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Also by John Muckle

Poetry

It Is Now As It Was Then (with Ian Davidson)

Firewriting and Other Poems

Prose

The Cresta Run

Bikers (with Bill Griffiths)

Cyclomotors

As General Editor:

The New British Poetry (eds., Allnutt, D'Aguiar, Edwards, Mottram)

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London Brakes

a novel

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London Brakes

*Make me a mandrake, so I may growe here,
Or a stone fountain weeping out my yeare.*

John Donne, *Twick'nam Garden*

One

I used to notice Gladys on my way out in the mornings. Gladys was a notable woman. I noted her. After the men had all left for work she'd hesitate for a moment in her doorway in a quilted housecoat, then generally started her day by unnecessarily polishing the liver-coloured landing tiles and obsessively rearranging a row of green wellington boots beside a doormat that said OH NO NOT YOU AGAIN. Typically I'd be late for work myself. If it was cold I'd put my helmet and gloves on indoors and move my head up and down like an astronaut signalling in weightlessness; the principal difference between me and an astronaut being that my gear was subject to the force of gravity; also a distinct lack of TV coverage of my more routine missions. What was so great about astronauts, anyway? You didn't hear much of Yuri Gagarin, John Glenn, or Neil Armstrong anymore—not in 1986.

Gladys and myself never spoke beyond this muffled hello. I spoke to her because she was the next-door neighbour and because she reminded me slightly of my mother. It's even possible I reminded her of one of her own sons, but I won't bore you with a lot of crap about how people are often reminded of things by other things which even they know are completely dissimilar to the things of which they're being reminded. After all, what would it really prove except that some people's frames of reference are limited, or that they can't stop themselves trying to tease a bit of interest out of nothing?

When the weather turned bad I wouldn't go out except for a few days at the start of the month, not till the worst of it started to ease off towards the end of March; then I'd put in a couple of heroic weeks on circuit to pay the previous quarter's bills, well after the cut-off date but shortly before the actual cut-off. Otherwise I'd sit around on the sixth floor on my own listening to various sounds floating up from outside: kids calling; somebody kicking a can or the wind blowing it; snatches of music high in the tower—reggae, dance-music, salsa, heavy metal—any of which I'd much rather have been smooching to in somebody else's kitchen than agitating a teabag of sorrow in my own. Stray seagulls flapped across the big fuzzy double-glazing of the flat.

I turned the yellowing pages of a book somebody else had left behind.

All the stuff in the flat belonged to a guy called Willie, who was subletting to me. He also left a Humphrey Bogart mirror behind, like one of those Snoopy mirrors that young girl tourists buy. It was silk-screened and it seemed Bogart was wearing black lipstick. I took it down immediately and hung it in the bathroom. After a time I didn't notice the picture anymore, but I still saw my own face in the mirror when I was shaving and in the large murky fish tank as I crumbled tubifex worms for Willie's catfish and his tinfoil barb. Toothpaste got splattered over Bogart, obliterating his no longer operative charms. I kept meaning to do something about it, out of loyalty no doubt to my teenage years, but I never got around to properly cleaning it.

Willie had told me that Gladys was agoraphobic. That they were a particularly lumpen crowd over there. Frontish, bad news. The next-door neighbours were Scottish, like Willie himself, and so escaped this casually contemptuous description no matter how drunk they got in the long afternoons of their late antiquity. I was what we called a despatch rider myself, a motorbike courier. You didn't get any more lumpen than that in Willie's eyes. Gladys probably even thought I was a student; that was the received wisdom about me in the tower, or so the fat lady who cornered me in the lift once muttered, but that was way back before she started singing.

So. I had plenty of time on my hands and nothing to do with it. Even so, Gladys wasn't very high on my list of priorities. Meeting other tenants outside the flat was a bit like noticing graffiti by the lift that said SO NICE I WILL SUCK NICELY. You wondered if the message was for you (no way, José) and then it dropped from your mind. Or else I'd be thinking about some news from the old days—more dead star stuff—about Bob and me hanging around in the Country & Western cafe on Shaftesbury Avenue with the rest of the blokes and breathing in steam and the smell of frying while somebody else's radio crackled in anger at a nearby table or turned out to be your own machine; or else we'd be outside, pulled up in front of *Les Misérables* on Cambridge Circus, lounging back on our top boxes as we munched through

a Wendy burger and watched the tourists milling past like great drifting herds of kindly bison.

It was like—but it's easy to compare things when what you really mean is simply that they're out there, pushing in on you like the small smells and sheddings of someone you're sharing a flat with, the rasp of your own neck against a new collar. I keep on trying, you see, to get going on the Gladys business, but somehow she eludes me. I'll end up playing music or watching a film, something like *Desert Mice* with Sid James and Alfred Marks. That's quite a funny film, by the way, about ENSA in the North African campaign.

