

L7

An Inthebar Production

INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2006, various members of the Yahoo Group, Inthebar*, wearied of discussing cars, food, cats, music, and even doorknobs, and embarked upon constructing a collaborative narrative (try saying that with false teeth) based on an offhand suggestion that the lyrics of an old Sam the Sham & The Pharaohs' song, 'Wooly Bully', might in fact contain a coded message. Greater oaks have undoubtedly sprung from greater acorns, but hardly I'd wager, has something so inconsequential sprung from such a small one (no, I don't know what that means, either). It simply proved, as did the basic principle of the group itself, that a lot of people had a lot of time on their hands with no better way to occupy it. The text you hold in your hands has been shuffled into shape by a number of willing Inthebaristas. They know who they are. You need not. As is inevitable with a venture of this kind, it contains certain lacunae, irregularities of plot and timelines, characters who walk off the edge of the page never to appear again, etc. Dave Langford has undertaken to publish a separate concordance. The task of tying all the threads together was obviously the least

fun part of the exercise and no one volunteered, so it wasn't done. But I maintain it is not as bad or unreadable as anything William Burroughs or Brion Gysin ever wrote, or even that Joyce fellow.

We have adopted a low-visibility option to identify individual contributors. Their initials appear at the end of the texts they were responsible for. So you will need this handy key to identify them in full, and apply blame and criticism as necessary:

BT – Bruce Townley

DL – Dave Langford

EK – Earl Kemp

GC - Graham Charnock

GJ – Graham James

HB – Harry Bell

IM – Ian Maule

JC – Jack Calvert

JDB – John D. Berry

JNH – John Nielsen-Hall

KF – Keith Freeman

PC – Pat Charnock

RC – Rich Coad

RJ – Rob Jackson

The first rule of IntheBar is that you can talk about whatever you like. The second rule of IntheBar is that you can talk about whatever you like. You are actively encouraged to follow both of these rules to the letter. Fandom, books, SF, movies, beer, hominy grits, Earl Kemp, music, doorknobs, art. Let's celebrate them all.

Later an amendment to the first rule, or maybe the second rule, was added, but we need not go into that here.

Contributor's Biographies

Earl Kemp: A national nuisance, has been known by many disguises: adventurer, explorer, lover, beloved, rebel, First Amendment convict savant, and numerous others, mostly all bad. Cartledge, Biographer of the Elite, insists he is a wanker. Kemp is best known as the notorious producer, during the Golden Age of Sleaze Paperbacks, of more than 5,000 novels and half again that many Naked people magazines for Greenleaf Classics, Inc. In his dotage, for seven years he has been dribbling salacious memories at <http://efanzines.com/EK/index.html> and has become the (upper case) Chronicler of the entire sleaze book genre.

Pat Charnock: Pat Charnock was pulled kicking and screaming into fandom in her twenties, smelt the air and found it was good. Since then, she's spent the years correcting typos, raising boys, and

collating statistics. Loves gardening and reading novels set in alien places like Arizona.

John Nielsen-Hall: Born 1950, almost died, survived reluctantly, grew, got alienated, developed obsessions a) Music b) Literature, a) started with Les Paul and Mary Ford, b) with Dan Dare, now lives okay in Wiltshire with partner Audrey .

Bruce Townley: Born in a suburb in New Jersey, USA. Grew up in other locales, all within the USA. Discovered science fiction and dinosaurs at an early age. Am acquainted with such arcane knowledge as the use of the fungo bat. Have an unreasonable fear of the Laughing Cow Cheese cow.

Graham Charnock: Science Fiction renaissance man: fan, writer, editor, musician, performance artist, piss artist. Like Leonardo da Vinci he does not bathe or change his socks. Cocks a snoot at antisnootcocks.

Ian Maule: "Born in Newcastle, England. Grew up in other locales including Plymouth, Ipswich and Malta.. Discovered science fiction and mud pies at an early age. Am acquainted with such arcane knowledge as the use of chained proxy servers and creosote bottling. Have an unreasonable fear of anyone called Greg.

Dave Langford: Born 1953 in Newport, Mon, which suddenly became Gwent. Chased neutronsat Atomic Weapons Research Establishment 1975-1980 before discovering freelance idleness, too

many Hugos and too little money. Irrational fear of hearing aids.
Not dead yet.

Rich Coad: Born 1956 in London, and left almost immediately. Returned eventually and met editor of L7. Irrational fear of falling from a great height and landing with an awful Splat! on something unyielding and splitting open like one of those watermelons used by Gallagher.

Rob Jackson: “Read SF quite a lot as a medical student and junior doctor, and discovered and enjoyed fandom at the same time (the Seventies). He is now a consultant psychiatrist specializing in substance misuse, an interest which might or might not have been influenced by early experiences in fandom.

Mary Reed: Suddenly a shot rang out...

Graham James: Currently hibernating in Yorkshire. Ancestry obscure. Progeny more obscure. Origins Norf Lunden two years after Prince Charles. Interested in SF comix when young, mild fascination with SF at 20, obsessed with Fandom in late 20's, long time music fan, returning to virtual fandom after many years absence, in his 50's.

Jack Calvert: Born in another age. Discovered science fiction inutero, when mom was frightened by reading a John Campbell editorial. Currently lives in an ancient sinister wooden building on

the obscure distant fringe of fanworld, where he can be found glowering out from behind a pile of mouldy magazines.

John D. Berry: Born 1950 on the banks of the BronxRiver. Read science fiction before he knew that waswhat he was doing, but got hooked on monster magazines at a young age and came into fandom by a back door. Publishing fanzines somehow evolved, through another sideways shift, into designing books and writing and speaking about typography, which he does for a living. Irrational fear of typewriter apostrophes.

Keith Freeman: Born in 1938 in north Kent I spent my life (a) dodging German bombs,(b) dodging RAF authorities and (c) at University - 30+ years without getting a degree. Somewhere in there I found SF and fandom... and a wife... and a mortgage...

Harry Bell: Born in Gateshead. Grew up in Gateshead. Struggling to remain in Gateshead. Received an early introduction to science fiction from my Father, who also taught me to draw cartoon spiders. These two strands informed my life from then on. The spiders I had to learn to live with at a later date. Abandoned the comfort and serenity of Government employment in 1997to paint pictures no one wants or can afford.

Ian Maule: Born in Newcastle, England. Grew up in other locales including Plymouth, Ipswich and Malta.. Discovered science fiction and mud pies at a nearly age. Am acquainted with such arcane

knowledge as the use of chained proxy servers and creosote bottling. Have an unreasonable fear of anyone called Greg."

Dan Steffan: Born near an atomic energy plant in Paducah, Kentucky in 1953, he then moved in rapid succession to the sooty wastelands of Gary, Indiana, the frozen Cod infested snow banks of Portland, Maine, the trailer park laden sod of New Mattamoras, Ohio, and, finally, to the cul de sacs of Liverpool, New York, where he loved to ride his bike past the cute little guided missile factory. After a decade of suburban bliss, his family relocated to a pastoral Peyton Place called Cazenovia, where he lived among polyester poltroons and upper crust cunts. It was here that he discovered fandom and a whole new, wonderful world of poltroons and cunts. Shortly before his 21st birthday he escaped the rigors of familial disinterest and moved to Falls Church, Virginia, where he took too many drugs and remembers nothing after 1976. They tell him he now lives in a beautiful place called Portland, Oregon.



THE L7 CODE

The policeman unzipped his truncheon and turned on the lamp and shone it in Cartledge's face. Okay, this is how the whole mess started, said Cartledge, sitting back in his chair, putting his hand-tooled brogues up on the police chief's desk and lighting up an old stogie:

There was this group of reprobates and ex-cons known as the Inthebar Gang. They were sitting around shooting the breeze when one of them, a guy called Burns who made a fortune selling black market transatlantic telephone cable, suddenly starts singing an old Sam the Sham number, Woolly Bully. Pretty soon the whole Gang was joining in:

"Hatty told Matty, "Let's don't take no chance. Let's not be L-seven, come and learn to dance..."

"L-seven" = the letter "L" and the number '7,'" Burns explained. When typed, they form a rough SQUARE (L7), so the lyrics mean "let's not be square."

At this point Graham 'Skinhead' James, who had once actually spent a night in the drunk tank, spat a wad of chewing tobacco into a nearby spittoon and chipped in: "Hey guys, Maybe we could compile a whole list of coded song lyrics. Or maybe that's another one for Dan Brown.

Graham 'Old Man' Charnock looked up from whittling a banjo and said, "Sorry, but L7 does not describe a square. Either I am very dim or those songwriters were very clever or very stupid. I know which one I'd go with. Why were Hatty and Matty communicating in code for fer chrissake in what is basically a very silly song? Sorry, this simply will not do. What would that sultry linguist Victoria Coren, for example, have to say about the term L7 occurring in popular literature, or even a balti restaurant in Newcastle. I think we should be told."

"No need to get aggressive," said James. "This is how it pans out. Victoria Coren must be related, even in a Maule way to Richard Coren, a famous US Contract & Rubber Bridge player, best known for his skills at Duplicate weekends. L7 are a fictitious punk heavy metal band, the invention of Big Bad Bruce Townley who created a spoof web site of a spoof band just to see who based their musical knowledge on Googling rather than "being there". Try finding anyone other than Bruce who claims to have seen them. Try buying one of their records, unless 'Uncle' Johnny has been initiated into the conspiracy and created a mix. Hatty of course was or is, a transsexual, being short for Harriet, the female equivalent of Harry, as in Harry Bell, our esteemed ringleader, who was quietly sitting in a Balti Restaurant when in walked an ole pal. "Cor, Leone," says 'arry only moments before a

pistol is retrieved from a water closet. On hearing the news, and in a brave effort to save his only link to the outside world from imminent collapse, an itinerant gumshoe called Phillip K Cartledge succeeds in unraveling the mysteries of time travel by deciphering the subliminal anagrammatic code, thus, SSahm= Sham, and travels back in time to try and alter history and remove the pistol from the water closet before it is discharged. And there he remains, prostrate.

“You expect me to believe that bullshit?” said the Policeman. “That’s less likely than the plot of the average Punch & Judy show.”

“You haven’t heard nothing yet,” said Cartledge, “because this is what happened next...”

*

Phillip K got inside the toilet he immediately stripped and assumed the wankering position No. 4 but, unknown to him, he was angled correctly to catch the point of a carelessly discarded but unfinished needle of pure pleasure. As he reached the climax and sat down forcefully onto that syringe, the remaining contents were just enough to give him that ultimate thrill. He wasn’t prostrate, he was all the way over the edge and into oblivion when discovered there, straddling the toilet like a modern day Elvis looking for Mr. Goodbar again. (EK)

*

Cartledge arose from the toilet, confused by references to him looking for Mr Goodbar, which he remembered as a rather bad novel and a worse film about a woman seeking

self-degradation, which obviously wasn't something which applied to him. A homosexual man seeking degradation possibly, but never a woman. A cleaner with an OBE and his own brush scuttled in immediately to clean the pebble-dashing. Cartiledge tipped him by pressing something into the cleaner's pocket with the injunction 'here, have a drink on me'. When the cleaner reached into his pocket he found a tea-bag. Curse you, Cartiledge, shouted Kettle after Cartiledge as he strode off down the platform, for it was him and he was it, and they were indeed they.

An old Mexican steam train issued a sigh of steam as Cartiledge passed by. Cartiledge was grateful it was the train and not him, since that last enchilada had not gone down at all well. Cartiledge had a feeling he was being watched over his shoulder by a shadowy chthuluesque figure with many tentacles but otherwise resembling either Will Self, or Bruce Townley, an obscure west coast writer who had spent most of his life in the shadow of James Joyce, if not Jack Kerouac or even Joyce James Kerouac. Bruce had tried to emulate Kerouac but frankly couldn't afford the continuous paper rolls since had fallen on straightened times and forced to seek employment as a humble legal clerk. The figure Cartiledge glimpsed was too indistinct to be even defined by turning his head round, through 360 degrees which was a trick he had learnt from an obscure Buddhist Guru known as Uncle Johnny. Cartiledge paused in mid-stride to insert another roll into his typewriter because the old roll had almost run out.

He wandered out into the streets of the small Mexican town in which he had inexplicably found himself and strayed into a bodega which not only served him shots of peyote-laced tequila, but had a video booth offering short spasms of sexually-related visual delight for 20 escudos per minute. He plugged in, only to find he was watching a loop of Ted Turner being shafted by Jane Fonda, not with a

strap-on dildo, but with an actual cock. Was there something he hadn't been told about Jane Fonda? That is, possibly that she had been born a man, and had had her cock cut off quite late in her career. What else could explain her bizarre behavior in releasing aerobic tapes when she would obviously much rather have been pitching for the Miami Dolphins with a fungo bat. Cartledge called up his friend Sandra to exchange notes, but she was out ramming it up Roy Kettle a disgraced homosexual civil servant with a plug she had bought from Clone Zone in Earls Court. He left a message on her voice-mail, hoping she would call him back, but it was without much real hope. (GC)

*

The usual sound effects herald the arrival of the Tardis; the wind blows an eddy of last autumn's leaves plus an assortment of even older rubbish down Kimberley Gardens. The blue box stands impassive across the road from number 45. The door opens and Rose sticks her head out. "What dump's this?" she asks, calling back into the unsuspected depths.

"Should be London, 2036." The Doctor now stands behind Rose looking over her shoulder. "These cars are wrong," he says, "unless they are all collectors of old motors around here.

They walk out and examine a parked Honda. "This can't be right," mutters the Doctor.

"Why are we here?" asks Rose.

"I intercepted an interesting voice mail.... " the Doctor is peering into the back window of the Honda. "Wait a minute.... I know this car."

Just then the door of number 45 opens. An old chap with glasses, a face indistinguishable from his shirt, and pee sodden pants is standing there. "Hey Hey, leave that car alone. It's mine, that car is." He has a high pitched Yorkshire voice.

"Oh sorry." The Doctor takes a step back and addresses the Old Man. " You don't drive this all the way to Goodbar, at 533 Alpha Xenophon 3, do you?"

"What, what.... I don't understand you, I say, I don't understand what you're saying. I'm an Old Man" says the Old Man. But he looks a bit shifty behind his specs.

"Are you really?" says the Doctor, wide eyed and sceptical.

"Doctor," says Rose, pulling at his fine camel coat that he nicked off a policeman stuck in a time warp in 1973, "look at his feet. He's got football boots on."

"Is that what they are? Oh dear."

"What?" says Rose.

"What?" says Old Man.

"Slight error, I'm afraid." The Doctor scratches his head " This is actually 2006, not..."

"2036? I should have guessed. You're always doing this. Doctor, why can't you be more careful?"

"Thing is," says The Doctor, "if this is 2006, and those are football boots, then that car hasn't yet been converted for extra-temporal relative displacement."

"Is that bad?" asks Rose

"Might be" says the Doctor, but he is distracted by a bad smell. Old Man has shuffled up to stand beside him

"I know you," says Old Man. "You're The Doctor. We've met before. I used to know Chris Priest."

"Good heavens! You knew him?? But he worked for"

"Status Quo. He were Francis Rossi's secret weapon. Oh yes. They would sing Rockin' All Over The World and that would be the signal..."

"For Chris to finish the next line. Yes. I know. I had to construct an android Chris Priest to replace the real one after I foiled Status Quo's plot to hijack planet Earth and take it through the space-time division separating this reality from the Boring one. I don't remember you though."

"Well, I was younger then. I'm an Old Man now."

"Do you recognise this?" The Doctor produces an old fashioned piano-key cassette recorder from the capacious pockets of the coat.

"Isn't it an old cassette recorder?" asks Old Man "Police issue by the looks of it. I know that 'cos it's got Greater Manchester Police stamped on it. I may be old, but not much gets past me."

"This did." The Doctor presses one of the keys. A voice not utterly like the Old Man's is saying: "Sandra, it's me – Phil Cartledge. Where are you? You're wasting your time on that Roy Kettle. He made a vow to Her Majesty now. He'll never leave her. Call me back will you? I've got something to tell you."

Rose gasped: "You're Phillip K Cartledge. Didn't you used to write Science Fiction?"

"I did, young lady," wheezed Old Man "and it were a sight better than this rubbish!"

"If that's true," remarked The Doctor, "why are you calling Sandra?" Old Man looks a bit sheepish, and shuffles his football boots.

"C'mon. You must have had a reason," says The Doctor. "Everyone has a reason. Human beings never do anything without a reason, do they? Could be an utterly stupid reason, but it would still be a reason."

"Alright then," says Old Man. "I'll tell you. I need her advice."

"I'll bet you do," says The Doctor. "But then, it's not everybody who needs advice from the Vorgon Ambassador, is it?" (JNH)

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"That's the way to do it," said Mr Punch, falling backwards off his seat. His swozzle lodged in his throat and as his little legs waved in the air, he let out a strangled squawk. (HB)

*

Stately, plump, Vorgon Ambassador looked down upon the wretched creature groveling beneath.

- Get up, Cartiledge. Get up you squamous horror.

- Somebody's hit me with a biscuit tin. I'm an old man, I'll have you know. Shouldn't be treated like this. I'll tell the council, I will.

He got to his feet with a grunt and began his ascension.

-Ouch! Plantar fasciitis! Where's me Jazz?

I'm back, he thought, after twenty years and losing it all but I'm back despite Roscoe and will regain mine own.

*

A poem to celebrate this stranger's arrival!

Uncajon you need not...

But too late!

What man of such horrendous vintage
Does engage us with his presence?

Can it be this addled sot
Will complete this cursed plot?
Years twice times ten we gathered fen
have tried to pub our ish
and oft come close to strew some rubbish
only to be hit by fish.
So long we've traveled,
the plot's unraveled.

- eeeeeel! Can I have that?

What is this, thinks Cartiledge, all these men at my
typer at my duper at my stencils and ink.

Erect and rigid he stands throbbing as a rush of blood
tumesces his shrew.

A fanzine. Thirty days. On paper. Oh, I will smite you
all.

*

Pathetic yes I remember when he could write yes and
edit yes and not just grovel about licking the strapped on
didoes of Barbarellas yes yes and playing in police boxes
yes he had a way he could write yes clever and funny yes
not old young yes he was and editing yes oh yes playing all
the time with his little wrinkled shrew oh yes and vibrators
yes yes

*

A screaming comes across the sky. But it's all theater now and the contrail is spelling out something that looks like LDV...

(RC)

*

"It sparkles tinct tinct all this our funanimal world"

Cartledge shook his head to try and disperse the grey fog that had settled upon it. The taste in his mouth resembled rancid aluminum or at least aluminium that had been sprayed with citric acid. You know what I mean. If he had examined his tonsils in the mirror he would have seen a thin white deposit upon them. He was on a bed in a cheap tenement in Notting Hill. Next to him on the tawdry semen-stained mattress was a famous science fiction writer, and next to that one was another, who was equally if not more famous, although that of course would remain disputed for years by John Clute. He unplugged himself from the strange hoses and a bellows-like contraption that conjoined them and stood up. And fell down. Soon he discovered he couldn't in fact stand up for falling down. He reminded himself to post the idea to Elvis Costello on the transtemporal Interweb as an idea for a possible song.

Out in the street leaves were falling from the horse chestnut trees than lined the broad boulevard of Oxford Gardens. This was not at all significant, except it probably meant it was autumn. He just thought he'd put it in for local colour. He flagged down a taxi and instructed the driver to take him to Shad Thames. He didn't know why. It was a kind of hunch. Or else a plot device. As the taxi pulled away from the kerb, he saw an old acquaintance stumbling drunkenly along the pavement clutching a bottle of cider. It was Graham M. Hall, himself a renowned time traveller

and shape-changer, whom he had last seen several years ago but whom he knew he would see again many years in the future, unless one of them made the cardinal mistake of dying in the interim.

The world is full of mysteries, Cartledge sighed. What's that Guv, said the taxi driver. You looking at me? You think you've got troubles? My girl friend Beryl's just had a hysterectomy. And she's only fourteen years old. My son is a crack addict and successful financial consultant. All my life's savings are invested in this motor, and listen, its pinking, can't you hear it. And last night's episode of Doctor Who was absolute shite. Furthermore, I cheated on The Knowledge. Now, which way is it to Luton?
(GC)

*

I awoke in a haze of pain in a place I didn't know. A light in the ceiling shifted achingly left to right to left and with each shift a large throb registered in my head. I sat up, realized that was not a good idea, but did it anyway. The window frame swayed alarmingly as I turned and put my feet on the floor. Ouch. The heel was tender. I stood up. I laid down again, not on purpose. The doorframe swayed alarmingly and the door opened.

"Oh, you're up are you? You shouldn't be you know. You need to get some rest now. I'm not a harlot, by the way. I deliver meals on wheels to elderly pensioners who are incapable of cooking for themselves."

I tried lifting my head to look in the direction of the voice. I saw black leather boots with six inch stiletto heels that covered gams I'd like to see more of. I raised my head a bit higher. The boots ended at the mid point of two milky white, perfectly formed thighs. Something other than my head began to throb.

Cautiously I crawled up to my knees and looked up. She was a gorgeous dame who was all business, if the business was dominatrixing. Jet black hair framed a wholesome face; she wore a black bustier, the boots, and a smile.

You look just like Betty Page," I managed to croak out.

