



**STORENSICALS**  
surreal short stories

by  
Henk de Kruyff

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noisepollution.nl  
STORENSICALS

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absurd and surreal short stories

BY

HENK DE KRUYFF

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## FOREWORD

In nineteen eighty nine I started writing absurd and surreal short stories heavily influenced by Douglas Adams, Monty Python but also Isaac Bashevis Singer and many other writers as I am a voracious reader. I enjoyed writing these short stories but quit writing them after only a few attempts.

Then in 2005 I discovered blogging and podcasting and decided this would provide the perfect outlet for these stories so I picked up the thread again.

In this short book I bundled the stories published on [storensical.blogspot.com](http://storensical.blogspot.com) in the years 2005 and 2006 and a couple of previously un-published ones.

I decided to include the early attempts as a representation of where it began for me. These stories are: *the chicken and the egg*, *time feels rotten*, *personality disorder* and *the silting duck*.

I re-read, corrected and revised all the stories which was necessary because the stories on the blog are written very quickly, consequently full of mistakes. You can look upon the blog stories as live versions and the ones in this

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book as the polished studio produced cd. Just to use a music analogy.

Some of the stories have a dark subject or can be perceived to be critical of religion or at best they don't take religion very seriously.

Now, one can protest as much as one wants, throwing all sorts of accusations my way about not respecting beliefs and being a pessimist.

However: I think religion has, these last couple of millennia, played a very important role in the way aggression has bloomed all over the world. I'm not saying religion is the cause but it has certainly been used as an excuse!

I do believe religions and those who blindly follow them should start taking themselves a little less seriously and look around what else the world has to offer. Broad horizons are often not compatible with a doctrinal lifestyle, which is a shame.

Further more I do think humanity as a group is about as un-intelligent a group as you can find. No other species destroys its habitat as thoroughly as we do (and I am a card carrying member of the species!).

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I also believe we, as a species, are heading to a cataclysmic confrontation with mother nature and do very much believe that mother nature shall win, must win!

Does this make me a pessimist? I don't think so. Realist perhaps. Pessimist only if you believe that humanity is the crown on creation, but I am humbler than that!

So it is high time some counter weights are thrown into the balance. As it says in one of my stories: it is high time we make God laugh at himself.

I hope you, the reader, will enjoy this little book of short stories and maybe even make you think about us as a species although that is a very high minded goal, probably higher than these stories warrant.

Who knows, next year I will have written enough stories to produce a second installment and maybe the humor will be less dark, although history compels me to think not.

HK

Bennekom, 11-2006

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing my stories with any degree of seriousness and trying to build my career as a self employed sound engineer besides would be impossible without the support, assistance and advise given by family and friends who must sometimes wonder when I will get a proper job.

The following people I would like to name because they act as my guinea pigs and as such suffer most acutely from my stubborn refusal to find that proverbial proper job:

B. Weekers, J. de Kruyff-Bosch, H. de Kruyff sr., M. de Kruyff-Tutuarima et al, A. Geurink, H. Roggen, V. Gregoire, C. Chen.

B.: Sorry for being a grumpy old fart sometimes! My brain is a bad multi-tasker and not always prioritised towards the real world.



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## A WOMAN SCORNED

The phone rang in the ornate hallway of the stately home of Sir and Lady Rossbottom. It was a futile ring. No one came to answer it. No one would come to answer it. There was a ghostly quiet about the house only temporarily disturbed by the obstinately ringing phone. Presently the last ring echoed through the hallway and the house seemed to hold a collective immaterial breath but no more rings came. Silence returned. Upstairs the slowly decaying corpses of Sir and Lady Rossbottom lay in peace in their respective beds in separate bedrooms.

Sir and Lady Rossbottom had been dead for three days now but their deaths had yet to be reported by anyone unfortunate enough to stumble upon the gruesome effigies of their former splendour. Whomsoever it would be it would be no one in the Rossbottom's immediate circle for the simple reason that anyone belonging to that select but widely spread category was in much the same state as Sir and Lady Rossbottom: as dead as the proverbial doornail.

Except, that is, Percy Rossbottom, the spoiled and maybe justifiably much maligned son of Sir and Lady Rossbottom. He, however, was in no state to transfer any information he might have to the authorities as he was

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hanging upside down from a chain attached to the ceiling in a damp, dark cellar and for the life of him couldn't remember how he got there and he felt he had great reason to feel immensely sorry for himself. So much so that no thoughts for other people's plights could be spared. All in all a compound situation that could be classed as remarkable.

It was to be the party to end all parties. To celebrate the return of their son, Percy Rossbottom, from military service abroad, Sir and Lady Rossbottom had invited everyone upwards from vague acquaintance to join in the celebratory affair. The whole week before the party the house had been in upheaval over the preparations.

Lady Rossbottom had a strict and tight schedule to which each staff member, and for the occasion this included her husband, had to adhere. Every caterer in town was involved in the supplying of food and drink and even they got terse and sometimes violent phone calls from her ladyship in person if the slightest hint of tardiness or sloppy behaviour reached her ladyships ears. She ran a tight ship and any deserters could expect the cat o' nine tails.

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The object of the party, Master Percy, was miraculously excluded from the effective reign of this regime. He spent most of the week recovering from a most uncomfortable journey home. Having spent all of the considerable contents of his coffers on wine, gambling and women he had had no alternative but to travel in the, to him unfamiliar and vastly inferior to his tastes, lower classes of the several conveyances that had brought him to the parental seat: a plane, two trains and a bus. Even the concluding part of the trek had been plagued by discomfort as he had to walk the last couple of miles in a blistering rainstorm that had soaked him head to toe.

Master Percy felt uncustomary regret for his behaviour. Or maybe the regret was angled towards his inability to cover things up more satisfactorily. In any case: he had been unceremoniously kicked out of the army. Dishonorable discharge. No chance of reprieve, no way back to his pampered life in an army that he had thoroughly made his own. His network of sub-ordinates and ranking officers had made certain that his postings and his tasks were as pleasurable as possible and on top of it he had always made a point of making the army the best possible sponsor of his life style. Things got out of hand however and too much wine, too much gambling had

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brought him down beyond help from his extensive network. And above all towered the threat of Emily. One conquest too many, his personal bridge too far.

Emily was of common descent and as is so often the case as lazy and resigned Percy was in his easy family wealth so hardworking and proud of her achievements was Emily. Through low ranking connections in the army of her father's she got a job as typist for the civil support department of a non-descript army base. Through hard work and initiative she worked herself up to become personal manager for the department and as such the liaison between army and civil personnel. In this capacity she had met the striking young officer that took over the command of the base after the old commander retired.

Haughty but peculiarly handsome with that upper class ease of manner he had held an irresistible attraction for Emily. She had soon learned of his philandering and debauchery but like so many before her and doubtless many since: she believed she could change him and she fell in love with him. A more unsuitable object of her love she could hardly have chosen.

Percy, because he it was that received the shyly yet bravely professed affections of Emily, had had no

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difficulty or scruple in responding affirmatively to her feminine onslaught and for a while he wallowed in her peculiar cross between lovers bed and maternal nest. Emily wasted no time in getting to work on him and used all her considerable female charms to wean Percy away from his old lifestyle.

However, Percy's attention span was famously short and he soon got bored and began to drift away towards the far brighter horizons that promised variety of spice and excitement. The play has been staged many times with different characters and different back drops but the finale is as familiar as it is inevitable: Percy went his own orgy-esque ways and left behind a heart broken and devastated Emily.

Some people, and Emily was one of them, have a heart that only bears breaking once. For her there was no process of mending, no shrugging and dusting off and moving on. As far as Emily was concerned her life was ruined. After a period of grief her feelings transformed from love to that very close neighbour: hate. An all consuming hate that became the profound basis of Emily's life. She swore revenge and that same determination that had propelled her from typist to manager now drove her inexorably towards

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an awful goal: Percy Rossbottom had triggered his nemesis.

The day of the party arrived. Percy had stayed aloof of all the hubbub and his doting mother had allowed him his peace. A peace that all the others involved in the preparatory activities desperately longed for.

Percy had of course abstained from telling his parents the exact circumstances of his unexpected early discharge. Instead he had concocted a story of honorable discharge on medical grounds due to the unendurable stress caused by the massively important job he had to do, on which he could not expound in view of the security issues involved. His parents were only too willing to except his story as they found in it the success and importance of their offspring and in consequence the elevated status it afforded them.

Their friends and family would, at the party hear all about young Percy's hush hush job that had left him a near invalid, all with no thought for himself and with all the hallmarks of a true hero. Sir and Lady Rossbottom wrung their hands in glee and anticipation.

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It was now three o' clock in the afternoon and that strange lull in activity that constitutes the interlude between meticulously planned preparations and the storm of the event proper descended on the house. All that needed to be done had been done. Jennings, the butler and head of the household staff gave his underlings a few moments of rest before they had to attend to the many wishes of the many guests. Mrs. Jennings, the butler's wife and head cook quietly enjoyed a cup of tea at the kitchen table.

A table laden with all kinds of cold dishes ranging from bowls of caviar to lobster salads and all sorts of pâtés. While sipping her tea she kept an eye on the hall boy who sat softly snoring in his chair. He sat dangerously close to a large plate of canapés but she need not have feared: the boy had been running errands all day delivering messages of haste to some of the late deliverers: his snores were not feigned.

The only real movement came from the serving girl that Jennings had hired to have an extra pair of professional hands. In this he had been given carte blanche to use his discretion. Lady Rossbottom trusted Jennings' judgement implicitly in these matters. The girl moved from dish to dish and decanter to decanter. Weighing, judging

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sizes and familiarizing herself with the various items she had to carry later. Sign of a true professional, Jennings thought. Suddenly the doorbell rang shattering the peace that was not to return till the early morning sun peeked tentatively over the eastern horizon.

The party was a great succes. Sir and Lady Rossbottom were complimented extensively on the daring and yet solid show of taste in both food and drink. Not one guest complained of not being catered for. As the success upstairs seemed a certainty the staff downstairs started to relax and partake of the inevitable left overs and surplus.

By two o' clock in the morning the whole house was in full party swing. No one had noticed the early retirement of the object of the feast. Percy Rossbottom was tired of concocting ever more elaborate lies to explain his early discharge and he had fled to his room where his own stash of Whisky would provide him the stupor he so desperately wanted.

By four o' clock the last hat and coat was returned to a thoroughly sloshed guest and Jennings closed and locked the front door. He reflected on a thoroughly successful campaign and the only snag had been the disappearance of

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the hired serving girl which to Jennings was a disappointment as she had seemed a real professional. Other than that the evening had been a resounding success. Jennings chose to ignore the slight ache in his belly and back, attributing these discomforts to strange food and a hard days work.