I was trickling along in traffic—fresh cool spring water finding its immutable way through igneous rock. In my top box I had a book going from a publisher in Soho to a publisher in Mayfair, artwork from Covent Garden to a Kensington ad agency. I could practically taste volcanic ash on the roof of my mouth, my spine felt it was like under compression in a vertical G-clamp and a lava of molten anger was about to blow off the top of my helmet. My arse was itching like crazy in a permanent sweat bath. I wanted to get home, wanted to scratch it, really make the dog cry, bathe it in hot water and pamper it with talc and exotic unguents—say hello to whoever preceded Buffy, and let my mind open its wrists in a pointless dream before the first documentary—before the big turn-off.

Anyway, I was standing outside the ad agency trying to loosen off my shoulders when the radio started up again. It was a sound like the noise of the sea withdrawing over gravel, slowly, forever, and every slave of the signals that bounced off the Telecom Tower (the maypole we all danced around) waited to hear their call-sign between shushing breakers, crackling like some call to further distress. Mine was Alpha 2-7. A long time ago it had been my age. Now when I heard it I knew Nick the fat controller had another job lined up, and at that moment I didn't feel even remotely like doing it.

"Got one you- -an do on -o-r -ay home." His voice came over between clicks on a slipping tape: "A-igh-?"

On your way home could mean anything at all, just about: usually a run out to Heathrow Airport. Nick's grasp of London geography was pathetic at the best of times. It would've disgraced a novice, in fact, especially in the late afternoons.

"What is it, Nick?"

"Cash job," he rapped. "Pick up round the corner."

"Okay," I said, "but it better not be the airport again, is it?"

That's exactly the sort of thing you don't say to a controller, not if you want to carry on working.

"Do -our way- it or -to?" he shouted. "I -a-nt -ot all bloody -igh."

I wanted it. "Roger-dodge," I said. "Sorry, mate."

Nick handed me the job out. Surprise, surprise: it really was just round the corner and the drop was in Acton. You couldn't say fairer. At least the bastard was giving me something I could do on my way home. I turned right into Queen's Mall without further complaint and did a swift left-hander into a nondescript residential row in Kensington where it wasn't until you got up close to the houses you noticed how well the brickwork was kept and caught a glimpse of dark, heavy furniture through parted curtains—and realised you were dealing with the serious, old rich: people who had it all from way back; who bought and sold—and ate—your grandfather and mine ten times before breakfast, then deciding they'd better stick to the Fruit 'n' Fibre.

I lifted a black glossy latch on a gate in the railings and walked down a flight of sandblasted steps to the basement flat. It was a cash customer. He waited for me inside the door, but it was shadowy in there. I couldn't see him too well, but he looked like some sort of sky pilot or crafty, a man of the cloth, or something, anyway, in those regions: a bit disappointing, really.

"Six pounds?" His voice hesitated, queried; his fingers were scrabbling through a worn purse. Typical—and, of course, he was fully expecting to be ripped off.

"Yep," I said.

He pushed a package into my hand with a fiver on top. "I'm afraid the rest will have to be in change."

I felt my left hand weighed down by an assortment of metal. "Thanks, chief," I said.

Back on the pavement I glanced at the address before dropping the packet into my top box. I stood there not knowing what to do, nor whither which way to go; I wanted to go back straight away and explain there must be some mistake: it was a small rectangular old-fashioned brown parcel, tied up with string—and it was addressed to Gladys. My neighbour. Gladys. I rode away with it and for some reason I found myself trembling. I rehearsed a few lines I'd never dream of saying, and on my way into the tower read a notice pinned to the caretaker's notice board:

PLEASE DO NOT PUT RUBBISH DOWN THE SHOOT AS
IT IS BLOCKED—THE MORE YOU FORCE IT DOWN THE
HARDER IT WILL BE TO UNBLOCK

Some bright spark had already crossed out SHOOT and put in SHUTE. I fished a biro out of my pocket, deleted the S and put in a C. I didn't want to have to bang on their door and get her to sign a docket, for some strange reason (who did she think she was?) but there wasn't much else I could do, so I did. Harry Chambers came to the door wearing the bottom of a tracksuit and three day's growth of beard on his still-handsome boat-race.

"Delivery for you," I said.

I passed him the packet, along with my clipboard and a biro, trying to make out this happened every day. Harry seemed to feel that some discussion of the matter was in order. I was determined to frustrate him. I looked off at a random point on the doorframe while he signed his name with a jagged flourish across the gap on the docket.

"We was thinking of getting away for the weekend," he said noncommittally. "But there don't seem much point."

"What's up, not warm enough for you?"

"Roads'll be chock a block, won't they?"

