

Nanowrimo Winner

By Peter Hankins

Chapter One: Why am I doing this?

Yes, why? So I'm writing a novel for Nanowrimo 2008: the obvious question is, why bother? Let's face it, you're going to spend more time than you ever thought it would take, cranking out 50,000 words during the course of a month, and at the end of it, all you're going to have – let's be honest – is 50,000 words of unpublishable crap.

The answer, of course, as always, is sex. I don't mean some obscure motivation to do with unclean thoughts about your mother, thanks all the same Sigmund. No, I mean, like all of human culture, as Stephen Pinker has so acutely pointed out, this is fundamentally nothing more than an attempt to impress girls.

Well, not girls, really. Just Julie. She's a wonderful girl, but the truth is, she has a problem with commitment. You know how it is. A venturesome snog, a nervous phone call. Then the exciting era of the date. Gradually the frequency of dinners eaten alone diminished until even Tuesday would see us together, consuming a companionable spag bol in front of *University Challenge*, as workaday as you like. Toothbrushes and clothes ceased to move back and forth with the same scrupulous regularity. Slowly, the age of staying in replaced the age of going out. We've basically been living together, albeit in two different flats, for over a year now. I want us to take the big step - sell one of the flats. But she won't.

She's not really averse to the idea: she never says no, exactly, but somehow it never happens. I think she may be partly under the impression that I want her to move in here so that she can wash my socks and shirts, and maybe even cook. No way. Unfortunately, I can never explain this to her in so many words, but to be honest Julie's washing standards are not mine. She only washed my socks once and they came out two sizes smaller and tinged with pink. I'm very careful about these things: I sort my washing and use three completely different settings on the machine, with an ecologically friendly unperfumed liquid. So no, Julie, thanks: I'll be washing my own socks for the rest of my life: I've accepted that – in fact I insist on it. And cooking? Well, she's not really a bad cook altogether – that spag bol would have been hers, probably - but I don't like the way she uses the kitchen. She doesn't tidy as she goes, do you know what I mean? So the pasta or the casserole is fine, but when you go into the kitchen afterwards, it's as if there's been some kind of explosion. When I've finished cooking, there might be one knife to place in the dishwasher, a gentle tightening of the lid on the jar of Madagascan vanilla pods, a quick swipe across the surfaces and voila.

But I couldn't tell her that, obviously.

"Maybe in a year or two." she says, "Look, I don't want to have a row about it. Don't you like having your own place? Where you can have the odd evening on your own? Where you can sort the mugs according to predominant colour?"

"Actually I no longer sort them by predominant colour. I'm sorting them by date of last use," I explained, "That way you can circulate them."

"What, to even out the wear?"

I'm not really that bad, you know, but I like to play up my studious thrift and huswifery from time to time.

"No, that would be ridiculous. You see, the rate of wear on a normal glazed ceramic mug is negligible. The cumulative effect of stresses in the handle region is more significant, though since my collection of mugs varies widely in design and presumably in composition of clay, glaze, and firing practices, it would be a gross over-simplification to assume that equal use would lead to equal life, even supposing equal life were desirable, implying as it does an eventual day when the handles fall off each and every one of your mugs in succession or simultaneously, depending on the number of users on that occasion. No, obviously the reason is simply to bring one's full range of attractive drinking vessels into regular use..."

Anyway, what has all this to do with writing a novel. still less with Nanowrimo in particular? You see, I think the underlying problem is that she doesn't think I'm serious enough. Not reliable enough for her to want to commit to me. She needs additional reassurance about my ability to stay the course when things get dull.

"These projects of yours," she says, "You always start off well. There was the acting. And the journalism. The cartoons. And then the killer Internet site. Actually that one didn't really get very far, did it? I think you were on page three of HTML for Dummies?"

"Hallo, World!" I replied, waving.

"You're a clever person, and fairly creative. But you don't stick with anything long enough. If you want to do these things, you have to persist. You have to work hard. Otherwise, you just waste your energy."

So that is where Nanowrimo comes in. And what is that, you ask? Oh, I beg your pardon. You really don't know? Nanowrimo is National Novel Writing Month. Every year, anyone who wants to, takes on the project of bashing out an entire novel (a shortish novel, actually – 50,000 words) in the course of a single month. There's a website where you sign up, where they check your wordcount, where you can swap notes and tips with other aspirant authors, where they give you encouraging messages and advice on how to stay awake. To be honest, the thing isn't really a literary undertaking at all: it's more in the spirit of those people who decide they want to run a marathon, except this doesn't involve your dying of exhaustion or having to pee in the middle of the road in front of thousands of gratified spectators.