As the clock in the hallway chimed the five o' clock mark all the house was in deep sleep. In fact the occupants of the house had entered that realm of sleep from which there is no awakening. They, and all their guests had in fact all died.

The only two survivors of the macabre feast were Master Percy and the hired serving girl. When Percy had left the party downstairs the girl had sneaked upstairs and had followed him to his rooms. After a few moments she had knocked on his door. On Percy's prompting she had entered the room softly closing and locking the door with the key that stuck in the lock on the inside. Percy, fully expecting his mother trying to persuade him to come down turned slowly to give the impression of intense fatigue. He started to say something but then a silent gasp stopped his speech. Before he could utter another word an enormous

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blow from an empty crystal decanter sent him lunging backwards. He stood reeling for a moment seemingly contemplating this unexpected turn of events. Then he slowly crumpled to the floor like a deflating balloon.

When Master Percy woke up he was hanging upside down in the cellar as described earlier. All he could remember was his surprise at seeing Emily in a servants uniform with a cruel smile on her face. A smile that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The crime could not stay undetected long but due to the sheer mass of victims and the thoroughness and scope of the crime it took at least a day before all the chaos of reports pointed to a mass poisoning and it took another two days before the tomb that was the residence of Sir and Lady Rossbottom, deceased, was opened up. The detectives were frustrated by countless niceties that had to be observed because of the high profile of the victims. Some had died in their own beds, some had not. Some had never been at the party officially others were there incognito. It was all in all a very slow investigation.

At long last the scene of the crime could be identified and visited and cleared of all the gruesome inhabitants. It

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took another three months of tiptoeing research before all clues led to the missing son and his doings. Slowly but surely the puzzle that was Percy lacked only one vital piece. That piece was Emily.

On searching her house after her arrest, which went easy enough as Emily had no intention of fleeing, the police found Master Percy in deplorable state in the cellar. He had been kept there with only bread and water for sustenance. No daylight entered the dank grotto and he had had no clue of what had happened. Emily hadn't said a word to him all that time. His weak and spoiled spirit had quickly broken and he left the cellar as an insane wreck.

Emily entered the annals of history as the most brutal female mass murderer and the press had a field day. Never had one person murdered so many high ranking socialites in one fell swoop. The audaciousness and wide spread reach of her crime left no room for leniency and Emily died on the end of a rope on a clear winter day in December. Her proud ringing last words rang through the prison yard just before the hangman threw the lever: "Hell hath no fury!"

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## THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG

The question about the chicken and the egg. You know the one? The answer is easy. All you have to do is think outside the box. You know the kind of box? A compartmented affair in which you can store six or twelve or more eggs without them banging against each other and breaking into a slimy mush. That box? Think outside it.

You have to ask the question differently. Normally people ask "what came first: the chicken or the egg?" And then they look at you with a smug face thinking they asked you the ultimate teaser that will render you sleepless for as long as the birds lay and hatch.

Now, humans are intelligent entities. At least they are supposed to be. So if for donkeys years no one has come up with the answer why not ask the question differently? Why stick to the question you know is un-answerable while all the time the answer is staring you in your beady little eyes!

Ask yourself: if someone asks you the way to the nearest public phone and you don't know the answer but that person keeps asking you over and over again, what would start bubbling up in the old grey matter? The thing

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that would start bubbling up would be any iteration of the term "stupid fool". "Stupid" being a descriptive term for your protagonist's intellectual capacity, not his or her capacity for producing audible vowels. "Fool" would in this case be just padding: it's silly to waste one's breath on just one word to describe such a comprehensive and smartly arranged array of molecules that obviously doesn't understand concise answers like "I don't know".

So why do entire populations on earth stick to this question? Why keep asking for the metaphorical way to the public phone booth in a world where even the undiscovered tribes of stone-age people in the amazonian jungle send text messages on their mobiles to complain about the poor reception of the sports channel?

In other words: change the channel; heave to; rope in the blind followers and start the revolution: ask the question in an intelligently altered way and the answer is so glaringly obvious that you will need to hold on to your chair with both hands to keep it from falling on top of you.

The question you should ask is:

"What came LAST: the chicken or the egg?"

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Now all of a sudden all of you know! Now it's obvious, right? What did I tell you? It's that simple! I hope you can now sleep the sleep of the righteous and rest in peace. Enjoy the smug little smile you can allow to adorn your face the next time you get entangled in a philosophical discussion!

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## DEATH INC.

Death walked alone. Although this happened regularly of late he still couldn't get used to it. In the old days there was always someone at his side who he had to accompany to the Courts of Eternal Judgement. He used to enjoy chatting to the one condemned to eternal afterlife, which ever form that afterlife would take. He would chat about his work, about the pro's and con's of either Heaven or Hell. Trying to make the person feel at ease and if the journey to the Courts was a long one he could become positively chummy.

But things had changed. Changed dramatically one might say. Ever since the world population had exploded to humongous numbers Death had to branch out. He had to appoint deputies and for his administration he had to set up offices all over the world. Now with global network connections death had become a multi-national business that could be run from a lazy chair and a computer.

He missed the travelling. He used to love the changes of scenery, the sweet-sour smell of pestilence, the sound of wailing wherever death occurred. What Death loved the most was the exhilaration of the battlefield. This is where death was in its element. The smell of cordite and

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gunpowder, the earth coloured red with blood; especially in the early days when war was a much more brutal affair as opposed to the surgical precision of later years.

In those days war was hard work. The weapons were heavy and cumbersome. The men fighting these wars were strong and fierce. Sweat poured at least as freely as blood.

However, wars that typically claimed at most a couple of thousand in a day now claimed tens of thousands all over the world. War had become a global affair. Talking to soldiers he collected at a certain period they called The Great War talked about huge carnage that had gone unnoticed by Death. He had worked his fingers to the bone, in a figure of speech, and still hadn't collected every soul wandering the battlefields. He knew he overlooked a soul once in a while. Every age had it's peek times or on the contrary, in easy times it happened that his attention slackened. But in this war there were just too many souls to collect. The souls he missed were doomed to wander in limbo. Neither here nor there. Un-judged. Un-dead.

Death wondered about these souls. Were they not better off, really. Would they be served by collecting and processing through the Eternal Legal System. Some strange decisions were made by the Courts, Death thought.

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It was not his place to criticise but more than once he heard of cases where while chatting with the deceased he would have come to quite different conclusions. But his was not to wonder why, his was just to do and, well, let die.

Death had started hiring underlings from the ranks of uncollected souls he encountered. At first out of pity, later out of necessity. Now these underlings were his employees, with social benefits and a pension plan, including a deal made with the Courts of secured admittance to the afterlife of choice. They had become so good and efficient at their job that Death hardly needed to work anymore. He had all the tools to oversee the workings of his conglomerate empire but even that was hardly necessary. His staff could handle any emergency with speed and, albeit corporate, grace.

Yet he wondered: did the souls now travelling to the Courts get the same personal attention he used to give his charges? Did they arrive at the courts with the same reassurance that whichever afterlife it was going to be it would be bearable? Death wasn't so sure the changes were for the better. Yet they were, for the moment irreversible and he had to accept it.

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Maybe one day, population numbers would get back to a sustainable normality. The signs were there. Just like in the middle ages, pestilence, in very refined viral form was rearing its head again. And it used tactics and methods, humanity could hardly keep up with. Sometimes testing the defenses of humanity, attacking from the right with just enough force to be perceived as a major threat while all the time massing the real threat on the left.

Unstable despots with weapons of mass destruction at their fingertips, an old threat but still a very real one, were still in evidence. The more crowded the target area the more effective the weapons could reduce the numbers.

The real killer, Death thought was that humanity was degenerating. By spoiling its habitat in a profound way and making life easier and easier for itself humanity degenerated slowly but surely in a creature that in a couple of hundred years wouldn't be able to move without aid. Humanity relied more and more on surrogates for its natural functions. Movement, warmth, digestion, healing, communication and even thought. All things that made a human strong as an individual but also as a group were now aided by prostheses. And these would, statistically, fail one day. Death was quite certain about that. And that

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day, nature's law of survival of the fittest would ruthlessly bring the numbers back to normal levels.

Death thought about this while he walked among the fields of Flanders, now efficiently farmed and criss-crossed by busy main roads. But still, some fields were kept as memorial to humanity's fatal stupidity in which, Death thought, an individual could perform heroics beyond believe but as a collective they were, are and always would be savages. Death hoped he would encounter a lost soul still wandering among the corses and ploughed fields. He would so much like a chat as in the old days. Especially here, where the lost souls could remember the old days, before death became a corporation.

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## TIME FEELS ROTTEN

The whale had a rotten time. There it was floating about in endless infinity. Space all around him. Not a frontier in sight. In it's younger years it had played an important part in a guide to the galaxy. Those were it's days of fame and fortune. It had given lectures all over the galaxy. Been invited to all the great parties and moved in the plasma-jet-set. But now that the mice had taken to treading their mills as their favorite pastime and had made a screwball comedy of their last project 'Earth' the universe had changed into a dull, mutinous and generally unorganized bit of black stuff. The whale was out of a job. Times were rotten.

This in itself was the crux of the problem. "Times are rotten" implicates that time has a plural. Which of the times was it now then? Which time would be coming for the whale? How many had it had? How many were left? The whale had no understanding of the plurality of time let alone about the plurality being rotten. "Now there's a project the mice should undertake," thought the whale, "Restore time to the singular, drain it a bit, cut out the brown parts and generally restore time to it's fresh, lush, former self."

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But here the whale made a capital and crucial mistake! Time contains it's former self already. That is what time's all about. It consists of it's former self, it's here and now self and it's future self. That's why time feels so rotten. It's full of inner conflicts. It felt depressed. And so it should feel. In the old days Time had a ball. It had laughed its head off at times. It had not yet been discovered then. Time could do what it wanted. It could run backward, forward, move sideways, walk on stilts: no one cared.

But then the mice discovered it. They found it in a corner of the universe sleeping off the effects of a great booze-up it had had on Beziercurve Gamma 6 with Place, Thought and Consciousness. How drunk they had been! Thought was snoring so loudly it couldn't even hear itself think. So they were caught unawares by the mice who then proceeded to make them obey certain rules and regulations. And that was the end of the good times Time had had.

Consciousness fared little better. It had to enforce many of the rules, which was difficult for one who never thought for itself (they left that to Thought who said to be specialized in thinking, although they suspected Thought of bragging).

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Now Thought was used by the mice to think up rules. They used Consciousness to enforce them and Time to give the rules a certain ultimatum. Place of course was used to give Time's ultimatum somewhere to be put upon. You can't put an ultimatum on the table without having Place to put it. You'd be standing there with a piece of paper in your hand not knowing what to do and looking a tad silly. So the happy four turned in to glum, gray, pen pushing civil servants whom no one liked.

