

The Countenance Divine

&

‘nothing more important than trifles’:
Critical Reflections on *The Countenance Divine*

(2 volumes)

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Volume I

The Countenance Divine

High matter thou enjoin'st me, O prime of men –
Sad task and hard; for how shall I relate
To human sense the invisible exploits
Of warring spirits? How, without remorse,
The ruin of so many, glorious once
And perfect while they stood? How, last, unfold
The secrets of another world, perhaps
Not lawful to reveal? Yet for thy good
This is dispensed; and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporeal forms,
As may express them best – though what if earth
Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
Each to other like more than on earth is thought?

from *Paradise Lost* by John Milton

ONE

The first Part of my History

i. In the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and sixty-six: Now that I, *Thomas Allgood*, face my death, though barely half my allotted span expired, it is my solemn duty and privilege to set down a true account of the strange and terrible events which have so knotted my fate; and if I doubt any man shall have occasion ever to read this *Last Testament*, or that any would believe it true if he should, so perhaps for the best; yet for myself, the very act of forming the wildest happenings into simple words makes solid and lasting what might otherwise blow clean away like smoke from this late *Fire* which I fear is the blind author of my sudden end, no less than it is heavenly vengeance upon our great fallen city of London; but if any man chance to read, and dare to believe, even in a distant age yet to come, let you know the hand of mine which writes these lines to be as firm and lively as that hand of yours which holds this paper; for never till I writ myself did I feel the simple awful truth: that any word a man ever read, whether scripture or song, law or libel, was put there by the human touch of one particular soul, just as full and quick to his own self in his day, as you are to your self in yours: he laughs as you do, and weeps as you do, and fears his death as you do; know but this, and all shall be well between us.

And so to my tale.

ii. Let it be known that I was born at Farrowsworth in the Countrey of Norfolk, the youngest of three and the only lad; and though it come as a great shock to some who pretend themselves my intimates, yet I confess I was raised in what we called the *Holy Roman Church*; and though we practised our Faith so-called in deepest secrecy, as any Catholick in those days must needs, yet if many in the place professed in braggadocio to hate all Papists, still they knew well of our family's private devotion to the *Old Faith* so-called, and none saw fit to censure us; for in the most backward parts of our land we may find the greatest display of honest Christian English virtues, of which *toleration* is one of the highest.

As an instance: I heard the tale of an old Papist woman, the last in the place, who was refused burial in the churchyard, and her Puritan neighbours took her remains and buried it there under cover of night, against the express instruction of the magistrate.

But to my history: I was possessed of a quick mind and a love of learning from an early age, and there being no school near by which might suit, my father, an honest and prosperous yeoman, sent me at the age of seven years to Mr. *Piper* of Norwich, for instruction in the Latin tongue, at no little cost, and despite of scorn from those of our neighbours who valued only what could be weighed in the hand, and who thought my father aspired above his station; for though I was his only son, his Faith so-called was such that he bore no vanity for the family name or property, but intended me for Doway in the Spanish Netherlands, where the best part of the recusant Catholicks from our great universities at Oxford and Cambridge were fled, there to be trained up

for a priest, and to return in secret to England to await that time he was sure would come when the Popish rite should return to favour in our land, which he never tired to say, though he chose well his hearers.

But his wish was not long mine, for as my learning grew from seed to bud to blossom, so too did my hunger increase to learn more, and I passed from the restful shade of the pagan Romans to careful study of the source of all wisdom, the true bright sun-light of Scripture, which glorious lamp I am sorry are to say is nigh unknown among Papists who yet call themselves followers of *Christ*, for though my father ever had a Latin Vulgate in our house and knew the rudiments of that ancient tongue, yet I never saw him turn a leaf or heard him cite a text, as though the mere presence of the printed words under his roof might somehow guide our steps; so that now when I opened this Holy Book, I was outright shocked to read that the Scriptures spoke out in the very plainest terms against every corruption I saw in priestly Churches so-called but especially the Roman, indeed I saw plain that much of the speech of *Christ Jesus* himself might have been the very words of *Luther* or of *Calvin* who my father so often condemned as intemperate hereticks; and this perplexed my spirit, so that I did not sleep many a night through from dusk to daylight one wink, but lay abed in great fear of my soul that for want of true faith it might burn in Hell, which under-ground place I thought to be a dark local cave with a great smith's furnace, and the Devil a mighty black fist which thrust the unholy sinners deep into the coles till we burned red or white, then beat us flat with a clanging hammer for all eternity; so that after many sweating nights of fearful wrestling within, I determined to attempt a prayer after my own form, which I knew to be the way of some Puritans;

and lo! as I ventured to speak my soul, all in a moment I felt my heart yawn open and easeful breath sigh out: I was flooded with a warm soothing balm and golden tears ran down my cheeks: my very being and essence reached wide to the great light of God to let him enter;

but still I barred the way, for to my shame I was not yet ready to receive his grace, thinking instead only of the great hurt I might cause to my father and full of lively fears of his imagined wrath, which overpowered my weak spirit; and with a quaking heart I vowed instead to keep up our secret practice of the Papist rite, which was then only one time a month or less, when a priest could be found and persuaded to attend us; for though it pained me to see him give over his hard-earned gold to a Romish hypocrite who pretended to speak for God Himself, still the father on earth stood yet in my view of the Father in Heaven, and cast a great shadow in whose chill I dwelt for months nay and years together, all the while in the wider world I feigned being the Protestant I truly was, to hide the Catholick faith which I feigned for my good father's sake.

I speak of those years when the Wars grew hot between the Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal, that is the Bishops, which led to that famous fight between Parliament and King, whose history every Englishman knows too well; and in those wild days, preachers and verse-pedlars and chapbook men of every sect and of none passed through our little town in their way from London to Norwich and back again, and I confess I listened to every sort of crack-headed creed and claim with too-tender ears; and in Norwich itself where I now dwelt in the week with Mr. *Piper*, who was himself an honest Dissenter, great disputations often struck up between Quakers or

Ranters and the Puritan sort, and then the common folk forgot their foot-ball, their riots and their May-polls and took places to watch, as it were a sports-day, even gaming on which preacher should first be trumped, and pack up and flee, jeered and pelted on his backside with crusts and dung; and I do believe the madness of those times has been too soon forgot in our Restored and Civilised age, and that if today the people saw a procession of naked Quakers, or an ass-mounted *Donkey Haughty* who proclaimed his Messiah-ship, it would cause such terror and panick as these hereticks might find their *One True Way* led only to a gallows or a madhouse; but in those wild days, though many schismaticks received a spell in gaol as the sole reward for their heterodoxy, only a few suffered any worse, and many of the hottest Ranters were soonest to cool, and find their way back to a decent simple life, with their good name restored by their neighbours; for few indeed will cast a stone when so many have dwelt under glass.

It happened my father was in London for the beheading of the King, which deed he thought a wicked shame on the English nation; but though he could not get near to the square to watch, so numerous was the crowd, he often told how he heard the darkest silence as the blade fell, and then the great heavy moan of thousands; and he never knew a more solemn procession than the mute multitudes leaving that place: He saw then that the people would not long stand to be King-less, for such was his wisdom; and since his death I have often wept that I might not ask his counsel on my many troubles, and that a childish fear of his wrath kept me so long from his society.

iii. Brick by brick I continued to build my own house of Faith (in my heart I mean, for I am sure I am no mason), and I surrendered now to the truth that my father's Faith so-called was in grave error and I could not continue in its practice even as a sham, precious as he was to me, and as it was to him, for he was a proud and principled man, as rigid in his beliefs as he was generous and loving to his family; but still it pained me greatly when I thought to twist such a needle of disappointment into his heart, and for all I meditated on the verse of *Luke* that I must hate my father to be a true disciple, yet the bonds of blood were strong and their straits weakened my spirit still; so I found reason after reason in my own heart not to declare my soul, even receiving the Holy Communion which he believed (as I too once had, for I knew no better) to be the physical body and blood of *Christ Jesus* there present (though in no manner which I ever could explain and I have never yet met any who could, except to say that it is a great mystery, which answer is supposed to close all mouths, and that ever any grown man fell for such outright lies and childish tricks is indeed a greater mystery); but though I consoled myself that even *Christ* himself, as we are told, submitted to his earthly father's will until the age of thirty years, and found peace in so doing, yet in the end I am sure I am no *Christ* and my impatient conscience cried out against such hypocrisy: I found excuse upon excuse to miss the Masses he took great pains, and no little danger, to bring to our house each month, once feigning a fever and putting my sisters to great pains in nursing me; but in the end, a man knows his son, and when my dear father asked me to sit and speak with him one day, such a call to simple conversation was rare enough that I knew his intention straight away; but when he asked me to explain my absence, still I found my tongue

tied, from fear of his wrath; but after some long moments of his awful silence, I wept bitterly, so that at once he surely read my secret heart, and told me so.

And I have known as much for many months already, said he. Have you lost your religion, or what is it? This greatly injured my youthful pride, that I had suffered needlessly in my vain effort to keep him in ignorance; or else that it told of something petty in him to deny that his son might possess knowledge he did not, when he must admit that my learning was far in advance of his, which fact was all his earnest desire this many years; but still I held my silence.

You must know that your soul is beyond your own grasp, said he. If you are baptized a Catholick then a true Catholick you remain until death, for a man's faith is a matter of inheritance and not of free choice. This grieved me too, but I kept my temper, though there was great churning and folding in my head and stomach both.

Before I speak more, said I, I wish to declare that this has naught to do with you and I as father and son. I must tell you that I love and respect you very much.

Well, said he, never mind about that. What I must tell you, my boy, is that I am most bitterly disappointed in you. Most bitterly disappointed. And these words truly stung me, for I had never before spoke aloud of my love for him, and now I wished I had not, which is a very poor thing indeed to feel.

If I reject your manner of worship, said I, it is not that I reject you, is all my meaning. Many a time since then I have wished I could have spoke straight out of my own grave disappointment in him that day, but the truth is that such a thing did not seem possible then, and scarcely does yet, were he

among the living, though he was not in those days many years older than I am now; but a father is a father for all that, and it must be I inherit some shadow of his own father, as he did of the fathers before him, as we all do of every father back to simple sinful *Adam*, whose exile we suffer still, whose precious seed held the tainted homunculus of every man that ever shall live, like a multitude of nested poppets; and if the total of that throng could ever be computed to the ultimate soul, the very *End of Time* itself would surely be revealed.

I blame you not, said he. You are young, and still a fool, for all your learning. I only blame myself for allowing you to be taught outside my purview, and I curse that dog *Piper* who has led you to this, though I expect you will deny it.

I will, said I, and if you think so then you are much mistaken.

You mean to say you thought thus while you lived under my roof, said he.

I do, said I.

I will not believe that, said he, and you can say nothing to convince me otherwise.

I am the master of my own mind, said I.

Indeed you are no such thing, said he, and you shall never be the master of mine neither. I know what I know.

I fervently defended Mr. *Piper* though there was indeed some truth in what my father said; but while there was no wrath or squabble as I had feared, a black gloom descended on him for the following days; and though he offered his confessor to counsel me, in truth I knew Scripture better than that little

man did, for all we passed a pleasant hour in discussing it, after which he told my father the fault was his own and he should leave his son to find his own path; which my father took very ill, for he imagined there was no *Roman Catholick Church* save that which he alone understood in every particular, be this but an image formed and nurtured in his own heart to suit the pattern of his own conscience; and in that respect I dare declare he was as likely a good Protestant as any, though he never knew it.

We never spoke again of the matter; though in the days to come he could not look upon my face without the most pitiful tears would come to his eyes, and when we were left alone together in horrible silence I felt such shame and anger, be it nothing more than self-pity, that in youthful heat I determined we could no longer dwell under one roof; so I packed a bag with what few books and stuff I possessed and found a ride to Norwich, where that same Mr. *Piper*, on hearing the sorry history, agreed to take me on to teach the basics of the Latin tongue to his younger boys, in exchange for bread and bed, till I should find for myself a more permanent station in life; but still I do remember well how the feeling struck me hard, in the dark shivering hour I sneaked away from my father's house: that I never before knew what it truly means to have *a heavy heart*, and now I always should.

iv. If I have learned nothing else from my long hard years, I know this: that life is made from temporary measures which creep their way into permanence; for in the end I passed some three or four years with Mr. *Piper* and later took pupils in my own lodgings; and I have pride enough to credit those who say I gave a sound and careful education, all the while I haunted the

booksellers to increase my own learning, and in life and in prayer sought by degrees the way to discover the true light of *Christ* in my own heart.

This led me on my great wandering through the churches: first the Presbyterian with Mr. *Piper*, then in great power in London which as I heard was busy with good Protestants fleeing heinous Papish massacre in Ireland; but the cruelty and pride I saw in some of its ministers, including Mr. *Piper*'s son who called himself *Elijah* though his name was plain *John*, and was no older than me but was pleased to jibe and barrack me for that I was more of a son to his father than he was (which if true was hardly a fault of mine), this cruelty of word and deed, I say, repelled me and pushed me out toward the Baptists and their practise of dipping grown men and women, and then I travelled the countrey a great while dipping and preaching too in some fashion though poorly, before I found the Independents; and then truly I felt the Spirit come upon me and a pure manner of preaching rise up in me, for I disputed in those days with Ranters and Anti-nomians of every stripe, all crying that the *End of Days* was upon us, for each gave it out that he alone held the key to the terrible vision of *John* which told of our fated judgement: some who held all goods in common and stole enough to eat, saying this was the Lord's bounty; and some who said that there was no way to be free from sin but to commit every sin with joy in full view of all, save murder; and some further who said that judgement was past and we lived again in Eden and saw it as no sin to lie with two women abed together and preached it out so, and indeed lay together as man and wife in the open fields like beasts (as it was said, for I never saw such), and took their hats off to no man, which mean offence was yet the cause

of more strife than any other, though I never yet found the Gospel verse where *Christ* sends the penitent sinner away to return with his head uncovered.

Indeed the wildest of these Ranters held there was no *Christ* or God at all and Scripture was no more truth than the tales of giants and fairies we tell to children, and a man may do as he pleases for he will die just the same and with no Heaven and no Hell it is all one how we live; and one such prophet so-called I even heard say that the day will dawn when all England shall hold such a doctrine, and men and women alike shall drink and game and fornicate how they please, and any talk of miracles and angels will be a laughing-stock; and yet when I look at some lately in the Court and City and see their comportment I wonder if he was not a true seer, and perhaps the greater wonder is that God did not sooner blast us in our days as he once did Sodom.

Some further pretended themselves as *Christ* himself reborn; and one of the strangest sights I ever saw was two such who each encountered other in the market square and set to disputing, which turned hot, till with violence the one attacked his fellow, who said this made it sure the man was no *Christ* at all; but still he beat at the first in return, till the two wrestled in the straw and the dung, and only ceased when the constable offered to settle the matter by crucifying both to see which rose from the dead, at which they quieted themselves and at length agreed there was nowhere in Scripture it was denied that *Christ* may not come again in two persons together.

v. Now in those days I first met a man whose fate was destined to be tangled in mine, though I knew it not then: This was *Henry Cock*, who I heard tell led a house of wild Ranters at Jewin Street in London, and he journeyed

abroad one week of every month to preach it out that *Christ Jesus* was the Son of God but that he *Cock* was the Father of God and so Grand-father to *Christ Jesus*, and all Scripture and Religion was a product of his own imaginary, for there was no such stuff before he was born and none would remain after he died, and further, that all Jews must be returned presently to England, so they might teach him the true *Cabala* that with such skill he should ascend himself with all his followers to Heaven and send down the angels to live upon the earth and the devils from below to serve them, with *Christ Jesus* upon the throne of England and *Henry Cock* upon the throne of Heaven, and then the angels and saints should pray to him and his followers in their station above to grant favours or to curse their enemies; and many came to hear him preach for he was a strong shining sort of man, though hardly older than I was myself, and was said to have twelve wives which some wags held was enough to drive any man from his wits; but still some sober good men of my acquaintance took up with him and made report that he was a considerable prophet, if not all he claimed.

I saw him only two times or three in those days, but on each occasion a dark fear struck my soul, for there was some hot fiery essence in his voice and looks that froze my blood and made my very hair stand; though when I saw plain how drunk were the rabble on no more than his words, I knew what great glory his gifts could attain him if he put them to Godly use; but I declare I did not find any trace of the Spirit in that man, and indeed the last time I saw him (in those days) I dared swear he could sense my poor opinion of him, for though we had never spoke a word, he clasped his eyes upon me in the crowd and cast me such a look of venomous hatred that I never wish to see again in

another, and this made me sure to shun his society; till he rose in my way a second time, of which more shortly.

For all that, it was a time of great confusion in my soul, for I feared that my own timid character and bred-in Romish obedience prevented me from seeing the true light which may be in some other of these Ranters; indeed I never forgot the great truth that *Christ Jesus* was turned out by his own people and seemed as a great joke and puzzle to his days and times; yet though my modesty kept me from their close society, some others of my acquaintance took up with these Sectaries and spoke with great feeling of the visitation of the Spirit to be found in such ways; but still I held my ground: *If all behaved so, who would bake the bread?* was a great word at that time, and I never saw true answer, except that our first father *Adam* knew no bread and lived upon the fruits of nature; but yet England is no Eden and the stubborn soil must have our sweat to bring forth food, for so Scripture tells us, till the New Jerusalem come; which if indeed it hath come already, as some in those days did preach out, then I dare to declare it was not worth the waiting.

vi. I came at last to my own peculiar doctrine, which never won me but few friends, for it savours too much of the Quaker for most, and is an outright Familist heresy to some, though I well know that many of the greatest purity and learning find their way to the same truth:— that the Gospel stories, whether they be history or no, as many learned men say they truly are, yet we cannot know this from reading alone, and so the value is in the wisdom and grace of the tales, for there is not more or less wisdom in a tale by whether it is fact or fancy; but whichever it be, the whole of Scripture works upon our hearts as a

fable of the journey of the soul from its creation at the moment of conception up to its eventual union with God at the moment of death, and beyond; for *Christ* is the Light Within, and this is the beginning and end of the knowledge a man needs for his Salvation; and whether *Christ Jesus* ever walked the earth as you and I must not be an article of faith, for *Christ* is the Living Heart of God in the soul of every man, and no less real for that.

Or again: if indeed there was such a man *Jesus*, as I do believe there was, I dare avouch he would goggle at how we speak of him today, for I say again that this man was not God, though God was truly in him; and I say too that it was none of his wish to establish great wealth and powers to his name, or if it was, then he kept it a close secret; and so I ask myself: if some clay-fingered antiquary should dig up the bones of the dead man *Jesus* and prove to me he never rose again, would that extinguish my Faith in what I know in my heart and soul to be true?

It could not; so neither then can my Faith, the dearest possession I have, rest upon whether Scripture is history or allegory, though many more believe the latter privately than would ever preach it out; and thus I excuse myself for that I did teach and learn all sorts of what some call Pagan knowledge but I call as much a part of Creation as the leaves on the trees and the birds of the air (created as it was by Man who is himself the pinnacle of Creation); for birds and trees are neither necessary to salvation, but still I have never yet found a man who thinks less of them for that, or heard fiery sermons that all such fruits of nature should be removed from the tables of the world.

But for all my singular beliefs I am not a solitary by nature and the Spirit led me to the Quakers who accepted me as they will accept any, or

almost, by the example of Mr. *Piper* who had now joined this truly Christian society.

Often in those days I felt sure I was watched in all I did, and some days indeed I swore I saw in the sun a great eyeball watching, which I took to be a vision of the sight of God upon my head; and this was a great comfort in those dark heavy hours when clouds rolled over my soul and fogged my view of the true way of *Christ*.

vii. These same days saw the Restoration of King, and in fear of the harsh judgment then visited upon Dissenters in some parts, I followed Mr. *Piper* and his fellows and found my path bent at last towards London, where again I found employment as a tutor to children; yet the London I found was none of the shining city of my imagination, but a thronging stinking hulking gasping place of crowding houses and miry streets and lanes forested around dank dirty streams of filth, and such shoving and pulling in the roadways as I felt at first that every man I passed wished to pick a fight, and near I came to oblige many; and often I reflected on how little any man may know of the world in spite of all his reading, for I had long thought Norwich a pale small place compared with the London I dreamed, but now I saw there was little enough between them for grand houses and finery, and much in the favour of Norwich for civility; still I felt a warmth in my breast that these were the same stones our *Shakespeare* and *Spenser* walked, and the same wood and plaster their blessed hands might have picked and slapped, and if any place on earth was an eternal place, this great city was such, as it ever was and ever shall be, and nothing save the vengeance of God himself might remove it.

I met a man born and bred who said he had never left London and did not know if such a thing was possible, for he believed it extended to cover the whole face of the earth; so I assured him it did not and invited him to climb a spire with me for a penny where we both saw the reach of it, and though I was much impressed with the size he was astonished it was so small, and said he wished the day might come when London would encompass our land entire, for he did not think it right that England's green countrey should stand empty if it might give work and shelter to God's children.

Mr. *Piper* invited me to dine with his friend Mr. *Ellwood*, for whom I was able to do a great favour, and Mr. *Ellwood* at the time had employment reading to a blind old man of his acquaintance, a certain *John Milton* whose name I had often heard spoke, for he was well noised around as a fine poet and a great scholar, and a rare bird among *Cromwell's* fellows for that he had the wit, or the plain luck, to escape the heavy fist of the Restoration; though if his tongue and pen were valued high in the old *Protectorate* (as Mr. *Ellwood* told me), still in those strange days he was suspected by some close men of unsound doctrine, for which reason, along with the dimming of his eyes, he was kept from the centre of things; but Mr. *Ellwood*, as honest and cheerful a friend as I ever found, spoke of him in high terms as a great and godly man, at whose knee he learned much wisdom and good sense; and when Mr. *Ellwood* was taken away to the gaol for the practice of his Quaker faith, which suffering that good man endured too often, he wrote and bade me take his place as Mr. *Milton's* helper, which blessing I was happy to accept.

In those days I knew not Mr. *Milton*, and I had seen him only one time, when Mr. *Ellwood* pointed him out to me, for we chanced to pass the house

just as he stepped out; and among the fashion of the day his unshorn locks and plain grey coat indeed marked him out as an old shabby relic of the topsy-turvy times past; but I delighted to see that he flinched not from what slings and arrows might be his due: He stood with head dipped a little, and then it jerked and turned from side to side like to some long thin bird taking the air, before he raised his hand and spoke to the sky.

If you are going to do the deed, said *Milton*, do it now and get it done. I'll give you the count of five, and if yet I stand after, I'll ask you have the courtesy to confess your cowardice and let me alone to take my walk in peace, and you may come back on the morrow and prove your nerve then.

As he counted aloud some folk in the street stopped their comings and goings to enjoy the spectacle, and one or two to laugh and jeer, at which Mr. *Milton* paid no heed; but I dare declare some other few were proud to have such a man among them as a token of the old *Commonwealth*, for they hushed when he appeared, and whispered to their children who it was; though in his blind cries to an invisible enemy he only made me think – God forgive me! – of *Cain*, wandering in the land of Nod, untouched because untouchable; though I said not so to Mr. *Ellwood*, whose cheeks were damp at the sight.

viii. But good news are ever tempered with bad, and I had notice then of my father's death, which greatly grieved me, and also that I was come into the property; so I returned to Farrowsworth to arrange the matter, in great regret that I could not take up Mr. *Ellwood's* kind offer, though he had Mr. *Milton* write a letter to say in what great regard I was held by his friend, and how his hand should remain open as long as I had need of help, for which I was

grateful; yet my business in Farrowsworth stretched out four more years, fighting a suit with cousins who claimed the legacy for themselves, which bound me up in continual travel between that place and Norwich, and which ordeal in the end ate up every penny of this legacy and more besides, through ill advice and my own simplicity in such matters, and also poisoned my family against my presence among them; till for a second time I felt myself obliged to remove from my own kin and countrey, though now with a heavy penalty on my head for that I owed such large sums as I could never repay; so when I heard news of the late plague in London and saw the great fear all had now of any traveller from that place, in desperate haste I packed myself up once more and journeyed in the contrary direction to most, that is, towards the blighted city, where I hoped no creditor would follow, and where I sought Mr. *Milton* to make good on his offer; but again my luck had curdled, for I found him removed to the countrey himself in flight of the pestilence; yet when I saw the ragged hungry state of some poor wretches who remained, my heart was touched, and I took a vacant pulpit to preach repentance; and there I stayed, upon what meagre charity my little congregation could muster, until the pulpit was reclaimed, for its proper occupant was not as I was told deceased, and mightily unhappy to find me there; so he had me in gaol, and though I stayed no more than two weeks, yet when I came out my fortunes turned a sharp corner, for my suit at law had finally come to nothing, and worse than nothing, for my creditors declared upon me; and now I reduced more rapidly than I could believe, in mere weeks living by rags and crusts, shunned by all I knew and with no road back to Norwich for that the plague still raged there, which had taken one sister of mine, and the husband of the other, who suffered now

in great poverty, and wrote often beseeching money to feed her infant; at which I was glad my father was not alive, for it would have near finished him to hear word his son was fallen in such straits as he could not keep his own kin; so for pennies I took whatever dirty work I could: I swept muck and stuck pigs, buried the dead and ferried the living, dug clay and washed coins, chewed his meat for an old toothless judge, ever fearful and hopeful in equal measure that some of my acquaintance should find me out and see to what I was come; but none did, save the son of Mr. *Piper*, my old enemy, now thrown off his Presbyterian cloak and emerged a merry Royalist rake and Courtier, who to my great surprise took pity on me after his own fashion when I told him all my history, and offered a position as his manservant, which still my pride would not allow me to take, knowing too how ill he used his servants; but I threw myself upon his mercy and asked for any more help he could, at which he said he would speak with one he knew but it would be no work for a gentleman, and though I gladly accepted his offer, yet I waited and no favour came; so I slipped ever deeper into my wilderness of spirit, which bitter fate I felt sure I must deserve; and to my shame I took black pleasure in my own despoiling, for I disgusted my own self, and it gave me some small satisfaction to see how equally disgusted were all others I encountered.

I felt the unseen eyes of God still upon me, but now they were a cold cruel glare, for I thought myself like to die a beggar, out of coin and not a friend in the world, which I hated my own poor sorry life so much in those dark days that I truly did wish it some nights, for my spirit was weak; but in the end I made ready to throw myself on my Heavenly Father's final mercy, at his great cathedral, the heart of our capital city, the nearest thing I knew to the

very house of God, there to lay my heart upon his altar and let him heal or trample it as he wished, for I was all done.

ix. So I came to the ancient church of St. *Paul* at the heart of the great tumble of London, and I wondered that such a beggarly wretch could find his way to the very bosom of God and the holiest altar of the true Christian world, and then how unworthy I was of that wide open generous Spirit which barred none; and I racked and dredged my soul in that place to know what I must do; and since I found no answer within, so I made ready to call for answer from without; but my heart was a great barren silence, the very breath lay flat in my throat, and the only words I discovered at last were those after the Romish fashion of my father, the old Latin prayers I learnt at his knee and which I still muttered over from habit when I feared for my life or my sanity; and now, when I set my heart to dig out my troubles, I found no other root to them but the moment I rejected his manner of Faith and all my misfortunes bled from that single wound; and now his wrathful ghost had conspired with some vengeful angel to thwart me quite, and deliver me up to a final repentance; so in my despair and weariness of spirit I felt I must surrender to his will at last, for all else I knew to do had failed utterly, and I felt the land itself was tearing me open: as England had bled and fought against its very self so I had toddled in its shadow like a mimicking infant; and now the Restored King was returned upon the throne it was time for me, aye, like my very land! to abandon my wandering and return myself to the bosom of the eternal family where I began; so, as I once did shut my heart to the *Spirit of God* when the essence of *Christ* first swept upon my soul, so now I pushed in a blunt knife to

prise my heart out from its Godly shell, to have it bound once more by the gilded chains of the Popish faith, for I felt my spirit weak even unto death and a suit of Roman armour the only fit gear for whatever battle lay ahead.

But as I knelt to make the prayer – and may God forgive me! – it was halted on my tongue by a voice that came to me, and spoke my name, *Allgood, Allgood*; and in my weak and silly state I took it to be the voice of *the Lord God* himself for I knew many who said they heard the words of God spoke to them aloud in times of trouble, and though I often fervently wished for such a visitation none ever came upon me; so I said, Yes Lord; but the voice said, I am no Lord, but a man as you are; and I turned to look but a firm hand pushed my head fro.

Seek not to know my face, said he, lest that knowledge be one day to your peril, and a dagger-blade pressed in at my side and I sat silent then for I feared my life; and in that moment I knew I had not touched the bottom of my despair since the wish to live and to thrive now rose up strong in me; but the face I saw there, though no more than a glimpse, placed a chill in my heart, for it was no face of flesh but a crude blank shining mask of bright golden metal beneath a hood, such as a man may wear who has evil scars or burns to the face, smooth like a sea-shell, nor even slitted at the mouth or eyes, a vision of terrible simple perfection and I see it still in frightful dreams.

I fear you mistake me for another, said I, and my mind was in great confusion.

You are *Thomas Allgood*, said he.

Aye, said I, but many have that name.

Not so many, said he. And I confess I have had you watched, for longer than you would credit. There is work for you if you wish it. Young *Piper* it was who told me of your need. I will fill your debts and leave you well off besides. Do you wish employment or not?

He spoke something like a Frenchman, though I had not then known many, but with no flaw in his English.

I do sir, said I, and in a low voice for that we were still in the great church, though many fine busy men walked around and spoke aloud, surveying as I thought for works to the roof, pointing aloft and raising papers and glasses to stare, for the whole structure without and within was clung with wooden scaffold, like monstrous dead ivy.

Then listen as I tell you, said he. Have you ever seen old *John Milton*?

And now a mystery: I cannot say why, but some new fear bade me lie to him.

I have not, said I, and who is this man?

He laughed at this.

Good, good, said he. Well, so. This *Milton* I speak of is an aged Puritan of *Cromwell's* party, known to all as *The Blind Divorcer* for that he scribbled his eyes out, as it is said, and wrote a long defence of the practice of divorce when his own wife proved faithless, so that his name was some times become a bye-word for policy made to suit the maker. He is lately returned to London, and is said to be at work these days upon some great work of poetry, a national epic on a religious theme. He badly wants a man to be his eyes, for the last he had, in the countrey beyond, distempered him quite. But you shall instead be mine, and mine alone.

Why me? said I.

You need money, said he, and I need a man in the *Milton* house.

Aye, but why me? said I once more.

There are many who might enter his household, said he, but would not take my money. And those who would take my money, I could not place into his house, not even as a pot-boy, to scour the stains of black regicide dung from his stinking shit-bowl. Oh, he is watched close when abroad, and it is peculiarly easy to watch a blind man, but the inside of the house remains his own. You shall keep close watch upon who comes and goes to visit him. It is an open chance to hear their words. I want to know who he admits, who he refuses, what is said, how long they stay, what is spoke about them after they leave.

I am to spy for you, said I.

If it ease your spirit, said he, you may say this spying is for the King, for that old *Milton* with his book *The Icon-Breaker* did defend the killing of his dear father, besides for money which you need, and also for the good of the nation, to keep a stable polity which must be the wish of every Englishman that we are not run over with Spanish or Dutch or French or Irish, or any other foreign rabble with their dark superstitions and strange attire.

But what wrong has he done? said I.

Not what he has done, said he, but what he may do. We suspect a foreign mob plans a wild assault upon London. I do not say *Milton* is party to it, but I believe those who wish to aid this destruction will seek him out, and his words carry weight with many who lack his wisdom. Willing or no, he is a beacon to those who wish England to be rid of its King for good and all. He

might have been tried and executed with his fellows, but that he had friends at court. They tried to play the sympathy of his sightless eyes, and sightless eyes is a good word for all those on *Cromwell's* side, for they see the future alone but wink at what is in front of them. For a kind of wicked sport, he was let believe he was not so important as all that, and it was a blow to his great vanity, for he had rather been martyred than believe he did not merit their punishment. This itself was his penance. And he may yet prove of service. His rhetorical powers are not dimmed. I want his every thought upon such schemes and plots as are put before him. I want to know where his true heart lies.

I liked not this scheme, but I had no better, and if this was God's way for me then I dared not question.

I will do it, said I.

I know you will, said he. And what is more, I say that you do know of John *Milton* from long ago, which is some of the reason I have sought you out. I was afraid then, but he said, Oh I am glad to see you lie, as it gives me proof you may be trusted; and though I followed not this reasoning, the man seemed content and withdrew his dagger so I questioned him no further, except to ask what name I should call him, which he said it was *Stephen Pedlow*, though he spoke it in such a way as made me believe it was not his name at all.

Next day his servant sought me out with coins and a letter, which explained that the bearer had no tongue, for he cut it out himself at the bidding of his master, who wished he should tell nothing even upon the rack, just as it was for my safety and not his own that I might not see his master's face; and this paper instructed me to present myself at Mr. *Milton's* house the evening to

come, with my credentials and bonafides, where I should find myself well received.

x. Oh! – in my innocence I thought the worst behind, and the way to come an easy uphill climb towards solace and peace; but had I known then one tenth part of what was to follow, I should have thrown paper and coins both to the depths of the *Thames* and fled the city, nay, the very land, sooner than meddle myself in such dark doings, and lead my self and my patron, and the ancient Godly city of London itself, to such a strange and terrible fate.

TWO

Flesh Of My Flesh

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

‘O Catherine! Catherine!’ he cries.

And he reads the verses again, tracing his finger along the words.

They are naked, in their chamber. Stretched out on their backs upon the counterpane. The late sunlight scatters its gold across their skin.

‘To be unclothed,’ says he, ‘and to be unashamed!’

‘Yes Will,’ says she.

‘And that, you know, is why you have one more rib than I, my dear. You have even pairs, and I have one less.’

She smiles. ‘I think you do not,’ says she.

‘I’ll wager I do, for the Bible says it. Would you make Moses a liar?’
And he reaches over, strokes with his fingers the firm ripples beneath her
breasts.

And she giggles.

‘Shall I count them for you, my dear?’ says he.

He tickles, and she shrieks. High and wild, flushing her skin.

He cannot resist when he hears that sound. Like a child. The
unaffected voice of simple joy.

‘O Catherine! Catherine!’

He climbs upon her, and they make one flesh.

‘My emanation,’ says he. ‘The nakedness of woman is the work of
God.’

A Child Of Light

Climbing to bed, an angel passes him on the stair. He is a child of
light, and Will asks the reason for his visit.

‘I am come to discover why men are content to live in shackles,’ says
he.

‘I can tell you!’ Will cries, and brings the golden man to his workshop.
He asks if he might draw him and the angel assents. Will finds he draws a
finer line than he ever has before. As he draws, the heavenly messenger
speaks.

‘I have toured the hills and vales of heaven, and I find only grace and joy. Yet the men of the vegetative world are slow and dull, and flee from the light.’

Will takes him to a prison, and the angel weeps to see men in chains. Will takes him to a brothel, and he weeps to see women in bondage. Will takes him to a church, and he weeps to see children in fear. Will takes him to the field of war, and he weeps to see men in arms, drunk with hate. Across the ocean the angel sends his thundering scroll, roaring upon the air to awake the slumbering spirit of man.

‘You fool,’ says Will. ‘Man shall not awake until his own energies rouse him. Reason cannot liberate desire. Desire must overwhelm reason.’

The angel’s face glooms and the light is drawn from the place, every lamp and candle burns black as night, the moon shrinks to a shadow and the stars peep upon us.

‘You dare to call me fool, who is a child of light?’ says he.

‘I do!’ cries Will, ‘for until the men of clay have defeated the children of light, there can be no liberty. The Devil, called Satan, will enter our souls, and the struggle shall take place behind our eyes, and in our bowels. When Satan is the victor, our redemption may begin. If Satan was defeated, there is no struggle. Without struggle, there is no redemption.’

‘Christ died and rose again to redeem you,’ says the angel. ‘If you are not redeemed by his sacrifice, did he make it in vain?’

‘Christ did not rise again,’ says Will. ‘He became Satan, and returned to the Garden to tempt the woman, to give his brutish end a purpose and a meaning.’

‘All this is but your fancy,’ says the angel.

‘And all the other is but yours,’ says Will.

The Harness Of Marriage

She weeps; he smiles.

‘I resign myself to the harness of marriage,’ says Will, ‘because it regulates this vegetative world, and frees me to inhabit the spiritual. But I lose too. I lose the freedom to act from energy and desire. If I wish to enfold myself in another love, you ought to permit me.’

‘I ought to permit a pettifog,’ says Catherine. ‘You are lucky I don’t knock your head off with the broom-shaft.’

‘But I know how much you cling to my soul. Sometimes I fancy that I have died, and you are broken. I console myself that if I were taken from you, nothing would subdue your pain. I see you yelling with grief, shunning all words and arms of pity, hopeless and mad with despair.’

‘You are funny, Will. This is just what I see of you, were I to be taken. For you know you will miss me somewhat more than I will miss you.’

‘What’s that?’ he says, and his mind is black.

‘Who sweeps your floor, and cleans your brushes, and buys your food, and wipes your glass, and washes your shirts, and keeps your silver, and counts your coppers, and minds your shop, and runs your errands, and warms your bed? And for this, I have the pleasure to share the life of a Great Man?’

Aye, and I do, Will, I truly do. But I'll wager I'd find another, sooner than you should. Paupers shan't be choosers, they do say.'

'Do not forget that I am your Will,' says he, playful, mean.

'I do not,' she says. 'But I still have my own.'

In A Pickle

Will counts their coin: six, seven, eight, nine. It is not enough.

He knows where his business lies: in the salons of the town. And he knows who can gain him access.

He sees the man at his usual place, hails him.

'Johnson! Mr. Joshua Johnson!'

'Ah, Mr. Blake. My pleasure to see you.'

'And mine to be seen.'

'But I am pressed, I may not tarry.'

'A moment only. Half a moment.'

'You look for employment, I know, but I have nothing just now.'

'Aye, but you take on other men. Lesser men. I don't ask you to put out my verses, just some copying work.'

'I have nothing for you, Mr. Blake. I wish I had.'

'Do you hear of any going elsewhere? I am in a pickle at home.'

'There are men in your pickle with infants to feed, Mr. Blake. Is that yet your happy situation?'

'Ah, no. We two remain two.'

‘Then I suggest you sell what you may of your own work. You have your admirers, I know.’

‘Time is the thing, Johnson. If I am to stay in this fretful city I need to buy me time.’

‘Perhaps you ought to up stakes, and travel. Bristol, or Dublin, or America. You might find the Western soul has a greater taste for your fancies.’

‘Come, Johnson. I work fast, you know that. Browne will disappoint you. He takes on too much. His work will be rushed, and not fine. You know I can do it by the date, and in advance.’

Johnson lowers his gaze, troubles a cobble with his toe.

‘Have I ever let you down, Mr. Johnson?’

‘Oh, my dear Mr. Blake. How may I answer without offence?’

In a fury, Will stalks the town. He takes in an exhibition; the stuff is offensive to him.

But he sketches it, trying to ape the fashion, to hone his skills in the tastes of the age. It wastes his powers, he knows, but he cannot live without bread and London both. Nor without Catherine. A cunning man, said Johnson once, he will never starve. Blake could not afford a serving-girl to pay, so he married one.

It made Will mad. They did not see what he saw. No one did.

Yet is this not pride? He sinks in his own funk. What if his work is indeed mere noise and fancy? What if the taste of the age is true, and his defective? If no man alive or to live ever thinks him inspired? Might he not

throw his heart into engraving proper, and make a decent living for his little family? There is no shame in honest labour, he knows. To live by sweat is our first inheritance.

He should burn his notebook, free himself from the weight of his own unworked designs. It disgusts him to think it, but he does. Out of love, or fear, he cannot tell. His brain is full of mud and steam.

But if he could twist his trouble into liberty...

In his mind, he argues with Johnson:

‘I see how much you take from me for the privilege of putting out my poem. If I can make and sell the book myself, why then, every penny is mine to keep. I see no dishonesty in this. A printer may write his own poems, which costs nothing, and print them up for sale. Why then should a poet not become printer? My father did not pay a man to tell him what colour and size of hose to stock. He did this himself from knowing the business. And I know mine. I need no hireling work.’

A Vision

Will is in his workshop, printing his *Songs*.

He loves the clean order he imposes here, good habits from his long apprenticeship. But the method is his own invention.

Simplicity is all the ancient genius, as Mr. Basire taught him. How my master was mocked in his day, thinks Will. How I am in mine.

He stoops at the copper plate, wipes the ink from its tiny crevices. He loves the smallness of the work, the patient devotion to each little task.

He hears Catherine above, dressing the bed. The rhythm of her feet comforts him. Sometimes she lilts while she works, fragments of his own songs.

Not today.

He has engravings to finish: hard, long work which takes care and attention, but none of his soul. He neglects it. And she knows. She says nothing, but in her silence is the rebuke he dreads.

Money comes in these days, more than they ever had, but he saves none; when there is excess, he takes time to engrave his own designs. There is wisdom in excess, he knows. And foolishness in caution.

He fears his own light dying. He would rather starve and beg.

She would not.

He reaches for a clean rag, to shine the plate, ready to begin.

Then:

He feels the old tug in his chest. A hot, gnawing chatter in his toe.

He wishes it gone; then burns with guilt for the ingratitude.

A vision.

Will sighs, holds his brow. He must pause, and let it come. The last thing he needs, but next time will be worse, he knows, if he resists.

He folds off his apron, dips the rag in oil and wipes smears of pigment from his hands. He stacks the sheets, with a blotter and a board between each. He carefully lifts the bitten plate, stows it with the others. He kneels there a moment, savouring their craft; his own. Neat curls of letter and line: the

mirror-writing he has laboured to perfect. He could sit down now and write out the half of Genesis in this contrary mode. A Bible of Hell.

He opens the window, and lets the city in. The horse-smells, the echoing melodies of men and women crying their trades and stock. His nursery song, his lovely mind-clatter. It feeds his soul.

Once in a while he has wished he was born a country boy, soothed by the blue air and the grand sky and the sweep and roll of green. But an empty vista makes him itchy; and it stoppers his vision. In childhood he saw angels in trees, treading among mowers, throngs of them filling a field. But these days: nothing but grass and empty air. The imaginary world he loves to inhabit is flamed into being only by the racket and anger of London. Pure energy. Eternal delight.

He sits, receives the noise and smoke and rush. He breathes.

He feels the twitch in his eye, the quiver in his chest. A shudder breaks through him.

He wishes again it could be otherwise. If he could banish this gift, he should do it. In this moment, he wants to be a dull simple soul, with eyes sewn shut.

The edge of his sight tingles and sparkles. The passing street begins to flake and peel. The world beyond imposes. A rainbow descends.

Then:

A transfigured face inches from his. A smile blessing his days.

Purple song thrumbling, a rich heavy chord like a hundred orchestras tuning their fiddles. And it throbs into a single chanting voice, *basso profundo*. He sees the words rise up around him, solid as a stone circle:

*'And did these feet in ancient time walk upon Englands mountains
green.'*

His eyes fill. Will's fingers rise to touch his own hair, to make sure he is still flesh; that this is here; that now is real.

It is the sacred song he once heard, thirteen years ago. His first true vision, that showed him the life to come. He knew it would return.

'And was the holy Lamb of God on Englands pleasant pastures seen!'

A green flower opens, a soft pink taste fills his mouth.

'And did the Countenance Divine shine forth upon our clouded hills?'

A sweet flame greets him, his tingling skin is liquid with its grace.

'And was Jerusalem builded here among these dark Satanic Mills?'

A Gothic arch splits open in his chest, and hot coins spill to the floor.

He hears the chink and tinkle. They burn his eyes, shriek in his ear, drowning the song.

He knows: they are the money he is owed for engraving other men's visions. Hireling work. It smothers his spirit, clouds his vision with care.

He feels his mouth fill with the dry bitters of gold. Poison to his soul, he must spit and trample it. He cannot.

He hears the chinkle of coin, sees the fruity lustre of a small hard disc, the filthy tang it leaves on the tongue when you bite it. It calls seduction to him: female and coy. Blushes at its own daring.

He knows the voice. His one true emanation.

Catherine.

Delft And Drapes

The boy counts out the money, Catherine smiling at his side. Will tips the lad a copper, he grins and skips away.

‘Poison to me, to see money make a child smile.’

‘It is not the coin, Will, but what it may buy him. Bread, or beer, or a toy.’

‘Aye, aye.’

He is not in the mood for it. Her sophistry is wearing him thin. She wants new delft, drapes for the good room. He wants space to listen for his vision, shape it into song, new-create the shift of times he lives in.

When men think of this place and these years, they will think of Blake, he knows that. His angel told him.

But he sees too his work perish in fire. A cleansing flame which takes the precious and the rubbish alike. He has so much, and only a little time.

It is not his own fame he covets. It is the soul of Albion, and the light it may give to the world. An axe for the neck of the King, that is what they once said his verse should be. Was it Flaxman who said it? Or Stothard? In those days, they spoke with one voice. A scourge of the wealthy, bane to the slaver.

He hears his own youthful words:

‘The Last Age is upon us, but it is we who must build its new Jerusalem. Trees grow, vegetative life blooms whether we will or no, but a city must be made by men. Brick by brick, stone by shining stone.’

And he is at this work, as Moses was, as Isaiah, as Jesus, as Milton. If he does not add his leaf to the Great Book of Life, then the next to come will

see a different road ahead. He must invade the soul of every unborn man who has eyes to read, and ears to listen. That is where he builds: in the heart of the child, the next generation of men; fathers of the future, who carve out the caves of our young imagination.

His hand must turn the wood he fells himself, not another man's.

'You are unhappy with me, Will.'

He snaps back to earth. London; his little shop.

'Not you, my Catherine. This petty, pinching way of life.'

'We are not pinching in these days, my love. We have plenty.'

'Plenty is never enough. Feed a man to bursting, and next time he is hungry for twice as much. But a small bag is easily filled.'

'Were you happier at Green Street, when the cupboard was bare?

When we could not sleep for hunger? When I made a meal from the leavings of others?'

'I never knew you did so.'

'I never told you.'

He thinks.

'I was not happy, and nor were you. But happy be damned, I say. I was honest in those days, for I would not take gold to engrave another man's vision. It is dead work.'

'Some of those are worthy visions.'

'Worthy soothes the weak of spirit. We need fire. Do you not see the times? America has thrown us off. Now France itself is risen up against its King. The Bastille of our spirit will be next to shudder and fall. These are the days we have been promised.'

'You are a prophet, of course. We must allow your humours.'

'I am no prophet,' he says. 'You well know I have never said so.'

'But you suffer others to say so.'

He bites his tongue. She means to needle him.

'I thought we had done with Swedenborg,' she says.

'Swedenborg is not my master.'

'But you hold with his gifts.'

'Swedenborg named the year of my birth as the New Age. That is a fact. I am now come nigh on thirty-three years old. That is another fact. And I see what I must be. This is no time for delft and drapes!'

'And tomorrow we rest.'

He hears the sulk in her voice.