"It's the wig, the clients love it." she said pulling it off to reveal thinning, stringy, mouse-colored hair. "They like the teeth, too." She took them out and her mouth collapsed in on itself. "I'm Laura Doreen Valletta. Usually called Doreen.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You were set upon by Luton's dastardly vagabonds. I found you unconscious in front of my flat and dragged you in to recuperate. Would you like a nice cup of tea? Let me just get pout of these working clothes.

She stepped behind an Asian screen and I heard the long drone of a zipper, twice, as she discarded the boots. Bustier snaps popped. A hand reached out for a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She stepped out. The fat middle-aged woman now before me bore no resemblance to Betty Page; she looked like Shelly Winters in *The Poseidon Adventure*. "That's better," she said. "Those things are so tight. I can hardly breathe in them."

"Why am I in Luton?" I asked.

"Probably to catch a plane," she said. "That's the only reason anyone ever comes to Luton." She started to cry. "I'm always going into Harringey delivering my meals on wheels but whenever I ask someone to come and visit me

in Luton, well, they've always got a sick hamster or something to take care of.”

Luton. I knew she'd never get anyone to visit here in this cesspit of corruption. I recalled now why I was here. In Luton.

I staggered to the door, and, with a last dangerous vision of Doreen sobbing in the chair by the bed, I went out. To face Luton. (RC)

*

Mr Punch had regained his composure. He found the story intriguing because, in all his long years of entertaining, he'd never been to the beach at Luton. That there should be such wanton harlots as Doreen had not occurred to him and he vowed to find out more.

But first he would have breakfast. He'd been given some hot links by a grateful man with an American accent. The man's T-shirt had frightened him at first, with its depiction of something many-tentacled and strangely squamous. It seemed to writhe and shimmer on the man's chest and only the blot of hot sauce held it fast.

"Hot links," he thought, and smiled to himself. He had been convinced they must play some part in Transatlantic communications. Perhaps linking the abominable celebrations of a hideous cult whose rights involved the foul throwing of food. How surprised he'd been to learn they were simply sausages!

But where were the hot links? He knew he'd left them near his other telly, the one that had flown in and settled of its own accord. Where on Earth were they?

"Damn Dog Toby!" he muttered under his breath. The swozzle shifted again and he fell to the floor, choking in his rage. (HB)

*

Mr. Punch picked himself up and marched to the door of his flat and turned the doorknob. It didn't budge.

"That will be 50p," said the door.

Choking with rage and clutching his truncheon tighter, Mr. Punch said unctuously, "Put it on my credit card, please."

"Your credit card is suspended. 50p please," said the door.

"Ouch!" said the door. "Stop hitting me! I'm open! I'm open!"

Mr. Punch clouted the door with his truncheon a few more times for good measure. Then kicked it hard.

"Ouch!" said Mr Punch.

Stepping out he stepped onto his neighbor, Jou-dee, the Ganymedan slime mold.

"Where's the baby?" screamed the telepathic alien mass of protoplasm in a shrill shrewish telepathic way. "What have you done with the baby, Mr. Punch? (RC)

*

The world had taken on a curiously transparent appearance, as if there were another reality beckoning him from beyond this one. He knew he should not have taken

the Morning Glory seeds, but his efforts to raise peyote in the back garden had not been successful. The seeds, however, were causing him trouble. Twice now he'd fallen into the pond and barely escaped with his life. And there was that awful incident when he'd blindly walked by his neighbour's house and been pebble-dashed for his trouble. It had taken a great deal of creosote to remove the annoying little pebbles which lodged in even the most private of crevices

Mr Punch knew in his heart of hearts that the slime mould was actually the Policeman who had been badgering him for days about the damn baby. It could not be Judy. He'd sent the bitch off to find a cock horse. "And don't come back without some fuckin' bells on the ends of your pointed shoes!" he'd screamed at her.

Sidestepping the Policeman's grasp, he clipped him on the side of the head with his truncheon and made a break for the end of the road. The sun glinting on something caught his eye and he stopped running for a moment. It was a huge set of shining teeth, swinging from a metal support on the outside of a concrete prefabricated building. The sound of whirring and clanking came from within.

"Damn Babbage," he cursed under his breath. "What's he building in there?" He'd been suspicious of the man ever since he'd self-erected this Banbury Buildings garage and knew he'd be up to no good. Last time he'd peeked inside there seemed to be some kind of accounting machine sitting there, it's brass and mahogany polished and bright.

Mr Punch could be a patient man when it might be to his benefit. He settled down behind the concrete garage and took out his crumpled paperback. He longed to know how the events in Luton would work out. (HB)

*

Cartledge staggered out into the wild and woolly streets of Luton. A finger post directed him to Luton Beach and soon he found himself on a broad sunny esplanade. A group of children sat agog whilst Mr Punch beat Judy with a policeman's truncheon. It could have been worse, Cartledge thought. It could have been Richard Madeley beating Judy with a truncheon. No that would have been better. The banner over a nearby tent read: 'THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH. See Naked Civil Servants dive into cups of vomit!' but Cartledge decided to give the attraction a miss. Something in the back of his mind troubled him. It was as if he had been sent here on a mission but couldn't remember what it was. It seemed he had lost the plot.

A post office messenger accosted him whistling a jaunty version of Woolly Bully in between sneezing very loudly from a copiously running nose. He thrust a telegram into Cartledge's hand and expectorated over him. Cartledge thanked him and pushed something into the man's pocket. "Here's something for your trouble," he said. The messenger poked in his pocket and found a Beecham's Powder. Curse you, he gurned as he lolloped away. Cartledge ripped open the telegram. It was from Sandra Bond.

"You're losing the plot," it read, "Which I think you will find was first described in the July 1962 issue of Space Junk, the one with the cover by Breugh Twinley, and the infamous semen stain on page 14, which was in fact later found to be yoghurt. I suggest you seek out the infamous transsexual disco club Hell Seven and attach a hastily drawn map. Since entry is only allowed to transsexuals you may have to take certain measures to ensure admittance. Best of luck loverbody. (GC)

*

According to the read-outs it was a LoverBody 3000 that was stalking him. Punch didn't like it one little bit. Neither did Cartledge. The spellchecker bot didn't like the word "Cartledge" for some reason -- kept sticking a red line under him. Cartledge decided to send the spellchecker bot after the LoverBody 3000. Now if he could configure the coad *just right*

*

...Just then a Sila-drone vectored in. It looked like Punch exploded in a wet, greasy, hairy, bell-shaped explosion. What a mess thought Cartledge with his strap-on brain blinking red

A bus wandered by. Dang it all! Why is it **always** the 52 Excelsior when he wanted the 54 Felton!? Curse the nanny-state data-set and all it stands for!! (BT)

*

Cartledge stood outside the Hell Seven club in Luton, It was raining and the flagstones underfoot were very very greasy. The lurid neon flashed out a sign almost in tune with the random firing of his synapses if he had been hit over the head with a policeman's truncheon, or else had something like a pipe-tamper shoved up his arse, neither of which of course had happened. A taxi pulled up and the driver leaned out and asked, "Here Guv, which way to Shad Thames?"

Well, said Cartledge, if you are coming from the North From A34 take exit for A4 (should be sign posted

Newbury Hungerford). From the roundabout at the top of the slip road go right across A34 to next roundabout, then take B4000 Road signposted Lambourn. Follow this for some miles, over the M4 to its junction with the A338. Turn left then take next right, (by a pub called The Pheasant). Carry on to and through the village of Woodland St Mary, then take the first left after leaving the village (sign posted Chilton Foliat) then take the first right after the bridge carrying the M4 which you have passed under.

Follow this bumpy road for something less than a mile, to a point where it bends sharply right- on the bend is a turning left which you should take, then take the immediate next right. The windy lane you are now on eventually starts to go down hill. Near the bottom of the hill you will see a house in front of you. Brake and exercise extreme caution as the next right turn you need is hidden on the right by this house with another house opposite it, and you are not likely to be seen by anything coming in the opposite direction until they are almost on top of you.

If you have successfully negotiated this tricky bit, you are now on an even narrower lane which proceeds straight for a few yards before bending left up a wooded hill. You are now getting close. Proceed past the house with signs warning about its children and pets (who are now old enough to be riding horses) and past another white house on the left (proceed slowly - oncoming traffic , if any, can mostly get by but you need to pull into the side), past a junction with another lane in a dip on the left, then on to two more substantial houses, both advertising Bed and Breakfast. Keep right at this point, past the "No Through Road" symbol and Coachman's Cottage is the second driveway on the left - sign at the bottom. Don't be put off by what looks like a derelict industrial building immediately in front of you. As the drive turns left, the

Manor is facing you and Coachman's Cottage is the white front door on your left, adjoining the (unused) stables. It is not Shad Thames as you know it but probably the closest you will get to it in this lifetime.'

"Thanks Guv," said the taxi driver spitting a wad of chewing tobacco at him. Did I tell you about my girlfriend's hysterectomy? Eliciting no response from Cartledge (a common occurrence) he drove away in a Honda Fit of High Dudgeon, which I think is what the Japanese designers call the pistons. A difficult choice awaited Cartledge as he loitered outside the gaudy exterior of Hell Seven. Was there no one who could help him decide if the final cut was the deepest and if it was would it even help him at all in discovering the truth behind the Woolly Bully Code?

The taxi driver pulled up again having done an illegal U-turn. Sorry, Guv, he said, was that the right or the left by the pub called the Pheasant. Sorry, but I'm shit at this job. Mind you I had that Mr Punch in the back the other day. Oh, the stories he told me about Richard Madeley.
(GC)

*

I looked at the mess that had once been Mr. Punch and smiled. My quarry was definitely here. In Luton. Perhaps at the beach with its broad expanse of rotting fish. I sniffed the air and headed east into the pong.

Luton Arcade had the flavor (the spellchecker bot dropped from the clocktower straining with an extraneous u - I whipped out my Ruger and shot its aluminum hide before it could throw its superfluous i) of... of what? I couldn't place it, quite. A forty-five year old taxi-dancer? A soiled mattress discarded in a weed strewn empty lot? A donkey ride in the rain? It was all of these things and less. The smell of the sea and its dying denizens was overpowering. Yet the beach was crowded with men who

had their trousers rolled up to their knees and wore knotted hankies on their heads.

Hell Seven was on the boardwalk. A valet was taking the keys of a maroon Cord and wondering why people called him a vallette instead of a vallay. The Cord pulled away as I reached the roped off entrance way. A bouncer looked me up and down, nodded, and opened the entrance. I was in.

She was in a spacious booth at the back dressed in a very elegant Donna Karan number with Prada pumps. If that didn't tell you she was moneyed elegance the Chanel 5, diamond necklace, and Cartier watch did. I ankled over to the booth.

"Relax, loverbody," she said.

"Frankie say," I replied, thinking they didn't make groups or jokes like that anymore. I gave her my card. She arched an eyebrow, it made her tiara tremble

"I'm Bond. Sandra Bond," she said

"I know. I've been looking for you. Here. In Luton. What do you know about the plot?"

That shook her. She looked aghast. "The plot? How do you know there is one?"

"Don't try and kid me, sister. You're in it thick as molasses on a flapjack." Sometimes when you come down real hard with the American it makes them talk. "The trail's been colder than a well diggers ass until you scorched it up. So, spill the beans, sugar."

"All I know is what I hear in this booth. The plot's out of control, now. There's no way of stopping it. Well, maybe one way."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"The mad careening forces could be stopped if -
gnrgh!"

"Gnrgh? Look, I know you Limey's cain't spe-yell two
gude but use some vowels, fer criminey's sake!" But she
wasn't going to be using many vowels again. The hilt of
the knife was as black as her little DK number and it
vibrated at about twice the speed of her last labored
breaths.

"Sandra, my love! Tell me quick what you were about
to say?"

Her eyelashes fluttered and she gazed up at me with
tears welling in her eyes. "Too bad about this. We could
have had us some good times. Try to get the plot under
wraps. Do it for me. You need to.." she coughed.
"..Harringey see the old man...". With a last shuddering
breath she expired.

I took her watch and necklace and tiara and the Prada
pumps to remember her by and defray some expenses.
Harringey, huh? Doreen delivered meals on wheels there.
Somehow it all added up. (RC)

*

Mr Punch eased up his sugarloaf hat and wiped away a
trickle of sweat that had gathered on his brow. He didn't
like the references to his demise in the book. How had the
author come to Tuckerize him in this way? It was
unnerving. Mr Punch had a firm belief in his immortality
and intended to go on with his plans to defeat the
Policeman, hack off his neighbour's pebble-dash at dead of
night and replace it with woodchip, hang both the
Hangman and the Devil, and have tea with the Queen.

A noise inside the concrete garage brought him suddenly alert. Twisting round in his little space behind the building he found a crack in the joints of the prefabricated panels. In the dimly lit interior he could see that people were quietly assembling. Needing to mark his place in the novel, he tugged out a scrap of paper from inside the paperback. There was writing in a crabbed hand on it. He looked at the note in his hand.

"If you can't bring good news then don't bring any," it said.

*

Out on the pavement again, I flagged down a passing bread van. The driver leaned out, a jaunty hat on his head and a pipe firmly gripped in his teeth. "What's it to be, Bub?" he asked, taking out the pipe and tamping it down with something strangely phallic

"Take me to Harringey!" I yelled at him, and before he could mutter what was evidently on his mind, "And keep your amartass remarks to yourself!"

I climbed in the back of the van and made myself comfortable among the cobs, bloomers and sliced white loaves. It might be a long journey and I had a lot to think over.

I felt something trickling down my arm and for a moment thought that maybe Sandra's assassin had nicked me with the knife. Turned out I'd put my hand in a tray of sandwiches. I sniffed at them. Peanut butter, mustard and honey. I vomited into a handy cup and put it in a little cupboard for later. (HB)

*

Cartledge awoke from a dream in which he had been playing football all alone naked in a stadium in Cologne when Arvid Engholm had leapt from the stands and raced towards him waving a used condom. Not only did he not know where he was he didn't know who he was. Was he a third party character employed by Philip K. Cartledge, and perhaps even the alter ego of the same, or a first person gumshoe in the pay of Rich Coad, a second rate hack writer who had obviously read too many Dashiell Hammett novels. He daren't enter the Hell Seven club, unless he had already done so, because he was sure the doorman who resembled the Devil and even had his own prehensile tail, would see through him, or at least through his trousers. It was okay for the gumshoe who obviously existed in some alterative dimension where having your cock removed was not de rigueur.

Next door to the Hell Seven Club was an internet café. He stumbled in and fell over, because some villain had tied his shoe-laces together. He suspected the disgruntled post office worker who might have sidled up behind him whilst he read his telegram. He paid the surly attendant one pound for one hour and squeezed into a plywood booth that was obviously designed for a smaller man, or indeed a woman, which ruled out a lot of his American acquaintances.

On top of the monitor was a cup of cold vomit which was beginning to pong a bit. It seemed to contained shreds of regurgitated peanut butter, mustard, honey, but not banana which the culprit had obviously forgotten to include in his diet. It ruled out Elvis, but not Boris Twomley, or even some fictitious puppet, which was possibly the alter ego of a madman from Gateshead. He checked into www.youtube.com. Old Man was doing a very funny routine involving transsexuals, pipe-tampers, Cray computers, Jacques Cousteau, and little Russian girls, but not hot links and Transatlantic Food Hurling, possibly

because he was aware someone else had already covered that. He had had such an exciting day he fell asleep over his keyboard and was turfed out by the proprietor four days later but not without having to write a cheque for £48. So. Back on the streets of Luton at Midnight. He thought of sending a transtemporal web message to The Jam as an idea for a song, but then thought better of it.

A taxi driver drove by. "Hey, Cunt!" he yelled. 'Why did you tell me to carry on to and through the village of Woodland St Mary, then take the first left after leaving the village (sign posted Chilton Foliat) then take the first right after the bridge carrying the M4 which I had passed under? I ended up in the backyard of some fat right-wing pervert accountant who denied he'd even phoned for a cab.' (GC)

*

Cartledge was morose. The indicator on his strap-on brain indicated that this wasn't a flower but a somewhat depressed emotional state. Rain, or some kind of fluid, continued to sluice from the slate-like Luton skies. "Hell Seven Club my Auntie Fanny's corrupted Blind Lemon Astral MP3 file", he thought. Too bad they rolled up the slidewalks after 2400 in this town. How was he ever to get back to his conapt? (BT)

*

I sniffed. The smell of the vomit was there, but what else? It reminded me of the beach at Luton. I opened the cupboard door and sniffed again. The smell was stronger. Definitely something fishy going on. I put my head into the cupboard to investigate. Just then the van lurched and my head cracked against a doorknob. A hatch in the floor of the cupboard swung open.

Down on the concealed floor of the van was a twitching, scaly being of a shocking pink hue. The twitching stopped. I threw a bottle of water over it to revive it. It twitched again, then spoke: "This must be the plaice... Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Mr Punch. The plaice, you said? What plaice? I have come to search for Old Man - Old Man in Harringey."

"You mean Old Man who used to be a guitar tuna?"

"That's the one."

"He used to know Doreen, you know... but their relationship floundered."

"What happened?" I asked the being.

"When they first met he was a groper and his codpiece throbbled, but then his pike went floppy and he lost his mullet. So she threw herring at him."

"Then what?"

"He fell off his perch."

"Ide rather not know that - stop carping on about it. How do you know all this anyway, and who are you?" I asked him.

"I'm Peter the Fish, and I am the sole survivor. I must go now."

Just then the van lurched to a halt at a traffic light and the rear door banged open. The fish wriggled across the floor of the van and fell out onto the roadway.(RJ)

*

Philip K arrived. It had been a long journey. Fortunately he'd had sufficient nutrition by licking off his hands in some style. "Boy, that tasted good" he echoed. He felt stumped, though. Caught behind.

He rolled his eye, the other being kinda permanently transfixed. "Where am I" He reflected as the neon sign above beckoned.

He pondered, a technique he had recalled from his youth, whereby in ever decreasing circles one approaches a water hole, taking care not to plunge too deep with the final step before All Truth is revealed.

At each circle a stream of thought passed through what was left of his Digital Storage Receptacle.

"Hmm", he Omed. "Matty .. Goodbar ...Elvis Kettle Mexican Steam Trains The Tardis 2036 Vorgon Ambassador ... Banbury ... Hell 7 ..., surely they must mean something"

They did.

"Luton" he exhaled in almost orgasmic tenor. "That's it. I've been in Luton and that must hold the key".

He looked up.

Harin Gay Bookshop, the neon sign shone brightly under the night sky. He knocked. The door opened. There stood Old Man.

"Are you Old Man?" He begged.

"No, I'm not Old Man", said the Old Man, "I'm Devo", carefully confusing him. He thought of replying but thought better. "No matter," he quipped. "Can you direct me to anything you have on Luton?"

Be pleased to, thought Old Man. After all this was the finest Gay Bookshop in Town.

"Something fishy", he said "You're the Third Man we've had in here today", statistically speaking, "asking that very same question". "Turn right at the end of the first shelves, straight on past punk lists, skiffy tunes and web cams & other cults".

K meandered. He reached up to a dusty old shelf on the left. "Yule Brunner", he read, "The stone that never came down." Interesting he thought. Very Interesting. He had heard that name before, maybe it was from the Albert Hall where he had last played. Right next, he saw a sight - "I-ching" he exclaimed. "That's it". Had he not once written those very words, in more literate days?

He opened the cover and out popped 5 stones. "5 stones" he thought. They fell to the floor, spinning like a pitcher at the Yankee stadium. He stooped and bent down towards the fallen stones. Each one had a symbol. They were of a script once familiar to him.

The first one resembled the Letter L.

The second, U.

The third, T.

The fourth O.

The fifth, N.

"No, wait a minute", he paused. The second one, there are two Us. He felt sheepish but the moment passed. "Yes, it's a double U, it's a W."

He rearranged the Letters, L, W, T, O, N. They made no sense. He looked up again, and there, tangled up in a blue square box, barely visible, was a Videoscope. He brushed off the dust and read the title. "The Magnificent 7". Yes he thought, I remember the horsemen. There were seven riders. Seven. And just at that moment, Old Man appeared.

"Is this what you're looking for?" It was, thought K, feeling somewhat that the Old Man was a lot like him, even though he was only 24. He needed someone to love him the whole night through. Ah, one look in his eye and you could tell it's true.

The Old man handed him two further stones. "Think they must have slipped out that book when an earlier customer was browsing".

K examined the stones. Again, the same script. A letter Y and a letter E. He drew the 7 stones together and threw them in the air. It was a pitcher to behold.

The stones did come down. He stooped again, with feint hand a kimble to his back.

He read the letters, one by one. T-O-W-N-L-E-Y.

What did they mean? He knew he had to find out. Some way. (GJ)

*

I couldn't shake the feeling I wasn't alone with the cobs, bloomers and sliced white loaves in the back of the van. I felt a malign presence brooding within the spacious interior. I felt a sharp pain on my right ear, a pain not unlike being hit with a hard swung truncheon. "Punch!"