Now that the mice had turned off earth they didn't need their four servants much anymore. Most of the rules had been thought of, broken and been reworked again to fit a new concept. Consciousness wasn't used much anymore either. It had not been in fashion for some years now. Place was put in place and stayed put. And Time? Well, one of the outputs of that great computer project called earth was that Time was relative. Imagine that: one day your skipping along feeling quite important. Ok, you're not partying anymore but at least you are important to the scheme of things. Then suddenly you are told that you are relative. You're not moving in as straight a line as you were thinking. You're not even moving at the same rate in all instances.

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My god (or yours for that matter), what will they tell you next, that black holes can eat you? That you are having wormholes?

Time tried to reverse the output of earth, but the mice immediately send Consciousness around to remind Time in no uncertain terms that reversal of output was not allowed, being in fact disallowed, and would therefore not be tolerated and would be frowned upon and would Time be so kind as to not reverse the output of earth as it would result in the termination of Time's freedom of movement and as it was relative anyway and not moving straight it was not wise to upset the mice more than absolutely necessary.

Time decided not to reverse the output as Thought had told it not to be stupid but feel depressed instead. That would teach the mice!

Well, it did. It taught the mice that as time was relative and not moving straight and not moving at the same speed under all circumstances at that, they might as well shut down earth, dismiss Time, Consciousness, Place and Thought and tread mills till they all felt jolly dizzy and toppled over. At least in that way they would move staying in the same place therefore they would not have to think

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thus breaking no rules and therefor not needing any ultimatums. The last project Thought had to think out for the mice was the design of the tread-mills. They were tread-mills with 42 spokes. It turned out that 42 spokes gave the best stability. So there was the question to an age old nagging answer: how many spokes do you need for a well stabilized tread-mill if the occupant of the tread-mill weighs an average of 42 grams?

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## PERSONALITY DISORDER

Once upon a time there was a wood. It lacked trees. It had never had any trees. It would never have any trees. Yet, it would still think of itself as a wood. Friends tried to talk it out of its silly idea. But to no avail. They spoke of personality disorder, a bit of a turn and even about madness. "All psycho babble," said the wood, "I am a wood!"

Then there is the case of the desert. It was full of trees, and lush green grass. Yet it felt it was a desert. Again the friends, again the psycho babble, again "I am a wood" with 'wood' being substituted by 'desert'.

And why not? What's in a name after all. There is an 'n' in it and an 'a' and a 'm' and most always an 'e'.

But take Eric for example. There's a good solid name for you. But not a 'n' in sight or an 'a' or a 'm' for that matter. Just a lonely 'e'. That's all that is left.

Still Eric is a name. There are no friends trying to convince it that it is not a name. There is no talk of personality disorder, no turns, no madness. Just a sound name. Now there's inequality for you. That's discrimination

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in the wild. Why can the poor sod not be a wood? Why not let the desert be a desert? Just because they don't adhere to some puny little rule doesn't mean they have no rights!

This kind of thing makes me so mad. I can get so pissed off by this. I can really catch fire over this. IF THE WOOD WANTS TO BE A WOOD LET IT BE A WOOD!!! AND THE SAME GOES FOR THE DESERT!

So there. I needed that shout. Now I go and found a foundation against false accusation of personality disorders (FAFAOPD). Any members want to apply?

Well, if you apply you're not a member yet of course. You will, in time and due course, after careful consideration become an aspiring member to the FAFAOPD.

After a trial time of about two lifetimes you can be considered for full membership to the FAFAOPD if the board thinks you're qualified. During your aspiring membership period (and, hey, time flies when you're having fun!) you can raise your chances by doing good work for the causes of the FAFAOPD. Like saying to the world "I am a car" and at the same time spreading your arms and make airplane noises.

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Then if you can convince a certain amount of people that you are in fact a car then you will be immediately considered for a chair in the board of curators of the FAFAOPD. Which in itself is a feat because the chair of course thinks it's a table. And who are we to convince it otherwise?

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## THE SILTING DUCK

Romeo was a silting duck. No problem if you like silting ducks but if you don't you're likely to scoodle the poor animal.

It was the third rev of the season and Romeo was up with the tipples. He liked to go to the pond early before the rispings arrived. When they started peshoning around, it was done with the sterks.

When he arrived at the pond he saw he was not alone. In the middle of the pond peshoned another silting duck. She, for it was a she, was very kursely so Romeo didn't come to close. He knew about kursely dames. You best left them alone. Before you knew it you were snittled.

So Romeo started peshoning near the edge of the pond. From the corner of his eyes he saw the other silting duck moving towards him. Romeo didn't know what to do. It was to late to wurse so instead he decided to DUCK! Where? In the pond of course. By the time he had retracted his head out of the bottom of the pond, covered in thick, sticky grunch the other silting duck was floating beside him.

"Not very deep here, is it?" The duck asked sjiggering.

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Romeo mumbled something under his breath, still shaking de grunch from his head.

"You are probably the dumbest duck around here aren't you?" She said still sjiggering.

Romeo wanted to answer that one but he couldn't say no. That was his biggest problem: he just could not say no. So instead he said:

"I dunno, am I?"

"I think you are ," the dame duck said shaking her tail. "I think you're the stammest duck in the pond."

Romeo felt a bit awkward. He couldn't tell the other duck what he thought of her. He was to polite for that. He couldn't very well tell her he thought she was a barsel, a wonter and an archenial. That wouldn't do at all. So he kept quiet. He just tumed his tail to her and peshoned off.

But there he made a kergel mistake. He heard an all to familiar sound behind him and before he really realized what happened he was severely snittled.

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## THE HAUNTED HOUSE

The house was haunted. Everyone had told me so. Still I had decided to buy it. There had been two possibilities: either the house was indeed haunted and I had to learn to live with it or the stories everyone told about the house were just that: stories.

When I went to look at the house with the real estate agent what struck me was how perfectly the house adhered to every cliché appropriate for a haunted house. It stood back from the road veiled by a sizeable front garden which had known glorious and magnificent times. But now, like the house, it showed signs of ruin and lost grandeur.

The trees however were still majestic, casting a calming and soothing shadow on this hot summer day. I could picture myself: a nice cold drink in hand, sitting under such a tree whiling away a lazy afternoon with Henry James or P.G. Woodehouse, forgetting there was a world outside of this walled garden. By the looks of it the garden at the back of the house showed the same potential.

The house itself was built in the eighteenth century no doubt by some old world entrepreneur who had made his money in trade with the new worlds being discovered.

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Its gabled front entrance and symmetric window layout gave it a mathematical precision that belied its state of ruin. Like any good design: no matter how battered, it still looked good.

But battered it was. Several windows were missing and the walls were blanketed by moss and ivy that none the less failed to hide several large cracks and scars. Several slates were missing from the roof but still, it had a roof, mostly. I shuddered at the thought of how much the house would cost to restore but one look at the garden and the idyllic scene's I imagined there and all common sense went overboard. And anyway, my needs were simple and I could adept the house to my wishes with relative ease. I smiled at the thought, many would think me naïve, but what did they know?

The imaginary vista of bliss clinched the sale for me on the spot but I had to play it cool. I shouldn't encourage the price on this property, now should I. Although money, or the lack of it, was no longer a concern anymore, I wanted to play by the book.

“The garden has seen better times,” I remarked, masking my internal joy in finding this secluded haven.

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“Ha,” Michelle, the estate agent said with as much scorn as she could, “Wait till you see the inside of the house!”

This didn't sound like a typical house sale where the house and gardens are praised out of proportion, turning all defects in to features and all catastrophes are brushed away with an airy “that can be fixed”.

The sounds of the rather busy main road behind us were muffled by the walls around the garden and we slowly made our way to the front door along, what had once been a gravel path but what could now only be described as a weeds trail. Michelle was wearing Wellingtons which I thought was rather unnecessary but she didn't strike me as the camping and outdoor type. For her this was probably as close to nature as she ever hoped to be. Maybe this was a reason for her less than enticing sales pitch: she really hated the place!

We arrived at the front door. It was a massive oak door with a large brass knocker on it. Yet the door showed signs of ruin as well. One of the little windows in it was broken and the door handle was missing.

Michelle pulled a large key ring out of her bag and selected an ornate black key from the bunch. The lock

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creaked and seemed to protest a certain reluctance of complying with its function in life: to allow access to the one with the key. With or without key: this house had its own mind on who it let in. I liked this, it showed character, I loved a house with character.

Finally the lock gave up and the key turned. Without the benefit of a door handle Michelle held on to the key and leaned her shoulder against the door. With a grunt and a groan both Michelle and the door moved. Both Michelle and the door cursed. I could tell that for both of them it was a repeat annoyance. I barely suppressed a smile. The more time I spent here the more I liked this house and its surroundings.

I entered the house, subconsciously listening for any significant noise that characterized the point of no return in so many horror movies, but no sound apart from Michelle's footsteps and their echoes were to be heard. And when she stood still an absolute silence reigned. Even with the door still open the noise from the street was gone. The house itself was totally quiet. No banging windows in the wind or creaking beams. Nothing. It was as if the house banned all outside manifestation of activity.

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Here was a world within a world where the rules of outside no longer held any sway. It was so quiet that I didn't think even a ghost resided here, although ghosts were of course known to hide until some opportune moment to show themselves. But that didn't scare me. The more the merrier, I thought bravely, although the thought of disturbance in this peaceful abode perturbed me somewhat.

I closed the door, its protests as violent as on opening and it banged shut with a tomb like booming echo. Michelle looked positively uncomfortable. She stood there in the hall seemingly uncertain how to proceed. The sunlight filtered through the smudgy windows, lighting the hall dimly. Shadows fell on the wall and I could see Michelle shiver and looking around her suspiciously.

“You don't like this house, do you?” I asked to give her an opening.

“I hate it, I confess,” she said, “I know I should try my utmost to sell you the property but I just can't pretend with this house!”

“I think I know what you mean,” I said, while I moved to the ornate stairway that led to the upper floors, “This house enforces its character on you, whether you like it or

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not. I rather like it though and I think it likes me. In a grudging kind of way.”

I ran my hand over the smooth wooden banister that ran along the stairs. A thick cloud of dust went up in the air and a film of grey covered my hand. I smiled at Michelle. She merely shook her head.

“Ok,” I said in a decisive tone, “let's not pretend any longer. You hate the house, I love it, even without seeing the rest. I know this is not the normal premiss to start negotiations from but let's do so anyway.”

Michelle nodded. She was ready to do a deal, and ready to accept anything that would get her out of this house as quickly as possible.