Harry was exactly the sort of miserable bastard who avoided travelling down to the seaside on a Bank Holiday so he could watch the news and gloat over the idiots stuck in traffic all the way down to Brighton and Southend. All had been revealed, or at least set in motion. I went indoors and made myself a cup of coffee. I surveyed the washing up and three bin liners which had begun to disgorge their contents over the floor, left the coffee to

cool and ran some hot water. I scrubbed at the congealed food, and, stopping to unblock the sink, thought about the delivery—trying to work out some sort of wild thriller plot including a Kensington packet going to Acton.

My first ideas were things like Gladys having a bastard son who'd made it big and sometimes sent her presents. Maybe even his laundry. But that was ridiculous. Not enough edge on it. Anyway, the packet was too heavy (too heavy for what?) and maybe she herself was the daughter of a wealthy family (who married beneath her) and on, and on, and on—exactly the sort of thing that reveals the limits of your imagination and drives you right on to the very end of the night, till false-dawn. Exactly the sort of thing I'd stopped doing some time ago.

Ideas of this sort are two a penny, and mine were neither spectacularly original, nor, in the final analysis, remotely plausible, although I suppose they might just have done in some old melodrama; as far as my morale was concerned, they had a similar result to my correction of the notice downstairs. Because if earthly power and the city were conceived as a great vaulted arch of light in which beings of various stations buzzed around forever, the lowest scarcely able to conceive of the ways of the highest in the inscrutable eminence of their motivations and activities, then a person like me was doomed to be one of those moth-like creatures who are attracted upwards by hot lights that could only scorch and blind him.

Before I really knew it I'd scoured several weeks worth of filth from the drainer, the sink was clean and the steeliness of its metal had startled the whole sordid question from my mind. I picked up three bulging bin bags and wrestled them onto the landing; but it wasn't till I'd reached the chute I remembered the notice I'd altered. I felt ashamed of myself for some reason. I couldn't pin it down. And as I swung the bin bags down the first flight of stairs, baked bean juice started to trickle out between my legs.

I'd started on the courier game many years ago, not long after moving in with Bob, Stig and Rudy over at the flat in Twickenham. They were quite well into it, cleaning up three hundred a week

sometimes, no tax, although you had to take off quite a bit of off that for wear and tear on the bike. Rudy and Bob went for new RDs, a brand new one every eighteen months, 400 and 250 Yamahas; both were on what was called the gold circuit. Probably it's the platinum circuit now. Even the uranium circuit. But it seemed like a good life, the good life: cruising around the North Circular waiting for jobs to come in, sheering into the centre and out again, and doing what you liked doing best—what could be more perfect?

I was riding an XS750 myself, which even then they considered to be a bit of a dinosaur—not a Tyrannosaurus, just sluggish and unhandlable in traffic. A Diplodocus. It looked fierce, but its brains were in its arse. They had a point, I suppose, especially at the sort of speeds they were employed to do. The XS was a shaft-driven bike (only the BMWs, the old Sunbeam S7, and the water-cooled Honda CX500 V-Twin—a despatcher's bike par excellence—were shaft-driven at that time) billed as a Super-Shaft (with a unit rumoured to be designed by Porsche) and advertised with semi-naked women draped over it, as always. Anyway, that shaft unit was bulletproof: it might well have been an ideal courier's bike, except (as I say) for the poor handling, and the moped brakes. These were the same as those on the RD400—but fitted on a bike twice the weight (half a ton) you'd sometimes find yourself with no brakes in the wet. You just had to knock her down through the gears until the back wheel locked up solid—and hang on. Still, the XS was economical (60mpg) and most importantly she was what I had. I liked the bike a lot and managed on her for years and years and years.

In fact, they only let me move in because I happened to know Rudy's brother, because they needed somebody straight away. They weren't prepared to advertise: it would've meant emptying the roaches out of the ashtrays, cleaning the place up, and that was just too much trouble. Rudy tried to hang that name on me at first, of Super Shaft, and it nearly stuck for a while (he was trying to say I was uncool, I think) but mercifully it didn't stick for too long and after that I was happy to be plain Tony. The flat was a great place to live. Rudy was dealing at the time. There was always a joint or three on the go. We'd bring in a few cans of Holsten in the evenings and listen to a few Floyd albums. Nobody

said very much, which could get you down after the first ten; but Rudy had worked out his very own little private dope-language, just to make sure that anyone who came round to score didn't Bogart any of them.

When someone held up a joint and said 'Quiz' you were supposed to say 'Ago' and the first to say it got the next toke. I found out what it meant, eventually. It was 'Ego' not 'Ago'. Benefits of a classical education. But at the time outsiders certainly did look pretty stupid sitting there with their fingers out and their mouths open, although you could get pretty stoned by taking a few deep breaths.

