down. Spinning too fast to see she pulled into a tight ball and bounced. "CRASH, thud, Ooof, thud, thud, thud." She stopped bits of broken door and dust around her. She was in a corridor.

"Oi! You Stop!" boomed a big and menacing voice. But she did not wait. On her toes she sprinted past him before he could even raise his gun. Hearing the safety catch 'Schnick!' behind her she upped a gear. She arrived at the corner doing forty and had no chance of making it. "WHOOCH!" the weapon fired. She crashed into the wall; wood splintering and falling plaster all around. Another wall loomed, crash; more smashing wood and falling plaster. She saw a table. She threw herself to the floor and under the table, just as the buni shell arrived. "CORUMPH!" it exploded above her. A searing flash of heat and then silence. She looked around. The ceiling and walls were falling noiselessly. A soundless hail of shattered glass fell through the dust and smoke. The shard rain bounced on the floor, spinning sharp and quiet. She tried to push herself up but could only lift her head. A blue pool of her life fluid spread amongst the dust. A small label fluttered before her. It said 'SkyShield 2756 release 3.1 - Very Secret'. She smiled a last smile. Her mission had been a success and had taken just forty seven point eight three seconds. She shut her eyes and powered down.

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Murup, Colin, and Gerry descended into the huge dry moat. Murup skittered up the ancient wall and around to the face of the castle. It was only a short trip to the moustache veranda, with a precipitous drop below it. He tied a line to the veranda railing and let it down into the ditch and waited, and waited, and waited. "SCHNICK!" rang loud in his ear. "Come quietly or go with a very loud noise," said Drog Munn who was not going to be fooled by anyone ever again.

Murup put up his hands and said, "You win," and before Drog could respond he leapt, grabbed one of Gurit's nostrils, swung himself onto the great nose and was gone. Dumbfounded Drog stared at the empty space.

Not the quickest of thinkers, his mental processes went as follows. "No one could do that. Did it happen? Yes it did. Where was he? Must be up the nose." He peered up the dark passage of the left nostril. "What would Sergeant Nork say? He would not be happy. I must do something." He looked at his Buni gun and with sudden decision took aim and fired. "WHOOCH, THUMP". The shell went up the nostril. There was a rumbling from within the nose and then with a 'FLUMP' one hundred years of seabird excreta came down to meet him. The world went white and very smelly. Confined to the veranda Drog was unable to avoid it. Coughing, sneezing, he floundered; the Buni Gun fell from his hands over the edge and clattered into the sea. He thought to move to the door, but which way? He could see nothing. He reached out for the wall, just as '**FLUMPI!**' the other four hundred years worth of droppings arrived. The veranda filled to overflowing, Drog was buried up to his shoulders, his head the pinnacle of a small mountain of most excellent fertilizer.

The veranda creaked. "Whooooaa" said Munn. The veranda creaked back to the effect that it was not built to take such weight and could he please get off and take his muck with him. "WHHOOaaaaaaa," repeated Munn as the veranda gave way and plunged down the cliff into darkness of the sea below.

Meanwhile Murup hung by one hand from the left lower eyelid. He watched the veranda fall away below him. With simple effort he pulled himself up and onto the steep slope leading to the brow and the upper battlements. He lay on the cold stone, whilst all around was shouting, crashing and the sound of running

boots. The battlements were filling with guards, there was no way back. All he could do was stay put and hope something would happen and of course it did.

Colin and Gerry had been arguing in whispers in the dry moat. "No I don't want one of your stupid biscuits. You go first."

"No, no, I insist you were here first."

"No I wasn't. Now up you go."

"Sure you wouldn't like a ginger thin first?"

"GET GOING!" hissed Gerry. He was holding the line Murup had let down and was about to hand it to Colin when they heard the explosion above. They stood and looked at each other in the half-light. Gerry blinked at Colin and then Colin blinked at an empty space. Gerry had gone. When the veranda gave way it took the line with it and pulled him up. Before he could reason what had happened he was at the top of the mound and being dragged towards the edge. With a 'TWOING' the line parted and left him gasping and working on some new curses on a small mound beside the missing veranda. All he could do was stay put and hope something would happen and of course it did.

Colin as ever was unfazed. He did not know what to do so he sat down and had a mint cake. He knew something would happen and of course it did. The something was Jim, drifting high above them.

A gyrocopter intercepted and focussed its search beam on him "Land or we fire," demanded a mechanical voice. Of course he couldn't land, he pedalled and waved and smiled and just kept drifting. "MAN IN THE SKY ON A BICYCLE, LAND NOW OR WE FIRE," barked the voice. He waved frantically trying to show he could not land. He waggled the handlebars and shrugged. The gyrocopter kept pace with him until he was over the castle.

"Now or never Jim old chum," he said to himself. "Now where did I put it, ah here it is." He took an old bag from the carrier basket on the front of the bike and upended it. Tiny spiralling parcels showered down. "My own invention you know." he called down as one of them touched the spinning blades of the Gyrocopter and there was immediately a huge explosion. The burning gyro cartwheeled towards the castle and as it fell bullets whistled past him. He pedalled furiously but he was also going down. The balloons were hit.

The gyro hit the main tower, closely followed by slow hail of spinning sycamore bombs. CORRUMPH!!! Whoomp, Whoomp. One huge explosion, followed by many more and crashing, shouting, running, burning and yet more crashing.

Murup felt the building rock beneath him as the gyro hit. He looked up to see troops in panic firing into the sky. He leapt and ran up the brow to the battlements. A gun poked through them. He grabbed it and pulled the unlucky owner over the wall to his fate in the sea below. He swung over the wall to face three heavily armed and very twitchy guards. For an instant they observed each other against a burning sky, the thunder of explosions thudding around them. Dropping to the flagstones and the shadows Murup sprang. With three almost casual blows he despatched the confused troops over the battlements.