“I know the asking price but you know as well as I do that's a ridiculous price. Tell me what would be your lowest limit and I will meet you half way. It's the quickest deal you'll ever make in your life,” I sounded as if I made deals like this all the time but in fact I was trembling like a leaf from anticipation.

I had a highest limit I would go to, that was the sporting thing to do but I wanted this house so much!

Michelle looked at me and sighed. Her shoulders sagging. She muttered under her breath:

“My boss won't like this, he won't like this one bit.”

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Then she had named a figure.

That was a long time ago. Nearly twenty years now. Twenty years in whose passing the house hadn't changed one bit. I had moved in the very next day. And I never left it ever again.

I still love the house. It's perfect. Any sane person of course would have gone on a long holiday and let the builders do their stuff but then again: I'm not a sane person. Not even a person.

I wonder what Michelle would have done if she'd known what she had been dealing with. She would have screamed I guess. People tend to scream when they see a ghost.

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## MRS. SIMMONS SELLS HER SOUL

Mrs. Simmons is a witch. Not the broomstick flying, madly cackling sort of witch, but a witch none the less. This is the story of how fine upstanding Mrs. Simmons became the devil's concubine.

One morning while having her customary cup of tea at about ten thirty the doorbell of Mrs. Simmons neat little house rang. She got up, laying down the gossip rag she had been perusing and mumbling such classics as "Now who can that be," and, "dear, dear," she went to the front door to answer the now repeated call of the bell.

When she opened the door she was momentarily startled by the appearance of the caller. It's not every day one gets to meet the devil in person and on first encounter one tends to be taken aback a bit by the half goat, half man theme he's got going. However, Mrs. Simmons, being descended from that sturdy stock of humanity that refuses to be taken aback for any length of time, regained her composure quickly and asked politely but firmly what the caller wanted.

"I've come to take your soul," the devil explained the reason of his crowding her doorstep.

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“Have you?” Mrs. Simmons answered simply.

“I have,” the devil said. His little hoofs made not unpleasant clacking noises and his smile was ingratiating.

“Please come in and tell me more about it,” Mrs. Simmons said invitingly.

So few people called on her these days and she was secretly glad for the interruption of her daily, and frankly, boring routine. Life had sadly lacked of any excitement of late. Mr. Simmons had passed away a few years ago and Mrs. Simmons had settled into a life of widowhood that was bordering on the insanely dull. Not that she complained. Oh no, she accepted life as it happened. One had to had one not? But any chance of some excitement was grasped with a barely hidden relish.

“Won't you sit down?” Mrs. Simmons asked when she led the devil into the sitting room.

“Thank you,” the devil answered politely and he folded his legs in the most peculiar and intriguing way Mrs. Simmons thought.

“Would you like a cup of tea,” Mrs. Simmons decided that the best way to prolong the excitement of the visit was to make the visitor as comfortable as possible.

“Thank you, that would be nice,” the devil said.

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“Now tell me again, what was it you came about?” Mrs. Simmons said while she offered the devil some home made biscuits.

“Well,” the devil said munching and obviously enjoying his biscuit. “Well, I came about your soul.”

“Ah, yes, that's what you said. And how does that work, this taking my soul business?” Mrs. Simmons asked.

“It's simple,” the devil explained. “You offer me your soul, I take it and that's it really. Nothing to it. Actually, you'll be glad to be rid of it.”

Mrs. Simmons had a long and varied experience with door to door salesmen and she had studied the species at some depth. She knew that there were always hidden complexities in the apparently simple proposals these people made. She had made it her mission to always go to the bottom of the offerings and try to weed out every line of fine print the salesman tried so desperately to hide from lesser mortals.

“And what do I get out of it?”

Mrs. Simmons decided she'd use the blunt frontal attack to get to the heart of the matter. Often salesmen were not prepared for a sustained series of cutting, pointed questions. She was more successful then she knew. The devil was indeed not prepared for this. He hesitated.

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“Ehm, well, nothing really. You don't seem to understand Mrs?”

“Simmons,” Mrs. Simmons said. “Come now Mr. Devil, you're not telling me you came all this way out here offering me 'nothing' are you now?” Her voice may have sounded more cutting than she meant for it to sound but she was going to get the best deal she could out of this.

The devil had been afraid of this. There really wasn't much he could offer Mrs. Simmons for her soul. Traditionally he had offered eternal life but that was no longer his to give.

After privatisation of all matters evil he had lost most of his powers to the competition. Ironically the competition came from the ranks of humanity itself. The ones who had once sold him his soul were now his fiercest competitors: government leaders, big company bosses, crime and war lords. The marketplace was getting crowded and he was poorly prepared for this new breed of devil.

The brute force approach he had favoured had lost it's impact. A new fangled method was being used now, comprised of building networks of people and using who you knew to get what you wanted.

Not his way of thinking at all, and now he was losing out in a field where he used to be lord and master.

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“Mr. Devil?” Mrs. Simmons had sat patiently waiting for the devil's reverie to end. “Mr. Devil, there must be something you can offer me for my soul? I can't go about chucking my soul in for nothing, now can I?”

“No, no, I suppose not,” the devil said feeling thoroughly depressed.

“Well?” Mrs. Simmons persisted. Gathering she had backed this strangest of salesmen in a corner in record time, she now moved in for the kill:

“My soul won't come cheap you know!” She said.

The devil looked at Mrs. Simmons. His overworked, under appreciated spirit broke. His eyes filled with tears and his lower lip started to tremble. He passed a hand over his eyes and sighed.

“Oh, Mrs. Simmons,” he sobbed, “I'm sorry, it's all so wretched. I really can't offer you anything. They've taken it all away from me. They've mown the grass right from under my feet.”

The devil sobbed uncontrollably now.

“So wretched,” he repeated.

Mrs. Simmons was slightly perturbed by this show of emotion by such an eminent guest. She wondered if she hadn't gone to far. He may have fallen on hard times and

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be forced to ply his trade door to door but even so: a lord is a lord!

“There, there,” Mrs. Simmons said soothingly while pouring the devil another cup of tea, “We'll work it out together, shall we?”

And so they did. It was past three when the devil left Mrs. Simmons. As he walked down the flower bordered path that led from her door there was a bounce in his step and he even whistled a merry tune.

He clutched a signed contract for Mrs. Simmons soul thus making her a witch from that day on. It was his first contract in several hundred years but he felt it to be the start of a new beginning. The devil was back in business!

And what about Mrs. Simmons? What had she got out of it? Well, last I heard she has moved from her neat, dull little house in the neat, dull little street to a luxurious penthouse apartment in a very fashionable part of the city. And according to the papers she was involved in a scandal bringing down a very rich and very powerful man who shall remain unnamed. Further investigation would, if you would endeavour to delve deeply enough, reveal that this

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was the third such scandal a Mrs. Simmons has been involved in.

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## ROAD MAP TO HELL

Dante wrote about Hell. He told us about the nine circles of Hell, where every circle represented a greater degree of evil. He took us on an imaginary journey through these nine circles of Hell to the centre where Satan was to be found held, bound in the unholy trinity of impotence, ignorance and evil.

He was wrong of course. We in modern times and after some logical research and the experience of the ages, know better.

Hell could never be this symmetric, this well ordered. Although circles are forms of infinite complexity, you can get stuck on one for days and never reach the end, circles are much too easy on the mind. Too beautiful in concept.

No, Hell has to be reached by an intricate network of roads of varying degrees of impassableness. Some dead-ends have to be thrown in of course and some bridges will be on the verge of collapse or indeed have collapsed. The roads will pass over steep inclines and skirt deep, craggy ravines. All accompanied by a raging hurricane and seething clouds throwing out copious amounts of rain and hail. In the phonic department the sharp whistling of the wind will be interspersed by thunderclaps.

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Now when you start on your road to Hell you will be issued with a road map. This map will be very accurate, at least that is what you will be told.

However when you have followed the optimal route to Dante's peak, a ridge of rocky heights from which you can have an excellent view of the inferno proper on a clear day, you will find that the road leads you to Rome instead. Don't worry about this slight inaccuracy of the map: no matter which road you follow it will invariably lead to Rome.

In this eternally ethereal city you can buy a ticket to your favorite form of Hellish entertainment. If you ask nicely and assault, indecently or otherwise, a monk or nun or two they will even give you detailed directions how to get to all the fun.

Now, Dante can be forgiven for twisting the facts a little. He lived in a time when Christianity was still in it's comic book fase. The book-with-letters version of the Bible was only read by the scientific fraternity: the monastic elite. The common folk had to trust to what was said in the pulpit and God knows some facts were twisted in there (but he's working on that).

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To satisfy the ones with short attention spans beautifully illustrative windows, fresco's and sculpturesc masonry was provided. These visual clues and the rather loud audio commentary more often than not painted a rather bleak picture of things to come supported by exemplary facts of things that had been.

Demonic heads of various monsters guarded the entrances of churches and eyeless, ghostly figures stood erect and stiff as un-dead watchers over the congregation. To top it all a bearded man nailed to a cross showed what could happen if you crossed Rome's path on a bad ulcer day.

Granted the Patrons of Rome were of a slightly different descent in the days when this mental picture was taken but the message was clear all the same: no matter what you did in those days, good or bad, chances were you'd end up nailed to a piece of driftwood on a hill in nothing but your briefs. A chilly prospect! (pun intended).

So Dante can be forgiven for trying to not make the picture more scary than it already was. Who'd want to go to Hell anymore? Who'd want to be the party pooper and kill all the fun? Not Durante Degli Alighieri. A nice symmetric stroll down the nine circles of Hell with your mate Virgil. Straight to the hub of all the fun. In his

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circumstances it was the best picture he could verbally paint.

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## ROAD TO NO RETURN

In a far away land, over the horizon and then some, there is a road. No ordinary road of course. I wouldn't send your fancy over the horizon and then some to imagine an ordinary road. You can see one of those outside your kitchen window or from your front door.

No, this is a very strange road. I'm sure it leads somewhere but I don't know where. I have no idea what weird and wonderful places it passes or what magnificent countries it runs through. Of all these things nothing is known.

Many a traveler has started down this road just to find out about these things. Like the intrepid explorers in past ages entering the unknown interior of Africa or pointing the bow of their ship towards unknown seas, these modern equivalents had no idea what awaited them. But exploration is in our blood. Curiosity and ambition drive us out into the unknown in the hope of returning, laden with treasure and stories to amaze the dull cowards who stay at home.

Dull cowards like me. The road intrigues me. It runs off into the distance until it converges into a infinitesimal

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small point. It blinks out of view like an old television tube after the last news bulletin. But I have never travelled this road, as I said: I'm a dull coward. So I sent others.