At the beginning of that time I was still working at the garden centre over on Richmond bypass, second job I got after dropping out of college. It was quite a nice place to work, relaxing. The money was liveable but lousy. I didn't learn much about plants and shrubs—like Rudy and the rest, I was more interested in the prospect of turning over a spare greenhouse to combustible greenery production. So in the end the lure of despatching was irresistible. You could make up your own hours, within reason, as the others said (that's how they got you in) and this particular aspect of my new job suited me fine.

I took to Bob more than to the others. Immediately, as you often do. His most notable characteristic was an intense, indiscriminating kind of enthusiasm, and as well he had a peculiar vocabulary he invented for describing his mental processes. He wanted people to listen to him, I suppose. Don't we all. Rudy liked the idea of it—like the way he'd describe a whole space station on the side of his hamburger when they were tripping—but didn't have much real patience the way he rambled on day to day, and anyway, he had quite enough of a gob on him for the rest of us put together. I'd plenty of patience myself, I'm a patient person; but eventually it ran out, or I realised it was something a bit different.

Bob was sitting in front of the gas fire. Talking about the peculiar world he seemed to live in half the time, of the amazing James Railo and the ominous Mr O, with digressions on the way someone had once looked at him as he was getting into a sleeping bag some years before, in the back seat of someone else's car, travelling nowhere at a leisurely pace. I took out a cigarette,

dropped the packet on the couch. It fell on its side and the cancer warning was level with my eyes. I flipped it over and moved the lighter diagonally towards my mouth. A long blue flame jetted across. I sucked it in. And I looked at him across the littered floor, nodding at him, staring, and mentally enacting a scene in which I just leaned towards him, putting my hand out, or maybe shifting my weight a little.

"This is how James Railio disappeared on the beach, right?" he said. "He was sitting over his chessboard with Morgana, right? Next to them was a sandcastle of a mansion with seven floors and seven rooms on each floor."

"Why seven?"

"I don't know, there just were seven. Anyway, James Railio turns to look down the beach. Mr O is walking slowly towards him. So he looks back and the chessboard is gone. Morgana is slowly walking into the sea. Railio walks towards Mr O at the same slow pace. Then, when they're about ten feet apart, they pause and -" Bob brought his hands together so that they appeared to walk through one another "—like this, you see they just disappear into nothing, they just keep walking, just leaving this echo on the empty beach—and then a wave washes through the rooms of the mansion."

"Wow, that's amazing."

"Fancy another tea?" Bob sprang up, and then squatted again, bouncing his arse on his heels.

"Okay."

"Another bubble I had," he went on, dangling the mugs from his fingers now, "was that I'd write the book of this—" he gestured vaguely beyond the room "—bury it in a time capsule, dig it up in about ten thousand years and see if it was still true."

"But it's not true now," I said.

Bob got up and stalked out into the kitchen; I heard the valve whining on the cold tap as he blasted out the cups and filled the kettle. I stood up to stretch my legs and ran my eye along Rudy's bookshelf. They were carefully arranged by him in an order of author and colour, with the SF at the top and the Fantasy at the bottom. I'd already been through the first two, from Asimov to Zelazny, now I was coming down to the greens and the mauves, to the weird stuff like William Morris and Lord Dunsany.

"Looking at the models?" Bob was standing behind me carrying two mugs of tea awkwardly in one hand.

"No, just for something to read."

"Look at this." The so-called game box was wedged into the bottom shelf, a group of tiny hand-painted models in positions on top of it.

"Hmm." I was the only one who didn't play the game. It was quite a complex, absorbing one, but it didn't involve any glass beads—and their absorption in it made my life quite a lonely one sometimes. Though I'd tried hard, I hadn't been able to get into my assigned role as a dwarf. And the other blokes, Stig in particular, had become so irritated with me I decided to bow out of it gracefully.

"This is me." Bob picked up a tiny figure in a starry cloak. "I'm a level three wizard, but at the moment I'm operating with level two spells."

"So, if Railio's dead, I suppose you'll be spending more time on this game?"

"Railio's not dead," he said impatiently. "I thought I'd explained. He's walking away along the beach—and I still have the bank accounts."

"So how much are they worth?"

"Mr O's got twenty quid and Railio has a fiver."

"I wonder if Rudy's left any blow behind?" I wondered absent-mindedly. "He wouldn't miss it if we twisted one up."

"No way," Bob shook his head, "no way can we nick his blow."

"He wouldn't miss it."

"That's not the point. What sort of mate are you?"

I looked away at small bits and pieces on the carpet, some of which could possibly be dope.

"Oh well, I suppose we could always just take enough for a toke." Bob was on his feet again searching through the pockets of the leather Rudy had left hanging on the back of the door. He struck lucky in the little key pouch sewn into the left sleeve.

"Where is he now, round Rosie's?"