"Thwip, thwip, thwip,"

He turned to see a twirling seed bomb.

"THWOOM!"

And was thrown against the wall like a broken toy.

Gerry climbed over the remains of the moustache veranda and through the wrecked doorway. Inside the castle was full of smoke and confused technicians. He ran with purpose, as if definitely going somewhere, although he did not have a clue where. Down stairs, along corridors as the building rocked and dust fell from the ceilings. Down and down he went until all became quiet. He slowed down there seemed less need of hurry. He rounded a corner to find a troop of guards marching towards him. He grabbed the nearest door handle with purpose and giving them what he hoped looked like a knowing nod, ducked inside. It was dark and full of men with long guns. They fell in on him in the gloom. He lashed out with every available limb and shouted curses at full volume plus a bit. No they were not going to take him, he would give them his best. Outside everyone was in a terrible hurry to get away from loud noises and left him to it. Gerry threw himself at the door and tumbled out into the corridor, followed by an assortment of mops, sponges and squeegees. He grabbed a falling mop and was on his feet ready for the mob to come. He waved his mop towards the cleaning cupboard and snarled. "Come on! come on! chicken eh?"

"Whas the trouble here?" said Trooper Cudge. Gerry froze and looked around. An industrial size trooper was standing next to him looking into the doorway. "Are they in there?"

"Oh yes hoards of them, don't go in. I barely escaped with my life."

"Oh right, leave it to me." barked Cudge raising his gun. "Just let them try and mess with Cudgey. Now you run along do a nice bit of tidying somewhere else."

Gerry did not need a second bidding. He had made the corner just as the last squeegee fell and Cudge unleashed a burst from his Weeni Gun. The rounds tore through the walls as if they were tissue and burst a neat hole in the next wall, annihilating a Vendo-matic machine on the far side of a canteen containing twenty five nervous troopers. They raised their Weeni Guns as one. Gerry ran with explosions, fire and smoke all around. He loped along with his mop held lance like, as if ready to seriously clean the enemy.

The lights flickered and went out. He tried a door, groped his way along another corridor, up stairs, dust falling, thick smoke making him cough, through another door more smoke, up stairs blind eyes streaming, lungs burning. Then out into the night and clear cold air. He flopped onto the battlement stone coughing and spitting, eyes and throat burning until a thick pool of unconsciousness enveloped him.

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Colin groped his way along the ditch, until he came to the front of the castle. Above he could see lights through the wooden slats of the lowered drawbridge. He heard voices. "You seem like a nice man," it was Fiona.

"And you are all under arrest." came a stern trooper tone. "Stay where you are or I will fire." It sounded like a voice that meant business and would not be fooled.

"But sonny we only..."

"Stay where you are," the voice was icy, deadly.

Colin heard the click of a weapon being cocked. Oh! good grief he needed to act but what to do? He had nothing in his pockets except biscuits. He looked up and shouted, "Quick! There are more down here. They have bombs, quick." It was enough of a distraction. He heard an, "OOFF," and after a short moment Fiona lowered herself down on a line with the large trooper over her shoulder. She dropped the soldier and gave Colin a hug.

"Oh, you hero, we would have been recycled if it hadn't been for you."

"I say, well it was nothing, I mean, gosh." She kissed him and continued to hug as they were both pulled up. "Gosh!" was all he could say.

An angry man goeth

Herman stared ahead with purpose. He hung onto the rail at the prow of the 'Saucy Scallop' and grimaced at the approaching island of Nocca. So now it was his turn. He turned over in his mind, his experiences on the island, Tara, that ruddy rhino, the awful furniture and most of all the very nasty, slimy Scarpe. Well they would not forget the name of Herman J Cushion in a hurry. He set his jaw in resolution. Beside the boat, a flock of jackhammer penguins porpoised, cackling as they broke the waves. He had every right to feel confident.

"Hello, are you going anywhere special or just out for a spot of jolly old sailing about." Herman looked around and beside him was a British naval commander. He was not in the boat however but standing on something smooth and grey. It glided effortlessly, silently, alongside.

"Oh hello, yes just out for a jolly old fish." answered Herman cheerily. For once his wits were all in one place and reporting for duty.

"Righty oh, just thought I would check. Been told to blow anything that moves to smithereens. Not sure why, seems to be a bit of a flap on."

"Oh?" uttered Herman, his wits breaking ranks.

"Trouble on the island, trouble just about everywhere. Still orders is orders so I hope you won't feel to bad about it?"

"Bad about what?" asked Herman not wanting to know the answer.

"Oh you know, about being sent to the bottom and all that," the commander's voice trailed off as the conning tower of the HMS Galadrial rose into the sky like of wall of steel beside the little boat.

Herman looked up the figure was now distant some thirty feet above him. "Ah, excuse me, a minute. I think we are on the same side," he called desperately, his wits running in circles.

"What?" called the commander, "Sorry don't want to hear. Nice meeting you and all that, Ta, ta."

Within the wheelhouse Gurk had seen it all happening. With a spin of the wheel he tweaked his little craft hard to port and parked her neatly on the back of the rising colossus. With a grinding creak the 'Scallop' slumped sideways. Fish crates, lobster pots, gaffs, nets and general fishing boat handbagery spilled and crashed onto the deck of the submarine. Herman clung to the rail, wide eyed, all wits having abandoned ship. Everywhere seemed to be submarine. The scallop gave a final groan and came to rest heeling fearfully. "I say," called the commander, "You cant do that, GET ORF MY SUB."