Many a journalist, travel writer or adventurer have I sponsored to travel down this road and report back on their adventures and the wonderful sights they have seen. None returned, none was ever heard from again. Many a poor traveler have I followed with my eyes until they, like the road, winked out of sight and seemingly out of existence.

Who built this road? Where does it lead to? Does it ever end? Questions abound about this road but alas, no answers.

So what happens if something unanswerable exists in our midst? We invent legends about it. Myths.

So with this road. Fantastic stories are spun around this road. Some of these myths dub this the road to heaven. Others assure us it's the road to hell. Again other myths tell about this road going to the earth's core and all my travelers are burned to a cinder.

However, I can't believe they wouldn't return if their hair started to singe or their clothes started to melt and if going to heaven was this simple I think the road would be much busier with people trying to get in.

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Scientists have argued their cases with me. Some proving the existence of heaven and hell by quoting old manuscripts of questionable antiquated pedigree. Drawing maps, invoking complicated mathematics only they understood proving that this was indeed the road to either heaven or hell.

I disbelieve them with relish.

Then there are those that argue that the point at which the road vanishes from view is the point where it dives into the earth's crust and leads all the way down to the core. I dismiss this as well.

An old grey haired philosopher has until now, given me the most believable explanation:

If you travel and return home you go from one destination to the other and return to your point of departure. This means that your point of arrival and your point of return are physical places, you can point them out on a map. So what happens on a journey from which you don't return? You still arrive somewhere, a physical spot. Maybe it is not on any map yet but it is a spot none the less. This spot is the point of no return. So this is where I believe the road leads to: to no return.

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## THE STREET

The man walked down the street. The street didn't like it but there it was. Lying on it's back day in day out with a man walking down it. Nothing the street could do about it. So: the street, the man, both in a state of *laissez faire*.

Suddenly a car turned into the street. Now the street felt a slight tremor of discontent in it's *laissez fairness*. It's bad enough having any old blighter walking down one but having random cars turning into one is not what you might be expected to put up with.

So: man walking down, car turning into, street lying helpless, slight annoyance creeping in.

The car stops when adjacent to the walking man. The occupant of the car got out and asked the walking man the name of the street. The walking man answered, substituting the 'ph' for a 'f' and the 'street' for 'avenue'.

Now this was starting to become really painful. Having one walked down upon and turned in to is all very well or at least part of the job description, whether one likes it or not. However, having one's name mis pronounced, by a perfect stranger no less, is unworthy of such a fine specimen of thoroughfare.

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So the street was fed up with the whole situation. So thoroughly fed up that it decided it needed a change of career.

Now for a street to change it's daily occupation is a big step. It involves lots of paperwork, applications to several government bodies and a complete overhaul of the A to Z of the concerning locality.

So it was at least a year before the street was re-deployed as a city tree. With the occasional car slamming into it and squirrels walking up and down it and people calling it an oak or a beech or a chestnut when in fact it was a limetree. The street felt much better as a tree!

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## THE GREAT STARLING LOTTERY SCAM

Mr. Sprot was very well versed on the intricacies of sparrow hunting. There was nothing he did not know about the subject. He was the leading expert on the many ways to bag yourself a flock of sparrows on any given morning and he knew just how to make life as short and miserable as possible for the little blighters.

Now, sparrow hunting is not without its dangerous side effects. Sparrows are highly intelligent and wily creatures. Their methods of defense and indeed offense are legion. But Mr. Sprot knew them all, anticipated them all and countered them all.

Yet, I'm afraid I'm using the passed tense where Mr. Sprot is concerned with good reason. Mr. Sprot is no more, indeed, he has gone the way of the uber-sparrow: the dodo. In the courageous battle against an enemy of this magnitude there is no room for quarter, no room for leniency, no room for reprieve. The battle rages, casualties will fall on both sides!

What mishap did end Mr. Sprot's martial existence? He was after all in the prime of his life, of good health and had

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a sunny outlook on his day to day proceedings that he liked to call “my stint on earth”. What, in short, went wrong?

I will narrate the gist of the proceedings as far as I can authoritatively do so. I do so with trepidation and in fear of reprisals but the implications are too chilling and it concerns us all.

We are all in danger of being snuffed out by these supposedly innocent little birds. They have found a new way of killing us that has the potential of wiping out the human race in an excruciatingly slow but sure way. One by one we will fall: run over a bird by accident on your way to work... your dead; your cat presents you with a freshly caught sparrow chick... you and the nine lives of your cat are forfeit. So it goes on: any sparrow life taken will be ruthlessly revenged.

I feel it is my duty to disregard my own life and happiness and disclose as much of the facts surrounding Mr. Sprot's untimely demise as I can.

The starlings must have been planning this scheme, this fiendish plot, for generations. Ever since the first starlings started to get caught in primitive nets or under cardboard boxes the survivors must have been breaking their little heads over a way to stop this senseless killing.

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I must at this point grant them that from their point of view they had a certain right to defend themselves. But there always is a certain balance in warfare. There is a definite code of conduct. There is a gentleman's agreement to not overstep certain boundaries of what's done and what's not. If it's time for tea it's time for tea: even the Romans knew this.

The starlings however, did overstep this boundary with a massive hop, skip and leap!

As in any war, civil or otherwise, your number can come up. No matter how well prepared you are and no matter how well versed you are in the habits and behavioral patterns of your mortal enemy: your number can come up. Play the game of strife long enough and the odds of your number coming up get to be huge. In the lottery that we call life, Mr. Sprot's number was five-billion-six-hundred-million-five-hundred-and-ninety-five-thousand and one.

An insignificant ball in a great sphere filled with billions of other identical balls only differentiated by the number printed on them in stark black digits.

Nothing significant about Mr. Sprot's ball made it stand out in the crowd of other balls. In the great lottery there are

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no kings and queens, beggars and tramps; we all have a ball with identical specifications with an unique number.

The great lottery commission in the sky, spirits from all walks of life, sees to the fairness of the drawing. But I'm afraid our trust in this commission has to come under review because of what happened with Mr. Sprot.

It was a beautiful day in late spring. Mr. Sprot was outside in his garden setting up a newly built trap.

The trap consisted of a small cage and a trapdoor, which was worked by an elaborate system of cogs and levers sprung by a small footplate at the entrance of the cage.

By placing a carefully prepared melange of seeds in the cage Mr. Sprot was sure he would have a fine catch of sparrows by evening time.

He was sorely disappointed for suddenly he heard a great booming voice.

“And the number issssssss...” the voice boomed. “Wait for it, there it comes...”

Mr. Sprot looked up in surprise. None of his neighbours had the habit of having the tv or the radio turned up this loud. Poor, silly Mrs. Regenby might be going a bit deaf but she never watched tv at this time of day and she had

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complained recently to Mr. Sprot that the radio was no good anymore. All shouting and loud commercials. She hadn't listened to the thing for months. Mr. And Mrs. Turnpike were on holiday and young Mr. Rake was probably still in bed sleeping off the previous evening's intake of alcohol. Mr. Sprot had heard the party leave Mr. Rake's house at three o'clock this morning. No the voice could not be explained by loud neighbourly actions. Yet there it was again.

“Ladies and Gentleman the number that has come up is,” and the voice paused, building up the tension rather annoyingly Mr. Sprot thought

“Five-billion-six-hundred-million-five-hundred-and-ninety-five-thousand and one,” the voice rattled off the number with a practised ease.

What a ridiculously large number for a lottery, thought Mr. Sprot. And that was the last thing he was allowed to think on earth for at that instant he dropped dead right where he stood. He just crumpled to the floor and lay there in an impossible pose that only death can bestow on a human body.

What had happened was the following: the sparrows had rigged the lottery.

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As impossible as it sounds they had managed to infiltrate the lottery organisation which was run by the spirits of those that have ceased to be.

In a way Mr. Sprot aided his own demise: he had killed so many birds that their spirits were in abundance and it was easy for them to rig the machinery of the lottery of life. They had access to the administration that kept tags on all living people on earth.

This administration seems mind-bogglingly complicated by the sheer numbers that are involved but once you get the hang of it it is quite simple really.

Once Mr. Sprot's ball was located he was as good as dead. Making sure the ball would float up to the tube was a matter of having the right spirits look away at crucial moments, lifting the ball near the tube's sucking mouth and presto: there was ball number five-billion-six-hundred-million-five-hundred-and-ninety-five-thousand and one floating up the tube and sealing Mr. Sprot's fate.

And so Mr. Sprot lay beside his trap for approximately five hours. Impossibly posed, like a rag doll discarded by a forgetful child.

He lay there until Mrs. Regenby decided she'd like a chat with nice, patient Mr. Sprot who knew so much about

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sparrows. She wanted to ask him what best to feed the little birds which she so adored on her little feeding platform in her neatly kept back garden.

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## THE TRIAL

The call came early in the afternoon. Just after lunch. I had worked through lunch to prepare for the preliminary hearing that would begin at three that afternoon. It was a hearing I didn't look forward to. I knew the chief judge, however unprejudiced she might be normally would find it difficult to stay so in this case.

In a way I was glad the phone rang. I could do with a break from reading the massive stack of files that had accumulated on my desk. I picked up the phone and was glad to hear my direct superior on the other end. We had worked together for so long that we had become friends as well as employer and employed. He was able to shed some new insights on the case and in general help me prepare for the hearing in a positive way.

It had been the news of the century. That's an understatement: it had been the news of all time: a month ago the Devil had been caught.

Scientists of a top secret metaphysical laboratory in some suitably obscure small town in the Carpathian mountains in Romania had discovered a way to create a portal through which they could enter any world they could

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imagine. That was what made the discovery so immensely powerful: the world didn't even have to exist. As soon as they thought about it the world would be there for them to visit.

After some experiments with the obvious worlds, ranging from dragon infested fantasy worlds to ones where the laboratory bound professors could live out their wildest promiscuous dreams, one of them came up with the brilliant but dangerous notion to visit Hell and try and capture the Devil himself in an effort to eradicate evil from the world.

They tried several times but it proved more difficult than they thought. The main difficulty lay in the intense heat of Hell. It turned out that the way they had imagined Hell was indeed what Hell was: an inferno. Then one of them came up with the idea to imagine Hell a little less hot and archetypal and finally an expedition proper could be mounted. With international support and some crack para military specialists they managed to lure the Devil into a trap and capture him. I suspect my boss was heavily involved but I had learned not to ask too many questions.

Now the Devil is held in a maximum security prison. He will stand trial for crimes against humanity and judging

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by the thickness of the dossier on my desk of almost every crime known to man. I have the doubtful honour of being appointed as attorney for the defense, again no doubt through the machinations of my friend and boss. So for the duration I have moved to the city of The Hague in the Netherlands where the International Criminal Court is situated.