I shifted my head just in time to miss a wicked blow to the back of the noggin. As it was, my shoulder got banged pretty nicely. I leapt up, hit my head on the roof of the van and fell on top of Punch. This knocked the breath out of him and he dropped his truncheon. I grabbed it and applied it to his windpipe with all my weight leaning on it. Punch's normally ruddy face began to purple. His eyes bulged. I sucked his right eyeball into my mouth and felt the satisfying pop of a giant tapioca pearl as I bit down. I grabbed my Biro and stuffed it into his left eye admiring the viscous pulp that oozed out. Suddenly, the van braked

hard and I lost my grip. Punch regained his truncheon and began swinging wildly. He couldn't see a thing. I dodged behind him and grabbed his nose and chin. I pulled up on the nose; I pressed down on the chin. With a horrendous crack of cartilage both snapped together and began dangling loosely, bobbing and swaying with every ever-weakening swing of the truncheon. I grabbed the truncheon and his arm and wrenched them behind his back. As the arm separated from the socket, Punch dropped the truncheon which I used to lay into his head. The skull fragments began to ricochet off the floor of the van as it hit a patch of bad road. The wrinkled evil gray of Punch's brain began seeping out of the holes.

Reaching into the toolkit in the van I found a flare. I shoved it deep into the evil mannikin's throat and lit it with my trusty Zippo. Then I found a knife and opened up the beach-front bully's belly. Intestines began to slither over the floor of the van. What else did he have? I lit a cigarette and started inventory. Liver, two kidneys, a spleen, no appendix, pancreas, Islets of Langerhans, a grossly distended stomach, an esophagus, two lungs, no heart.

"Hoy! Bub. You gotta clean up that mess!" the driver shouted from the front.

I stubbed out my cigarette on Punch's left lung and found a trash bag. The offal was duly scooped into the bag and I slung it out the back door into the path of a steamroller flattening the tarmac. I watched with glee as its ten ton roller passed over the bag.

"Damn," I thought, "that was as much fun as watching Hostel."

*

Punch picked himself up from the roadbed and glared in the direction of the receding van. A vein on his forehead began to throb alarmingly. "Now," he thought, "I'm REALLY pissed off." He looked about for a baby to kick but there was nobody in sight except shadowy Turkish drug dealers. "SOMEBODY is going to pay." (RC)

*

If there had been a cup at hand, Mr Punch would have been sick and filled it to the brim. Angrily he tore out the pages of the book which had frightened and upset him so. Who was this Coad who wrote such diatribes of hate? How had Coad come to learn of his existence and why did he harbour such wicked feelings towards gentle-yet-malevolent Mr Punch? It was as if this Coad had built himself an alternative reality in which he might pay back the world for shipping him off from England's green and pleasant to the uncaring shores of a land ruled by a mad despot.

No matter. Coad would get his comeuppance, although it might be that hanging would be too good for him.

Mr Punch eased himself out from behind the Banbury Buildings garage and set off along a rough track that wound through a patch of yellowing weeds. There were pieces of a rusting car - a Jazz, he thought - scattered among the weeds and it was one of these that caught his pointed red shoes. He tripped and fell and found himself tumbling down the side of an embankment

At the bottom, he lifted himself up, shook off the foliage and pieces of dogshit that had clung to him as he rolled, and looked about in dismay. He was on a traffic

island, caught in the interstices of a set of roads. Cars screamed by, horns blaring, their fumes like a cloud of noxious similes in the hot wind.

Poking its head from the window of one of them, a dog with a ridiculous ruff looked at him, a string of hot links in its mouth. And then it was gone

The heat was intense. The sun was a bright globe of fire, it's radiance trapped in the bowl of the concrete island and reflected back onto the sweating Mr Punch. He wished he'd invested in some of those flame-proof scanties he'd heard about.

"This is worse than the time I drank too much tequila and fell into the drained swimming pool, " he mused. He cursed silently but, finding that he couldn't hear himself, cursed again. "Damnable Lady Fortune!" He wasn't really satisfied with that, and settled on "Bollocks!" but knew that he'd have to return to the subject in the coming hours. (HB)

*

I shouldn't have been standing at the back of the van gloating. If I hadn't been doing so I might not have tumbled from the van onto the traffic island when it made a sudden swerve to avoid a tumbling man in pointy red shoes and sugarloaf hat. I looked about. Cars, vans, trucks travelled past at sixty miles per hour with no break. I was stuck on the island. Off in the distance I spied the man with the sugarloaf hat and pointy red shoes. It was Punch! Ironically we had been thrown together in this isolated spot where we would have to depend on each other for our very survival. That mutual need, the inability of one to manage by oneself, the desperate necessity for some human contact, would lead inevitably to mutual respect and even admiration. Something not unlike friendship would blossom between two sworn and embittered enemies.

I took out my Ruger and shot myself in the temple. (RC)

*

An aetherial voice spoke from out of nowhere:

But this temple - is it Greek, Roman, Jewish or what...
I feel we should be told (KF)

Another aetherial voice answered:

It's Buddhist. Read on. (HB)

*

Russian Roulette, I never win. I threw the Ruger aside
and drew out the Luger I kept for emergencies. (IM)

*

Getting off the traffic island had proven easier than he'd thought. There was a zebra crossing and, as the cars swerved madly to miss the beast, Mr Punch had hitched a ride. From its back he looked across his little kingdom to the Buddhist temple with the neon sign, "Uncle's," flicking on and off. He'd been surprised to hear the shot ring out and not a little horrified to see Dog Toby tearing at the limp body in the doorway of the temple.

Mr Punch could not know, however, that Coad, the spectre of evil, lay dead in the entrance to the VAT-exempt temple.

Pleasantly tired from his exertions, Mr Punch slid from the back of his striped steed on the other side of the road, and looked about him. There was work to be done and not a moment to lose.

A flight of tellies winged their way into a faded blue sky, clouds ragged and pink about them. (HB)

*

Cartledge's strap-on brain flashed red, amber then green, so he crossed the road, narrowly avoiding being run down by the driver of a van whose face was a distorted mask of terror. Something told him a character in the narrative in which he found himself trapped had just taken his own life, needlessly, in an effort to make a cheap joke, so not that needlessly really. Never mind, something told him that just like the Polk Gulch bus another one would along soon. Sure enough a man wearing a jelaba, a fez, and sporting a rakish moustache sidled up to him and said, 'Effendi, you want to see photos. Me got plenty good photos, effendi.' Despite feeling slightly effended by such wanton racial stereotyping, Cartledge shrugged, whereupon the weasel-like figure pulled out some eight by tens. 'This is the front view, effendi,' he said. 'Note the pebble-dashing. And this is the back view. See, she is huge, no, she is immense. She is beautiful no? Only 50 lirasi for one night, quick, jigajig, yes, boss?'

Cartledge pushed him aside. He really wasn't in the mood for any more photos of Sandra Bond right now. (GC)

*

Reality wavered., and...

The stately plump old guy (not to be confused with the Old Man, an entirely different old character) labored up the

Broadway Terrace hill, sweating profusely in the nearly hundred degree heat of the first day of summer in Oakland. As he jogged along the shoulder of the road, cooled only by the downdraft from his propeller beanie, he muttered an arcane mantra, "Ellseven, ellseven, ellseven, its a plot, its a plot, its a plot." Occasionally, the chant's rhythm was broken by a thought: "There is no plot, it has no plot, the ellseven plot does not exist, it's like being stranded on an escalator." He came up on the ancient ruins of a burger stand, thinly disguised as a frou-frou tea and gift shop. Among the revenants of old Chevy Malibus parked in front was a more substational white Volvo, against which leaned a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman. "You appear to be a fan in distress," this personage said.

"I am not in dat dress, nor any other," the old guy said.

Just then, a breadbox roared by on Broadway Terrace, trailing a cloud of pipe smoke. Strangely, there was a foot protruding from the driver side window. "But you were uttering the incantation 'ellseven.' I have a large and *well-organized* collection of grimoires and other dusty and ancient tomes that are said to contain all knowledge. Surely among them is the true key to ellseven--"

"I've been warned about peering into those kinds of things. The wizard B'r'uch Toh-Lhee, who knows all and tells some, has spoken of brains being eaten by books of Lahn-drough-maht."

"You invoke He Who Has His Name At The Top of the Page. Surely no good thing can come of this," the tall man made a sign against evial and climbed into his Volvo. As the Swedish car roared off, the exhaust somehow emitting no "aitches," the old guy briefly studied the nearly vertical climb ahead of him. He noticed a morning glory plant in the bed in front of the tea shop. Acting without thinking, he grabbed a hand of seeds to reinforce himself as he set off

. . . reality wavered. (JC)

*

"Nearly vertical" was almost an understatement. Within a few minutes the old guy was glad he'd brought along his pitons his crampons and, more especially, his vorgons. Was it the morning glory seeds, or could it be that he really was climbing the outside of a three - storey house? Looking down he thought he could see a patch of violets but his view was suddenly obscured by what appeared to be schools of fish. Hideous puns swam through his mind but he knew there had to be a catch. The old guy's brow broke out in sweat. He had almost reached the top of the wall and even from this close range he could see that the brickwork had been carved with the giant letters "BRUISED TOELNEY" (HB)

*

Startled, Mr. Punch rubbed his eyes and looked up again. He stepped back smartly just in time to avoid being hit by a rope ladder hurtling down from above. It dangled just in front of him. A voice from the sky intoned- Come up, Punch. Come up you fearful harlequin!

Where had he heard that before? He cast his gaze skyward once more and realized that what he had thought was a flight of winged tellies was, in fact, the painting decorating a large zeppelin. The Vorgon Ambassador looked down from an open hatch.

Punch, we must go to Harringey. Will you come too if I can get the old Aunt to fork over twenty quid?

Punch thought of the beaches of Harringey and the lovely dogs running after the mechanical bunny. Just as he was about to make his ascent he began to feel oddly flat. He noticed that the buildings in the background had also become rhomboid as if there was a trick of perspective at play. The zeppelin itself began to look like lines with an ellipse at one end. The rope ladder stayed fixed beneath his very fixed gaze while the Vorgon ambassador remained leaning from the hatch at an impossible angle, clearly unafraid of falling.

Cripes, thought Punch. I'm in a painting. (RC)

*

The new guy, who close readers of this text will notice is also known as "the old guy," [extra points for those who remember, and can explain in detail, the distinction between "old guy," and the "old man"] sat on the edge of the concrete island and stared morosely at the puddle of sweat forming on the asphalt between his feet. The puddle spread toward the tracks near the island as the hot sun beat down on his bald head. Across the street, a huge gold tooth hung from a shady-looking office building. He noticed a little fellow with a big nose and a sugarloaf hat sitting on the kerb in a similar attitude. After seventeen laps along the empty, soulless twists and turns of freeway frontage road, his heart filled with joy to encounter another sentient being.

"I know you," he said, after studying the little guy's face. "You're the one they call "Punch." We met in the consulate at Invention."

The odd little man produced a long black truncheon from somewhere and swatted his new companion over the head. "I don't need any of your inane arse-kissing comments," he said, "I've got enough trouble with the idiot plotters sticking me on this concrete island just because I once read an old and dusty tome about

finding L7. And they're trying to kill me. Geeze, I needed to write an essay about the damned thing for my A-levels. How am I supposed to know where the fooking thing is? They already got Sandra Bond. I'm an old man."

"Ouch! You hit pretty hard for a little guy. You should have a little more respect for a fellow sapient stranded with you on a concrete island."

"Stranded? What stranded? Being stranded here would be like being stranded on an escalator that has stopped." The odd little being delivered another whack with his truncheon. "I can't believe we ended up on the same island," he said, "Did you get here by yourself? -- it doesn't seem possible."

"Well," the new guy said, "I started out, jogged up a hill in Oakland, then I turned onto a frontage road for I-24. I think what has happened is that with the massive increase in the number of freeway interchanges in the BArea, connectivity has become topologically infinite, and any point in the system is connected randomly to every other point. Everything is on the concrete island, and nothing is. Getting off the island may be the kind of problem that is 'difficult beyond solvability'. And finding L7 is that squared."

Punch gave him a look. "You've been reading *way* too much skiffy," he said. "To get off the island and find L7, we needed to do one simple thing."

"What's that?"

The other gestured irascibly at the tracks with his truncheon. "When the 19 Polk comes along, we get on and transfer to the L at Civic Center."

"But-- that's two things."

A breadbox driven by a Scientologist roared up Polk Street past the island. (JC)

The wormhole opened thirty degrees below the ecliptic, some 25 million miles from Earth. The disturbance in space time consequent on hundreds of interstellar battle cruisers was immense, and while beyond the puny resources of the nations of the Earth to detect, the Tardis's delicate instruments shrieked in alarm. The Doctor and Rose however were elsewhere - having a curry at the Gate of India Tandoori, in Manor House and arguing about whether they could be arsed to get to Luton - or anywhere else, thought the Doctor as he trowelled more chutney on a pappadam.

The battle fleet was crewed by life forms from every corner of the vast Vorgon empire - Spakquid technicians had an overwhelming natural ability when it came to monitoring large complex pieces of engineering like the warp inducers - their secondary brains could interface directly with the semi-intelligent control system, their eight eyes could monitor a great many displays at once, and their twenty four squid like tentacles could push buttons, type reports, and open cans of beer simultaneously. On the middle decks thousands of Griptyppe marines, drilled, tested weapons and serviced vehicles. They stood twelve foot tall on their clawed feet, and had no concept of humour - they only knew rage and boredom. Either they were enraged, or they were bored. Their activity had been prompted by becoming mildly enraged by the orders from the control deck of the flagship. There, a dozen different species argued over the correct way to invade a planet.

A senior officer from the planet Madbucket, who despite his seniority was only four foot high and shaped rather like a condom full of water, was formulating rules and regulations about who could kill what and when. The

fact that any such regulations would be entirely superfluous to an enraged and (more to the point) illiterate Griptype marine, did not concern him in the least. In another corner, a Komedian, a biped in a tight pinstripe suit, ludicrous haircut and square eyeglasses, put the finishing touches to the work of art he was determined to force the RA to accept for its Summer Exhibition when they made planet-fall. It was a cartoon of a man on a concrete island threatened by a rain cloud that hovered over it, dropping raindrops and lightning flashes in sticky gold foil. A loudspeaker hung down from the cloud from which the Komedian had drawn big crayon letters emerging. The letters spelled the word WANKER.

The central command platform in the middle of the control deck illuminated and the Grand Admiral of the Vorgon Fleet stood looking out over the masses of squabbling Vorgon officers. His sudden appearance caused the hubbub of dispute to dissipate. Even the Komedian looked up from his masterpiece long enough to take note of the appearance of a pure bred Vorgon - the stripy suit, the curved hat with a little bell on it, the enormous hooked nose and cruel teeth, the strangely painted looking eyes and the extra large galactic class slap stick clutched in both hands. The Grand Admiral was here on a mission, to trace his brother whom he believed marooned on this barbarian planet, and to wipe out the nasty verminous beings who he believed, held him there - rabble led by a mysterious figure known only as Old Man.

"Open a Channel to the planet, Number One" called the Grand Admiral.

"Channel open, sir."

"That's the way to do it" acknowledged the Grand Admiral. "People of Earth," he began, but before he could carry on a crewman of a crocodilian species put his head over the rail of the command platform, necessitating a

great many whacks from the Grand Admirals slap stick. “That’s the way to do it - People of Earth, this is the Vorgon battle cruiser L7. Surrender or we will throw you out of the window!!!” (JNH)

*

On a road junction somewhere between Luton and Haringey, a scaly pink being struggled back to consciousness. Just as well that idiot ate the sandwich and left me alone, thought Peter the Fish. He’ll have to find Old Man by himself.

He wriggled to the gutter and found a drain, then plopped gratefully down into the murky, brown-flecked waters below. North a hundred yards, then east half a mile... surely there must be one of Thames Water’s many leaks around here... He turned north again and swam upstream, to find that the sewer opened out into a small culvert. The culvert ran north a further mile and on his right Peter found a grille. He wriggled through this and found himself in a canal. A derelict flour mill towered over the western bank.

To the other side, against the morning sky, Peter shuddered to see an elongated, elliptical airship with a rope ladder dangling from the cabin at one end. From a hatch leaned an alien being looking awfully like a Vorgon. He was shouting at a wizened little man with a hooked nose dressed in a harlequin suit, who was hanging off the rope ladder by one hand.

“Grab hold with the other hand, you fool! If you don’t hurry up we won’t have time to get the twenty quid from your Aunt, as there’s an invasion fleet on its way to rescue you!”

The man in the harlequin suit shouted back in agitation: “If that’s my mad megalomaniac brother with his interstellar battle fleet, tell him I don’t need resc –“

At this point he lost his grip and fell, arms flailing, into the canal not twenty feet (all right, six metres) from where Peter was watching – open-mouthed, as usual. After hitting the water with a huge splash, he eventually resurfaced, gasping for air and spitting out old boots.

At length he managed to splutter: “All right, you can bloody well rescue me now, then!”

The zeppelin descended and the rope ladder contacted the water. The man in the harlequin suit grabbed the ladder, with both hands this time. The ladder began to roll upwards into the cab of the airship.

Just as the harlequin man was about to reach the cab and be hauled in, an overwhelming thought beam hit Peter. FISH, YOU ARE DANGEROUS, it said. YOU ARE COMING WITH US. At this point an immense sucking noise began and Peter felt himself dragged upwards by a whirling tower of water like a miniature tornado. Along with hundreds of gallons of canal water, the inverted maelstrom sucked him through an opening in the airship’s cab and he landed in a tank in the passenger cabin.

The airship turned and began its stately way towards the towering mountains of East Anglia. There it may or may not meet its nemesis. (RJ)

*

Cartiledge was frankly stumped. He didn't know where he was or who he was.

One moment his strap on brain told him he was a psychopathic killer who killed indiscriminately, as

psychopathic killers tend to do, but in an essentially evil fashion by disassembling and eviscerating their victims, even if they were only wooden manikins who couldn't, strictly speaking, be eviscerated. Maybe they could have their insides removed by routing if you had a Black & Decker router but that was another issue which would involve tortuous depths of regional pronunciation and Anglo-American differences of interpretation. Then again, strangely, he seemed to be someone else entirely in San Francisco, possibly cruising Castro in a pair of reversed cowboy chaps. All the time there seemed to be some imperative directing him to solve the L7 puzzle which most of his compatriots, if indeed he had any in this mad world, seemed to have forgotten. Maybe it would turn out that they had all been hit by an atom bomb, or an engine falling from a Zeppelin flying overhead which would blast them in to another timeline or dimension, which would be very convenient for those who could make no sense of it all, like Keith Freeman, an ex-airman who was obviously harbouring a grudge for not being allowed to firebomb Dresden. In the meantime he had just discovered that one of his old flames, Linda Krawecke, had in fact all this time been a dink. It was hard to recover from news like that, and he felt in need of a shot.

He wandered into the Tallyho Tavern where a grey haired lothario of a singer called Kris Somethingorother was singing a lugubrious ballad about being drunk and coming down on Sunday morning. The matchgirl sold him matches and because she was doubling as a waitress took his order for ten steam beers. He asked her what a dink was and she reassured him it was not in fact a prick, as he had first surmised, but an affectionate term applied to a very small person. He felt somewhat heartened by this, but not much. It was going to be a long night while he tried to remember all of what had gone before. Had he really offered to let a psychopathic killer write a piece based on a novel series by an equally psychopathic professor of

American Literature. Had he really gone out with a dink, i.e. small person, without being any the wiser? He rubbed his knee. His old medial cruciate knee ligament injury was tender but at least it wasn't yet arthritic. Gone knows what would happen if it finally did become arthritic and he found he had to scale that vast precipitous cliff, whilst carrying a comely wench named Pam on his back, which was an incident that would appear somewhere near the end of the novel.

Someone had dropped a receipt on the floor. He picked it up. It was for '5PP LRES TGT NUDE'. Could this be the clue he had been looking for. He tried using skip codes on it but could only come up with initial sequences of 5PLETTEU and 5LSTD and 5RTE, none of which seemed to make a lot of sense, then he remembered 'Pletteu' was the name of an invading alien in the cult film 'Code L7 From Outer Space'. At last he was getting somewhere. But where? He opened the box of matches the matchgirl had sold him and they all spilled out over his table. Fifty, he said to himself immediately, not because he was an idiot savant but because he had read on the box that it contained fifty matches. More intriguingly three of the matches had separated themselves from the main cluster and formed the shape of an 'L7'.

Cartledge's strap-on-brain hummed and bleeped, as it often did when trying to establish a transatlantic connection. A seductive voice, three parts whisky and two parts Banbury came over the line in a sultry fashion that suggested the owner was wearing nothing but a pair of red-hot flame proof scanties..

I've been following your adventures, the voice said, and I must tell you, you are far the most interesting character in the whole narrative. But when the matches spilt out of the box, you would have surely needed four matches to make an L7 surely? Unless one match was bent,

which I suggest is somewhat unlikely given they were from a newly opened box.

Damn you, said Cartiledge, you have spotted what we in the trade call a lacuna. I am tempted to let it stand, which is what you should do with all lacunae, before straining them into a colander and adding shavings of parmesan and drizzling with olive oil. Now, the question is shall I go back and open the box of matches again and correctly report the outcome, or merely lie here twitching at the thought of your in your flame proof scanties.

Cartiledge, the voice purred, I've just taken them off..
(GC)

*

Cartiledge scratched his head, and a couple of head lice fell out and scuttled away across the table. One of them stopped and yelled back at him, "Gee, thanks Buddy, that was our home for three years, you know."