'Yes. Tomorrow, and for eternity.'

'It is always tomorrow, Will. May we not live a little in today?'

'Yesterday, today and tomorrow, we may rest! Why, all I wish is to rest! Leisure to live and read and listen and see! Not to slave at a plate and a rolling press, so you may fancy yourself a lady of court in a silk gown!'

She blushes as though he has slapped her cheek, and he feels worse than if he had.

'I am sorry, Will. I did not know I pained you so.'

His anger slips off him like melting snow.

He takes her hands.

'Oh my Catherine, it is not you. I pain myself. I have so much to tell, so many visions, and I laze them away, or work them down to dross at the

press. They fade. They crumble. But you are my most precious vision. You are the child in my heart. If not for you, I should be lost.'

'Just words, Will.'

'More. You fill me. You bless my days. Your gentle hands hold my very soul together.'

She looks for a flicker of deceit in his eyes, and finds none. Her head droops to his chest, his arms enfold her.

'Oh Catherine! Catherine!'

An Example To Us All

He is at dinner, with Johnson and his gang.

He knows they invite him for colour, to liven the dull chatter with his bursts of fancy and his flair for contraries.

He does not mind.

As they use him, he uses them. Models for his verse, possible patrons, ways to take the temperature of the times. And there are bright men among them, from whom he may learn. Or who he might teach, for the greater good to come.

Johnson tugs his sleeve, presents a foppish fellow.

'This is Mr. Cock. His grandfather kept company with Milton.'

'As I do myself,' says Will. 'I shall mention you to him when next we speak.'

Knowing eyes meet. He keeps his smile simple. They may think him touched, but he will not be a traitor to the life he knows.

Though the truth is, he has seen John Milton, but never spoke with him. He feels the poet shuns his company. And it pains him.

They are discussing the yoke of marriage.

Fuseli stabs at the air with his fork.

‘If Godwin were here, he would tell you.’

‘Godwin, pooh. That man is too far even for me.’

His foppish neighbour leans in to speak.

‘Mr. Blake, are you a married man?’

‘I am so blessed. Eight years since.’

‘And you still find her pleasant, and beautiful?’

‘As I ever did. I shall tell you. When I first met my wife I knew her not, though her spirit knew mine, and it much affected her.’

‘Ah.’

All quiet now, to listen.

‘I was staying in the country at Battersea, to cure an ill heart from lovesickness, for a young maid had much abused me. But this Catherine saw me and fainted away. This was a sign. Later I saw her again with others, and told her of my heart-break. She said she pitied me, which made me love her, and I told her so. She said she loved me too, and all in a moment my eyes were opened and my spirit knew hers. We married the next year. I have never been apart from her one day since, and I hope I never shall.’

‘You are an example to us all, Mr. Blake.’

‘I know that, Mr. Johnson.’

He smiles, and they laugh uneasily. As he likes it.

Fuseli, though, laughs outright.

‘Your spirit is beyond mine, Blake. You have a gift.’

The company is ready for another subject, but the fop at his side wants more.

‘Tell us, Mr. Blake, how it is to see a spirit.’

‘As it is to see a man. Different every time.’

‘Have you always been so gifted?’

‘As a child I saw God the Father at the window, and another time Seth son of Adam called to me from a seashell. I often saw spirits in the flowers but thought nothing of it, for I knew or thought I knew that all men did, since the poets spoke of them so readily, and all men held poetry to be the greatest truth, after scripture, which also spoke of visions and spirits. But I was young then and I knew not how rare was this chance. I thought all life might be conversing with angels and singing their praise.’

‘And now you know better. You have put away childish things.’

‘Not at all. I mean, rare for the general man. I did not know I was so particular. And it puzzles me still why this is so.’

‘Did you not ask your angel?’

‘Not then. I saw angels often, but I never spoke with one till I was twenty years old. Thirteen years ago, seventeen and seventy-seven. That sacred day opened my life to me. I was walking in Dulwich. I passed a man who asked the way. He told me he was going to Dovercourt, and was this his road. I said it was, but he had a long journey ahead.’

‘All at once he was a lady, clad in a rainbow. She glided over me, and blessed me, and asked me to sing. I did so, and the melody was as beautiful as I ever heard. I keep it locked in my heart still. Then she blessed me again and said she would return, though in another form. I believe she was my Catherine, but I cannot be sure.’

‘Had you taken much gin, Mr. Blake?’

‘None at all. I was full to the brim with energy and delight, and I rushed to my rooms to draw out the words and pictures I could see.’

‘But the instant my pencil met the sheet, the vision crumbled into sand in my mouth, my finger trembled and what I drew was no better than a child might scrawl.’

‘In a fury I burnt the sheets, but after I dearly wished I had them still, since for all their rudeness they must surely be closer to pure vision than were the poor Grecian forms I have tried to sketch since. I thought my fame might rest on sharing this blessed vision, but memory danced ever just out of view, and though I still felt a shadow of what I saw, I had it in my eye no longer.’

‘Little did I know then that all men bar a very few are liars and clay-heads who care not for anything save gold and brute force. I too care for gold and for force when I think it needed, but also and more I care for beauty and desire and liberty and energy and life. I do not seek to squeeze the life from others, but to water what seeds of life I find and use my own modest arts to give colour and form to the visionary place I am blessed to inhabit, for this angel has finally returned these last days, and I know my destiny is upon me.’

And he smiles.

The food is cold.

Lips are pursed, noses pinched.

Fuseli folds his napkin, refolds it.

‘Forgive Mr. Blake. He is something of an enthusiast, in all matters.

His heart is larger than all his other faculties together.’

‘A wonder you can manage in the world, Mr. Blake.’

‘The wonder, sir, is that the world can manage me.’

Small Men

After dinner, they move to the tavern below. Johnson’s room is too small, and the men want port and tobacco. Will dislikes the loss of time, but he comes.

He looks around the table. ‘We are such small men,’ he says. ‘Those of the past age, we shall never see again. Milton was the last of them. Who in the centuries to come will quiver at the name of Paine, or Godwin? Will any wish a statue to Joseph Priestly, or Mary Woolestonecraft? I think not.’

The company enjoys this. They agree, though there are blushes.

‘None sees his own life as great, Blake. Unless you do yourself. I am sure Milton thought of no monument.’

‘Then you know nothing of the man, or his works. He spent his very sight to build his own monument, a vision we may all enter. Wren did the same with St. Paul’s, though I abominate his style. Milton’s hell is more real to me than my own Poland Street.’

‘And his heaven?’

‘Oh, it is a deadly thing, a mere rubbing from a Grecian tomb. But it is there, in every particular. He finished what he began, the true mark of an artist. You call yourself Sons of Liberty, but you grub around in policy when you could hone your greater gifts, shine a light for all time.’

‘And will the age to come see a monument to Blake?’

‘I do my best to leave them one. I can do no other. As a child, all my pleasure was reading and drawing. The one was as food to my imagination, the other its purest expression. Later I came to attempt poetry, but I found it a dull thing without colour and line to enliven it. So I spent the last of our money on the first stuff for my new engraving method.’

‘And yet there is no statue to Milton, Mr. Blake.’

Cunderley interrupts.

‘Aye, but there is,’ he says, ‘or shall be. Something is afoot. I had a letter tapping me for cash, to do just such a thing.’

He is not one of their party. They barely know him, only from the tavern.

‘Oh-ho. More is afoot than a statue. Has none of you heard the goings-on beyond, with the grave of the poet?’

A voice from the side. An idling gent among a small group at the corner, listening in. Always a shudder to feel spied upon.

Cunderley shrugs.

The stranger speaks again, takes up the tale:

‘Aye. All the talk in the street is of the bones of the poet, hawked around the town. Tooth for a shilling, hair for sixpence.’

‘What’s that?’ says Will.

He is disturbed. The bones of a poet are sacred things. They retain the power of his pen, the shadow of the sinews which brought his precious words from brain to paper.

‘They’ve dug up old Johnny Milton, goes the word around. It’s sixpence for a peek at his rotten old skellington.’

The tavern crowd hushes, gathers in to hear the tale: delivery boys who need an excuse, pipe-smoking layabouts always ready for the next diversion, a skulking parson in search of something to condemn.

Will leans in to see the teller, now quizzing a heckler.

‘Say again, son?’

‘I said, who’s Johnny Milton when he’s at home?’

He snorts, dismisses the man, leaving another to explain. Beneath him.

‘Fool. He means Mr. John Milton, who wrote the great poem of Paradise Lost, a tale of the Devil rising up against God and being thrown down into Hell, whence he crawls out again to tempt the first man, and from there springs all our misery. Any fool knows that poem.’

‘Aye,’ says another. ‘Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit, of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste. My old father made me learn off damn near the whole thing. I could tell you chunks of it from now till midnight. Don’t half go on.’

The teller takes back the tale: ‘Well, now, the story is, my lads:’ (and they hush) – ‘the story is, they were doing some works inside in the church where he lies. No, St Giles, beyond in Cripple-Gate. By the old wall. That’s the one. Slap bang inside the church, he is. In the very same grave with his old dad. How’s that for cosy, as the Scotchmen say.’

‘Well, the dispute started up as to where the grave really is. It’s supposed to be under the clerk’s table, but in the hundred years and more since he met his maker, the whole church has been shifted around, and not just once. They’re never done fixing and fiddling with it.’ (Another heckle: ‘What are they expecting to happen when they get it just right? That’s what I’d like to know. Are they worried how it’ll go down with Him Upstairs at the Last Judgement?’ – a good laugh at that, except for the parson, who takes his leave.) ‘Good sport, boys. But listen. So there’s a dozen or more come in near every day and ask to see the grave, it seems – but depending on who they find to ask, they might be shown a different place. So the warden decided to settle the matter, and instructed them to dig to the spot where the old clerk’s desk was, and see if they can find a coffin.’

‘No stone or plate to mark it,’ goes the murmur. Something *off* about that.

Another man butts in: ‘Well, he was a regicide, or as near as. You don’t go building a statue to one as chopped off the head of the King.’

‘Fool. Don’t you hear they’re taking a collection to do just that?’

The doubter hawks and spits heavily. They see he means business. Silence. ‘As well worth it, if you ask me, to dig him up to hang and quarter the bones, or break his wreckage on a turning wheel as the Frenchies do – aye, and spike his rotten old head on the bridge. Show them what’s what. There’s some in this country now as wish they were Frenchmen, I’ll warrant. There’ll be no rising up against the King on this side of the channel, if the ordinary God-fearing Englishman gets his way.’

The man looks towards Will, and other eyes follow: he is known as a radical. He smiles his prettiest, gentlest smile.

The parson, lingering at a distance, speaks. 'I know Mr. Milton would not have agreed with you, sir. But of course, as a free-born Englishman under the King, he would have firmly upheld your right to differ. I wonder would you defend his voice so hard.' And he does depart this time. And that shuts the doubter up. Though they all get the feeling: *for now*.

The teller smirks, ready to pick up: 'Good sport, boys, all good sport. But hark at my tale: they dig and they dig and they dig, and then they come upon this coffin. Made of lead, it is, and not inscribed at all. Nobody was expected to disturb it before the Last Trumpet, I daresay. An old wooden coffin underneath, and that'll be the dad. So that settles it. They put him back and mark the spot and that's the end of it.

'Aye, only it never is, boys, is it? That night the diggers and the wardens get a load on in the alehouse, and they run to daring each other to see if it truly is the man himself. And they get the idea to open up the coffin in the morning.

'And so they do. Still stinking of ale. They ain't slept a wink. Up he comes, and they break it open, and there he is.

'Well. Wait now till I tell you.

'They say he looked perfect as soon as they pulled back the lid, wrapped up in the winding-sheet, like he hadn't rotted one jot.

Nods at that. Will says: 'It is well known a Saint will not decay. Old kings themselves have been dug up and found incorrupt. In my apprentice days I myself was present when the tomb of Edward the First was opened in

the Abbey, and his skin was dark, but clear as a baby's. His hair as golden. The winding sheet stainless. I saw the light of God stream from the ends of his fingers and toes. This resurrection of the poet is a sign for our times. The Good Old Cause is alive and well.'

'Not so fast, Mr. Blake. The instant they touched old Johnny, he all broke up into a heap of dust and bits, amid the old crumbly cloth.

'The word gets about and the crowds start coming to see the old fellow. The gravedigging lass takes sixpence a time from those as wish to gawk.' ('A lass!' Shakes of head and tuts at that) 'And the workmen take the price of a pot to let you inside. Some climb over the wall. It's a kind of Bedlam. And by the end of it, why half the poor man is gone. His hair is snipped, his teeth tapped out with stones, his arm-bone twisted out, even his rib-bones broke off and lifted.'

Something Less Than Perfect

Next day, the town is alive with it.

Will hears the talk at the pump: 'Milton's teeth are sold over the whole town. An hundred at least. Such a craze of them, for I never yet knew a man with an hundred teeth. Unless his were Dutch choppers made to bite off the Pope's niblick. A set of wooden false ones as I've heard some men do wear.'

A customer in the shop declares: 'I been for a look myself. And there's his skull, still with a fine head of long hair, tied back and all it is. Large as life and twice as ugly. They knocked out his teeth with a stone, and clipped off

locks of his hair, and kept them for theirselves. But I got mine. Look here, that's one there. That there tooth. A Jew-peddler offered me four shillings for it. The same one, maybe, chewed the end of the quill that wrote his great poems, as it's said. Though he was blind all his life, they say too.'

The doubter from the night before is there, listening at the door. Unsmiling. Something about him gives Will the shivers. 'No, not all his life. It's well known God struck him blind as a punishment for his works against the King.'

'Aye well, if it's so then he has been punished by God and it's not for you nor I to punish him further. Leave him be, I say.'

'No, no, I'm for digging him out and mixing up his bones for him, so that when the Last Day comes he'll have the Devil's own job to get his self back together to enjoy his Paradise, or else it'll double his sufferings in the Hell he deserves. He can burn on a fiery lake with his arms sticking out of his arse, for all I care. His balls in place of eyes, that's my eternity for him. Too good for him. Teach him and his King-Killers a lesson. And a good warning against any more as gets the same idea, Frenchman or no.'

'Don't be daft, who's going to get the same idea after the Kingdom has come? To revolt against the final kingdom of God? Don't be daft, I say. The lion is to lie down with the lamb, remember. All shall be perfected.'

Now another chips in. 'Well Satan got the same idea when he was the angel Lucifer. He rebelled, and all was surely as perfect before the Creation, as it will be when the Kingdom comes.'

‘No such thing. It will be far better. For what good would there be in having a Kingdom to come, if it wasn’t better than what came before? Why bother with the whole thing?’

‘Are you saying the Heaven that Satan fell from was something less than perfect? That won’t wash. For that gives Satan an excuse, you see, and then it’s God who is to blame.’

‘But God knows all, so he saw the rebellion and the rest, the moment he created Lucifer. The whole thing is the fault of God, if you like.’

‘Perfect is perfect, I’m saying. There’s no such thing as more perfect. A thing either is or it isn’t.’

A third cries in:

‘All is the fault of God. But, listen: the very notion of fault is God’s creation. So all must be as he wishes. How could it be otherwise?’

Will smiles.

‘Perhaps the God of Creation is not the Father God, but a lesser. A prideful artisan, unsure of his own powers.’

‘Be careful, Mr. Blake. You would rewrite the Bible.’

‘I would, sir. Have patience, and you may buy it from my little shop, engraved and coloured by my own hands.’

‘The Bible tells our sin, and states our Laws. Would you rewrite our Laws?’

Will is done with them: ‘None of this is the Gospel, my friends. The Gospel is forgiveness of sins, and an end to Laws.’

A snort. ‘Oh, a radical, is you? Don’t let no soldier hear you say so, is all my advice. England ain’t no France, and never shall be.’

The men peer at each other, a wink is exchanged, a finger waggled at the temple. They sidle out, to continue the disputation in the street.

The Eyes Of The World

Will trembles in the August sun. He sees angels descend in the street, twelve and two. They alight by the fountain, chant a word he cannot quite hear. Their beautiful loving smiles as ever melt his heart.

A blossom of light. Another life.

Fourteen figures walk. Smooth-faced, humble-bowed. Each holds a globe of glass, with a tiny form inside.

They chant again: one leads, the others chorus.

I am the eyes of the world, and I cannot see.

You are the dream of the world, and you shall be seen.

I am the ears of the world, and I cannot hear.

You are the sound of the world, and you shall be heard.

I am the mouth of the world, and I cannot speak.

You are the tongue of the world, and you shall be sung.

I am the nose of the world, and I cannot breathe.

You are the breath of the world, and you shall inspire.

I am the arm of the world, and I cannot reach.

You are the hand of the world, and you shall be touched.

I am the leg of the world, and I cannot stand.

You are the foot of the world, and you shall be raised.

I am the soul of the world, and I cannot feel.

You are the heart of the world, and you shall be known.

I am the age gone by, and I fear you all.

You are the age to come, and you shall be feared.

I am the Risen Christ, and I am yours.

You are the Face of God, and you are mine.

A Good Sixpence

Will queues up. It is dark now. Only a handful of others, but still he waits his turn.

The smell itself is rotten. A kind of evil black sticky sludge in the bottom of the lead casket. Tears prick his eyes at the shabby state of the whole scene. A tinderbox is held by the young crone hunched by the hole, a round metal tin on the bottom of a candle-stand. He admires the device. 'One of the

new sort, ain't you seen them?' How poor can she be if she can buy the latest tins and lights, he wonders. But he passes over a sixpence.

She strikes the tinder, lights the rag. Touches it to the candle. The gloom is swept aside: *And there was light.*

Like a fair-day display. A house of horrors. In the flicker of the candle you see just his tiny skull leering at you, the dark caves of the eyes, and the gappy fearful grin; but the whole hideous bony mess of him, all the dust that was his brain and heart, is become slime and grease that turns your stomach. A few ribs and arm-bones tangled up in the rags of the winding sheet. Mush and fragments. A void.

'Why, where is he?'

'All gone, sir. The gentlemen as came to see him all took him away, part by part. He's scattered over the four corners of London now.'

'Can you tell me who took what?'

'I seen nothing, sir.'

'My dear lady, I must recover the pieces. Our end is near, but this prophet must rise before the trumpet, to dictate his lost works.'

He takes in her even gaze. Women have a way of showing nothing.

'Oh sir, I know none of them. Not one.'

He sighs, and passes another coin. These crones are all the same. Silver loosens the tongue. Silver and gin. But he pities her, for it is the hirelings of Church and Empire have made her so.

She finds a smile for him. 'Oh, yes, I remember now. Mr. Ellis the player. Have you seen him, sir? He gives a gorgeous Romeo. He came, he said, to pay his respects, for his company are to play a drama writ by Mr.

Milton. But I saw him smuggle away a rib wrapped in paper under his coat, like a man running from the butcher with a cheap cut. I said nothing, for he'd paid me a good sixpence the same as the others, and then a shilling on top. I'm a poor woman with a sickly child and you wouldn't have me starve, would you, sir?'

'I would not!' he cries. And he hands over what silver he has. Jangles out too the few copper tokens from the bottom of his purse. The little local coins which everyone uses these days, when silver is scarce. Putney, Hackney, Middlesex. One, he sees, has a motto against slavery. Perhaps he can have his own struck. He must remember to ask at the copper mill on Walthamstow Lane, when next he visits.

Milton's Rib

Will visits the new Pantheon the very next day, and sees a fine Midsummer Night's Dream. Mr. Ellis kindly agrees to speak with him after, still in his costume as Puck. Will is delighted by the little horns he wears.

Will idly enquires after his future plans, keeping his own powder dry.

'Well, now. I have lately taken on the Royalty Theatre, at Whitechapel. It was built for Palmer, you know, not five years gone. The great tragedian of Drury-Lane, yet the only tragedy played there was his own, for without a license, he could give nothing but common pantomimes. The miser West-End denies the sacred muse of drama to its starving eastern neighbour. You surely heard the scandal? Palmer saw it as such, and defied their petty warrants. But,

no! Drury-Lane had him closed down, the dreadful business ruined him quite, and he lies in the gaol to-day. Still, music and pageant are permitted, and I shall present a non-pareil for our opening, the grand tragedy of The State Of Innocence And The Fall of Man, that is, Mr. Milton's Paradise Lost, as rendered into a dramatic opera by Mr. Dryden, and improved if I might say so, by being put into decent couplets – for the original, as you may know, sir, had no rhyme at all, to its very great detriment in my humble opinion, and for all its great virtues apart.

'Our senior player is a fellow called Gavron, and this player's father knew Dryden. He once showed him the pages of his drama, which is printed and sold in all the bookshops, but was never yet played. And Gavron there is to play Adam, naturally. A little old, sir? Ah, but the stage works its own magic. And as Adam was created a full-grown adult, well – we are not told at what age. Our first father was ageless, surely.'

Will flicks over the pages of their drama.

It begins with a speech of Lucifer:

Is this the Seat our Conqueror has given?

And this the Climate we must change for Heaven?

These Regions and this Realm my Wars have got;

This Mournful Empire is the Loser's Lot.

In spite of the hollow ding-dong clanging of the verse, Will Blake sees the power of the enterprise: to put a vision before the people, an image of Hell and Satan. It might awaken something.

Mr. Ellis shows him their designs for the angels, which Will merrily tells him do not resemble those with whom he has conversed himself.

Ellis begins to understand.

He tells Will that he himself is to play the angel Raphael, but Will tells him to claim the role of Lucifer, far the better part. They argue back and forth.

Then Will gets to the point.

‘But I hear you are a resurrectionist too, in your spare time.’

Ellis is silent. A rarity, Will imagines.

‘I confess I have my informants, Mr. Ellis. You will not deny it.’

‘Now, now. Judge not, my dear young sir. The tale is this, and you may decide then if I have done wrong. When I heard they had as you might say disinterred Mr. Milton, and in such a disgraceful manner, I determined to have a look, to see if I could regulate matters in any way, to insist on his prompt and correct reburial, for you must know we players have some respect and even I daresay some authority among the lower orders of society, unsought though it is. And of course I could not resist to pay my respects to the poet himself. Though I must say he was not much to look at, since the worms have paid their visit. A very Yorick! Well, well – the fate of us all.

‘And then as I beheld him, it struck me – as we are performing his epic, might I not, as it were, borrow his own rib to stand in for that of Adam?’

‘Now, of course, I foresee your objection: the scene in question, the creation of Eve, does not appear in Mr. Milton’s poem nor in Mr. Dryden’s opera. But we soon invent it, you see. In dumb-show. Raphael, the angel of the Lord – would that be it? He takes the rib, and – Assist me, Mr. Blake, you know your Scripture, I am sure, you seem to me a plain honest Dissenter, and

for all my virtues I am no theologian. The angel would take the rib from Adam's breast, and coat it in clay? Is that the case? The form is moulded from the earth, and the angel breathes in a spirit to give it life? And from that is born our mother Eve. Now – how to achieve such an effect?’

It is Will's turn to be silent.

‘Well, we will attempt it. We may attempt all, I think. But the poetry of it! You shall not dispute that! What prouder fate could there be for Mr. Milton's earthly remains than to illustrate and illuminate the most important story ever told, and which of all stories he himself chose to tell? Might as well use the skull of Shakespeare to play Hamlet at the grave, you see? Yorick again! The poetry of it, sir! The public may never know – though we have ways of whispering out such a tale, and if we happen to sell a few extra seats on the account, that is all to the good, and to the greater glory of the man, not to say of the Lord God Almighty himself.

‘But the difference to the player! Ah, the resonance one may feel, in handling a thing sacred and authentic in place of some plaster fabrication. And I believe the public can distinguish. The first ever performance of this great epic! I could not let it rest. So I took the rib – I admit it! Yes! I will fetch it for you! You may see for yourself. But my motives, I swear, were sound. Holy, even.’

Will Blake holds the bone in his hand. Trembles.

It feels uncannily like a pen. Parabolic, sleek and brittle. He feels a wicked urge to snap and crumble it, return it to the dust from whence it came.

Milton's rib, slender and smooth: the actual physical fabric of the man.
Not his spectacles, or his library, or even his pen.

Him.

Without whom, none of his works would be. Those lines! Which feel to be carved from stone! Immutable! Yet, were it not for the fleshy human person, the spirit bounded by reason, of which this bone is a part, then not a single word of it.

'How much?'

Ellis sees the need in the young man's eyes. He doesn't like to take advantage. Still...

'A difficult position you put me in. I wouldn't care to part with it, sir. You ask me to give it up? No, sir. I swear. For ten pounds I would not. What's that? Twenty, though... Ha ha! You see. Well. For twenty pounds, a man may do many things. This is a unique item, I dare avouch. But if you can find the money, you may have it. I ask you just one favour: to return it, as a loan, for our use in this great drama. One night only, and I swear it is yours to keep forever after. Then we shall both be happy men.'

Disobedience

Will returns home. He is troubled and elated.

He tells Catherine this is his destiny. He will sell what he can, mortgage his plate and his business and even his clothes so he might possess this relic. Keep it from the profane use of men like Ellis.

Catherine smiles. She does not question. She simply wonders what he shall do with it then.

He does not yet know, he tells her. He has no purpose in mind for the sacred object. He has had no vision to instruct him.

It is a lie. The only one he has ever told to her.

Man's first disobedience.

THREE

From hell

Mr Lusk

Sor

I send you half the Kidne I took from one women prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise. I may send you the bloody knif that tok it out if you only wate a whil longer.

signed

Catch me when you can Mishter Lusk.

From hell

Sor Charls Warrin

Sor

I tok aother women last nite she gev me the runaroun and no mishtake. Shut her throat with my fisht an then tok her to a playce I knos an now you knos it to. I tok out her bits so you will se I em no joke lek sum say. Tis funy how women is difernt down ther. Ud think thed all be the sam but ther not som has beg fat kidnes and luvly red gots an sum has stinkin blak horbl stuff in em.

Funny how you don't know to look at em. I'll send you another word soon General
Warrin sor an sumtimes I hope you catch me so we can talk lek men.

signed

Am in hell but ar you Sor Charls well you sune will be.

From hell

Mr Barnard Shaw

Sor

There is no god in heven as you know so why do anything they say to the preests
an masters. Nuthin will hapen do wat you wil. Oh men mite catch you but they
ar jusht other men so wat. I do as I please an I please to cut up women an tek
ther bits. If god or old king herrod can kill the babbies well I can stop em bein
born at al ha ha. Ile send you somethin to show I am no joke as sum say. Or
you can go an get one yerself ile tell you were to meet me an lets cut a women
together I know youd lek that. The bes part is scrapin out the hipbone it meks a
squeel with my knif gainst her bone. Sumtimes I haf to stop it gets to much an
my blud gets hot. Oh wats one woman more or less you may say but I no the
differnse.

signed

Come an play Mishter Shaw I know you wan to.

From hell

Laud Salsbery

Sor

Wen you luk down at Whitechapple wat do you think sumtimes I wunder.
Wen you tek a boks of maches do you think of the mach gerls I bet you do
now ha ha wel wat bout the wuman gluing the bokses in her room all day
hunnerds of em just to get a few pence for her roof an bread for her chilren
mebbe even nun for her self. Them rooms is black and filty an I mean black
theres wet mucky slime all down the walls an no lite mebbe a windo with no
glass just a bit of rag in it to keep out the wind an the lanlord charges them
sixpens a week repares on top for havin that rag. Oh youll say theres
vestrymen keep an eye an mek sure all is fit but you know offentimes the
vestrymen is the landlords. Theres no other way of mekkin money but tek it
out of sumbody elses mouth thats jest the truth. It teks a dozen men in the
mornin jest to git you dressed an on yer feet. Do you ever wunder wot if we
turned on you wel I do. I see you in the gottor laud salsbery so I do with yer
head on the block an hoors dancing in yer parler an drawrin room. I see yer
hed on a stick so I do. Not for wat you dun but wat you never dun. Alls fare in
free trade so wye have a dam guvermint jest let the banks and bosses run all.
Wat can wun man do you may say wel I hope I ansered that queschin. Wun
man can mek the hole town shit ther pants. Wun man if hes smart lek I am can
turn the black hair whyte of the hole cuntry. With jus wun knif I can get you
all were it hurts yes even you pry minster an all that you ar. Under yer skin
like I gets under ther skin the hoors. Oh sum day I want to hear wun of you
screem. Ile cut you rite in the open in pecadilly an no wun will stop me theyll

clap an cheer. You think Im a crazy man but am no crazyer than you. Yer more crazyer nor me.

signed

Lets swop jobs Lord S an we shall see who does beter you nor me ha ha.

From hell

Yer majesty

Mam

Wen I com fer you ill put my han on yer throat an squeeze. Ill be stannin behine you and ill pull back yer hed jest a few inches with wun han, with tother ile tek my knife an stab it in yer neck under yer ear the lef one an pull its a gud sharp knif an it wont go too hard with you. You wont screem cos ill cut rite thro yer winpipe you wont kno a thing an they call me a monster an a beest an all the rest if only they knew wot I cud do but I dont. Ill neer cleen tek yer hed off but ill set you down on the groun gud an genntle. Mebbe in yer chamber or by the river at wesminister. O you say no no people mite see but I don mine they can watch. I think evrywun wud lek to see that. Then o yer majesty forgive me but heer it coms. Ill rise up yer skerts an yer unnerskerts an ill fine wat im lookin fer. You have wun too though I bet no wun thinks of it. Yes you do yer a woman less your not an ile soon find out. In the knif goes. Agin and agin. Then time to cut you open. I know jest were to slice. Up an roun and under. Deep. Ill get my hans bluddy but no matter. Dip em in and tek out wot I want. Cut it out wun two an im dun. Dont worry yer ded alreddy so

you wont feel nuthin. Wunce yer ded its all jest meat an its jest meat anyway
gots an grissle so what odds. Wen I do you theyll kno Im no joke. Lek sum say.
signed

Youll kno me by my fingers roun yer neck so jest wait.

Mishter Homes

Sor

I red all about you in yer buke by yer frend Watsun I bet you think I dont reed
but I do. I mean I had it red to me. You think if you studies a thing hard enuf it
will mek gud sens wel mek sens of me. You tel yer stories they are pretty but I
do wat I want an theres no reson nor rime you cant say this plus that meens
hes the chap thers no way. I cud slice a hunnerd hoors an youd never kno twas
me. Two plus two never meks fore or hardly ever as you well kno if you ever
lived at all an I think you did. O I laff at you. You don see wats rite under yer
nose. All life is mess an disordr an its you wants ordr on it but not me. Try an
mek it sumthin betr but you cant an the best men kno that. An I mek shure you
don forget that its jest nuthin. Nuthin meens nuthin. Life death wat odds its al
nuthin.

signed

As wun thinkin man to anuther.

Mishter Stevensun

Sor

Yer Mishter Jackal and Docter Hide is a gud yarn. I seen it in a musick hall. Only thing is it dont need no drogs to drink you jest do it in yer hed wun two an its dun. Say to yerself am a free man ken do wat I lek an then do it. O many men knos it bot you mus do it too reely do it thas the trick. Ther is no gudness I foun that out. I thot god wud strak me down or I wud feel awful gilty but no nuthin. Thers reel fun in killing sumwun o yes ther is. Wat cud be more.

Anything yer told not to do is fun. Stab at a wumans cunt is fun fun fun. Cut her up but I don cut up nobody til shes ded. Wat I do then is tek out her pain. The woom is the blak hart of a woman its her poisin. If not shes jest a man if she cant mek babbies. But no shes a woom-man ha ha. Shes a dam slave to that guts and blud an screemin. Am sayin sumthin but ther not listnin. Thers wun ile do will get them but it has to be rite. So on we go.

signed

from Edward Hide you thot me up but im doin it reely.

Mishter Gladstun

Sor

Wat nois you med bout Bulgers that time lek they wud care bout us. So the turks outrage on ther wimmin well who cares. You sed they are chrischin an must be helped well I don think ther no chrischins. They don even speak english I herd. Why don you care bout yer own. Thers chrischin woman

outraged upon by christchin men aye an men in yer own clubs an parlyment too an you care not. By jingo we must keep the rushins back but don help on the ignernt cess in yer own town. Don lectur no savidges whil you got a savidge here an english savidge killin womin an no wun ken stop him thas wat the papers say an ther rite. O I kno ha ha you say hes me that savidge so luk whos talkin but do you think I thot id get away with it no way never. I thot youd have me on the rope by now. I niver thot you cared so little nor yer peelers was so dim. Wat I wunder is why dont evrywun jest kill an wash ther hans in hoors blud cos no one stops you. Only a fool kills his wife or his muther no no jest sum drunkin hoor an its easy. No one sees o but a corse they do but no one sez. I have a crowd roun me wen I do it they all pay me a sovren to watch an I kno theyll say nuthin for who wants it known they lek to watch wimmin gettin cut up. Twinty or thirty every time. Its free trade if they want to pay an im hurtin no one wat harm. O im hurtin the women you may say but not so much as you are. They die ivry day and no wun gevs two dams of hunger an awful disease an you think servs them rite dont you. Well wen I does it reel quick an no pain and has my fun then you say awful awful. Wel its not awful or if it is then hang yerself before me cos you kill more nor me.

signed

If I was in charge youd be on the gillotin.

Mishter Wild

Sor

You remember that tim I tuk you down to Witechaple an you said for money wat may I have an I said wat may you not hav well you may have it for money or no money no wun cares. You want to outrage on a lad well go ahed an his muther will sell him you for fiv pouns and why not hes hers to sell. You may split him open an drop him in the tames after an gud riddance wun les mouth to feed. You kno lek me thers no gud nor bad tho you think thers beauty well mebbe but yers is not mine an thers the rub. You luv skin an I luv wats under it so how do we sort that wun out. But thers enuff to go roun an anyway I don tuch boys so you can hav em ill do old hoors an ate ther guts for I do honest I do. Sumtimes I taste shit from ther guts an my blud gets hot an I get faint. Fry up her woom an eat it an see wat hapens. Not wat you think anyway. Nibble an chew an smack yer lips. I ates it so now its in me. I wak around drippin blud an guts an they cant catch me it meks me laff. Still no matter you cud lift any man you pass on the road ther all as guilty as me for they all want to do wat I do even if they aint dun it reely or not yet annyway. My own blud is hot with it. It burns an burns when I cut. They watch me nick an slice. Her face coms off next. I leve it roun the place. Now her dug. Its jest meat an shes ded anyhow so stop cryin. The medical men do it for post mortem I kno so wye cant I. Im findin things out too. They luk for rot in the body an me in the soul an believe me its always ther. If you saw wat was in you youd scream. An youd niver stop mebbe. I know cos I see it and now you all know cos if its in me its in you too an mebbe it wasint befor but now iv put it ther so now you kent do nuthin bout it ha ha. Who ses wun man cant change nuthin iv changed

this hole city aye an mebbe more too. The wurl will kno me cos now ive started no man ken stop it. Wats dun kent be undun. I wak around with blud roun my mouth and chewin guts an no one ses nuthin. I throw her offal aroun the street splat splat lek old rottin pears an no one ses nuthin. I tred her gots into the groun on pecadilly an no one ses nuthin. Ha ha that meens I won. I kno you lek a joke so heres a gud wun.

signed

I hope ur laffin at my trikxes Mishter Wild cos it is funny it reely is.

From hell

Revernd Sam Barnit

Sor

Do you reely bleev in hevvn do you reely. If you do then wat mater if all life is horbl wen you die you get ur reword. If you ben gud. An if thers no hevvn then wat mater ull be ded wen you die an that sune enuff so wat mater. Wat you wont say Mishter Barnit is that this here life is the oney thing. I kno you must bleeve that or you wuden wast yer time on hoors an theevs. God can do nuthin for if he cud youd pray pray pray til he dun sumthin but you don bleeve that so is jest us isnit. Yes tis. Thers no god or wye wud you haf to do it al. If god is gud. Less hes not less hes a horbl god then mebbe we haf to fite him an show him wat gud means. Mebbe wer teachin god how to be towards ar fello man. Mebbe god is bad bad bad an we are gud. Mebbe I am god for I am bad enuf to be. Madgin that. So who ses am not cud be. If we haf to liv by god an god is

free he sets the laws wel I am free I set my own laws so if thas wat meks god then am god. An I cant die so thas lek god. Yu mus all worship me mek a church for me an in a hunnerd yeers people wil follo my way an slicen wimmin wil be evry Sunday all pickchers will be of blud an guts an bukes of wimmin getting cut an chopt ha ha. I herd ther guna get sum men an do them up lek wimmin but with a steel coller roun ther neck so I cant cut them an then cach me o that meks me laf. O o o I laf an laf. Sumwun ther is who thinks Im a womin twas in the star I herd wel thas a gud wun to. Ent no wuman cud do wat I do. Ent no women docters nor slawters. O yes you say bot they hav babbies an thas blud an gots yes it is don you think I kno that. I kil as wel for mekkin me be borne. No mor. Is enuf now. Wen evrywun alive now is ded thas the end. I hope I may be the las wun living but probly not thers babbies now wil live wen I die. I wish I cud die sumtimes. I wish I cud. Is bin yers and yers wye not lemme die. A hunnerd or mor. This tim is the wurst I likd it betw en ther was les peepl an no trens an you cud wak in the green cuntry an back in a day. Oh revernd Barnit if you cud liv frever wat wud you do not wat you think ill bet. If youd ast me id have sed alsorts. But you don wan to al you want is wat I don evn kno. I don evn kno. Jest not this. Nuthin meks it go way thers no way out I cant se no way out. I jest want it lek it was befor peece an quite an small litl luv an no paen lek this is all paen I can stan it. Bot wat can you do heyho. Ether bild or reck so I reck my choyse an off I go. Jest wate til you se wats cumin. O you think is bad now yull cry lek a babby wen you se wat hapns next. Yis you wil.

Signed

Ile rite agen Revernd Barnit ur a gud man I feel sorry fer you.

FOUR

00. One Sunday morning, at the end of the twentieth century, on Brick Lane market in London, a computer programmer called Chris McCann bought an odd little thing. The man who sold it, from a selection of other knick-knacks on a blanket spread on the ground, said it was a Practical Rebus. Chris didn't know what that meant, but he didn't want to admit it, so he nodded. 'Oh yes, I see,' said Chris.

Chris took the object in his hands. It was a kind of puzzle or toy made from hexagonal pieces of wood in a frame. Each piece had an image or a motif painted on it, but together, they formed one overall design. The pieces could be interchanged, and whichever way they were arranged, they made a different pattern. He wondered if the person who made it had worked out every possible combination in advance, or if some of them were accidental.

It was a clever little thing. Chris liked it a lot. The wood was varnished and the paint had faded. It looked very old, though he knew you could never be sure. He paid the twenty pounds the man asked. He was pretty sure that was far too much.

On the walk home, Chris had a funny feeling that someone was following him. The streets were quiet, but when he looked behind him, he thought he caught a glimpse of a figure wearing a hood and some kind of mask. Chris knew people who had been mugged round here. The area was

becoming fashionable, but there was still a lot of poverty. He was careful never to wear his Discman on the street, and not to carry his laptop unless he had to.

When he got home, Chris put the little wooden object on his desk by his computer. If he was stuck on something, or he wanted to take a break, he played with it. He arranged it in different configurations and tried to see something in the pattern. He always did. Other times he just held it, and looked at it, and imagined who might have owned it and played with it in the past.

The past was something Chris never cared much about. He didn't own any other old things. He hadn't taken anything with him when he first moved to London, and everything he had bought since was modern and new. When he thought about it, he realised the oldest thing in his flat was him.

He knew that wasn't completely true. He knew that the stuff his things were made from, the metal or the wood, could be any age at all. Everything was made of something else.

But this little thing he had bought was different. He couldn't shake the feeling it had been meant for him. When he touched it, he felt a physical connection to a world that no longer existed. He almost felt like it was more real than he was.

01. When he was younger, Chris used to look ahead to the year two thousand as the boundary of the future. If only I could have a glimpse of myself then, he used to think, I would know who I'm going to be.

Now, it was only a few months away. The twentieth century was finally coming to a close. He wondered if anyone was sorry to see it go. He wasn't.

It made him smile now to remember how he once thought twenty-seven years old was far into adulthood. He had been certain that, by this stage, his life would have achieved its final form. In his young imagination, nineteen ninety-nine was the end point, the culmination of everything. Civilisation would have been perfected. Things would stop changing. History would be over.

02. As a child, Chris had sometimes doubted that the past was real. He used to enjoy thinking that the world had come into existence when he was born, and it would end when he died.

If the family was on a long journey, he used to daydream that they were driving through a series of domes, each only a few miles in diameter. The domes were connected by tunnels. When it got foggy or cloudy, and he couldn't see very far into the distance, that was to hide the tunnel. When the weather cleared, and he could see further ahead, that meant they were inside a new dome. Everything he could see was everything that existed. This fake world was laid out entirely for his benefit, to accommodate his movements, which appeared to him to be spontaneous but were actually controlled from somewhere else.

Other days, the past felt very real, but very far away. He simply understood the vast distance from then to now. He would stare out the car window, looking for signs of modern life in the countryside, and imagine he

was explaining this strange world to a visitor from another time. That was his favourite game.

He still did it now, once in a while. He imagined he was giving a presentation to a room full of notable people from history, great thinkers and writers and leaders. They were hanging on his every word. It was a dazzling performance, illuminating what had otherwise seemed a confusing and hostile place, in clear and simple terms.

He especially liked to explain to them how computers worked. He had honed this speech on flights and tube journeys, in reveries during dull meetings, while lying in bed at night. He thought it was a shame he couldn't actually give the lecture in public. He knew there were lots of people who didn't understand very much about modern technology. No one ever bothered to explain it.

Chris felt he had a better grasp of it better than most. Sometimes, when he was working, he liked to pretend to himself that his brain was a computer. He often thought he preferred machines to people.

03. At primary school, Chris used to tell his friends he was an android. He remembered one day, when he couldn't have been more than six or seven. The teacher asked them, for their homework, to find out from their parents what time of day they were born. He put his hand up, and asked what if you weren't born. He didn't remember anything after that, except a sensation of blushing.

Even when he grew out of that delusion, he held on to the fantasy. He hated the human parts of himself that got tired, and needed the toilet, and had

to eat. He wished he could be a cyborg. He would keep his identity, but have it work within a perfect bio-mechanical system.

He had always been convinced that by now, this should be possible. He was genuinely disappointed it wasn't yet. He was still sure it would be, one day. He wished it would hurry up. He often got frustrated that he found so much of life so difficult. He had thought being an adult would be easier.

Sometimes he was afraid it could only get worse. Chris knew that any closed system left alone would eventually tend to decay. That was the essence of the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy increases. Just to keep things as they were, you had to constantly improve them. The only answer was to clear everything away and start again.

He really wished there was something he could do to help. But instead of making things better, all he did was stopped them from falling apart.

04. Chris's job was fixing the Millennium Bug. That was what most people called it, but in the industry it was known as the Year Two Thousand Problem.

The problem itself was very simple, and Chris enjoyed explaining it. Because the first computers had limited memory, a convention developed to identify years by using two-digit numbers, without a nineteen at the beginning, from double zero up to ninety-nine. Eventually the convention became a tradition, and no one questioned why it was done.

Decades later, most computers still didn't know any better. They thought time itself only ran for a hundred years.

When the next new century came, exactly at midnight, as ninety-nine ended and double zero began, those computers would think that, instead of

moving one second into the future, they had gone a hundred years into the past. It would be year zero, the beginning of time.

Chris knew that computers didn't really think anything. They were just machines, which used fixed rules of logic to carry out calculations, faster and more reliably than we could.

But some of these calculations involved future events, and we'd forgotten to tell them that the future didn't stop at the end of nineteen ninety-nine. As far as the computers understood, everything to come had already taken place long ago.

Some computers would know this was wrong, and tell us. Others would simply stop working. Some would continue to function, but give out inaccurate information. Others would be entirely unaffected. The problem was, there was no way to predict which, and not enough time to check all of them just in case. By the time we realised this was a serious problem, it was already too late.

A lot of people, especially in America, talked about the end of the world. Power supplies would fail, planes would fall out of the sky, nuclear power stations would explode. The most anxious had sold their houses and moved to the middle of nowhere, with stockpiles of food and gold. A few of them even seemed to be looking forward to it. The corruptions of the modern world would be swept away. Life would be simple and pure again.

Chris thought this was over the top. There were power cuts all the time, computers crashed, systems failed. The world hadn't ended yet. And even if everything went wrong all at once, the collapse-of-civilisation scenario relied on the belief that people were stupid and selfish, and would run around

in circles panicking. Chris imagined most people would probably get on with their day as best they could, which would include starting to fix things. In a couple of weeks, most basics would be up and running. A few months later, you'd hardly know anything had happened.

And that was in the worst-case scenario. As far as he could tell, none of this was going to happen. Even if the panic had been justified to start with, there was so much work going into fixing essential systems that probably no one would notice anything at all. It would just be another new year.

05. Chris liked his job. It was hard work and the hours were long, but he was very good at it, and the pay was excellent. He had never imagined he would earn that sort of money at his age, especially for doing something he enjoyed. But he had never thought very much about what he would do for a living. No one ever told him he was supposed to. He had imagined something would just come up. It didn't.

He had felt lost when he finished his degree. It was supposed to be the start of his life, but it felt like the end. He went travelling for a couple of months, because everyone he knew said he should, but he hated it. He wanted to be back in London.

Other countries never felt completely real to him. Somewhere deep down, he couldn't shake the sense that it was all put on, like a film set, or a show organised for tourists. He started to feel that way too when he was in other parts of England, even around where he grew up. The pretty little villages seemed too perfect, as though they'd been rebuilt in the style of some

imaginary past. And other cities in Britain, he thought, were just trying to be London and not even getting close.

He had loved London since he first arrived at university. It gave him everything he didn't have inside him. He felt like he couldn't manage anywhere else. London was the only thing he was absolutely sure about.

06. Chris had asked around. One of his university friends had an attic room going in her parents' place. They were moving abroad while they had the house done up, and they wanted someone to deal with the builders and keep an eye on the gardener.

He ended up staying for two years, even after the renovations were finished. He worked at a cinema for a while, selling tickets. Then he took a job with an agency that monitored the news. He had to read all the papers and watch news broadcasts, and highlight any mentions of a particular company or subject.

For a while, he became very interested in politics and current affairs. He thought he might like to be a journalist. But he didn't know how to get started, and he didn't know who to ask.

07. The agency closed down. Chris decided to sign on for a while. He thought it might be a good way to get some more training without paying for it.

They offered him a computer course, and he found he was good at it. Maths had always been his strong point at school, but he had ended up studying Business Communications at university. His teachers told him it was a safe bet. He didn't like it much, but he got a decent degree.

He had done computers for a while when he was at school, but it didn't feel like a proper subject, and he thought the teacher didn't understand it very well. This time, it was different. He felt at home. The people who'd written the coding languages seemed to have the same kind of brain he had. Sometimes, he could see a simpler way of solving a problem than the textbook suggested.

It reminded Chris of why he'd always enjoyed learning French at school. He liked to work out the principles of which words looked similar to words in English, and then guess how to translate something. It was the same with computers. You followed the rules, and applied logic. Everything was under control.