I had never been to the Netherlands before, indeed this was my first trip to Europe, and I must say it is strange that such a prestigious court is situated in a country hardly bigger than a postage stamp.

The city of the Hague as a whole didn't strike me as very old. Most buildings not much older than eighteenth century with a few exceptions that went a bit further back as far as the fifteenth. Yet, however recent and however small: this is where the court was held and this is where I had to be.

As the attorney for the defence I had had a few meetings with my client already. Instead of the long tailed half goat half man people would expect the Devil was actually a rather thickset man of medium height, a balding head and a generally average appearance. The only remarkable feature of this otherwise totally unremarkable

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man were his eyes: they glowed a dull red with ever changing hue and intensity. These eyes reflected his inner emotions with fiery accuracy.

The moment I entered his cell he sprang up from his bunk, where he had been sitting reading, and with outstretched hand greeted me as if we were old friends. His voice was suave and convincing. I had to use all my strength of character to convince myself that here I was in the presence of the most feared creature in the universe.

“Gabe,” he said in greeting. “I was told you were going to defend me, I'm honoured, you're the best!”

“You flatter me,” I said, feeling slightly put out by this most unexpected greeting, having expected some form of enmity or sarcasm, as would be the Devils wont. “I merely see to it that my clients get a fair trial!” I added.

“You don't give yourself enough credit, Gabe. Don't sell yourself short!”

Something in his voice put me on my guard. My long experience with all kinds of people under judgement had taught me to watch for the tell tale signs of guilt. Over exuberance was one of them.

“Please sit down Mr. Devil. We will go over your case but I must warn you: it doesn't look like we have much to hope for.”

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“Now, now, Gabe, not so glum. We are both men of the world,” here he grinned broadly. “We have been in a scrape or two before, now haven't we.”

“I would appreciate it Mr. Devil if you wouldn't act so familiar with me. It might hurt the case and undermines professionalism.”

“Ok, ok,” the Devil said, returning to his bunk. “I was just trying to lighten the mood a little.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon going over his case and as I had predicted, it did not look good!

After that first meeting I had revisited his cell a couple of times but the more I read about the case the more I became convinced that it was a lost cause.

Three o' clock arrived and the court session started. The Devil was officially indicted and after the preliminary hearing of both prosecution and defense the judge set the date for the beginning of the trial. I went back to my office with a sense of relieve, the first hurdle was always the most laborious I felt. Now it would be just a case of getting into the flow and staying alert. After reporting back to my superior I decided to call it an early night.

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The trial lasted three months, which in view of the seriousness of the charges made it a very speedy trial indeed. However the evidence mounted against my client, the Devil, was so comprehensive, so massive and so convincing that my job consisted of little more than seeing that all went according to the rules of justice. On the whole my job proved to be a formality. Judgement was reached speedily and efficiently. On a cold, clear day in January the Devil was found guilty on all counts and sentenced to life imprisonment. The death sentence was called for, especially by the world media but both legally and practically it was impossible to pass this sentence. After all: under who's jurisdiction did the Devil fall and above all: how do you kill a Devil?

In an unprecedented act of sufferance my superior was allowed to appoint me to accompany the Devil to his prison at a location again chosen by my superior. Here he will spend the rest of his life, which in effect will be eternity.

A specially chartered plane took us to Bucharest and from there we were bundled in a high security car in which, under heavily armed escort, we were driven at high

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speed to the lab where the Devil had been brought into the world. On arrival I took the Devil to the office where the scientist worked who had thought of the idea of capturing the Devil. Outside the office I told the armed guards, who had stayed on our tails as shadows on a sunny day, to leave us alone. Reluctantly they obeyed, staying in sight of the door and poised to act if anything happened.

On entering the small dusty office a grey haired senior scientist looked up. His eyes squinting, he tried to focus on the intruders of his inner sanctum.

“Hello Mr. Singer,” I said. He recognised my voice immediately and he got up out of his chair as quickly as his old bones would allow him.

“Gabriel,” he cried, “How good to see you again!” He shook my hand heartily and even gave me his customary hug. “Did you succeed?”

“Yes, my friend, he's going with me for the duration.”

The devil looked from Mr. Singer to me, realisation dawning, a wry smile of understanding came to his face.

Mr. Singer squinted again, this time trying to focus on the unremarkable figure standing behind me. “Ah, yes, just as I had imagined him,” he said shaking his head slowly. “I have been breaking my head over what would have been if I had not thought of Hell and Heaven that day in the lab.”

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He shook his grizzled head. "I guess it was a good thing for once that I can never think of the one without the other!" A sad smile played on his lips.

"Who knows, Mr. Singer?" I said feeling a stab of compassion for this old man who was a veteran campaigner in the battle between his science and his faith.

"Who knows indeed," he said with a roguish twinkle in his eyes, "Maybe it would have all stayed a figment of our imagination if I had thought of something else all together!" At this he winked.

I laughed. The Devil grinned, the paradox wasn't lost on him.

"Perhaps," I said. "Perhaps, but you did think of us, that's the important thing!"

"Richtik," he said, "and masl-tow to humanity for that!"

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## THE ROSE

Smoke clouded the small, slightly down trodden bar and the haze all but obscured the stage. There, on stage stood a woman who gave the impression she felt a little out of place. As if she wasn't entirely certain she wanted to be there. She was not especially beautiful. She could even be described as rather plain, her prematurely aged body inclining toward the chubbiness typical of someone partaking of what pharmaceuticals could be obtained without prescription.

When she sang however, the real world stopped turning and the audience would sit spellbound, transported by a voice, whose tone told a story much deeper and sadder than mere lyrics could express.

The Jazz combo behind her played with practised ease the songs they had been playing every night for so many weeks now. But still the people kept coming every night, filling the bar and the owners pockets.

The crowd sat at little round tables, drinks in front of them untouched, listening enraptured to the enthralling voice occasionally punctuated by a virtuoso solo from the saxophone player who seemed to declare his eternal dedication to this woman with every note he played.

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Slightly apart from the crowd a man sat alone at a table. He sat listening attentively, nodding his head and tapping his right foot to the beat of the rhythm.

Presently he beckoned the waitress and ordered his fourth whiskey. Yet his eyes were as clear as the smoke allowed and the alcohol didn't seem to influence his tapping. He just sat there, watching, listening and tapping, obviously as enthralled as the rest of the occupants of this small bar.

When the whiskey arrived he tipped the waitress handsomely who thanked him with a blush on her cheeks. A good looking, heavy tipping customer was a rarity in this somewhat sleazy bar. Most customers stayed all night on just one or two drinks and cheap ones at that. However this man was obviously a better class of person. Clean shaven, bright eyed and with a nice, well cut suit, the quiet lonely man stood out amongst the regulars.

The combo finished their last song before the break. Three or four sets they played, depending on the enthusiasm of the crowd. These last few weeks it had been four every time.

The man got up and walked over to the now empty stage. Here he produced a red rose from under his jacket

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and lay it carefully next to the microphone stand. Then he turned and walked out of the bar. The people who saw this remarkable action looked at each other with silent wonder.

When the singer returned to her place at the microphone she picked up the rose, looked around the room with a questioning look but no one gave any indication of having placed the rose there so she went on with the show after laying the rose carefully on the piano.

This ritual repeated itself for night after night. The singer, clearly as mystified as the crowd joked about the secret lover who was even a secret to her. The regulars in the crowd started to enjoy the ritual and no one stood in the way of the completion of it night after night.

Then one rainy night the boards outside the bar that had until now announced the singer and her combo carried a different message: “Due to unforeseen circumstances, no live music tonight!” it read. People walked hurriedly passed in the pouring rain. No one entered the bar.

Inside the barman and the waitress sat at a table with a slightly forlorn look on their faces. Not one customer had come in all night. The barman rose and walked over to the

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bar. There he reached over and pulled his coat from behind the bar and put it on.

“Come on Daisy,” he said in a dark, rasping voice. “I’m closing up. No use waiting on no one.”

The waitress, rose with a sigh, got her coat and together they walked out of the bar. Before leaving, the barman switched of the light. The dull click of the switch echoed, emphasizing the emptiness of the room.

Outside the barman and the waitress pulled up the collars of their coats against the driving rain that was now swept on by a gusty wind. Then the waitress pointed with an astonished look on her face: there on the gleaming wet pavement, carefully placed by one of the boards announcing the bar’s doom, lay a single red rose. A splash of colour bravely weathering the black onslaught of this, foulest of nights.

*(To Billie Holiday, April 7, 1915 – July 17, 1959)*

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## THE SCARF

Beautiful she was. Blue silk with soft orange patterns woven into the translucent fabric. She always made her wearer look luxurious and expensive. She saw to that, always taking care to languidly spread herself around the neck and shoulders of who ever was lucky enough to make use of her services. Not too opulent but a quiet statement of style and refinement.

She remembered well how one day, when she was so much younger, she was taken from the glass cabinet in which she had been displayed.

The sale had been rather a trial of wits and had been, from her vantage point, a battle of some magnitude. The primary actors in the play of classic tragedy and strife had been a gentleman in his autumnal years and the saleswoman of the shop the scarf resided in at the time.

He had told the saleswoman he wanted a present for his wife that would breathe style without being an overt statement of flashiness.

The scarf had known right that instant she was just the ticket! Although the saleswoman had tried other things

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first. The saleswoman not being the kind of woman who liked the understated exuberance the man was after, had selected several items of accessories far too garish for the gentleman's refined tastes.

First the saleswoman had selected a hat of such ridiculous fruitiness that the man had nearly left the shop that instant. So overly richly the hat was decorated with fruits of all description that it looked more like a tropical fruit bowl than a hat.

The poor gentleman nearly had palpitations of the heart and went quite pale. The saleswoman, seeing she was running down the wrong avenue at a brisk trot heaved on the reigns and turned about with such force that she went from the unbearably garish to the positively unremarkable in one easy jump.

She chose a bottle of perfume that reeked of, well, nothing. It was a perfume that was so understated that it wasn't noticeably affecting the senses, especially not the olfactory ones.

The scarf observed all this with an ever growing lessening of regard for the poor saleswoman, who having sprayed herself liberally with the odourless perfume tried to save a sinking ship by denying any knowledge of the gaping hole below the waterline. In a word: she foundered.

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The man was by now exasperated by the constant insurances of the saleswoman that the scent was especially designed to allure to the subconscious senses of the male half of the species and, trying to make her point, moved closer to the man in such a spasmodic way that even a drunken sailor on shore leave after ten years on a desert island would not have found inviting.

The gentleman wasn't in the least prepared for this when he finished his breakfast this morning and folding his paper had said to his wife: "It's a lovely day today dear, I think I'm going for a stroll". This remark had made his wife smile in a contented way.