It was almost as if some guiding hand had been directing his own, with the matches, not necessarily the scratching his head bit. He didn't believe in a God, but suddenly he almost believed in an Author.

He staggered out into the street, much the worse for having the barman pour several dry martinis directly into his mouth whilst he lay on the bar with his mouth open. And this was after the ten steam beers.

Next door to the bar there was a small tumble-down hovel looking not unlike something you might come across in a small Italian village. A sign outside creaked in the wind and proclaimed it was the premises of a certain Giuseppe, carpenter and carver of bespoke marionettes. He went inside. Giuseppe was an old Italian somewhat resembling Kurt Vonnegut, but without the talent. I am on

a mission said Cartledge, against an evil manikin, guilty of wife and baby beating and much worse. I need an equally evil marionette, one possibly incapable of telling the truth, because his deeds will lead him into nameless black places where he will experiences nameless black horror and be ruthlessly interrogated by the evil agents of someone or other, not least of all a man/cthulhu hybrid called Buruche.

"I have just the one for you," said Giuseppe, pulling out a puppet from beneath his workbench. "I call him Pinocchio." (GC)

*

"He'll do," said Cartledge. "I also have a conundrum - someone dropped a receipt on the floor which contains an essential message - but I need a codebreaker."

"Let me have a look," said Giuseppe. Cartledge showed him the receipt. "5PP LRES TGT NUDE."

There was silence for about a minute. Suddenly Giuseppe exclaimed: "I have it! It's an anagram for "5PP DUNG LETTERS"! Has anybody you know been writing pages & pages of shit?"

Cartledge felt silently mortified. He didn't know what to say. (RJ)

*

Yes he did. Quite suddenly for no real reason he knew what to say, because he knew it it wasn't him whose name was being dragged through the mud, no no, not mud, shit shit, yes yes, shit and more shit. And even it it was he would be proud, yes yes, for writing shit shit yes yes, even if other people yes yes couldn't understand it, yes yes because they had been left two dictionaries short of a real definition. For instance he could say did you see that leader

of the Conservatives on the Jonathan Ross show last night. Wasn't he a cunt. No no, but probably yes. But, that group, The Raconteurs was quite good, because that was they were in fact Jack Black this time pretending to be Neil Young, for no real reason. He collapsed and lay in the gutter for several hours. Many pigs passed by and made derogatory remarks about him as you'd expect, but none suggested he should be looking up at the stars. He knew tomorrow would be another day, but unfortunately it would be the one after today, which wasn't very satisfactory. He reached out for his tiny Marionette Pinocchio, and clutched it tight to his breast, or at least one of his breastS. He reminded himself to go and see the doctor about that.
(GC)

Cartledge hobbled down the emergency southbound lane of the M1, heading for Staples Corner, where he thought he might pick up a lift on the North Circular to Harringey. He clutched his marionette Pinocchio to his chest. The little fellow was looking dishevelled but still had an irrepressible grin on his face, and the two red apple-painted cheeks cheered Cartledge in his misery. A disabled electric buggy overtook him, although barely, going at five miles an hour. At the wheel was a ruddy-faced Old Man.

That's a nice puppet, said the old man. It's a marionette, said Cartledge, not a puppet. But that's Italian for puppet said the Old Man. Here, look, this is my puppet. I call him Mr Pig. I keep him tied to my handlebars as a mascot. See, he has a pale pink/beige head with cord ears and a loop at the back, and emits a low grunting sound when he is shaken. The old man shook him. The pig grunted. Bought him from Sainsbury's, said the Old Man. Would you like a lift?

Cartledge climbed aboard. Are you sure disabled buggies are allowed on the motorway? he asked. Who's going to stop me? chortled the Old Man, revving up until they were moving at at least seven miles an hour. 800 yards later they were flagged down and forced to move over by a police car which pulled alongside.

An officer got out. Cartledge couldn't help but notice he had a huge truncheon. Hello hello hello, said the policeman. Can't accuse you of breaking the speed limit, can we sir. I can explain, began the Old Man. I'm sure you can, said the policeman. Emergency. Acute proctitis. Had to get to hospital. Your friend certainly looks in need of some kind of surgery, if only to remove that puppet of his from his nipple. It's not a puppet, Cartledge began, but was cut short.

But let's not bother about that, said the policeman. He took out a rolled poster and unfurled it. Its yellowed parchment showed a mannikin in a sugarloaf hat, with a hooked nose. Reward: 10,000 Vorgon Lirasi read the banner above the image. Have you seen this mannikin? the policeman asked. He's guilty of several charges of grievous bodily harm, and of endangering an endangered species, to wit a crocodile. I did see him a few miles back near Luton, said the Old Man tipping a wink to Cartledge. I saw him too, Cartledge confirmed. Thank you sirs, said the policeman. Have a nice day. The police car did an emergency u-turn and screamed off in the opposite direction. Two miles on it would find three juggernauts involved in a face-off chicken run bearing down upon it, neither of them willing or able to give way. The police car and its passengers were reduced to a small slab of metal the size of a suitcase. Oh well. There you go. Being an author lets you indulge fantasies like these.
(GC)

*

Round about junction two on the M1 the bushes on the electric motor of the Old Man's buggy burnt out. Cartledge's strap on brain told him there had been a huge pile up some two miles back so he could safely walk all the way to the North Circular if necessary. He left the Old Man in an insensate rage kicking his non-functional transport device and swearing in Welsh. He set off, whistling a merry song called 'I'm Your Puppet'. He stuffed his own puppet, Pinocchio, in one of the many pockets of his designer dungarees. In the meantime a group of nuns from the Sisterhood of Eternal Guilt, patron saint the St Brontes, wandered past the Old Man and his buggy. They were led by a little dink who stopped momentary to absolve the Old Man of all his sins, and offer him absolution in the form of a slice of peyote and a chug of red wine. The nuns were on a pilgrimage to the Smith Klein Benson office just off the Great West Road where they would publicly apologize for all the sins of this major pharmaceutical company, and then unfortunately be wiped out when a police surveillance helicopter suffered a rotor malfunction and plummeted into them. Only the pilot of the helicopter, Agnes Bronte, would survive the awful incident, and be resurrected as Robocopwoman, and she would be condemned to seek out the families of the victims and to apologize for it for the rest of her life. Later an Air Accident Investigation unit discovered the cause of the rotor failure was due to it intercepting a stuffed pink pig which had been dropped from a great height, almost as if from a passing Zeppelin. Meanwhile Cartledge felt a twitching from within one of the pockets of his dungarees, almost as if his marionette had come alive, and was pleased to see him. (GC)

*

Oh. I thought you wanted the Mickey Spillane mode. My bad. Sorry. Have to start again.

Call me Cartiledge. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before video cameras, and bringing out the Welsh in every book I read; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me deliberately opening the word processor and methodically editing people's prose - then I account it high time to get to sleep as soon as I can. (RC)

*

Cartiledge reached the junction of the North Circular without being run down in an bizarre accident involving huskies, or 4x4s, far less huskies driving 4x4s. Another fantasy which goes by the wayside, he thought to himself, along with the one about the Nuns, and especially the dinky one. He was very thankful that Pinocchio after waking up and ticking his willy had at last gone to sleep again. Maybe he didn't realize the World Cup was on, or maybe he'd simply had too much to drink. He had almost reached the turnoff for North Finchley, when a BMW sports coupe pulled up alongside him. The driver passed a business card to him. It read `Swish McKenzie, Freelance Entrepreneur and Business Consultant' Jump in said Swish, and because his legs were getting very tired Cartiledge did. Hey, said Swish, is that a puppet in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me. They both roared with laughter as Swish roared away from the kerbside and promptly ran into the back end of traffic queuing back from the local IKEA. Swish vaulted out of his car and verbally abused a man who had a Tolka, (small shed for containing wolves) and also a Bokult (even smaller shed for containing

weevils) on his roof-rack. Fortunately because neither of them could speak Swedish it didn't lead to an international incident. You may be wondering why I picked you up, said Swish, after vaulting back into the car. Well it wasn't entirely because of your tight buns, although that was a factor. But I noticed you had an insouciant air and a certain swagger which I thought might go well on the new series of Golf Club House, which I am working up for Ted Turner. It's a reality TV project and the basic premise is six or maybe seven people are trapped in a Golf Club. Some of them (we've already signed up Arnold Palmer and Rocco Mediate) are obviously professionals involved with working on their Par, other are sheer out and out psychopathic shits who like hitting people with golf clubs, dressing up like gimps, and forcing golf balls down their throats. Guess where you fit in? GC)

*

Clement Greenberg saw the move towards flat painting as an historical inevitability. Having decided in a spirit of Kantian self-criticism on the need to free painting from its simulation of other forms of art, artists could only come increasingly closer to those properties of painting which were unique to the discipline -- the arrangement of colour and shape on a flat surface.

Painting's race towards a totally flat form was hastened by further achievements in Europe, but it was not until the 1950s, when the baton of the avant-garde was passed to the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, that the ultimate goal could be achieved.

The principles of reason and individualism developed during the Enlightenment of the 18th century underpin modern society's concepts of social and scientific progress. It was not surprising then, that Greenberg's theories met with great approval from Western governments at a time when the Cold War was at its height. He presented the

opportunity to demonstrate in a quasi-scientific manner the apparent superiority of Western painting over that of the Soviet Union, where, after the Revolution's short flirtation with radically experimental painting, Stalin had come to power and espoused Socialist Realism.

Greenberg's theory enabled a direct line of descent to be drawn from the Rococo of the 1700s, through Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and the schools of the 20th century, each movement acting upon or reacting against the ideas of the previous movement, with American Abstract Expressionism as the triumphant climax to the process. Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956) , Willem de Kooning (1904 - 1996) and others of the New York School could be hailed as the latest in a long line of heroic individual artists, coming out of a great Western Tradition.

Some years previously, Mr Punch had been forced to serve on a jury, in a case in which he was the principal defendant. He had taken the opportunity to brush up on his art history in theory and practice and knew that, although Greenberg was prepared to defend his views as late as 1981 in an interview ("Greenberg on Art and Criticism") televised by the Open University as part of its course Modern Art and Modernism: Manet to Pollock, it had become increasingly apparent by then that the theory was flawed.

Recognising that the apparent flatness of his current position was due to the oil sinking into lower layers of reality, he pulled out a bottle of linseed oil which was fortuitously concealed in his tight little tunic. Using a soft cloth to rub the oil into the layers about him, he was able to restore the brilliance of the colours and render the illusion of depth once more.

"It may be only an illusion," he murmured, "but what after all is life but an illusion"

Grabbing the rope ladder, he scrambled up to the waiting zeppelin, where two porters helped him aboard. He took the opportunity to relieve one of them of a bottle of porter the porter had in his pocket, and between swigs, yelled to the Vorgon Ambassador, "Make haste, man! To the Royal School of Needlework at Harringey! And drive like the wind!"(HB)

*

Meanwhile the Vorgon airship ploughed on mercilessly, its protective tractor beams pushing aside any intoxicated Pelicans that dared cross its path, especially those that dared to call out 'You're my best friend, you are'. But even evil invaders cannot fly on empty stomachs so the Commander called for the ship's cook to be hauled before him. Wretch, he said, I still remember the last time you tried to serve us Deep Fried Tunnocks Caramel Wafers. How come you are still alive? You pardoned me, sire, fluted the cook, one of the ancient Fryinge race, who resembled a mole with an octopus for a face and spatulas for hands. How remiss of me, said the Commander. Never mind. Tonight I will hold a grand banquet with my various newly acquired friends as honoured guests. What will you cook for us? The Fryinge cook reached into the pocket of his cook's jacket and took out a tattered piece of paper. I have this special recipe passed down to me by my mother on my father's side, or maybe vice versa, because as you know my race changes sex every five minutes. It's a hormonal thing. Perhaps my humble recipe it will serve, your Commanderness, however. Not without a degree of trepidation the Vorgon Commander unfolded the grease-stained document and read:

"First sidle into the kitchen. If you can't sidle, erupt though the floor but try to not spread too much dirt around. Try to find some rocket or saxifrage and salsify it, but don't worry if you can't. Just add an extra slurp of Tapatio soy sauce in the final stages of the recipe. Make a dough out of

puppet's brains and mashed liver, and freshen it with gin, and form small boats or papilottes, whichever is the easier. Rest the dough in an Ikea Plokta, which is specially designed for harbouring large lumps of boring and indigestible material. As soon as it is as runny as whey, catch it, smack it until it dribbles through your fingers, if you have fingers. Drain into a flowerpot, no, not a flowerpot, you know what I mean, like a flowerpot but without a hole in it, except at the top. Wash some Watsonville artichokes and mash them with first pressing virgin engine oil. Cut an apple into chunks and throw at the wall while reciting the ancient Fryinge prayer 'Salutations on the deliverance of the cook in the hope that he will not be slaughtered today' which will either guarantee the success of the meal or ensure you have fruitful loins. It is, I'm afraid an either/or option and you take pot luck on the outcome."

At this point the Vorgon Ambassador came across something unintelligible which he assumed was Welsh for squid.

He read on: "Now the hard part. Dance, dance as if there were no tomorrow. Gather up the rest of the ingredients, cherries, dinks and twats. Place everything in a blender and whizz, but not into the blender because that could be objectionable. Serve on open Psalters with table-side winches to take care of the heavy stuff. Post prandial flatulence is optional."

I suppose it will have to do, said the Vorgon Commander, without much enthusiasm. Just warn the guys in the sick bay to be prepared for incoming casualties. By the way, as a matter of interest, which sex are you at the moment? The Fryinge cook blushed. Oh, Commander, sir, it fluted, I'm surprised you have to ask. This isn't a truncheon you know. (GC)

*

Times of London: 747 MISSING. Richard Branson has said he thinks the mysterious disappearance of one of his 747s was caused by the Vorgon Ambassador hijacking it for the engine oil.

UNQUOTE (KF)

*

Appearing as a huge viola-marrow in the sky, the zeppelin loomed over the Royal School of Needlework at Harringey. Too late, the Vorgon Commander realised there was something amiss with the towering Rococo pinnacles and domes of the School; they seemed to be shimmering as he watched them from the gondola window.

There had been an explosion in the steam room of the needle laundry and with a horrendous wheeeee, a cloud of steam and needles billowed out through the roof of the building. Within minutes, the zeppelin was deflating like a punctured lung.

Mr Punch stared in horror as the towers raced upwards towards him. He did the only thing possible. With a cry, he launched himself into space and found himself falling, falling....

*

With a start, Mr Punch woke to find himself sitting in the damp grass behind the Banbury Buildings prefabricated garage. "Blimey!" he thought, "It was all a dream. No more hot links for you my lad." Deciding to go home upon the instant, he tossed his paperback into the long grass and vowed to go back to his little pyjama-striped house where Judy would give him a good beating. In turn, he would

throw the baby out of the window again and give Judy a return bout. Which he did.

*

The Vorgon Ambassador to the Court of St James was panicking. He felt as if he were in a dream. He thought there had been a little hook-nosed man on board who would help him to solve the riddle of L7, but that seemed not to be the case. He also was having difficulty determining quite who he himself might be.

Straightening his voluminous gown and adjusting the cut of his jib, he minced over to the Vorgon Commander's chair. He hated mincing like this, but his anal warts were giving him gyp and until he could take them out and polish them, he would have to walk this way. The thought of "Walk this way, " raised a smile on the Ambassador's face (although it was difficult to see it as a smile unless you were used to the peculiarities of Vorgon physiognomy) and he found himself murmuring, "If I could walk that way I wouldn't need the talc..." But he cut himself short.

"Commander," he said, "I think we should get some things straight." "Are you me or am I you or are we both together?"

"And is the zeppelin in trouble?" (HB)

"I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together," confirmed the Vorgon Commander.

"And the zeppelin....?"

"Flies like Lucy in the sky."

"Oh that's all right then. But what are those pretty little policemen doing sitting in a row?" the Ambassador asked.

"Waiting for the van to come." (RJ)

*

The Ambassador wondered which foot to stand on. It was clear the Commander's faculties were failing under the strain of holding the collapsing zeppelin on a steady course, and the Ambassador realised that should they survive their imminent crash landing, they would be cast adrift in a land of aliens. The Ambassador feared the prospect of anal probing, especially given the condition of his fundament and determined to disguise himself, the better to facilitate his merging with Earth's populace. Throwing off his voluminous gown, he revealed a bright pink safari suit

"Haul on the bowline!" shouted the Commander. "Ware below." The stricken dirigible was about to clip the top of a three storey brick building. The Ambassador took his opportunity and leaped from the gondola, sliding down the roof of the building and coming to a halt in the guttering.

He steadied his breathing and smoothed the Crimplene of his safari suit. All might yet be well, if only he could fathom the L7 Code.

A hand appeared at the edge of the guttering. Drawing himself up over the edge, an old guy in mountaineering gear heaved into view. "Got any cherries?" he asked. (HB)

*

Cartledge was feeling angry. He'd just been to Sainsbury's to buy some Wits, and had seen a Barratt's Booty Bag in the sweets aisle. Except you could see what the contents were, so it wasn't a booty bag. And the

contents of each packet was exactly the same. So it wasn't a booty bag. He left in high dudgeon and his mind was racing with ways he might seek revenge on Barratts for their misrepresentation of what had been a classic confectionary item of his youth. He might for instance buy a booty bag, piss in it, and post it to them. Or else he might get the telephone number of their managing director and ring him up at 2.00 am every morning to tell him what shit his products were. He was so distracted he didn't notice a news vendor who blocked his path until the man yelled: "Horrible disaster in Harringey as Needle Laundry explodes. Not many Old Men Dead. Police blame Vorgon suicide bombers and say they will exact retribution on the part of society by operating a shoot to kill policy if they ever find out what a Vorgon actually looks like. Meanwhile they will practice on Argentinians."

Wait a minute, said Cartledge, aren't you that taxi driver that once took me to Luton?

Yeah, but I lost my cool and thumped a fat Boodist in Wiltshire, said the news vendor, so they took away my badge Apparently thumping Boodists is frowned upon and I didn't realize the entire taxi industry was regulated by a secret masonry of Boodists. But I'll get my own back one day. I'll go and piss in their booty bag, just you wait and see.

You should turn the other cheek, said Cartledge. Forgiveness is good for the soul.

Yeah but vengeance is a strong human imperative. Forgiveness might be said to be irrational.

But the cycle has to end somewhere. It only takes one man.

Na, an eye for an eye mate. Forgiveness might be for the greater good of mankind but I'm not that altruistic. Look do you want to buy a newspaper or not?

Not really, said Cartledge.

Then fuck off and stop wasting my time. Wait a minute. Now I remember, you're the cunt who misdirected me to Wiltshire in the first place.

He took out an Uzi and pointed it at Cartledge and pulled the trigger. (GC)

*

Cartledge knew that his only chance was to play the ultimate trump card which had baffled so many previous opponents.

He rasped through clenched nostrils: "I give u--"

(DL)

*

The streets were empty, hot and empty like a secondrate backpackers hotel. The city shimmered in a heat-haze like something out of a J.G. Ballard novel that had lots of sun in it and not much water. A huge asteroid was bearing down upon the planet, but the world governments had decided not to tell anyone about it, in case it spoiled the party, although the England footballers might have been fairly grateful if it had arrived during their penalty shoot-out with Portugal, when they lost 3-nil. But unfortunately it didn't, and the England team went home with their WAGs to a world that had already been wiped out, and would be taken over by the survivors of cockroaches in millions of years time. And they too after organizing their own world cup competition, except with

very small balls, would go onto kill each other in seeking retribution

Punch dusted himself down. Since his fall from the Zeppelin of the indeterminately gendered Vorgon Ambassador, he had been unsure of what exactly reality was. Or indeed of what reality exactly was. Or indeed of what was reality exactly. He was also unaware of exactly where he was. He had thought he was back in his comfortable pad in Gateshead, after going out to buy bird seed for a bird he didn't have, but this was obviously not the case.

He plodded on down a street full of shops selling cherries which suddenly nobody wanted to buy. A dink wearing Converse shoes shuffled round him and then ran away very quickly. The only other person on his immediate event horizon, was the deaf dumb and blind guy who stood outside the pub all day with a plastic cup.

He paused outside a Turkish drinking club punningly called Zorba The Mastiff, and peered in through the window. Those that weren't involved in playing cards were watching the World Cup on a flickering television. The Vorgon Cockroaches were beating the home team by a sizeable margin. He took off his teflar bullet proof vest and threw it into the gutter. He had a feeling he would not need it any more. (GC)

*

Cartiledge looked up at the sky. It was blood red. A cockroach scuttled by, and shouted over its shoulder, hey buddy I'd get off the streets if I was you. The future is ours. In this respect at least its optimism proved to be ill-

founded. Suddenly a fireball tore across the sky. The giant asteroid named L7 impacted with the Earth reducing both the planet and all its inhabitants (including cockroaches and Kurt Vonnegut) into a fine dust of undifferentiated matter. All that remained in its wake was a malign source of evil energy embedded in an infinitely resonating superstring known as Koad (GC)

Frodo awoke. It was all a dream. (JDB)

Suddenly, inexplicably, realization came to Frodo. Reality and dreaming are but manifestations of Koadian awareness. "48 is really 47 which itself is but one matchstick away from L7," Frodo muttered to himself. (IM)

*

The shimmering superstring that was the evil and malign entity known as Koad opened a bag of peanuts and mused. The bar was certainly a lot more peaceful without those tics squabbling away on their wretched planet. Peaceful and yet... boring. it looked about for something else to destroy for its wanton please. No, it thought, not destroy... What was the last thing any one would expect a malign and evil entity to do? Well, since each superstring contains the basic template for each universe that was, is and ever will be, what was to stop it creating one which contained the wretched planet and its inhabitants but without the asteroid L7 hurtling towards it, and a few other little tweaks. Maybe it could even incorporate a few World Leaders who actually believed in Peace not War, and conquering poverty, while it was about it. It popped a few

more peanuts, gave its tail a shake, and the deed was done.
Koad felt an experience it had not felt for a long long time
A warm cosy glow.