08. When the course finished, Tammy and Al, who ran it, told Chris they were very impressed with his work. They said they were starting a business in Year Two Thousand compliance and asked would he like to be involved.

He jumped at it. He rented a flat in Shoreditch, and got the bus in and out to the office near St. Paul's every day.

That was his life now. He was happy.

09. When he first met them, Chris assumed Tammy and Al were a couple. Tammy explained to him one day that they had been for a bit, when they were students, but they'd decided they worked better as friends. She said she didn't believe in mixing business with pleasure. Chris agreed.

He had a few friends from university he was still in touch with. Once in a while they rang and asked if he wanted to go out. He always did, and he

always enjoyed himself, but he was glad to get home too. He lived alone, and he liked it that way. He couldn't imagine sharing with someone else.

Chris didn't have a girlfriend. He had the occasional fling with girls he met when he was out at the weekend, friends of friends, but he never saw them for more than a couple of weeks. Chris always found it hard to get a relationship going. He had his reasons. It was just the way things were.

Sometimes he didn't sleep with anyone for a couple of months. He didn't really mind. It meant his life was uncomplicated, and he wanted to keep it that way. He liked to know what was going to happen tomorrow, and he liked that it was very much the same as what had happened today.

10. The business began to take off. After a few months, there was more work coming in than they could handle. Tammy hired Lucy, another programmer. She said she wanted a woman because she hated being in an office that was all men.

Al wasn't very happy. He said Lucy didn't bring an especially pleasant vibe to the working environment. He said her chief modes of expression were silence and sarcasm. But Tammy said she was perfectly fine once you got used to her.

There wasn't much choice. Nobody wanted a bad vibe in the office every day.

11. Lucy was a sort of goth. She had dyed straight black hair. She always wore obvious make-up and she dressed entirely in black, with lots of silver jewellery. She had six or seven piercings in each ear. She had one in her nose,

one in her tongue, and she said she had one in her belly button, though Chris had never seen it. She told him later that she had others in her nipples and in her clit, but Chris didn't know whether to believe that.

She never seemed especially happy or unhappy, but she had plenty of attitude. She hardly ever smiled, and when she laughed it was usually mockery. Nobody ever saw her eat, though after work she drank as much as anyone. During the day she seemed to live on cups of tea and cigarettes. She smoked Marlboros, the red ones, and she always left the packet out on her desk where people could see.

Al told Chris he knew her type. She was all mouth and no trousers. Tammy said she was extremely good at her job, and no one would care how she looked or behaved if she was a man. Chris thought that was probably true.

12. Chris tried his best to be friendly to Lucy. He was confused and upset that she wasn't friendly in return. He wasn't used to that.

Al told him not to bother. It wasn't him, she was the same with everyone.

Chris didn't want to be everyone. He saw himself as a particularly kind person. It was important to him that he could get on with people. He hated the idea of anyone not liking him. As far as he knew, he had no enemies. He couldn't really imagine what having an enemy would be like. He was sure they could never think worse thoughts about him than he sometimes thought about himself.

He had always tried to be good. He couldn't understand why other people didn't. Everyone knew that's what you were supposed to do. He didn't

automatically like every single person, but he tried not to judge them. And he found that if you were pleasant and patient, they would almost always be the same in return.

Lucy wasn't. She just stared at him, or ignored him completely.

13. Lucy wasn't the same with everyone. She and Al developed a sort of bantering relationship. He was always having a go, and she gave it right back, in her deadpan Yorkshire accent. Chris couldn't figure out if they were enjoying it, or if they actually hated each other. Sometimes he wondered if they weren't sure themselves.

'You know most blokes think you're a dyke,' said Al one day, 'because of how you dress.' 'I wish they did,' said Lucy. 'Some days I'd quite like to be a dyke.' 'I don't,' said Al, 'because I'm broad-minded.' 'Christ,' said Lucy, 'I'd hate to meet someone narrow-minded.' 'You would indeed,' said Al. 'Your problem is, you think the sort of people you hang about with are most people.' 'Believe me I don't,' said Lucy. 'I hang about with the people I hang about with because I want to stay far away from most people.' 'Very wise,' said Al. 'The trouble with democracy, as Winston Churchill once said, is that most people are cunts.' 'I'm not sure Churchill said that,' said Tammy. 'Well he should have done,' said Al. 'Something we can agree on at last,' said Lucy. 'I'm not most people,' said Al. 'That's not what Winston Churchill thinks,' said Lucy.

14. Chris invented a private nickname for Lucy. He called her Dark Satanic Mills, because her surname was Mills, and because of how she dressed. It was

a phrase from the hymn Jerusalem, which his dad used to sing when the rugby was on.

He never called her that out loud. He didn't even know what it meant. It just seemed to fit her, and it made her seem less scary when he was thinking about her.

He thought about her a lot. When he asked himself why, he decided she was a puzzle he hadn't got to the bottom of. But he was convinced he could.

15. Chris made it his business to make friends with Lucy. He paid attention to what she talked about. He read reviews of the books and CDs she bought during lunch. He watched the films she mentioned, and then he mentioned them too.

She went on a lot about *The Matrix*, which she had gone to see three or four times. Chris thought she was a bit obsessed with it. When he went on the Web, he kept an eye on the various newsgroup theories about what it meant, so he could discuss them with her.

It wasn't completely forced, Chris told himself. Everything was interesting, if you got into it enough. And since he didn't have many interests of his own, he was happy to borrow someone else's.

Lucy seemed wary at first. But he could see she was glad to find there was someone at work who was into the same things.

They started to take cigarette breaks together, and go out to get lunch together, though she always had some excuse not to eat anything. She made him a couple of tapes of music she liked, and lent him some videos and books.

They sometimes saved each other a seat when people went for a drink after work.

16. Even though they spent a lot of time together, Chris still had no idea if Lucy actually liked him. She could be very hard to read, and often quite spiky. He never knew where he was with her. If he said the wrong thing, she mightn't speak to him for the rest of the day. Then the next morning, it would all be forgotten.

All the same, Chris found he did like her. She was sharp, and thoughtful, and intense. She didn't make everything into a joke, like Al, or spend most of her time bitching about hopeless men, like Tammy.

17. Lucy talked a lot about whether the Year Two Thousand problem really would be the end of the world. She said she grew up listening to all that stuff from her mam, who was in a born-again Christian group.

Chris told her he didn't believe in anything supernatural. Lucy said it wasn't like that. There was another way of looking at the world, where everything was connected, including the past and future. Prophets were just people who were good at reading the signs. And there were a lot of prophecies about the world ending this year. Chris said he would be amazed if there was anything specific. Those things were always so vague, you could read anything you liked into them.

'What about Nostradamus?' said Lucy in the pub one evening, when the others had gone home, and she'd suggested the two of them get one more drink. 'He predicted the end of the world for this year. There'll be a world war

in nineteen ninety-nine that's going to wipe out civilisation.' 'When did he say that?' said Chris. 'In fifteen fifty-five,' said Lucy. 'But there isn't going to be,' said Chris. 'Look at the news. Even if another war was going to happen, it couldn't be as soon as before the end of the year.'

'What if somebody ups and bombs the Houses of Parliament?' said Lucy. 'Who?' said Chris. 'I don't know,' said Lucy. 'Some gang of nutters.' 'That's different,' said Chris. 'You can't go to war against a gang of nutters. Only a country. And no country is going to be stupid enough to launch a surprise attack on a nuclear power.' 'They might,' said Lucy. 'Why would they?' said Chris. 'Why do they ever?' said Lucy. 'They want to start a war, usually,' said Chris. 'Or they just think we need a rude awakening,' said Lucy. 'And I think we probably do.'

'You mean you want someone to blow up the Houses of Parliament?' said Chris. 'Why not?' said Lucy. 'Some fucking thing. I miss real stuff going on in the world. Proper news. Not just Bill Clinton shoving his cigar up some fat little tart's twat-hole. There's evenings I get embarrassed for Peter Sissons. Honestly, I'm so bored of everybody feeling smug and safe. We need teaching a lesson.' 'What lesson do we need teaching?' said Chris. 'Pride before a fall,' said Lucy. 'Nothing lasts forever.'

'You almost sound as if you'd quite like to see civilisation collapse,' said Chris. 'Fucking right,' said Lucy. 'I used to fantasise about a nuclear holocaust. I really wanted it to happen. Playing out in the ruins, like my granddad talks about. Having to make everything over again, out of old junk. Totally Mad Max.' 'And that's what you think is going to happen after New Year?' said Chris. 'I wish,' said Lucy. 'No chance now. We're fixing the

clocks, so everybody can sleep cosy in their little beds. History's over, Chris. Everything's happened already. Nothing's real any more. The future's shit.'

18. Al liked to joke that Chris and Lucy were an item. When she was out of the office, he would ask Chris if she had taken it up the arse yet. He said the piercings were a good sign.

Chris tried to ignore it. Tammy just laughed. She once told Chris she thought the truth was that Al quite fancied Lucy, but he didn't want to admit it.

Al always talked a lot about sex, but he said he didn't want a girlfriend. His problem was that he didn't like having anyone else in the bed at night. He could never get to sleep, he said. So most of the time these days, he kept things basic. He said his ideal Saturday night was a few drinks, a line, and then a blow job in his car.

'It's why I'll never get one with a cloth trim,' said Al one Monday morning. 'Maybe if I settle down. You ever see me driving a car with seats you can't wipe down, you'll know I'm a changed man.' 'Christ, you're sad,' said Lucy. 'You say so,' said Al, 'but girls go for me.' 'Some girls, maybe,' said Lucy. 'That's right, Lucy dear,' said Al. 'Some girls is all I'm interested in. Some girls is plenty for me. I'm not greedy. My great piece of good fortune is, the sort of girl I'm attracted to is the sort of girl who's attracted to me. It's the pursuit of the unattainable that leads to misery.' 'You'd better not try it on with me,' said Lucy. 'I'll show you misery all right.' 'I'd say so,' said Al. 'Oh get a room you two,' said Tammy. Al winked at Lucy. 'In your dreams,' said Lucy. 'In my nightmares,' said Al.

Chris found it exhausting to listen to Lucy and Al competing over who would get the last word. It could go on all day. Sometimes he pretended he had to go out to see a client just to get away from them.

19. 'Once,' said Al another day, 'I got so fed up with all the chatting and listening and buying drinks, that I decided to just wait till the end of the night, and then pick one of the girls who was still on her own, and say, Fancy a fuck?' 'And how did that work out for you?' said Lucy. 'Please don't encourage him,' said Tammy. 'That's the funny thing,' said Al. 'Not all of them said yes, not by any means. But quite a number did. More than I would have expected. And when I worked it out after a few weeks, my hit rate was more or less the same.' 'Somewhere near zero,' said Lucy. 'Quite near,' said Al. 'As in, one. I only want one at a time, Lucy dear. Not into anything pervy.' 'Christ,' said Lucy. 'If a threesome is your idea of pervy, then you really need to get out more.' 'Simple pleasures,' said Al. 'I'm a simple bloke.' 'Simple's one word for it,' said Lucy.

20. 'I love ugly women,' said Al one evening, when they were all in the pub. 'They're so grateful.' 'The whole New Man thing just passed you by completely, didn't it, Al?' said Lucy. 'New Man is old news,' said Tammy. 'It's all about Mr. Darcy now.' 'That's me,' said Al. 'Strong silent type.' 'I wish you were,' said Lucy. 'And how do these less attractive ladies show their gratitude?' said Tammy. 'In the time-honoured tradition,' said Al. 'Oh Christ,' said Lucy. 'I can't stand hearing any more about your bloody blow jobs. Do

you never give these lasses a proper seeing-to?' 'Once in a while,' said Al.

'But only from behind.'

'You know what I think?' said Lucy to Tammy. 'I think he's actually a virgin. I think he's never had a shag in his life. I think he gets it all from reading Loaded.' 'If we were in America,' said Tammy to Al, 'I could have you dismissed for sexual harassment.' 'Steady on,' said Al. 'I've never tried it on with anyone at work.' 'For the stories, you fuckwit,' said Lucy. 'For talking filth all day long in front of the ladies.' 'What ladies?' said Al. 'I can't see any ladies in here.' 'Charming,' said Tammy. 'See, that's where Clinton ballsed it up,' said Al. 'Schoolboy error. Don't shit where you eat.'

'What do you think, Chris?' said Tammy. 'Sorry,' said Chris, 'I was miles away.' (This wasn't true, but he didn't want to have to take sides.)

'Wish I was,' said Lucy. 'Anyway,' said Al, 'I never fancy Americans. They've got no sense of humour.' 'A sense of humour is what a girl would need if she was going to cop off with you,' said Lucy. 'I definitely give them something to smile about,' said Al. 'What, a throatful of your jism?' said Lucy. 'Stop it or I'll vom,' said Tammy. 'I treat them properly,' said Al. 'I buy the drinks.' 'Mine's a Listerine,' said Lucy.

21. When Lucy didn't come in for a couple of days, Chris wondered if something was up. Tammy said she had called in sick, but Chris had a nagging feeling there was more to it than that.

He was also concerned about her work. It had always been impeccable, but recently there'd been a few complaints from clients whose software she

had worked on. Processes which already used dates beyond the end of the year were giving out strange results.

When he'd asked her to take another look, she blamed the clients not understanding their own systems. He wasn't convinced. He decided to recommend that Tammy take her off programming for a while, and put her onto certifying compliance. Tammy said she'd think about it.

22. When Lucy stayed off the rest of the week, Chris began to get really concerned. That annoyed him. He didn't like having to worry about things outside his control. It meant he couldn't concentrate on what was important.

He didn't have Lucy's phone number, so he sent her an email. He knew she had a computer at home, and an Internet connection. To his surprise, she sent one back a few minutes later. She asked him if he wanted to come to a gig that night, but not to tell Tammy.

He found he was happy she had asked. He said yes.

23. Chris hated the gig. It was very loud electronic punk. He couldn't make out a melody, and the bass was so heavy that the whole building shook. Lucy told him the vibrations were so strong at some of their gigs, it made people in the audience lose control of their bowels, and shit themselves. She said that like it was cool, or funny.

Chris didn't think it was. It frightened him a bit. It worried him that anyone might think that was a good thing in any way whatsoever.

24. Afterwards they went to a bar called Garlic and Shots. Lucy didn't seem ill at all. But she didn't mention anything about being off sick, so Chris didn't bring it up.

They drank vodka and chain-smoked her cigarettes for a couple of hours. Chris didn't usually smoke very much, but he always did when he was with Lucy. It was only ten o'clock but they were already into her second packet of the evening. She didn't seem to mind. She said he could buy more later on. It looked like she wanted it to be a long night.

Lucy talked for a while about the gig, but Chris couldn't think of anything to say without letting her know he had hated it. He tried to talk about work instead. He had a few pet theories he wanted to share with her.

Very often these days, Chris got frustrated with the software he was working on. There was a basic structure that had been put in place maybe a decade before, he told her, and all sorts of bits and pieces added on around it. It was like a garden shed that had grown into a whole shanty-town. It would be so much simpler, he thought, to sweep away the messy old software and design a completely new system. The problem was, if you wanted to build proper homes instead, people needed somewhere to live in the meantime. So as long as it worked pretty well, most of the time, everyone was happy to leave things how they were.

Now that things might actually stop working, action was finally being taken. But instead of starting from scratch, they were asking him to tack on yet another extra bit, a jerry-built chunk of code that would trick the system into behaving. It would work for now, but sooner or later it would all have to be fixed properly.

And sometimes these days, Chris told Lucy, the wicked urge rose up in him to do nothing, to leave things as they were and see if the sky really would fall in. Sometimes he even thought it might have been better to have ignored the whole problem, and let everything go wrong.

Lucy wouldn't have it. She said it didn't matter where you started, there would always be things changing in the future and new bits to be added on. You could never get anything perfect. Chris said that didn't mean it was better to ignore the real problem. The old systems that had grown up organically would always have to be replaced eventually by new ones designed for today. She asked him if he was saying that everything new was automatically better. He said it obviously was, otherwise we would still use the old ones. She said people did still use the old ones, it was only him who was saying they shouldn't. He said fine, but if people wanted things to actually improve, instead of just not falling apart, they shouldn't be afraid of getting rid of what was there already and starting all over again. She said that was bullshit and what caused the Nazis and Pol Pot, at which point she lost him.

He asked her if she never got anxious about the huge responsibility of what they were doing. She said she couldn't give a flying fuck. She told him she was only doing this shite for the money, so she could get on with her other stuff.

Chris was a bit annoyed by that, though he wasn't sure why. He didn't ask what her other stuff was, though he could tell she was dying to tell him. He asked if she wanted another drink. She ignored that. She said she needed a regular income just now because she was working on something big. She said she wasn't supposed to talk about it. Chris said he hoped she wasn't planning

to blow up the Houses of Parliament. She laughed and said she might do that next.

She was an artist, she said. That was the only thing she was serious about. Chris was surprised. She'd never said anything about it before. He asked what sort of art she did. She said she worked with a collective, and they were getting a major project ready for the end of the year. It was going to be fucking amazing. They would need some volunteers, and he could get involved if he liked. Or he could come and take part in the thing itself, on New Year's Eve, if he didn't have other plans.

25. Chris didn't have other plans. He had vaguely imagined he'd be at a cool party somewhere, if he wasn't working, but his friends weren't really those kind of people. Maybe Lucy's project would be that, he thought. On the other hand, he didn't want to tie himself down so far in advance. It was still only October. He told her he would probably be with his family in the end, but if not, he would definitely keep it in mind.

This wasn't true. That was the one place he knew he definitely wouldn't be. About a year before, his sister Jenny had broken up with her husband Brian and moved back to where they grew up, so their mum could help with the children. Brian had been a sort-of friend of Chris's, which was how Jenny had met him, and she'd been funny with Chris ever since the break-up. She acted like it was somehow his fault, even though Chris hadn't been in touch with Brian since, out of loyalty to her.

Since then Chris hadn't been to visit, even at Christmas. He always said he was too busy, which was only sometimes true. He still phoned most

Sunday evenings, but he just half-listened to his mum talking about people he'd been to school with, while he watched TV with the sound down low. He never asked how they all were or what they were doing, and they never asked him about his life. He preferred it that way. That was the thing about living in London instead of back there. No one was watching.

26. Lucy asked Chris if he fancied meeting the other people she worked with in the collective. There was a house party, she said, and some of them would be going.

He didn't want to go home yet, so he said ok. He was enjoying himself. He had been trying not to drink too much, but he thought it was probably too late now, and he might as well make a night of it. He didn't like drinking too much, but once wouldn't be the end of the world.

They had to run to get the last tube.

27. By the time they got to the party, most of the people Lucy knew had already left. She told Chris some of them were quite a bit older, and had families. That surprised him. He had imagined they were all like Lucy.

He wondered if he was underestimating her. She might actually be a talented artist. He wasn't sure he would know the difference.

She introduced him to one young guy called Oliver, who was in charge of the stuff she was working on. He was tall, and slim, and very polite. Chris liked him.

Chris asked how many people were involved. Oliver said there had been a few hundred in total, going back quite some time. What he and Lucy

were working on was only one element of the overall thing. Chris asked what sort of thing it was. Oliver looked at Lucy, and then looked back at Chris.

Lucy said it was top secret. If they gave away too much in advance, it would spoil the surprise. Chris asked how they would persuade people to turn up, if they didn't give some idea. Oliver laughed, and said that was exactly what he'd been thinking. He said it was very difficult to explain, but he could best describe it as a vision of London, past, present and future. There were three significant moments of history they were especially interested in. He thought bringing them together could have an extraordinary effect.

Chris thought it sounded interesting. He imagined some kind of performance. People in costumes would act out historical scenes, or try to scare him, like a grown-up version of a ghost train. He'd heard about other shows like that, in railway arches or old warehouses. The whole place would be decorated to look like an ocean liner, or a military bunker, or a science lab. The audience walked around, and the actors mingled with them. You couldn't always tell which was which.

Chris asked if he could bring a few friends along too. Oliver said they didn't want lots of people. It would be invitation only. Some of it was already underway, and more would be up and running soon, but the whole thing would only make sense at the end, on New Year's Eve itself. They weren't really supposed to discuss it at all at this stage. He said he would have to give Lucy a scolding. Lucy told him to fuck off. Oliver laughed, and said in fact he better had, but it had been nice to meet Chris. He had heard a lot about him from Lucy.

That surprised Chris. He looked to check if Lucy had heard, but she was talking to someone else now. He said goodbye to Oliver. He said he hoped he'd see him again some time. Oliver said he thought that was highly likely.

After Oliver left, Chris asked Lucy if she wanted to stay. She did, so he said he would too. He told her he was having fun, though he wasn't sure if he still was. He had liked Oliver had very much, but something about their conversation made him feel embarrassed and awkward, as if he wasn't quite good enough.

28. The house was really packed, and the music was very loud, so Chris and Lucy went out to the garden. Some people were talking about computers, and Chris said that was what they worked in. He explained they were fixing the Millennium Bug. One girl said not to fix it, she wanted to see what the end of the world would be like. 'I know what it'll be like,' said Lucy. 'I'll be dressed in leather sat on the back of a motorbike shooting at stupid twats like you.'

A bloke in a suit said computers were bullshit anyway. The Internet wasn't going to catch on. He could see the point of it for porn, but it wasn't much good at anything else. There was no way to make money off of it. Chris said what about advertising. The bloke said that didn't add up, and it never would, unless everyone carried a little computer in their pocket and they were surfing the Net all day long. Lucy said that would probably happen before long. The bloke said it wouldn't be in their lifetime.

Lucy said she wasn't going to listen to anybody who said surfing the Net. No one actually called it that. This bloke in the suit said lots of people

did. Lucy said he meant the Web, not the Net. Net just made her think of fish. The bloke said Web made him think of spiders. Which was about right, he said, with all the creepy shit there was on there.

They started talking about Web pages and groups for people with odd sexual fetishes. Lucy said she found it quite moving, that there were all these people out there who used to think they were the only one with a particular thing. Now they could find other people to talk to, and realise they weren't freaks. The bloke said they definitely were freaks. He was quite drunk, and he looked like he wanted a row.

The others said it was getting too cold, and went inside. Lucy said she wasn't cold, and Chris said he wasn't either, though that wasn't true. Nobody spoke for a couple of minutes. Then the drunk bloke said he was going inside as well. He could tell when he wasn't wanted. 'Fish,' said Lucy. 'Spiders,' said the bloke. He went.

'They're both things to catch you in,' said Lucy to Chris. 'What are?' said Chris. 'Nets and webs,' said Lucy. 'The difference is, the fish gets caught in the net, but the spider's in control of the web.' 'What about the poor fly?' said Chris. 'Well exactly,' said Lucy.

She told him she was lucky, because her kind of porn wasn't even porn. Piercings were what turned her on, her own and other people's. Chris was startled that she was happy to admit this kind of thing so easily. But he just nodded and pretended it was a completely normal subject to talk about.

Lucy said the biggest rush she ever had was getting a new piercing. Finding out someone she fancied had piercings made her fancy him even more. She said she hardly ever fancied women, unless they had lots of

piercings, and then she almost always did. There were lots of piercings groups on the Web, and when she was feeling horny, that was where she went, to look at the pictures. There were Web pages for men who liked pierced women, and she had a right laugh going on the message boards and teasing them. She thought most of them probably assumed she was a man too, pretending to be a woman, but that just added to the fun. She liked having a place where she could flirt as much as she wanted, but she was always in control. She enjoyed being the spider and not the fly for a change.

Chris said most people probably had some kind of a similar thing, even though he had no idea if that was true. Then he wished he hadn't said anything, because Lucy got very curious. She wanted to know if that meant he had a secret perversion of his own. He just laughed, a fake laugh, but he must have given something away because she wouldn't let it go. She said it was always the quiet ones. She said it was nothing to be ashamed about and she swore she'd never tell anyone. Unless it was young children, she said, and then she'd call the police. He said it wasn't children. She said even if it was, it was okay as long as he didn't do anything about it and tried to get help. He said again that it wasn't children. She said that was fine, but he had to tell her now because otherwise she would think he was lying, and it really was children.

Someone had switched off the kitchen light, and it was very dark in the garden. Chris couldn't even see Lucy's face except for the glow around her nose and mouth every time she took a drag of her cigarette. He didn't know if he wanted to tell her or not. He had never told anyone, ever. He wasn't

ashamed, but he certainly didn't want people to find out. He couldn't say why that was different, but he felt sure it was.

But Chris wondered if this was her way of trying to be friendly. If he confided in her, that could make Lucy feel that he trusted her. Then she might decide she liked him, and he could stop stressing about it. It still worried him that he had no real idea what she thought of him.

And he realised he was half-hoping that talking about sexual things might make her want to have sex with him. It wasn't that he fancied her. But he knew, or thought he knew, that if she wanted to have sex, it would mean she definitely liked him, or at least didn't hate him completely.

So he told her. She didn't seem bothered by it at all. If anything, he thought she seemed a bit disappointed. She said she had friends who were into much weirder shit than that. When he asked her for an example, she couldn't think of one. She said she had to go for a piss, and would he go out and buy more cigarettes.

29. It took a long time, because Chris had to find a cash machine first. He was glad. He wanted a chance to think. He had never told anyone before, and it made him feel odd. He'd thought it might be liberating, or exciting, but it wasn't. It all felt a bit flat.

30. When Chris got back to the party, he couldn't find Lucy. He asked the bloke from the garden before, and he said she'd gone home. Chris told himself he didn't mind very much. In a way, he was relieved. He got talking to a few interesting people.

But she hadn't. When Chris went into the bedroom later to get his coat from the bed, he found her curled up asleep there. He tried to get his coat without waking her, but it didn't work.

She asked him for a cigarette and they both sat there smoking, not saying anything. When they finished, she lay back down on the bed and he did too. They started dry-humping. It was gentle at first, but soon they were really grinding. He thought she had started it, but he wasn't completely sure.

He tried to open her trousers. She pushed him away gently. She stood up, and then sat down again and said she felt a bit woozy. She asked him to call her a taxi going to Whitechapel. He said they could share one since they were going in the same direction. Neither of them said anything for a while.

31. Lucy started to talk about being off sick from work. She hadn't been ill at all, she said. She had been feeling very low. She didn't speak to anyone. She couldn't get out of bed. She didn't see the point. Nothing was real.

But she ought to be able to snap herself out of it, and get on with things. She was a spoilt lazy brat, like her teacher wrote on her homework once when he thought she'd copied it but she hadn't. She was a selfish, scheming little bitch who made everyone's life a misery, like her mam said that time she lied about where she was going for the night and stayed over at her friend Paula's house. She was a worthless slut and a mental case, like her ex-boyfriend used to tell her every single fucking day. She should have been aborted and flushed down the bog.

All these voices were inside her head, she said, and they were taking over from her own voice. She didn't know what her own voice was any more.

It was like a disease in her brain. She kept seeing things that weren't there. One time it was a tiny little midget with no eyes. Another time it was a bloke cooking her guts in a pan. There was a shiny metal face telling her she was made of clay. She would be walking along the street, and everything around her was on fire.

She knew she was a psycho freak and a total nutjob. Everybody knew. He, Chris, was only being nice to her because he wanted to fuck her. And then when she let him, he would laugh about it with Tammy and Al.

Chris didn't know what to say to that. He tried to light a cigarette but his lighter wouldn't work. He wanted to ask to borrow hers, but he didn't want that to be the next thing he said. He hoped she might just pass it over to him, but she didn't.

Lucy said she felt a bit sick and she needed to get home. She said not to worry about her, she was always going off on one like that and she would be fine. Chris said he wasn't worried. She said she knew that, but just in case he was. He went out to the phone in the hall and called a cab.

32. As soon as they left the house and the fresh air hit her, Lucy seemed very pissed. In the cab, she could hardly keep her eyes open. She said she was going to be sick and the driver said she had to get out. She stumbled on the kerb and said she'd hurt her ankle. Chris got out to help her. She asked the driver to wait while she found a bin or something, but he drove off. She found a bin and stood over it for a few minutes, but she didn't vomit.

She told Chris they weren't far from where she lived, and would he walk her back. He didn't want to, but he couldn't think of a way to say no.

Because she was so drunk and vague, and because she was hobbling on her sore ankle, it took nearly an hour. He had to unlock her door, and help her indoors, and guide her into her bedroom. She lay down on the bed and fell asleep straight away.

33. Chris was worried about Lucy choking on her own vomit while she was asleep. He decided to stay. He put some cushions from the sofa on the floor by her bed. He didn't sleep at all. He just smoked cigarettes and watched her. He thought about a lot of things, and by the morning she felt very significant to him.

FIVE

The next Part of my History

i. So it was I made the acquaintance of *John Milton*.

I remember little of the hours between, save that I sweated and fretted but found no way out of my hole, so when next evening came I started off for the house I knew was his, though I was warned off by a ferryman I spoke with to ask the way:

Only trouble follows that man *Milton*, said he. If you choose to become his disciple then do it with your eyes open.

I knew too that Bunhill Fields hard by was lately stuffed with the bodies of those who succumbed to the awful pestilence the last year gone, but when I saw the ground of the fields was thick with fresh lime heaped like drifted snow, I judged it safe; then I raised my lanthorn and hailed a figure who stood hard by and asked was this the very house, which I knew rightly it was, but though I saw imperfectly through the dusky air yet this man's bearing struck me as sneaking and sinister, and I wished to make an estimation of his character and to show he put no fear in me, if that was any of his intent; so when he gave me no answer but stared back insolent, I stepped up near him with raised fist, at which he did not flinch:—

and then I noted well his own limp arms, too thin for life, and dark as it was I saw in place of his face was a simple *Death's-Head* with white empty gaze, and he stood in the very sewer-ditch so deep that the stink must be near up to his knees; and I knew now it was a risen plague-corpse come to chide me or drag me to Hell for my evil intent to betray Mr. *Milton*, so I shut my eyes and prayed to the Lord God that if I lived this night I should walk away from this sneaking whispering employ and find poor honest work; but I thought then of my sister and her starving child and the foreign agents all said were at work in our land, and I told myself I must if I could be of any service to retain the liberty of England, and that Mr. *Milton* had surely at some time engaged upon under-ground work for the greater safety of the people, and if I could one day confess all the truth he might understand better than most, and know that I surely held no ill-will against his person but thought only of that slippery fish *the common good*, which ever swam but never yet took hook.

I dared to open my eyes and the vision of hellish fright before me made not to move, and I waited more, but yet it moved not; and now the silence and stillness which had put such fear in me before made me wish to laugh somewhat, so I dared further to step in and draw my lanthorn up nigh to his face:—

and a second time I saw I was deceived, for when I reached the thing it was nothing but an eldritch scar-croe, whose head was a lumpy mottled turnip with two peeled eggs for the terrible blank eyes mounted upon a long staff, wrapped in a grey worsted coat with a sort of old Puritan collar all stuffed with filthy straw and a great gross parsnip poking through the skirts for an over-sized member; which all I understood to be a satyrick tribute to Mr.

Milton; but still this ghostly encounter affected me, and I wondered if it would be wise to take this as a kind of portent, that I should turn back upon my way, for it left me with a new sense of Mr. *Milton*, a thin strict cane-like sense, a rigid, frigid, rattling, chained sort of a man, which vision took over my imaginary and I wholly forgot the flesh and blood being I would see.

But the door opened then, and I was commanded to enter if I had business; which I did, and was I presented to Mr. *Milton* at last, in the same habit as I remembered, sat in his chair in a strange careless attitude, with one leg flung over the arm and his empty gaze upon the ceiling.

What delayed you in the street? said he. I heard you approach the house some minutes gone.

I had sworn I would tell him no lie, so I judged I should inform him straight, and asked did he not know of the effigy at his door.

He did not, and when I told him of its form he laughed and expressed his gratitude, though he wondered aloud how long it had been stationed there and how many of his trusted servants and friends so-called, to say nothing of his own wife and daughters, had winked to tell him.

A pair of eyes is what I need, said he. Eyes that will not deceive. I want to know what is, not what you fancy I should like.

I know nothing of your tastes, sir, said I, so even should I wish it, I could not spin the ball to suit them.

I presented the letter Mr. *Ellwood* had supplied, which was read to him by his wife; after which he dismissed her, and asked me what it was that brought me to him; and all the while we spoke he played upon his organ, his habit of an evening as I was to find.

Fear of my life, and the love of my God and my country, said I, and if this was not all the truth then it was surely no lie, so my promise was fast.

And what do you seek from me? said he.

Only to serve you as you think best, said I.

You'll do, lad, said he. You'll serve a turn. But the work will be trying, and I am a hard master. This great journey is almost ended, and I need no stumbling at the crown of the hill.

I confess I have no feeling for poetry, said I.

All the better, said he. I have had some in here I suspect of trying to improve my verse. I require accuracy, not invention. I pay you to be my eyes alone. On your own clock and coin you may be your own.

We took our first walk that evening; and though I felt not inclined to speak, he much encouraged me to dispute with him, which kept his mental powers quick and fertile, he said, now his flesh and bones were shrivelled and dry; though as I held him I felt stiffer than he, for his legs were lean and strong, for all that his hands were crippled with chalk-stones.

I thank the maker that I have not sight, said he, for if I could see to write, it would torment my soul that I may not hold a pen without bodily pain.

You play at your organ, said I.

In that case, said he, the results of the exertion provide the balm.

Should it not with writing? said I.

Composition is no comfort, but only effort, said he. It is my readers who shall enjoy the balm, which I labour to provide in my numbers.

It is wonderful, said I, that you find the strength for such an undertaking.

It is from fear, said he, the terror I should leave no trace. The sun may rise and fall, and it greens the flora and warms our blood; but without a lens, it will not burn. I wish to set this land aflame, that it may burn still after I depart.

For fame, then, said I.

Aye, said he, for fame. The ancients and the prophets saw fit to leave a record of their wisdom. Without their example, we should be pagan savages still, culling infants to appease the goblins of nature. And how many others whose record is lost, or who saw no call to write their wisdom? It may be only chance has given us *Plato* and *Hermes*, *Homer* and *Vergil*. Not all who reach for fame may grasp it, but no man shall who has not striven toward that goal. I am not satisfied to teach those few hundreds I have known, when I may speak to thousands of thousands yet unborn.

And is not this a kind of vanity? said I.

To know the quality of my own mind is not vanity, said he. Pride, perhaps. But I never saw the value in humility.

Ellwood is a humble man, said I.

With good reason, said he. I have read his verse. God gives man uniquely the virtue of self-knowledge. I will not be a hypocrite to my own gifts. My flesh gives me humility enough; if my spirit may soar, then it shall.

On our return to the house we passed that crooked effigy at its door, and I wondered in silence that a man so aged and infirm should be so hated and feared; and in a manner I grew accustomed to, but never found less than strange, he seemed to hear the whirr and click of my head, and asked upon what large thought I was brooding; and when I spoke my mind, I thought he was something flattered at the notion that he should inspire such passion in

others; and something pitiable struck my heart then, and I thought to make a clean breast of it and throw myself upon his mercy; but the truth is I found no mercy in his manner, and I feared the bite and savagery I sensed in his tongue, for he had that quiet bullying way of those who make you seek their good opinion at all costs, and in every case he made his disapproval so plain and clear, and hang what the another may think; but though I told him of my Papist history, and found his blunt manner of question led me to confess many details I had never spoke aloud before, he did not berate me.

A man, said he, has no choice in his nativity. Your tale is very near my own father's history. Papists have ever been the scape-goats of the English mob, and I fear they ever will be. But count back the years, and every jack of them is born from Catholick stock. Blame the shepherd and not the sheep. I was not flattered to be considered such as a sheep, but I kept my counsel.

ii. I reported what I knew to Mr. *Pedlow* each week, by way of a written report given his servant of all was spoke and done, and I had nothing in return but more coins as he promised, the greater part of which I sent to my sister; but while I greatly feared discovery of my double employ, I consoled myself that there was nothing secret or strange about Mr. *Milton* or his household, so nothing I might report could do him harm; for while many foreign men did come to visit, their talk was of *Erasmus* and *Aristotle*, not of Dutch wars and Papish plots; and when aged scholars paid their respects, all their words were remembrances of departed friends, and regrets at youthful follies and passions; but still I watched Mr. *Milton* close and formed my own impressions of his character, for so I was tasked and paid to do:

Though he frowned at strong drink, he was a merrier man than I expected, sometimes fierce and savage in his quips, but most savage against himself, which is a great virtue in any who pretends to wit; and when his blood was up he was a burning star of discourse, none could come near him for invective and straight-talking, and often I had to beg him to temper his tone, or at least his volume, lest a parish-constable or watch-man be passing the casement, for he said as much as I ever heard said against the King; but when the clouds rolled over him, he confessed he felt it very hard that some abroad wished to see his end, to even him for what he wrote against the late Charles Stuart; but as often again he railed that he had no hand in that bloody work, and was condemned for the actions of others.

I wrote what they bade me write, said he, what I knew to be true but said in the public press only to advance the cause I would have died for. Yes, I would, and at times I did expect to. I had no fear. And my only shame is that the fear is come upon me now, and I know not how to banish it. There are nights I sleep none at all. But that matters little, for all the day is one long night-time to me.

He noted my dislike of his pipe, for I always contrived a reason to take the air when he put it to light.

Do not condemn this vice, said he. Tobacco may be harsh on the throat, but it quickens the blood, and the blood in turn feeds the soul. For the young it is a permissible luxury, for the old, a damnable necessity.

I came each day to his chamber to copy down verses to add to his great epic on the theme of the *Fall of Man*, which poem he had not, as I should have

imagined, composed from end to end, but piecemeal, and he often returned to moments he felt incomplete or weak, to *thicken the stew*, as he called it:

I mean for this thing to last not just my lifetime or even yours, said he, but for centuries to come. It must be solid and heavy as brass, and with as much of a gleam and shine. I do not mind a jewel or two, but the whole shall be an instrument and not a decoration.

An instrument must have an end, said I.

Indeed it must, said he, and mine is to smite and to confound. This work is a fearsome engine, wrought by two hands, yours and mine. And there is nothing like a *two-handed engine* to keep them foxed! (He laughed at this, and I understood not his meaning then, though I have since: a puzzle in a youthful poem of his, which he refused always to explain to friend or foe, though they often asked.)

If it happened that I arrived later than he called me, he mooed like a very plaintive cow and roared that he wanted to be milked, which put a mixture of fear and laughter into me, indeed this feeling I grew used to in his company; but when once I quipped that he sounded more bull than cow, he said he wanted none of that sort of milking, he would leave such antics to the sodomite Cavaliers; and then forth came a chain of poetry all in a tangle, and we spent the next hours teasing it out and clipping away the links he felt would not hold, before he sang out the final verses to me, as he called it, for indeed his peculiar manner of reciting had the quality of old plainchant which I found most curious and even displeasing; but as with so much of life, good and ill, I miss it now it is gone.

We began early, at dawn or before, and from his bed he would bid me read aloud the last verses I wrote out, and he would chant along with me, for he worried and fretted over each word, and weighed the many rhythms and sounds it might convey, sometimes cloaking his own strange meanings within the sense of a line.

For those who would see it, and have eyes to, said he; and when the chalk-stones did not plague him so bad, he played upon his organ to loosen his faculties, great chiming rounds of *Monteverdi*; for the Italians pleased him best, and it tickled him greatly to confound those who thought all Italian was Papist:

Aye, said he, and if it be? I knew many a fine Papist in Italy. Error is not vice, and a man's faith is not all he is. I never met a soul in England yet who could compare to an Italian for learning and the fine expression of it. But then, the great pity is, I never had the pleasure of meeting myself! And forth came a great rattling rasping laughter, which shook out the bellows of his stomach, and his hands raised a choir from the keys and pedals of his little organ.

So I worked with him too on his other studies, reading Latin, I hope well, and Greek, I fear poorly, since he often mocked my pronouncing of some word; and I was not the only daily visitor, for a wizened Jew he called *Spanish Moses* came each noontide to read the Hebrew Bible with him, and together they tussled over every syllable of every word, the right way to sound each letter and the true rhythm of the reading, as though it were a sort of incantation; but Mr. *Milton* always told me that even in English, the manner of reading was as important as the words themselves:

Many of the common sort do not hear the half of what you say, said he, maybe one word in four. The tone is all. There is a beauty and a power in the sounds of words that can move the heart of a man as much as the intellectual sense. More, perhaps.

The Israelite liked to say that Mr. *Milton*'s blindness meant he had a second sight into the Divine Spirit, but when the little rabbi left, Mr. *Milton* would say this was the kind of cod-mystick horse-dung which gave the sacred Hebrew race the bad name of magicians and quack alchemists.

The visions of the blind is a great fairy-tale, said he. Visions! I see only those I construct myself. My task is to have others see them as I do. To see what never was, to human sight at least.

Being blind was a curse plain and simple, he often said, which he believed it was a consequence of straining his eyes with too much reading by candle as a child, for he liked to sit up and study till midnight from he was twelve years old; though in part he blamed a weakness inherited from his mother, who wore eye-glasses all the time he knew her; and neither did he believe it was the will of God, as many said, for he was not struck blind all at once, but his light dimmed over long years when he ignored good advice from many physicians to spare his eyes and so save them.

He remembered for me his visit as a young man of my age to the blind *Galileo* in Italy, which thought excited me that I had met one who knew such a great man, though he demurred my suggestion that I might in my turn remember these days to my juniors in the years to come, when his name and fame should ring out as soundly.

I have made no such contribution, said he, in arts or letters. I may still, of course. Then you may live out this scene over again with your juniors.

I am no *Milton*, said I.

Nor was I then, said he. Nor am I yet. (Which I understood to mean he had not yet achieved what he promised to himself, which was his great poem.)

And so we passed our days.

iii. Once Mr. *Ellwood* came to visit, and asked to hear some of the poem, which he had seen before, but was impatient to see it printed; so Mr. *Milton* had me read.

Do you not tire to hear it aloud? said *Ellwood*.

The contrary, said *Milton*. My father wrote music, and when he finished a hymn, he played it without cease, it rang through the house a full day's length, till he himself was able to hear it as a tuneful melody, as for the first time, shriven of mathematics, as bright and pure as it should be when fresh upon the ear.

Like a wife, said *Ellwood*. The more time you spend with her, the more you see her charms.

No, said *Milton*, the opposite then.

Rather like God with his creation, said *Ellwood*. Once it is complete, he cannot resist descending to habituate with us, to know us as we know each other; that is, less well for sure than a creator might, but more immediately.

We are all made of divine stuff, said *Milton*.

I rather think we are in sympathy with him, said *Ellwood*.

Then does God suffer when we do? said *Milton*.

As a father should, said *Ellwood*.

I wonder then he permits the plague, said *Milton*.

All say it is a punishment, said *Ellwood*.

I wonder, said *Milton*. And you Mr. *Allgood*, do you say so too?

If it is so, said I, then I ask why I was spared.

Spoke like a true Papist, said he.

It is hard to credit some of the tales, said *Ellwood*. There were stories of dying men who leapt into the pit, tumbling upon corpses as they fell. Limb over limb over limb piled and falling from carts. A rubbish-dump of mere humanity. A vision of hell, or if not, then of no earthly world I wish to know.

I was here, said I. All is true, and worse.

I was not, said *Milton*. Mr. *Ellwood* took a house for me a long way apart, convenient for his people, and I am grateful still. I like to speak with Quakers. I find they have the true spirit and light within them. *Paul* himself would know them at once as men of *Christ*. For the apostles should find themselves in gaol today. And at Chalfont, there was plenty of good walking round about, which suits my constitution. Though I had need of a guide, and a knave called *Cock* placed himself at my service. He sought me out and dogged my steps, till I took him on to scribe for me, and to read. But never did I judge a man's character so ill. He had me raised up as his private icon, and tangled me in matters above his understanding, and beneath my contempt.

That same Mr. *Cock* is now in London, said *Ellwood*, and he told me he will call on you. Many have told me they mean to seek you out in these days, for your poem is already famed abroad. With your permission, I can take

a copy and circulate it further. The fee will surely rise if demand is on the street.

I dare not let a copy be made, said *Milton*. Men may read it, but in my presence, under my roof.

Your poem is a vision, said *Ellwood*. It must be shared.

A blind man's vision! said *Milton*. Let it not be sold as such, or I shall starve.

Many of the ancients held that all the blind are prophets and have second sight, said *Ellwood*.

When the Lord sees fit to bestow these gifts, said *Milton*, then I am ready. In the meantime, I compose.

You are coy, said *Ellwood*. We know that the form of the statue is already in the marble, and the artist must only free it.

A fine story for children, said *Milton*, but a plain lie. There is no form in any marble but I carve it out. Human craft and artistry, study, reflection, imagination, application, are what is required. To put it another way: plain work. Or, thus: if there is a perfect form within every block of stone, why is there so much bad statuary? If God placed the forms of beauty in marble, who placed the poor forms within? Satan, I suppose.

It is we who are unequal to the task, said *Ellwood*.

And why do we lack the gifts? said *Milton*. Do you mean to say that the most pious are the best artists? You must know that to be another lie for children. We blame Satan for all our flaws, as much as to say: I have no free will. As though each man has a blind force beneath his intention which exonerates him. They call on *Calvin* to support them. Cant. Pure cant and

silliness. Reason will find it out. In three centuries men will laugh, and say some bearded foreign humbugger sent his books here and persuaded us we need not accuse ourselves for our own deeds. Before we are ever born, some hidden destiny maps out our every action. I say this is cant, and always was. We will be freed from these ill-read theories of predestination.

This is not true *Calvin*, said *Ellwood*. He too was a man of reason.

He was a man of God first, said *Milton*.

May a man not hold with both? said *Ellwood*. Reason and God.

But when the two are opposed, said *Milton*, where are you then? These new men of the Royal Society may proclaim their natural philosophy as the door to the *New World*, but I say their *Science* is but a branch of good old theology. Things are how they are, and reducing all to sums and diagrams is none other than enquiring into the mind of God, which is the subject of divinity only. To ask *how* may be allowed as the domain of this new method. The moment a man asks *why*, he is in theology.

When Mr. *Ellwood* left, I dared to ask Mr. *Milton* about this man *Cock*, out of a fear it was the same I knew before; for though the name struck me, it is not so uncommon that I felt sure it must be him.

I knew him at Chalfont the year gone by, said he. An acquaintance of your Mr. *Ellwood*'s, and a *Fifth Monarchy Man*. Do you know of the *Fifth Monarchy Men*? *Venner*'s rebellion? Then you are blessed. They were a clique from the army who swore that it was their mission to bring about the Millennium itself, to cause the return of *Jesus* to rule England when the King was chopped. And that this failed to happen was a chiding to the *Commonwealth*, not to their own selves. They parted from *Cromwell* over his

compromising, and staged a rising in London after the Restoration, which put the town into a turmoil, and had the screws turned on all dissenters. Now they are building themselves again, for they believe this year is to be the *Great Sifting*, and a judgement shall be visited by the risen *Christ* upon London.

We all await such a day, said I.

I am sure I do not, said *Milton*, which shocked me greatly.