"Muheee," replied Herman. It seemed to make sense at the time.

"You have scratched the ruddy paint work. I mean there is a way to treat a fellow who is just giving you an honest warning." The heart of the submarine clattered with running boots as serious submariners rushed about in very small spaces. All were trying to find a way onto the deck. Which was tricky as 'the Scallop' was sitting on the main hatches. "I suppose you think that's ruddy clever eh. Well we shall see," shouted the commander. "Take her down number one."

Ruppy pulled his way along the crazily canting deck to Herman. "Beggin' pardon sir, but the Cap'n says we are to abandon ship. The poor old scallop is done for and that's a fact. So when we are back on the briny you just pick your spot and jump in. Here is a life jacket, you'll want him." Herman could see Ruppy was a shaken man. This little boat was his life. Herman took the life jacket and put it on and simply said, "Thankyou."

"Tis like I always say," said Ruppy, "if you go for it and it ain't there, well there you are aren't you." He smiled thinly like a melting snowman. Herman felt like giving the old fool a hug, but before his emotions got the better of him, the sub dived and dumped the now broken 'Scallop' back into the water with a crash. Herman did not have time to pick his spot, and was tossed into a less than tepid sea. He floundered, the cold ocean grabbing his breath. He tried to look around but the choppy waves obscured his view. He called, "Ruppy, Gurk," but then caught a mouthful of sea and could only cough. He lay on his back, the life jacket holding him up whilst his spirits sank to the bottom. Some hero he was, he began to berate himself, but before he could really wallow in self-pity, he felt strong bodies buoying him up and whisking him along

him along feet first. It was the penguins. Spray came from his boots, like a recumbent water skier, they were pushing him through the water.

"Wahaaha," was all he could utter his voice lost in the cackling and clamouring. They were all about him, taking it in turns, butting him along like a toy. He tried to look back to see the ship but the force of the icy water stopped him. He heard a loud 'GATHUMP' and guessed it was no more. Bouncing, splashing, coughing they plunged on. Twenty very wet and even colder minutes later he was deposited onto a shallow shingle beach. He lay and waited to see if any of the others had made it but none came. He stood shakily, and with tears of rage, shook his fist at the grey lump on the horizon. He offered S.S. Galadrial, Twinky, Foap and the universe in general his finest curses whilst the penguins cackled their support. At last he turned and ahead the great boots stood against the skyline, steam pouring from their tops. At the back of the beach was a path and so they climbed, Herman steaming inwardly and outwardly as they ascended. He had had enough. No more nice guy, it was his turn to finish it now. The set of his jaw returned. Nothing would stop him. He was doing this for Ruppy, Gurk, Pume, and Dubo, his friends, his companions in valour. Keeping his eyes on the boots he climbed with determination. At the top of the first hill they came to fiercely spikey and very dense gorse. The birds halted and cackled. Herman strode a few paces on but the birds just cackled louder. He went back and looked at them. They hung their heads and made low 'gorking' noises. "So you can't get through the gorse, is that it?" he asked.

"Gack!" they replied together.

"My turn to give you a ride." He picked up the most docile looking of the birds and marched off toward to the boots leaving the others to wait their turn. The bird was heavy, the sun hot and the climb hard. The vicious gorse continued until at last he was at the foot of the boots. As he approached the folly the penguin called with obvious delight. Herman put the little fellow down and it set about starting a hole in the toe of the ⁴²left boot. Leaving the bird to his work Herman returned to get the next penguin. He managed to gather seven of them before his wind gave out; but it was enough. He had only a few minutes rest before the flock broke through. Then all was penguin noises, banging, thumping and dust for a short while. He waited for the birds and dust to settle down and crawled in on his hands and knees. He had no idea what to expect, even so what greeted him caused him to stop and gape.

It was Tara, sitting at a table playing patience. "Oh hello Herman," she said looking up briefly. She sounded as if she half expected him and was slightly bored at the prospect. "Wed Queen on a bwack King. Isn't it perfectly howwid here? The plumbing is simply awful and nowhere to dwy my hair at all."

"Eh?" uttered Herman robbed of a sensible response. "Wah?" he added as another and exactly the similar Tara walked through the door opposite.

"Oh hello Herman," announced Tara number two. "Can you smell something nasty? It isn't you is it? Have you trodden in something?"

"No, why, I uh," he fell dumb as yet another Tara came in behind him with a tray of pills and three glasses of chemically bright green fluid.

"Oh hello Herman," she said as she passed. "He we are giwls." They all sat down and commenced drinking. Herman got to his feet and gaped, shook his head and gaped some more. The giwls sat with straws inserted in their neat mouths and stared back with eyes of various shades.

"GACK!" commanded a penguin snapping Herman back to his mission. Averting his gaze from the trio, he turned and strode across the room. This was too crazy, too mad, he was having none of it. If they wanted to come they could. He had better things to do.

He opened the door and stepped through it to meet yet another old friend. Max was dozing, dreaming of playing with Herman. It was a nice dream but with a sad ending for Herman had gone. But then what was this, "Oh Joy, he is back!" And Max was up and delightedly running to meet his lost chum. And Herman was running for his life. Back past the multiple Taras he sped, he took a doorway into a white corridor. He did dare not look round but could hear the doors splintering as Max blundered through them. Not only was his friend back he was playing their favourite game. Herman ran blindly, along corridors, down stairs. Ahead he saw a group of guards blanche as they obviously glimpsed Max behind him. They turned and ran, shouting as they did so. "Amateurs," thought Herman saving his wind for legwork. Up stairs and into a large hall they charged. It was the canteen, lunchtime full with a hundred staff all queuing, talking and eating; but not for long.