So the plan is that I pull off this amazing feat, stunning the woman of my dreams with my stamina and fixity of purpose, not to mention my prolix fecundity. I'm sorry, I have to get the long words out my system somehow so that when I'm writing my actual manuscript I can pump up the word count with a never-failing flow of monosyllables. You know: Ag saw Ug hit the bear. I told you it wasn't going to be a literary enterprise.

To be honest, Julie didn't quite seem to understand the idea at first.

"You want to prove to yourself that you have the stamina to stick with things in the long-term, see them through?" she asked, "And you're going to do this with a project that lasts a month, max, and requires only 50,000 words?"

"50,000 words is a non-negligible quantity," I replied, "Take it from me, this requires stamina. It may be only a month, but by golly it will be a dedicated month."

"But the real point of this is to get a novel published?" she asked, "You're not doing the poetry any more, is that it?"

"No, no." I exclaimed, "Publication is entirely beside the point. I'm not saying that I wouldn't consent to let a literary agent look at my work if it turned out to be worthy of their attention, you know, but that's not what good old 'wrimo is about. It's more a matter of man measuring himself against the void, pitting his strength and will into hewing some kind of novel out of the vacuum and our simple human condition. No? Alright, look. You're always saying I never finish anything, aren't you? Well, here's a challenge, and such as it is, I'm going to complete it. Lots of people fall by the wayside every year. Only fifteen percent finish - but *I'm* going to finish."

"OK," she said, smiling, "Well, good for you. But I don't really believe you haven't got some idea of publication at the back of your mind. Why else would anyone try to write a novel? It seems such a sterile achievement. You could just sit down and pound out absolute rubbish, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. You could sit with the television on and just transcribe every word they say. Or is that against the rules somehow?"

"Not really," I said, "The rules are very loose and flexible. And there are no prizes, so in a way it's up to you what you want to allow and what you want to count as cheating. No one's going to throw you out or anything. Well, not unless you do something wrong."

"When are you going to do all this writing?"

"I plan to knock out 2,000 words every day, rain or shine, hell or high water, till I'm there. Half in the morning and half in the evening. 2,000 is more than I need, but that'll give me a margin for error. I may squeeze in a few extra words at lunchtime in the office if we're not too busy."

"You want to watch that," she advised, with a frown, "You could get into trouble."

She's right about that. Behemoth, my employer, does not take naturally to any form of information technology. If I sat scribbling on a pad of paper for hours, that would be a tolerable eccentricity; but using the severely outdated PCs the company has reluctantly provided for my own purposes would be a matter for instant dismissal. On the whole it may be better not to risk it, even in the lunch hour.

Actually, she's partly right about the literary element, too. If I'm completely honest, I do harbour the ambition to produce a proper novel. Julie doesn't know this, but I actually have a dead one lurking at the bottom of a cardboard box in the cupboard somewhere, written when I was about seventeen. I thought everyone did this – sort of the novel-writing phase of life – but discreet enquiries reveal that this is not so.

Geoff, for example: I'm pretty sure Geoff never wrote an abortive novel, or any other kind. Looking at him as he sat in the subfusc grandeur of the Royal Oak yesterday, it was hard to believe he'd ever really been interested in anything except consultancy. Some people can keep a little distance between their careers and their inner selves, but for others the two seep across the boundaries and influence each other. Teachers' private conversations start turning into lessons. People you know who have gone in for the law start inserting disclaimer clauses when they discuss the weather with you. Geoff – well, he's a consultant. I hope I don't look like that these days – the finicky haircut, the suit, the beetling brows. I hope my smiles don't look as if they're meant to put people at ease, or my conversation sound like a repertoire of tested ice-breakers. He's still alright once you get him talking, though.

"Writing a novel?" he said, "I mean what? Jeez, have you any idea how many crap novels get sent for landfill every day?"

"It's more like a sporting thing really – like running a marathon. You jog a bit don't you? You must have been tempted once or twice to put your name down for a marathon?"

"Not me. I only jog because it's cheaper than the gym. See, this novel-writing thing isn't going to be like a marathon really, is it? Not in health terms. It's going to be more of an anti-marathon. You'll spend even more time sitting at a computer eating Mars bars. Instead of getting fit, you'll be piling it on. I bet you won't get further than half way – and just as well, because that's probably the only thing that's going to save you from clinical obesity, mate."

It is a theme of Geoff's that I should lose a little weight.

"Ah, you're jealous." I pointed out.

"No I'm not."

"You are. You were always jealous of my achievements, even when we were in school. When I joined the Scouts, you couldn't bear it until you had joined too, and got more badges than me."

"Rubbish!" he paused, "You just weren't any good at knots, that's all. Never were. I bet if you look down now, your shoelace is undone."