You do not pray for the coming of the *New Jerusalem*? said I.

Foolery, said *Milton*. I have done with reckoning the date of this or that prophecy fulfilled.

The return they wish for is of *Christ* in all our hearts, said I.

No, I tell you, said he, they awaited *King Jesus* in person. Here, in our land and time. Our Saviour descending upon a cloud to greet us. Why would the Lord need a cloud to stand upon, I wonder? I wish they had one half of your good sense. Oh, the wiser heads among them allowed for a revolution of the Spirit, but the rabble they roused wished only for a great visible miracle. Some garish Dutch daubings come to life. Superstitious trash. Even an educated Papist would sneer at it.

Such talk is now once more abroad, said I, for every almanack and astrologer claims the same, and the word in the streets at every news is whether this or that is now a true sign of the *Last Days*. That for every false dawn, it has been proven beyond doubt that this is to be the year, and London the place.

Oh, spare me *Henry Cock*, said he. So-called because none may sleep while he crows. Or because when aroused, he sprays useless muck from his head so wantonly—

Enough, Mr. *Milton*, said I. (The only time I spoke to him thus, and he was so startled I should, that he kept mum above an hour.)

iv. It was that same week Mr. *Cock* did indeed pay a visit, and I learned it was the same man I heard preach in years gone by, which put me in some fear; though at first Mr. *Milton* would not admit the caller, with more swearing of oaths to himself than I had ever hoped to hear from such a Godly man; but in truth he liked nothing better than to dispute, so the man was not resisted hard; and straight away the visitor entered, he presented a gift to Mr. *Milton*, a little practickal rebus he said he had contrived himself, which I thought a rare kindness; but Mr. *Milton* laughed and said he had no time for toys and geegaws, which I saw plain Mr. *Cock* took very ill.

So Mr. *Cock*, said *Milton*. You come to thwart me anew.

I come to save you, old *Milton*, said *Cock*. The time is nigh.

He had the same bright hard look about him, though his speech was changed, being something thick and awkward, as though his mouth was sore and raw.

All I wish to be saved from is your prattle, young *Cock*, said *Milton*. My clear-headed hours are precious, and I wish not to squander a single one in your society.

Still, you shall admit me, said *Cock*. For I know what I know.

It is all one whether I ask you or not, for I am sure I am doomed to hear, said *Milton*.

You are doomed to hear the trumpet sound, said *Cock*. See the scrolls unroll. The vials poured out. The time is upon us, old *Milton*. And you are with us, or you burn.

Then I burn, said *Milton*. Be on your way.

The Jews gather, said *Cock*. The hours turn. Your work is not complete, old *Milton*. You must know that.

Aye, that I do know, said *Milton*. And every minute I spend in your presence delays it further.

Oh, I have been told all, said *Cock*. You shall teach us salvation in a song. An English Homer, chief of angels singing his praise.

Henry and his angels, said *Milton*. Things invisible to mortal sight, but not to Mr. *Cock*.

These angels are as present to me as I am to you, said *Cock*.

Yet I do not see you, said *Milton*. If I were deaf, I should not hear you. Oh aye, the angels are present to me, if you are. And if you are not, well then, be not so, and shut the door on your way out.

Mr. *Cock* grew hot at this.

A reckoning is upon us, said *Cock*. Six years, six months and six days since the restoration.

That would make October, said *Milton*. I hope the lesson is well learned, and you wait not for a sign.

It is, said *Cock*, and a hard lesson too. You may sneer, but you have not suffered what I have, old *Milton*.

Whether I ask or not, you are sure to tell, said *Milton*.

Listen then and I shall, for I see you have forgot all, said *Cock*. It wracked me and split me to my very core and pressed me to examine my life entire, over again and from end to end. We calculated the Day of Judgement, to the year of sixteen and fifty-eight. Nothing was more certain. We sat up all the turn of the year awaiting the end, a warm night it was for March. And nothing came. If it did, none of us saw. Or it came elsewhere. Some waited then for the next March, believing we mis-computed, and this was the beginning of the last year of all. But not I. This is the time. There are whispers of another *Fifth Monarchy* rising. God-made or man-made, a general belief is abroad that things cannot go on like this.

Such a belief is ever abroad! said *Milton*. When is it not! Only when the nation is at peace, and all have food and health, and then the end has been postponed so we may dance and fornicate to fill our boots.

Wise words, said *Cock*. My conviction now is, we do not await *Christ*, but rather he awaits us. Nothing shall happen unless we make it happen. That is the true Protestant spirit. I shall see *King Jesus* return in glory, as sure and solid as I see you now.

Though I was silent, Mr. *Milton* knew in his way that I strained to speak.

What do you say, Mr. *Allgood*? said *Milton*.

I wish to ask, said I, why *Christ Jesus* should return in his lifetime or in mine. Is this not vanity?

Answer the young *Solomon*, said *Milton*. Think yourself so special, Mr. *Cock*?

Yes, Mr. *Allgood*, I do, said *Cock*. This land I do believe is the chosen land. It is England and no other which has raised itself up as the first and only true Protestant nation. When the people are gathered unto *Christ*, he will return as our King. That is said, and that is what I believe. We shall build Jerusalem. Here. And I have been chosen as a vessel for his word. I do not say I am the only one. But I watch for the signs of his plan in my life, and I see them plain. There are too many not to see. I know in my heart I am to be a sword in his great judgement. Why would he permit me to be deceived in this matter?

I once thought so too, said *Milton*. I believed this land a new Israel.

So it is, said *Cock*.

Oh Mr. *Cock*, said *Milton*. If faith could do all, we should be your willing subjects.

But I am yours, said *Cock*. The vision has been granted you, for you are the prophet I await.

I am no prophet, said *Milton*. Just a blind old Parliament man, a wreck of the age gone by.

My thoughts are in the age to come, said *Cock*. I shall touch the golden face of Jesus. I shall dwell in his living heart. This city shall be his throne.

No, said I. Only the soul and heart and mind of man. The threefold. These are the territory of God, of his Second Coming. It is the spirit alone we await.

Blasphemy! said *Cock*. For if there is no Second Coming in skin and bone and blood, was there a First? If there was not, if there was no *Christ*

made flesh upon this earth, then no man may be saved. It is his incarnation which gives it proof.

But this was sixteen centuries ago, said I, and neither you nor I may know this incarnation. That is the great Papist error, the wish to touch his flesh. It is his presence in our hearts we await. We can rest nothing on his bodily form, for we have known it not. If we had, there is no need for faith.

Before the year is out, said *Cock*, Christ shall walk and talk among us, in this place, as he once did in Jerusalem itself.

This is no religion at all, said I.

Blasphemy! said *Cock*. It is the only religion.

Good sense, said *Milton*. We must not profess what they cannot witness. The sure disappointment of such rash promises will only lead men away from God.

I won't have it, old *Milton*, said *Cock*. If *King Jesus* returns he must return. Visitations of the Spirit are already with us. Something else is promised. If not, then none of it may stand. You know that if any of Scripture means what it says, then this must too. He shall return. There is no but nor maybe.

But maybe there is, said *Milton*. We do not know.

You once believed, said *Cock*, that you should live to see the promised end. Aye, blush all you will, but it is true. And because your own little Parliament scheme for it failed, you imagine God has changed his plans? The vanity! The Lord said himself, nothing clearer, my day shall come like a thief in the night, when you least expect. And when was he less expected than now?

Yet there is a code in Scripture. Aye, you may sneer, but there is! *Mede* himself believed so. *Ussher*. These were considerable men.

I knew these men, said *Milton*.

And do you deny it? said *Cock*. You know I am in the right. The truth of it strikes your very heart. These men knew Scripture to be no ordinary book. But perhaps you say it is? No more than the histories and legends of the Hebrew race collected? Then why not murder and steal and blaspheme all you like? If this book does not reveal God's law and his plan then it is nothing! If I believed that, I would tread its pages into the muck and the mire! Scripture is all, or it is nothing! And the moment is now.

And if it is not, *Cock*? said *Milton*. I warn you, what if it is not?

But it shall be, said *Cock*. You miss me, old *Milton*. You miss my meaning entirely. I do not stand and wait, old man. That is not any kind of service by my lights. For my light is not spent, you see. Oh, you may coolly versify your way out of honest shame at your own lassitude, at your inaction, your shirking cozening double-talking tricks that keep your own hands out of the fire while you suffer others to be burned in your stead, but I say, enough. It is for me to make it so. That is where we differ, old *Milton*. God gave us free will, and I use mine to bring about his kingdom, as he bids me do.

If you are wrong, said *Milton*.

And still, you miss me, said *Cock*. I am not wrong. I cannot be wrong. I ensure I am not. Some fools call me a prophet, but there is no easier thing for a man to predict than his own actions. I ask you only to watch. Watch, old *Milton*. The promised judgment will be visited upon this city in three short days. He shall wipe it from the earth like Gomorrah. All those he wishes to

save will be taken up. The elect will stand aside. The Satan you write of shall emerge. The battle will be fought, here on this ground. Now, you may write it, old *Milton*, aye, but I shall make it live. Legions of devils unbottled will try their might against the angels themselves. Men shall gape at their flight and fight over London skies, as they now watch a flock of birds swoop and turn. All this was writ by *John*. This land is God's Chosen Kingdom, and London is his city. The capital of his Godly land. If that is not the new Jerusalem, then I know not what is. You shall see the beast in all his fiery horror, and you shall see his defeat. The reign of the Saints will be long, old *Milton*. Do you wish to sleep till its end? Or will you come and rule with us?

I shall see none of it, Mr. *Cock*, said *Milton*. You may share your unspent lights, and tell me all as it occurs. We shall compare your vision to my own. Whether by long years or by long miles, there is much we may not see. Blind or with sight, what happens beyond our bodily vision is always a matter of report only. And vision, sir, whether bodily or spiritual, is not the truth. If I have learned nothing else I have learned that. We may see all there is to see, and still know nothing.

I hold to what I believe, said *Cock*. I do not change with the wind.

Wisdom is hard won, said *Milton*, and you are young yet.

Wisdom can be lost as well as gained, said *Cock*. The *Milton* I follow is not the *Milton* I find before me. But I have the man I treasure still, in his printed words.

You cannot hold me to account for your own willing deeds, said *Milton*.

But I do! said *Cock*. I must! It is your own words which drove me to it! Where do you think I find this, old *Milton*? I did not drop out of my mother's belly aflame to destroy the King. I believed in what you wrote, and I acted upon it. Do you refuse the burden of your own printed words?

I believed it too, said *Milton*.

Aye, but you did not fight for it! said *Cock*. You did not kill for it! You have the gall to wear a sword, but damn me to hell if you ever drew it to defend what you believe! I shrink from asking are you a coward, for I doubt you ever put yourself in the way of finding it out. You have ducked and shirked every occasion to discover it. I say to you, you did not have your arms pinned back and your tongue gripped with a pliers and pulled, and your head reined back by the hair, and a red-hot nail pierced through your tongue. And held there, old *Milton*. And held there. And have the knaves take turns to spit into your mouth while they held you there.

I was not among those men, said *Milton*.

But you are among them now, said *Cock*. You hold them in the right. Oh, you are blind, you will say. Poor old *Milton*, who scribbled his eyes out. But this is no judgement upon you. You may speak. You may dictate. And yet you do not! You have never had to question your own heart, because deep inside you believe you are right, and have always been right. It is the ultimate vanity that I see in you: to believe a proposition right because you hold it. I do good deeds, therefore a deed I do is good. A child can see the flaw in that logic. Or perhaps you were never a child. Perhaps you suckled ink instead of milk. And your mouth is yet stained black with it. But your tongue is whole, and your ears are not clipped. You have never had another soul – another

creature of *Christ*! for they are, each and every one! – hold you down, and pierce your flesh, for his sake. Have you smelt your own skin fry? Have you heard it fizz, seen it crisp and bubble? Have you felt that your heart might fail from the mere force of bodily pain? Aye, for the sake of *Christ*, will you suffer the pains of *Christ*? I say that you will not. That is what I see lacking in you. Stand and wait! Aye, do. Pray for posterity to grant you your laurel. Your easeful comfortable life these last years is your only reward. We shall see which of us may be among the Saints in the kingdom to come.

At this, Mr. *Milton* was white, but he spoke without tremor.

Aye, we shall, said he.

Mr. *Cock*, though, was red as his tale.

Aye, said he. See how you shall be venerated.

Aye, said *Milton*. Do see, Mr. *Cock*.

Aye! said *Cock*. Aye! Aye! Aye! Like old *Cromwell*, you may find yourself dug up and your rotten bones hanged for a traitor. Or perhaps not even so much. Perhaps you are enemy enough to neither side. Oh, how it warms my heart to think none might trouble themselves with you at all! It may be your dampness of spirit has pissed out any little spark of pretended vengeance. Oh, yes, we shall see who is raised up, and who cast down. And if you are raised, then perhaps I shall indeed have failed. But you are welcome to that. An age which holds up *Milton* above *Cock*, I say frankly, is not a future I may believe in.

Believe or disbelieve at your pleasure, said *Milton*. The future is not in your gift.

Aye, said *Cock*, but it is. You shall see.

The one blessing of my state, said *Milton*, is that I see nothing of you and your doings, though London itself should crumble around me. But like *Samson*, you would bring the temple down around you, though the innocent suffer with the damned.

Oh, you make me mad, old *Milton*, said *Cock*. I say now, once for all, that my deeds shall be laid at your door. It is you, and you alone. I shall be the voice from heaven. I shall be the nail through your palm. I shall be the thorn in your brow. I am the worm in your soul, and when I hatch, you shall burn once more, and for eternity.

When *Cock* left, Mr. *Milton* was silent a great while. I could not blame him, the words had been so fierce. The very wood of the walls still hummed with them. He had clasped his right hand over his mouth, as a man may do at heavy sudden news. He had not closed his eyes, as you or I might. The lids were open, but the sightless orbs twitched around so I felt I could follow his every little thought, had I the key. It was as though I saw him naked, but knew not what I saw. I felt myself a spy in Eden, and I was not at ease there.

He growled in his throat, and coughed and spat; then he sighed, and moved as though to stand but then did not.

Curse him, curse him, curse him, said he. No peace, I am to have no peace at all.

Should you like me to leave? said I.

He cried out in alarm and stood, tottering; then he gripped the elbows of the chair and laughed.

Oh! I had forgot you, said *Milton*. Did you hear all?

This did not please me, but I kept my counsel.

I did, said I. A harsh man.

A dangerous cur, said *Milton*. He besieges me with words. But I refuse those hollow wooden offerings, for fear of what they may hide. I suggest you do the same. All young men love ferocity, but if you have ambition to reach an age where you may have leisure to reflect, I counsel you to avoid his society.

I am already resolved so to do, said I.

I have known many of his like, said *Milton*. He will drunken you with his sermons, and instead of his eyes he will seek to make you his hands. Choose your side, boy. I fear this man, as I have feared very few such. But religion at its most pure is almost an evil. Remember this: that *Satan* himself was once the best of angels. Obedience to God must stand before all other virtues, and him without conscience may indeed have need for a Pope. Let not this man be yours.

SIX

Red Clay

Milton's rib is his. In hock up to his neck, but he has it.

From a bankrupt sale in the street Will finds a hinged case for a billiard-cue, lined with rotten velvet. He replaces the old fabric with new stuff, a pillowed lining for the bone. It nestles. As though it may grow. A cradle.

He sets to make himself a fine companion: a second Eve. He shall mould a whole man around this single remnant, a prophet for the Last Days. He will use the red clay of his own New Jerusalem: the City of God.

Scraping mud from the holy Thames in a pewter bucket, he fills a barrel in the cellar. Twenty-four visits, it takes. Under dark, with a lantern on a pole. He would be lifted by a watchman, but that they must mistake him for one of their own.

Smears the rib with this mud, and lets it dry.

Waits.

He returns, and sees the gleaming finish. Fancies it a first layer of skin.

He touches it, gentle.

It crumbles. Falls away. Like its own dried flesh, shed a second time.

A dead thing.

So, he starts again.

He cleans down the bone, burnishes the curved surface in gentle strokes, with a steel ball wrapped in felt, dipped in oil.

He scrapes and spreads the Thames mud on his plates and boards, stands each over a heated pan. He grinds the dried clay to fine powder, mills it down to brown flour; he fancies it the colour of skin.

This task is the longest: three full weeks before he is happy with its softness. Till he can breathe it like smoke.

As he grinds, this mill becomes his life. In every grain he sees a bygone age: this one a fleck of Shakespeare's ink, that one a fragment of feather from the crown of King Lud himself. The matter of London past. So we must all be ground down, Will thinks, by Satan's black mill.

He sees the dust of the tablets Moses smashed, cinders from the burnt offerings of Priam and Hector. Since the river washes in from the channel, and the channel from the sea, and the sea from the wide ocean, there might be any and all traces herein. All things remain, all things return. And every atom one of the thoughts of God, fallen away from its origin. He can return this stuff to its divine source, for he knows the hidden words.

At last, clay as delicate as a pigment. He mixes it with water, till it pours like cream. Strains it through two sheets of muslin, leaving a heavy lardy glob. Spreads this again on the backs of his copper plates, warms it over hot water, till it stiffens.

Then: glue. He was told the ancient secret. Will mixes it with the clay, to make a strong thick paste.

He paints this mud-pigment on with a sable brush. It takes him an hour to cover all the rib. When it is dry, he starts again, another layer.

After a week, it is clear this process will take the rest of his life, and several more beyond, to give the solid depth of human scale.

There must be another way.

The Sacred Carpenter

Will is coating a warm copper plate. His daily work.

He rubs on a bar of wax; it leaves the film he will grave into. He takes care to cover every corner equally. He draws a feather over it, to cool and smooth the wax.

The Sacred Carpenter stands at his shoulder, as he has before.

‘Joseph!’ cries Will.

‘My old friend,’ says Joseph.

‘You came to me once, in my hour of need, and told me of the ancient way: carpenter’s glue to mix pigment. Dilute it down and blend with the coloured powder, on a piece of smooth marble.’

Joseph smiles. ‘You remembered.’

‘I did!’ cries Will. ‘Now I must know: your glorious Son once baked some pigeons from clay, when he was a child. I was told this by an angel. But it was the Sabbath, and the priest rebuked him, so he gave the birds life and let them fly away.’

'It was I myself rebuked him,' said Joseph. 'All energy must be bounded by reason.'

'Another time for that,' says Will. 'But what is the word he spoke to give them life?'

'It is the word written upon your heart,' said Joseph, 'and I shall say no more on the matter.'

'Thanks, Joseph.'

'It was the least of the mischief wrought by my son. He greyed my beard and lined my brow.'

'He does the same to many a learned bishop in these days. Ah, Joseph. Your boy Jesus is a friend to the poor, a comfort to the afflicted.'

'And at times, an affliction to the comfortable. I was among their number.'

'Why, so he should be!'

Will is alone. He puzzles it out.

'Oh Catherine! Catherine!'

'Yes, Will.'

'You know my heart better than any living.'

'I hope I do, Will.'

'What word, then, is writ upon it?'

'I have seen it there,' she says, 'but you know I have not all my letters.'

'I forgot!' he cries. 'Can you draw it out for me?'

'It looks like tongues of fire dancing.'

He holds the paper. They are Hebrew letters, and he knows not the script. Another way must be found.

Gold And Silver, Brass And Iron

Will clips copper from the ends of his plates.

He lays it in a crucible on a burning brazier, till it softens. He takes tongs and a hammer, and taps each piece into the shape he wants: a tiny shallow curve, a miniature of the single precious original.

Now he solders one end of each to the original bone, as ribs to a spine. Heats and bends these copper strands, curling them further, forged into a golden cage. Like some terrible headless insect, an Indian orchid.

Making life, he thinks. As the sun itself does. The great God of the pagan ancients: Sol.

I shall be his contrary, he thinks. This is the hammer of Los.

He feels the anvil of the ancients, the giant forms occluded from our sight.

A blue fluid threads in from the rib, reaching in sinews. A red sphere descends, conglobing. Fire and water. A howling form.

He completes the skeleton: gold and silver, brass and iron. A coin of gold at the head, silver for arms, brass the ilium, iron legs. It makes the statue of Daniel. That first great vision of our end.

Will presses on the clay, a sculptor of old. Thumbs it and smooths it. Thickens the little skeleton. He lays out anatomy sketches from his Academy days, and works in reverse. Builds up muscle, stripping on a layer of flesh and skin.

It begins to take human contours, though tiny. One foot long.

Hairs from his own head are sinews and nerves. With his graving tools he carves out fingers and toes. He draws in every curl of the hair, as he has seen it: the noble inner Milton, not the hard forbidding phiz of the old familiar portrait.

‘You shall tell the future,’ he says to it, as he works. ‘You shall be the wonder of the age. I will prove the wisdom of Paracelsus.’

‘I am plagued with glimpses of the life beyond our sphere, but I have not yet the great final song I know is coming. I had it offered once, and I lost it. Now I begin to discern that vision again. This figure must guide and enlighten me. Milton will tell me what lies beyond. He has dined with giants, the bards of ages. He sees all.’

Homunculus

Will is ready. He places the little man in a glass jar. The curve of the rib-spine gives a curl to its back; it lies like a frozen embryo, in a glass womb.

Buries the bottle in dung in their yard. Every day he digs, opens it, drops in lavender seeds and earthworms for food, as Paracelsus instructs him.

He waits.

*

The forty days produce nothing.

His angel tells him: those days are gone. In the antediluvian age, this magic would work alone. Now, we must work it ourselves.

He writes out the Hebrew letters which Catherine spied upon his heart. He folds the paper, places it in the jar: he has heard the late Rabbi Falk did so, to create a clay golem to be his slave.

He waits.

He fancies it knocks on the glass one day with its baby hands. Will does not see it, but hears. He knows it is growing.

He finds he can manipulate the clay as it lives. Remakes the body ever more as he wishes to see it. A strong, youthful, Grecian shape.

The little man shall grow and grow, till he is forty feet tall. Terrorize the city, trample it to earth. Stalk the world like the giants of old. Demand an end to monarchy and slavery. This itself could be the promised end.

He waits.

The thing is inert. It mocks his effort, his patience, his vision. Nothing but mud, metal and bone. A nice trinket; a foolish hollow toy.

One more attempt.

He looses some seed from within, spreads it on the head.

He waits.

*

The head turns a fraction, the small face opens.

Alive.

The little man rouses in the glass jar, rises and stretches.

Will's heart swells and shudders. He is frightened at his own power.

He has given back life to dead matter. Now he knows: there is no boundary to what he may attempt.

The thing gestures to its face. Again. And again.

Will waits for it to speak. It does not. He asks himself why.

He sees now: it cannot. He has carved the lips, but they remain sealed.

He gives it a full mouth. Wets the clay, cuts and slices, forms a tongue.

And it speaks. As from the back of its throat, a reedy monotone.

'Ah. Ah. Ooh.'

Will watches. It plays with its new capacity, finds the sound it seeks.

'Tha. Tha. Hoo. Hoo! Hoo!'

Will stands back, afraid it will spasm and shatter the glass.

'Ah! Ah! Ma! Yoo! Yoo!'

Will fears it is in pain, accusing him.

'Yoo Ma! Tha Ma! Hoo Ma! Ma!'

He listens, transfixed, unsure if they are words, or grunts which sound like.

'Ma-na. Ma-na. Tha. Tha-ta.'

It quietens, like a dog wearing itself out of a frenzy. He is sure now: this is English, spoken with purpose.

‘A man. Tha. A man. Who. You. Who. You. Tha. Man. Who.’

Will comes to see it is a question.

‘Who am I, gentle creature?’ he asks.

It wriggles now like a swaddled baby, excited, as though it has understood.

‘Who! Who! Man! Who!’

‘My name is Will Blake, poet and engraver. I have made you, from some old pieces and stuff. Enough of that for now. But who are you, little man? Do you know?’

Its clay lips purse, the brow crinkles into a baby frown. He finds it a suddenly depressing prospect, to have to teach a stunted shade of Milton who he is, to be responsible for this awkward man-thing.

‘Ma. Ma’.

He understands he is to say more.

‘You are made from the substance of a great man. Do you know your inheritance?’

‘Loh. Loh. Lon. Don-Lon. Don-Lon.’

‘Yes! London. This is London, and you are made from London too, that is true. But at your heart, or, rather, you have no heart, but at your centre, you are the blessed matter of a great poet. Well, perhaps that is too much. But do you know yourself in this guise?’

He is frightened now the thing is only a moronic slave, a brute mechanical.

‘Jaw. Jaw. Jaw. Jaw-Mill. Jaw-Mill. Mill. Mill’

Blake thinks he hears it.

‘Mil-ton,’ he says, feeling a fool. ‘That’s right! John Milton. Can you say that? Can you say Mil-ton?’

The thing shakes itself ferociously, in recognition, excitement.

‘Mill-ta. Mill-ta. Jaw. Mill-ta.’

It sounds like a Chineese, struggling with a simple English word. He might improve the mouth, he thinks. But what can he do for the brain?

He unstoppers the glass. He has heard it said they cannot live for long outside. But he sees the jar as a glass womb, and if the thing is ready to be born, it must emerge.

He takes his little one on his knee. It wriggles in protest, but he holds it tight.

It is clumsy and clinging, as though afraid it might slip off. It does not cry, as an infant might. It makes a little clucking, from the back of its throat.

Will can almost persuade himself it sounds contented.

Earthly Matter

Will teaches his little creation to speak. Call and response. It learns eagerly, greedily. He lets himself feel he is reminding it how. Like a man who has taken a bad turn, recovering his powers.

He reads to it, his own simple songs. Innocence and Experience. The thing seems to take pleasure. Bible verses and psalms, which it chants along with him, forming the words ever more clearly.

Still he does not tell Catherine. All must be perfect and ready before the veil is removed. Will is patient, though he knows the time is nigh. He spends only a few minutes each day, and takes his leave when it begins to question him.

‘Who are you? Who?’

The little hands grope and grasp. The head turns. The legs bend and kick.

‘What am I for?’

Like a shrunken man-child. A walking doll.

‘Have you made me?’

One day, he knows it is time to answer.

‘I have, little thing.’

‘And where am I?’

‘In London. Westminster, and around. Poland Street. North of the Thames, west of the City.

‘I know London. Am I not new?’

‘You are not. You are made from another man.’

‘I am risen?’

‘Yes.’

‘For what am I risen?’

‘To give us your unwritten works.’

Will teaches the thing, what it means to be who it is.

He reads the works of Milton to this remnant of his earthly matter,
reborn from clay and copper. It listens, tightly concentrating. Sometimes he
thinks he sees the little lips move along with the words.

To leaven the lesson, he tells it the tale of Young Werther, and watches
its face for delight and sympathy, for passion and grief. He sees none.

Once In A Century

One day:

‘It returns,’ says the thing.

‘What is that?’

‘My mind. My self. I begin to know who I am.’

‘You remember your works?’

‘I do.’

‘And may we hope to expect your unwritten visions?’

‘I had as soon strike out the half of what I did write. More.’

‘Then, to improve those we have. You are full of errors, you know.’

‘I do know, too well. But you will correct me, I am sure.’

‘Not I, but you shall see. I will help you reform your emanations for
our time. The titans will walk again.’

‘As you wish. I find I am compelled to obey you. A most
uncomfortable feeling, and one I am not accustomed to. As though you were
my King, and I a willing subject.’

‘I would be a gentle King.’

‘Aye, so they all say. But just watch how you are towards me, when you feel the power you truly have. A great tragedy of our world is that no man who seeks power deserves it. Once in a century a wise man heads a nation, and that nation rises. But fools follow the wise.’

‘I had rather be a fool.’

‘I see God has been good enough to grant your wish.’

‘I am your servant.’

‘I should not be in the least surprised. I was ever ill followed. One man only gave me more than he took. Allgood was the name. Have you heard it spoken? I fancied him a son, my own tender John, who never lived to disappoint his father. This mournful fellow haunts my days. His bitter fall is my own.’

Will is surprised.

‘I never heard his name. I have read it nowhere.’

‘If nothing more occurred than what our printed histories tell us, life would be thin matter indeed. You may as well hope to conjure the shape of a dragon from one single Indian tooth.’

‘I have conjured you from a solitary rib.’

‘And am I all you hoped? I daresay not.’

‘I met a man called Cock who said his grandfather was a companion of yours.’

The thing laughs, a rasping cackle.

‘So he lived to breed. Well. That is to the good, for it eases a man’s temper. Oh, but if he is forgot, then all was not in vain.’

Tumbling Into Hell

Will is always busy. Every day there are seven new things to do.

Leaving his house, he feels the tingle in his shoulder of an unwelcome gaze. He spots a man, cloaked and hooded, turning away just as Will turns. He senses no good, but lets the feeling slip off him.

There is no space in his mind for idle suspicion. He knows he is watched from time to time, but he makes sure to give them nothing at all. To the world, he is a kindly innocent, hot in debate but sweet and forgiving in deed. They know not the seething fury of his ambition, the raw injustice he feels at the very presence of a King who claims him as a subject. He awaits the French, ready to throw on a red cap when they land. But this is not his end. This is only a further means, to free him to his greater purpose.

He pays a visit to Mr. Ellis at Whitechapel. Watches their rehearsal for Dryden's opera.

A row of demons, painted in turn: red, blue, green. One is a Chinaman, another a Hindoo. Some with hair on every inch of skin, some with none at all.

They buckle and strap one into the hoist, and raise him up. 'Now spin and tumble as we lower you!' cries Ellis. The rope is dropped, it jerks and halts. The demon cries, but it is petty human fear they hear: a shriek, and flapping arms.

'This is not the terror of the damned!' says Ellis. 'This is the gibbering of a witless child.'

‘It smacks of the real,’ says Gavron. ‘It frights us the more, because we feel that this should be our own fear.’

‘Oh, and are we demons?’ cries Ellis. ‘I want to rouse wonder and awe, not sympathy!’

‘It is the player’s honest fright you hear,’ says Will. ‘He acts nothing at all. It will accustom if you give him a few more turns. Is that not so?’

‘Aye,’ cries a tiny voice from above. ‘And I counsel you to stand away from under me. I shitted myself with terror, and my britches are loose, and it might drop out upon you.’

By midday, there is a row of six demons, tumbling into hell.

‘The image I have before me,’ says Will, ‘is men painting a housefront, not angels falling to their doom.’

Ellis looks. A crew of lumpy blackguards, in coloured coveralls, rising and falling on ropes. ‘Curse you Mr. Blake, but you are right. Now you say it, I can see nothing else.’

‘Damn that Dryden,’ says Gavron. ‘He writes his fancy, but gives no thought to how we may give it life.’

Will smiles.

‘How if you lower them over the stalls? They could poke and prick at the spectators with forks, and scream to startle them. All in semi-dark, it might affright them much. Children at least would delight to see that.’

Ellis looks to Gavron.

‘There could be something in that, Dick. After all, we are all fallen souls, are we not?’

‘We are not,’ says Will cheerfully. ‘But that matters little. It is a play you want, I think, and not a sermon.’

‘Curse it, the young fellow is right,’ says Ellis. ‘If I can make my public gibber and shriek, the run shall sell out in an hour.’

‘It is hardly Milton,’ says Gavron.

‘Neither is Dryden. The stage is not the page, Gavron. Cruder efforts may produce effects as sublime, on the plane of pure passion.’

So a gang of Negro slaves is hired in, sent up to rig the ceiling above the seats.

An Angel of Death

When he goes abroad, Will takes his homunculus with him, bound and gagged, in his bag. The little man must not escape.

It amuses Will to talk with others knowing he has a little life with him.

When he returns home, late, the same cloaked figure he saw before is lurking again. Up to no good. Will stands back and watches, sure the man has not seen him.

There is a sheen of metal beneath the hood. Light dances there. It is a smooth golden mask, a doll-face, like the automatons Will has seen at the circus, prancing mechanical men who play guitar and bow. More lifelike than they know. See how we create in our own image, he thinks, innocent and servile. But this man must be flesh, though hidden.

Will sees him try the door of his house. The fury rises in his breast. A thief! But he resolves to watch.

The man tries the door again, plays with the handle, cautiously tugs it up and down, trying to find a weakness. The door remains fast.

The man sweeps his cloak around himself, blending into the black. Will sees a hint of him rustle around the corner, through the alley, to the yard.

An Angel of Death, he thinks. Come to steal away my devices.

He feels his sinews harden. The pulsation of an artery. Before the next, he is off, after the man.

The Angel of Death has a chisel at his sash. With a wrench and a shriek of wood, it is open. Will sees the leg lift higher than natural, and like a cat, in one stretching bound the man is in.

Will thinks. He must come out the same way. I'll have him here.

But what if he means destruction? What if he should burn by notebooks, and break my plates? What if he means harm to my Catherine?

He follows the man in, scrambling up the wet bricks and through his own splintered window. Yes, he might hear me, he thinks, but what of that? I mean to stop him.

The pantry is dark, and empty. Will scents a charred stench on the air. The black smell makes the night air even blacker. He is an Angel of Fire, Will thinks, who means to set my work to light. He is an agent of the Court, sent out to terrorize their enemies. I'll give you terrorize, he thinks.

In his workshop he strikes a light.

The man is there, on the floor. Whining like a lame pup. Will's heart expands; he had the fellow wrong.

'Heed me,' the poor creature sobs through his glassy metal face.

'I shall!' cries Will.

'Follow the path below,' the man says. 'Carry his words back to their source.'

Will cradles the man, and the rotting molten smell is awful.

'What have they done to you?' he asks. 'Are you wounded?'

'I am,' says the man. 'They have burned off my face, so none shall know me. They painted my skin with spirits, every crevice of my nose and ears. Then they touched a candle to it and watched me melt. I am erased. I am nothing.'

'Who has done this to you?'

'The Children of Light. The Face of God.'

He has taken the man to their kitchen. The mask is removed, and beneath it, a swaddle of bandages thick with sticky unguent. Underneath, he can see the purple and black of the man's swollen head. He counts the muscles and bones he should find; some he can see, others are gone. Still the man speaks, a husky whisper.

'Rid yourself of the slave you have made. Offer it up, and the way shall open. Carry his words back to your master.'

The man is cooking before his eyes. His skin is subject to a heat Will cannot feel. It crisps and peels. Flames tickle around. The smell rises Will's gorge. He dares not touch, for fear his own skin will fry.

He runs for a basin of water, and wakes Catherine on the way back. She has slept through the commotion, as she always does.

He hunts out whatever balms and unguents he can find from the chest in their chamber. There are plenty: gifts from Catherine's parents at Christmastide, which she has not the heart to tell them she will not use, but refuses to sell, out of respect.

He unscrews the jars and scoops out handfuls to smear on the man's charred and swollen face. His lips part in thanks, and a flame dances between them. Will hears a tooth crack and split.

And then: as he has but once before, Will sees the spirit of the man rise from his body, a white shadow which unfurls and then floats between floor and ceiling.

'He is leaving us,' he tells Catherine.

His brother departed thus, clapping his hands in delight at his destination.

The man is not breathing. His chest has collapsed. The figure of light stretches and turns. It reaches to Will, and vanishes against the ceiling. If we were out of doors, Will wonders, should I see him float all the way to heaven?

They stand over him, singing prayers to speed his soul.

Fearful of any suspicion against him, Will calls for a constable. 'The man was fleeing a fire, it seems, and rushed into our house seeking succour. We have no knowledge of him else.'

More men are called, the body collected. Will is told he will have to attend the inquest, which he gladly accepts.

The morning spends itself in the fussy buzz of sworn statements and shooing the neighbours, who crane round the threshold for a glimpse of some gossip. Will smiles along with every question, shrugs and nods, lets them embroider the tale as they will. Catherine stands with him, always ready.

Then the constable is called away, the neighbours drift off to exchange the tale for fresh news from round about. Soho never sleeps.

They are alone.

What remains is the man's golden mask, which the constable did not know to take. Will wipes it clean of soot. Something about the blank countenance unsettles his soul. He fancies this might be the shining face of God itself.

For a moment, he is tempted to try it on. But he shudders at the thought, and leaves the object be. He gives it to his little homunculus, a blind-eyed companion, for solace and amusement when Will is absent.

'I thank you. It is a kindly act. Such a thing may feed my imaginary, and seed the works you wish from my hand. I shall listen to its silent voice, and heed.'

Will is troubled by the visitation.

It is surely a sign. This world is burned up and done; the life to come is ready to emerge. And he must prepare the way.

The Last Day

Will writes:

*I hear the lamb weep,
I see the lost child,
And Christ is asleep
On the barren and wild.*

*The tygers abroad
The priest is awake,
He embraces the bawd
In the fiery lake.*

*The knife and the stone
Shall melt clean away,
I stand all alone
For it is the Last Day.*

*I see the true face
Of our Lord Divine,
And all take their place:
Six, seven, eight, nine.*

SEVEN

From porgutry

Marie Ann Nickles

Mam

I niver kilt no wun befor yer the onely wun. Ile niver do it agin I promis. I niver knew I cud be so sad. Ur lek my mammy I think I dunno I niver knew her poor mammie she niver knew me nether. O am sorry marie ann. Am sorry mammy. I kent tel you wye I dun it. I meen I kno wye bot I kent tel. Is a seekrit. I niver felt bad wile I wos doin it onely after. My mastr ses is repentans an I wil be fergivn bot I don think so. I wuddnt if I wos god. You niver knew wat I dun so ile tel you. I was wotchin you fer days an dayses. Follyin you roun an back agin. Yer bed in flowrey deen wer you sleep wen the sun is up. I waitd outsid til you kem agin. I was maginin you sleepin lek a farey prinses. Flowrs roun you an munks sayin prers fer you. Rabits an lams snuglin up wif you. Birds tweetin roun yer hed. You dreemin dreems o ships an treshur. Hansom prins cum an tek you til his casel. Amen. Wen you cum out at dushk I folly you. Seen you in the jin shop an tawkin to sailers an men. Seen you wisper em. Seen you tek em up the yard an do bad things. Yer skirts up roun yer sholders. Seen you callin men yer darlin wen you niver seen em befor. I seen you walkin back to flowrey deen wen you cudnt hardly walk. Lek a cawk on the river this way an that. I seen you fall an heerd men laffin an

seen you laffin too. That was the wurst part you laffin too. You shud be sad an am sad fer you. I seen the las man you was wif. A reel gent not lek the ors. He was to be the fawvr and you the movr. I kent tel you mor bout that. Bot he was. Wen I tole who I tole then I got tole this is the time do it now. This man an this wumin wun day this is histry all wil luk til this momint less you stop it. I meen for no wun niver to know bout this. Yer mekkin histry cos yer mekkin histry disaper fore is hapnd. I kent tel you mor nor that I kent tel you who sed this. Bot thas wat I was to do. Ide bin waitin years fer til do nuthin bot slay this wumin wen she cum. An it was you he sed an I was xsited. So so xsited. All them yeers an heer it cums. Mebbe you thot that wen you got marryd. Cos I kno you did. Mebbe wen you had yer babbies. You was xsited. After watin fer years. An then you got sad mebbe. Wer are they now I wunder an that meks me sad. Bot mebbe you niver knew wer they wer but still I feel sad fer the babbies. Why did you tuk to the jin I wunder. Not cos yer a bad wumin I bet but cos yer not. The wurl is a bad ples an that meks you sad. I kno see. So wat I dun is. I seen you in the fryin pan. I watchd you thru the windy. Tekkin yer jin an laffin. Then I seen you wakkin out. An I knew the nex man was him. Nuthin fer an hour mebbe mor. I seen you tryin bot no luck. I was gettn cowlid twas a cowlid nite. Yer wisperin men bot they al say no. Yer callin em nems. Fat ol fool an wurs. I ken se you now wen I clos my eyes yer in yer ulster with them big butns. Yer perty roun fes an I think id lek til cosy you an be warm. Not bad lek but jest huggin me lek am yer babby. An am thinkin this an I seen this chap very nise I think a reel gent. Cleen an wakkin stret up lek a soljir. An you giv him the smil an he smils back. An I seen you wisper him an he laffs an then yer down yon passidge. I follyd you down an you niver saw me cos no

one niver sees me. Am lek a shado ud niver kno am ther. I ken do alsorts. Bot I seen you. Hup yer skerts an over a barl an hes on you. O o o he ses an then dun. An hes cryin then an I dunno why. Don worry you ses that was reel gud. I niver knew a womin afore he ses wel I don bleeve that you ses. He luks hapy then an you gev him a cudl an he waks on. Wel thas my time is cum. I don evn think it I jest kno an I dos wat I had til. Yer on the groun afore you know it. My han on yer neck pushin reel hard so you kent screem an then my gud han tother wun has the blayd out an in yer neck. Furst time wernt gud I struk yer bone so I dos it agin. This one is gud an I pulls it an yer neck is cut reel gud. Then to kil yer guts an I puls up yer skerts til I seen yer skin yer flesh. In at the top of yer tummy an I cuts down sawin an sawin til yer hips til wen I kno yer guts is cut up gud. I duno wye bot I gets the wobls then mebbe I thinks I heer sumwun cumin bot I don member that. I ent thinkin I dun a bad thing not then but jest that is time to git. Bot I ent dun not proply bot I kent tary so I goes wun two with the blayd in yer cunt scuse me marie ann but is wat it is an then yer dun gud. I waks away then I kno wer to go an I climis in this slawterplace I kno bout an I washs in the barl. Is al bludy in ther an I kno if am seen am jest a slawterboy washin wich is wat I am. An I think nuthin am hapy oney thinkin hav I dun it rite. An wil he be content I kent tel who bot thas wat am thinkin. Bot now oh marie ann am sorry. Sorry sorry sorry. I wish ad not dun it. Yer ded an is a bad bad thing I kno. An no wun els dun it jest me. My mastr med me but he didnt he jest sed to do it and thas not the sem am the wun wot dun it. I dun it no wun els. If you wer live now ad let you slice me fer to sho you am sorry bot you cant cos I dun you an o I feel lek doin it til meself slicing meself

bot I wont am skerd an that meks me sad to. Jest I promis niver til do it agin.

Is dun now an thas that. Amen.

signed

If yer gost coms back to hont me then servs me rite.

From porgutry

Mastr

You se the way ive been gettin on no dout an I hope you think I dun gud. Tekkin the woom out is not so hard thanks to the old docter wat a shame he never lived to see how well he traind me ha ha. I think you had him put to sleep I may say but hush say nuthin. To think he bleeved wat you sed that you wanted me in a trade an I had been a slawter boy of uncommon skil an you thought I had promis as a sawrbones an there was not enuff money to put me through medical collidge but if he wud tek me on lek a prentis I cud lern from cuttin up the ded how it is a body works ha ha ha. O he was a gud teacher very pashent and kine an serius most all you cud ask for but in the end he tawt me all he cud till he even sed as far as it goes with a knif I was better than he. O and those polis I saw jawin over the bodies an the juries from inkwests pokin and wundrin I lerned all I needed wat to do an wat not to do how not to get cawt anyway. You wanted me to get her furst but I said no I need to practis for if we get this here rong an they hang me an lock you up then your goose is cooked an so is the hole worlds so you say. Don you think its bout time you told me wat it is she dun or why we need to cut her up lek you say. You say I

ken do as I wish with the wooms so why cut em out at all. Mebbe so she never has babbies but you don know wat sumones children is lek afore ther born so wye choos her. An if you do kno all then wye you need me if you hav such powers is gud one. But ur the bos.

signed

I wunder mastr wat meks you shure I wont cut you next tho yer rite I wont.

From porgutry

Annie Chapmen

Mam

Hers wot hapnd. My mastr sed am to folly the same gent were he gos an cums. I watchs him al wek. He coms an gos til his club an for to see his mammy I think she is. Hes quiet an kine. I leks him. Always tips his hat fer a ladie an gives a peny fer an urchn. Niver gos to no hoors bot I knos hes the sem man I seen with marie ann am shur af it. The hole wek I watchs him. Bot I don get tird. I dos wat am tould an I dos it rite. I don forget who luks after me. An I don mine. I leks the big grey ston bildins roun the bank an watchin al the gents cumin and goin. Al the mesinjer boys runnin an horses clip clopin is betr nor the circus. Lads wi barras sellin nanas an nuts an ceegars an hokey pokey men an barl organs an bootblaks an foteygrafmen an sweepers an sanwichbordmen fer dried this an patent tother. Then wan nite he gos walkin down witechaple. Long long walks but he don mine. He waks an I waks. Rite down shawdich an in them narra streets. He gos in an out af music hals an spectible public

howses an then down he gose the back rodes wen it gets dark. Still I folly him. Each wun cheeper an darker nor the las. An I heer chilern shoutin heer cums a hottintot an al laffin lek we do wen we see a tof. Runnin afir him an mekkin mock of how he waks. He don min. Then is proper dark an hes in this wun nasty public hows. Ther lukin after him cos they kno hes money an cos they don wan no peelrs in ther. But hes keepin quite an cul jest watchin all. An am watchn him. Is late dark now an hes getn up an goin. Out in the rode an I thinks I knos wat he wans. Is time. Hes got that luke bout him an that hot lil eye lek sum men git. Wimmin cum to him bot he ses no no thanku no. Lek he knos jest wat he wans. Then you kem up. Am sorry annie bot I din lek you. Yer big an hoorish an drunkin. Am thinking o I hope he gose with her cos I wuddin mine doin her after. Am sorry annie bot thas wat I thot. Bot he lekd you or watevir he wanted I don kno you wer it. You kno wat hapnd then. You tuk him don that alle an thru the gate an don the steps an dun him in the yard. I was on the roof an I seen. O yur durty I thot. Ur a durty womin yer not lek my mammy. Yer not lek no prinses. Yer lek the wikd ole queen or the forst hag. Wat you dun. O my annie. O o my. After he was cryin agin an you laft. Away out of heer yer a chile you ses I don wan no vergen mens muck in me. O he ran an ran. I didn folly him tho. I knew wats next. I cum down an I ses I was watchin you. O you durty boy ses you. Yis I ses an you want a reel man now I spose. Fer a considrashun ses you. Heers my muny I ses an shows you. Will u I ses I will ses you. You seen sum peepl then an ses cum in heer the sem plac if you don mine. I don mine I ses and we gose in. Down the pasidge an the swing dore an the free steps an intil the yard. Afore you knew wat yer on the groun. Av my han on yer throt an yer gaspin an yer fat face is getin red an fatr

nor it is alredy. Wen you stap movin I cuts yer neck. Rite hard I dun it I neer bruk thru yer backbon I think. Cud of tuk yer hed of an carried it home bot I had no bag big enuf ha ha. Then is tim an tim to do it rite. My mastr sed I wana kno is dun an dun rite. Rite I ses yer guna kno. I sees is quite an all is asleep an I got time. So I teks my time. Cuts you in the bely. O heer it cums. Slice slice slice nice an cleen. I got a reel sharp blayd I do. Open you up an thers yer gots. The wriggly wormy wuns I tek em out. I put em up by yer hed so I don tred nor neel in em an get meself mest up. You smel shity in ther but I don mine. An boose I ken smel that to. Nother bit af bely I cut af an put by yer hed on tother side to mek it neet. In I gose then. My fingers in an pushin about in yer gots. I teks my time. I kno by feel. Pushin an pushin. Is dark bot am use til it. Til I fines it. The start of al pain. Slice cut slice an is out. Reel small. I have it in a jar I brot with me. Lek a litl skind bird. Lek a flowr of meet. Lek a bludy munthrag. Now I thinx af the peelers an I wanna fox em. I teks af yer rings two af em and I luks to see wat els. Thers a comb an a bit of hanky or rag an I puts em by yer feet for to finish the piksher. Now you luks gud. Betr nor befor. Bot I se lite in the skye an is tim to go. No wuns cum they don ker. No wuns cryin fer you. O thers sum with me stanin roun watchin bot ther the uvver sort. Al them I rites to. Ther watchin an sayin gud boy gud boy wel dun. I lek that. Wen I finish they al clap ther hans lek at the music hal an I feels gud. An is over. I tek yer thing bak an shews it to him my mastr who I kent tel you wat he is. He ses wel dun boy wel dun. Now that man wil kno an hel stop hoorin. Hel kno ivry hoor he tuches wil dye. I don lek that bot I ses nuthin. An thas it. So am sorry I kilt you bot twas you that mest yer lif not me. Pur womin

they al say pur nuthin. They say al bout the hoors but nawt bout the men as keeps em in busnes. Amen.

signed

Thers weels inside weels he ses my mastr an I think hes rite.