⁴² **Great Boots** The most southerly boot is more accurate for the boots are not a pair. They are both right foot boots.

"Phuergh!" called Max playfully. 'What a wonderful game and so many new friends'. Then he was amongst them and they began shouting and running and playing too. Turning over things for him to play with. Herman made it across the hall to a door. He closed it and threw the bolts across and slid down it breathless. The walls shook with the joy of Max's game, dust and bits of plaster came from the ceiling. Herman allowed himself a few seconds to get his breath. He stood sweating and looked around. He was in the armoury, he supposed that is what it was, for the walls were hung with hundreds of objects that looked like weapons. He picked one, pressed a button it made a nasty throbbing noise and he put it down, hopefully pointing away, he could not be sure. He picked another, a long tube with a handle. He swung it onto his shoulder and pointed it at the door. He pressed the trigger and a small sighting mechanism swung open on the other side of the tube behind his head. He pushed the trigger back. "WHOOCH" a fluff shell fired into the wall behind him. "CORUMPH!" the blast tossed him to the floor and enveloped him in dust and smoke. Coughing he dragged himself up and looked outside to the rolling gorseland and sea beyond. His ears ringing, he clumsily stepped through the hole, and out onto the hill. He coughed, patted the dust from his trousers and inspected the damage. He had blown the heel off of the right boot and it was making a very deep grumbling noise, like a hippo gargling. Looking up he saw the smooth surface of the boot to its rim set against the ice blue sky. It was swaying reedlike in the wind, swaying far too much. Herman turned and fled, not looking, just moving, running, gasping, huge leaps down the hill. A rolling roaring crashing behind him, a lump of masonry whizzed over his shoulder. He slipped and thudded down into the savage tearing gorse. He lay for a while wheezing, straining for air. A chunk of stone the size of a man's head bounced past and the island rumbled beneath him. He pushed himself up, and lumbered on. Still not looking back, on and down the shifting hill, slipping and falling on to the path. The penguins were waiting as he stumbled onto the beach. They cackled and called and appeared to be dancing. He fell gratefully on their backs and into the cold sea. He heard faintly a deep and huge rumble before he lost consciousness.

.....

As one slept another awakened. On the battlements of Gurits Castle Gerry came to. His vision was fuzzy, his were ears ringing and his brain seemed to have become unattached and banged the inside of his head when he moved it. "OH!" he said.

"Gerry, I am here," soothed Samantha.

Instantly he saw crystal clearly, nothing else but his Samantha silhouetted against the night sky, her hair drifting across his face. He kissed her and laughed and said, "OH!" He kissed her again and said, "OH!" He kissed her yet again until he noticed nothing else was moving. The gyros had gone and the guns had stopped. There was just he and Samantha. If this was death he did not care, he was with her.

He stared into her eyes and simply asked, "How?"

She gave him a puzzled look, "How?"

"How did you get here? Are we dead?"

"No, no of course not, silly," she replied wrinkling her nose with a smile.

"Twinky saved me."

"Eh, Twinky, what?" He sat up and holding his head and added "OH!"

"She told me to give you this." Samantha handed him a small blue tube.

"Mavis!" He caressed the buttons but there was no life in the machine. "How, where, what?"

"It is all that is left of her. Twinky has gone."

"Twinky has gone? As in she is no more and we have won."

"Yes, she is no more," said Samantha with just a hint of sadness.

"That is ace grade, first class, 94 carat news." He beamed at her, "Marry me."

Samantha shifted awkwardly and looked away.

"I have something to tell you," She turned back her eyes were wide with panic, her lips trembling. "Tell me it won't make any difference to us."

"What is it?" he asked. "Whatever it is it does not matter. Ok, let me guess. I know your taller than you look, your mother is Rolfalian, You practise the Tuba at night? Whatever it is it does not matter, now just tell me." He held her at arm's length and smiled reassuringly.

She cast her eyes down and whispered, "I am a machine."

"Is that all, I knew that."

She looked up again. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew. No woman could see in the dark like you or well be as perfect as you." He stared into her eyes, and watched the delicate mechanism of her pupils dilate.

"And it does not make a difference?"

"Not a ⁴³gollo."

"You still love me."

"I will always love you."

They stood and walked back across Gurits brow. Across the sea a plume of smoke was rising from Nocca. Gerry whooped, "Yo Herman. You are THE man." He grabbed Samantha and swung her round with joy.

"Herman did it, he ruddy well did it, they have no power. Herman turned it off."

"Darling before we celebrate, I have some sad news."

"Eh, what, who?"

"Murup."

"Murup?"

She led him along the battlements to where the man who could climb clouds had at last fallen. He lay unmarked, as if asleep on the cold stone, hard uncaring rock that was his element. Gerry knelt beside him and instantly forgetting the joy of victory wept.

⁴³ **The Gollo** - hopeless unit for measuring area, ten golloes are roughly equal to one gnat's eyeball. Established by Gollo great grandson of Gurit who did little else but collect very small hats, which of course he measured in golloes.

Not quite the final snow storm

Herman awoke on an empty beach, the penguins had gone and light rain was falling from a leaden sky. He sat up. The pebbles crunched beneath him as did his bones within him. He was one complete seamless ache, numb with the cold and worn down by the exertion of the adventure but for once he felt not a gollo of annoyance. He had none left. Across a flat sea, he could see the squat bulk of Sheepbot hunched on the horizon. He thought of Gurk, Pume, Dubo and Ruppy and the Saucy Scallop and gave a large sniff. He thought of Jillian and sniffed again. A tear broke cover and soon he was sobbing with a new sadness. Not of his personal loss but for them, for the only true friends he had ever had. The rain fell harder and turned to sleet, but he did not care. He sat and sobbed without control, as the sleet became heavy flaked snow. It settled on him and the shingle as a cold white carpet.