*

Cartledge had been to Sainsburys to buy some Wits. They didn't have any but he had picked up a Barratt's Booty Bag, and made his way home contentedly munching the excellent confectionery that reminded him so much of the booty bags of his youth. He was so distracted by the taste sensations, in fact that he didn't notice a newsvendor who blocked his path until the man yelled: `World Leaders declare World Peace, an end to War, and vow to stamp out poverty by the end of next week. Miracle cure for Cancer discovered. Insignificant planet in the arm of a distant spiral galaxy wiped out by massive asteroid named L7. "Wait a minute, said Cartledge, aren't you that taxi driver that once took me to Luton?

Yeah, but I decided the job wasn't for me. I was bottling up so much rage and aggression having to deal with stupid tossers who misdirected me all the time, that I just had to get out. I cleansed myself of guilt and vengeance, learned to forgive, and became a Boodist. They are really quite nice people you know. Om. Do you want to buy a newspaper or not? Lots of nice things happening everywhere. Apparently they've caught some arms dealers who had been selling dodgy Uzi which jammed up firing mechanisms, but they decided to forgive them as long as they didn't do it again. Read all about it." I'll pass, said Cartledge. Fair enough, sport, said the newsvendor. Have a nice day. (GC)

*

The superstring known as Koad went to visit this new brane of the multiverse that it had used the gravitational waves to move to after the destruction of the bar in M-Brane-1 by the rogue asteroid L7. It landed in Green Lanes and assume a human form.

As the now human looking superstring walked along the road it was struck by the peace and harmony that prevailed. Turks and Greeks danced together trading lamb kebab recipes while birds tweeted and cooed. At the Portuguese pub, The Vasco de Gama, men wrapped in banners with a Saint George's Cross were buying rounds for the Portuguese fisherman who had been on the sea getting their daily haul and had missed the match.

"Gor, blimey," said one English fan, "That Ricardo. What a goalie! We never stood a chance with him, did we, Joao? I love Lisbon, by the way. Pity about that earthquake but you recovered well.

Another English fan was holding forth in poem:

We want Iberia to know
That though it may not show
We do repudiate Rooney
That Liverpoolian looney
Who should by this time know
It's for the ball you go
And not the balls

Let's see it again, cried the crowd!

And Joao and Neville did chase the ball loosed into the crowded bar and Gomez did come up and stop the ball and he passed it to Joao who was tackled late by Neville who was whistled at by the referee yet who, yea verily, did step back into the gonads of Joao and did him injury.

Koad heard a snickering in his head. He could not immediately tell where the laughter came from but, looking about, he saw a large steaming pile of dog shit on the pavement before him. A large dung beetle was cavorting in the odoriferous heap.

"Cartiledge?" asked the former superstring being Koad.

"Hoo hah. I'm an old dung beetle! Oh the Dalai Lama thought he'd got me but I just love stirring this shit. Look at them, there! They can't possibly get along, can they?"

Sure enough, as if on queue, the doors of The Vasco de Gama burst open and a writhing mass of humanity spilled forth.

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;" cried an English voice.

"For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon quarter-final day."

The English, of course, vastly outnumbered the Portuguese and the battle soon turned to rout. As the Iberians retreated towards the needle laundry the English looked to finish them off. They found Turks and butted their heads; they found Greeks and kicked their shins; they found French and showered them with kisses for beating the vile Portuguese-speaking Brazilians.

The Portuguese, having established a defensive perimeter within the needle laundry began to wonder. Who will save us, they wondered.

*

"Fantastic!" cried Dr. Who

"Glad you think so," said Rose, rising up from her knees and wiping her mouth.

"Yes! The Vorgon battlecruiser is capable of destroying entire planetary systems in minutes and we're miles from the Tardis in Harringey armed only with some Major Grey's Chutney! Well, blow me if this isn't fantastic!"

With a sigh, Rose knelt down once more.

*

The Vorgon Ambassador looked out of her zeppelin at the chaos below in Green Lanes and wondered if there was any point in conquering such a troublesome lot of beings.

Just then Mr. Punch pulled himself into the zeppelin. He drew himself to his full height of four foot none and produced an alarmingly large pistol. "I claim this zeppelin in the name of the Andorran People's Popular Liberation Enclave! For too long we have suffered under the Franco-Iberian boot. APPLE to the core!"

What's this got to do with me? thought the Vorgon Ambassador as the bullet ripped into her minor brain.(RC)

*

Suddenly, a shot rang out... (MR)

*

Cartledge awoke from a dream in which he was laying a vast Transatlantic Cable dressed only in a slightly gay Safari Suit. He stretched and did ten bench presses as was his custom most mornings. He went into the bathroom and

showered, and splashed some of Gucci's new 'Mauler' brand deodorant on his body (Body Fragrance for Men Not Afraid to Fall Off Ladders, as it had recently been marketed.)

He stepped back and looked at himself in the mirror, and recoiled aghast. Somehow, overnight he had been transformed into a dung beetle. He was a very well turned out and well-groomed dung beetle but a dung beetle nevertheless. He stepped into his walk-in wardrobe, and realized that all his clothes smelt of dung, if not shit, even the ceremonial apron that someone who was a mason had once given him. His mother knocked on his door. C., she said, are you okay, I've made you some nice schmeltzes for breakfast. Why have you locked the door? Mama, C. said, something terrible has happened and I can't come out. Just push the schmeltzes under the door. Are you crazy, his mother yelled, latkes I could push under the door, but Schmeltzes no way, not since your Grandfather Ira rehung the door. What's wrong with you, have you turned into a loathsome insect or something? If you have you should just realize it is only a metaphor for having consumption. That's easy for you to say, Mama, said C. Forget the latkes and schmeltzes, he pleaded. Just give me some shit. I particularly like Tesco's own brand Buffalo ordure. Cartledge preened his antennae and rubbed his compound eyes. Suddenly he saw the poster of Carol Doda which adorned his bedroom wall in an entirely new light.(GC)

*

There was a knock on the door. Go away C. said, I've turned into a horrendous insect with mandibles who likes to suck shit. I was thinking of going to San Francisco later this year but what hope have I got of getting a passport looking like this? I went down to the photobooth in

Sainsburys to get a photo but it only caused a panic with people fleeing, only after stopping to buy up all available stocks of 'Fairy Soft BugKill'. Who are you anyway? And do you have any shit upon you?

I'm Swish Mackenzie, Don't you remember me? I picked you up on the North Circular. I was intending to lure you into a gay hotel in Finchley modelled on a Swiss chalet and have sex with you, but I realized the futility of my plans when you suddenly disappeared in a poof of smoke leaving only a business card with your address on it. I've followed you here not because I still want to have sex with you, unless you want to, but because I can see how I might make a buck in selling the story of someone who has turned overnight into a hideous insect to the Sunday Papers.

You mean like Angus Deayton, C asked.

Exactly like that, said Swish.(GC)

*

The Dhalia Lama leant back upon the silk pillows of her penthouse apartment. Her hand maidens cavorted around her in their flimsy negligees and giggled and awaited her next request. Would it be the giant strap on rubber cocky they wondered, or merely a slice of fudge tart. Ever since she had been warped into this narrative at the behest of someone called Uncle Johnny she had wondered about her exact role in it. It couldn't simply be to transform someone who was already a dung beetle into a normal human being, could it? Of course she was a supreme being in a supreme religion, capable of ensuring the rebirth and regeneration of any being or non-being or, for that matter, any simple string of organic molecules which had managed to clump together over millennia and

thus turned into your Uncle Walt. But that didn't necessarily buy you any bananas she realized, suddenly feeling in need of a banana or indeed a cucumber, or at least of something of that girth and length. Oh, what the hell she said, and clicked her fingers.

Cartledge felt a spasm pass through his body, and then his legs. In ten seconds he managed to evolve from a slime mould into a reasonably rational biped, passing through and thankfully forgetting all those times when he had been a dung beetle. He strapped on his Uzi and strode out into the streets of Harringey. There were debts to settle and bills to paid, including his fine for venturing into the Congestion Zone, in search for truth and justice. A smoke cloud was billowing over the Harringey Needle Laundry. He thought he would go and investigate. (GC)

*

Mr Punch was sitting in his favourite armchair, staring absently at his second-hand shoes. Inside were his second-hand feet and together they were resting on the edge of his coffee table. He'd just finished a pipe of his best herb and now was contemplating the use of the 7% solution.

He was troubled. Some hours earlier, he'd heard the screen door slam and when he went to investigate, saw what appeared to be a big yellow taxi driving off. As it turned the corner of the street, however, he noticed a baguette, two stotties and a fadge fall from the window and roll into the gutter.

Puzzled and a little unnerved, he returned to his sitting room and stoked up the coal fire. The current heatwave - temperatures were climbing into the nineties - was bothering him but he still felt uncertain whether it was time to cast off his smoking jacket before retiring

It was then he saw it. A fluttering. Just in the corner of

his eye. Looking towards the dining table, he spied the dog-eared and cruelly foxed paperback he'd discarded in the long grass by the concrete garage at the end of the street. It was riffling its pages at him, as if to invite him to pick it up and renew the narrative. The room grew noticeably cooler but pausing only to tie a scarf over his sugarloaf hat, he reached for the damnable book and began to turn the pages.

Now he was mulling over what he'd read. Somehow it seemed that, although he knew was safely at home in his little pyjama-stripped house, another version of himself was acting in a most peculiar fashion inside the book. He knew it was time to resolve this once and for all. Casting about to ensure no-one was able to see him, he wriggled and shook, squirmed and writhed; with a final blast of light and an uncomfortable farting sound, he ripped into innumerable copies of himself. "Go my Brothers!" he cried. "Spread throughout the land. Disguise yourselves in strange and worrying ways. Let nothing stand in your way. Be victorious but attempt working with wood only to distract and confuse the unwary.

In a whirl of ruffs and a ritual slapping of truncheons in a comical Morris-like routine, they blended into the night air and were gone.

Mr Punch sat down again to a bowl of stewed rhubarb, to which he had added a little ginger and a handful of sultanas. It was good to be alive.(HB)

*

Audrey sat back in her super executive ultra large office chair and pondered the desktop on the LCD screen. No use, that wouldn't help her remember. Nothing contained in the volume to which the desktop related ever did - if anything it only caused her to be more forgetful.

Still, when all else failed, there was her organic hard drive as back up.

"You know that estimate we did for that couple in Burbage?"

"What estimate out of the many hundreds that have passed before my protesting eyes was that?" Uncle Johnny looked weary as he stood in the doorway of his cubby hole.

"Oh, you know," she said, waving her hands about, "the one about the new bathroom in the old listed property - dodgy floor joists or something." Uncle Johnny sighed a sigh and looked at the carpet. It wasn't as if there was any shortage of old listed properties in this corner of Wiltshire and probably most of them had dodgy floor joists or something. But he thought he might be getting Madam Company Secretary's drift.

"Would that be Mr & Mrs Love?" he enquired

"That's it!" Audrey perked up. It was almost as if she had thought of it herself. "What job number did you put it under?"

Uncle Johnny felt a cold shiver go down his back. A dark shadow seemed to hover at the edge of his vision. "L7," he said, in a lifeless tone.

"Ah, so it would be under L then" remarked Audrey, leaping from her super executive ultra large office chair, and ran her fingers along a shelf of large lever arch files. She selected one, turned to an index and stopped. "Oh, someone's squashed a bug on this estimate."

"It wasn't me," said Uncle Johnny. "It's against my principles."

"I hope there aren't any more bugs in these files. They make a nasty mess." Audrey could not abide mess in any shape or form, unless it was the chaotic heap of mail order catalogues, donkey sanctuary begging letters, rescue centre

fund raising packs and TV guides that washed up like the wrecks of old sailing ships around her super executive ultra large electrically powered armchair at home. Uncle Johnny, had moved to stand behind her and looked over her shoulder at the icky mess at the foot of the sheet of A4. It looked as if the bug had been eating schmelztes. (JNH)

*

The Harringey College of Needlework was an imposing gothic edifice overlooking Finsbury Park. Cartledge rang the bell on the huge cast iron gates and they swung open almost as it driven by tiny electric motors. CCTV cameras swivelled to follow his progress as he walked up the broad gravel drive to the huge iron-bound main doors. The doors opened automatically and he proceeded into the entrance hall. From all around came the sound of frantic activity, needles snickered and clattered echoing down vast seemingly endless corridors. All around were stentorian voices shouting: knit one purl one, knit two purl one yarn over make ringlet cast off and other arcane directions. A stern matronly women behind the reception desk peered at him over the tops of her pince nez as he approached. She had large fleshy thighs and unsightly holes in her tights. I'm afraid our rolls are closed and we not taking on any more students at the moment, she said. And anyway this is strictly a college for genteel young ladies. And we're certainly not looking for the services of an itinerant odd-job man either, certainly not one who smells as if he has only recently been wallowing in shit, so I would humble suggest you might like to sling your hook.

Cartledge lit up a small cheroot which he had just found in the turn-ups of his combat fatigues. Listen lady, he snarled, your hard-ass act doesn't impress me. The only hook I will be slinging is your crochet hook, straight down the toilet. I don't want to enrol, but I do need your services. Intelligence has reached me that the world is about to be

overrun by a plague of miniature Punches spawned out of some hell-hatchery in Gateshead. They are on the march even as I speak and may even have reached Hebden Bridge and Todmorden already. Unless we take drastic action they will over-run us and foil forever our quest to find the secret of L7. Cartledge pulled out a piece of paper on which he had scribbled a hasty schematic. I need your young ladies to knit up some Punch Traps to this specification. You can see it somewhat resembles a finger-trap only on a larger scale. Enticed by these erotic depictions embroidered on the inner surface, the Punch crawls in the large hole at one end but when he tries to extricate himself its only gets tighter leaving him hopelessly immobilized.

That's all very well, the Bursar said, uncrossing her ample fishnet clad thighs and farting gently, but what's it for me?

I can darn your tights, said Cartledge.

I'm tempted, said the Bursar pulling up her skirt. But can you do garter stitch?

Lady, said Cartledge stubbing out his cigar, do you want it with ribbing or without? (GC)

*

Joao smelled the smoke before he saw it. He'd showered three times, changed clothes twice, and even added a dash of perfume here and there but still the smell of smoke persisted. It must be in my brain, concluded Joao. Just then Gomez ran up, screaming, hysterical, naked. "Joao!", he howled, "The Needle Laundry is on fire!"

"Gomez," said Joao, reasonably, "Why are you naked?"

Gomez thought briefly about telling Joao of the nice

blonde lady he'd met in a blue police box that was larger on the inside than on the outside but decided he'd never be believed. "Oh," he said instead, "I've just been bugging a bug. Rather large dung beetle, actually. Cute once you get past the smell."

Joao looked at his friend with admiration. He knew it took a real man to get past that smell. He handed his pal a pair of maroon shorts and a maroon shirt. "Here," he said, "put these on. Should help you slip unnoticed through the crowd outside. Meanwhile, I'll dress up in this white shirt with the large red cross and black shorts to divert attention."

By now, acrid smoke was beginning to seep into the room. Joao and Gomez retreated down a hallway looking for an exit. They found a door marked "Gents". That's us, they thought, and entered the room.

A large black man with corn rows was scrubbing vigorously at a urinal. Every now and then he would take two quick steps back, feint to his left, then rush in and attack the urinal with renewed vigour.

"I know you," said Joao, "You're Lennox Lewis." Since he was Portuguese this came out as Lennukth Lewith. "Why are you here?"

"I'm trying to get an OBE," said the former world heavyweight champ.

"You need to go to Kings Cross Station," said Joao, except he said it as Kingth Croth Thathion.

"Oh," said Lennox Lewis.

The smoke had filtered down the hallway by now and was curling under the door of the gents. "Perhaps," said Gomez, "we should head there now."

The window of the gents was small but so were the Iberians. They quickly climbed through. Lennox Lewis had

more difficulty as his broad shoulders and massive biceps barely fit at all. Fortunately, Gomez still had an ample supply of Crisco on his person and, after a good greasing, the former champ slipped through. The mob was on the other side of the grounds singing as the Needle Laundry burned. Gomez, Joao, and Lennox Lewis were about to slip away into the streets of Harringey when, suddenly, Lennox Lewis cupped an ear. He listened intently and walked toward the corner of the building. "Uh, Lennox, shouldn't we be heading away from there?" asked Joao.

"Listen to what they're singing," said Lennox Lewis. "It's 'No-one Likes Us, We Don't Care'" The champ abruptly surged around the corner of the building and, with a mighty cry of "Hammers!" he ran toward the mob, a look of fury on his face.

Joao and Gomez exchanged glances and wondered if they should aid their new friend. As they wondered a hssst came from the gate of Needle Laundry grounds. "Hsst," it said, "over here mates." Joao and Gomez walked warily to the gate, opened it, and stepped out of the Needle Laundry grounds. They had escaped from the Needle Laundry!

"Who hssted," asked Joao, only it came out "Who hthththted?". There was nobody in sight, only a mangy street dog sitting calmly by the fence scratching himself behind the ear. The dog stopped scratching and said "I did." He then curled about and began licking his balls. After about ten seconds of this he stopped, looked at the dumbstruck Portugese men, and asked "Do you know why dogs lick their balls?" Joao and Gomez, as one, shook their heads, no. "Because we can!" shouted the dog and cavorted about wagging its tail while barking happily. "Oh, the old ones are the best ones," he said after calming down some. "Now walk this way."

*

Punch looked down at the odd procession that made its way along the High Road. A dog led the way, followed by two men dressed as footballers walking on all fours. He shook his head, the bells on his sugarloaf hat tintinabulated. He wondered if anything would come of this strange trio or would they just wander off, never to be seen again.

He looked back into the zeppelin as he heard a moaning sound from the Vorgon Ambassador. She wasn't going to be bothered too much by that blast to her minor brain although Punch rather hoped it might remove her short-term memory for a while.

The Vorgon Ambassador stood, shakily, and saw Punch. "You shot me," she said. So much for short-term memory loss, thought Punch. "I love you, you adorable, little, hook-nosed, large-chinned, sugarloaf-hat-wearing, truncheon-wielding, baby-smiting, doll!" She cossetted up close to him and cooed, "What's under those colorful trousers, babe?"

*

Cartledge arrived at the Needle Laundry just as the first flames began to show through the windows. A large black man was walking through the mob in front of the building casually KOing people left and right. Two thirds of the mob were on the ground already and most of the remaining third looked ready to leave. Cartledge thought he would too and stepped around the corner. In the distance he saw a dog leading two men down the road. The one in the maroon shorts looked familiar, like someone he had once dreamed of having sex with while he was transmuted into a giant dung beetle. Intrigued, Cartledge

followed from a distance. (RC)

*

Several of the spawn of Punch had reached Wiltshire by following the directions of a fat Boodist they had found on the internet. Yet others had shipped with a truckload of illegal immigrants bound for Morecambe bay to pick cockles or maybe cock pickles. Unfortunately the truck was driven by an ex-taxi driver, who had since become a news vendor, but then lapsed into yet another driving career by being bribed with vast Yorkies. They massed outside Coachman's Cottage, biding their time.

Audrey slipped into a basque and fishnet stockings and beckoned to the fat Boodist to follow her upstairs, which was difficult because they lived in a bungalow.

The Punches had already sent in several spies in the form of small dung beetles equipped with surveillance cameras, so they knew exactly what was going on. They waited until Uncle Johnny was running his hand up Audrey's thigh, and then leapt in through the windows like a miniature SWAT team. Flesh! they howled. Lots of Flesh! And not just sausages! Real Flesh! And that was only Johnny. The little devils swarmed over their victims ripping flesh from sinew and sinew from organ and then sinew from flesh, until nothing remained of the star-crossed lovers except a small pile of congealed cartilaginuous material which he would later re-work into a novel. Sated, for the while, the miniature carnivorous Punches turned their attention towards... Harringey. GC)

*

The Vorgon Ambassador was in a reverie. His thoughts were of the whereabouts of the female Vorgon Ambassador whom he had last seen entertaining Mr Punch on board the sinking dirigible. He had always questioned the need for two Ambassadors but the Grand Vorgon Admiral had been adamant. "You can wear the voluminous state gown," he threeped, and the female will wear the ambassadress."

Shaking himself out of his fugue, he stared at the old guy at the edge of the roof. The old guy had said nothing since asking for cherries and the Ambassador wondered what use he might serve the plot. None whatsoever was his ultimate conclusion, so he drew forth a handful of Vorgon ticks and flung them at the old guy. With a pitiful wail, the old guy fell backwards over the edge of the roof, his arms flailing.