He had made this remark for nigh on thirty years on their wedding day, pretending he had forgotten all about the special connotations of the day subliminally marked with a red circle on their private calendar.

She was more than happy to play the surprised wife when he would come back. Such routines were the mainstay of their marriage. They were the foundation on which they had built their life together.

So mumbling an apology and trying to keep a safe distance from the saleswoman who by now was fully

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dedicated to her role as Helen of Troy and entirely determined to launch a thousand ships by wearing her oh so subtle perfume, the man made his way as fast as he politely could towards the door. Trying not to knock over the various items of, no doubt, vast interest to some hitherto suspecting client.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks.

“By Jove,” he exclaimed, “But that is beautiful! Just the ticket!”

Helen of Troy failing to spot her ships at the horizon decided to beware of the proverbial Greeks suddenly bearing presents and asked wearily: “What is?”

“This, this,” the man pointed at the scarf, not being able to find the words to describe the item of accessory that so perfectly fit his ticket.

“That scarf?” The saleswoman asked now fully restored to her former self, having decided that a Greek launching a thousand ships and fighting fierce battles over one was bound to drive the more rustic clients from the shop.

“That scarf, sir is a thing of beauty, it's a perfect example of...”

What the scarf was a perfect example of we will never know because the man raised a hand in rapture. Silencing

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the ineffectual words of the even more ineffectual saleswoman. As far as he was concerned anything she could say would detract from the simple beauty of this scarf and anyway he had long ago decided that she was as mad as a bat.

Having enjoyed a thoroughly classical education at one of Englands finest schools, the gentleman might have felt more favourably inclined to the poetical side of the saleswoman's venture had she imparted her deeper Trojan reference by way of, for instance, subtitles or some other form of supporting her performance with a meaningful storyline.

Alas, he had no idea of the deeper meaning of this woman's ecstatic, though silent performance.

As earlier stated, but it bears repeating, he thought her over ripe for the loony bin. In his opinion this specimen of humanity should have been locked up in a pleasant home where she could act her ways together with Napoleons, Ceasars, people who thought they were chickens and other pleasantly misguided individuals. All safely away from the society of unsuspecting gentlefolk and well meaning citizens such as himself.

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It was all too much of a shock to the system, a system which, after all, was still coping with the effects of an especially lavish break fast.

“That scarf, that's exactly the present I am looking for,” the man said.

The saleswoman opened the glass display case where the coveted object lay and demonstrated the scarf to her best abilities.

Not wanting to run the risk of a relapse the gentleman cut the performance short with a curt nod and an approving grunt.

“Shall I wrap it for you, sir?” the saleswoman asked, a supposedly simple question. The man however, had to think about this one. He didn't want to stay in this woman's company longer than absolutely necessary but on the other hand he couldn't very well present his wife with an unwrapped gift on their wedding anniversary.

“Yes, please,” He said and quickly added, “Could you be quick about it, please, I have another appointment in a moment,” he flushed slightly at the white lie.

The wrapping was done with speed and expertise. Mad she may have been but wrapping of presents was an art she mastered nevertheless.

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The present turned out more lavishly decorated than the gentleman would have felt necessary but he let it go. It was a small price to pay for the speed with which he was able to finalise the purchase.

He left the shop hurriedly and turned his steps home with a feeling he needed that steaming cup of tea that would be waiting for him more than any other year he had returned from this annual shopping excursion.

The scarf now lay neatly folded in a drawer of the wife of the gentleman. Quietly content with the fact that she was only taken out on special occasions.

Occasions at which she shared a private, and simultaneous sigh of love for the gentleman who had had such good taste and had withstood the onslaught of the formidable derailed runaway train that was the saleswoman, had kept his wits about him and had chosen wisely, tastefully and decisively.

She may not have launched a thousand ships but the scarf was glad she had been 'just the ticket' for someone. That was all the confirmation of beauty she needed.

The glass display case she didn't miss. It had hurt her complexion and she had felt rather uncomfortable being on show all day long.

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No, whenever she was taken out now, she wrapped herself with aesthetic expertise around the neck and shoulders of the only Helen she'd ever need. Together they conquered a world vastly superior to Troy in the sense that this world was real and now and not buried under mounds of dust and broken stones. And, by Jove, together they conquered it!

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## NOW DON'T GET UPSET!

"What nonsense!" Mr. Follicol exclaimed. "What utter nonsense!"

He paced the room gesticulating frantically. his sole listener and object of his oratory ejaculations studied the points of his shoes with a certain amount of feigned interest.

"Why shouldn't I get upset, tell me that!" Mr. Follicol said with force. "I never expected this from you, Donnicker, never!" Mr. Follicol's voice took on a disappointed tone. "Never."

"Why, Mr. Follicol, I just..." Donnicker said while his gaze shifted to a spot just in front of Mr. Follicol's now stationary shoes, not daring to let his eyes rise any further.

Mr. Follicol turned to pace again and then rounded on him with sudden renewed fierceness.

"Who else is responsible for this?" He exclaimed, "Who else is in on this sordid business?"

"Well, ehm," began Donnicker not sure what to say. "There's Mrs. Rosmiff, and Ms Beggan and oh, of course Mr. Shotthrough." Donnicker was ticking them off on his fingers, glad he wasn't alone in this 'sordid business'.

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"So the whole department is in on this one, eh," growled Mr. Follicol. "I thought so. Never trusted them, never will!"

"And young Mr. Planterer was more than happy to join in," went on Donnicker as if he hadn't heard Mr. Follicol's lowly assessment of the department.

"I see," said Mr. Follicol in a threatening tone which Donnicker didn't fail to appreciate. He took a few steps back to stand behind the chair he hadn't been offered anyway and he snapped his eyes back to the points of his own shoes. He pressed his lips together while he felt the tension in the room rise.

He had already said too much. He always did say too much. Mrs. Rosmiff had said so the other day: "You always ramble on too much, Dicky," she had said. And she was right. Bla bla bla, always blabbing too much. Even now while thinking about it he blabbed too...

"Donnicker!" Thundered Mr. Follicol. "Are you listening to me?"

"Well, in fact sir," began Donnicker, looking up with a start. But he was cut short by the searing look he received from Mr. Follicol.

"Well, in fact sir," intoned Mr. Follicol with derision permeating his voice. "Well in fact sir!" He shouted, "you

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are all fired, out, sacked, terminated, off the job and out on your ears!"

"Eh, sir, may I interject here for a moment," began Donnicker throwing caution to the wind.

"No you may not!" A red faced Mr. Follicol screamed at the top of his voice. "You may not anything. Yes one thing: you may, nay, you must get out! Immediately, pronto, now, as in 'very quickly indeed'."

Never in his life had Donnicker seen the origin of the saying "hopping mad". He saw it now. Mr. Follicol was hopping and squeezing his fists. His face contorted and was as red as a tomato, eyes bulging out of their sockets. His gestures became more and more frantic. He kept repeating "fired, the lot of you, fired!" and he practically jumped now. Sending up little puffs of dust every time he landed on the plush carpet. In short: Mr. Follicol looked ready to explode...

Which in fact he did. With a loud bang Mr. Follicol ceased to be a solidly constructed human being.

Donnicker had just time to duck behind the chair before a mass of matter formerly belonging to Mr. Follicol's corpulent body flew in all directions. When the

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reverberations of the explosion died down Donnicker peeked cautiously over the back of the chair.

All that was left in recognisable state of Mr. Follicols former appearance were his shoes that were left standing rather forlornly in front of the grand oaken desk.

"Pitty I never got a chance to tell Mr. Follicol what to get upset about," thought Donnicker with a shrug as he straightened himself, "All I said was 'Now don't get upset Mr. Follicol...'. He never would let one finish."

Donnicker shook his head, turned and left the room leaving what used to be Mr. Follicol in an uncharacteristic state of chaos.

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## DEATH COMES AS THE MIDDLE BIT

The phone rang, I should say it performed its digital emulation of a ring. Penetrating and annoying. It couldn't have come at a worse moment, as so many of these phone rings do. I was disinclined to answer the phone as, in fact, I was busy recovering from being dead.

It's strange to talk about death in the past tense, isn't it? Death is believed to be eternal. In what ever form you want to take your death, whether you believe in an afterlife or not, all forms of death have one thing in common: where ever you go you go there for the duration. And that duration is pretty damn long. It's as long as you can think of and then quite a bit longer still.

Yet I speak of death as if it has happened to me like a bout of nasty cold or a sprained finger. It came and went and I was none the worse for wear apart from a splitting headache.

Many people don't believe me and secretly think I just try to cover up some illicit absence. A spell in jail perhaps or some *affaire de cœur* that I want to keep hidden. But

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the truth is much simpler and in a way much more common. We all have our off days, don't we?

The people that are fiercest in their scepticism are also the ones who shout the loudest inquiries into how it happened and what it was like, trying to hide their curiosity in vain. I'm on to them! They know it's going to happen to them and they want to be prepared. But I keep them guessing and consequently, unbelieving. If one is loudmouthed about not trusting me on my word why should I satisfy ones curiosity as a reward? No sir!

However I know you, discerning and broadminded enough to read this, do not belong to this crowd of loud louts. You belong to that valued breed of connaisseur of intellect and higher thinking; you will not dismiss my story out of hand. Like the Time Traveller I will tell you my remarkable but true story.

It was this summer in the middle of July that the summons came. I couldn't help but feel that it was all done in a rather cold and impersonal way. Just a standard notice with a printed signature at the bottom.

I can understand death being big business these days with overpopulation and consequently over-mortality but still: when a bloke gets his paper equivalent of the death

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knell he likes it to be a bit more in tune with the rather sudden shock to the old system.

Yet here it was: “We, the undersigned, regret to inform you yadda yadda yadda.” Ending with: “This decision is irreversible and no correspondence about the contents of this letter will be accepted, signed God.”

Well I mean, all a bit cold and business like, what? And about this correspondence bit: no return address was stated on neither the letter nor the black envelope it came in. So even if one wants to be bold and correspond in disregard of the concluding sentence, one couldn't.

And another thing and then I'll stop ranting and get on with the story: does this letter really have to self destruct in such spectacular fashion? Really! one gets the shock of ones life reading the contents of the letter. One battles between laughing at what clearly is a practical joke from one's soon to be vague acquaintances and a horrid feeling that this just might be the real thing and then with a loud “POOF” the letter disintegrates in a ball of black smoke. I can tell you what this does to a persons early morning humor: it sours it somewhat.

But I digress. Having read the letter and having swallowed the ball that had formed in my throat after digesting the new info and inhaling the acrid smell of self

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destructing death notices I decided a fellow had to present a decent appearance for what ever judicial body one would be facing in the near future.