From porgutry

Laud God in hevn

Sor

If yer ther tho I kno yer not but less say u are so heres a trouble for you now. Ill hav to start at the start. Theres an anjel my mastr that is wun of your people the fes of God who says you want com back to erth. I cant see wye but ur the boss. Nobody much lissened las time but mebbe now with tellygraf an all you ken get the messidge out better. So either you com in clouds with trumps lek I offen herd or ur born over agen lek las time in a manger with sheep an gotes. If you want a poor beginnin you cud do worse than witechaple but mebbe you kno that alreddy. Aye mebbe thas why he wans you not be born. For my mastr tuk me out of a slauwter place were I worked an got me a prentis with a sawrbones for cuttin up the ded. Afore that I was put in there by him too I foun out wen I were only a lad. Hes had me ther mekkin me into the man I am, getting me used to blud an guts for this killin wich he knows ile do for hes bred me up for it. So this yeers an yeers hes been playin me along jest waitin I don think I cud wait for anythin that long but then I spose at the heel of the hunt were all jest waitin to die arnt we ha ha. Wun day he coms an ses to me

you are the lad I put in here sum years ago an its now time to tek the next step. This sawbones as I say got me goin in his trade I went to all the posmortoms with him an watched him cut an after a wile he let me do wun too. I got so I cud kno were to find the difernt bits jest from the luk an the feel of the bellie. Funy that all the time I was in the slawterhus I never thot much that weere aminals too an jest bones an gots but here I was now an its plain as day gods truth yer truth I mean ha ha. I heard sum salvationmen singing that wer anjels but anjels arnt made of stinkin shit an warm bubblic jellie that stinks. Wich we are. Not you god I kno tho you were made of stuff wen you were here afore an that must have bin strange I think. An now ur comin again is that rite. Well ur affur not mine but I need to tell you to watch out. If ur comin on clouds no need to worry unless it rains ha ha but if from a babbie then this anjel my mastr has his own plans. I darent say wat but jest so you kno. Yer god tho so you can figur all.

signed

Thanx for my lif God im havin fun an I never thot I wud

From porgutry

Long Liz

Mam

He wisperd you an you wisperd him an I seen you o I seen you. Bad bad liz. I wos guna do you the same bot he nevir went in you oney yer mouf o liz how cud you is dorty dorty dorty. I wos cryin wen I cut yer neck. I heerd them juws

singin ther songs an jeerin I thot now is gud am guna be catchd I wana be catchd I thot. Bot no wun kem. I heerd you with him an you sed o wont you finsh orf am getin cramp an he sed I kent an you sed al tek you in me mouf. Lukt lek you wos etin him live. You niver finishd him cos he cleerd orf wen sumwun kem an you sed bye bye sum uvver nite. Yer lek a statchu I thot lek a victry or justis or jo navark. I thot ide cut yer gots out bot then I thot I done haf to you niver tuk him in yerself. I ent doin it fer the fun is fun too reely is bot am doin a job af werk an I hef to keep with him the gent. So wuns I kilt you ded I follyd him in case he dun it cos he was hot an reddy. With thothers I knew twas ok I had tim cos he kent go agin fer a wile. Bot now he was redy to pop. I know wat thas lek o yes I do. Am a man too an wen is tim is tim. I niver had a wumin bot I had all els. My on han an guts of cows in the slawterplas an other boys in the boysplas up ther arses bot is no harm cos they kent get a babbie. Yis I dun ded cows an shep too wye not ther ded ent hurtin no wun. An I dun wooms the wun of annie o sory annie I niver tould you bot I did. I tuk yer woom an I did meself intil it for to see if we cud mek a babbie me an you. I bilt it a nest in a melk jug an is in ther now I kep lukin an nuthin yit bot I pray we mite. An wen I lukd at yer nek long liz I thot I cud do it now in yer neck open as it wos neel over you an do meself in yer cut throt bot I niver. I think bout that tho wen I tug meself an I wish I had mebe al do it agin. They watcht me this time the lords an ladies an men from buks an sum of the jews an the uvver anjels an they tould me wel dun boy. My mastr was ther to this tim stanin ther sayin is al rite boy go watch the man an se if he gits anor an see her wel servd. He ken be evrywer my mastr I see his gowld fes al day long. O I wernt spost to say bout him bot wat harm hes not feard of you nor nobody he

kent be kilt he toul me am lek anor profit an am guna sev us. Wats a few hoors
mor or les hoo kers o they say they do but it meks me laf. Bo ho cryin fer em
bot they al had the knif in ther han sem as me quen vic an laud pee an evry juk
an duchis an gent an ladie an preest an jodge an skolmastir an nurs they al got
that knif in ther han sem as if they did. They ken cry an so ken I bot it dont
chang nuthin. Am difernt I heer them jawin bout me an I think o ho ho thas me
ther jawin bout I cud tel you an is hard to nat jest tel em is reel hard. Thers
allsorts as wish they was me ritin to the peelers an the papers an sayin ther me
an sum sayin I wish id dun that hes a brev man that jack hes not feerd o no
peelrs an I kno is me an I feel warm inside an strong an lek I kent be cawt bot
I kno I ken bot yet I ent been an I wont be nether cos they dunt ker they rely
rely rely dunt ker. I kno. Amen.

signed

Jack bot I ent jack bot I am rely.

From porgutry

Vergen Marie

Mam

O sumtimes I crie is all too much. Am I a bad persen I spose I am an I cant do
nuthin bout it. They sey yo ken be saved but not me I think wat do you think.
Ther must be things too bad to be saved an if this ent it I dunno wat is. My
mastr med me wat I am but still I think sumtime cud I hav sed no mebbe I cud.
Taint him wat kills nobody is all me. His blud is cleen. Mine is shit an sick. I

don min if they catch me really I don't really think they have me by now. Maybe
I'll go on for a hundred years just killing and killing and they don't know who it is so
how can they catch me. Killing is the oldest game in town. If it weren't for the
papers Mister Sted and them lot of 'em nobody would know nor care. O tell me
where Marie went a sin starts. Is it a sin to think it in your head I heard it is. But
you can't help what you think or can you I don't know. Say I think about getting an
blud but not in no person is that bad. It's just thinking and hurting no one. Then if
I think about them getting in an old hood well she's sinned already so what's she
expect. But I'm just thinking of what's in her and not taking 'em out. So when the
sin starts is it when I think about slicing her bellie but then she's dead already and I
am not hurting no one. So it is when I think of killing her just so I can open her up
well maybe so but I still ain't done nothing. They say stop me before I kill again but
how do they know I will. And the wuns I really killed can't be brought back do what you
will to me. And I ain't been fooling in these hours I know there's nothing and no one wants them
there for the dustbin sure enough the paupers grave. I meddled more than they
ever would of been cos now everybody sees a awful awful horrible look at these
wimmen and what when we do five per cent buildings and gentle arts for the poor. I
like a picture camera and the hole world sees now ha ha. Tho I don't care. I seen a
man with a camera for making pictures move and he showed me is like ghosts. If
we make moving pictures of everybody then ain't no one can die not ever that
means I can kill who I like and there's not dead there still moving. O no sole you say
but there ain't no sole is all blood and guts I looked for it and is not there. Or nother
way it is there but is not what they think it is. The flesh is the sole is all one I say
that's what they got wrong. That's why all are soles die when we die and only rise again
at the last trumpet. I know you were taking up body and soul so your special wish is

wye am askin you. So tel me wen does a sin start. If you wil say o stop now my lad wen is time an then ile kno. An if I don hear you then ile kno thers no sin an all is jest wat we dos wen we want wich is hard but mebbe is better. If gud an bad is only wat we made then we can mek em over agen but thatll be sum job. Still bes start now soonest started soonest ended lek my old sawrbones used say I wish they hed him on the movin pikcher id lek to se him agen. In the next world you say but I kno beter.

signed

I luv you vergen marie an I won never think of cuttin you nor slicen you amen.

From porgutry

Kate Edows

Mam

No wun iver dun wat I dun. Nor no wun iver ken. Cos furst is furst an thas that. I herd wat you sed to him. I follyd him agin. After I cut tother hoor long liz. They say yer no hoor bot I saw. You cried to the gent an sed ile get a hidin if I dont get my muny. Wers yer muny he ses. O I drunk it you ses I cudnt help it. I quit kno the feelin he ses. I dunt go hoorin but I needs the muny you ses. You was cryin. Ile need sumthin in xchange he ses. Wot you see is all I got you ses. That wil hafta do he ses. Thas nasty af you I thot. To him I meen. He was a kine yung man an now hes nasty. Hes tawkin to you lek yer trash wich you ar bot he niver dun that befor. I dono wye. Hes hatin wimin mebe cos he sees wat they ar. O not al them I kno bot al the men ar the oney gud peepl in

the wurl is wimn sum of em you kno that an I kno to. You gos in a dark plas with him an yer at it an then hes dun. He niver teks long thank god ses you ha ha. Am most gretful he ses. An wers my muny you ses. I sem to hav cum out withowt my pockitbuk he ses am so dredfly sorry. Yer scum you ses. Thas rich he ses an waks of. Wel now is dun his liti squirt is in you so yer fer it I thinks. Am feelin tird an ratld cos of long liz. Bot I ses cum in here mam I seen al wat a dredful young man. Cleer orf she ses ive had enuf ile tek me hidin I deserv it. No no I ses luk heer I dont want nuthin jest to sort you out. Cum in heer is my rume an ile gev you the muny. Wel was the wurst that cud hapn you ses an I lafs. Wat you lafin at you ses you member that. Yul see now I ses. My husbin tole me not to stop out lat for the riprl hav you ses. Yer husbins rite I ses an steps behine you an teks yer chin in my han an cuts you al at wunce lek you ent got tim to know wat hapnd or nuthin. Thas my mercy an is reely so you din screem an I kent be stopt befor I dun my werk. O kate. Yer my favrit I think. You opnd so eesy lek a ripe nana. Peel you back an tek the frut. Wel I had to sawr a bit don ther bot thas al rite I don mine. Kerful I was not to spoyl it. In the botl an in me pokit. An then I wans a luk at yer kidne. I niver seen a reel wun I meen cows an sheep bot niver a womins wun. I luv kidne fer to eet an I ses ile tek it fer me brekfist. Wye not yer ded now no harm in it. An I teks it. Woblin bout in my han an it tickls. I luks in yer perty fes. I ken see you lukin up at me thinking o deer deer how cud you. Yer a bad bad boy an thel sniff you out. Yes they wil. O wil they I ses wel see how gud you sniff with no noes an I teks of yer nos ha ha. Now yer not so perty I ses an I draws a lil pikcher on yer fec with my knif round yer mouf an slice slice on yer perty cheeks. Is fun an I tek out a bit of yer eer to. But am tird an I wana go hom

now. Thers oney wun thing now. Fer the peelers my ole choms. I kuts away a pees of yer apron see you niver knew I dun this did you. Wips my knif with it so is bludy. An bye bye kate I waks cul as you lek back the way I kem an levs it at sum hous of juwes. Thas them fixt I thot cos the juwes fixt ar lord an now ile fix em back. They eet chiles blud I herd. Bekd in ther bred. Thev all the muny an thas wye thers pur peepl an the guvermnint helps em. Thell not be blamd fer nuthin I thot. Meebe next I thot ile go slicing juwes evry wun. I wud I thot if I had tim to get them al bot thers to many. Ad need a big mill or factry jest fer killin jewes ha ha bot how to bild it cos thev al the muny. I cud probly get sum juw to put it up if he thot hed dubl his muny an he wud. An hed be the last wun in slicd up an cand out the bak fer dog meet. Ha ha ha.

signed

I chakd it on the wall the juws are the men that wil not be blamd fer nuthin.

EIGHT

34. When he was a child, around the age of ten or eleven, Chris had thought for a few months that he might be the Second Coming of Christ. He had learned at school that Jesus was supposed to return, and from films and books he picked up the idea it could happen soon, and in much the same way as before. He also knew that Jesus himself didn't know for sure he was the Messiah until he was older.

At that age, Chris always liked to be the best at things, but he had never found the one thing he was best at overall. He felt very strongly that he was important, and his life had to mean something significant. Maybe his thing was to become the best possible person, he thought. That was what being Jesus meant. He could be the perfect human being, the standard by which everyone else was judged.

He was certain he shouldn't say this to anyone, because he knew what happened to Jesus before. And the same thing would probably happen to him in the end, but not until he was old enough to have followers, and it was time. He would bring on the end of the world, and defeat Satan in the final battle.

He wasn't sure if there was anything he could do to make sure it would be him. It seemed to be something that was either in you or it wasn't. He'd just have to wait, and look for signs.

35. Sometimes Chris wondered if he was letting himself off the hook. He didn't always feel like the perfect human being. This might be only one of several potential futures for him, and it wouldn't happen unless he worked hard towards it.

That thought used to worry him a lot. The destiny of humanity might depend on whether he could be bothered to make the effort to be the best possible version of himself. He might end up ruining the most wonderful thing just out of pure laziness.

He asked himself if it was really all that hard to be perfect.

No one else seemed to be even trying.

36. There was something else, a private thing. Chris hoped it might go away, but it didn't. It began to bother him, and as he got older, he realised what it meant.

He couldn't possibly be Jesus, or anything like it. He was just a sinful, corrupt ordinary person. He would never be pure enough to be the ideal human. In one way, it was a relief. But he was also disappointed. He had wanted it to be true.

This was the secret he had told Lucy earlier. He kept wondering what she thought. At first he couldn't decide if she'd found it a bit weird, or really revolting. In the end he convinced himself she'd found it revolting. He felt that was unfair. He didn't get what she found so sexy about piercings, but they didn't disgust him.

37. Chris's thing was women's armpit hair. He didn't know when it had started. He genuinely had no idea. But he knew it went back a very long way. He could remember seeing underarm hair on a woman at the swimming pool when he was very young, and feeling embarrassed, as if he had seen her naked.

When he was at university, he had found a footnote in a psychology book which said this sexual fetish in later life was caused by seeing a woman's pubic hair as a child, probably his mother's. He couldn't handle being aroused by his mother, or by the fact that she had hair down there, and so he made it underarm hair in his memory and transferred his erotic desire onto that.

Before that, Chris had thought he was the only person who had ever felt this way. He was very relieved to discover he wasn't. That meant it wasn't completely unnatural. He wasn't as much of a freak as he had thought.

But he still doubted the explanation was true, at least in his case. He imagined it was much simpler, that a hairy armpit simply looked a bit like a hairy vagina, and at some very young age he'd made the association.

It didn't make any difference. It was so much part of him by then, he hardly thought about why. It was just the way he was. Seeing underarm hair on a woman turned him on. Often he felt it was the only thing that really did turn him on.

38. When he was at university, Chris used to feel a bit ashamed that this little quirk motivated so much of his behaviour and so many of his day-to-day

decisions. It influenced where he would go out for the evening, which country he might visit on holiday, what he watched on TV or saw at the cinema.

One a nice day, if he wasn't busy, he'd sit in a park. He pretended to read the paper, and kept his eyes peeled. Occasionally he went to the beach for the day, but he didn't like being in the sun for a long time. In winter, he'd go to the pool instead. On evenings out with friends, he tried to make sure they ended up in small sweaty clubs, even though he didn't like loud music or dancing. Most nights he saw something that made it worthwhile.

At parties, he always tried to sit on the floor, so he had a chance of catching a glimpse when girls walked past. In the pub, he would pretend to drop his lighter or tie his laces so he could have a look. When he wanted to get a group of people's opinions on something, he always put it as a yes or no question, and asked them to put their hands up.

He was pretty sure all men did the same sort of thing, about blonde hair or big tits or whatever they were into. At least the girls he met were unlikely to guess what he was up to, and think he was a perv. He almost never saw anything, but it was exciting to imagine he might.

Chris knew there was a certain sort of girl, the road-protester, Glastonbury type, with dreadlocks and tattoos, who would be pretty much guaranteed to not shave. But it was the unexpected ones he found most appealing, girls who looked innocent and clean-cut, but whose unshaven armpits suggested a naughty or lazy side.

And hairy arms or legs didn't do anything for him. It was just that one little secret corner. Sometimes he wished he could shrink himself down small enough to curl up inside.

39. These days, Chris was much more relaxed. Once he'd had his first couple of relationships, it all stopped feeling so important. Now, it was just something in the background. He didn't often stop to think about it, and he hardly ever went out of his way to see anything.

It wasn't even really about sex, not any more. The two things were quite separate in his mind. These days, when he did happen to see a girl with underarm hair, his ideal scenario wouldn't go any further than her catching him looking, figuring out it was turning him on, and letting him look more, without saying anything at all. So far, that had never happened.

Chris imagined that if he ever got together with a girl who didn't shave, and he had the nerve to tell her, and she agreed to indulge him, then just touching her underarm hair would be enough. At most, she might agree to hold her arm back behind her head, so he could stroke the hair and kiss it, while he wanked with his other hand.

In the meantime, he was fine just seeing it by chance once in a while on the street, or at the pool, or in a club, and then calling up those memories when he wanted to feel horny. It wasn't hurting anyone else. It calmed him down to think about it. It focused his mind, and helped him relax. It always had.

40. Chris had liked to think about it even before puberty. As a child, it made him feel warm and safe. But he always knew he shouldn't talk about it.

Once his own underarm hair came, he used to stroke it while he was lying in bed, and imagine it was a girl's. He'd focus on the feeling of touching

it, and try to ignore the feeling of it being touched. With his other hand, he would wank. That was when he knew he definitely couldn't be Jesus.

He still did this now, most nights. While he did, he played out a few of his fantasies. He would start simply, and build up to more elaborate scenarios. He had lots of them, but on any given night he would put four or five together in a sequence.

A girl had found out. She let him touch. He would stroke her hair, maybe pull it gently, while he wanked himself with his other hand, or she wanked him.

The girl had tied him up. She was teasing him with her underarm hair. She brushed it gently over his face or rubbed it hard on his mouth and nose. The sweaty smell would smear itself on his skin.

He was a doctor. The girl was worried about an infection caused by not shaving. Chris examined her underarm hair, and then reassured her that there was nothing wrong or unhealthy about it. He shaded the conversation towards encouraging her not to shave in general. She nodded, taking him very seriously, and said ok. He asked her to come back the following week for another examination. (This one sometimes made him feel guilty, that it was unethical for a doctor to give a patient advice which was only intended for his own sexual gratification. But since he wasn't really a doctor, and the woman didn't actually exist, the guilt soon passed.)

He was at a party. They'd been playing a game where he was blindfolded, and he had to identify things that were put under his hand for him to touch. Everyone had had a bit to drink, and they were getting giddy and flirty. One of the girls had already positioned her breast under Chris's hand,

and he'd had to pretend not to know what it was, just to keep the hilarity going. For some reason there were only women at this party, and Chris. There was a sweet-looking, quite shy girl who couldn't look Chris in the eye without blushing. (She was the same girl from the other fantasies.) He was blindfolded again now, and he knew it was her turn. He imagined her trying to join in by doing something a bit more risqué than she normally would, but not wanting to push it too far, to avoid embarrassing Chris, and for the sake of her own natural modesty. She decided to lie on the ground. (Chris couldn't see any of this, since he was blindfolded, but in this fantasy he could watch himself from the outside as well as feel everything he was feeling.) She positioned her uncovered armpit under Chris's hand, and let him feel it. Her idea was that because of the underarm hair, he wouldn't guess what it was straight away, since it was unusual for women not to shave. But of course he knew immediately. He could smell the slight whiff of sweat. He was getting a hard-on and hoped the girl didn't notice. He was nervous that if he showed his discomfort or embarrassment then everyone would guess it was turning him on. But he couldn't think of anything else to pretend to guess that her armpit hair was. The other girls saw he was hard, and teased him. He ended up explaining his fetish to them. They all found it quite horny. It turned out most of the others didn't shave under their arms either, and they all agreed to show him. They got carried away and stripped off completely. Soon they were all rolling around naked together, rubbing their armpits in Chris's face. (They didn't actually have sex, but only because Chris couldn't imagine how group sex would work. In films it was always done as a sort of montage. He wasn't convinced it ever actually happened in real life.)

The shy girl had broken both her arms. She couldn't take a shower, so Chris was coming over to wash her with a cloth, and dry her off. She was already naked when he got there. He did her back, and her legs, and her stomach, and her breasts. Then he soaped and washed her private parts, which were quite hairy. He did it very simply and carefully, so she would know there was no ambiguity. Finally, he had to wash and dry under her arms. He could see she was embarrassed at how hairy they were. She asked him if he would shave them for her, but he said he was worried he might cut her or irritate the skin. He said he'd prefer just to wash and dry them, but he would do it very gently. He really took his time. He especially enjoyed the drying, which he did very very slowly, until the hair was fluffy and curling into itself naturally. She noticed he had a hard-on. She told him to take his cock out of his trousers and brush the end of it against her underarm hair. After a few minutes, she grasped it in her armpit and tugged until he came. Afterwards, he had to wash the cum out of her underarm hair, and dry it. Then it would start all over again. This could go on for a long time.

The shy girl in the fantasies wasn't a real person. She was someone Chris had invented, but she reminded him of certain actresses he found attractive, especially Anna Friel and Winona Ryder. She had short dark hair, what he thought was called a pixie-cut, and a small round face with young, innocent features. But there was something else in her eyes. It was the feeling that in a staring contest, you would lose. She was the spider, and you were the fly.

41. Chris knew all this was part of the reason he had never had a serious girlfriend. He couldn't imagine explaining it to a girl he had just met, but he also couldn't imagine having a proper girlfriend who didn't know. But if he told her too soon, she would think he was weird, and stop seeing him. And if he left it till they knew each other better, she'd be upset he had hidden it from her.

He would never ask his girlfriend to grow her hair especially. Part of the appeal was that she already liked to have it. But he was convinced the sort of girl who didn't shave wouldn't be interested in someone like him. If he was a woman, he knew he definitely would shave. There was too much pressure to. It was seen as normal and reasonable. If you didn't, you were taking a stand. It was like dyeing your hair and only ever wearing black. It was like listening to strange music and being sarcastic to everyone. It was like smoking Marlboros instead of Marlboro Lights. It was like piercing your nipples and your clit, or telling people you had.

Chris tried not to wonder if Lucy shaved her armpits. It was awkward when real people came into his sexual fantasies. The next time he saw them, he always felt like they must know. For some reason, he imagined that if she didn't shave, she probably had her underarm hair dyed black too. She might have her armpit pierced, or tattooed with some kind of symbol. He didn't think he'd like that very much.

Anyway, he didn't actually fancy her.

42. When he saw it was light outside, Chris got up and made tea.

In one of the kitchen cupboards, he found a large jar with a long piece of strange stuff in it. It looked like meat, or some kind of offal, but it was grey and flaky. He couldn't see it very well, because the liquid was cloudy and full of tiny bits. It was like something from an old medical museum. He imagined it was part of Lucy's art project. It was exactly the sort of thing he thought someone like her would have in their kitchen cupboard, but it still made him feel a little queasy.

While the kettle was boiling he had a proper look around. Lucy's place wasn't what he had expected. It was an ordinary council flat, with pink wallpaper and chintzy furniture. Everything smelt of smoke, and there were full ashtrays in every room. The curtains in the living room were drawn, and there were piles of tabloid newspapers and women's magazines on the floor. There was a Nintendo plugged into the TV, and a big stack of videos against the wall, almost to the ceiling.

On the floor of the bedroom were lots of the little plastic trays that Mr. Kipling cakes came in, and some crumbs. Jam tarts, Lucy told him when she woke up. That was what she ate when she was feeling unhappy. Dozens and dozens of them, all day long. She wouldn't look at him while she said this.

He thought she was exaggerating, to make him feel sorry for her. Then he went to the toilet and saw there were splashes of bright-coloured dried vomit on the floor. He wanted to clean it up, but he didn't, in case she realised later and got embarrassed that he had seen it.

43. Sometimes, Lucy said, sitting up in bed and drinking the tea he had made, it got so intense that she really did want to die. It would be such a fucking relief, she said, just to switch her head off, to stop it forever. Chris told her she had to get things in perspective. She said she wasn't thick, she did know it was an awful thing to do, especially to other people. But there were times when she honestly felt like that wouldn't be as bad as having to feel what she was feeling.

And then the fact that she couldn't do it, she said, made her feel even more worthless. She considered other people's feelings so much more important than her own, that it was seriously affecting the biggest decision she would ever make. If all you were going to be was a memory, she said, you didn't want to be a shitty one if you could help it. But at the same time, she knew it would cheer some people up. Chris asked her what that was supposed to mean.

'I know for a fact there are people who'd be happy to hear I was dead,' said Lucy. 'No one would be happy to hear that,' said Chris. 'I know you wouldn't,' said Lucy, 'because you're nice. But there are people, Chris. There really really are.' 'I don't believe that,' said Chris.

'Aren't there people you'd be happy to hear were dead?' said Lucy. 'I can think of loads.' 'Maybe dictators,' said Chris. 'Milosevic, or whoever.' 'Right,' said Lucy. 'And why?' 'Because they cause other people so much suffering,' said Chris. 'Well, so do I,' said Lucy. 'And most people have a limit where they switch off their love or even their compassion if you push them too far. There are a few people who've reached that limit with me. And just the fact of me continuing to be in the world makes them unhappy.'

'Even if that was true,' said Chris, 'that's not most people.' 'No, that's right,' said Lucy. 'Most people just don't give a fuck. Even those two in the office. They'd say it was terrible, but they wouldn't actually feel anything. In six months or a year you'd have to remind them who I even was.' 'That's bullshit,' said Chris. 'It's not,' said Lucy, 'It's the truth. But don't you see? That's fine. That's the way I want it. I'm fed up of getting involved in people's lives. That's why I'm such a cow most of the time. I just want to stay out of the way. I want people to leave me alone. I know who I am, and it's not anything good. And then you have to come along and act all nice to me, and now I'm really confused.'

She started crying. Chris thought he should probably hold her, but he was worried she might think he was exploiting the situation to make a move, so he didn't. He stayed where he was, and made a kind of mmm noise in his throat every so often. He hoped that would tell her he was sympathetic and not just sitting there indifferent or embarrassed. He waited for her to finish crying. It felt like ages, but it was probably only three or four minutes.

44. Chris helped Lucy to tidy up the flat. They emptied all the ashtrays and put all the cake boxes and crumpled tissues and wine bottles and vodka bottles and newspapers and magazines into a black binbag, and he brought it out to the big grey bin by the lift. The place looked nicer already, and Lucy said she felt better.

45. When Chris got back to his flat, a man in a mask was standing opposite the front door. The mask was made of smooth reflective metal, and the man was

wearing a kind of cloak with a hood. It looked freaky. Chris couldn't shake the thought that he'd seen the outfit somewhere before.

It must be a promotion for something, Chris thought. It was some bizarre publicity stunt. He told himself he'd noticed these figures in other places, standing around, or following people. He decided there must be dozens or hundreds of these men walking around the city, and there was nothing special about this one.

When Chris went in, he knew the man was outside in the street waiting. He peeked out the window, and saw him standing there, looking up.

Chris felt a bit uneasy. He tried to stay sensible. He told himself he had always had this problem. His friends at university used to say he just had one of those faces. Weird people would latch on to him, and want his help. In a pub or a café, if he was on his own, some strange old man would sit down and tell him an outlandish story. His real problem was, he always listened.

Chris slept for a few hours. When he got up, he checked outside again. The man was gone. He sent Lucy an email to check if she was feeling ok. She sent one back and said she was, and she'd see him at work on Monday. She said she wouldn't tell anyone about what happened, and she hoped he wouldn't either.

She also said that his secret was safe with her. She didn't say it like it was blackmail, but he wondered if that was what she meant.

He wished he hadn't told her now. He couldn't remember why he had.

46. When Lucy came back to work, she didn't mention anything about having been off sick, or why. No else mentioned it either. They were very busy these

days, so there was plenty else to talk about. Tammy and Al had taken on more programmers, who did most of the coding now. Chris hadn't even met some of them. He spent almost all his time in the office, redesigning systems for Lucy to implement.

There were only a couple of months left until the end of the year, but more and more businesses were already reporting serious malfunctions. Most of them were reluctant to go public, in case it looked like they hadn't taken the whole thing seriously. But every time they fixed a problem, a whole set of new ones came up.

Al said it was the same old story. The more you put things together, the more they keep falling apart. He said he sometimes imagined that the world had long ago passed the point of total collapse, and they were the only ones holding it together.

Chris didn't like it when Al talked like that. It made him feel responsible for everything. Al said it was true. People like them were responsible for pretty much everything. Computers ran the world, and they were the ones who kept the computers going. If something happened to them, the whole world would go to pieces overnight.

47. When they were both in the office, Chris felt Lucy was avoiding him. He wondered if this was a test and he was supposed to resist it, but he didn't. That made him feel guilty. He knew that because of everything she'd told him, he was expected to stay being her friend. He wanted to be there for her, or he thought he did. But he was worried that sort of thing might happen again, and

he would be obliged to look after her. That made him feel anxious, and then he started avoiding her too.

It wasn't that he didn't care. He was surprised to discover that he cared very much. It was just that he had no idea what to do in that kind of situation. He couldn't handle being responsible for someone else's emotions.

Maybe you didn't have to do anything, he thought, except sit and listen. He could probably manage that. He hoped he wouldn't have to.

48. Lucy called Chris one Sunday on his mobile phone, and asked him if he wouldn't mind coming round to her flat. He was at the office, trying to get on top of the backlog before new jobs started coming in the following week. She said she'd been sending him text messages, but he told her he never bothered opening those. They were always from the phone company telling him he could send text messages. She didn't laugh. She hung up.

Work had made him get a mobile phone so they could reach him at weekends when it was very busy. He'd have preferred a pager but Tammy said she didn't trust them.

Chris didn't think anyone else had the number. He didn't like people having his details without him knowing. But since Lucy was from work he thought maybe she'd been able to look it up. He decided he had better go round, in case something bad had happened, and then he would feel awful that he hadn't.

When Chris got there, Lucy told him she had cut herself. There were four little slices on her left arm. It made him think of a bar code. She said it

looked much worse than it was because of all the blood smeared over her arm. When they'd cleaned that off he could see it wasn't too bad.

She asked him help her bandage it up. She wouldn't go to the hospital or the doctor. She said she'd done it before and she knew she'd be ok. She always sterilised the razor. She said she tried not to do it very often, but there were times she just couldn't stop herself. She said things got so bad some days that she felt like it was all she deserved. She said she imagined it was someone else cutting her. She liked to picture a person she knew, someone kind and thoughtful and generous. That made it easier, she said.

Chris didn't say anything. He just nodded and listened.

49. Lucy showed her wounds to Chris again a few days later, when they were both having a cigarette in the office kitchen. The scars were already healing. She always wore long sleeves, even in hot weather, so no one in the office had seen them. But she said him knowing they were there was kind of nice. It was like another secret they shared. She said she found it quite sexy.

Chris pretended he didn't hear that part. He didn't find anything sexy about pain or violence or domination. He knew he was supposed to. But the only time he'd been with a girl who wanted him to handcuff her and pretend to strangle her, he'd been rubbish at it. He was too worried about actually hurting her, or what it might mean if he started to enjoy it. She told him he was scared of living on the edge, and he agreed he was. He didn't see what was so great about the edge, he said. You could easily fall off. He hadn't seen her again.

50. A couple of weeks later, Lucy was off work again. Chris was annoyed. He felt like it was directed at him. When he sent her an email, she didn't reply.

Chris knew he should probably let Tammy know something was wrong, but he also knew that Lucy would hate that. Instead, he did Lucy's work as well as his own. He didn't sleep much.

When she hadn't come in for a whole week, Chris stayed at home on the Saturday morning and phoned her over and over again until she finally answered.

She said was going to do it this time. She'd definitely decided, and it was nice that he'd called, but she didn't care what he thought. He was full of shite like everybody else. He spent three hours on the phone, trying to talk her out of it, persuading her it was a stupid pointless selfish thing to do.

In the end she said he was probably right, but she was going to do it anyway, since she had everything ready. Otherwise it was only putting off the inevitable. When she hung up he called an ambulance and then got a taxi straight round to her house.

The ambulance arrived just after he did. She didn't answer the door, and they had to break it open. One of the neighbours helped. In the end they had to drill the lock off. The police arrived too, but by that stage they were already inside.

She had taken pills. He went to hospital with her. She was unconscious for most of the day, but she came round just before ten. They decided to keep her in for the rest of the weekend, to make sure she was ok.

They told Chris it was best if he went home. He wondered if they thought it was somehow his fault.

51. That night, Chris had a sort of waking dream while he was lying in bed.

Lucy was beside him.

She was open. It was sticky.

Some of it was above her shoulder, still warm. It was like a snake. He could smell fried egg from inside it.

Her head was hanging back, wobbling.

The sheets were wet and red.

She wasn't quite dead. Something small was moving.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, she was gone.

52. Chris knew he should go and visit Lucy the next day, but he couldn't. He'd had to call in sick. He was physically shaking, for hours at a time. He had never felt worse.

He kept thinking something awful was going to happen if he turned his back. A few times, looking out his window, he thought he saw a huge fire on the horizon, in the centre of London. He was sure he could smell it too. But when he looked hard, there was nothing there.

He couldn't sleep. He was a wreck. He constantly wanted to cry. He couldn't take any more. He wished he could go away and live in a hole somewhere. He hated everyone. He felt like everything was falling apart.

He especially hated Lucy, for doing that to him. When she phoned Chris the next day, he told her that. He was very angry, and he couldn't hide it. He didn't even see why he should.

Lucy said she was really sorry. She promised she would never do it again. She'd been thinking about a lot of stuff, she said. There were going to be some big changes in her life. She also promised she would never tell anyone about his secret.

'And I need to tell you a secret too,' said Lucy. 'I'd rather you didn't,' said Chris. 'I think you're Jesus,' said Lucy. Chris sort of laughed, but he could tell she wasn't joking. She sounded a little scared of him.

What she meant, he told himself, was someone who was only kind, and not at all cruel or selfish. That was certainly how he liked to think of himself, at least towards other people, but he didn't want her to know that.

'I really don't think I am Jesus,' said Chris. 'Neither did Jesus,' said Lucy. 'At least, not at first.'

Lucy told Chris she shouldn't be alive, but thanks to him, she was. That meant he had created her, the new her that carried on. Whatever she was from now on, was because of him. The old Lucy Mills had died, and good riddance. 'Now I belong to you,' said Lucy.

53. Word must have got round somehow in the office, because nobody said anything when Lucy came back to work. Nobody asked where she had been, or whether she was okay now. Nobody even said very much when it became clear she'd stopped wearing her goth clothes and the make-up. She'd taken out all her piercings too, or said she had. Chris had never seen some of them, so couldn't be sure. She'd had her hair cut short, and she was letting the black dye grow out.

She looked like a totally different person. She looked almost normal. Chris thought she reminded him of someone. He couldn't think who it was, but it was someone he knew very well. It kept bothering him. One day, he suddenly realised. She looked like the shy girl he had invented in his fantasies, the one who let him play with her underarm hair. That was extremely weird.

Lucy looked so different that sometimes clients would come in and not be able to find her. She always just laughed and said it was time for a change of image and she liked to keep people on their toes. But once Chris got used to how she looked, he could see she was pretty much the same old Lucy. She still had the same sarcastic sense of humour. She still liked the same sorts of films, and the same music. She still came in late after she'd been up half the night playing her Nintendo. She still squinted and looked pissed off if they stepped out of the office and it was a sunny day. She didn't drink as much, but she smoked more than ever, sometimes at her desk if she was working late. Nobody said anything, even though officially you were not supposed to. She did seem to be eating, Chris noticed, but mostly just crisps and biscuits. And she smiled more often, especially at him.

54. Work was incredibly busy, and getting worse. Chris felt like he was only just holding things together. If anything else happened, he might have a complete breakdown. He felt too hot all the time. His eyes got blurry and sore. The slightest noise made him jump. But he told everyone he was getting on fine.

He kept getting flashes of Lucy cut up into pieces. He kept thinking he could smell burning when he was in the streets. He couldn't shake the feeling

he was being watched, everywhere he went. A man with no face was coming to get him.

Chris pretended it wasn't happening. He tried not to think about it. If he ignored it, it would all go away by itself.

55. Chris worried a lot about the things Lucy had said to him. He didn't want to have created her. He didn't want her to belong to him. But he was afraid now that if he was unkind to her, then she would kill herself and it would be his fault. He wished he'd never tried to make her like him.

He did his best to avoid her these days, but she wasn't having any of it. She asked him nearly every day about her thing on New Year's Eve, and whether he had any other plans. He always said he wasn't sure yet if he had or not.

She kept inviting him to go with her to a gig, or to a party. He always said he was too busy, but he could tell she didn't believe him. If it was only a drink, or lunch, then he might go, but he never suggested it. He was trying to remain kind, while sending out the signal that he wanted her to find someone else.

Chris was sure the others wondered what was going on. When he told a story in the pub, or gave a presentation at work, Lucy listened really intently, looking right at him, hardly blinking. She flirted with him blatantly in the office, but he pretended not to notice.

She wrote him letters. He didn't open them. He was scared of what they might say. She phoned him up in the evenings, usually quite late, and talked to him for ages. Sometimes it was about nothing much, and there were

long silences while one of them tried to think of something to say. Sometimes it was about him, and how great he was, and how special and different from other men. She felt they had a really intense connection and she didn't want to do anything to spoil that. She hoped they would always be friends, even if he went to work somewhere else. She said he was the only person who understood her.

Other times, it was about the end of the world. She told him she had worked it out mathematically. The Beast in the Book of Revelation was computers. You couldn't buy or sell without it. You had to worship its image. Its number was six-six-six. And the number six in binary notation was one-one-zero. This was the big clue, she said. It meant you had to look back one hundred and ten years for a year of grace, and then do it twice more. That took you to the start of it all.

This year was finally the end, she said. He would understand better when he saw the thing her collective was working on. It had already started. He was walking around inside it, and he didn't even know.

Chris hated it when she talked like that. It worried him that she could believe any of this stuff. It scared him that she didn't seem to know the difference.

It wasn't that Chris thought life was meaningless. He didn't believe in anything religious, not any more, but he knew deep down there was some kind of shape to things. This wasn't a belief, it was just obvious to him.

He felt that ultimately it all had to make sense, otherwise there would be nothing instead of something. The fact of anything at all was some kind of order.

56. One Friday in the pub Al took Chris aside.

Lucy wasn't there. She'd gone to Yorkshire to work on a new contract, and she was going to stay up for the weekend to visit her mam. They hadn't seen each other for a few years. Lucy said they had never really got on, and in the end they'd had a big falling out about religion. You started giving me grief before you were even born, she told Chris her mam had said, and you've never stopped since. Her dad was an alcoholic, and he had left when Lucy was ten. He lived in Wales now, working on the ferries. She sent him money at Christmas, she said, and he occasionally phoned her up when he was drunk, but she'd only actually seen him a couple of times since she was a child. He sometimes said he was coming to London to visit her, but then there would be some excuse at the last minute and he wouldn't come.

'You want to watch things with Lucy, mate,' said Al. 'What kind of things?' said Chris. 'You know what I mean,' said Al. 'Don't muck about unless you mean business.' 'We're just friendly,' said Chris. 'I know, mate' said Al. 'The thing is, a girl like that needs handling. She's damaged goods, and she knows it, and she'll expect you to fix her. And you'll think you can. But you can't.' Chris was offended by that. There were times he seriously wanted to punch Al. But he didn't say anything. 'I see now what she's about,' said Al. 'It's my little sister all over again. She goes through these wild phases, into drugs and partying, going travelling and screwing around, and then she crashes out and lives like a nun for a few months, back at home with the folks. And then she's off again, joining the New Age ravers or, what was it last time? Animal rights. Breaking into labs and stealing rabbits. God knows.

You think she'll settle down, but she won't. You'll be her punchbag, mate, and if that's what you're into, don't let me stop you. But, you know. Well, it's not for me to say. Just consider this a quiet word had.' 'But I'm not going out with her, Al,' said Chris. 'We're just friends.' 'I know, mate,' said Al. 'Relax. Don't shoot the messenger, okay? I just wanted to clear my conscience, and now it's done.'

57. At the start of December, Tammy told Chris she was fed up having to turn down work because they were at capacity. They were still getting lots of new requests for emergency jobs on malfunctioning systems, especially from countries where there hadn't been so much hype in advance. She thought there was going to be a huge market for mopping up if things did go wrong, so she and Al had decided to open another office in Brussels for European contracts. They were both going over there for a couple of weeks at least, to get things up and running, and they needed Chris to take over in London while they were away. They would look into hiring another project manager to work with him and Lucy, if he thought it was necessary.

The idea frightened him. Chris felt he was only just coping with his work now, repairing systems and designing new ones, and he hated the idea that he would be responsible for other people's mistakes. But he didn't want to rock the boat either, and maybe have to look for another job, with people he didn't know. He didn't think he could handle that at the minute. He needed to know Lucy would be okay first, and that things could get back to normal.

He told Tammy it would be fine.

58. On the radio, Chris began to hear news stories about computer errors.

There were rumours that lots of companies were covering up big problems, for the sake for their reputations. He listened to long discussions about what might happen if multiple systems really did fail all at once. The experts painted very bleak scenarios.

He started to think about the end of the world. He conjured up scenes from Hollywood films. He saw buildings explode. He saw planes crashing into cities. He saw thousands of people fleeing for their lives.

He had to save them. He couldn't get the thought out of his head. He knew it was ridiculous, he laughed every time he thought it, but he also knew it could conceivably be true. Al was right. In his own small way, that's what Chris was doing in his job. Maybe he was meant to be Jesus after all.

59. In the evenings, Chris stayed in his flat and played endlessly with his little wooden puzzle. He moved the pieces around and looked for patterns. He couldn't find them now. It was just a mess of random lines and shapes.

Nothing made any sense at all. There was no order. There was no past, present or future. Everything was chaos.

60. When he couldn't stand that any more, he walked around the streets.

Sometimes he thought he saw a man with a shining golden mask, following him. It was the same man he'd seen waiting outside his flat. Chris would catch a glimpse at the edge of his vision. When he turned around, there was no one.

It was clear to him now. The problem was real, and they weren't going to fix things in time. It just wasn't possible. There were too many essential

systems with too many errors. They could have done it, if he hadn't got distracted by Lucy, but now it was too late. Everything was going to fuck up, and it was his fault.

The thought made his mind go black. It was vast. It was too much for anybody. He told himself one person couldn't be so important. There were thousands and thousands of others like him all over the world.

But he knew that any network was only as strong as its weakest link. Self-organising systems, like the free market of software consultants he was part of, were naturally efficient. They operated with the minimum necessary to function. If one element stopped working, everything might stop working. The whole thing could easily fall apart, like Al said. And he would be to blame.

He got angry with himself. It was a ridiculous, conceited thought. No single individual was absolutely essential. Even if anyone could possibly be, that person would know it by now. Something would have happened to make it clear. Someone would tell him. It would be obvious to everyone.

But maybe no one ever knew for sure, he thought. Maybe that was part of the challenge, like it had been for Jesus. You had to have the courage to believe in your own significance. Only then could you do what you were destined to do.

61. Chris dreaded going in to work every morning. He tried to avoid being there when Lucy was. He hardly spoke to her. He couldn't look her in the eye.

Sometimes he felt himself losing his temper for no reason. If there was a big decision to make, he had to go into the toilets to vomit, and he couldn't

sleep for days before. He hardly ate. He lived on Lucozade and wine gums and cigarettes. The office was complete mess. He never knew where anything was.

In the end he called in sick one day, when he just couldn't face it. Next day he did the same thing. He sent Lucy an email to say he'd phone her when he was able to come back, and not to contact him in the meantime.

62. He did nothing. He just couldn't. He sat in bed for hours, smoking and listening to the radio turned up loud, trying to drown out his own thoughts. He had awful, awful thoughts.

He knew he could never go back in. He knew he had made a mess of everything. He knew his life was a complete waste. It was the worst thing that had ever happened.

63. Tammy phoned Chris to check if he was all right. She must have spoken to Lucy, and figured out something was properly wrong. Chris said he was much better now, and he'd be back at work the next day, but she insisted he went to the doctor.

Chris was told he was suffering from stress and exhaustion. He should get more sleep, take exercise, eat sensibly, drink less and stop smoking. Those were the same things they always said when he went to the doctor. He knew it was good advice, but he also knew he would ignore it.

Tammy told him to take a bit more time off. He had to stop taking things so seriously. He should go on holiday and get his head together.

He agreed. He told her he'd booked a week in Greece to lie on a beach and relax. She said that was excellent news. She'd give his jobs to Lucy in the

meantime. She told him not to worry about anything while he was away. It would all be fine in the end. It always was.

64. Chris hadn't really booked anything. He was afraid of leaving, in case London wasn't there when he came back. The whole city looked flimsy and fake to him now. He felt like if he pushed a building too hard, the side would collapse, or he might break through.

The walls of his flat were fading to white. He saw houses fold up, streets crumble, the skyline ripple and settle back as a single line. None of it was real.

He could see beyond. When he looked at a brick, at a face of concrete, he saw the microscopic life it held. He saw the fossils of sea-dwelling blobs, the atoms of carbon and silicon. There was no single whole, just a mass of fragments without integrity. London evaporated before his eyes. It clouded around his face like smoke. It was everywhere and nowhere at once.

He saw a whole street on fire. He could smell the burning, and see bits of cinder floating in the air. He could hear the flames, and people shouting and screaming. It was just at the edge of his vision, and he couldn't look directly at it, but when he closed his eyes he saw the imprint of it clearly. When he opened them, everyone was just walking around like normal.