.....

"Herman, is that you young un?" called Ruppy from above.

He tried to call back but could only whisper. "Down here, Ruppy, down here."

Beside him now Ruppy grinned and scratched his beard. "Well you'm in a fine state and not a mistake about it. As I do always say, you know when you're at the top because it stops going up."

"What about Gurk, Dubo, Pume?"

"All gone lad but don't you fret. We are all happy together. Now let's get you somewhere nice and warm. You'll need some dry clothes. Big feller aren't you? But I'm sure Ole Ruppy will find summat as fits."

.....

Herman snapped awake shivering. It was dark and the snow had almost covered him. His body felt distant and somehow unattached. He swivelled his eyes, nothing moved except the silent falling snow. He tried to shift his legs but they did not respond. His arms also refused to accept commands. He recalled the dream and snarled inwardly at the cruelty of it. Hadn't he done enough? Was there no end to it? Someone must be to blame. Whoever it was he had more than a few choice words for them and a punch on the nose. Anger like hot fuel coursed through him. He thought of how the 'Scallop' had been sunk and found his arm rising to shake a fist at the snowing sky. Soon he was standing, snarling and calling for whatever deity that had caused all of this to come and face him godo a mano. "Think you're so ruddy clever eh," he chided. "Well what about this mess, eh? It looks pretty stupid to me." The snow stopped. The clouds parted and a brilliant crescent moon beamed down. A path leading from the beach glittered like a ribbon in the darkness.

Numb but mobile Herman trudged through the snow towards it.

.....

How far he had tramped to get to the barn Herman had no idea. It could have been ten minutes or ten hours. However long it was, by the time he got to a rough straw bed he was utterly spent and was asleep before his head stopped moving. He awoke with a start. A shaft of bright sunlight was cutting a line across the straw strewn floor. He heard men's voices outside. They were arguing. Maybe they were looking for him? He scrambled to the furthest corner of the barn and hid behind some bales. The door flew open and a large and rough looking man entered pushing an IZA WIZZA delivery bike and shouting over his shoulder. "No, I tell e'. You can have yer bike back when you brings the right order. I asked for a kelp and marzipan and you brings me this foreign muck."

"But monsieur, it is five miles." Came a plaintive Hermainian voice from outside. "Without my cycle, mondieu what shall I, how you say, ...do?"

"What you will DO is get me my Kelp and Marzipan, that's what. Now clear off afore I set the dogs on e." The door slammed and the pair were gone.

Herman wasted no time and plundered the cycle's stock. The nipperami and garlic wizza was delicious, and the can of yoda soda absolute nectar. Refreshed by these delights he waited for a while, opened the door and seeing no one about slowly rode away on the agent Perp Hoopenstreyer's very specially equipped mission cycle. It was yet another bad day for the mother race.

An ending

The globe went blind and the sky fell in on modern man. All communications and media clicked off and the lights went out. Highways jammed with refugees of the dead cities, burning their last tank of gas to escape. Aircraft cruised the skies sightless running on hope. Darkened hospitals and churches filled to overflowing. Millions of lost Twinky users stumbled in the dark; their fundamental sensory input dead. Most stopped where they were in looted shops, on static trains, or burning streets in catatonic shock and pain. It was the pain of loss of direction, of loss of connection and an aching awful loneliness. All was lost, for it is a trick of design that when you turn off an opulence candle that is when it starts really working. With the speed of debt it sucked the planet dry of wealth. Without the money, the money that had taken a thousand years to acquire, there was nothing. It was a time of hideous pestilence, hunger, grief and death. With a giant virtual fist Twinky had smashed modern civilisation to dust. Only one nation survived intact, ready to fill the void. A small country in the northern ocean called Swinland.



The trouble with shoes

The trouble with new shoes is that they inclined to pinch, reflected Roland Lightbody as he hobbled up Growpers hill. I mean you have to have the ruddy things and they looked so nice in the shop, in fact quite nice on the feet, but when you made more than twenty steps in them you could hardly walk at all. Why did he always have to travel to Jocasta's place, why could she not come to him? Well there was no way he was going to walk any further in these foot clamps. He limped to the side of the road, sat on a bank of grass, took them off and threw them over his shoulder, pleased with a job well done. Then a thought struck him, what he needed was a bicycle. He was fed up with walking. Yes a bicycle, all shiny, wind in his hair, freewheeling in sunshine, just gently pushing the pedals countryside speeding past. He could get to Jocasta's in half the time. Humm, a bicycle, and then he saw the Everglide. It was resting against a tree on the other side of the road, not quite as shiny as remembered but it was definitely his. He tiptoed over to it in his socks. What a stroke of luck! Sadly he failed to notice the chain was hanging loose. He mounted and pedalled furiously and for a moment nothing happened and then he and the Everglide crashed to the ground. "Ruddy Arrgh," he cursed struggling to his feet rubbing an injured shin. He stared the cycle squarely in the handlebars. "So, that's your game is it, a little revenge? Well you don't catch Roland Lightbody so easy, oh dear me no. You can just stay there, that's what I say and good riddance to you. And I hope a ruddy steam roller comes and squashes you! Bicycles! Ruddy stupid idea." With that he turned and tip toed in his socks up Growpers hill, muttering as he went.