Looking over the edge, the Ambassador watched him strike the ground three storeys below. Or was that three stories? Someone would correct him if he said it out loud, so he held his peace. Or was that piece? Anyway, his attention was distracted by the sight of hundreds of women hanging out of windows in the buildings round him. They seemed to be throwing their old pants down into the street below. Shinning down a drainpipe amongst the snowstorm of lingerie, the Vorgon Ambassador found himself in the path of two men coming down the middle of the road. One of the men wore maroon shorts, but what caught his attention was the little dog who seemed to be leading the parade. Were it not for the absence of a ruff, he could have sworn it was Dog Toby.

*

Clement Greenberg took time out from ironing a painting flat to consider the architectural merits of the Royal School of Needlework at Harringey, otherwise known as the Harringey College of Needlework.

Architecture was not strictly his line of expertise, but that had never stopped him before. Why, he wondered, had the builders started in the Gothic style, then added vast Rococo towers? It was simply another example of inconsistent design which would require him to write a letter in green ink to AR magazine. Sadly he was not to know that the College was an early example of Post Modernism and the architects had merely helped themselves to the grab bag of history. (HB)

*

Pierre Cartiledge strolled along Green Lanes. He was here to visit his distant cousin, twice removed but had mislaid his address. Nevertheless he felt confident if he just sauntered in a typical French fashion he might come across his cousin, perhaps while he was out buying a deep-fried baguette or whatever travesty of French cuisine they practising in these parts. He passed a Turkish football club and popped his head in to see what was going down. The television set in the corner of the room was dark. Three old men sitting around a table playing cards studiously ignored him despite his cheery cry of 'Bonjour'. A gay chef carving slices of doner turned to Pierre with a cheery grin, which faded as he took in Pierre's striped shirt, beret and strings of onions. *Piss off Frenchie* he snarled. There is no joy amongst my people, our Greek brethren, since neither of our teams qualified. So you are through to the Semi-finals but I predict Portugal will beat you 2-1. Pierre went on his way, and passed a betting shop. He put a quick bet on for Portugal to win 2-1 and then. He went into The Salisbury, ordered, an absinthe and a glass of Beaujolais and settled down to watch Alan Hansen, Alan Shearer, Gary Whatnot and the Irish Guy pontificate on the imminent match.

Would the waiter's prediction prove to be true, and would he later have to return to the cafe and rub his nose in the shit (GC).

*

He thought for a moment and came to a conclusion. No matter what the result he would go back just to irritate the waiter. If he were lucky there might be a knife fight and he could scare the shit out of them with his Uzi. (IM)

*

One of the old men at the table was having difficulty holding his cards. The plaster casts on both of his arms and that on his right leg made sitting a problem, but he reflected on his luck in surviving the fall from the top of the three storey building earlier that day. Bugger that bloke on the roof, he thought. I only asked for cherries to pass the time of day. Not as if I fancied him or anything although the pink safari suit did give me a bit of a boner.

His attention wandered from the game. At that moment, he spotted the French geezer sauntering back towards the cafe, his onion strings abob. Bet he thinks he's a real flaneur, thought the old man, who had come upon the word in his reading of Baudelaire. He knew that Clement Greenberg would never have used it and that gave him some cause for joy, even in his currently painful state.

The Frenchman had stopped in the middle of Green Lanes. He'd been accosted by a curious individual whom the old guy could not know was Koad the superstring being. It puzzled him, therefore, to hear the Frenchman raise his voice and say quite heatedly, "Get knotted." (HB)

Koad, the superstring being, was surprised at the reaction. After all, he'd just been trying to save Pierre Cartledge from himself, but the Frenchman had been obstinate. Koad rearranged his molecular structure to reflect the same light waves and patterns as his ambient surroundings, thus becoming effectively invisible in a plausible scientific manner. He followed Pierre.

Pierre had noticed his cousin following two Portuguese men and a dog down an alley off of Green Lanes. "Zoot Alors!" he thought, for he was French. "Merde!" He hurried down the alleyway after his cousin and caught up to him as Phil Cartledge stood on a trashcan peering into the window of a warehouse the dog and Portuguese men had entered. "Mon petit frere!" expostulated Pierre, momentarily forgetting the French word for cousin, "Voulez vous couchez avec chien, c'est soir?" Startled, Cartledge lost his balance and fell amidst a large clatter as the trashcan fell. Cartledge found himself sitting on the road, a pile of coffee grounds beneath his arse, a banana peel riding jauntily on his head.

The plausibly invisible superstring being, Koad, vibrated harmonically with the gravitational waves of the planet and, consequently, levitated in a very scientifically plausible manner to the window that Cartledge had been peering through

"What was that racket?" asked Joao. "It sounded just like somebody standing on a trashcan to spy upon us falling off when suddenly surprised."

"Probably just a cat," said the learned dog of Harringey. "They do that all the time looking for previously flung fish."

"Now," continued the dog, "what I am about to tell you is of the utmost importance. When you have heard me out much that has been obscure will become clear, much that has been hidden will be revealed, much that has been veiled will become like it had no veil, much that..."

With a loud CRASH! the door burst open and Lennox Lewis strode in carrying Pierre Cartledge under his massive left bicep and Phillip Cartledge under his massive right bicep. "Look what the champ drug in," preened Lennox Lewis. "I surrender!" cried Pierre, between mouthfuls of garlic and cheese.

Joao and Gomez looked at Phillip Cartledge. "Filho da puta," spat Gomez. "That's the pica that called us gratuitous, Joao!"

"He said I lisped," said Lennox Lewis, sibilantly. "I think I'm going to get gratuitous on his ass!"

"WAIT!" cried the dog. "What I am about to tell you is of the utmost importance. When you have heard me out much that has been obscure will become clear, much that has been hidden will be revealed, much that has been veiled will become like it had no veil, much that..."

A huge explosion, an explosion not unlike one might expect from a large Vorgon zeppelin coming too close to a burning Needle Laundry, interrupted the dog. A wailing cry could be heard from outside "Oh, the Vorgonity..." (RC)

*

Sitting disconsolately at his table by the window, the old guy poked a bit of wire inside each of his plaster casts in turn, scratching a multitudinous itch. His card playing buddies had left and he was sitting with a cold cup of weak coffee at the table by the cafe window, watching the world go about its business, without much enthusiasm.

"Can I join you?" said a voice with a Brooklyn accent. The old guy looked up and saw a balding man blowing smoke through his nostrils. "Sure. Why not," said the old guy, pushing an empty chair out from the table.

"The name's Greenberg. Clement Greenberg," said the newcomer, lighting up a cigarette. The old guy noticed that Greenberg still had a lit cigarette in his hand. When Greenberg noticed too, he stubbed out the old one hurriedly.

The old guy hesitated, then looking rather sheepish, proffered a hand at the end of a plaster cast, and said "Mine's Frodo, I'm afraid. Frodo Ramsbottom. Parents were hippies," he added, as if used to having to volunteer an excuse.

"Ah," said Greenberg, trying to sound understanding, while choking back a snigger. But he shook the proffered hand as best he could. "You look like you've been in the wars."

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," Frodo said, but thinking better of it, went on, "I was out for my daily constitutional. Climbing a three storey building near the Royal School of Needlework - you might know it as the Harringay College of Needlework. Minding my own business I was. Just cleared the upper guttering when I sees this geezer in a pink safari suit sitting on the tiles, cool as you like. Well, I says to him, the way you do, passing the time of day like, got any cherries? Without a by your leave, he reaches into one of his pocketsets and pulls out some really nasty bugs. Throws them at me and well, like Dali faced with the prospect of a grasshopper clinging to his face what was there for me to do? I threw myself off. No, don't smirk, I said threw. This ain't a Max Miller routine. When I come round I was in the St Bronte Sisters General, with all these here plasters. Ever since, I've been waking up and thinking this is all a dream. But it ain't."

"Fancy," said Clement Greenberg, lighting up another fag.

"But what about you, Clem? How's your day been?"

"Oh, not so bad," began Greenberg, "but somehow I can't help feeling that everything has gone a littleflat."

At that moment a huge pantehnicon pulled up across the road from the cafe. Like the pit stop crew at a grand prix, a swarm of little hump-backed figures dressed entirely in red, sugarloaf hats wedged firmly on their heads, raced round from the cab to the rear of the vehicle and opened the big doors. From inside the pantehnicon they rolled out a big red Routemaster bus and set about changing the number on the front from 722 to 27A. One of the gang climbed aboard and with a grin drove the bus away round the corner. The remainder climbed in the back of the pantehnicon and disappeared round a different corner.

"What was that all about?" wondered Greenberg.

"Fucked if I know, said Frodo Ramsbottom. "Fuckin' buss drivers. We hatesss them, yess we doesss." (HB)

Are you Frodo Ramsbottom? asked the stranger. He was dressed in a leather poncho and smoked a small cheroot, or it may have been a cigarillo, but certainly not a panatella. He wore chaps, but the right way round, and his tooled leather boots jangled with ornaments, some of which may have been spurs.

Why, yes yes, said Frodo, extending his hand, but I'm just an old hippie, as I'm sure you realize. I'm not really working as a health practitioner advising lots of Health Care Trusts scattered about the Home Counties and especially to the South, quite near Eastbourne. I also don't sit on a number of advisory boards for medical examination bodies, but that is neither here nor there, unless you are sitting for a medical examination, which I

take it you aren't exactly, at this minute.

The stranger spat with a spung into a nearby spittoon. The spittle was a coalescence of tar and blood, and those little strings that are left when you've sucked asparagus dry. Shut up, he said, picking up a huge Cricket bat which appeared to be constructed entirely from Willow, of one from one willow he couldn't be sure. He turned to the undertaker who was standing by the side of the road watching them. That will be three coffins, he said, and make one extra large for this tubby doctor. For I also have to go up against two Portuguese football supporters, Joao and the other one. Don't kill me said Frodo, falling to his knees, and then remembering the awful fate that lay in wait for Billie Piper, in the next episode of Doctor Who, namely being replaced by Freema Egyeman whom he had heard was capable of taking twelve inches. Then Frodo rose immediately, but not in a real sense, and looked insouciant, as if butter or something else wouldn't melt in his mouth. My wife is waiting for me in bed in a very skimpy corpse-bride t-shirt masquerading as a nightie, he said. If you have to kill me, at least kill me in the morning. It's been so long. Be here at high noon sharp, said the stranger, cocking his pistol, drawing his poncho around him and stalking off with a clank of his spurs.

A train timetable blew by in the wind. Frodo speared it with a used toothpick. Apparently a train was arriving tomorrow morning bearing three brothers who had pledged to kill him for sending one of their other brothers down. Thus is the cycle of violence and hopeless retribution our hero wrote to himself which would unfortunately never be discovered through several million recyclings of universes, and only by a Rat called Herbert North, who could play the guitar exactly like Hank Markin, or Marvin, as he was known in an alternative universe. (GC)

*

The Vorgon Men In Black paid a visit to the Grand Admiral, arriving via the bowels of a giant dung beetle that had fallen into a superstring and thus suddenly found itself possessed of bowels. They emerged fairly sticky and slimy but shook off their gloop and confronted the Admiral, not only with vast unlikely guns, but with a series of photographs, taken through a Kodak Land Clement Greenberg Interstitial Camera, which I could probably rework into a proper acronym if I had either the time or inclination. Anyway it was the only camera capable of taking photographs across intersecting dimensions, and of printing them out in a flat format, which, of course, would later have to be ironed.

The photos showed an old Boodist having sex with his wife. Sorry, said the taller black Man In Black, a mistake, you weren't meant to see those. Those were purely taken for our own enjoyment. I will have to neuralize you, whatever that means, but I think it means if you look into this device while I flash it, you will never remember the horror of experiencing a Fat Boodist humping his wife. Click. Could you show me that last photo again said the Admiral only too aware that these idiots had not researched their topic and hadn't realized he had a backup set of compound eyes, which couldn't be affected by a neuralizer.

Can we just get back to the plot, said the less taller white one whose face was nevertheless crinkled with the lines of experience. He pulled out another photograph. This time it was of Punch. Can you deny this is your bastard son, he said, for certain lost souls on a lost hyperdimensional contact group have suggested that this is the case.

No this is the case, said the Admiral, indicating an aluminium flight case. And it contains the fabled Will Rogers Bomb, capable of destroying not only this universe,

should I choose to trigger it, but every other universe that exists in a Fibonacci sequence. I do not know the trigger for the bomb, I am merely the carrier, but it is embedded in my language cortex and may be made manifest in some mundane statement I might choose to make at any time, perhaps only by accident, or it might be because I choose in a maudlin fashion to witter on about my (GC)

*

The mini Punch bounced his way along the street, savouring the freedom of Harringey - the multi-linguality, the cultural quarter, the voluptuous breasts of the blonde waitresses. At the hugely expensive men's clothes shop, he negotiated a trade of his designer striped pjamas for a black Gucci T-shirt and jeans. He hoped, dressed thusly, to pass for a Jewish greyhound owner from the eruv of Stamford Hill. Sadly, he looked more like a babyhumpback whale with motion sickness.

Little Punch headed for the empty workshop on the top story of the Chocolate factory. Sadly, it was no longer empty, and he had to compete for space with the Sunday afternoon life drawing class. He set up his signalling equipment, drew his huge flask of cherry brandy from his pocket, and settled down to wait for a signal from the Vorgon ambassador (PC)

*

As he sat his gaze wandered around the room. His left eye took in the details of the flock wallpaper while his right danced from artist to artist. "47" he counted to himself quietly. Meanwhile his central eye stared straight ahead, fixated on the voluptuous breasts of the artist's model. (IM)

*

It was high noon. The stranger had arrived in the designated arena in Finsbury Park bang on time and was a little disgruntled to find one else was there, except the Afro Celt Sound System who were busy making lots of noise several miles away on the other side of the park. Maybe, he thought, when he had finished with current business he would go and check them out and perhaps pick up someone between the age of forty and sixty, for companionship only, but who might be willing to take lessons in ballroom dancing with him. He opened his watch and it began to chime. His eyes looked left, then right, then up, and then down, but it was no use he still could not see anyone. He lit up an old stogie and then a young stogie because the old stogie frankly tasted like an old stogie. The boilerplate that was concealed beneath his poncho had begun to chaff against his raised belly button (the legacy of frankly shoddy surgery) so he adjusted it by retensioning the straps that secured it around his neck.

Ding de dang de ding de dang, went his pocket watch. Still no one arrived, except an undertaker, who held up a placard reading 'Special Offers on four or more coffins'. The stranger was about to give up and go home, or at least to the kebab shop, when just then a tiny Punch strode into the arena. He was wearing a baseball cap back to front and dungarees, and was carrying a sand-blasted Uzi. How can the Punches ever hope to take over the world thought the Stranger, when they have such bad dress sense and buy their guns off dodgy arms dealers. He drew a bead on the Punch and shot him straight between the eyes. Unfortunately because the Punch was made of wood and didn't have a brain as such this had no effect on it. The Punch levelled his Uzi and pulled the trigger.

Predictably the mechanism jammed. So the Punch shot again. The mechanism jammed again. The punch shot again. This time the mechanism didn't jam but two bullets were released into the barrel only to come up a solid core of solidified sand. The resulting explosion reduced the Punch to a shower of wooden splints. The stranger picked one up and stuck it between his teeth to work on a bit of kebab gristle that had lodged in the gap left by a missing filling. Now, he thought, if only the fat Doctor Frodo would turn up. GC)

*

The roar of the exploding zeppelin could still be heard when the skylight of the warehouse gave way and the Vorgon ambassador, with Mr. Punch clutched tightly to her bosom, fell through and landed on top of Lennox Lewis. The Cartiledges, Phil and Pierre, rolled free. The learned dog of Harringey yipped and began to chase its tail. Joao and Gomez, fearing that this was a German attack on goal excitedly leapt at the soccer ball that had bounced in after the Ambassador both tried simultaneously to head it away, missed, collapsed in a daze as they successfully headed one another. The ball rolled into a net at the far end of the warehouse.

A great sound reminiscent of electronic wheezing began to reverberate throughout the large room. A blue police box gradually formed itself in the midst of the fallen and befuddled group. The door of the Tardis opened and Rose stepped out displaying her voluptuous breasts.

"Nobody move," she shouted, "or I will blow you!"

"Away, Rose", said the Doctor from inside the Tardis. "The line is 'Nobody move or I will blow you away!'"

Both Cartiledges spoke simultaneously. "I liked her way better."

"Who's in the police box?" asked the Vorgon Ambassador.

"That's right," said Rose.

"What's right?" queried the VA.

"Who," said Rose.

"That's what I'm asking you," said the Vorgon Ambassador, her voice rising most undiplomatically. "Who's in the police box?"

"Yes," said Rose and her voluptuous breasts rose and fell.

"What?"

"No, Who."

"So, who's in the police box?"

"In a nutshell. Spot on."

The Vorgon Ambassador saw that questioning the addle-brained blonde with the voluptuous breasts was getting nowhere. She stood up, still clutching Mr. Punch tightly to her bosom.

Just then who stepped out of the Tardis? No, that wasn't a question. Just then Who stepped out of the Tardis.

"Ms Ambassador," he said.

"Who said that?" asked the Vorgon Ambassador who was still rather dazed from being thrown halfway across Harringey when her zeppelin exploded.

"Yes," said Who.

"Who?" asked the Ambassador.

"Absolutely," replied Who. "You're sharp today."

"I don't even know who I'm talking to!"

"Who."

"You!"

"I give up," said the Ambassador.

"The reason I'm here," said Who, "is as a representative of the Intergalactic Commission of the Entropic Protection Agency. Do you realize, Ms Ambassador, that Vorgon Battlefleets account for only 30% of the interstellar battlefleets waiting to conquer small remote inhabited planets yet contribute almost 45% to Universal Entropic Decay?"

"There is no proof," said the Ambassador, "that Entropic Decay increases are in anyway due to sentient activity. It is just as likely caused by cyclical changes in the cosmological constant." (RC)

*

Unaccountably, the two men and the little dog had not noticed him standing in their path but had instead turned into a little lane, from whence some noise and commotion issued. Deciding that caution might be the better part of valour, the Vorgon Ambassador started to cross the road to the Green Lanes cafe, where he noticed two men deep in conversation at the window seat. He was forced to quicken his step when a huge pantechnicon pulled up nearby and a strange pantomime with little men in red and a Routemaster took place. Earth was certainly not short of puzzles, he reflected, and remembered then that the greatest puzzle of all – the L7 code – remained to be solved.

When he stepped out again from the cafe he was wearing a pink scaly creature on his head. He'd obtained it

in exchange for some simple services from a man in the cafe who told him it had fallen from the sky earlier that day. The Ambassador thought it went well with the pink herringbone of his safari suit and enable him to blend in further with the local denizens. He was wrong, of course, for even a 16th century eunuch detective could have told that this was a being not of this earth, but he had no way of knowing this for he had never seen a copy of The Observer. (HB)

"Frodo! Frodo! Mr Ramsbottom! Are you alright?" said Greenberg, splashing a little cold coffee in his new friend's face. Frodo's face was ashen. Brimful of ashen, in fact. Greenberg blew smoke at him to see if that might help.

"What just happened?" asked Clem, conscious of the fact that he might find himself asking this time and again if he remained too long in this little demi-monde.

"I think the proprietor has been spiking the java with morning glory seeds again, so it's difficult to say which, of all the curious incidents of the last five minutes, were real. For instance, it seemed to me that, in fear for my life, I fell to my knees, but in view of my plaster casts, that seems unlikely?" His voice lifted interrogatively at the end of the sentence and for once Clem knew that this really was a question and not an annoying trope of streetkids.

"No, you didn't do that. How could you? But there was an ugly bastard in here, in need of a shave, who waved guns about and shouted a great deal about medical matters. His poncho was unbelievably wrinkled. I could have taken a flatiron to him there and then. Have you any medical background?"

"None whatsoever. I was training as a toilet cleaner in the hope of getting an OBE, but could only get a post at

Fenchurch Street. Since then I've helped out photographing the sides of houses for my mate. Nice bloke. Bit Turkish."

Trying to look more concerned than he actually was, Greenberg asked, "Will you be here if the poncho guy comes back? Might not be too safe."

"My mobility is a bit compromised," said Frodo, lifting his arms to indicate the plaster casts.

"I could help with that, I believe," The two turned to find a vision in pink standing behind them. His herringbone safari suit did little to conceal the fact that his body was unusual; somewhat rugose, it seemed. His eyes, however, had a light in them that suggested he was to be trusted and Frodo agreed let him do what he could.

Within minutes, the stranger in pink had stripped away the plaster casts and replaced them with a pliable yet supportive exoskeleton fashioned from strips of Formica taken from the table top. Mobility was provided by a tiny engine which drew its power from a digital aerial he installed on top of Frodo's head, drilling a tiny hole through his skull to accommodate the cabling.

"This is wonderful!" exclaimed Frodo Ramsbottom, "But what can I give you in return? I'm a bit pushed for cash. My Turkish buddy is late with the wages."

"Maybe I could help out there, " interjected a man who'd been sitting quietly in the corner, reading a book which the others now could see - despite the dribble of hot sauce on the cover - was "The Algebraist," by Ian M. Banks. The design on his T-shirt twisted in an uncomfortably non-Euclidean way as he went on: "When I was in the street not long ago, this pink fishy thing fell out of the sky at my feet. It's no good to me. Maybe the big guy would like that for his efforts?"