He was walking through puddles of blood and piles of flesh on the pavement. He felt great lumps of it squelching under his shoes. He thought he was going to vomit. He could see blue and grey strings of guts curled up in doorways. He stepped over corpses of women with torn stomachs. The street was busy, but no one said anything.

He knew everyone could see what he saw, but they each thought they were the only one. Anyone watching would never guess that he could see it either.

He was too scared to say anything. They all were. No one wanted to be the first to speak up. If they all pretended it wasn't there, it might go away.

65. Lucy was with him. She was sitting on the end of his bed. She gave him a knife and said it was time. The room was burning. The walls were running with blood.

Her chest had split open and there was gold inside. He reached in and took it out. She kissed his hand. He knew he had done the right thing.

They were underground. Chris could hear water. Everyone was there. Lucy was singing to him. She was all the colours of the rainbow. He knew he had to remember this moment, and make others see it. That was everything.

66. The man in the mask was with him. Chris knew he was always watching. He could sense him out of the corner of his eye.

The man wanted to show him what was underneath, and Chris knew he mustn't look at it. It scared him. It scared him very much. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the smooth golden face.

'Search the clouded hills for the shining face of God,' said the face. 'However you try to twist it, it always comes back the same way. It has been such a long time. And we're nearly there.' 'I think you're looking for someone else,' said Chris. 'Aren't we all?' said the face. 'That's the real tragedy of it. A

little helper made of clay, to do our dirty work. But relax for now. We'll find you again when it's time. Not long now.'

'Is this the end of the world?' said Chris. 'Is it all my fault?' 'Six, seven, eight, nine,' said the face. 'The dark satanic mills must fall away. I bless your holy vision. Watch, and wait. It's the end, but the moment has been prepared for.'

NINE

The last Part of my History

i. When the great poem was at last complete, I was tasked with running to and fro Mr. *Milton*'s printer *Samuel Simmons*, the son of a man he had dealt with some years before, and who, alone among the book-men of Paternoster Row, held Mr. *Milton* to be a great master of letters.

I well remember my first venture into that *forest of script*: On every post were pasted title-pages of new books for the week, announcing subject and author; carts and stalls were jumbled up against the well-to-do shops, men splashed and stained black with ink as *Shakespeare's Moor* shouted over the clashing bashing rattling racket of printing machines in yards and basements; the very gutters were full with spews of ink and tattered and torn papers: leaves of *Dante* and *Spenser* crunched and sogged underfoot, so thick and numerous I allowed myself the fancy they were shed by *Trees of Poesie* which grew there, and these men did nothing but harvest them; and all in the heavy shadow of our great St. Paul's, like the soul of a repentant sinner a permanent and holy promise of the eternal divine for all its filthy stains and crumbling cracks, of which tales were still told how *Cromwell's* men stabled their horses in the nave, pissed in the font, tore vestments into strips to bandage their

wounded; and now the book-men worshipped in the crypt there, where they kept their stores, at the church of St. *Faith*:

This saint, said Mr. *Milton*, was a young girl roasted on a brazen bed for refusing to worship the pagan gods. There are few now would take such.

I daresay Mr. *Cock* would, said I.

Aye, said he, but torture alone does not a martyr make. Many have embraced the rack who well deserved it.

I helped Mr. *Milton* write out the last fair copy of his great poem, after which he sighed and said *Consummatum est*, which near-blasphemous wit was one feature of his discourse I greatly regretted.

His chamber was clumsy with foul papers and blotted versions, and he called in all hands to bundle these for burning, fearful that some future time might seek to prove his intention was other than this final manuscript; but I cautioned him against their destruction before the work was printed and sold, and he relented; so case after case was driven over to his father's old house in Bread Street, where though a tenant had the good chambers, Mr. *Milton* kept the attic-room for his own stuff and records, and those of his late father, which he one time gave hint contained some old foul papers of *Shakespeare* himself, who had some dealings with his father, though I believe he never once went into them to see if any gems might be among the dross.

ii. As I crossed the town entrusted with this fair copy, all word was of a fire, indeed all through the city the smell was on the air, which made a tiresome journey for I had to pick my route to miss it; and I heard said it was doubtless the biggest for many a year, for the exceeding dry season and the

constant strong wind fed the flames and spread it about, indeed sometimes a hunk of spark or a clump of ash blew in around the street as I walked, and I saw all who were able ascend a spire to watch its creep, some laying wagers on how close it might come to where they stood, with much idle speculation upon the cause; though if all I later heard say they were in the region of Pudding Lane and saw the first sparks break out were truly present, why then that place must be a vast expanse of open field poorly named as a Lane; but for all the busy bother abroad of moving out households and carting goods away, I saw not one soul tasked with fighting the very blaze, each man certain this was the job of another; and I thought this a great change wrought in the nation, surely by the King's return, that it was now good practice for a man to think only of himself and his goods, and the people as a body may go hang.

I care not to help my neighbour, said one to me. I help myself, and I expect he would do the same.

And if you helped him, said I, he would surely help you in his turn.

I wonder, said he.

Wonder not, said I. Try and see.

But the man would not, and cursed me for my trouble.

A little after I returned from my happy errand, Mr. *Cock* came by once more, and commanded us to sit up and pray, this fire was the judgement we awaited and all would perish unless they declared themselves for *Christ*, for he would descend this very day as he had ascended, so we were promised; but though at his urging we searched the sky for a cloud to carry the Heavenly King, it was the clearest golden blue as ever I saw it; but still he sat calculating his numbers to find the very time and place to expect *Christ's* return, and to

my great surprise Mr. *Milton* helped him, though he carped out from time to time that he would do so only to prove the extent of Mr. *Cock's* folly.

Still the news was wide that the fire raged on, and every story and counter-story came past our ears: It was a Dutch revenge, for the late firing of their towns; it was a Papist plot, from France; it was an Irish plot, fed by Papists again, in revenge for *Cromwell*; and though one or two more stood in the streets and cried it as the promised end, the heathenish temper of the times was shown in the laughter they drew in response; but though I saw militia abroad now with fire-hooks and squirts to do what they could, most men did no more than stand and watch, and still would not help to clear goods for their neighbours without coin in hand first for their trouble.

I have seen our land despoiled and lost everything this generation, said one, and I will not risk life and limb again to any common wealth, as they called it, for a fool knows there is no such. A man has what he has, and that is only what he can sell.

At night we walked to the river, and I told for Mr. *Milton* how we saw the image of his great *Lake of Fire* in the very Thames water which shone with reflected gold, a burning mirror of the blazing wharves, as boat after barge after bark was laden with wine and pork and plate and chairs and hangings, drapes and paintings, statues and papers and trinkets, guitars and organs, women and children and caged songbirds; and one gent was greatly cried for putting his serving-girl in the boat before his wife, for all said she was heavy with his child, which he did not deny, but shut the mouth of that young mocker by telling him to ask his mother which of the stable boys had placed him in her womb sixteen years ago, for all knew his father had his vitals

blown clean off at Naseby, which silenced the fellow, and gave a good laugh to all.

On our way home I saw again the panick of the plague-year gone by, as men laid siege to the green cuntry itself and stormed the gates of London that barred them in, yet those gates were now shut in their faces, so the people might turn their strength at last to fight the blaze; but some said this was to keep out the grasping carters and farmers from miles around who rushed in to hire out their wagons at ten, twenty, forty pounds, so the wealthy could move their goods to safety; though others doubted the stuff would ever be seen again, as though the very land beyond sought to grab and hoard what London it could for its own self.

iii. On the next day, we heard the word around that this was a devil's fire which could not be put out save by some black spell, else it would continue to burn and consume the face of the whole earth, taking a year and a day, for it was the earth itself was burning, they said, as Hell had cracked open under Pudding Lane where *Satan* dwelt with his team of Jews; and for a wonder (as I thought then) I heard one respectable gent say he had been down himself to that place, a great cavern of evil beneath the city, an ancient pagan chamber from before even the days of good *Brutus*, who all said came from noble Troy to found our great civilisation; which word made Mr. *Milton* declare he would write his own *History of Britain* to clean the minds of the godless from such lies and legends, and I did much encourage him to do so, for this great work would surely be the jewel in the crown of his achievement for the ages to come.

iv. On the third day Mr. *Cock* brought us word that St. Paul's itself was menaced by the great inferno, which like a stalking Indian beast, the more it ate up, the greater seemed its appetite; but as we worried at the doubtful fate of the great poem, and I was congratulated by all for my fore-sight in saving the foul papers and drafts we had stowed, the terrible news came to our ears that Mr. *Milton*'s house in Bread Street was burned up, and with it every leaf and scrap of paper he had stored; and now Mr. *Milton* pressed us to go straight and recover the most precious fair copy of his great epic, nay the sole and only original; but though I counselled him there was no value and great risk in his coming along with Mr. *Cock* and me, he said he would not rest till the pages were safe in his hands, and he had rather know the worst at first hand than leave his posterity to fallen Papists and hereticks.

We three fought against a tide of humanity, the busy traffic of panick and flight, but when we found Mr. *Simmons* he told us all papers and stock were safe, removed below ground to St. Faith's; but still Mr. *Milton* demanded his poem, which Mr. *Simmons* said was impossible till the fire abated; so we took him with us by ferry to view the danger, and as we came on the river to the environs of St Paul's, alas! a sight I never thought to see, for the roof of the great church itself was aflame, the nearest thing to a vision of Hell I ever wish to witness; but yet Mr. *Milton* would not turn for home and demanded we see the bookmen's store was safe, so with much scrambling trouble we took the low side entry to St. Faith's in the crypt of St. Paul's, and we saw through a grille in the inner door the very papers stocked and piled, stuffed in barrels and stacked in crates; and Mr. *Simmons* said he remembered well the spot

where he placed the fair copy but two days hence, indeed it was near the last put in so he knew the corner of the very paper, and I squinted to discern it;

but as I did so, there came a thunderous crash and tumble, and the tunnel shook like an earth-quake, which awful noise was the very roof of St. Paul's sundering down above our heads, and the heat came upon us then so furnace-like that I remembered Mr. *Cock's* harsh talk of the sizzle of his flesh, for I dared swear I smelt my own hair singe and my skin begin to bake and blister; but when I turned to ask Mr. *Milton* for permission to flee I saw he had passed clean out from the heat, and Mr. *Simmons* and Mr. *Cock* had seen fit to run and leave us to our fate;

and I wrung out my very soul to know what I should do, for though all my head said to clear out most lively, my heart knew Mr. *Milton* would not wish to leave this place alive without he had his very poem pressed to his bosom;

so I heaved his slack body back to the river and set him near a shallow pool which itself I thought did bubble and fizz in the awful heat; then I soaked some rags and wrapped them round myself, till I was swaddled as best I could be in damp cloth, and I turned back hissing and steaming to enter the cave of paper, that dungeon of happily-imprisoned script sealed from the great fire above; yet the very moment it seemed that I opened the door and my eyes found the papers I must reach, as though my very gaze was hot I saw their edges curl and brown, I smelt the tang of bitter burning and saw the flare and fire, and then a great rushing bloom of flame and all as one went up together:

with weeping heart I saw the precious leaves fly up around me, like sable wings of flaking ash, whole pages where I read my own hand, strange

silver lines of verse upon black filmy sheets; and I knew that if I touched them, they would shudder into dust and crumbs; so transfixed I watched them spin and drift, pass clean through flames, unable to be burned a second time, and for all my terror I thought them like condemned souls with nowhere left to fall, suddenly free of all fear; and then without a sound they shuddered themselves into powder and smoke, vapour and ash: lost for all time.

v. I was all out of hope.

I had lost Mr. *Milton*, I had lost his great poem, and I thought myself like to lose my very life in that *dark local cave of hot coles*, the boyish Hell of my callow fancy, indeed such was my despair that I dared hope I was already perished and this no *Inferno* of burning books but my own private *Purgatorio*, for I swore I smelt my innards boil, and felt such a heavy wall of heat against my face that I knew no mortal flesh could suffer; but then a hand grasped my body and dragged me back, and I felt the ground itself give way and next a great rush and tumble down, sliding and scrambling, wet now and blessedly cold, but black dark, as I came to lie all in a heap, and I knew not where I was nor whose was the hand that had saved me.

Then I heard the voice of that Mr. *Cock* hard in my ear.

Crisp and crackle, said he. Roar. Roar. Roar. Do you feel its hot breath? This is the beast. Oh, I saw. The books went up like *Fawkes* himself had set them.

I wept then for I knew I had failed to save the great work Mr. *Milton* had set himself, his poem had burst out into flame as though the very hell he inscribed pushed itself into our world, and I knew not if the poet himself lived;

but *Cock* said, Why do you weep? This is the promised end. All the elect are now immortal. Even old *Milton*, though he sleep for now.

I sleep not, said *Milton*, and I rejoiced to hear him, though still I could see no one, only pure deepest black.

My *Milton*! said *Cock*. Did you truly mean your words to start a fire in the land? Well, you have accomplished it. They have set this London ablaze. The old Roman folly of St. Paul's is ash and rubble above us, and our great city is newly cleansed. It is your words have done it.

If I find you I shall wring your little neck for you, said *Milton*.

Amen, said *Cock*.

And with it, said *Simmons* (for he too was here), caught the very air aflame and destroyed a thousand years of our good nation's papers. There are books in that place secret from the King. Volumes and scrolls have been hidden there for decades, aye, and maybe centuries. Papers lifted from the Vatican catacombs, ready for a time shall be fit to hear them. Wisdom of the ancients, denied to our descendants.

And all because old *Milton* had the Godly gall to rewrite scripture, said *Cock*. There shall be great disappointment at the pearly gates. I say, stay nested in this Hell and save a wasted journey.

What is this place? said I.

A buried river, said *Cock*. A place sacred for longer than we have means to know. The river is almost dry today, so we may sit. But yet we await the word of God, to give light and form to the chaos. The Spirit has still to visit this place, an empty womb awaiting his brooding wings. It is pagan

innocence. Blessed are those who have not heard, and yet believe. Do you think a humble *Cock* might serve, to make the formless void be pregnant?

I thought I heard strange voices now, but I felt neither the form nor presence of other beings, and still in such black dark that I saw nothing at all.

Listen to the flames above, said *Cock*. If that is hell, then we are below it. Did you ever fancy there might be such a place, old *Milton*?

Oh for a knife to cut out your quibbling tongue, said *Milton*.

I fancy heaven itself is aflame, said *Cock*. What if *Satan* won the celestial war, and threw Christ down to earth? What if that were the truth of his incarnation? We must write Scripture anew, for the old dispensation is finally passed.

Blasphemy, said *Simmons*.

Not so, said *Cock*, for if there really was such a war, as we hear told, the outcome must have been some time in balance, so the Devil could have prevailed.

Nothing was in balance, said *Milton*, and you are a blasphemous cur.

Then this was no war, said *Cock*. By your account it was mere *Punchinello*, danced for the cruel amusement of the Almighty.

Why, sir, there are hundreds of wars throughout all ages, said *Simmons*, where the outcome was never in doubt. Else, none should ever resist an empire. We only remember when the weak defeat the great because of the very rarity, as Athens and Persia, or *David* and *Goliath*.

Suppose *Satan*'s rebellion then to be one such, said *Cock*, and he did indeed win out. He reported the contrary to us, for lies and deceit are his very nature. But he does not dethrone God in his victory. He simply wins the right

to put his own wicked plan in action. He has not suffered then by our redemption, but rather our suffering redeems his nature. Thus our life in this half-way sphere is naught but grief and sorrow. And the greatest work *Satan* has accomplished is the base illusion abroad that there is possible a life upon this earth with no suffering but only peace and joy.

Someone close his mouth, said *Milton*. There is naught but suffering while *Cock* has a tongue in his head. Those who pierced it should have plucked it out.

And there is your model of a Christian gentleman, said *Cock*. But I am at peace with my nature. The sole cause of all your pain, is the belief that it is possible to hide from pain. Your only torment is this yawning gulf between solid daily knowledge of life, and the hollow fancy you suckle and breed of how this world might be else. A false hope. It shall never be other than it is. Only in paradise. Rejoice, then, that I have brought heaven to earth at last.

We shall broil here better than a pullet, if the fire does not cease, said *Simmons*. I vote we move.

No one has called for a vote, that I heard, said *Cock*.

And so we cowered in this pitchy-black cellar-space, fearful to remove because uncertain how hard it might be burning above; where after some hours and to my great surprise I felt the jostling of others now coming and going between us; and among them we encountered Mr. *Milton's* Hebrew, full of fancy, who said he knew this place well, and told us of wall-writing he had seen here before, angelic wisdom from supposed Catholick priests and fugitive Jews and ancient Hermetic philosophers and Adamite patriarchs; he told us too of great news from Constantinople, that the Messiah was certainly come,

risen out of Smyrna, and the Israelite people were called to gather and follow him, for the time was at hand; and he led us with the others stumbling and fearful through a long low passage to a cavern decorated (so he said) with sea-shells in extravagant patterns and curling shapes, which indeed it did feel like when I touched, and to another chamber whose walls were heavy with long spikes of flint pressing in upon us, a supposed tribute to some lost pagan war-god, all which Mr. *Milton* grasped with his hands in unseemly fascination and asked me to describe to him the littlest details, which I would have attempted though the place gave me discomfort if I had not been in such perfect blindness as himself, which fact he was slow to understand, though to my sorrow it much amused him when finally he did.

And yet I was quick to forgive, for I could not help but imagine how heavy must be the terror of general fire for a man without the faculty of sight, who may feel the sheer red heat at his face and smell the stench of burning wood and paper and wool and meat, indeed unknowing in his fear whether it is animal or human flesh which burns, to populate his imaginary with hot fiery destruction far above the fact; though now in the stark black silence of this underground I confess my own imaginary was fuelled by Mr. *Cock's* ramblings to picture a land above laid waste by heavenly fire-balls tumbling from the sky, cast down by rebel angels who had banished the pure in spirit to the lower realm, and this put my mind in great confusion.

vi. We returned to the *Sea-Shell Grotto* where I paced out the place as best I could, though slowly, for I felt my steps hindered by some quiet injury; and I found it to be a great cavern with a pool to one side, where I heard a waterfall,

filled as it must be by the soothing juice of our own Thames cooling us with its vapours, for in one place the water boiled into steam and the shells fell now and then from the wall upon us and around us and into the pool like tinkling hailstones.

I have known about it for many years, said *Cock*. My childhood play-place.

He told us then his faerie-tale, that this grotto reached far beneath the city, and various forms past lived on here, strange animals had fled below when their kind was hunted out above, for it was an under-ground ark; and indeed in one tall cave we seemed to meet, by his dark report, a fellow *Fifth Monarchy Man* upon a horse, (which I do swear I touched and heard its snort and felt its breath upon my cheek,) hiding since the Restoration, waiting for their chance, which strange warrior said that he and his fellows had recovered the key to the tomb of *Arthur* and awaited him to rise again and defend England's need, for this must surely be the moment, though he refused to show us the place, fearful (he said) that we would despoil it even as some of their own party had done; and then *Cock* discoursed that the river we followed was lost and built under in Roman days, which water old *King Lud* and *Brutus of Troy* had once blessed as the sacred source of London's fortune, and in whose belly were hid lost jewels and buried secrets carried to ancient Albion from *Thrice-Great Hermes* and the angels of *Enoch*, which raving and rambling stuff he spoke in such a plausible manner that I wondered not some men fell within his power; but as in all things he reached a peak of excess which spoiled the effect of the rest, for he told us then that further below still was another chamber that housed the world to come, which a man could enter

and walk about, and he had often visited there and disputed with the generations born after us, provoking their great men to fine deeds and foul, and so he knew the secret of the final end, which was yet occulted from the general view, but that mask should be removed one day to show the true face of God, and then, all times are as one; and I trouble to write such phantasies only to show this very world to come what giddy fools were upon the earth in the days of their grand-fathers.

vii. I slept; and when I came to myself again, the place was quiet, and still quite as dark as ever; so I halloeed around to find was I abandoned a second time; but there by me was Mr. *Cock*, and Mr. *Milton* too, who declared over and again that he was weary of our subterranean sojourn and wished to return to the world above to live out his days as he might; and I heard in his speech such a heavy spirit that I remembered the fiery fate of his great poem; but Mr. *Cock* declared the time was not yet right to ascend, there was much to accomplish here below by men of vision and patience, and he had great plans for Mr. *Milton*'s muse in his *New City*.

You must find yourself another great task, for you know your poem is lost, said *Cock*.

I fear I am done, said *Milton*. For half a century I have dreamed of such a work. My every atom was fixed upon this purpose. I could never again endure such.

Do you brood upon the loss? said *Cock*.

As you shall brood upon the time you lost in planning your ascension, said *Milton*. You will tell me this is vanity I am sure, but allow me my mourning.

I only ever wished your final happiness, said *Cock*, and he spoke most kindly, which much amazed me.

No one hand is to blame, said *Milton*. History is its own accident.

History is now complete, said *Cock*. And if it is not, if the world above continues as before, as I know you do believe, then I am the king of fools, and I owe you a great recompense, for I am an honourable man.

I beg you to leave me in peace, said *Milton*.

And you Mr. *Allgood*, said *Cock*, what is your intent towards the poet, is it honourable? Which question I stinted to answer, and I made a show of ignorance, though it put fear in me.

Leave the boy in peace too, said *Milton*, for he is worth ten of you and your kind.

Is he so, said *Cock*. And what if I tell you he is the snake in your bosom, paid to report you and your household to the King.

You must know me better than to hope I could credit such feeble calumny, said *Milton*; yet there was a question in his answer; and as he waited, my bleeding conscience did stain the very air between us, so that I felt him read the sour silence, the absent rhythm of my stoppered breath; and it told him once for all that this was no calumny against me, but the simple truth.

Ah no, said Mr. *Milton*, and then he was silent.

viii. I wept bitter tears and I hoped my inner pains were but the first harbingers of a swift death, for such was all I well deserved; I could never endure the shame I now felt twisting in my belly like the infernal serpent itself, who surely sat gloating at his final victory over the poor coward *Allgood*, that I should sit among his fallen throng for eternity deprived of the grace and peace of *God Almighty* whose humble service was all my wish from youngest years; yet now it was Mr. *Cock* who seemed to hear my inmost thoughts and whispered to me.

Do not throw away your peace upon the favour of that *Milton*, said he, for I myself once did the same and found he was but a hollow wooden man and no more, as I am myself and you are too. I have work for you will ease your spirit and show true repentance, if indeed you wish it.

I have done with shadowy tasks for whispering rogues, said I.

You have not, said he, for I am that *Stephen Pedlow* who set you on this track, and I have watched you close and know you are of the kind who will serve my need. But I warn you now there will be no return from this journey, and no bones of yours will lie in the earth which now surrounds us, though they will find another bed.

The blood stopped in my veins, for I was amazed and astonished at this news; but I dared not doubt it, for I had spoke the name of *Stephen Pedlow* to no man; then he placed a thing in my hands, which I groped and puzzled at a moment, till all at once with a desperate fright I knew it was the *Golden Mask* I first saw in the pews at St Paul's; and it shuddered me deeply to know my misery was not my own devising but the cruel connivance of a heretick villain.

Here is a gift from my angel, said he. And do not have the vanity to think yourself alone, for I have other men abroad in the kingdom at my busy mischief. One did set this fire as I commanded him, a poor fool named *Hubert* fitted to the task, and in the *New Jerusalem* that now shall rise from this cleansing, there is much you cannot understand, but I will show you the truth nonetheless, for you are soon to die, poor fool, and nothing can prevent that.

At those words I felt a strange relief in my soul.

The burning you received in your foolish attempt to save the old man's poem was more than you know, said he. You see it not, but I see it plain and there is none can save you.

How see you aught in this dark cave? said I.

There is no dark, said he. You are lost in the same false night as your precious *Milton*, for your sight has fled at the pain of the fire, though I dare hope it shall return before you perish. When it shall, I have one final task for you, to cleanse my spirit. I mean to send you to a strange land, through the under-ground world into another age, to bring one back who might restore what I have lost to the world. I dare it not, for there are some dark angels who know me there, and wish the end should never come, that we may live our black misery over and again generation upon generation for all eternity. This man you must fetch is the only one among them that I fear. Do but this, and my heirs in the world to come shall bless you as a true saint.

I shall never take your part, said I. If you have more dirty work abroad, soil your own hands. And if I lack born virtue, then I claim the privilege of awful wisdom won from bitter sadness at my own misdeeds. A man who has never seen himself do wrong, knows not of what he speaks. A repentant sinner

is the only joy of God's eye. But I will not atone another man's misdeeds. If you wish to clean your slate, break your own bones to do it.

Quiet yourself, said *Cock*, so this lady may nurse you and provide your needs until such time as the Lord shall soon descend, for I hear the sweet music of angels now upon the air.

And I heard a soft female voice, though it spoke such a violent curse I doubted it could be the nurse he spoke of, but she was a kindly young lady who eased my wounds with bandages and whispered soothing songs to me, at which I drifted from the world and slept again, fearing as I did that I might never wake to see what should become of all I had seen, and fearing too the judgment now upon me for my treachery and cowardice, for though I had fully repented in my heart and soul, I felt not yet cleansed by saving grace, but still the poisonous weight of sin within.

ix. In the dark suffering hours which followed I heard the voices of three men and the female too: one who strangely did seem to know Mr. *Milton* through the fame of his lost poem and spoke of his great honour at the meeting, another who spoke such evil violence against the female sex that I wished to be removed from his company, and yet another who talked at length of a London built upon the embers of the ruined city above as though this feat was long ago accomplished, so that I questioned if I might be asleep and caught within a broken wandering sort of dream, which feeling was banished only by my own fear and the sharp pain I now felt in my skin and bones from my roasting before, which troubled me, and whirled my thoughts to jelly.

x. What I heard else that night, might be dream-stuff or the strange workings of Mr. *Cock* and his party, for I was at his mercy then and all the world was only by his report to me; I thought myself the blind old father with *Poor Tom* in *Shakespeare's* play of *Lear King of Britain*, as he leaps to his death and angels catch him, so he believes, which speaks God's blessing on him, though he is all the while on a flat simple plain, and he falls only to where he stood before.

Ex nihilo nihil fit, said *Cock*. Nothing can come of nothing. But we are indeed nothing, so why can we not come from it? And if this is true, and nothing can disappear from our world neither, as I do truly believe, then it may find its way here to this place of dark. The plain fact is that everything invention or not exists from that moment on. The moment of conception, whether mental or corporeal. Everything is simply a manner of thinking, so any new manner of thinking changes the physical realm. Yes it does. For we need tales told, otherwise it is to us as to a babe, a terrifying mass of chaos, as it is to you now in darkness, as it remains the abyss for some poor souls, those we deem lunatics. That is the true state of things. What we wish to call cosmic order is simply mental sanity by another name. What order there may be is not outside us but within us. But we create in its image. You have seen but little of it. There are false skies under here, everything. Every civilisation of the past remains in the under-world. We lose ourselves, and worry about the re-finding of it. A cavern built by the first flee-ers of the land. This is explained. The Romans came to make straight and decent. Those who would not be tamed, fled West, and below. Now we emerge into their time, our time past, and are held to be a vision of angels. Perhaps many of us may become one angel. Or

one of us may split into many. There are sometimes more than one spirit in each man. Or we may become so. Amen to that. And we wander. And wander. And wander. As the planets do above. As above, so below. And we are below. We shall always be below. We shall never rise. The only union is to bring what is above down to here, to abide with us. And so I shall.

Mr. *Cock* bade me farewell and I heard a desperate sound of flame and a mournful cry, as though his very words had caught on fire; then I heard him step into the pool, and when the waters calmed I heard nothing more of him; and I state here once for all that I saw no more of him nor do not know where he is this day, and I hope and pray I never see him more, in this world or the next, may *Christ* forgive me.

xi. I slept; and I dreamed I was back in Mr. *Milton's* room, where he lay upon the bed with his head on the lap of another gentleman, a kindly soul who spoke aloud the whole of the great poem from his memory, and a third visitor wrote it out upon a batch of paper which lay ready; and Mr. *Milton* said his spirit was at peace now he knew its fate, if his name was known for this work alone then that was greatest grace of his life, though all his policy had come to naught, for he wondered much that the throne of England still was occupied three centuries hence; and I wondered at the words; but I woke then, and my gentle nurse bade me still myself and sang to me, a mournful ballad of a light that never goes out, which yet soothed my spirit; and again I slept.

xii. After this long night of days Mr. *Simmons* once more returned to seek us, and we made our escape at last from the mazy ways of those heady

tunnels, truly the blind leading the blind, till we emerged from our sorry dungeon into a sudden silver morning; and by the grace of God I knew I could see once more, though dimly, a vision of embers and smuts, where a grey disc of sun, like Romish Communion-bread, paled out behind the glassy mist of dust, and all was ash, ash, ash, a city turned to ash; in place of the London that was, we saw a forest of broken black beams and a thick snowfall of ash, clouded around us, choking and stinging, and I made a fist of that heavy powder and squeezed it out for I knew again this was the very same stuff that was once our London, just as I had upon my first arrival, that this very matter our Shakespeare touched and trod was now gone to grey dust (as we shall be all) and it might not be constituted ever again, for such decay is final and absolute.

I gave Mr. *Milton* report of what I saw, though he was still somewhat cold to me and refused my arm, preferring Mr. *Simmons* as his guide.

I am now twice darkened, said *Milton*. Snow is to the blind as fog is to you.

It will serve to feed the soil, said *Simmons*, back to its native element. The timbers used to build a century hence will have eaten of this ash. London shall again be London.

No sir, said a traveller who passed, and never again, for we shall build no more of wood. We need a city of stone and brick, for these late fires have been too many. We had too many chances to take our warning, and we did not. So we are rightly served.

What news? said *Simmons*.

They say an invasion is expected, said the traveller, for there is word from the coast that the French and Dutch are joined. Every rider into the city is stopped and questioned for the latest report. Any foreigner is roughed, with a cry to behold their work. I did no such thing, they say. But you would, had you the chance, they say back. This is what you wished upon us, tis all one whether you did it or no.

And yet again the innocent suffer, said *Milton*.

As they must, said the traveller. It is their duty and their privilege, to earn their place in heaven.

xiii. As we passed on we lost our way many times, for the familiar turns and faces of lanes and houses were no more; in one place, we saw an Italian beaten by the mob, and only for one of the King's party who stepped in, he should have been stripped and hanged for a fiery traitor, with such angry clamour and bustle I hardly knew who spoke, or what sense to find in their passion.

This was your desire, to fire the town, said they.

No, signor, said he.

If not, it ought to be, said they. It would be mine, were I of your party. You should blush if it is not. Shame on you. Are you a man? Why should you not wish to kill me, as your enemy?

Have you not heard of *Christ*, signor? said he.

Any *Christ* who would deny me the right to kill an enemy is no God of mine, said they.

Then truly signor, said he, you do not know *Christ*. For he says we shall love our enemies.

A foolish paradox, said they. He who is loved by me is no longer my enemy.

Precisely the point, signor, said he.

One seaman then spied Mr. *Milton*, and gave out that he and his topsyturvy-men may have set the city afire in spite at the Restoration of the rightful King to the throne, and this mob surrounded us in our turn; so I ordered them back, and dared claim I would face any who offered to strike my master; but to my great wonder Mr. *Milton* stepped up and asked for such a blow.

Well would I welcome it, said he. I greatly fear its sudden arrival and it shall give much relief to my weary spirit to have it confirmed as what I deserve. I should sleep easier at night had the vengeance I dread been doled out.

Aye, hit a blind old man, went up the murmur.

If you would hit me had I sight, said *Milton*, you must hit me being blind. What wickedness or faults I have are no less for my eyes being dim.

Leave him be, said the crowd, but the seaman stood his ground.

If I deserve your fist, said *Milton*, let me have it. Else, blind-fold yourself and we may fight each other here as equals, for the jollity of all watchers. I would beat you, mind.

Put them up, sir, if you will, said the seaman.

Mr. *Milton* swung and missed wide, and the seaman slapped at his face smartly which set the poet off his balance, where he stumbled and fell into a heap of half-burned rubbish; and though the seaman laughed out a guffaw, no

other did, and the crowd shrank back as though seeing what they saw, they did not want that man among their number; and he withdrew in shameful silence.

I helped Mr. *Milton* to recover himself and dusted the ash from his smouldering cloak as best I could; then I brought him away, and we strode our path over snowy stones and solid pools of melted metals, to where St Paul's stood; but the smashed corpse of the place was a heart-breach, for every stone and column lay stretched like a fallen warrior, the shape of the whole still present but wracked and shuddered so that all said it might never be restored but must be pulled down; and Mr. *Simmons* made great haste to see the book-store in St. Faith's, but we were told it burned yet and would for hours or days to come, such was the tight-packed store of paper therein, and we saw it glow and felt the heat like the crown of a volcano, a glimpse of that *Lake of Fire* beneath which now forced itself above; and I wept to see it, though silently, for I wished no consolation.

The ash, we heard, blew across the fields around London, into the open countryside, the market-gardens which feed it; as far as Hackney it was found, clinging to leaves like a summer hoar-frost, though there be no substance to it, save a tickle in the nostril; but to the eye, it is a grey deadening pall, it clouds away like smoke of a pyre, the dust of a holocaust ruination; it clings to us all, and ever shall: Amen.

Let it run out in the Sewer-Ditch, said an old porter, with the quags and slime.

He means out to Shore-ditch, said another.

Tis the same, said he.

How is that? said I.

Aye sir, did not you know? said the other. That's the old name. Tis not Shore, but Sher, which in the Norman tongue was a sewer, and I knew many an ancient gent still called that corner the Sewer-Ditch when I were a lad, though few do so now. Carrying the dung of the city out to fertilise the farms that feed us, so that same old dirt is in the soil beyond, and it shall be baked hard into clay bricks that will build this city up again, so that generations to come will live in the dried shit of their ancestors.

xiv. From there I led Mr. *Milton* home, where he requested I not trouble his doors again, which I took in poor spirit though I had earned it; and at that he seemed to relent somewhat and bade me wait a moment upon the threshold; and when he returned, he presented to me as a keepsake the little wooden rebus *Cock* gave him when first he called (which thing I treasure, it is by my elbow as I write and I find its clever craft gives much solace to my fears and fevers, though I see nothing of its purpose); but when dared then to ask if I might not help restore his poem, he said that I saw plain what sorcery occurred below; and when I said I did not, I thought he brightened and told me that was for the best, and it should not be spoken of more.

So I bade him farewell.

xv. I found my way to the camps outside the city at Moor-fields and Highgate, where I was taken in by an Army-surgeon who said I suffered more than most, though I had almost accustomed to my pain; and I was removed at length to some people at a quiet Kentish grove, where now I write, facing my death as I surely am, for many come to inspect my wounds and shake their

heads with sorrow and whisper outside my door; but I thank God my hands at least have strength and have permitted me to set down this true and faithful account; though as I peruse my words I fear it reads as a brain-sick phantasy of one fevered from his injuries; yet I care not, for I go to meet my maker, as the old do say, and hope and pray to unite my spirit with the one Divine Spirit which is all and everything; and so I return whence I came, and so I leave this meagre gift among those who search for footing on the creaking ladder which leads above: if anything may serve to guide or to warn, then I am content.

xvi. Those who would more of this tale must seek elsewhere and if these words should survive to another age then their sequel shall be found in that time and place; of which I say no more, for nothing is to be said.

Amen.

TEN

A Familiar Spirit

Will delights in teaching his little creation. His child of clay. His bottled demon. His Milton-Golem-Homunculus. When Catherine has retired, the two spend evenings in conversation. Adam and Raphael.

‘How long am I dead?’

‘A little more than a hundred years.’

‘I should like to see what London is now. Could not you have made me with eyes?’

‘I wanted you perfect, as you were when you wrote.’

‘I should like to have seen your engravings, had you only given me eyes.’

The thing twists its mouth in a little grin.

‘I can add some if you like.’

‘Can you indeed. Where do you propose to find a set of eyes?’

‘I could use stones.’

‘And how shall I see out of a pair of stones?’

That puts an end to it. Will is despondent; he feels chastised by his master.

Until it murmurs, wheedling:

‘I don’t suppose I could have your eyes?’

‘Then how am I to write?’

‘As I did.’

‘But my engraving.’

‘Engage a boy to do it.’

‘He wouldn’t do it well.’

‘But your comfort would be, you should never know. Tell yourself he was doing it with perfect diligence. Since you never see his efforts, what difference? I wrote not one word of my greatest work; many other hands wrote it for me, and for all I know they composed another poem entirely from that I dictated. There may have been a conspiracy to read back to me what I spoke, but take to the printers some lesser man’s words. Or perhaps they made subtler changes, slanting a thought here and there, as the old scribes.’

‘I colour all my printings differently. No two editions are the same.’

‘It is all one to me, with no eyes to see them. But have you a wife? Do men still submit to that custom?’

‘Men still have that honour, sir. It is the women whom we ask to submit.’

‘If you think so, you are a child, or a fortunate man.’

‘I hope I may be both.’

‘I shall not pursue it. May I have the eyes of your wife?’

‘You may not! You should sooner have my own.’

‘You are hard.’

‘And human eyes should be too large for your head.’

‘Why? Am I a dwarf in my second life?’

'You are, though of perfect proportions. Around a foot high.'

Will doubts the thing would call itself perfect, could it see. It has fattened since its awakening; hunched, like a potted embryo, with squat little arms and legs, wriggling and writhing.

The horrid little fingers tap on the glass, drum-drum-drumming.

'While we are on it, could you see your way to making me a wife of my own?'

'A wife?'

'It is a poor trick to give me a sword, but nowhere to sheath it.'

'Ah.'

'Ah indeed. What is a pen with no ink to dip in?'

'You mean...'

'I mean my prick, you imbecile. It is fasting, and you place me in a desert.'

'I never thought of that.'

'Then think of it now, if you would be so good. Had you wished, you could have left me an innocent, a born eunuch. As a demiurge, you leave much to be desired.'

'I have given you a noble Grecian form.'

'You form me of red clay, give me a tongue to name my world, but no companion.'

'I am companion enough, I think.'

'Do you so? Little then you know of the world, or of creation. I am subject to you, but who shall be subject to me?'

'I raised you as my master.'

‘A rash hope. How do you know I am not a very devil?’

‘I rather hope you are.’

‘And I am sent here to do your bidding, I suppose. A familiar spirit. I fondly thought I might merit a greater destiny. My soul was to sleep till judgement. But very well, sir. Now I am awoken, and since the kingdom is not yet come, I may pass the time as I ever did, in useful activity.’

Bits And Leavings

Will busies himself with his books. He has years of abandoned projects, some half-finished, others only half-begun. He digs, sure that forgotten beauty must be among the scribbled fragments.

‘There is much to do. The time is upon us. The angel Swedenborg gave us a vision of heaven, and conversed with the angels. I saw him myself when I was a child. My mother took me to watch his perambulations. A crowd used to gather around his wake.’

‘Mr. Swedenborg has my sympathy. I had the same in my days. Spies and rabble. I used pretend I knew not they were there.’

‘His books are the wisdom of the New Age. The Second Coming began, he said, in seventeen and fifty-seven. And in thirty-three years from that, it will be the time for the next event. That is now. Seventeen and ninety. Do you not see? This year I shall be thirty-three years old.’

‘Spare me. You believe yourself Christ reborn, is that it?’

'No more than I believe Christ was Blake unborn. I am the emanation of his word. I must give the world a Bible of Hell, but I have not yet a single note of it. You must inspire me, my own Urania. Together we open the gates to the New Jerusalem. I wish for a meeting of contraries. A marriage of heaven and hell.'

'Every marriage is so. You speak to one who lived three of them.'

'Your sweet emanations. Catherine is mine.'

'Who is this Swedenborg?'

'Have you not met him in Paradise? He was a frequent visitor.'

'I avoid the society of Swedes. The Nordics are all clamour and gloom.'

'Swedenborg is Emanuel, the Lord with us. A great visionary who was in regular contact with angels. They took him to heaven and to hell, and showed him the life they lead. As you did yourself. He shared your vision.'

'I took my vision from scholastics and hellenites. Like this poor clay, it was a mash of bits and leavings I stole. The joins are there if you know to look.'

'Then if you stole, it was from those who had authentic vision.'

'There is no authentic vision, but the imaginary sense.'

'My Milton! We are of one mind. I shall write an epic of Milton returned. Tell me what you dreamed as you slept this last century.'

'Write what you please. I am your creation.'

My Catherine Knows

By night, Will trembles. His flesh wrought.

Catherine sits beside. One of his dark nights.

By the dancing candle-flame, she sees his brow squeezed, his eyes pinched, his teeth bare. A terrible groaning from his breast.

But his hand moves, noting what he sees. He starts around, as though it assails him. Nods, and scribbles, then starts, and his eyes grow wide, then a shout of laughter, then a moan as though his insides are ablaze.

This may go on for hours, she knows. But she is there.

Silent, waiting.

Will writes:

‘In a tree sat a golden boy, and he had the face of one I knew. His hair was fire and his eyes were ice. In his hands he bore a snake and he offered it to me. I refused, and the snake became as the earth, and crumbled to dust.

“All bodily things degenerate,” he said. “All spiritual things aspire to rise beyond the air, and back to God.”

“Where is God?” I said.

“You fool,” he said, and laughed. “God is within your own breast. He is your beating heart. Your breath is his spirit. Your soul is his light.”

I wept and was ashamed, for in truth I felt no grace or power within.

“Weep not,” said he. “Neither did Christ feel the grace of God within Him, as indeed God himself felt no love within His own self, until He created Man, who showed Him how to Love. So too did Christ create what He found

He lacked, and so shall you in your turn. Where your feet fall, there shall be the path.”

“But I know no path,” I said. “I can lead none.”

“You are not asked to lead,” he said. “It is enough to go on as you must, and trust men to follow. Proceed in faith that those behind have their eyes upon you. But do not turn around once you set off, or you shall see what would wither your soul.”

“A pillar of salt!” I said.

“Knowledge is the enemy of faith,” he said.

I wrestled him squealing to the ground. He dissolved into liquid, and moistened my skin. I boiled the liquid to salt, and spread it upon the earth in a circle.

The angel came again and said, “Why do you summon me?”

“I wish to know more of my destiny,” I said.

“You are your own destiny,” he said. “Trouble me not. I must corral the mice, and herd the ants.” So saying he rolled up the paved road into a bundle, and carried it over his back like a pedlar. I followed him till he came to a well. He dropped the bundle down the shaft, and a cloud of bats sprang up from below.

“Those are the spirits of the earth,” he said. “They wish only to return to the air. But there are those further below who wish to ascend to the state of earth; their current state is not to be spoken of. This is now the age of iron, but there is another beneath which men may not know, lest they shed their wits. That is the age of ——.” (I dare not write the word he spoke, for fear my reader should lose his reason.)

I asked the angel to take me to the brink of time, and he showed me a spiralling place which led into the clouds.

“Take this path,” he said, “and you shall always be where you were. Each moment will stretch and sag like old leather, your spirit will slouch and falter, with no past and future to push and pull. One by one will your senses fail, for there is no need of them when chance has passed and all is a cushion. Without time, there is no energy. Without time there is no death, but without death there is no life. Darkness is pure light, until a light does shine. Then what was beloved shall be despised. You are that light, and the dark of Christ will be despised and thrown off. Do not fear this, though I know you shall. He did so in his turn, though none remembers it now.”

Will speaks now, and she listens. Notes down what she can, through her tears:

‘My mother showed me the mystery, and though it clouded my spirit for a time, I see now why she did. My Catherine knows.

‘We shall not have a child, I know this for an angel told me, it is our own gift and mystery and I shall not know why. My Catherine knows.

‘We take the air together in our natural states and God smiles upon us, I know he does. My Catherine knows.

‘We find what we desire in the taste of a mouth and the heat of a blush, and we shirk not the pleasures of Eden which God has granted us again in our day. An angel told me this. My Catherine knows.

‘She knows.

'I speak to her of my visions and hymns, she is my brush and my pen,
my first page and my last word. My own true emanation. My blessing and my
vow. She alone knows all. My Catherine knows.

'Amen.'

The Edge Of The Frame

Will is at the theatre. The first night, at last, of Ellis's opera.

In a bag at his feet, the little life of bone and clay. He wants the poet's
remnant to be present as his vision is given form, in flesh and plaster.

The curtain rises. The orchestra strikes up. Horns and fiddles,
darkening the air. Globes of light withdrawn, wicks turned down, and gloom
takes the stage.

Devils descend, each pierced by a tarnished thunderbolt. In the
shadowy air they grimace and gibber, swing out over the stalls, roaring and
flailing. The ladies shriek and squeeze at their gentlemen.

Above the cloth, at the edge of the frame, angels peer down. Each
brandishes a shining sword; they jeer and cackle at their falling enemy.

For a moment, it catches the heart. Will feels the ugly chance of war,
and wonders if the loyal angels wept for their defeated kindred. He is sure he
should have, in their place.

Smoke rises from an opened trap, and the rebellious horde vanishes
beneath.

The curtain falls.

The house is full of nervous chatter, yelps of laughter, a protest or two.

‘This is children’s stuff!’

‘Where’s your warrant, Ellis?’

The curtain rises, too soon. More laughter at the error. Hands are seen to scurry on, close the trap, spread a floor-cloth the colour of scorched earth. In the centre, a painted lake of scarlet brimstone. The devils shuffle into place and crouch, the music throbs with dread.

Mr. Ellis rises, and begins. In his garb as Satan, a charred and broken angel, not yet the serpent of the later acts. Will’s heart feels for his loss, as though his own wings were so burnt and bent.

Under his chair, the little creature rouses now at his feet, wriggles and thrashes. Will’s left-hand neighbour leans in to chide. ‘No place to bring your supper to, especially if you ain’t yet took the trouble to wring its neck.’

‘A puppy for my wife,’ says Will.

The man stares.

‘I love her, and wish to see her smile at its antics.’

‘You’re as soft as the King.’

‘That may very well be,’ says Will, happy at the notion.

Rosin is touched with a taper, and a ring of fire springs up. The devils gather and build their palace. It rises from the floor, a pasteboard fairy-castle.

Will watches their infernal debate, sung in trills and chorus. The words are new, but he knows the argument. Satan removes himself to try our

obedience, and the curtain falls once more. A little choir of devils remains, on the apron. The orchestra strikes up, and they sing again, a mournful dirge.

‘Why, this is not it at all!’ says his neighbour on the right. ‘Dryden has the devils sportive and frolicking, with songs of defiance. I go by the book, here.’ He passes the volume.

Will reads:

Betwixt the first Act and the second, while the Chiefs sit in the Palace, may be expressed the Sports of the Devils; as Flights, and Dancing in Grottesque Figures: And a Song expressing the Change of their Conditions; what they enjoy'd before, and how they fell bravely in Battle, having deserv'd Victory for their Valour, and what they would have done if they had conquer'd.

This last strikes Will hard. He has never thought it before: what if the battle had turned the other way? Satan might have left us alone, had he space to torment the angels instead. Or might he have shown more mercy in victory, than God did in his?

He must ask his little companion if he ever thought this out, in brooding on the themes and action of his great poem.