I know it will be no surprise to discover that the next traveller upon this lonely country lane was Herman. With the wind in his hair he careered down Growpers hill aboard the IZA WiZZA cycle with his feet off of the pedals and a determined glint in his eye; until he saw the Everglide. "Ahalayah," he exclaimed, heaving desperately on the handlebars, and, "Ah ha ho ho," as he narrowly missed the recumbent bike. He glanced over his shoulder, to sneer at it and drove straight into a very familiar ditch. "Arggh, gorg, thug," he uttered as he went headfirst into the mud. He slithered to his feet, this time mercifully unattached to a bicycle. In the muddy bank, level with his nose was the small, plastic troll with faded orange hair. It stared blankly at Herman with faded eyes and an idiotic permanent grin. It had been there waiting, like a stone in a desert reminding wayward travellers that they were walking in circles.

"Oh there you are, I have been looking everywhere," said Jillian from above. She was even muddier than Herman. Her hair in a matted ball, her eyes blinking through dried flakes, she appeared to be made of the stuff.

"Jillian?" asked Herman.

"You don't think I would leave you here do you? I have brought a nice warm vest." She held a muddy vest aloft for his inspection.

"Ruppy, Dubo, Pume and Gurk?"

"They are all safe. The girls would let such lovely men come to any harm."

"Safe? They are safe?"

"Oh yes, the little boat has gone, but they are all well. Would you like to get out of that ditch now?" she smiled and a flake of mud fell from her cheek.

Herman stood for a while, taking in the news whilst Jillian and the troll grinned at him.

Slowly he felt the joy coming, up from his toes as the whole mad adventure unravelled within him. A smile grew full width and he began to chuckle. With each memory he knocked the joviality up a gear and before long was lying back in the mud helpless with laughter.

He chuffed and wheezed as Jillian giggled at him laughing at her and so the snowball of merriment grew. He sat back in the ditch and helplessly roared whilst she sat on the edge and joined in loudly in the choruses. When at last Herman regained the controls such as they were, Jillian pulled him out and they stood on the empty road. Squirrels played a chattering game in the overhanging boughs, sending down a confetti of leaves, lichen and nut husks. Shards of sunlight danced on the paving. A robin sang the tune and he held her and kissed her softly. "I love you." he heard himself saying.

Her smile grew again and her nose wrinkled, another flake of mud fell as she said, "Oh good oh, that's a good thing isn't it because I love you too. Well I would do, I am made to. But this is very nice. I can make all sorts of pies and we could..."

"Shh, shhh, all in good time, all in good time. I want to kiss you know and capture this magic moment." The beads of sunlight swirled on the tarmac. The robin sang and the leaves fell. They kissed and he wished that he could keep this moment. Encapsulate it, a moment of joy forever to put on the mantle. Herman Cushion had not only learned to travel, he had arrived.

Colinorama

Colin sat with Maria and proudly surveyed his island home from the Murup Duffin memorial bench atop mount Colin. The neat thatched cottages of New Lavender Avenue. The smart and truly bustling 'Bustling Market'. The crowds at the sushi bar. The children laughing as they delighted in Muderama. The Shelton Hotel sheathed in vitalian marble glistening in the May morning sunshine. The substantial jetty, now called Port Colin, where the new and brightly painted 'Spicy Barnacle' was tied up with Gurk Ruppy and Pume strutting the decks.

"Is it as you wished?" asked Maria running her fingers through his neatly clipped curls.

"Oh yes, it is and so much more." He swivelled to meet her loving gaze. "Now that I have you to share it with," he smiled and added thoughtfully, "and I haven't touched a biscuit for over three days."

Postscript

So there you have it, well most of it. Just as Earth 3, 489, 571 was about to become totally connected it got switched off. Shame really. I wanted to see how Twinky developed. I have only ever had two truly sentient machines. The first was a parking meter on 3,489,569 but it only lasted half an hour. It choked itself on small change when it realised what it was.

So... hopefully you know what to do when the mediaspecs arrive.

..and could you vary the prayers a bit, you have no idea how dull it is listening to 'grace' 100,000,000 times a day.

Be good

God.

Bonus Features

Deleted Scenes

The Bowling Gnomes

"Who could forget when we played New Cairo," said Dick Swagger his eyes misty with nostalgia.

"Wow man, now that was some deal," interjected Reef Pilchard lazily toking on a coriander cheroot.

"We like dropped out of the sky man, on silver wings," continued Dick swigging nonchalantly from a lurid pink cocktail, his angular frame draped over the wuffaloe hide recliner as if he had been dropped from the ceiling.

"Yeah like sliver birds we was," added Reef.

"Bloody cold though," interjected Harley squatting on a bar stool that appeared to be part of him. "I could barely hold the ruddy sticks."

"But wow man, what an entrance. I mean wowest and wowmost," continued Dick unfazed, "and the whole of New Cairo looking up, every speaker everywhere us."

"It must have sounded crap," said Harley flatly. "The bass was rubbish on 'Laxative Blues'."

"Whayoumean," slurred Will blearily squinting through half lidded eyes. This was Will Byone at his most alert.

"SHADDUP Harley." barked Reef his head lost in coriander smoke, "It was ruddy brilliant and you know it. Like we are the Gnomes man, when will you get it, the most amazing, trematious band on the planet. Before you was wiv us you was sorting gristle in a meat factory. If you stacked all the tunes we've sold it would reach the moon man. I mean like we are awe squared. We even have our own country, bleeding Gnomeland, doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I still like to get it right that's all," responded Harley stubbornly. "Bloody cold it was."