"Yeah." Bob was chewing a chunk off the lump with his thumbnail. "He's probably getting a sore prick right this minute."

"You get used to it," I said, which I supposed you probably did.

We passed the joint back and forth between us, taking little gasping tokes. I got up and put *Highway 61 Revisited* on at low volume—it was the only half-decent record in the place and it belonged to my friend Bob.

No dope, no hope. What a useful time-waster, loosener of stiffened joints, and creative spur to sporadic splurges of nonsense. It came down around each of us like a soft bird cage you didn't want to break out of as we listened intently to an album so familiar it barely needed to be turned up or on. I was looking at Bob in that knocked sideways sort of way. His brown hair was a mess of tangled curls. There was a couple of day's beard on his face, which made him look darker than he really was. On his cheesecloth shirt some buttons were undone—and underneath it his deep chest swelled and sloped away, as chests do.

I wouldn't say Gladys had started to obsess me, but when you're on your own the strangest little things catch at your interest. Usually I tend to turn into a vegetable when no-one's about; but the packet had triggered off a curiosity I find it hard to account for or even remember with much accuracy. I refactored even the smallest glances in a thousand ways, taking it seriously; and before I knew what was happening my pathetic excuse of a life had been taken over by people and things I didn't really care about and a series of thoughts meant as no more than allowed playful fantasies took on the fishy smell of truths revealed by people who always seem to think they know exactly what truth is. And don't.

Sometime during the next couple of weeks they bought a dog—a hideous dog, designed by a marketing committee specialising in creatures to be cherished by people who liked defective beings: the same firm who'd designed my mother's cats. I was made fully aware of the existence of this one morning when the lift door opened and it scuttled at my ankles, yapping furiously as its little paws skated away over the tiles.

Gladys's miserable bastard of a husband was on the other end of the lead.

“Whoa, boy,” he said, and smiled at me, strangely.

Harry. Harry Chambers. He was a bit friendlier after that, although the dog never settled down. When he was with it he’d chuckle quietly as he jerked at the lead—and if I made a noise on the landing (like pushing my key too briskly into the lock) there’d be a heavy thud opposite as Gladys’s dog hurled itself against their door. I’m not even sure why I thought it was hers. Probably it was smallish and a bit yappy. Her husband would have needed some reason for the pleasure he got out of this animal. Here, I bought you a dog, I imagined him saying, as he pulled out the small furry bundle from under his coat. Personally, I’d have taken it straight to the cleaners to be de-haired—or better still just thrown it in the bin and bought another one. Another coat, I mean.

I seemed to see her whenever I left the flat. She was always herding the dog back down their hall with a slippered foot and simpering—but I also spotted her outside the tower, huddled into the main entrance, in the draughtiest spot, peering out across the walkway at the grass beyond as though the way out there consisted of big chunks of broken ice on a thawing pond. She was holding one of those extending leads on a reel in her hand and the little dog was careening on the end of it like a particularly noisy fish.

One of these occasions another tenant was passing by into the tower. “When’s she due now?” this friendly woman asked. “It seems like ages.”

“September, end of September.”

“Still with you, is she?”

“Nowhere else for her to go, mate.”

Many people went in and out of their place. I wondered where they slept at night. I imagined three generations of them overflowing from a three-piece suite, trying to see the screen over one another’s heads, Gladys bringing in their dinners on juggled trays, and after a while an argument developed about the boxing or the snooker or the nags. The ugly little dog was jumping about over everyone, continually yapping to go out, and they cuffed its nose away from their plates. The family seemed to bring out a bit of the snob in me: they were one of those bad families you’d heard about, if you grew up in the suburbs, like me.

I started to have a suspicion that Gladys wanted me out of my flat in order to install her daughter in my place; this idea seemed to make as much sense as anything else I'd been able to come up with, so why not run away with it? I stood there in the lift one day with members of her family; a young father cradled his baby daughter in his arms, his pregnant wife was next to him and a girl of sixteen was crammed into the back—her mouth continually twitching as another possible sarcastic comment occurred to her developing young mind.

My finger was hovering over the buttons.

"Six," one of the women said.

The bloke looked down at the child in his arms—she'd been crying hard and was thinking of doing so again. He pinched her gently on the cheek. "You didn't like the black man, did you?"

"Blak man. Blak man."

The two women shuffled, the lift jerked upwards with a whine of effort. It was the usual coffin of scarred aluminium with a puddle of piss on a thoughtfully rubberised floor.

"What's he called?" he looked into her eyes and bounced her. "He's a coon," he said, pronouncing the word carefully.

"Coo-coo-coo-n."

The three grown-ups laughed.

"You mustn't say that!" said the younger woman, pretending to smack the child although she too thought it was a good thing to teach her.

"Coon. Coon. Coon." Her brother smiled into baby's eyes, folding her close to him in his big forearms.