The man in the pink herringbone safari suit seemed delighted with this and left with the object on his head, a

smile flitting playfully about his face and round the back of his neck, to settle grudgingly under the mini-tentacle that was disguising itself as a nose.

"What about youse guys? said the man in the T-shirt. "I could do you some good hot links. Sold some to that nice Mr Punch just a few days ago. Although (and this he finished sotto voce) it seems like a lifetime."

A voice from behind the counter cut in. It was the owner of the Green Lanes cafe, who had learned his English from Dolmio adverts. "Hey-a you! Don't-a you think-a you gonna sell-a your wares-a in-a my cafe. Take-a your stinkin' links-a and getta gone."

Reluctantly, the three decided to leave. They were joined by Automatic Slim, an old friend of Frodo's who despite having pitched a wang dang doodle all night long, offered to take them down the street to the House of Blue Light. (HB)

*

The stranger stooped to pick up a visiting card that had been discarded into the gutter. It read "Eddie Lantern, International Detective, Special Rates for Special Mysteries". He tucked it into his leather cowboy boot. It might come in handy later he thought if he came across any particular mystery he had to solve. He stood and sniffed their air. His experience had told him that sometimes the smell of a neighbourhood could tell you something about it, like whether it was built on a landfill site, or was next to a sewage treatment plant, or simply had students living nearby. There was nothing like that in this case, just the odour of charred lamb wafting on the breeze. He strode on, occasionally spitting out tar and gristle. He had to find the fat one called Frodo, if only to reassert the male stereotyping that he had already been branded with.

Besides, the truth was he quite fancied him. Well, when you've been out on the plains alone for several months anything is better than a cowardly steer, who is only capable of backing onto your penis, but possibly not much better. He passed a gaudy shop lit up with neon proclaiming Leia's Metal Bikinis and went inside. A ginger haired shop assistant was busy sorting through a recent consignment of chocolate coated dildoes. She greeted him with a tarty sneer. "Wot, Lost yer way, love? The leather shop is next door."

"I'm looking for someone called Frodo," the stranger said.

The ginger minge suppressed a giggle. "In that case you definitely want the leather shop next door, duckie."

"Thank you, said he stranger, `in the meantime, I'll take half a dozen chocolate dildoes."

"Suit yourself," she said, "would you like them gift wrapped?"

The stranger left the shop. Next door was a shop emblazoned in neon. "Punch's Western Shoppe". Inside was a diminutive Punch figure dressed in an Armani Suit and clogs. There was a lot of riding tack on display and huge racks of double-barrelled shotguns. The Punch minced about in a fashion the Stranger found so threatening that he left hurriedly, only too glad to escape with his sanity. A dirigible floated by overhead. On its side was the message: "Nanjing Automobile Group plans to resurrect the fabled MG marque in a tricontinental demonstration of the global automotive industry. Watch this space."

Obviously, thought the stranger, the Vorgons had sold out to the lure of corporate advertising. (GC)

*

The stranger caught hold of a ladder that was trailing from the Vorgon's Advertising Dirigible, and rapidly shinned up it. He negotiated several transverse sections of their airship, rendered in flat painting by Clement Greenberg, and finally found his way onto the command deck, although it was a very small command deck this being only a very small dirigible. The commander was a mole-like creature with a cluster of tentacles for a face. I'm not a Vorgon, snuffled the mole, apologetically, but merely one of their subjugated races, the Simolei. I am Captain Simolion, at your disposal. I hope you won't hold this against me. If only I could caper and do a little dance you might be more impressed, but I am at heart a mole-like creature and don't go in for much of that. Ah, I remember as if only yesterday when I was happily ploughing my way way through the very succulent soil of the mole runs on Swigitor Aleph, a small sun cluster out in sector 901 of the Vorgon Empire, a sector not very well known let me tell you for anything else except tunnels and dirt, Ah well. Happy memories, as far as they go. The mole sneezed and apologized. Sorry, rather goes with the territory when your nose is a mass of tentacles, he said. By the way is that a gun, and unless I'm much mistaken it is a Colt army Issue 45, or are you just pleased to see me? If you are pleased to see me I can undertake to invite you down into a dark underground run and then have sex with you? The stranger took out his magic eight ball. Well, did he want to have sex with a small subterranean creature in a dirigible, or not? (GC)

*

As they walked down the street, each was deep in his own thoughts. Frodo Ramsbottom was delighting in the mobility provided by his Formica exoskeleton, its little engine humming almost inaudibly. He skipped a little as he

went along but then thought better of it lest the others call him a big girl's blouse.

Clement Greenberg walked in a shuffling gait, trying as he went along to tramp down the irregularities in the paving stones. The man in the T-shirt with the eldritch design was walking in the gutter, but his nose was in his book and his mind was in the stars.

Automatic Slim was skipping along and through the group like a big Jessie and didn't care who said so. The Serious Groat Squad were after him and he knew his days were numbered.

Each in turn found themselves tripping over shreds of cloth which wrapped themselves round their ankles. Now and then a tubular piece of plastic would get caught between someone's feet and almost bring them to their knees. Soon they were wading through bigger ragged festoons of cloth until they found they were having to push their way between what seemed to be small igloo-like dwellings.

"Disposable tents," explained Automatic Slim. "Becoming a real nuisance round here. The Government will have to do something about making their recycling compulsory." HB)

*

The Old Man paused to check his email, cursing the inefficient Vorgon spam filters.

"GREETINGS! I am Mrs Gregory Pickersgill widow of Saddam Hussein. Your beneficial partnership assistance is humbly requested to expedite transfer of 26 MILLION FANZINES from here in Haverfordwest with GENEROUS COMMISSION for kindly patronage in aiding this. Please send full POSTAL details in the love of GOD thanking you ..." (DL)

"The reason I'm here," said Who, "is as a representative of the Intergalactic Commission of the Entropic Protection Agency. Do you realize, Ms Ambassador, that Vorgon Battlefleets account for only 30% of the interstellar battlefleets waiting to conquer small remote inhabited planets yet contribute almost 45% to Universal Entropic Decay?"

"There is no proof," said the Ambassador, "that Entropic Decay increases are in anyway due to sentient activity. It is just as likely caused by cyclical changes in the cosmological constant."

The conversation between Who and the Vorgon Ambassador about Entropic Decay increases not being due to sentient activity, but just as likely caused by cyclical changes in the cosmological constant so enthralled Lennox Lewis, that Pierre and Cartledge saw an opportunity to make their escape. Back in Green Lanes they came upon Leia's Metal Bra shop. *C'est nouveau n'est pas lui*, said Cartledge. *Je suis sûr seulement ce matin qui était un club social du football turc. Vous avez presque certainement raison*, said Pierre, *parce que vous vivez localement*.

As they watched a stranger strode out of the shop. He was wearing a greasy poncho with a couple of six-guns on his hip. He was smoking a small cheroot and clutching eight chocolate dildoes. He went into Punch's Western Shoppe which was next door. That's new isn't it, mused Cartledge, but this time in English. I'm sure only this morning that was a Turkish Football Social club. You are almost certainly right, said Pierre, because you live locally.

The stranger soon emerged from Punch's Western Shoppe. A dirigible floated by and Pierre and Cartledge watched as the Stranger shinned up a dangling rope ladder.

It's a Vorgon Advertising Dirigible, said Cartledge, although I suspect that's just a front, and it is in fact a sophisticated surveillance vessel sent in advance of the main invasion fleet. Do you not think the inane advertising might also be a ploy to numb the brains of the indigenous race prior to invasion, said Pierre, who was remarkably perceptive for a Frenchman. Vous avez presque certainement raison, said Cartledge. Just then a man wearing an Italian football shirt ran up and pointed accusing at Pierre. You scum, he said, you are the one that head butted our brave footballing hero, Marco Materazzi. Pierre started to protest his innocence but Cartledge stepped in and head-butted the Italian fan. I think we should leg it, said Cartledge. Follow the dirigible. It seems to be heading for Finsbury Park.

They found the dirigible moored to a tree next to the baseball and cricket area. A squad of worker moles had deployed and were busily setting up row upon row of disposable tents. Cartledge sensed the groundsman was going to be furious. Cartledge and Pierre climbed the rope ladder. On the command deck they found the Stranger and Captain Simolion laying naked on a huge bank of dirt, both smoking small cheroots in the after glow. The Stranger reached for his six-gun because he was pleased to see them. "Either of you guys know where I can find Frodo?" he asked. (GC)

*

Lennox Lewis stood on the heights outside Alexandra Palace watching the mop up operation that was going on across North London. It was thad, Lennox Lewis mused, to thee tho many miniature Punthes trapped in the punth-traps that had been laid for them by the ladieth of the Harringey Needlework College. They mewled and howled as the giant freight helicopters employed by the National Refuse

Agency, or NRA, lifted the nets that contained their huddled masses, dredged from the streets or wherever they had fallen, to fly them off for disposal to the nearest landfill site. That, sorry, Sad yes, But at least the menace had been destroyed and the threat eradicated. All except possibly for one small Punchlet who ran a Western Shoppe on Green Lanes, and had escaped detection by wearing an Armani suit and clogs. Lennox wiped a tear from his eye. Oh, the thenseless thtupidity of it all. (GC)

*

Lennocth mused on how athtute it had been to change his name by deed poll from Cwith Eubank. He could now imperthonate a boxer (sorry, bocther) who had actually won a heavyweight world championthip, while keeping his twademark lithp.

At least he knew he could defend himself against any more Punches (though maybe not a right uppercut to the chin). (RJ)

*

Frodo awoke again. He seemed to be on the 19 Polk. Again. Would this never end? (JDB)

*

Frodo awoke again. He seemed to be on the 19 Polk. Again. Would this never end? Frodo awoke again. He seemed to be on the 19 Polk. Again. Would this never end? Frodo awoke again. He seemed to be on the 19 Polk. Again. Would this never end? Frodo awoke again. He

seemed to be on the 19 Polk. Again. Would this never end?
(GC)

*

The evil Koad mentally nudged the arm of the imitation 1920s phonograph making the stylus jump to the next memory track. "Damn those cheap needles from the Royal School of Needlework in Haringey."

*

Frodo awoke again. (IM)

*

Whap! Molesworth smote Frodo a mighty blow, and the little flyboy was no more. "Now," sez Moalzwurth, "let's cue up the old Edison cylinder player and see what's up next." (JDB)

*

Poirot looked around the room at the assembled characters. "I have called you here today because, unlikely as it may appear, one of you is an impostor," he said with a strange lack of accent. (IM)

*

Joao and Gomez decided to pay a visit to the restaurant on the ground floor of the Chocolate factory, as opposed to the one on the top floor. They had heard the waitress had massive breats, and were keen to see what breats actually were. They were shown to their seats in the outside courtyard, it being a mild summer's evening. I see a

novelty toy latex casting company in Hackney Wick is advertising for a vagina model, said Joao, dipping his complimentary bread in his complimentary olive oil and balsamic vinegar dip. Do you think I should apply?

Only if you have a vagina, Gomez replied. And a bus pass, for Hackney Wick is famed as being the veritable back of the beyond. A spasm of what could only be called uncertainly passed across Joao's visage, and then dribbled down into the turn-ups of his rather fetching Gucci trousers.

What exactly is a vagina? he asked.

Gomez told him.

Well I certainly don't have one of those, Joao said. What exactly is the opposite of a vagina?

Gomez told him.

Joao looked perplexed, then worried, then worried and perplexed at the same time, which made the malleable portions of his face look a bit like bread dough in an automatic bread-kneader, but we'll pass over that.

What if it's all plain and smooth with no indentations or indications of any orifices whatsoever? he asked.

That would mean you're an android, Gomez said, a bit like our goal-keeper, Alexandre Ricardo.

Thank God, Joao said, you had me worried for a moment. But one more thing, what exactly is a bus pass?

Gomez didn't answer him immediately because a waitress with massive breasts had arrived with two plates of chilled minted pea and marrow soup, despite the fact that they had ordered chorizo with salad.

Gomez sort of accidentally knocked his spoon onto the floor so she had to bend down to retrieve it for him.

Joao took a sip of his soup and spat it out. This soup is cold, he said.

Gomez didn't consider the remark worthy of a reply, partly because he knew his old chum and fellow football hooligan Joao was only joking.

Instead he examined his toenails. They seemed to have achieved a hardened consistency that would only be useful if he wanted to send them off for carbon dating, which he did*.

(Ed. Three weeks later the results came back, indicating he was either alive but only just, or had been dead for forty years. It indicated nothing, except possibly the sad decline in laboratory techniques, due I suspect to a lowering of educational standards in the higher education system. Let's face it the universities are taking the money off their students, which isn't even theirs, and spending it on nothing, except perhaps toga parties, which our sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, and possibly cousins, will be expected to pay for over the next hundred years. At least that's as I see it.)*

Joao asked the waitress for some water.

Certainly, strange Portuguese person who is unable to stare at anything except my cleavage, would you prefer still, sparkling or spun water.

Spun, please, mumbled Joao in an embarrassed undertone. She brought a machine resembling a foot spa to the table, and Gomez recognized it as something he had seen advertised in the latest Argos catalogue as a device for oxygenating water by spinning it in a whizzing spinner kind of goblet.*

*(*Ed: It costs \$150 and \$2,000 depending on whether the current president is a Republican or a Democrat, or £400 in real money on Peckham High Street. If you peel off the Hyundai badge labels you might get the impression it is*

a cheap functional laboratory device manufactured by Martin & Soakes of Northampton and probably costing no more than 4/6d on the open market. But the water does taste damn good.

They (and I mean mainly Diane Swooze) call it an open market economy. I call it in the words of Karl Marx, and his gay toyboy, Frederick Engels, the Ferble Ferble Ferble Theory of Economics, because that's what you'll end up saying if you think about it too much)

Joao and Gomez sipped their spun water quietly for a while, whilst listening to the restaurant's muzak system playing a recording of a skylark ascending over an English Garden, and the gardener blaspheming as he fell into a stray pile of mulch. Joao slipped into a reverie in which he was a recovering invalid, and occasionally an attractive nurse with massive breasts would come out and adjust his bandana, sooth his brow, and feed him Pina Coladas, whilst crouching down allowing him to see directly up the starched white linen of her skirts. It was patently obvious to Joao that she could certainly have held down a job as a vagina model. The dream was rudely interrupted by Gomez smacking him across the face.

The waitress was smiling down at him having just served him with some Eton Mess. She was naked. Would you like extra cream on that, sir? she asked, tweaking her huge nipples.

Gomez slapped him across the face again and this time he awoke properly. He looked up. A vast dirigible was hovering over the Factory. It had extended a rope ladder and a tiny punchlet grasping what appeared to be some signalling equipment was rapidly ascending the ladder. (GC)

*

"Quick!" shouted Gomez as he pulled Joao to his feet. "He must be heading for the final denouement with Poirot. Grab the ladder and follow them." (IM)

*

Poirot descended the rope ladder to the baseball field in Finsbury Park. So far his masterly disguise as a mysterious cheroot smoking stranger in a greasy leather poncho had held up very well, but it was time to assume his true identity even though the final denouement still lay 10,000 words in the future, and there was no guarantee he would be around to see it, let alone partake in it. He slipped out of his poncho, took out his moustache case, and stuck the silly moustache to his upper lip. He minced off across the park. At least he now knew where to find Frodo, but there was no knowing after all how long the Simolion's arcane hypnotic skills could hold the two Cartledge's in thrall, having convinced them that they were in fact two nuns from the Sisterhood of Eternal Guilt, patron saint the St Brontes, who had been brought back to life after a terrible helicopter disaster. They had been all too willing to confess and sell out Frodo, but at least they had been very sorry about it. (GC)

*

I am havving it off with a GURL who is pritty and super and smashing in the back of a CORTINA when JOHN LAW shines his LITE on mine ALBASTER GLOBES moving up and down in the BACK SEAT.

lo lo sez JOHN LAW wots all this then?

Molesworth havving it OFF with a gurl as enny fule kno sez I.

I em not enny fule, tho, sez JOHN LAW I em OLD MAN ROY thew danging fule.

And he commense to dange with the shimme and shaks lik wot if Molesworth did at a skool dange would hav Grimes sa do 200 lines MOLESWORTH But sir sez i or wood if it heppened I lernt from a danging fule with an OBE for kleening toilets at KINGS X STATION and GRIMES wood say rite MOLESWORTH kleen the toilets then and it wood not be a wheeze but I mite get OBE.

I tries to ignore danging fule and get bak to bizness.

Lo lo lo sez JOHN LAW cant do this heer still danging like a fule.

O JOHN LAW sez I but she has such voleupchus breats cant u see?

Na sez JOHN LAW I sees only molesworth alabaster globes moving up and down and looking like they need a choclat dildo Whereupon JOHN LAW whips out choclot dildo and tries unspeakabull things upon pore Molesworth. THIS is NOt a wheez thinks Molesworth and crawls to the frunt of the CORTINA and eskapes thru the frunt dore

KUM ON ROSE I shouts but she sez I like chcoclot which just shows that gurls are rilly fikkull.

I kno I must eskape from JOHN LAW and his CHOCLOT DILLDOES and jut then I see a zeplin passing overhed with a ladder and I grabs it and climbs up the ladder and sees Punch Lo PUNCH you wet weed I sez where are we going? (RC)

*

The assembled nuns of the Sisterhood of Eternal Guilt stood as if transfixed. Before them on the altar stood a large chocolate dildo (98% fat free solids). "Om, Om, Om", they chanted in rhythmic supplication before the object of their desires. At that moment a huge explosion rent the air and a large hole appeared in the roof. "Here it is," a voice cried from nowhere. As the stunned nuns looked up from the various locations where the force of the blast had cast them they could see a ladder dropping through the haze of dust and plaster. Dangling from the end of the ladder was a figure dressed in oddly stained garments and with a toilet brush tightly clamped between its teeth. "It's JOHN LAW", a few of the less stunned nuns muttered. "We know him from the times we go into the Gents to sell The Socialist Worker and not to stare at the willies". "Aargh tis I, come to relieve you of the chocolate dildo. For I have a better use for it." he said as he wielded the brush like a rapier to ward off the despairing nuns. He pulled the chocolate dildo from its position on the altar and climbed the ladder again. Soon he was out of sight and the sound of motors could be heard. (IM)

*

As Poirot minced through the baseball field in Finsbury Park, adjusting the carefully arranged handkerchief in his breats pocket as he did so, and pausing only occasionally to shine his already immaculately shellacked shoes, a worker mole popped out of a nearby disposable tent and lobbed a can of baked beans at him for no reason whatsoever. "The monopoly capitalists - even while employing purely empirical methods - weave around art a complicated web which converts it into a willing tool. The superstructure of society ordains the type of art in which the artist has to be educated. Rebels are subdued by its machinery and only rare talents may create their own work. The rest become shameless hacks or are crushed,"

yelled the mole-worker who also happened to be dressed as Che Guevara. I'll bear that in mind, said, Poirot, pocketing the can of baked beans. (GC)

*

The massed fleet of the Vorgon empire and its outlying subsidiaries including a Leather Shop in Camden Town suddenly materialized over Luton Beach. It consisted of seven battle Zeppelins, five dirigibles, three of which were assigned to cargo duties, and two to carry members of the Vorgon press and associated paparazzi who had been given roaming access. There were also three sports balloons of the hot-air variety piloted by mercenary adventurers or directors of super-rich international corporations, which is probably the same thing, and 600 blimps which could be deployed as tethered defences against attacks by marauding biplanes should the need arise. Its initial strategy was to try and rescue the Vorgon Ambassador and the Vorgon Ambassadors, ensure the safety of its advance surveillance dirigible manned or rather moled by the redoubtable Captain Simolion, and then maybe take in some local music gigs, and perhaps visit the planet's famed restaurant in the Chocolate Factory and take in the sights of massive breasts, whilst also subjugating the planet. The fleet commander soon realized his mistake in following the directions of an itinerant taxi-driver and materialising over Luton, and the fleet began to move off heading for Harringey. The various crews were getting restless after voyaging so long and to so little point throughout the universe, so the fleet commander issued a directive: "Splice the mainbrace, my jolly jacks, and break out the Baked Beans." (GC)

*

One of the hot-air balloons piloted by Sir Richard Branston-Pickle, heir to the vast Vorgon Branston Pickle empire which had been at the forefront of developing pickling in Virgin olive oil, was in trouble. Sir Richard, said his begoggled co-pilot, Per Lindstrand, one of the gas feed pipes is blocked. We are unable to maintain full burn. At this rate we will crash dive into the Lea Conservancy Reservoir in five minutes. Then send for Sir Marty Cantor, said Sir Richard. He helped me out in a similar situation many years ago by managing to talk for several hours about nothing of much consequence, for which service I insisted he be ennobled by our gracious Queen, HRH Roy Kettle. I fear you have your alternate history time-lines mixed, said Per. Besides Marty lives in America, we would never get him here in time.