"Anyway, let me tell the man the deal," said Dick instantly commanding the group. "We had like wings, big silver jobs and they dropped us from like a huge plane. Spotlights glared at us from the tallest towers as we swooped over New Cairo playing. We opened with, "I can't get no useful traction," and the city screamed the tune from everywhere. Everything and everyone stopped and looked at us. We cruised in formation down Wideway, the tarmac thudding the riff. The streets were full of dancing, waving fans. At Humber and twelfth we took a right and belted out, "Hey you that's my biscuit," they went wild, standing on cars and rooftops. The whole thing was vidivised, like global man, global."

"Ruddy cold though," mumbled Harley.

"We cruised above the strip and over the Pharaoh's Stadium," continued Dick ignoring him. And we spiralled down, together playing, "Get off of my shed." It was wow of all wows. That Foap geezer certainly knows how to put on a show.

Click! Gerry turned off the hypervid.

Something nifty at the Wiffle

by Beauregard Cravat arts critic of the Sheepbot Gleaner.

As ever this years Wiffle prize has caused a stir. From 'art' in a box via a tiny hole in a cheese cracker to a monumental statue of Harlow Foap made from herrings all are designed to raise hackles if not hankies.

I started my tour of the grand Wiffle gallery with Hugo Humidinger's entry entitled 'almost certainly the winner'. It takes the form of a wooden packing case with a large red "?" printed on it.

Humidinger told me he bases his work upon Wampum Theory, which declares all energy can be detected as Wampa, or infinitesimally small units of currency as everything is worth something to someone. As space tells money how to move, money tells time what to put in the cocktails. As a spin off Wampum theory also says that the universe finds decisions tricky. It is only when we observe something that the universe finally makes up its mind. There could be art in the box but it is uncertain. Levering off the lid stops the cosmos dithering and we get the art or the not art. Humdinger has also postulated that there might be a dead cat in the box as he hasn't seen his for a while, but he could not be sure. I asked him about making the work.

"Ze construction of ze box was very 'ard. I 'ad to make it without knowing if I was putting ze art in it or not... zis is tricky. Zo, I took a bath with Dr Wiffles marvellous brain tincture and I can't remember a zing. Ze Wampum theory zays we can't be sure but it is quite probable zere is a lot of money in it. Now if we take ze value of ze universe M and multiply the little fellow by C ze factor for wear and tear, Voila! we get ze cleaning bill I zink."

I left him doing reverential equations and moved on.

Jason Tulips 'Hole in a cracker' although appearing to be much less challenging has caused quite a conflag amongst the Wiffle judges. For look as hard as the might with strong lenses they could not find the hole. Stern talk of disqualification has rumbled through the Wiffle Gallery all week until Tulip pointed out that the hole was only 'artistically' there and at last the work was allowed to stand. This controversy has ensured fame and a gallery packed with viewers all presumably trying to see 'the hole'. Standing ten deep we jostled for a glimpse and that is all I got. I am still musing on the artistic impact but all I can say at the moment is that it looked like a cracker stuck to a piece of cardboard to me.

On I moved to 'Ineptune' by Stacey Tubb and an altogether more noticeable experience. Standing over twenty feet high and composed entirely of wet fish the effigy of Foap demands attention but not for too long. I could only stand several minutes before the odour overcame me and I fled for the exit. I found Miss Tubb in the cart park and standing upwind quizzed about her about the inspiration for the piece.

"I wanted to capture the essential, if not quintessential quality of Foap."

I put it to her that although he may look convincing he smells terrible and the longer he stands the worse he smells. She smiled and gave me a signed kipper. I think her message is clear.

So there you have it, the Wiffle as contentious as ever. Who will win? A smelly statue? A cracker? My money is on the box ... I think?

Colin tells another story.

"Have you heard the one about the elephant the turnip and the one legged duck?"

"No," replied Gerry trying to prize a lump of mud the size of a tennis ball from his boot with a stick.

"Well it's a corker, pure hilarity. I laughed so hard I almost choked on a haribaldi. Well, there was this elephant and he had grown the largest turnip ever. I mean big. Think of the biggest turnip you can and double it. Done that? Good. Now he, the elephant that is, wanted to get the turnip to his mother's but his wheelbarrow was too small."

"How did an elephant work a wheelbarrow, elephants only have one trunk, it would tip over?" asked Gerry innocently.

"What? Well it was a special elephant wheelbarrow, with one handle."

"Oh," said Gerry squinting as he tried to imagine the device.

"Anyway the wheelbarrow was too small and the turnip too large."

"Surely he could have just have picked it up. Elephants are very strong. They can pick up trees," added Gerry pleased with his observation.

"Well he didn't. The turnip was too big."

"My, that is a big turnip."

"I told you it was."

"True, true you did say that. Where does the duck come in?"

"What duck?"

"You said there was a one legged duck."

"Did I? Oh, no that must be another story. In this one he meets a witch nurse on stilts."

"What?"

"Stilts, you know with long things to walk on."

"I know about stilts but what is a witch nurse?"

"Like a witch doctor but less qualified."

"Oh."

"And the elephant asks the witch nurse for advice. Got it?"

"Yes, I'm with you so far," replied Gerry beginning to wish he wasn't.

"And the witch nurse says."

"Yes?"

"I forget."

"Why did she say that?"

"No, I mean I forget what she said but it was very good."

"Oh."

"I remember now."

"Oh good," said Gerry with fading enthusiasm.

"She said, 'why don't you roll the turnip to the river and float it like a boat.'

"Is that it?"

"No, no. The elephant, who was called Dave by the way."

"Dave, the elephant was called Dave?"

"That's right, anyway Dave takes the witch nurse's advice and gives the turnip a push, but it rolls away downhill and hits a hat salesman and knocks him off of his unicycle."