I really hated those stupid bastards. But it was like that, or I thought it was—everybody I ran into seemed to be in the grip of some sort of grudge that consumed everything else about them. This small, neat woman who lived upstairs looked at me with a loathing she couldn't easily disguise, and soon I realised it was because she thought I was responsible for every single soggy sheet of newspaper, every whiff of piss or disinfectant in the lift—the Kentucky Chicken box under my arm was just more of this future litter, more high octane fuel for her raging, desiring but never to be satisfied disgust: this universal feeling that can fix itself on anywhere, and so often does. But why me?

“There used to be nice people living here,” she said, “now we’ve got allsorts. licorice allsorts.”

How long had this been going on? Forever, I supposed. Anyway, it was my main reason for continuing to keep myself to myself.

In the West End roads were treacherously slippery; dark grease-patches loosened by now and again rain—and at night I listened to the madding weather batter at the double-glazing like a battery of angry ghosts out to scare the living daylight out of anyone living in bad faith or fudging their debts to the dead. It was the screaming abdabs all right, the kind that settle in for good and stab at your heart and your hopes with the strafing fire of a continual argument you’ve started and already lost with a friend who turns out not to be one, some antagonist who turns out to be—fuck, I don’t know, how should I?—rain, rain, go way—and sometimes I’d remember how I used to get a nice feeling of safety and well-being from that, long ago when I was doing my first forty blinks in my blue carrycot by the old caravan window.

I didn’t even think about Gladys anymore; that mystery had settled down to a dull nothing-feeling, but I knew there were goings on around me I didn’t want to know about. I didn’t care much but I seemed to know inside that I was being carefully watched and reported on—and late one Friday something happened to push me further in that well known direction. I was coming up in the lift again, drenched at the end of a rainy afternoon, when the doors slid open on the sixth floor and another messenger faced me, a gloved finger jabbing the call button. I thought it was a small man at first, but it wasn’t. It pulled its helmet off to reveal one of them. The woman-thing. The thing from planet porky. This one was only slightly drier than me: a pinched face under her visor, a Swallows bib (grey with the little stencilled bird flitting away in one corner) and full wets. We nodded and stepped round each other, like crabs.

The lift door closed behind her. I glanced at the tracks leading towards Gladys’s door. She’d be out there in a minute, mopping them up. Their hall light was on, a friendly patch of pale pink against the blue council paintwork. That little dog sounded like it was tearing its throat out—what a pity it wasn’t capable of it, I thought—and as my lock crashed open with a dry report

of nothing doing in moo-moo land, I stepped through into the hallway and scuffed another day's brochures in front of me.

Bob always made himself a large mug of coffee after work. He would sprawl with his head on the edge of the couch and pick up whatever he happened to be reading. In those days he seemed to go through about ten books a week, most weeks, half of them SF and Fantasy, the rest drawn freely from the curriculum of the previous decade. I'd read quite a bit of this stuff. Bob handled Rudy's books with extreme care, but always cracked the spines of his own purchases as a first gesture of possession. He'd paid for them out of his own hard-earned money and now he was going to gobble down the meat.

He consumed print by holding an open page against his cheek, opposite his right eye, and greedily blotting the words off that page before moving on to the next. On some occasions he would reach out impatiently and snatch handfuls of meaning-laden dust motes from the air.

The rest of us just chewed our way through a kebab and side two of *Dark Side of The Moon*. Bob crossed and recrossed his legs as he turned pages, lifting up his arse, jerking it from side to side (as a concentration aid); then he'd slap the splayed open book down, spring to his feet, and unwind; dancing around the shared room in a half-circle as words spilled from his mouth in fed-out spasms and his trembling kung-fu hands chopped at the joint-thick air. He would explain and explain and we were utterly astonished by the flashing light of his mind; but at the end of it, when he slumped back down onto the dusty old couch, I couldn't help noticing that he hadn't properly understood the stories he was telling. Not so any of us could really understand what they were about.

He often seemed to be quoting, but the source was usually himself. "James Railio said something interesting to me the other night," he would start off, "which incidentally has turned out to be one of his top five favourite sayings ..." What followed wasn't generally a saying, just another of what he called his bubbles, which he wrote down in blue notebooks where he kept: banks of quickly put down quotations in his weird handwriting: a broken,

slightly wobbling line a bit like Morse Code, mixed up with the wavering calculations he made when casting horoscopes, with the unbroken and moving lines of mysterious, soon to be understood hexagrams from the *I-Ching*, the Book of Changes. Biting Through was one of these. The lean meat is caught between your teeth and all you have to do is chew through it.

"Your energies are fitful, like mine," Bob pronounced. "You and me will never command the instant respect of strangers." This was while looking at a star-chart in the back of the 1958 ephemeris. "You will fail to achieve any of your ambitions, but you will die with honour."