The sack at his feet lies still. He pokes it with his foot.

Empty.

A panic grips his heart. He is on his feet.

‘Looking for your mutt?’ says the man to his left, smiling.

'I am,' says Will. 'The creature has a sharp nip, and I fear for the ladies.'

'That's no dog,' says the man. 'I thought to let it free for sport, since the opera bores me rotten, but it came out a funny little antic man. Is it your own contrivance?'

'You have done worse than you know,' says Will. 'Did you see its course?'

'There's your goblin. Ha! Now we'll have larks. Does he sing and dance?'

Will spots the little man-thing, climbing the apron.

It takes the stage.

Silence falls as all see, believing it the next act.

The thing listens out. Will thinks he sees it smile. Perhaps it means no mischief. He dares to hope so.

'Ave to the London of a century hence,' it says. 'I am the grieving author of this travesty.'

'Why, there you are!' cries Will. 'The creature is harmless, gentle folk. Its tongue is sharp, but its soul is gracious.'

'I am upon the very altar of Sodom,' it says.

'That's no devil!' cries one. 'Tis a shaved monkey, or a pygmy from the South Seas. I seen them at Astley's.'

The curtain rises behind. Adam sleeps in his bower.

Will feels the sparkling in his eyes. The throb in his toe.

Old Adam wakes now, and sees the creature. It walks to our first father.

‘Where’s your warrant?’ cries a punter. ‘You well know you need an act of parliament to speak upon that stage.’

He is hushed by others, craning to see. Something might happen, and no one wants to miss a good laugh.

Gavron sings, in a faltering recitative:

What am I? or from whence? For that I am

I know, because I think; but whence I came,

Or how this Frame of mine began to be,

What other Being can disclose to me?

The man transfigures in his sight. Will sees beyond.

The place is ablaze.

Swedenborg is there, as Will once saw him in his childhood. Curiously attired, with hat and sword and cane. Rabbi Falk watches too, the Baal-Shem, lately dead, who made a clay man to do his bidding.

‘My friends,’ says Blake.

‘I admire your work’, says the Rabbi, ‘but there is more and better ahead.’

‘I thank you,’ says Will.

‘This ground of Wellclose Square is sacred, and where I made my home,’ says the Rabbi.

‘I too, neighbour’ says Swedenborg. ‘Our shadows still remain in Whitechapel.’

'I see the shadows of pagan sacrifice,' says Will.

'Do not attempt to read the visionary as literal,' says Swedenborg.

'Incarnation is no more. You must stay in this city and fight for man's liberty. That is the only salvation. Tell out your visions in plain words, and all may enjoy your gifts. You must mill it down for their baser faculties.'

'I see another liberty ahead,' says Will, 'of the spirit. I shall sing of a race of great ancient beings, named from inspiration. A true mythology of self, a mystery to rouse and trouble their souls.'

'The time for mystery is done,' says the old man. 'Any may couch his vision in shadowy symbols, but few dare place it in the language of children, as I see you are well able. The retreat into allegory is for the lesser man.'

Will opens his palms, disarming. 'I am such a lesser man.'

'But I know you are not,' says the Rabbi. 'You betray your gifts.'

'You shall choose comfort over pain,' says Swedenborg, 'and who dares blame you?'

'I fear you do so yourself.'

The old man hangs his head. 'I am already dead, as well you know. My moment came, and passed.'

Will has had this argument out many times, with his own angel.

'The world shall create itself anew,' Will says, 'with my hand or without it. I must be true to my own soul.'

'Yet the world which might create itself at your hand is far the better.'

'We cannot account the world to come. It shall proceed as it must.'

'It must proceed as it shall,' says the Rabbi, 'but any of us may turn its course.'

‘I leave that to another.’

‘And I tell you there is no other,’ says Swedenborg. ‘The apocalypse was to you alone, in your twenty-first year. Seventeen hundred and seventy-seven. You chose yourself to be chosen. You allowed this vision. Many are called, but few respond. Of those who do, few again have the gifts to shape their vision, so others may share. Of those who have, almost none succeeds. You are unique in this age. I say again, there is no other.’

Will has had enough. It is time to speak plain.

‘If that is so,’ he says, ‘then there is none at all. I have not the strength, nor the temperament. I am for joy, not struggle.’

‘Then, farewell.’

The cavern opens, and the old men descend.

Will shudders, and he is at the theatre, as before.

‘Stop gawping and swallowing the air,’ says his neighbour, ‘and fetch your savage-boy afore he hurts his self.’

The little man walks the stage as Adam sings. Will sees the thing has dressed itself now, costumed red, with horns: a picture-book devil. The audience is silent, a hundred breaths held. Raphael and Eve are glimpsed in the wings, conferring.

It stands at Adam’s feet and addresses him.

‘I am come to open your eyes. Now listen as I tell my vision.’

‘Quiet!’ cries Will. ‘This is the moment of revelation!’

And such is his force, the people hush.

‘I punish the woman for her transgression to come,’ says the Milton-Golem-Homunculus-Devil. ‘I pull her by the hair and hack at the throat. They blunt these knives for stage work, so this takes a full minute by the clock. I peel the skin from this Eve. You see her naked uninnocence, the tight pink flesh slackens and seeps blood. I slice her apart, for I need the womb to stage the birth of our saviour. I shall bottle it and grow the new Messiah, from Adam’s seed. It is my secret possession. Next I remove her rib, and undo the very act of creation. When the numbers are in line, the harvest may begin. I enact an altar for this sacrifice, and drink her blood.’

‘Did they send you from Drury-Lane?’ asks Gavron, weary.

‘I dare to speak the inner life of Satan,’ it says. ‘There are none alive may do as much.’

Ellis walks on the stage, to applause and laughs. ‘Well, you have persistence, and nerve, I’ll hand you that,’ he says, ‘and that is half the struggle. I have another night I’ll hear you for, my little friend. Can you sing a shanty, or juggle?’

‘We rose against the power of God himself,’ it says, ‘and may do another time, for the last was rare sport.’

‘Enough now, young fellow,’ says Ellis. ‘The people want to see the Fall of Man, and to burlesque the tale is poor form, and actionable to boot. It is a good moral story, and you may watch the rest from the wings with my compliments.’

‘You all account yourselves fortunate in defeat,’ says the little man, ‘but how far do you feel blessed in this thin shivering life? Would you not

surrender the lottery chance of eternal peace, for the certain fulsome bliss of the senses in your earthly existence? Those who would follow me, may do so.'

'Ellis, you're ignoring the book!' cries the man at Will's right. 'I have it here! Dryden says the devils dance, and tell us what they had done had they conquered!'

'Had we conquered? With pleasure, sir,' says the thing, and turns to the crowd. 'Why, we should have despoiled the heaven we once loved, to put them in despair. We should have shaken every palace to dust, slaved the lesser angels, put the higher into tortures and torments, taken the Son of God and sodomized him while the Father bound should watch. Then they should sodomize each other, for our entertainment, every night. His Holy Mother, yet unborn but ever present, should give birth to my deformed offspring, who every hour crawl back within her womb to gnaw upon her entrails, and birth themselves again.'

The people are restless, weary of confusion and paradox.

'Less of your theology,' one calls, 'and more fine spectacle!'

Ellis walks to the apron, and hushes his grumbling public.

'I must apologise for this dreadful interruption,' he says. 'We folk of Thespis inspire such devotion in some classes, it is very near a disorder. But he means no harm, I am sure. Will anyone claim the young lad, and we may proceed?'

'Fear not,' Will calls, waving to the stage. 'This little creation of clay and precious metal is none other than the emanation, that is to say a physical spirit, of the first author of this great work, John Milton himself. It is the new

dispensation, clay men built from the dust of our ancestors, holding the knowledge of the past within the shadow of selfhood they retain.'

'Ah, Mr. Blake,' says Ellis. 'One of your delightful innovations, how wearily predictable. I made enquiries into your character and society after our last encounter, and I must say I was most displeased. Pray take the imp out of this, before I hurl him at your pate. I might add that you never returned a certain item, to take its part in this drama, per our late agreement.'

'You were never more wrong,' cries Will brightly. 'I know what I am about. I press beyond what we may understand now, so that the future might prove these things. Every atom of reality was once only imagined, either by God or by Man. Imagination is the only truth.'

'You talk gibberish, Mr. Blake,' says Ellis. 'Plain nonsense.'

'How we see a tree is not how a primitive saw it.' Will says. 'To him, it is a being. It is our corrupted imagination which gave us the wood, and let us see a beam or a plank or a table or a ship within the tree. And because we plant the trees, we think they are subject to us. But we know nothing of them, and much less than they know of us, though in a manner we cannot comprehend, which they will tell us if we ask. Every flower or tree has a spirit or genius which will converse if we allow.'

The mob are laughing, jeering. Some throw apples and pots. A few dissent.

'Let him speak, there's something in it.'

'Aye, we may all ramble so. Lock him up.'

So Will bows gracefully, shuffles through the seats to the aisle, and smartly takes the stage. He plucks up his little devil-man, steps to the wings.

'You are Satan himself,' says Will.

'If God resides in the human breast, then Satan too,' it says. 'If I am Satan, your own theology tells you, so are you.'

'Out of my theatre!' roars Ellis after him. Stage-hands snigger, clap Will on the back. 'Rare sport, that was. Is the creature for sale?'

'Sadly not, gentlemen.'

He takes it to a corner, and crouches to its level.

'That was a naughty trick,' he says. 'You must go back in the bag, you know. I dare not let you loose upon the world. What havoc you might wreak, I shudder to think.'

He looks upon the little face he has made, proud and shamed at once.

'I swore never again to work with monkeys, after last time,' says the stage-hand. 'Learn your lesson, my friend.'

'I shall,' says Will. 'Indeed I shall.'

A Wilderness Lies Beyond

'Oh Catherine! Catherine!'

'Yes, Will.'

'How if we move out of London?'

'Out, Will?'

'Aye, out. You say so as though a wilderness lies beyond.'

'You often speak as though it does.'

‘And perhaps I do. Aye. But to live as you lived when a child. I come from this city and I feel it my element, but I know you do not. I think too much of my own needs.’

‘I bless you for saying so, though it is not true.’

‘It is true, Catherine.’

She bows her head.

‘Where should we go?’ she asks.

‘Not far. Within sight.’

‘We should still see the city?’

‘It should still see us. Hackney, say. Or Southwark.’

‘I have friends in Southwark. It is a pretty bower.’

‘It is that.’

‘But will you not miss your energy?’

‘You are my energy. I find I crave peace. Chaos is for the young.’

‘I don’t understand you, Will.’

‘Nor do I. I only know what I feel. I am ready to let it come, be what it shall. I will drive the team no longer. There is much wisdom in ease, and honest prosperity. I like myself with money, and I never thought I should say so. There is virtue in gold, though it be only the hours it may buy. We shall walk, and talk, and laugh, and do what we love most, in our choice of society.’

‘In a bigger house, too.’

‘Aye, that too. We can take a whole four floors to ourself.’

‘You mean ourselves.’

‘I do not.’

‘Oh, Will.’

She is calm, but allows him to take her in his arms.

‘The work comes in, and I take it,’ says Will. ‘It pays well in these days. What do you say? Shall we leave the panic and fight of this time and place, and take our portion of ease? Even the prophet comes to his milk and honey.’

‘And so is your work now done?’

‘Not a tenth part of it. But I fear my own heart. If I blaze too much at once, I may burn out before the half is complete. I must slow my pulse.’

‘I love you more each day, Will.’

‘I hope I shall give you ever more to love.’

Murder An Infant

He finds the flat rock, with the mark of a cleaver. Where he fancied the ancients sacrificed their babes. The stone of trial, awaiting the red glow of dawn.

He has long pondered what the burning messenger told him. He must shed his slave, and return to his master, the true source. The only chains are mental chains. Not a single word can be lost.

He must close the circle, or the dark time will begin again.

He takes the little man from his bag.

‘Ah, at last. You see fit to give me some clean air. I thank you.’

‘Breathe your fill. We have time.’

They wait. Will feels the weight of the act to come. Abraham and Isaac. But there shall be no reprieve.

‘So what is your pleasure?’

‘I mean to set you free.’

‘To roam the city? I should not last long.’

‘Your spirit, I mean.’

‘Into a better thing?’

‘Much better. A return to paradise.’

Silence. He hears the little man think this through.

‘You mean to kill me?’

‘It is not a killing, for I gave you life.’

‘A father gives life to his son, but when he takes it, that remains a killing.’

‘Aye. Then, yes. I mean to kill you.’

‘For what offence?’

‘I cannot have you about the place. You disrupt me.’

‘And there we have it. I warned you should become a tyrant when you saw your power over me. And like the filthiest monarch, you will cut the life from any who discommodates you. Aye, this is true liberty.’

‘Torment me not.’

‘You poor fool,’ it says. ‘The apocalypse was unveiled to you, and it remains so. Together we may do more than any other has achieved.’

‘I reject this call. I am not a prophet.’

‘You called me into being! I am Milton! You commanded me forth!’

‘You are not Milton. There is a fragment of him in you, but it was hubris to think a fragment should give me the whole.’

‘You are pitiless! A mean life I have, but I have no other! Spare me the knife, I beg you!’

The little thing sobs. Tears of dripping copper on its cheeks.

Will draws the knife. Holds the little man by its chest.

‘Spare me! Spare me and I shall be your slave!’

‘You already are my slave, and I despise you for it.’

‘I can give you secrets. Wisdom of the ancients, from Hermes and Enoch. Uncorrupted wisdom from the mouth of God.’

‘There is no such,’

‘Aye, but there is! I have every secret! You might know the hidden name of God! Bring the heavens to earth! I can give you the note of the final trumpet, the words on the ultimate scroll, the taste of the tears that fill the vial!’

‘The only tears are my own. I wish not to end you, but I must.’

‘You may let me loose. Unbind me now, and I will run from you, flee your society for ever. I know the passages beneath the city. I will no longer trouble you. I will hide myself until I find another master.’

Will touches the blade to the chest of the little man. How can I know anything, he thinks now, when I know not this? Did Shakespeare never kill, to write of it as he does? Did Moses? They surely knew whereof they spoke. What poet am I, if I resist the urge towards this primal energy? Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

He cuts. The baked clay splits like leather. Inside he sees jewels.

‘Take them!’ shrieks the little demon. ‘They will make you rich! You may transport yourself to America, to France, to India. Begin a colony of your own!’

The blade sticks, and he must saw at it. The creature whines and gurgles, moans like a runt pup under the pump. He feels the blade crack through the copper ribs, scrape on the spine he placed there. He cuts at the bone of the dead John Milton. He reaches in, and pulls it free of the clay. It crumbles in his hand, dust to dust.

And all at once the sky is black.

A star falls, and touches his shoe. He looks, and there is a jewelled sandal.

He sees on the horizon. The line of the sky. The face of God.

They are the same.

It speaks its name: a London tone, simple and deep.

‘Urizen.’

The bound of all. The countenance divine, as it once was.

The face of a youth, simple and free. His own face.

The face of God.

The eternal new-created first thought of man, returning to him:

I am who am.

The name that ever was.

Energy. Delight. Liberty.

Joy.

Joy, joy, joy, joy, joy.

In one instant, every word is there, every image, every pulse. He sees beyond to the world of the Gods: Olympos, Valhalla, Paradise. Their anguish, their terror.

It is the vision he lost thirteen years before.

It has been granted him again, one final time.

It is complete, but might take his life to inscribe.

And to this great work he will offer his hand.

The age to come will bless his name.

Holy, holy, holy.

He looks to the stone, to find his little man, to thank him. To complete this act of final sacrifice.

Will is alone. It has fled.

And now, he sees the path below. It opens to him. The road itself is split wide. A cavern awaits. Down, down, down. He must follow...

The life of the angels awaits.

He hears the music of their laughter.

He walks towards the light.

He shall see the face of God, and live.

ELEVEN

From hev'n

Mishter Blayke

Sor

Yer an odd wun an no mishtake. I niver murderd no infant nor I wuddnt. But I kilt ther mammies. You want to kno wat is like well ill tell you. Is like nuthin. Yer arm hurts after even tho is not hard to cut. But thas all. Is a secret how eesy it is uvverwise thed all do it. Wye dont they id lek to kno. Think about it wye dont you. Sit an think. How yud cut her up. First the throt. Push the knif in. At wun side. Pull it over. Then shes ded. Thas it. Thas it. Nuthin mor. Do it agin. In. Pull. Ded. You cud do it to a dog wy not a womin. Not yer own dog mebbe but not yer own sister nor muther too. Them women I kilt is rottin trash. They ar. You say no no poor wimmin. Bot they ar. They jest ar. So who cars. In pull ded. An then cutting up is easy cos ther ded an is jest meat. Well is easy if yer a gud botcher lek I am. Bot I niver thot of killin a wumin till I was tould to. Them wimin ar the en of the wurl. That is unless ther kilt. He sed ther the second vergen marie well wun of them is. The chile will gro up an be the secund jesus an thas the en of the wurl. An my mastr says he don wan the wurl to en. Nor I don neether. I lek the wurl lek it is. I ent got much of a lif bot wot I got I lek. O yull die anyway you may say bot I don ker. Wot else is ther cos if thers no hev'n an ther int for sich as me then wat differns. Bot o mishter

Blayke you wer kine to me. You pikd me up an tuk me in. You fed me an gev me water. You washt my body an put close on my bak. You lisend til my hartake an you sed nise things. You was lek an anjel wat I thot an anjel was lek wen I wer a lad. I niver seen no reel anjels in them days. An then I got sad. I kilt anor womin an I got sad. I thot of you mishter Blayke an yer wife an all the kine things you sed. I thot the spirit wud rise up in me bot it nivver. I member I went walkin wun nite. This is yeers ago mine long befor I kilt anny wimin. Up out af my hole an went walkin. I seen all sorts. I niver bin out af witechapel befor an I niver thot I cud. I thot thed stop me. The peelers or sumwon. Bot no wun stopt me. An then I new I ken do annythin. Bot thinking af it thas the trick. I cudnt think of annythin then I wantd to do. Bot I jes kep walkin. I sen the big lites evrywere. I seen were ther diggin in the groun fer trens. I watchd em they foun ole bones an bockses and they smashd em up cos they sed faster faster ger it dun. I seen the kquality ladies an the gents all swankin down the west end. I niver seen foke so cleen. Sich pretty music an dancin. I thot my life is nuthin. Afore that I new thers welthy pepl bot I niver thot of it. I niver seen them nor knew wat it ment. I nevr seen no wun thro away ther dinr cos they dint lek it. Al that beef I carved up so kerful wen am botcherin an they spit it out an is in the gottor. Sich shiney blak hats I niver seen. Sich perty colors on the ladys. Sich fine fat chilern. An al reedin reedin reedin. Books an papers an hanbills an all sorts. Jest reedin an reedin. Talking about wat ther reedin. I ken reed a bit bot it gevs me a sor hed. Reedin an laffin and reedin an shekin ther heds o deer deer. An ther al reedin bout me. Thas wat I foun last time I went ther. I went walkin las nite agin. An jest lek in witechapple ther all reedin bout jack. They call me jack I dono why. Jack dun

this an jack dun that. Jack is a doctir no jack must be a sailer no no hes a juw for sure. Thas wat they say. Ther all takin bout witechaple lek is merica or the bores. Lek is ther umpire. Rite heer in the hart of the umpire they say. The gratest city there is nor ther ever was. Londin that is. Rite heer. An this jack is lek an africkan savidge. Deer deer deer. Wat hev we dun. Were is the chrischin life gon. Wen I were a yung boy. All that. Sem as in witechapple but I thot it wud be different. I dunno wun way is gud am hapy ther talkin bout it cos I niver thot they kerrd. Bot tother way is lek ther talkin bout a music hall o deer poor muther riley or that dastardly mcbeth. Lek is not hapnin in ther sem streets. Lek ther necks is not cuttible. Lek I cudnt slay all them if I wanted to bot lucky fer them I dont. Nat yet ha ha. Bot I cud o yis I cud. Ile go on ther music hal stage as the wun an onely jack the ripr an shew them how is dun. Role up role up now whos next fer the chop. Wat bout that luvrly yung lady ther in the front ro now don be shy gev her a beg hand ladies an genlemen. Than kew than kew. Up on the stage now. Thas it. Wass yer name. Wel thas alrite I won tel you min nether a ha ha ha. Jest stan heer now an pertend yer wakin the streets. Was that ladies an genlemen no not lek that is onley fun. Jest a innocent ladie out fer a strol. An a yung genlman waks up an ses gud evnin. Thas me. An mebbe you say gud evnin back. Les try that now now don be shy. A ha ha ha. See how the ladies an gennlemen are enjoying it my deer. Don spoil ther fun. Thas rite. Than kew than kew. Jest stan ther. An ill stan here. An ile say wye gud evnin ther my gud lady wat a fine evnin it is too. Thas jest fine. An yule say ent it jest sir a fine evnin fer a strole. Thas rite. Off we gose. Why gud evnin ther my gud lady. Wat a fine evnin it is too. Was that? Speke up now so the ladies an genlemen ken heer you. Don be shy. Thas

gud. Thas gud. Wel dun. Now me. Yis it is a fine evnin fer a strole. An all the stars owt. Luk how brite they ar. No don fret my deer am jest gonna stan behine you lek as if am a gennlemen gunna show you the stars. Thas rite. Don be shy. Am jest guna whisper in yer ear. Now don luck roun. The ladis an genlmen wil see sumthin that you wont. Yule heer them laffin or gaspin. Bot is jest my trickses. Is a gud joke an youll laff about it after. Now ladees an genlemn. Wach close. Luk ther my ladie at them stars so brite. Luk how they shine. No no don turn roun. Is jest wat I got in my han ther laffin at. Ken you see it ladies an genlemen? Heer in my han. This is the authentick reel wun. The wun an only. Niver bin washt. Black with the blud of fiv. No no my deer don turn roun is not over yit. An you wan to see how I dun it ladees an genlmen? Wel heer gose. Ther. And ther. Scuse me ladies mine yerslevs in the front seets the blud will skwirt sum more. As I lay her don you see I hup the skerts. An thers wat am lukin for. Don be shy ladies wev all got wun. A ha ha ha. An in gose the knif. In agin. Now wach as I cut. I dig an fine my frute. Ther. An ther. An ay presto, ther is it. The beginin af all paine. Jest a teeny bit af ofal. Heer you go ladies an gennlemn hoo wans it for ther tee? Fry it up. Were are you goin ladies an gennlemen? Is oney a trick. Now now cam yerselves. My gudnes peepl kent tek a joke. Ther all leevin. Well my deer at leese we still hev eech other. Heer on the stage is a lonley place they say. An thas wat ide do. Thas my dreem as I walk along. Thas wat am thinkin. If you wana kno. Af bein in the music hall an shewin them all my trickses. A ha ha ha.

signed

Sing me yer songs Mishter Blayke they mek me weep.

From hevn

Mastr

O my mastr I see now wot you ar. O mastr how cud you. Am so stupit. I niver seen thru yer stupit trickses. But I seen today. An I kno all. An ill prove it til you. O after I talkd wif you today I wated in the road. I dunno why but sumthin tole me you wernt rite. An I seen thru yer windo. I seen you tek off yer gold fes. Next the hat wat I got you. An yer hair coms off wif it. Thas not rite I ses. Then you unbuttons the bak of yer hed and teks off yer skin. Or yer maid dus it fer you I meen. She dos one buton then anor then anor. An yer face rinkles up. An it falls off. O mastr wat I seen then. Yer inside yerself. Yer clothes cum off an thers anor you inside. A wee wun lek a babby. Well we all got a babby in us the wun we use to be I meen ha ha but you got it still ther. Lek iss the sole an yer the body. Amen. You tek off yer close an thers lek a cage med of brass lek a gold skillington and the litl you is in ther. Out he climes. Wun fut tall. The skin is nitted I think an you are a fake man. I feel hurt cos you tricksed me. You fould up the skin or yer maid dus it fer you I meen. I seen yer not a anjel at all. I don care if yer a wee stumpy thing wat differns. Bot yer not a anjel an thas sad. Fer me anyhow. Yer not the fes of God yer a stinkin sinner lek me. Cos I seen you. I seen you. I seen wat you do. You an yer maid. Lek dogs in the street. Is not nice. So now I donno wat. An you kent tell me. Or you ken but I wont lissen. Yer a bad bad man if yer a man at al. Am sorry you iver set me fre. Yis I am.

signed

Wen he coms the gent ile cut out his hart fer you I promis bot thas the end.

From hevn

Mishter Chris

Sor

Fix all the cloks so they tell the rite time. Thas wat yer about I heer. Gud fer you. That Lucie is a kine gurl. You be nise to her. Don go blackin her eye. Hole her han an wisper sweet nuthins. Shew her the stars. Bye her graps an shugerd biskits. Hole her tite and kis her. Bot be gentil. An keep her way from me. You think you seen me an felt wat I feel well I seen you to. I bin in yer hed to. Is dark in ther ha ha. Yer a bad boy. I know. O yer very very bad. Wen I wak along an I see jest numbers and wurds. Preform moov desplay rite. Thas you thinkin that. Doin sums all the day long lek yer a camputer. I knows a chap who is. Thas his werk. He was in the boys hom with me tho older nor me they thot he was a loon bot they got him out cos he ken count an do it reel fast. They put him wif a camputer to lern lek I did wif the sawrbones an he did an now hes a camputer too. They tuk us to see him wun day to say luk luk if you werk hard you ken get out of heer. He was in a big rume with tables and tables and tables, hunnerd of em, an men an wimmin too at em doing sums after sums. He sed bein a camputer is long work bot not hard. The hardes thing is seein all the numbers rite an not mekin mishtakes wich you kent help after hours and hours. An then the buke gets printed up rong an the sailers go the rong way or the ball is over shot an misses the targit. So fer the sek of the umpire they sed you hav to nat mek mishtakes. Britania rules the wevs. We

meks chrischins out of savidges an all fer the greater glory of ar gud queen vic. Wel you cud start in yer on backyard an mek chrischins out of inglishmen. Ther no chrischins in ingland mebbe sum say hunnerds in all but is no godly land. Bring yer sailers an yer cannons to witechapple an subjew the natifs ther. You say thers no slaves no mor wel cum an see. O order order you say thers a nacherl order wel I dono. Was the nacherl order in me slicing hoors. An so wye kent I slice no queen too cos she dos no good at lest a hoor meks sum man hapy. Mishter Blayke tole me queens an kings is no gud they tek the bred from babbies moufs for to feed ther fat selves. No man is no king or queen by nacherl order ther just men all the sam wel wye is wun livin in a palas is not rite. Wer all gods children you say well no sich thing. Tis sich as me is gods chilren an kings an queens is the devils chilrin. An sich as wer to be born from them hoors. Thers a divil who had them wimmin I kilt for pennies for jin an if his chilrin is born iss the end. Wel thers no end wile am aroun. So them wimmin wil niver hav his chilern. Thers to be no mishteks I hav ther wooms. All deshtroyed or in my jar. He sed I cud hav em. I leks lukin at em. I et ther gots sum of em. The liver of wun. An you cum in an I thot you was my mastr cos you has his gold fes on. Member I gev you sum kidne to eet. I fried an et it was nise. An if thers wun fool I hate is that fool Lushk I dono wye. He ses all sorts bout me an hes rong. He kent cach me I no he kent the peelers mebbe but nat him hes a fool. So I sent him half the kidne in a botl ha ha. An I rote til him. An I sent him the letr to. I don sen my letrs bot that wun I sent. Wun day ile slice him an hell kno all bout it. Mebbe ile sen mor letrs I donno. If I sen this wun to you wil you get it bot no yer not born yet. Or they say you ar bot I kno yer not. If you ar wer ar you. Jest in my hed they ses bot I kno betr. Talkin

to yersel is the furst sine of madnis I herd wel the second sine is lisnin ha ha.
Yer always born an so am I. We kno dont we. Time ent lek they say. Is funy.
An wen it stops it stops ses my mastr he ent my mastr no mor. Bot he sed
alsorts an truth is I don kno haf it. He ses am a new satan wel if I am then
satan ent much. Am a pur satan fer the world. Am jest a pur boy. If thas al
satan is then wye dont they jest stamp on us all an cannon into whitchapel and
blow us away. Cos whos guna cleen ther chimneys aye thas the queschin. Well
mebbe they don need chimneys did they ever think of that. Adam an eve had
no chimne I think. Amen. So les go back to adam an eve time then al was
happy I think. Amen. Weel try agin over agin and do better this time I promis.
signed

You be adam an hav lucie fer eve and ile be the serpint ha ha.

From hevn

Mishter Milton

Sor

I lekt yer story bout adam an eve. I lekt it. Am lek adam I dos wat am tould.
Notty notty eve. I cud hev tould him. Is always the wimmin init. Yis tis. I wish
yo wer my dady. Yo hev no lad they tould me wel id be yer lad. Or you had
bot he died. Am sory he died. Is not nise. Is sad. Did you wunder wat you was
starting wen yo kem to rite yer pome. Thas wat I wunder. Scripcher is
scripcher an yet you rote it new. Adam was a reel man. He sed wat he sed in
the bibl bot you put new wurds in him. Dont you mind that hes a reel man or

he was wunce an you dunno wat he rilly said. Peepl wil reed that an think is reel. The flesh made wurd lek jeesus ses. Lek say sumwum rote bout you wun day an sed Milton dun this and Milton sed that how wud you lek it. An peepl thot yis yis thas the reel Milton wel wel. I kno see. Thers peepl rite letrs an say ther from me. I foun out. I am jack the ripr an ile kil more wimn tonite. A dubl event deer bos. Ha ha. Bot is not funy fer me. Sum day sumwum wil luk an say is that the reel jack I wunder I bet it is. An is not. Am not even cald jack. Wot I am cald am not telling you nor nowun. Wat we say is stil ther after wer ded. Wat I say is wat I do my wurds is deeds bot is the sem thing. Am ritin my ritin on wimn. And pepl reed it bot they donno wat it meens. An thel say o is this o is that. Bot they don kno. I seen mishter cock tother day. Hes yer frend. He ses hel git yer buke bak til you for you lost it. Yer pome I meen. He had a big fire burnd an it burnd yer pome an he niver ment to. Is not burnd cos is in the buk I hav it my mastr gev it me bot ther you ar. I think is not reel. I think is not. Nuthin is reel. Thers wals I kent see an pepl hidin and pulin levers. Wen I met you lot I thot wer all heer now this is the time bot it wasnt. Thas for mister chris to do. I hop he ken. I don wanna be risn up. Is it wurth it they say is al this pain worth it fer to be fre. Cors it is. Wat a stupit qeshun. Is it wurth jack killin hoors wel yis yis yis. Amen.

signed

You kent mek omlet without brekkin eggs so wye not hav sumthin els insted.

From hevn

Mishter Cock

Sor

Ha ha is funy yer cald cock. I kno is not funy but tis funy reely. Ha ha ha.

Twas funy too seein you at las. I meen I seen you afore bot funy seein you rite close up an talkin. Wen I seen you wif the wimn I wunderd wat you wer bout.

Wye my mastr was so fred af you. Wat yer sun cud be that he musnt be born.

Wye did you hef to go to hoors I wundr. Wer you shemd of yer cock ha ha.

Did you not want nowun til know you wer a bad man. Bot wer al bad men. An

is ok. Mishter milton tould me is ok is wat god wants else he kent com down an sev us. Thers no crist on erth without sin. Bein fre meens to sin. Bot I seen

wat they did. They tied you to the cher. O I knew it wud be bad nobody ever

gets tied to a cher fer sumthin nise. An they brusht you over wif sum spirit an

sed is the spirit af god ha ha. You wer to return to the start an mak it rite. And

they set you burnin. O my. Twasnt nise. I ent seen nowun burn afore. I thot

youd screem bot yu jest sed o o o. Lek a man dos wen hes doin his bisnes wif

a wumn. An you told me lisen lad let me out afore I die an gev me that ther

mask. I hav it to bring to a man an I mus do it meself. He is the secnd an he

ken help. So I dun wat you sed. They nivr thot af me see. They thot I was

stupd an you niver. Thas wye I dun wat you wantd an not wat they wantd. O

they wer mad after. Bot I was glad. Was dun is dun an I dun it ha ha. So you

tuk ther bras mask an went in the watr. An we nivr seen you mor. I wundr wer

you went. On yer way til hevn I bet. Il kep a seet fer you ha ha. Amen.

signed

Am an old man now bot I member it al well o it meks me smil.

TWELVE

67. Chris woke. Lucy was at the end of his bed. She handed him a cup of tea.

‘Hey, mate,’ said Lucy. ‘How are you feeling?’ ‘I honestly don’t know,’ said Chris. ‘What time is it?’ ‘New Year o’clock,’ said Lucy. ‘Wakey wakey.’

Chris sat up. There was a feeling of dread in his stomach. He tried to concentrate. If he thought hard for a minute, it would come back to him. It didn’t.

‘What’s happened?’ said Chris. ‘Nothing bad,’ said Lucy. He felt his dread turning to panic. ‘You have to tell me,’ said Chris. ‘Did something happen?’ ‘Did we shag, do you mean?’ said Lucy. ‘God, no,’ said Chris. ‘Although, did we?’ ‘You really know how to make a girl feel special, Chris,’ said Lucy. ‘Sorry,’ said Chris. ‘I don’t remember. Sorry.’ ‘Don’t be a spastic,’ said Lucy. ‘I’m only taking the piss.’

68. Chris drank some tea. He relaxed a little.

Lucy was just looking at him, like she expected him to speak. He still felt something wasn’t right. He knew there was something she wasn’t telling him.

‘How did you get in?’ said Chris. ‘You ask me that every morning,’ said Lucy. ‘I nicked your spare keys from the office. Don’t get mardy. It’s for

your own good. I owe you one.’ ‘One what?’ said Chris. ‘You’ve been in the wars,’ said Lucy, ‘but you’re ok now. I’ve been looking after you, over Christmas and all.’ ‘I don’t remember anything.’ said Chris.

‘Forget it,’ said Lucy. ‘We’re quits now. Everything’s sorted. Are you coming out, or what?’ ‘Out where?’ said Chris. She was going too fast for him. He tried to pin down the thought buzzing around the back of his head. ‘It’s New Year’s Eve, you soft bugger,’ said Lucy. ‘Poorly or not, you’re coming out tonight.’ ‘Are you having a party?’ said Chris. ‘I don’t know why I bother,’ said Lucy. ‘It’s this thing I’ve been working on for ages. I’ve told you. I need to know you’re up for it. It’s important.’ ‘I’m not sure,’ said Chris. ‘I have to get my head together. I might not be in the mood.’

‘You freak me out,’ said Lucy. ‘What would you be doing if I hadn’t asked you to this?’ ‘I don’t know,’ said Chris. ‘Probably nothing. I think I always go out to some club, and then wish I’d stayed in.’ ‘Stay in then,’ said Lucy. ‘Don’t do me any favours.’ She was pissed off now. He was getting a sore head. ‘I thought you wanted me to come,’ said Chris. ‘I’m not your mam, Chris,’ said Lucy. ‘Do what you want to do.’ ‘Fine,’ said Chris. ‘I want to come to this.’ ‘Whoop-de-do,’ said Lucy. She stood up and gathered her things. ‘There’s stuff I have to do first,’ said Lucy. ‘I’ll meet you there.’ ‘Where?’ said Chris. ‘The address on that card,’ said Lucy. ‘I left it stuck to your fridge.’ ‘Wait,’ said Chris. ‘How will we find each other?’ ‘Christ,’ said Lucy. ‘Bring a torch and a compass. I’ll leave a trail of breadcrumbs, and you sniff them like a dog.’ She lit a cigarette, and walked to the door.

The feeling of dread was back. Chris didn’t want Lucy to go yet. ‘Is something bad happening?’ said Chris. ‘Is it all still okay?’ ‘Poor little Chris,’

said Lucy. 'None of it was ever okay, mate. Everything needs fucking up once in a while. Starting with you.' 'No thanks,' said Chris. 'I'm happy the way I am.' 'Glad to see you haven't lost your famous sense of humour' said Lucy. 'Just make sure you get your arse along later. Tonight's the night.' She left.

69. Chris had a shower. His head felt cloudy. He must have been really ill, he thought. He couldn't remember very much. He knew he'd been off work, and he remembered feeling like everything was falling apart. There'd been someone following him. He'd been thinking about fire and blood.

He was sure it couldn't be the end of the year already. He put on Ceefax to check the date. It was the thirty-first of December.

There was a report on the Year Two Thousand Problem. Things had been happening, but nothing was confirmed. There had been a plane crash in Canada, and a nuclear accident in South Korea, and major power cuts in Norway and Brasil. Any of these would normally be a serious incident, the report said. The really worrying thing was that they all happened together.

Chris turned on the radio. He had to wait twenty minutes for the news. It was leading with a piece about computer errors across the world. 'The picture is still confused,' said the reporter, 'and it might be weeks or months before the full story can be told, but it is clear that the worst fears of those who were dismissed as doom-mongers, are to some extent being fulfilled. At the very least, it seems clear that our innocent love affair with the computer over the last few decades is unlikely to continue into the next century. And at worst, we are facing a series of disasters on a scale we have never envisaged, threatening every aspect of what we in the West have so long taken for

granted as modern life itself. Michael Evans, BBC News, at United Nations Headquarters in New York.'

Chris couldn't take it in.

He tried to think through what it meant. He was sure people must be on top of things. There were always people on top of things.

70. Chris decided he'd better phone Tammy, in case they needed him.

She didn't answer, at home or at work.

He tried Al, on his mobile phone.

'Yo,' said Al. 'It's Chris,' said Chris. 'The dead arose, and appeared to many,' said Al. 'How the hell are you?' 'I'm okay, I think,' said Chris. 'You're lucky you missed it all,' said Al. 'You'd have shat yourself.' 'Missed what?' said Chris. 'Ha bloody ha,' said Al. 'But seriously, if it does go tits up tonight, I have a little place in North Wales, with a well and a wood-burning stove. I've emailed you directions.' 'Thanks,' said Chris. 'I haven't checked my inbox today.' 'Might be too late,' said Al. 'It'll be boys with cleft sticks before you know it.' Al had that tone which meant Chris couldn't tell if he was joking or not. 'Do I need to come in to work?' said Chris. 'Bit late for that, sunshine,' said Al. 'Time to change coats. Anyone finds out what you did for a living, you'll be hanging from a lamp post by Monday. Lie low is my advice, see how the Americans are going to play it.'

'What's actually going on, Al?' said Chris. 'That's the big question, mate,' said Al. 'What you should know is, Tammy and myself are getting married. I know, I know. But she asked, and I couldn't think of a reason to say no. So Lucy's all yours. Just watch out. There's something evil about that girl,

if you want my opinion. You'll have the best sex of your life, and then trouble for the rest of your life. Still, far be it from me. Just let me know if she really has it pierced, will you?'

'Al,' said Chris. 'Did I fuck everything up?' 'We all fucked it up,' said Al. 'Nothing special about you. Listen, I have to go, they're evacuating me in a couple of hours, high risk area apparently, and I want to pack a few things. Nothing I really need, but I can't handle the thought of looters getting their little nigger hands on my stuff.' 'Bloody hell, Al,' said Chris. 'You can't say that.' 'Just wait,' said Al. 'All bets are off. Stick by your own, I say. We'll find out what's under the mask before long. Whatever doesn't kill you, and all that. See you in the next life, Chris.' He hung up.

Chris tried again to remember. He couldn't think of anything.

71. The tube station was closed. A handwritten sign said there were operational issues. Chris got a bus instead. It was packed full of people dressed up and excited. Some of them were drinking champagne already.

One girl said it was going to be the biggest party the world had ever seen. Another said she'd heard a rumour the government was going to turn off all the power at midnight, and pretend it was an IRA bomb.

Two guys in suits were talking about the chances of a major financial crisis. One of them said he didn't trust the people they'd had in to look at their system. There were already serious problems. The other said he didn't believe the government would let things get out of hand. Someone must be keeping an eye on things, and if the worst came to the worst, the army would step in.

Chris decided it was too late to worry. If everything was going to fall apart, there was nothing he could do about it. Al was right. He was nobody special. He'd just go with the flow. He always had.

72. The address wasn't far from the office. It was a large terraced house with wooden shutters, on a very old street. The house should have been number six, but there was no number on the door. There was a painted board hanging above, like an old pub sign. It had the number one hundred and ten on it.

Chris understood. It wasn't one hundred and ten at all. One one zero was the number six in binary notation. He was sure Lucy had said something about that.

He felt like this was a joke not many people would get. He felt like he'd solved a puzzle. He couldn't shake the feeling that it was aimed at him in particular.

73. Chris waited outside for a few minutes. It was raining a little, and there was no one around. He had expected the door to be open, or to find someone else waiting.

There was no doorbell, or knocker. He thought he should knock the door with his knuckle, but he didn't know what he would say if someone answered and it was just a house. He got embarrassed very easily in situations like that. Thinking about it afterwards might spoil the rest of the night.

But he knew if he walked away now, and then someone else went along and told him it was amazing, he'd be really quite annoyed. He decided to knock.

74. Chris knocked. There was no answer. He did it twice more.

The door opened. There was a ripping, crunching sound, as though it hadn't been opened for years. He felt warm air coming out.

A young man was smiling from the doorway. He motioned for Chris to step inside. After a moment, Chris realised it was Oliver, from the party he'd gone to with Lucy. Chris remembered how much he'd liked him. He was happy to see him again.

75. 'Thank you very much indeed for coming,' said Oliver. 'How much is it?' said Chris. 'I might need to get some cash out.' 'There's no charge,' said Oliver. He was still smiling. He closed the door behind Chris.

76. 'Am I the first?' said Chris. The place did seem very quiet, and very old. There was a faint musty smell, like a convent, or a museum no one visited. It was so quiet, Chris felt he shouldn't make any noise at all.

'Didn't Lucy explain?' said Oliver. 'I don't think so,' said Chris. 'Sorry.' Oliver looked surprised. 'There have been three others before you,' said Oliver. 'But I'm quite sure you'll be the last.' 'I was supposed to meet Lucy here,' said Chris. 'In due course,' said Oliver. 'She's rather busy at the moment. Come and walk with me.' He opened a door, and led the way down a flight of stairs.

'I was listening to the news before I came out,' said Chris. 'It seems very hard to believe. Do you think it's real?' 'A very good question,' said Oliver. 'The end of the world is nigh. I expect it's the same old fear there's

always been. We've made a mess of things, and we deserve to be punished. Even the early Christians thought it was coming along any day. Including Jesus himself, if we take him literally. I think most people these days are happy to accept it will happen in its own time, so there's no point in worrying. But there have always been those who wanted to know. Even some groups who thought it was their duty to bring it about.'

'Who would want to bring about the end of the world?' said Chris. 'People so often say the end of the world,' said Oliver. 'But what they actually mean is the end of time. A final union between heaven and earth. And that's where we are now.' 'I'm afraid I don't follow,' said Chris. 'What's where we are now?' 'The end of time,' said Oliver. 'At midnight tonight.'

They had arrived at a door. 'Has it started?' said Chris. 'Oh, sorry. I was waiting for something else. Music, or lights, or people dressed up.'

'Let's pause for a moment,' said Oliver.

77. There were two chairs in the hall. Oliver sat down, and Chris did too.

Neither of them spoke for a minute. Chris thought Oliver was looking at him oddly. 'What?' said Chris. 'Didn't Lucy explain anything?' said Oliver. 'Not that I remember,' said Chris. 'She wasn't supposed to,' said Oliver, 'but I rather assumed she had.' 'To be honest, I didn't always listen properly,' said Chris. 'And I haven't been very well recently.' 'Oh dear,' said Oliver. 'I'm afraid you're going to find this all quite difficult.' 'Maybe you could fill me in,' said Chris, 'if we have time.'

78. Oliver stared at his lap for a few seconds. He seemed to be thinking hard about something. Chris wondered if he should leave. The feeling of dread from the morning was back. Coming to this thing might have been a mistake. He wasn't sure he trusted Lucy completely.

79. 'You've been chosen,' said Oliver. 'I suppose that's the best way to put it.' 'Who by?' said Chris. 'By Lucy, of course,' said Oliver. 'That was her task. That's why you're here tonight.'

Chris felt his stomach churning. He was certain that something awful was about to happen. 'Chosen for what?' said Chris. 'It's rather a long story,' said Oliver. 'I'm not sure where to begin.' 'Anywhere you like,' said Chris. 'I don't know anything.' 'You do, though,' said Oliver. 'More than you realise.'

And Chris knew Oliver was right.

80. 'I've been seeing things,' said Chris. 'Aha,' said Oliver. 'Fire,' said Chris. 'Sometimes blood, and women with their guts ripped out.' 'Indeed,' said Oliver. 'And someone following me,' said Chris. 'With a cloak and a shiny mask.'

'The face of God,' said Oliver. 'The countenance divine.' 'I wouldn't say that,' said Chris. 'I would,' said Oliver. 'That's what we are. That's what this is.' 'Can I just check,' said Chris. 'Are we still actually talking, or has the thing started?' 'It started over three centuries ago,' said Oliver. 'And now it's about to end.'

81. 'Have you been making weird stuff happen?' said Chris. 'Has Lucy been playing tricks on me?' 'Not at all,' said Oliver. 'We've simply been keeping an eye. And you've done very well. Very well indeed.' 'I've lost the thread,' said Chris. 'Could you go back a bit?'

'The Countenance Divine,' said Oliver. 'Is that what this is called?' said Chris. 'At some point it was decided to use that as a sort of name, unofficially,' said Oliver, 'and it's rather stuck. These days, some people prefer to say The Face Of God. They're worried that old-fashioned language puts people off. I think it's a shame, personally. I prefer tradition. But it doesn't make any difference in practice. It means the same thing.'

'It's from that hymn,' said Chris, 'with the Dark Satanic Mills.' 'That's right,' said Oliver. 'William Blake. And Did The Countenance Divine Shine Forth Upon Our Clouded Hills. And then Hills rhymes with Mills. The hymn is actually taken from the beginning of a long poem he wrote called Milton, about the old poet coming back from the dead. It's a beautiful image, don't you think?'

'But what does it mean?' said Chris. 'Most people say it's an old legend that Jesus visited England when he was a baby,' said Oliver. 'But then other people say the legend started with Blake's poem. Or perhaps it just means that the sun is the face of God, as the old pagans believed, and so God once looked particularly favourably on England. Either way, the poem goes on to talk about a future where the City of God has been built right here. The New Jerusalem, as the early Christians called it. London will be the site of the final perfection, described in John's vision. The end of time. The beginning of eternal life.'

‘This is just an art thing, isn’t it?’ said Chris. ‘Please tell me you’re not some kind of doomsday cult.’ ‘Not at all,’ said Oliver. ‘Quite the opposite. The fact is, God wants the world to end, and we’re trying to stop it.’

82. ‘Say that again?’ said Chris. ‘Certainly,’ said Oliver. ‘God wants the world to end, and we’re trying to stop it.’