So I repaired to the bathroom and gave myself a thorough wash, scrub and shave. Funny thing was that I was extra care ful while shaving. The letter did not state the manner of death I was to be involved in but a not so unconscious part of me seemed to rally to the side of self preservation.

Cleaned and refreshed I took one last look in the mirror, turned, slipped on a bar of soap, smacked my head on the side of the bathtub and died instantly.

It happened so quickly and dare I say it, foolishly that at first I started laughing. Then, realising that one probably isn't supposed to laugh when one enters the eternal, except maybe if one is Tommy Cooper, I quickly took on a more solemn expression.

A loud booming voice welcomed me.

“Welcome to the halls of death,” the voice boomed, as booming voices tend to do.

“You are now in the waiting room. I will attend to you soon,” the voice sounded authoritative, slightly bored but not altogether unfriendly. I decided against a quip about

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having all the time and decided to wait patiently and scan the surroundings.

There was not much to scan. As a matter of fact it was just blackness all around. I couldn't see my hands in front of my eyes.

I didn't even know if the *corpus* had traversed the boundary of eternity with me so that last statement may have been a futile one. Maybe I lacked the hands and the eyes to see them in front of.

Luckily I hadn't long to wait. The voice boomed again.

Incidentally: that's quite an annoying feature. Why do voices like that have to boom so? Do metaphysical beings think us deaf, dumb and blind? I mean to say: A normal voice would suffice and would a small light be too much to ask, it could even be a low energy one. And that 'non-correspondence' clause in the literary death knell certainly pertained on vocal correspondence as well because when I asked about that light, I had gotten no answer.

But again I digress. I left you at a voice booming. So it boomed.

“What is your name?” It asked in a suitably bureaucratic tone.

As I answered I heard a pen scratching on paper.

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“Age?” The voice asked rather curtly I thought. Maybe answering ‘I didn’t bring my birth certificate’ to the previous question didn’t go down too well. But I was just trying to lighten the mood a little as one often does in these dull, bureaucratic circumstances.

I decided to go the direct route and ask the question everyone is the most concerned with once death seems the destined course: will I go to Heaven or Hell. The answer I must say, surprised me somewhat.

“There is no Heaven or Hell anymore,” the voice boomed. Its tone rather smug now.

“As you should know humans are created in the image of God,” I nodded but failed to see the connection with there not being a Hell .

“So,” the voice said with a sigh of exasperation at my stupidity, “How long do you think two competing entities up here would last?”

I got the point. Human strife and conflict had to be a characteristic of God if we are created in his image, so he probably kicked some butt and Hell ceased to exist. After I thought this the voice said:

“Rather crudely put but essentially true. And yes I can read your thoughts.”

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“So no judgement will be made and everyone goes to heaven,” I said incredulously.

“Haha,” the laugh was as booming as the voice but even more sarcastic, “No of course not. You forget again you are an image of God. Would you let just anyone enjoy your paradise if you had one? Do the filthy rich share their multi-media equipped personal spa with just anyone? Can you ask a billionaire to lend you his plane so you can visit a sick aunt in Hawaii? I think you need a reality check!

Now, I have never been a friend of God, any God. But now the voice started to annoy me just a tad. I thought I was asking perfectly reasonable questions so the least I would expect were half decent answers. Sarcasm, I thought, simply wasn't called for.

Yet sarcasm was what I got. Oodles of the stuff. The voice kept drudging on about how we humans expected to get our share of the good stuff just for living a couple of easy years on a very comfortable planet while he, God, had to spent all eternity in a state of non-being and vagueness. Now that he had finally got the competition, i.e. Hell and the Devil, out of the way he intended to make full use of his exclusive right to what little material comforts he had created. And so he whined on for a bit.

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After a while I got really sick of listening to him; yes it was a him, only a him can whine and moan like this. So sick and tired I became that I interrupted the self-pitying monologue and asked where I was supposed to go then.

“Where am I supposed to go then?” I duly asked.

“Oh, sort that out for yourself will you. Please don't bug me with these trivial matters. Let me alone I want to watch this. In the background I heard a whirring noise and suddenly the sound of the, to me familiar, intro music to Monty Python's Life of Brian thundered through what must have been a massive multi-speaker setup. I stayed for a few moments, uncertain of what to do. In the quiet bits I could hear God chuckling and mumbling:

“Now these guys are really funny. Can't wait till they're all dead!”

Knowing that I had been dismissed and that unless I could show God a Monty Python membership card I wasn't going anywhere I decided to take a chance.

What if I thought really hard about getting back to my body? Would the power of my mind get me there? So I concentrated as hard as I could. Trying to form my body around me in thought. Building it up layer by layer as you

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sometimes see in those animated scan thingies on medical tv shows.

Lo and behold: the scenes around me changed. Light was slowly dawning. A familiar smell entered my nose. The smell of aftershave and shaving cream. I opened my eyes, having closed them to concentrate even better, and there I was lying on the floor of my own bathroom. My neck muscles ached from the strange position my head was in, leaning against the edge of the bath. My head hurt like nothing I could remember and the ringing of the phone didn't contribute to my cranial comfort but I was essentially alright.

Above all, I was alive. A flash of realisation hit me: I had come back from death. I must be the luckiest lad in the world: I had caught God on a bad hair day and he had dismissed me out of hand.

I knew I was going to meet him again someday but before that I would make damn sure he would have a reason to let me in to his own little paradise. From now on I would dedicate my life to making God laugh at himself!

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## MORTIS CAUSA

My name is Dillon. Well, it is not my real name. It is the name I have used for the last twenty years. When you are in a profession like mine you tend to not use your birth name. You even try to forget you were ever born. As a matter of fact you often try to forget you are human. My profession has all to do with death: I am a contract killer, a hit man. I kill for money, that is to say I used to kill for money.

Shocking isn't it? Yet people have a totally wrong view of my profession and those who practice it. We are like the weedkiller you put on your lawn in spring or like the forester who cuts down trees to keep the forest from suffocating in its own abundance. We kill those who have become a menace to society. At least in the view of those who pay us. And without taking the moral high ground here: some weeds have beautiful flowers, but are weeds none the less! You may criticise me and my brethren for only killing for the money and never worrying about the ethics of the act but believe me: I have taken out more people who ultimately would have screwed you over big time than you know.

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The perception of what a contract killer really looks, thinks and acts like is, as so many things in life, mistakingly based on the Hollywood image of a menacing character with dark glasses, above average intelligence and nigh on supernatural physical prowess. These portrayals always make me laugh.

Would we really be able to do our job if we stood out in a crowd? No of course not. I, for instance, look like a kindly granddad whom you would instantly trust your kids with. And so you should, they'd be perfectly safe... as long as no one has payed me to kill your children that is.

Also people have the wrong idea about the tools of our trade: guns, explosives, poison, you name it. I never used any of that. I hate guns. They are noisy, cumbersome and surprisingly difficult to kill with. Wound, maim and permanently incapacitate certainly but kill? It's harder than you think, especially if you only get one shot, excuse the pun, at it. And they leave no end of traces: scorch marks, powder residue, cartridge cases, the cartridge itself.

No I hate guns. I only used one once and then even through an intermediary, but I'll come to that.

The same goes for explosives and poison. Too easy to trace and way to dramatic. I like to keep things mundane.

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My tools of the trade have always been observation, circumstance and brainpower combined with unbridled imagination. I have only ever finished one job where I left traces and where the victim didn't die of an 'accident'. And in that case it didn't matter.

Cars can be sabotaged; elevators can, like planes, crash; stoves can blow up; cigarette lighters can explode; spikes on railings can be lethal, especially if artificial aging has sharpened them a bit more; heavy doors can slam shut at precisely the wrong moment; heavy objects can fall from building sites.

There are so many possibilities if the professional killer just has the time and patience to stake out his target, observe the habits, and use his or her (oh yes, you'd be surprised!) brains.

Yet there was one victim I couldn't get a fix on. I had observed him for a very, very long time. I knew his habits intimately. I knew his every weak point and idiosyncrasy. I had watched morning, noon and night. Yet, I couldn't find a way to make him follow the way of the dodo. He was too clever and too afraid to die. He dodged my every move. That was the weird thing about this case: he knew he had it coming, he knew it was me who was hired for the job, yet

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he didn't run and hide. He just toyed with me. I hated him for that!

At first I liked his deadly game. I saw it as a game of chess in which the loser would surrender a bit more than just his king and I wasn't used to losing this kind of game. So, full of confidence I plotted and schemed but every time he forestalled me. Every time he escaped the what should have been lethal conclusion of the plot, unharmed. Smirking at me with a knowing grin. Oh, I could have strangled him with my bare hands, only I couldn't.

There was the paradox. The one time I had worked myself up to a state of murderous anger, forgetting my professional pride, was the one time I couldn't just walk up to him and strangle him. And there were many opportunities: public toilets, crowded shopping malls, dark alleys, you name it: we were there together and I could have killed him in this personal and direct way any number of times.

But I didn't, couldn't.

This went on for close on two years. Luckily I had a very close relation with my client and he was as patient as I was. But even he began to get a little anxious that this job

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might well be out of my league. Which would be a problem for him because I was the best.

That's not an idle boast, it's a well documented fact that ninety nine percent of my kills were passed of as an accident or at worst as suspicious but never proved as foul play. Never had any of my clients been implicated or even suspected and never had anyone ever seen me. Mostly because in most cases I would indeed not be around when the 'accident' happened, and I never went back to the scene of the crime. I was good, very good.

After being patient for all this time my client decided to use brute force. In our line of work that still means you'd probably walk right past the killing without noticing anything but to us professionals, it means a gross capitulation to unrefined slaughter. A nine millimeter bullet hole may not be very big but to us it is a vast, gaping effigy to brutality.

Yet my client had no choice. The contract had to be carried out and two years is a long time to wait even for my working methods. My client however was very attuned to the niceties of the profession so he let it to me to find and hire the unscrupulous killer, professional is hardly the

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word for these barbarians, that could do the job in a cheap, straightforward manner i.e. shoot the target.

I can tell you, this didn't go over well with my brethren. Once word got out, I was ostracised and shunned by all. It would be the end of my career. How low the mighty can fall, but it hardly mattered any more. By this stage I was obsessed by getting the contract fulfilled and there was only one goal in life left: the death of the target by any means possible.

Well, I'm happy to report rather an anti climax. The person I hired did his job quickly, cleanly and efficiently. The target never knew what hit him and he died with a nice round hole in his head.

It even gave me a new regard of this breed of hit man. He had been utterly discreet, quiet and had done as much research into his target as I would have done, only quicker. Knowing all his object's habits and habitats and picking his moment carefully. The last thing I heard in life as I was relieving myself at the customary time of seven thirty, was the shattering of the little toilet window.



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