But I didn't really have any strong ambitions. He was staring hard into my eyes. I stared back, believing in him as long as his quiet, nervous speech was right there under my attention. "What about you?" I said. "What did yours say?"

I looked away at the books lined two deep around the skirting boards. Bob scrabbled around on the floor, pulled another ephemeris from under his bed, quickly pawed it open and began to examine its map of his own birth date. He didn't say anything. I closed my eyes, opened them. The record player's lid (its bass cabinet) was up and the defective auto-turntable was continuing to spin a finished album; a ray of late afternoon sunlight hit the record, bounced off the slope of the ceiling and threw up a wobbly spiral of light behind his wide head.

"I could go one of two ways," he said. "No, make that one of three. I see myself living to a great age, and assuming the powers of the gods. On the other hand, those same powers could destroy me."

"What's the third way?" I looked down and saw the splayed lime-green cover of Colin Wilson's *The Occult* between my feet, a book I'd read too, poking out from under the bed.

Bob didn't seem to hear me. "Do you want to know what dying is like?" he asked. "Well, I'll tell you, Tony. It's like diving into a swimming pool. It's there on your nerve and the angle of attack—you either slide into another dimension and keep on moving, or you break up immediately on impact."

I woke up on the couch at 1.30am. The closing tone was shrieking in my ears. I crawled across to the TV and turned it off, trying to concentrate against fragments of dream, to bring back a memory of exactly what film I'd been watching. *Blind Terror*. Mia Farrow staggering around in deep mud with her arms flailing, then banging on the rusty body of a wrecked car with a rusty silencer she picked up. A poor little blind girl in a panic, flailing away in the middle of a deserted breakers' yard—crying out for help where there was no help to be had. The camera pulled back to reveal there was nobody and nothing around for miles and miles. Why was that so frightening? Why was that more terrible than so many of the more terrible things that are often shown?

Because it was much truer than most of them, or that's what I thought to myself. I threw myself back on the couch and let my eyes close. The tangled-up dream started again immediately: they bundled the girl into a Landrover, drove her to Kensington. Gladys opened the door of the basement flat. They carried her in. I was standing there like a complete plonker with a parcel under my arm, trying to get a docket signed. Nobody had any time for me. Nobody gave two shits. In the dream I woke up again, and there was a moment's relief before I looked outside. The city was an empty place. Cars moved—driven by what? Rooms were lit up—lived in by what? The sky was empty, empty. Somebody or something picked up an identity bracelet from the carpet. My call-sign was written on it in indelible ink.

I stood up and stumbled around the fading in room. I rubbed at my eyes and I found the door to the kitchen and I fought my way in there by touch, through fog. I plugged in the kettle and my hands shook as I quickly spooned coffee into a mug. I cooled the coffee down a bit with a splash of milk that went everywhere, gulped it down and my brain started to clear. Jesus Jesus. I'd read somewhere that you should always wash and eat before remembering your dreams; but there was no food in the kitchen, no soap, no nothing, and anyway, I felt as if the touch of water would damage the surface of my skin.

What a film, I thought, to push it away. The reason it was so frightening was because of all the things she didn't know. Because she was forced to trust what she already knew couldn't be trusted—and worse, she didn't know that there was no help,

no solution of any kind to her main problem. In *Blind Terror* Mia Farrow was totally alone.

It hadn't taken me long to work out that these packets to Gladys were happening regularly. They were if I allowed myself to generalise from the two incidents. The day before I'd seen Harry Chambers carrying out his granddaughter from the flat, followed by a teenage schoolboy on crutches. Who was he? A grandchild? I tried to count up the inhabitants of their flat on my fingers. They mounted quickly. I couldn't get them all in. I knew they were humans but I had some need to know. Then I forgot which ones I'd counted before and I started counting again, until I was just staring down at my empty hands.

I had to do something, something. You know that feeling? But what the fuck did any of it have to do with me? A question that popped up and was swept aside, it reappeared and teased me, but somehow I couldn't make it depart, like an irritating sort of person of poor character you've had the misfortune to fall in love with, like an *I-Ching* hexagram meant for some other poor fucker, one that you keep persistently throwing, or I did before I stopped that game. I felt in myself that I had to go back to the basement flat in Kensington to find out what was happening. I just had to, that's all. There was no reason, no excuse for it, and at moments such as these I expected anyone could see just what sort of person, sadly, I really am.

The streets were deserted and the big old Yamaha was clattering a little at her bottom end, echoing around the dark shop fronts that faced into Shepherd's Bush Green, like the stands of an end of the meeting racetrack still blowing with dropped programmes and ticket stubs after a day's cruel sport. I thought there'd be more police around Hammersmith. I carried on up to the roundabout, did a sharp right, idling up to each junction and accelerating away from them in a game where speeding made me invisible—to myself, to them, to the others, and to God Almighty.