You're reckoning without my hot-line, said Sir Richard. Pass me my Virgin Mobile. He keyed in the digits which would connect him instantly with the vibrating superstring called Koad, who could arrange anything, even Marty Cantor, at a price. (GC)

*

The Koad's mobile phone was switched off, but an answering service promised to forward any message. Damn, said Sir Richard. Looks like we can't rely on Marty Cantor. Prepare yourself Per, or else prepare yourself pre. It looks likes we may be going down. Per sighed and dropped to his knees. The murky waters of the Lea Conservancy reservoir rushed up to meet them but at the last minute the blockage in the gas feed pipe was burped out, the flare roared anew, and the balloon ascended away

from danger. The outcome for the Zeppelin following immediately in their wake was not so fortunate. (GC)

*

The Vorgan Ambassador felt rather pleased with himself for two reasons. He had ingratiated himself with a human by providing him with an almost serviceable repair exoskeleton, as well as being given a piscine decoration for his hat which delightfully matched his suit. A pang of guilt almost reached him about how long the exoskeleton was likely to last, but he shrugged it off.

He found he didn't care any more; the Punch who was waiting for a message from him could go and stew himself in a chocolate factory for all he cared. The society he had been representing just seemed so unimportant now. Being an ambassador was just a pain. He'd rather just be a member of society on this planet.

The fish on his head almost seemed as if it gave a sympathetic wriggle at the thought.

He continued on down the street, then stopped and listened intently. In the distance was an oddly familiar thrumming noise. It sounded like huge numbers of craft up in the air. Through a gap between some distant trees he saw a familiar shaped lighter-than air craft. Then another. Then another.

It was the Vorgan Atlantic fleet, with their star pilots Richard Branston-Pickle and Per Linenstrand!

If they were coming for him, he decided he didn't want to be rescued. He wondered where to hide. From somewhere just above his head a compelling thought seemed to evolve: "Hide underwater!"

On the other side of the trees was a long horizontal bank. He guessed it was the edge of a reservoir, and felt compelled to clamber up it and dive into the refreshing water on the other side.

Just as he reached the top of the bank he saw that the nearest zeppelin was trailing a rope ladder and losing height dangerously. The nose seemed heavy, as if it were overloaded.

One of the people in the cockpit in the nose saw him through the open door above the rope ladder, pointed and gave a shout. The other people all rushed over to the side of the zeppelin facing him. The craft gave a sickening lurch towards the open door and three of the seven men in it fell out and landed in the reservoir with a series of huge splashes. All three began swimming towards the shore.

A further thought entered his head: "Too late to hide now, you idiot!" The fish on his head gave a convulsive twitch and wriggled its way down the bank into the water. Its load now lighter, the zeppelin gradually climbed back into the air to rejoin its fellow craft. (RJ)

*

The Old Man regained consciousness. The last thing the Old Man remembered was somewhere near the beginning of the novel, when he had been hit over the head with a biscuit tin and being exhorted by a stately, plump, Vorgon Ambassador thusly – "Get up, Cartiledge. Get up you squamous horror!" The last thing he remembered before that was being interviewed by a strange 900 year old Dr Somebodyorother and his glamorous sex-interest compadre whom he had discovered loitering near his new Honda Jazz. He decided this time-stream, let alone this narrative-stream, was becoming far too dangerous for him,

especially since he suspected he might, more or less contemporaneously, as his alter ego Philip K. Cartledge, be expected to perform death defying feats or at least turn up for work at the bidding of some mysterious interstitial superstring entity. He slowly limped back to 45 Kimberley Gardens, and ascended the staircase to the top floor, brushing aside skeins of cobwebs as he did so. He settled in his comfortable chair and considered whether now was the time to make a final “Old Man” video, which would at least remind his children of what he had looked like when he was dead, I mean after he was dead, oh you know what I mean. And also remind them of how mad he had become in his drunken dotage. He decided to take a rain check on that, which was a term which had always puzzled him, but which now he realized through a serendipitous remark on a tv game show he had seen lately, was a ticket allowing re-entry issued by baseball or football venues in the event of the match being rained off. Over in a corner of his room stood something indistinct and hazy which seemed to change its dimensions and every aspect of its visual appearance even as you looked at it. It was not in fact the portrait which Roy Kettle had commissioned on the occasion of being raised to the landed gentry by virtue of a preference of a royal honour, but a time machine in the form of a closet which had been given to him by an old antique dealer “Bummer” Earl Kemp, in fond remembrance of a night spent together, or at least not far apart, in Amsterdam. A sudden pain gripped his heart, as it cinched and seized, crippled and degraded by several decades of alcohol and spliffs. He stood, as best he could, which was on the two available legs, and slowly made his way over to the time machine, hoping he might reach it and relocate himself in time and space before the cruel irony of a Massive Attack struck him down. He would obviously have to go back in time to before his incipient heart attack manifested itself, and then perhaps administer some ameliorative aspirin over several months.

How this could be done without revealing himself to himself, and avoid shagging his own mother, or at least Uncle Johnny, was a conundrum he looked forward to testing. He opened the closet and fell into the warm comforting pool of darkness just inside the door. His last thought was to send off a complaint to the Department of Works and Sanitation for digging a trench through the entrance to his time machine and leaving it full of sewage.

His second to last thought was that now he might at least be able to go either backwards or forwards in time and change the outcome of anything in L7 that had ever been written. As he saw it, it was the only way any of the characters trapped in the novel could hope for redemption, or at least a redemption written by someone who halfway knew what he was doing. (GC)

*

. . . a tattoo of hammering filled the morning air as the Vorgon Secret Carpenters worked feverishly on the launching tower for the Moon Dirigible. Punch paced nervously back and forth on the catwalk. "Faster," he cried, "Faster, more wood! More wood, I say!" He pounded his truncheon for emphasis. . . (JC)

*

The three men who had fallen into the Lea Conservancy Reservoir and had swam for the shore were Joao and Gomez and an illegal immigrant called Clint Eastwood, who had been picked up by the Vorgons on one of their few fly-overs of Hollywood. They hauled themselves onto the grassy banks that surrounded the

reservoir, and took off their football kit and spread it to dry in the unseasonably hot July sunshine. To show willing Clint took off his poncho. Pretty soon they were all butt naked and rolling around together in heightened sexual congress. It seemed before they had bailed out the randy Simolion had secretly sprayed them with a new male product called "Charles Platt's Gas, by L'Oreal", which combined the effects of a hair gel with an analgesic and a previously undiscovered plant derivative which heightened the human natural sexual drive. After they had all fucked each other several times, they lay on the grass in the blistering heat, smoking either small stogies, big stogies, small cheroots or big cheroots, and talked about the best science fiction novels they had all read more than once. It would be invidious of me to reveal which novel the most of them had read the most so I won't, except to say it wasn't the one I would have expected it to be. What is left for us now, Joao, said, gently stroking Clint's cock, apart from eternal reruns of Portugal going out of the World Cup?

Well we could see out the rest of this novel as a comfy gay threesome, eternally fondling each other, said Clint, or we could arm up and go out and kick some serious ass, and maybe find this Cartledge guy who's an arrogant bastard who thinks he's going to come up with some ultimate answer. What do you guys say"*

(* or to put it another way, Perhaps yes, I think we must arm myself above and leave and retrocede some serious donkey, and find this guy of Cartledge that has an arrogant bastard that it thinks that is going to come above with some final reply." (RC)

*

"Sim, eu penso nós devemos se armar acima e sair e retroceder algum burro sério, e encontramos talvez este guy de Cartledge que tem um bastardo arrogante que pense que está indo vir acima com alguma resposta final." Was the reply. (GC)

"Scheiße! Sie die gerechten Kerle falten mich herauf," sagten Clint, wie er seine jeans langsam oben über sein Mitglied zog. *

"Okay, okay, we speak English from now on hombre". (IM)

(*"Shit! They the fair chaps fold me up," said Clint, how he pulled its slowly above jeans over his member. (GC) Or:"Shit, you guys really crease me up," said Clint as he slowly pulled his jeans over his member. (IM))

*

Mike Hammer looked at the three pansies on the reservoir bank and curled his lip in disgust. He was definitely going to retrocede some serious donkey. Stealthily, well, as stealthily as a six foot three inch, 205 pound man in a pork pie hat, khakis, checked jacket, maroon shirt, purple tie, and desert boots carrying two pairs of brass knuckles, aRuger .45, a Mac Ten, and various grenades, could be, Hammer picked the lock and opened the gate to the reservoir grounds. He approached the trio with the sound of blood rushing by his ears. A vein in his forehead throbbed alarmingly

"You miserable excuses for men," snarled Hammer, "prepare to take what's coming."

"Quem é este disastre da forma?" asked Joao.

"É tipo de cute se você gostar d butch", replied Gomez with a giggle.

Clint squinted even more than usual

Hammer slipped a set of brass knucks onto his right hand. He slipped another pair onto his left hand. After retroceding this donkey, he thought, I'll have to find Velma for some love of the candy. He noticed with pleasure the mounting looks of horror on the faces of Joao and Gomez and the deepening squint of Clint, although it was odd that they all seemed to be looking past him. He reached down towards the homo closest to him who happened to be Joao.

"Ia! Ia! Fhtagn de Cthulhu!" cried Joao.

Hammer smiled. He liked it when they gibbered. He drew his weighted fist back prepared to break a nose and chip some teeth. A large tentacle wrapped itself around his cocked right arm, another whipped itself around his sturdy legs. Huh?, thought Hammer. He dropped Joao as a third tentacle encircled his muscular neck. Suddenly Hammer was lifted from the ground and found himself flying towards the reservoir. From the corner of his eye he could see the three queers gathering their clothes and heading for the gate. He detumesced

The water was a shock, colder than he'd expected. And deeper. He felt himself being dragged far beneath the surface, the world outside first distorted, then grew dim. His chest was pounding as he wriggled futilely against the star-spawned beast that had him in its grasp. Ahead he saw a shape, an indescribable shape, that seemed to shift in size and form as he watched in horror. Velma... he thought as his life ebbed away. (RC)

*

Where are we? said the three homos, or at least one of them who was willing to take responsibility for speaking for the two others. And is that vast fleshy manifestation of Cthulhu called Velma still following us? Hold on, said Clint, limping behind in a vain attempt to buckle on his chaps the right way round whilst he was still running. No, that's the wrong way round, said Gomez, I can see your cheeks, and they is very pert. Damn, said Clint. Can't we just stop running for two minutes while I get things straight. Not recommended, said Joao, if Cthulhu thing is behind us, and even less if it is front of us. At that moment Joao's mobile phone rang. It's some git called Michael Winner, he said, who wants to make a movie of our predicament called the Three Gay Hombres starring Martin Short, Steve Martin, and Chevy Chase. Tell him to fuck off, said Clint. I ain't appearing in anything with "gay" in the title. I have my reputation as a "hard" cop to consider. Eventually, by a process of limping and running, they found themselves in Epping Forest. Options are, said Gomez, we could team up with any of these gay bikers on Harley Davidsons that seem to have congregated here, or we could go away into the forest for more gratuitous sex.

You said that in perfect English, said Joao.

Yes, I have been studying the Berlitz audio course via my Ipod, said Gomez.

Joao took his hand and led him into the undergrowth. Fondle me gently, he said. Except in Portuguese: Fondle me delicadamente.

Wait for me, shouted Clint. (GC)

*

Defective memory chip, mused Koad as he took the cylinder off and cast it aside to join the gathering pile. Let's try this one. (IM)

Work on the launching tower for the Moon Dirigible had been going on all morning. And still it was only five foot tall. Punch consulted his drawings: wooden old hat space ship 100 feet tall, average daily rate of build 5 feet a day, and they hadn't even yet commissioned the topping out sombrero made out of walnut. It looked like being a long hot summer, at least 20 days long, and it was already 92 degrees in the shade. The tabloids were already running gratuitous photospreads of nubile young girls in scanty bikikins, and Punch was at least thankful for that, except for the one of Mary demonstrating her many tentacles, which was frankly hideous. Punch wished he was back in a dog-eared copy of a book being read by somebody in Gateshead and not a real character charged with organizing Vorgon Secret Carpenters, a peculiar sect who stood by their secret Masonic rituals at least as far as having regular tea-breaks every fifteen minutes was concerned. He was also a bit worried about whether he was the real Punch, or was suffering from false memories due to having being abused as a child, when he recalled his mother regularly beating his father with a truncheon. And why did they need a Moon Diribile anyway? Wasn't it the Earth they were supposed to be subjugating? He made a mental note to himself to send a memo to High Command on this subject, but then mentally scrubbed it out. He had made hundreds of such mental notes in the past and they had never got him anywhere. He raised his whip to lash a few more drones into action, specifically to collect more wood, but they only threatened to report him to the Union... If only Victor Gonzales were here now, he thought. Things weren't like they used to be. (GC)

It was time to go, the Old Man decided, and put an end to all this nonsense. He pulled out his cut throat razor and gave it a good stropping, then used it to shave scales of dead skin from a bunion that was giving him gyp. Yes, he thought, best to end it all as quickly as possible. He arose and made his way across the room to the shimmering time cupboard in the corner, knocking over several empty vodka bottles in the process. He pulled the door open and staggered inside, to be greeted by an elderly retainer in a fully-chalked peruke wig.

An aetherial voice spoke:

Not ... not ... Old Scrotum, the Wrinkled Retainer?
(DL)

Another aetherial voice answered

No, Balzac. The wrinkled French retainer. (GC))

Good to see you again sir, after all these years, the retainer said. Would you like some port? What brings you this way, sir, if I may ask. Is it that time of the millennium again when the Time Lords hold their reunion? Or perhaps you would like to go into the future to see if the Vorgons really have taken over the universe.

Nothing like that, said the Old Man. I have a hankering to go back to the moment I was conceived, he said, to see if as I suspect my whole life has been the result of a hideous mistake. As you wish, sir, the retainer said. He made adjustments to the central temporal drive mechanism which began to grunt and groan and flesh red amber and green and make lots of swishy noises.

The Old Man found himself on a bleak Yorkshire moor. He hid behind a gorse bush as Jim Charnock, motor engineer, dismounted from his motorcycle. With him was a radiant Yorkshire beauty. Jim laid out a blanket on the heather. Eee, up, lass, he told his companion, the radiantly beautiful Rose Jackson, in his throaty Yorkshire brogue. Get yer kit off and let's shag

The Old Man watched moist eyed. So he had after all been conceived in a poignant act of tender love. He felt redeemed. Now he felt he could really get mediievally postal on some Vorgon donkeys. (GC)

*

The Vorgon cargo ship was in trouble. Its load of baked beans had shifted. Unless it could dump them it was in danger of going down with its cargo. The captain, an annelid worm captain called Roger who had been discovered in a deep sea trench near an underwater volcano and had been promoted through the ranks, consulted his Sat Nav and set a course for the heart of Sainsbury's Car Park.

Joao was desolate. His gay lover Gomez had been shot by police whilst trying to cross an electrified railway line just south of Coulsdon. They had thought he was a suicide bomber, when in fact he had just been running in panic because he had seen a fleet of Vorgon ships on the horizon. Joao wondered along Green Lanes, sunk in his grief, and was confronted by a newsvendor. "Vorgon invasion fleet plans on dumping tons of baked beans," said the newsvendor. "Entire population advised to stay indoors, drink lots of weak tea and avoid looking at the skies." Joao elbowed him aside and strode on towards Sainsbury's. "Peace be with you," shouted the newsvendor after him.

Clint Eastwood buckled on his chaps and chapped on his buckles. God that was painful. A sage bush blew by and then another one and then another one until it became boring. He checked his six guns. He still had six of them. A tattered bill poster snagged on his spurs. "Revival Meeting at the Big Tent in Sainsbury Car Park Tonight" it read. Apparently this Cartledge guy had discovered the secret of L7 and was going to announce it to the world. Clint adjusted the sights on his hunting gun. Someone had to stop the fucker from blowing the secret.

Poirot looked up at a Vorgon cargo ship looming overhead. Using his little grey cells he quickly triangulated its eventual destination. It was the car park of Sainsbury's in Harringey. Pausing only to wipe off a dew of sweat from his upper lip with his immaculate handkerchief he minced off in that direction

*

In a seedy terrace house in Gateshead which smelt of turpentine and linseed oil, Punch watched Sunderland go down by two goals in The Inter-Geordie League final against Goole. On his coffee table a book called "The L7 Code" steamed and hissed like a thing alive. He was depressed. He had not heard from any of his punchlets for many months and assumed they were all either dead or running fashion shops, or worse had found gainful employment with the BBC as news presenters. His wife, Judy, appeared and thwacked him with her baby. Well, are you just going to sit there or else catch the intercity down to London to join in this Revival Meeting? she asked. You've been sitting on the sidelines too long, Punch. It's time you made your mark. She giggled then as if she had suddenly realized the stupidity of what she had just said.

In a revival tent in Sainsbury's Car Park, mullahs wailed, dervishes danced, every aspect of life and religion seemed to have gathered to celebrate their own existence. Clearly the poster campaign mounted by Pinocchio had had some effect. The crowd fell silent as a figure mounted the stage. Was it Cartledge or the Old Man or a consanguinate mixture of the two boiled up for just this situation? Whoever it was raised his arms in a gesture of beneficence. My children, he hailed the assembled rabble. You come here to seek an answer, as we all do, and all have throughout the ages, to the mystery of the L7 code.

A sudden roar pervaded the atmosphere as the downdraft from a mighty cargo Zeppelin's engines hit the tent and ripped off the roof.

The Zeppelin was slowly descending in a crazed spiral that could only eventually intersect with the car park and its hoards of gathered celebrants. Still Cartledge, or was it he, clutched his microphone and howled his explanation into the chaos: "L7? It was obvious. How could anybody not see it. L is Roman for 50. L7 - 57. What has 57 varieties? Heinz. And what is their single most well known product: Beanz Meanz Heinz. All this time we were being warned of the Vorgon's attempt to invade our planet, using baked beans as their main weapon. Because these are not ordinary baked beans. I have a can here and it contains genetically mutated baked beans, such as you will find on the Vorgon craft which even now bears down upon us. The tins contain a mutated versiaon of beans, crossed with a Mexican jumping bean, which will not only turn us into flatulent vegetables, but ones obsessed with leaping and dancing." Poirot listened to all this rubbish from the back of the crown, preening his moustache as he watched. Next

to him Clint Eastwood eased his hunting rifle out of its gunny sack and drew a bead on the small figure ranting on the stage. He was about to fire when Punch arrived, panting having just got off the 6.18 from Gateshead, and jogged his elbow. I hope I'm not too late he said. See, I've bought my own truncheon.

The cargo Zeppelin exploded in a burst of white light, and cans of beans rained down bursting open like grenades upon the hard tarmac of the car park. From the ruptured tins writhed hoards of mutated tiny beans which danced and jumped and spread like fulminating worms. They had rugose leech like mouthparts which enabled them to suck the humanity out of any victims they latched upon. Soon they had infected 99.99 of humanity, or at least 99.99 of that which was in the car park. The Vorgon ambassador and Ambassadors arrived in a stretch limousine to celebrate the victory of their race.

When suddenly everything went quiet.

A shimmering superstring materialized stretching up from the ground to the heavens as far as anyone could see.

You have reckoned without the power of the Mighty Koad a voice said. I can save you but it means absorbing all the cess and vile evil that exists in this gathering into my being, and that may poison me so much I may have to go away and leave you forever and find some quiet spiral arm of the galaxy in which to crawl under a bush and expire. Is that what you really want? A mumble spread throughout the crowd. It was, at best an equivocal mumble. Most of the crowd didn't want him to leave, and many spoke up on his behalf, but it was not enough to stay his hand, if he had had a hand. Very well, said the Koad, you have spoken, or not spoken, which was always your problem, and although most of you want me to stay, I will leave because I am an ornery contrary superstring.

The string that was Koad started to flash and rotate, building from the ground up like a vast funnelling twister. Tins of baked beans were sucked into it, along with nameless clouds of evanescent chthuluesque evil. With a final zap the Koad disappeared into the glowering clouds that had formed overhead. Lightning shot through them and a cooling rain began to fall; clouds of leaves disturbed by the vortex floated down on the car park and its stunned minions like butterflies. The Koad had sacrificed itself to redeem this small bubble of humanity and Vorgonity and everything was as it always had been in the first place. Only the world seemed slightly smaller for the Koad's absence.

Right, everybody back to my place, said the Old Man.(GC)

Koad the superstring being sat, or vibrated restfully, really, since it was a superstring and had nothing for a seat to support, in its remote spiral arm of the galaxy. It was glad that the denizens of the car park had been saved from the mutant Vorgon beanz and that Punch had finished the book. It thought that after the coming battle with Ko-Less-Troll and the Wrk Dedlynsit might visit again if it could find its wayback." (RC)

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Mr Punch closed the book and leaned back in his chair. A bit unsatisfactory, he thought. What had happened to the three men waiting outside the House of Blue Light in the hopes of seeing Miss Molly rockin'? Punch decided he didn't much care anyway. It would be different when they made it into a film. Maybe he

could audition for a part in it. His years in the entertainment business should count for something. Perhaps the handsome stranger with the cheroot and the guns? Or he might drag up a bit as Laura Doreen Valletta. Judy would loan him one of her frocks and a mob-cap. And perhaps a garter-belt and some of those fish-nets. And.....but enough of that. He was tired after a day cudgelling and hanging just about anyone who put their head over the parapet of his booth. The novel, contrary to his expectations, had not cured him of his drowsiness. Mr Punch nodded into sleep and the book slipped quietly from his fingers into the fire. (HB)