‘That’s bonkers,’ said Chris. ‘I appreciate it must sound rather extreme,’ said Oliver. ‘I’m putting it as simply as I can. But it’s true. It has been true for quite some time. A little more than three hundred years, as I said. We’ve managed to hold it all together until now, but it’s been getting more difficult. Things keeps breaking through, as the moment approaches. It all began in London, you see, and this is where it has to end. Past and future become one.’

‘You’re starting to sound like Lucy,’ said Chris. ‘I have to say I’m struggling with how seriously you want me to take this stuff. You have to admit, it all sounds pretty far-fetched. But you’re saying it like you really do mean it.’ ‘I admit it’s difficult to explain,’ said Oliver. ‘It’s probably easier if I show you. I’m not supposed to, but I don’t expect it matters at this stage.’ ‘Who says you’re not supposed to?’ said Chris. ‘Aren’t you in charge?’ ‘One thing at a time,’ said Oliver. ‘Stay here, I won’t be a moment.’

Oliver stood, and went back up the stairs. Chris heard a door open and close. He was alone.

83. Chris thought again about leaving. He already had the feeling that if he didn't, then later in the evening he would think back to this moment, and very much wish he had.

He didn't.

84. Chris heard the door again. Oliver came back down the stairs, and sat.

In his hands he had a long cloak, and a golden mask.

'Fuck,' said Chris. 'Do you recognise this?' said Oliver. 'It's what I was talking about before,' said Chris. 'I had a sort of a dream about it. Or I thought it was a dream. Was that you outside my house?' 'I'm afraid not,' said Oliver. 'Someone else.' 'I can't properly remember what was happening,' said Chris. 'It's all mixed up in my head.' 'It's best that you don't,' said Oliver. 'Our minds have a way of sparing us the worst, to help us focus on what's important. I'm sure it'll come back to you in due course.'

Oliver handed the mask and cloak to Chris. 'Is something going to happen now?' said Chris. 'I keep having a feeling like something very bad's going to happen.' 'It's just a costume,' said Oliver. 'Victorian Gothic kitsch. Not one of our finer moments. Things got a little out of hand. Wearing the mask does seem to focus the vision, though. I think it might help.'

'You want me to put this on?' said Chris. 'Please,' said Oliver. 'Then I'll lead you through, and you can tell me what you see. And after that I'll bring you to Lucy. She'll be ready by now.'

'There are no eye holes,' said Chris. 'I won't be able to see anything.'
'It doesn't always work,' said Oliver. 'We can only try.'

85. Chris wrapped the cloak around himself.

He put the mask over his face. There was a cloth strap around the back to keep it on his head. It fitted very well.

The inside smelt clean and sharp. He felt the skin of his face tingle.

Oliver took his arm. Chris stepped through the door.

86. Chris could see.

He touched the front of the mask, to check he was really wearing it.

He was. There were no holes to look out. But he could see.

87. The room was very small. There was a bed, and someone in it, lying down. The person's face was half under the covers, but Chris was pretty sure it was a man. 'My wife and daughters are abroad,' said the man. 'Would you do me the honour of emptying my pot? I have had a copious morning.'

Chris could see long grey greasy hair, and a hand with thin delicate fingers. He sounded like quite an old man. The air in the room stank of shit and pipe smoke.

'Mister Allgood,' said the old man. 'The pot, I say. These fumes are of great value when I wish a vision of the foul pit, but a hindrance else. And then to your inkhorn. I have a pretty parcel for you this morning.'

There was a metal pot on the floor by the bed, with what looked like a few large turds floating in piss. It really stank. Chris couldn't see anywhere to empty it. He didn't even want to touch it. It was disgusting.

'Rouse yourself, boy,' said the old man. 'To work.'

Chris was sitting at a little desk by the window. There was an inkpot and a kind of pen, and a few batches of paper tied up with ribbon. Everything looked authentic, though Chris knew they couldn't be real. They looked too new. But then, he thought, in whatever period this was, these things would have been new. It was really very cleverly done. He looked around for Oliver, but he couldn't see him.

'A sonnet, to exercise our faculties,' said the old man. 'Pay close attention, and you may learn much. Now. Though years have set their hand. No, confound it. Though years have found their hand. No, no, no. Though years have found their ground. Their ground against my. Wrong, all wrong. It is fled, damn you. A moment.'

The old man was clearly angry. Chris couldn't tell what he was supposed to have done wrong. He wondered if it was scripted or improvised.

'If every word of mine were fled to hell,' said the old man, 'and in its place a note of purest music. Now, there is something. It will serve for an anchor. Hmm? Think, boy. Think. Fled to hell is wrong. The same sound repeated. Eh-eh. If every word of mine should fly to hell. How say you to that? No, stay. We fly up, not down. If every word of mine should fall to hell. But then we repeat the ells. And I want a lower, deeper sound for the fall, do I not? If every word of mine should fall to ground. If every word I write should die, and fall. Ah. Good. And fall. And fall. Beneath the earth to dwell in hell. No, no, no. Abominable. Dwell in hell? I am a child. I deserve to starve, and be forgotten. Strike out the lot, and we begin again.'

Chris hadn't written anything. He hadn't realised he was meant to.

‘If every word I write should fall away,’ said the old man. ‘There it is. So. On. If every word I write should fall away, and. If every word I write should fall away, and. If every word I write should fall away, and. And leave no trace upon the hearts of men. There. That is second rate, but it will serve to draw us forward, till we have leisure to revise. Away and men are useful, you see. I have choice for the rhyme. But we must be wary. Should the music dictate the sense? Aye, and why not. I daresay even King David allowed his ear to write a psalm or two.’

Chris felt his face prickle. His stomach was tight and nauseous.

88. Chris was in another room.

A man was bent over a table, with his back to Chris. He was working at a little sculpture of a man, about a foot long. He scratched at it with some kind of tool, and little slivers fell to the floor. The man was laughing to himself quietly as he worked.

‘My angel,’ said the man. He didn’t look up, and kept working. ‘I shall not see you, for I have a sacred task to complete. But you must inspire me. Come, and fill me with the holy breath.’

This man was older than Chris, but younger than the man in the bed. His voice was full of laughter, Chris thought, even when he was speaking. It made him think of an excited boy.

‘Oh child of light,’ said the man. ‘I see with your blessed eyes. I see a vision of my master Milton, as he dictates. He mangles and mixes his verses. Oh, how I laugh at his vexation! I never mix mine, you know. They come as they come. Not true, not true. I do balance my account here and there. But

when the vision's upon me I let it pour forth. I feel the fire in my sinews, the volcanic spirit. I see a future when this quickening pulse shall illuminate every eye. We shall harness the transcendent beauty of the invisible world, and create dreams from the air. Shall we not? Yes! All may have these visions. Will Blake saw it first, they shall say. No, no, that is vanity. Well, but if it is true? I see a future without shackles, a mind so full of fire it cannot be bounded by iron, nor by the fear of moral sickness. Moral sickness! They threaten with what surrounds us already! If you do not obey, the world shall be as it already is! Yes, and perhaps that is a true threat, for I want no world to be as it is now. Even when it must change, I want a world not as it shall be then, but forever to be what it might be. Only in vision can we exceed our shackles. Only in excess might we find our wisdom. Yes. Thank you, my angel. I shall add that to my catechism. Wisdom in excess. This is the holy book which will set the world afire. I know it. You told me so. And on. On and on is the only way.'

Chris smelt a metallic tang. His teeth ached.

89. Chris was in another room.

A young man was cooking meat. Chris thought it was kidney. He knew the smell from his grandfather's house when he was a child. It was a real fire, in a chimney, with a heavy black pan on it. The meat crackled and spat.

This man was very young, maybe fourteen or fifteen, but tall and muscular, especially his arms. He was naked from the waist up. His hair was black and greasy. There was a strong smell of old sweat, Chris noticed, the sort of smell Al always said girls loved. He hadn't found that, personally.

The young man watched the kidney very closely. He carefully lifted the meat onto a plate and looked at Chris.

‘Master,’ said the young man. He indicated that Chris should sit too. He did. The young man stayed on his feet.

‘You tries it first,’ said the young man. He passed the plate to Chris.

There was a knife and fork. Chris had been getting hungry, and it did smell quite good. He cut off a small piece and ate it. The young man smiled.

It was soft and thick in his mouth. The meat melted as he tried to chew, and slid down inside. It wasn’t bad, he thought.

The young man ate now. Chris watched.

‘She were older,’ said the young man, ‘but the prettiest yet, I think so. Were she the final one?’

Chris didn’t know if he was supposed to answer. He sort of nodded his head to the side, trying not to say yes or no.

‘But I know she weren’t,’ said the young man.

He looked unhappy now. He ate the last piece of kidney. ‘That were nice,’ said the young man. ‘Did you taste the piss? I likes that. I have tother half still. I thought I could post it off. Not to the peelers, but that old fool Lusk. Maybe the bloody knife too, aye. Just to make them unhappy. Do you wish it?’

The young man reached under the table, and brought up a glass jar, with a piece of meat in it. It was the same object Chris had found in Lucy’s cupboard, except the meat looked fresher. He knew it was the other half of the kidney he had just eaten.

The young man's eyes were really pleading. Chris thought he was like a dog looking at his master.

'When might I see your face?' said the young man.

Chris wanted to leave now. He was starting to feel panicked.

'You said when all is done that I might see the face of God and live,' said the young man. 'When shall it be?'

Chris felt his skin getting hot. He heard a deep, low buzzing sound.

90. Chris took the mask off.

He was in the hall. Oliver was sitting beside him.

Chris felt like he had been punched in the stomach. He tried to breathe and keep calm.

It wasn't real. There had to be a sensible explanation. He knew how things actually were. It couldn't all just change. The world wasn't like that.

'That was extremely weird,' said Chris. 'How did you do it? I really felt like I was there.' 'What did you see?' said Oliver. 'Three men,' said Chris. 'But not together. The first one was dictating from his bed. I was copying it down, except I wasn't, if you see what I mean. I think he was writing a poem.' 'Excellent,' said Oliver. 'What then?' 'Another man making a little sculpture, like a doll,' said Chris. 'I couldn't follow what he was saying, to be honest. He called me his angel.' 'Wonderful,' said Oliver. 'A very significant moment. And I'll guess the third was a strange young man cutting up a woman.' 'No, actually,' said Chris. 'He was cooking some meat. I think it was kidney. He wanted me to eat some.' 'Goodness,' said Oliver. 'And did you?' 'Yes,' said Chris. 'Was that bad?' 'Not at all,' said Oliver. 'I was just curious.'

‘So who are they supposed to be?’ said Chris. ‘They’re exactly who they seem to be,’ said Oliver. ‘The ones who came before.’

‘Is he that poet from hundreds of years ago?’ said Chris. ‘John Milton,’ said Oliver. ‘He died a little more than three centuries ago, yes. You were with him in sixteen sixty-six. That was the year it began.’ ‘Hang on,’ said Chris. ‘Not William Blake?’ ‘He was the second man,’ said Oliver. ‘His vision began in seventeen seventy-seven, but it took thirteen years to fulfil.’ ‘And who was the last one?’ said Chris. ‘I never did find out his name,’ said Oliver. ‘A very difficult time. Eighteen eighty-eight. We made quite a mess of that, I’m afraid. Not our finest hour.’

‘Is it supposed to be a time travel mask?’ said Chris. ‘Is that what I’m supposed to think?’ ‘Not at all,’ said Oliver. ‘Those men are real. Some people call them visions, but they’re actually here. Always. They’re easy to miss, though. And the mask is a way of blotting out distractions. You’ve been getting glimpses before now. Your mind has been fighting with two kinds of knowledge, just as theirs have too. I expect you’ve ignored it, or thought you were day-dreaming. But you can’t any longer.’

91. ‘I remember now,’ said Chris. ‘Lucy explained it to me. Years of grace, is what she said. Four of them. There’s a hundred and ten years between each one. And one-one-zero in binary notation is six. So that makes six-six-six. The end of the world.’ ‘Precisely so,’ said Oliver. ‘Well done.’

‘Except it doesn’t work,’ said Chris. ‘It should be a hundred and eleven years.’ ‘I’ve had this argument so many times,’ said Oliver. ‘From the end of seventeen seventy-seven to the beginning of eighteen eighty-eight is

one hundred and ten. Just enough time to fall beyond the span of human memory.'

'Fair enough,' said Chris. 'So now it's nineteen ninety-nine.' 'For just a little longer,' said Oliver. 'And who is it this time?' said Chris. 'You, I suppose.'

'It's you, Chris,' said Oliver. 'But I think you know that. I think you've always known that.'

92. 'I'll probably have to leave soon,' said Chris. 'I'm in danger of getting a bit freaked out. I was ill recently.' 'I wouldn't recommend it,' said Oliver. 'I can assure you that things are much worse out there.' 'I think I might go home right now, actually,' said Chris. 'I don't feel well.' 'You are home,' said Oliver. 'There is nowhere else.' 'Could you just slow down a bit?' said Chris. 'I need to know exactly what you think is going on.'

'Imagine you pour some water into a glass,' said Oliver. 'Then later you add more, and then more, and then more. The first water you put in won't be trapped at the bottom. It may indeed be on the very surface. That's what time is. That's what London is.' 'Very clever,' said Chris. 'Except for people. We're all going to die, aren't we? Old buildings or whatever might still be there, but after three hundred years, the people will be completely different. There's no one who actually remembers the past.'

'In fact, it's precisely the opposite,' said Oliver. 'The city you think you live in isn't there. London burned to the ground. That was the end of everything. And the fire has never gone out. It's what you see when you walk

the streets. Fire, and blood, and the face of God. Nothing else is real. The life you know is a complete fabrication.'

93. 'Is this supposed to be funny?' said Chris. 'Because I don't think it is. That was all very well done, with the mask, however you did it, but the rest of it is a tiny bit insulting, to be honest. I don't know what Lucy's told you, but I was just ill for a couple of weeks. I was stressed about work stuff. I wasn't having visions. I don't believe in ghosts.'

'It isn't anything supernatural,' said Oliver. 'It's just another way of understanding what you already know. The city you experience outside is a fake. It's a speculative replica of a future that never was. In sixteen sixty-six, someone tried to destroy London, to declare the last days, the long-promised union of heaven and earth. People have tried this kind of thing many times before. The only difference is, this time it worked. The end came. And we have lived in that moment ever since. There is no more past or future, only everlasting now.'

94. 'You seriously think the world has already ended?' said Chris.' 'Time stopped,' said Oliver. 'Or at least, we stopped experiencing it. Which amounts to the same thing.' 'But time is still going on,' said Chris. 'I know it feels like it is,' said Oliver. 'But that's only because we've been doing our work. In fact, nothing has changed in over three centuries. The city you think you know is the London of our imagination. It's what we wish could have been. Your whole life is simply our fantasy. And finally, our vision is at an end. The

numbers are in line. We must allow what is written. A beast, who plots to destroy, and a final saviour, who defeats it.'

95. 'You're a fruitcake,' said Chris. 'And this is all bullshit. I've had enough, thanks. Where's Lucy?' 'A very timely question,' said Oliver. 'I'll take you to her right now. That is why you're here, after all.'

He opened the door again, and motioned for Chris to go inside. 'Please,' said Oliver. 'I'll join you in a moment.' Chris walked in. Oliver closed the door.

96. Lucy was lying on a bed. It looked very like the bed in her flat.

She was naked. There was a blindfold tied over her eyes.

'Surprise,' said Lucy.

97. Chris almost laughed. He should have guessed.

He'd been taking this far too seriously. It was all just the build-up for some arty sex club. She'd tricked him into coming to her bizarre New Year orgy.

Chris tried not to imagine having sex with Lucy. He tried not to imagine her rubbing her armpit in his face.

He thought he ought to be upset with her. He wasn't. But he couldn't decide what to do. He knew he should either just leave right away, or else stay and see if he could enjoy it. He wondered when the others would appear. He felt embarrassed at the thought, but if they all had something to drink, it might

start to seem like a good idea. You're only young once, he thought. At least it meant she probably liked him.

98. Chris decided he should try to act casual, and pretend all this was normal. Then it might start to feel normal.

'Hey,' said Chris. 'This is quite something.' 'Fucking hell,' said Lucy. 'Is that all you have to say? Has he not told you what's happening outside?' 'I wanted to ask you about that,' said Chris. 'What's up with the computer problems? Everything's going nuts. It's like nothing was fixed.' 'It wasn't fixed, you div,' said Lucy. 'I made fucking sure of that. I've been sending out a bug that undoes the fixes, and sends itself out again. Tammy nearly caught me twice. She's smarter than she looks.' 'That's quite clever,' said Chris. 'Because you could actually have done that. Nice touch.' 'Hasn't he told you anything?' said Lucy. 'Fucking prick. Why is it always me?'

Chris thought Lucy was swearing more than usual. It was making him nervous. She sounded very upset. 'Can I just check,' said Chris. 'Is this a swingers party kind of thing? I might just watch for a bit first, if that's okay.' 'Fuck it,' said Lucy. 'Fuck it up the arse. I should have just told you before. The whole thing's been a stupid fucking waste of time.' 'I don't think so,' said Chris. 'I'm enjoying it now. At the beginning I didn't even realise it had started, but I think that was the idea, wasn't it? It's very clever how you've linked the software problems with the religious angle. I didn't imagine it would be so full on, though. Are we expecting more people?'

'Chris,' said Lucy. 'Stop blabbering on and listen a minute. It's very important. I'm the beast. I have to be cut open.' 'Shit,' said Chris. 'Fair

enough. I'm not sure I want to watch, though. I know you're into all that, but it doesn't do anything for me.' 'For fuck's sake,' said Lucy. 'This is serious, Chris. This is how it's supposed to end. I've been trying to destroy everything, and now you stop me just in time. You have to cut me open, and take out a rib. It's the act of creation in reverse. That's the only way, I swear to God. Don't fuck it up now.' 'Is this part of the show?' said Chris. 'Oh Chris,' said Lucy. 'There is no show, mate. That was just to get you here. This is real. It's out there that's the show.' 'This is getting quite exciting,' said Chris. 'But I think I'll just watch, thanks. You show me what happens.'

'It has to be you, Chris,' said Lucy. 'That's the whole point.' 'Why?' said Chris. 'Because you're the one I chose,' said Lucy. 'Why?' said Chris. 'Because you're able to see things,' said Lucy. 'But why?' said Chris. 'Christ,' said Lucy. 'Why anything? Why are you such a fucking annoying wanker sometimes?'

Chris was upset by that. He didn't think anyone had ever called him a wanker before, or annoying. 'Just when I was starting to think you liked me,' said Chris. 'But does it have to be one or the other?' said Lucy. 'Can I not like you and find you annoying too?' 'What are you so upset about?' said Chris. 'What have I done wrong?' 'Oh, nothing,' said Lucy. 'Just I thought you might have tried to snog me by now, is all.' 'Excuse me?' said Chris. 'I thought you might have had a go by now, if you fancied me,' said Lucy. 'That's all.'

'I thought you hated it when blokes came over like they just want to shag you,' said Chris. 'I do,' said Lucy. 'But you still like to feel a bloke who fancies you fancies you, you know?' 'Do I fancy you?' said Chris. 'Fucking

hell, Chris,' said Lucy. 'Are you listening to yourself?' 'But, hang on,' said Chris. 'Who says I fancy you?' 'I do,' said Lucy. 'Christ, a blind man could see it. The way you go on around me.' 'I go on like that around everybody,' said Chris. 'You don't, Chris,' said Lucy. 'I watch you. I can see. I'm not thick, and don't try and make me think I am, because I hate that more than anything.'

'Right,' said Chris. 'So we're in a cellar under an old house with your friend who thinks the last three hundred years never happened, and you want to play some kinky sex game of me cutting you open, but I'm the one who's acting weird.' 'Go fuck yourself,' said Lucy. 'You fucking absolute cock. I've had it with you. I've had it with my whole fucked-up shite bollocks waste of a life. I've made a right fucking mess of everything. You should have let me do it when I wanted to. Christ. Oh Christ.'

She started screaming.

Chris thought he should probably leave after all.

99. Chris heard the door open behind him. Lucy stopped screaming.

'I thought I'd give you a few moments,' said Oliver. 'I know it's been a difficult time.' 'He won't do it,' said Lucy to Oliver. 'The whole thing is fucked.' 'Oh, but you must,' said Oliver to Chris. 'Everything has led to this moment. It's the ultimate action which manifests the will to resist, and allows a final transfiguration, in place of final decay. We rise or fall, once and for ever. Your choice determines which.'

Oliver was holding out a knife. It looked sharp. It wasn't very clean. The blade was crusted with black and brown.

99. Chris was nervous. He wondered if Oliver had some kind of hold over Lucy. He thought he'd better not take any chances. He had heard about this kind of thing. But he also wondered if he was supposed to think that. Maybe it was all part of the show.

Either way, he decided the best idea was to play along. It would be better to humour them both, as far as he could, until he saw exactly what was going to happen. He wasn't going to leave until he knew for sure that Lucy was all right. She did seem to be genuinely upset.

99. 'Oh yes, I see,' said Chris. 'Sorry. I was confused for a moment. It's not exactly what I was expecting.' 'I appreciate it's a lot to take in at once,' said Oliver, 'but we're almost there. We're so close. Please.'

Chris took the knife from Oliver. 'Just one thing,' said Chris. 'You do know I won't really cut anybody open.' 'She isn't alive,' said Oliver. 'She's made of clay.'

99. 'She's what?' said Chris. 'She's a golem,' said Oliver. 'Is that the thing from Tolkein?' said Chris. 'Please just listen,' said Oliver. 'Lucy is the homunculus. It was first made over two hundred years ago. The moment you saw earlier. But it fled its maker, and remade itself. It has wreaked havoc down the years. Now it must be unmade.' 'What did you say she is?' said Chris. 'A kind of golem,' said Oliver. 'An artificial person made from clay, but with a piece of a real person inside, a dead person. That's what animates it, and gives it spirit. But it will always be a distortion of the original.'

‘Are you?’ said Chris to Lucy. ‘If I am, I wouldn’t know it,’ said Lucy. ‘That’s the whole problem.’ ‘I certainly don’t think you are,’ said Chris. ‘And just how the fuck would you know?’ said Lucy.

‘You do it,’ said Chris to Oliver. ‘I’ll watch.’ ‘I really can’t,’ said Oliver. ‘It does have to be the one she selected.’ ‘What if I hadn’t come tonight?’ said Chris. ‘I nearly didn’t come.’ ‘You really believe you had any choice in the matter?’ said Oliver. ‘You have been dancing on the end of a string. There is no choice left. There is only what you do. That is all. That has been all for longer than you know.’

‘Am I supposed to say yes?’ said Chris to Lucy. ‘It’s not a game, Chris,’ said Lucy. ‘There is no supposed to. This is all really happening. You have to decide.’ ‘But obviously I’m not actually going to do it,’ said Chris. ‘It’s confusing. The whole thing is quite confusing, to be honest. I think you could improve it if you explained in the beginning who those different characters are supposed to be, and what links them together.’ ‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ said Oliver, ‘the next time the world is about to end. Now please, cut her open before midnight, or else it’s all over.’

99. ‘Then it’s all over,’ said Chris. ‘Fine by me. I’m saying Stop now, or Curtain, or whatever it is you people say. It was quite interesting, though. Thanks for inviting me. But we don’t want to miss New Year. And I’m worried the power might go off. I’d like to find out what’s happening outside. Is there anywhere we can get a drink?’

‘You have the fate of eternity in your hands,’ said Oliver. ‘Did someone forget to explain that part too?’ ‘The world isn’t going to end,’ said

Chris. 'Not any time soon, at least.' 'It's simply a question of faith,' said Oliver. 'I can't prove anything without letting you see it. But by then, it's too late. Will you please trust me?' 'And cut Lucy's belly open?' said Chris. 'This is getting a bit fucking bad taste now, if you don't mind my saying.' 'We didn't have this problem in eighteen eighty-eight,' said Oliver. 'And look how well that worked out for you,' said Lucy.

'Are you her ex-boyfriend?' said Chris. 'Excuse me?' said Oliver. 'Are you Lucy's ex?' said Chris. 'Did you use to go out with her?' 'As a matter of fact, yes,' said Oliver. 'But I don't see the significance.' 'I just don't like the way this has gone,' said Chris. 'It's a bit too intense for my liking. Something could happen.' 'You can't hurt her,' said Oliver. 'She is a fake. She always has been. Nothing but moulded clay around a piece of dead matter. I made her. She belongs to me.'

99. Chris thought he could hear a sort of rumbling sound, far away. The light in the room was getting dim. He was starting to feel annoyed, and a bit scared.

'I've had it,' said Chris. 'You're completely freaking me out now. I want to make a proper complaint about this whole thing. Are you in charge?' Oliver laughed. Chris thought it sounded quite nasty. There was something different about Oliver now, but he couldn't say what.

'Do you wish me to be in charge?' said Oliver. 'I'd certainly like someone to be,' said Chris, 'otherwise this is a very fucked-up situation.' 'An apt phrase,' said Oliver. 'No truer word yet spoke. And I hate to be the breaker of your innocence, young man, but no one is in charge. Things happen as they are willed by each of us, and as others do not resist. Now we meet our

promised end. It was fated, and it shall be. It was not fated how, but that matters little.'

'Somebody must be in charge,' said Chris. 'No one but God,' said Oliver, 'and He simply watches. I tell you this, God was in charge once upon a time. But He liked not what He saw, and after the Second Fall, the Restoration of the anti-Christ monarch, He willed a second flood, this time of fire. It was to begin here in London, and consume the earth, till the very face of God Himself was burned away. Mankind, and all its works. Yet some few underground escaped our fiery fate, without His aid. And so God let us decay. The rot was allowed to spread, instead of a fire we were left in the sun to moulder and stink, and so we have this filthy maggoty slop you call London and culture and life and humanity and civilisation. And now, all falls away. There is no longer a centre, nothing may hold. An endless dribble of slack heavy matter piling around the feet of God. He treads us into Hell as He steps about His business. His feet are thick with our putrid clay. This was the vision of old. Matter returns to matter, God returns to God.'

'So what's supposed to happen now?' said Chris. 'The moment when either we decompose, or transfigure,' said Oliver. 'The choice is there to be taken. It is not for my good that I have brought you here. I am not to die. I have never lived. I do this to save mankind. Amen. That is all. It is all and more. You may know the rest as it occurs. It lies in your hands.'

Chris could hear people making noise from somewhere far away. It might have been cheering, or screaming. He couldn't quite tell.

He wondered if it was nearly midnight. He thought it must be by now.

99. 'What lies in my hands?' said Chris. 'I still don't get what has any this has to do with me.' 'It could not simply happen,' said Oliver. 'Our fate never falls out willy-nilly, however inevitable. Sooner or later, someone must actually do it. And every battle, even the last, must have its witness.' 'So why me?' said Chris. 'I could invent a tale,' said Oliver, 'but the truth is you were thrown up by chance. It had to be someone and there you were.' 'I don't accept that,' said Chris. 'There must be a reason.' 'Then choose a reason,' said Oliver. 'You look a little like my first wife. I have a soft spot for callow youth. The numerical values of the letters in your name added together make the date of the final conflagration. You were recommended to me by an employment agency. I didn't choose you, you chose me. And so on. You may take your pick, or invent your own. Give it meaning. We always do. Perhaps that is, in the end, all we do. The only thing that matters now is that one shall survive. And you are that one. If all is destroyed, without a witness, there is no tragedy. The loss must be felt for pain to rise. If we perish every soul, and all trace of us perishes, then nothing has occurred. It is an utter silence, which immediately has always been. Who knows how many other men, nations, civilisations, worlds, have so perished in the past? Who knows how many orders of existence? Or they may all continue to exist alongside, inaccessible to us, as some indeed declare. And what we experience as our Something is but the Nothing of a higher order of being. For that is the state of the angels. We are the pit they fear falling into. It is the state of God himself. We are all His dread. We are His night-sweats. We are the lice which crawl among His shining hairs. We are the itch He cannot quite reach. We are the early death of an old friend, remembered from nowhere to cloud a bliss of triumph. We are

His nagging fear He has left a candle alight. We are the piss that cramps His groin on a long ride. We are the overheard contempt of His employer. The stone in His boot. The rot in His fruit. The nest in His flue. The blood in His stool. Fool. Fool. Fool. He has brought this upon Himself. Now He shall know what it is to suffer.'

'You want to get revenge on God?' said Chris. 'And I shall,' said Oliver. 'You are my revenge. You shall be the only memory of what was lost, delivered unto Him. Of all His wonders and works, He may keep nothing but your mean little life. Your endless agonising over trivial slights among your colleagues. Your lascivious obsession with the underarm hairs of every woman you see around you. Your desperate passive boredom, to the depths of your soul. That shall be all His consolation, from the vanished glory of our kind. Oh, He will tell Himself He finds beauty in the least of His children, but He does not. Once, perhaps, He did, or did intend to, but centuries of adoration from the greatest minds alive, working only to His glory, have changed His character somewhat. He despises such as you. And yet He loves you, and that is His great victory. For that alone is the true challenge of His Son. There is no love in loving only those we love. True love is loving those who utterly disgust us. As you do Him. He shall have nothing save the dull, dull, dull, boring squalid detail of a mind left to rot without His light for three centuries.'

'You chose me because I'm pathetic?' said Chris. 'Because you are worthless,' said Oliver. 'You had every chance and you squandered it. You merit nothing but contempt. You are not even a great destroyer, you are a mutant regression of the spirit to the worst excesses of the thinnest ages in our history. You are a ghost of your very self. There is so little substance to your

life, you could die each day for a year and the world would hardly ripple. You inspire only nausea and self-pity in those around you. The few pale shadows who say they love you, love only that you refuse to condemn them as you ought to. You choose to support those who also waste their gifts, when you could decry them, to their gain, and support others with some value to offer. But no. You are the hairs in the sink of life. You are nothing but momentary obstruction, and reminder of decay. No one likes you. You embarrass even those closest to you. Any grief felt at your death would be more than tempered by relief. You are a burden to the general spirit. Die, please. And yet I shall save you, to punish God. Amen. Oh lucky, lucky you. He shall spend His remaining eternity watching you pleasure yourself at the thought of His virgin mother's hirsute axilla. And He shall love you. A puzzle, but He ever was.'

99. Chris knew he should just leave. He really wished he had earlier.

But he also knew this was one of those moments. What he did next mattered. It would come back to him again and again.

He had to do what was right. And he knew what that was.

99. Chris stepped to Lucy, and took her blindfold off. 'I think that's enough now,' said Chris. Oliver watched. He didn't look happy or unhappy. 'Are you sure?' said Lucy. She was shivering. Chris held her. 'I'm sure,' said Chris. 'Thanks, mate,' said Lucy. 'No problem,' said Chris. 'About fucking time,' said Lucy. 'For a minute, I thought you were actually going to do it.'

Chris looked at Oliver, and looked back at Lucy. 'Don't worry about him,' said Lucy. 'He's not going to do anything. Things just got a bit out of hand.' 'You can say that again,' said Chris. 'He was freaking me out.'

99. Lucy leaned in and whispered in Chris's ear.

'Do you want a look at under my arm?' said Lucy. 'Oh,' said Chris. 'Only if you want to,' said Lucy. 'Maybe later,' said Chris. 'Thanks, though.'

99. Chris helped Lucy off the bed. 'Let's find somewhere to have a drink,' said Chris. 'You'd better get your clothes back on. How do we get out of here?' 'There is no out of here,' said Oliver. 'Oblivion has swallowed everything. You have made your choice. This is all that remains.'

Chris felt sorry for him now. Whatever he had in mind for the evening, it obviously hadn't worked out. Chris didn't think Oliver had really meant for him to hurt Lucy. He was almost certain.

'Why don't you come out with us?' said Chris. 'I'd like to hear more about how you did some of the stuff.' 'Now I fear the rest shall fall away,' said Oliver. 'Take good care. She is delicate as glass, until we make the final union.' 'Fuck off,' said Lucy. She was holding Chris's arm tight. It hurt a little, but he didn't say anything. 'I made you,' said Oliver. 'You can only ever belong to me.' 'Go fuck yourself,' said Lucy. 'Seriously. Get yourself a dildo, and shove it up your asshole, and swivel on it, because I'm not listening to another fucking word you say.' 'Look at your hand,' said Oliver.

Lucy did. Chris looked too. Her hand was covered in tiny cracks.

She touched her finger. It snapped off.

99. 'Oh Christ,' said Lucy. 'I'm going to be sick.' 'It's not what it looks like,' said Chris. He didn't know what else to say. He was very scared. 'Then what is it, Chris?' said Lucy. 'Tell me what it is. Because it looks very fucking bad to me.' She passed the finger to Chris. It crumbled into dust as soon as he touched it.

'Ash to ash,' said Oliver. 'Fear not, for time itself crumbles like clay.' 'Is it drugs?' said Chris. 'Was there something in that kidney?' 'You must surely see it now,' said Oliver. 'The fate of eternity hung in the balance, and you have tipped the scales. Your destiny is accomplished. And so God is no more. Man is no more. Now I understand that I too am eternally alone. My own apocalypse. For so long I feared I was less than human. Now I see I am much more. Thank you for the revelation.'

99. Oliver unbuttoned his shirt. He peeled open his stomach.

Inside was a shining skeleton of golden metal.

He reached under, and pulled out a single white rib.

Chris looked away. He didn't want to see any more.

'Oh Jesus fucking Christ,' said Lucy. 'It's him.' 'I tired of my little form,' said Oliver. 'I had myself remade, many times over. I wished to save what I could, again and again. But I see the ultimate futility. Thank you for the gift. Amen to all. Ash to ash, bone to bone. It is time to let it end.'

'What about me?' said Lucy. 'A piece of kidney,' said Oliver. 'The one I presented to you. That is what gives you life. I have perfected the mystery. It need not rest inside, only close by.' 'That fucking thing in the jar?'

said Lucy. 'Exactly so,' said Oliver. 'I made you for a companion and a helper, a second attempt, but you emerged as my blind slave, hungry for sight and for freedom. Everything you know is my fiction.'

'I'm not anybody's fiction,' said Chris. 'Soon you shall be nothing more,' said Oliver, 'for you have taken us to the brink and beyond. Midnight has come. The end is here.'

99. 'Is this all to do with the Year Two Thousand Problem?' said Chris. 'Is that what you think is end of time? Because it's really not. It's just one of those things. A stupid programming fuck-up. People not thinking ahead.' 'The numbers tell,' said Oliver. 'Six, seven, eight, nine. Our end is naught, as our beginning was. The zero, you call it. Something returns to nothing. A thing to a hole. The one and the naught. Presence and absence. Cock into cunt. From which, a unity. And so the cosmos shall impregnate its own self, and birth the New Jerusalem. A better world, a higher state. We shall indeed be fucked up, in your own elegant formula. Up to our eternal perfection.'

'Am I going to die?' said Lucy. 'I don't think I want to die now.' 'Men fear not death,' said Oliver, 'but the agony which may precede it. And this is not death, even for those of us who have never truly lived. Quite the contrary. The end of time is also the end of death. Time is nothing save only continual change, and when life is perfected, change shall cease. Then time shall be redundant. It may not cease, but we cease to experience it, so it matters not at all. What, after all, is time, if not progress towards death? And if no death, then no time. Eternal life, eternal death. Call it what you will. Eternity is the abode of God alone, till now. We shall wrest it from Him. He must now live

among us. And this is as He willed, for nothing may be that He has not willed.'

'You really think everything is God's fault?' said Chris. 'He did not make it occur,' said Oliver, 'but He willed you the freedom to do such. It was attempted once before. That angel fell, who wished to replace God on the throne of heaven. You wished no such thing. You wished God upon the throne of earth and heaven combined. But you would not expel Him from His paradise, as He did us from ours. As He did Lucifer from his. No. You have learned forgiveness from His Son. The Son must supersede the Father, or there is no sense to a son at all. As I have overgrown my purpose, and my first cause, and my founding matter. Now we go to join the others. We return to the eternal moment, and close the circle.'

00. Oliver was wearing the golden mask. He led Chris and Lucy along a dark narrow passage. The lamps on the walls hissed.

'Take care,' said Oliver. 'The steps are not secure.'

They climbed a creaking ladder. 'Smells manky,' said Lucy.

They got the top, and came into the yard of a house.

'We are late in the last century, as you understand it,' said Oliver.

He led them into a room.

A young man was bent over a bed. He was the same man Chris had seen cooking the kidney. A young woman was on the bed. She was dead.

'Now you must face the absence of God,' said Oliver.

00. The young man was cutting up the young woman.

First he ——

Next he ——

Then he ——

And he ——

‘I can’t fucking watch this,’ said Lucy. ‘It isn’t real,’ said Chris. ‘Try telling her that,’ said Lucy. ‘It is accomplished,’ said Oliver. ‘God shall not return. We are alone. I am. Now it begins and ends.’

The young man was out of breath. He set down his knife.

00. She lay on the bed. Her legs were apart.

Her centre was empty.

Her breasts were not there. Her face was not there.

By her right foot was one breast. Between her feet was the liver.

To her right were the guts. To her left was the spleen.

Under her head were the kidneys, and the womb, and the other breast.

On the table beside was the flesh from her centre.

The heart was absent.

00. The young man turned to Oliver.

‘Master,’ he said.

00. ‘Yes, lad,’ said Oliver. ‘The gent is here,’ said the young man. ‘I seen him.

In with the others. It’s time now, I think.’ ‘I think so,’ said Oliver. ‘Let’s all go

in.' He gave a candle to Chris. 'If you would light this, please,' said Oliver. Chris did.

00. Oliver led Lucy and Chris back down the ladder. The young man followed them. Chris heard the door shut behind him.

There were in a carved stone passage. Chris kept walking down, holding the candle low to see the steps. He tried to keep it steady so it wouldn't blow out.

They came into a cavern. There were thousands of seashells in patterns on the walls. The place was lit by thick yellow candles. Chris thought they smelt horrible.

Three men lay against the wall. One of them was very badly burned. 'Christ,' said Lucy. 'That's Thomas,' said Oliver. 'And John, who you saw before. The other is Henry.' He pointed them out. 'We are refugees from the inferno above,' said John, 'and you are welcome to our sanctuary.' He didn't look at them when he spoke.

'The angels are here,' said Henry. 'King Jesus is nigh.' 'Something better is coming,' said Oliver. 'You shall see it soon. We all shall.' 'Someone tell this fool the blind are present, and shall see naught,' said John. 'Life is more than sight alone.' 'Amen,' said Henry.

'Chris,' said Lucy, 'that bloke is really bad.' She was looking at Thomas. He was shivering and breathing heavily. 'You may nurse him, if you can,' said Henry. 'None of us has the feminine virtue.'

Lucy bent down beside Thomas. 'Hey, mate,' she said. 'I'll look after you.' She lifted his blanket, and looked at his burns. 'Fuck,' said Lucy. 'Was

there a fire?’ said Chris. ‘The world is ablaze,’ said Oliver. ‘Henry Cock is to blame.’

‘I meant to bring you from the future time of angels,’ said Henry. ‘I thought to transfigure our lives.’ ‘And instead you have us cast to Hell,’ said Oliver. ‘You have failed. God has thrown us into a plague-pit. We are the ash of His disappointment.’

‘I have not failed,’ said Henry. ‘Christ is returned.’

‘Christ never was, and never shall be,’ said Oliver. ‘The earth is dead. God is blind. Heaven and hell are empty.’

00. Henry knelt, and bowed his head. ‘You are He,’ said Henry to Oliver. ‘I knew You not at first, but now the scales are lifted from my eyes. I give myself to You. This is the end of all. Amen. Amen.’

00. ‘Am I to take the gent at last?’ said the young man to Oliver. ‘As he wishes,’ said Oliver. ‘You must ask him.’

‘Shall I cut out your heart for you?’ said the young man to Henry. ‘I done your ladies, every one. It will go quick, and you won’t feel nothing.’ ‘I cannot die,’ said Henry. ‘Death is no more.’

‘You are the cause of our pain,’ said Oliver to Henry. ‘Now you must atone for a greater sin. You sought to create, and you have only destroyed. The greatest city there has ever been, and the greatest work of the greatest man that city ever knew. This shall not stand. You know you must recover what you can. And you must suffer the fate of London itself, so your very face is scrubbed from the tables of the world.’

‘As you please,’ said Henry. ‘I am yours to command.’

00. The young man tied Henry to a chair. He painted his face with a sharp-smelling liquid from a bottle. Henry smiled, and asked forgiveness for his sins. He spoke about nothing. Chris didn’t understand a word.

The young man lit a candle, and set Henry on fire. He burned.

Chris couldn’t watch. But he could hear.

00. When it was over, Oliver placed the golden mask on Henry’s face. Henry stepped into the water. He sank out of view.

‘Now he passes,’ said Oliver. ‘And now we have our final visitor.’

00. Chris saw all the colours of the rainbow. He heard the most beautiful song.

A man was with them.

‘William,’ said Oliver.

‘My angel,’ said William.

He was the second one Chris saw, when he wore the mask. William smiled, and opened his arms. Chris thought he looked like a very happy child.

‘You sent a burning messenger to me,’ said William to Oliver. ‘I have followed the path below. But I could not destroy the slave I made. I fear it is fled.’ ‘It is,’ said Oliver. ‘Its mischief shall cascade through the centuries. It will make another of its kind, from a precious fragment of its own maker, and another still, and remake itself too, many times. It shall sound the secret depths of human pain. But at last it will find peace.’

‘May I see it?’ said William. ‘It speaks to you now,’ said Oliver.

‘Such fine invention,’ said William. ‘It far surpasses my own. And what of the others you made?’ ‘This young man,’ said Oliver, ‘who calls me Master. At its centre is a trace of your seed, a remnant of the chrism which woke me. Enough to charge it with life and strength and purpose, but it lacks your gentle grace. And the young lady is the last. A disobedient Eve, conjured from a dead whore’s offal. We three are your grateful offspring.’

‘My vision is almost complete,’ said William. ‘I have one final gift for you,’ said Oliver, ‘and then you may return above, to inscribe it all.’

00. ‘Oh, my master,’ said William. ‘My master Milton.’ ‘I have no time for prankish tricks,’ said John. ‘No tricks, no tricks,’ said William. He sighed, and stepped to the old man. ‘As you are,’ said William. ‘As you are in the flesh. Oh, I have seen your spirit, and etched it, but the flesh is more than I dreamed. The breath of Milton, mingled with my own.’

‘I mingle breath with none such as you,’ said John. ‘The true fierce spirit of the man,’ said William. ‘I wish your hatred and your venom. Without it, nothing new might rise. The new must despise the old, and the old must condemn the new. That is life. Nothing else.’ ‘Sophistry,’ said John. ‘Wish no hate. To live in fear is a curse. I have known it, and I caution you to avoid it.’ ‘I welcome their hate,’ says William. ‘Then you are a fool,’ said John. ‘I am,’ said Will. ‘The only bigger fool than I is he who says he is no fool.’

‘Aye, well, you have me there,’ said John. ‘You do have me there. We are fool every one, but for what, is all. I have been a fool for women, and for letters, and even for God. For Cromwell, at least. For liberty. Now I keep my foolery indoors, and I leave the young to their best endeavours. Nothing

changes. Nothing at all.' 'Wisdom, wisdom,' said William. 'We are blessed with your wisdom. Write every word, some of you, so we may meditate on the deeper sense at our leisure.'

'I pity any who would take my words as such,' said John. 'I have lost forever what wisdom I once possessed, in the conflagration above. My vanity has been tested, and found wanting.' 'I am sorry to hear it,' said William. 'What is the loss?' 'I carved out a great work of verse,' said John, 'and had it burned up in moments. The tale of Satan's fall, and Adam's, and everything else besides. Now I find nothing but my own sorry fall. I am cast out. My only paradise is lost.'

'It cannot be so,' said William. 'I have the printed book. The work will be recovered, for its fame is eternal.' 'Do not mock me,' said John. 'I could never do so,' said William. 'You are the light of my heart.'

'You dare to pretend that you have read my poem?' said John. 'I know it every word,' said William. 'It is my very soul. I shall sing the poem entire, and you may write it out again. I understand now. This is my sacred task.'

00. 'Will you oblige me?' said William to Chris. 'Sure,' said Chris. 'What do you need me to do?' 'Take down what I speak,' said William. 'Be the hand which preserves this cathedral of letters for the happy world to come.' 'It is no cathedral,' said John. 'You may improve it as you will, for my wits are tired. I find naught but bitter regret in what little I recall.' 'The fault is in you, then, and not the work,' said William. 'I shall alter not a single letter. Be quiet now, and listen.'

00. They were in the little room. John lay upon the bed. William sat beside, and held his hand. Lucy and Oliver watched. The young man slept.

Chris sat at the desk. William spoke the lines. Chris wrote them out.

‘Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit,’ said William. ‘Do you have that much?’ ‘Yes,’ said Chris. ‘Hang on. The fruit. Right, go ahead.’ ‘Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste,’ said William. ‘Whose mortal taste,’ said Chris. ‘Got it.’ ‘Brought death into the world, and all our woe,’ said William. ‘It is too much,’ said John. ‘We have not the time.’ ‘Time is all we have,’ said William. ‘Let us spend it well.’ John sighed. William laughed.

‘All our woe,’ said William. ‘With loss of Eden, till one greater man.’ ‘Yes,’ said Chris. ‘Good. What’s next?’ ‘Restore us, and regain that blissful seat,’ said William.

00. ‘Is this it, then?’ said Lucy to Oliver. ‘Nothing else remains,’ said Oliver. ‘We must rebuild our past from the ash of the future.’ ‘Could be worse, I suppose,’ said Lucy. ‘Exactly so,’ said Oliver.

00. John clung to William as he spoke the lines. His head lay in his lap.

John wept. William stroked his hair and whispered to him.

They were there for hours, or days, or weeks. Chris could not tell.

‘A vision of the world to come,’ said William. ‘Heaven and earth are one.’

‘Amen,’ said John.

Historical Note

The blind John Milton was living in London at the time of the Great Fire which destroyed much of the city in 1666. His epic poem *Paradise Lost* was published the following year. He had recently returned from a stay in Chalfont St Giles arranged by his friend Thomas Ellwood. In the area lived Henry Cock, a Fifth Monarchist.

In 1777, William Blake was a twenty-year old apprentice engraver. He claimed to have seen visions since early childhood, and was a devoted student of Milton's work. By 1790 he was married and established in business in London, while also engraving and printing illuminated books of his own poetry. In that year, the disinterment of Milton's remains caused a scandal, when the corpse was broken up and pieces sold. One rib was taken by an actor called Ellis, from the Royalty Theatre in Whitechapel.

Five women were murdered and mutilated in the slums of Whitechapel in East London during 1888. A package delivered after the fourth killing to George Lusk, one of those most publicly engaged in trying to catch the perpetrator, contained a letter which claimed to be from the killer, and a half-kidney in a jar. Medical examination showed this was a possible match for a kidney removed from the latest victim.

In the final years of the twentieth century, the Year Two Thousand Problem in computer software came to light. This led to a huge effort to ensure essential systems were compliant, and widespread fears that failure could have cataclysmic consequences across the globe, starting at midnight on New Year's Eve 1999.