I parked around the corner and walked back to the house. I pretended the streetlights were lasers. I must've been somewhere similar thousands of times. They had a similar layout. If you walked out this story in the day with a guidebook in your hand

you wouldn't understand it. There were no lights left on in any parts of the building. No cars were parked in the street. I slowly walked back to where I'd left the bike.

In my top box there was a small tool-kit, which I kept wrapped up in soft rag to keep it from rattling and damaging the packets. I selected a pair of tasty Mole Grips and strolled back to the house. My head was pounding. I tried to think, work out what I might be looking for. What if I was caught, found out? Well, well. I dismissed this thought. The best I could do was to think it would bring everything out into the open. But what exactly? I turned the handle, taking up slack in both directions. The flat was locked. Of course, of course. What was I expecting? I wanted to go home suddenly, curl round the spring in my mattress and fall asleep. I tested the wide sash and it slid up easily. I looked in stupid astonishment at the velvet curtains beginning to move a little in the night air.

I put one leg over the windowsill. My foot touched the deep carpet of the room. There was a row of brass bells arranged in descending order of size along the sill. I picked up each one, muffling the clapper with my gauntlets, and lowering them down behind the curtain. I pulled my left leg after me, crawled into the room, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, keeping low. I was behind a large overstuffed armchair with a flowery old-style cover. On the far side of the room a carved wooden table loaded down with knick-knacks. Beside the fireplace was another armchair. I sniffed it. Somehow it smelt like an old person's room, as I already knew it was. Sitting room of a retired couple, perhaps. A newspaper was draped over an arm of a chair, rustling when I placed my hand on it. In front of the fire stood a tray bearing what was left of a cold meal.

At once the room possessed a reality that chased away the idea I could find out anything useful here, anything I needed to know—and that meant I was really scared. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to be doing here, even. Doors presented themselves, and, as so often, I took the one that was slightly ajar. To the kitchen. Soft light bled in through a barred window, catching at taps and a sink. The fridge turned itself off, ran down, unwound. I thought it must have decided it had got cold enough. Icy spam temperature.

There was a stripped wooden table beside it and a cork board on the wall, and the cards of two messenger firms were pinned up in the bottom corner—one of them was us, the other was Swallows—and on the table was a small cardboard box. I tried to get hold of the lid and look inside, but my gauntlets were getting badly in my way. A black finger was there in my mouth; I was pulling, when I heard a sudden noise from next door of somebody coming through from the bedroom.

“What the...” Whoever it was shivered and padded across to the open sash and pulled it down. “Stupid woman...” his voice trailed away. “Who is it? What’s going on?”

I flattened myself along the edge of the open kitchen door. I closed my fist around the Mole Grips and raised them above my head. Silence. A scrape, maybe. I looked down at the back door. There was a key in the lock and my hand looked so stupid reaching for it.

“Dennis, are you all right?”

A light came on in the living room and feet in slippers were scuffed quickly across the carpet. When he came round the door with the poker I tried to bring the Grips hard down, but I was severely unbalanced. Before I could recover he let me have it across the ribs and kicked me right in the balls—and I fell back against the edge of the table and rolled off onto the tiled floor. A wave of nausea broke through me. I felt like a baby who’s been dropped, who hurts and only wants to be picked up again—between my legs there was a black hole of pain that was sucking the world up into it.

This pair had my helmet off and the bloke’s wife was trying to revive me with a dishcloth. Evidently she’d succeeded. The pain was still there, but more in one place. I had my hands pressed into my balls, my left side throbbing. I wanted to pass out again, but they kept gabbling at me. The woman was still dribbling her water on my face and I turned my head from side to side to make her stop it.

“Call the police, woman,” he said. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t get up.”

“Dear oh dear, dear oh dear,” she was saying. She started to wring out the cloth in the sink.

“Don’t hurt me,” I managed to say. “I didn’t come here to steal, I was just...” I was choked up with tears; they oozed out of me. Everything was clenched, straining to push them out of my eyes in a series of violent spasms, each of which stabbed deeper into my left side. As I cried I felt deeply aggrieved. I was the innocent party in this. I’d been conspired against, abused, driven from pillar to post, put upon, and what’s more ... my spasms slowly slowed. I was lying on the floor of someone else’s kitchen in the terrible brightness of their strip-lighting. I was guilty.

“Make him a cup of tea,” the old man said, “or perhaps a cup of cold water would be more appropriate.” He looked at me, smiling faintly. “Child, you are deep in sin. Will you join together in prayer with us?”

Somehow I struggled onto my knees. We said the Lord’s Prayer, followed it with Psalm 23; then the old man said another prayer, one of his own, a prayer I hadn’t heard before.