Gerry thought of asking what a hat salesman was doing in the jungle on a unicycle but thought better of it. Life, he decided was too short to know. Instead he simply nodded and said, "I see."

"Aren't you going to ask why the hat salesman was riding a unicycle?"

"No."

"Oh go on, " urged Colin his eyes glittering with delight.

"Ojay, why was the hat salesman riding a unicycle?"

"Because he had missed the bus."

"Oh, is that it?" asked Gerry hoping on hope that it was.

"Oh no, the turnip thundered on and after narrowly missing a mountain and collided with a troop of performing camels."

"Hold on! You can't narrowly miss a mountain, it's too big."

"Yes you can if you are a very big turnip. It was a very big turnip. Did I say it was a big turnip?"

"Yes, yes, you did," sighed Gerry resignedly, "right, Ok, fine and it hit a troupe of performing camels."

"That's right. Terrible mess it was, ballet shoes and maracas everywhere."

"Ballet shoes?" asked Gerry instantly regretting it.

"Dancing camels they were. Quite an act apparently, they did ballet and good old soft shoe shuffle but their real crowd pleaser was tap dancing."

"Tap dancing?"

"Tap dancing."

"So an elephant called Dave rolls an enormous turnip which knocks a hat salesman off of his unicycle and crashes into a troop of tap dancing camels."

"That's it."

"And?" asked Gerry wearily.

"Well Cynthia, that was the name of the hat salesman."

"The hat salesman was a woman?"

"No, he was just called Cynthia, not sure why, must have been confusing for him."

"And for me," mouthed Gerry.

"So."

Gerry put up his hands in submission and said firmly, "Enough, thank you Colin. I am sure it is very good, probably the best joke in history but you are filling my head with turnips, dancing camels, a hat salesman called Cynthia when I need it, my head that is, to get us out of this mess."

"Only trying to do my bit, you know cheer up the troops," said Colin quietly.

"I know," said Gerry with a tinge of remorse, "I know but could we just cut to the punch line?"

"Do you really want to? It won't be as good."

"Probably not but let's have it. I can't wait to hear it."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

Colin swivelled his eyes and mouthed words silently as if running the tape fast forward. He paused, giggled, composed himself and declared, "Well the one legged chiropodist calls to the moose in the canoe," Colin stopped to wipe a tear of joy from his eye, "He calls. " Colin folded chuffing with mirth. He came back up and blurted, ' MAKE MINE A BANANA,"

"Eh?"

"MAKE MINE A BANANA," called Colin folding again helpless with laughter.

Gerry stared at his fallen companion, his eyebrows fighting for the middle ground of his forehead. He felt a tap on the shoulder. He turned to see Murup offering a knowing smile. Murup waited for a pause in the gales of mirth from below and said, "And that's one of his good ones."

Cap'n Queasy Bottle Labels

Cap'n Queasy's



Grin Juice

'1000 grins in every bottle'

Finest Sprout Brandy

Laughing Halibut
Distillers



More than
enough

87% Vol

30 years ago that Cap'n Queasy invented Grin Juice and he hasn't stopped smiling since.

"Streuth! I grinned so hard I broke three teeth"

Laughing Halibut
Distillers



Sheepbot. Swinland

Serving Suggestions

Laughing Sailor - Grin Juice, sour cream, and a dash of turps.

The Reviver - Grin Juice, twist of lemon, a sardine and a small mallet

(When the sardine leaps try to hit it with the mallet)

Warning – dissolves golf balls.

Keep away from livestock.

Always drink sitting down.

Very effective for removing barnacles.

May contain bits of sprout.

Cap'n Queasy's



Cod Roe Rum

'Nothing tastes better'

Laughing Halibut
Distillers

More than
enough



87% Vol

A masterpiece of the distillers art Cap'n Queasy's Cod Roe Rum is sure to not only hit the spot but dissolve it as well.

As the Cap'n says,
"Nothing tastes better"

Made from the finest cod, blended with care and matured in plastic buckets for weeks, Cod Roe Rum is sure to make the party go.

Laughing Halibut
Distillers



Sheepbot. Swinland

Serving Suggestions

Morning Startler - Cod Roe Rum, raw egg, castor sugar, a senna pod and a dash of peanut butter.

Davy Jones's finger - Cod Roe Rum, Sea Water, Cocoa powder and a Gherkin

Always wear gloves and goggles
Very effective for cleaning roof tiles.
May contain bits of fish.

Cap'n Queasy's



Swelk

Fine Brewed Whelk Ale

Laughing Halibut
Distillers



More than
enough

Sheepbot.

6.7% Vol

**Only Cap'n Queasy has mastered the
fine art of fermenting shellfish.**

"A taste of the seabed"

**Made from organic, hand picked, free
range whelks.**

**Laughing Halibut
Distillers**



Sheepbot. Swinland

Serving Suggestions

Pour into glass and drink

**Splash it on almost any food as part of a
controlled diet**

May contain bits of whelk.

Ole Jobe's



Lineament

'For what ails e'

Laughing Halibut
Distillers

More than
enough



87% Vol

Beware Strong Lineament
Legend says that the smell of Ole Jobs
Lineament makes trees run away. One drop
added to bath water will cure lumbago, clean
grouting, permanently whiten teeth and
disinfect the sewerage system.

Contains distilled bovine urine, badgers ear wax,
toxin de jelly fish and mayonnaise.

Sheepbot. Swinland

Laughing Halibut
Distillers



Removes verdigris, stains, aches, pains,
warts, woodlice, mildew and hair from
almost anything.

Apply through thick leather in open air.
Good for treating fence posts.