"Well, that's where you're wrong. Come on, bet me. If my shoelaces are done up, you buy the next round? OK?"

"That's stupid."

"Aha! Chicken."

"Oh, very well then. Stick your feet out."

I knew I'd got him on this one, because it happens to be true that I was not very good at knots when I was small, and in consequence I always knot my laces with a nice secure double knot.

"You see?" I said, swivelling back on the stool and waving my feet triumphantly at him.

"Yes, yes, alright, put them away. What are you drinking then?"

"Pride, mate," I replied, "Pride. A foaming pint of London Pride."

"It was a stupid bet though."

"Ah, just because you lost!"

"No, because it was my turn to get them in anyway. You haven't actually gained anything, you've just made yourself look like some kind of prat, waving your feet about."

"So what's this novel going to be about?" he asked, when he got back from the bar.

"I'm going to do a detective story."

In fact, I'm going to revive and continue the plot of that aborted novel in the cardboard box. It won't be cheating: it's all in hard copy, so I can't cut and paste, and I don't want to copy it word for word anyway.

So, the story begins with this old fellow who is the local Earl or something. He's living in a run-down stately home, and one day he's found dead. The cause of death is some hemlock which someone has slipped into his habitual nightcap of a mint julep. His three children duly turn up, and they're all complete bastards. We see them patronising the servants, and creating havoc in the old village pub. Then Lady Sarah Pimsey turns up; a journalist and amateur sleuth.

Before the investigation proceeds far, Richard, the eldest son, is found dead, apparently as a result of an accident with his shotgun. Then Camilla, the daughter, is discovered one morning drowned in the village pond, apparently the victim of a mishap with a submerged branch during a drunken midnight swim.

Forensic investigation reveals that the water in Camilla's lungs is actually bathwater, and that for Richard to have shot himself in the way he seemed to have done would have required the arms of a gibbon. Not actual gibbon's arms. His own arms would have had to have the proportions of a gibbon's. You know what I mean.

So the local police conclude that a murderer is doing in all the family members one by one, but Lady Sarah, with the aid of Charlie her chauffeur, demonstrates various flaws in their argument – I'll flesh that out a bit when I come to it. I'm not that good at clues, I admit. Everyone has an alibi, especially Freddie, the remaining heir, who obviously stands to inherit.

Thing is, it turns out there is no money: the old man was pretty much bankrupt. Then Freddie is found: his body has been dumped on a local fox farm, where the ravening beasts have mutilated it almost beyond recognition.

At this point, a successful abstract expressionist artist who lives locally turns out to be the illegitimate son of the old Earl, and he comes forward with a claim that his mother married the Earl in secret, and that he is therefore the legitimate heir. The flatfoots arrest him at once, of course

At this point, Lady Sarah Pimsey reads a book from the Earl's library which has this story about a Russian being chased by wolves. He has a gun, but only one bullet. As the wolves draw ever closer, he wonders whether his best course might be suicide, in order to avoid being torn apart while still alive. But he decides instead that he will go down fighting, even if he only has one shot. He shoots the first wolf, and lo and behold the others all stop chasing him and eat the dead wolf instead.

So now, with unanswerable clues which I'll sort out later (yes, yes, don't hassle me), she reveals the truth: the elderly Earl poisoned himself by accident, having recently lost Oates his faithful butler and only remaining servant, and having no idea of the difference between mint and hemlock. Camilla then murdered Richard and administered a slow-acting poison to Freddie. Freddie drowned her in the bath and dumped her body in the pond before the poison reached a fatal dose, but then collapsed while trying to release the foxes... er, so that he could show up well at the local hunt by bringing down the biggest bag ever scored in a single day. No, I know that's not how fox-hunting works – I'll sort it out later.

The artist is proved to be the true heir and turns out to have made a mint from his paintings: he will now give up art (to Lady Sarah's disgust), restore the old house to its former glory, and bestow a new age of

prosperity and happiness on the village. Everyone gathers in the church to sing Old Hundredth or something, but Lady S tells Charlie she will wait for him in the pub. The End. I'm going to call it The Wolves of Wenham.

Good, or what? See, the plot is fine: I just need the words.

Chapter Two: Period underwear

I'm really excited. Yesterday I sat down and banged out not one, not two, but three thousand words. There were long evocative passages about the beauty of the fenland countryside, there were acute character sketches, there was subtle plot development. I can do this.

I think Julie, my beloved - she's raven-haired, sultry, with heavy-lidded eyes and a junior retail manager, incidentally - is yielding to the appeal of the whole idea. She smiled at me a lot yesterday, and I'm almost sure it was affection rather than hilarity. She's definitely pleased. It's the romantic appeal of that whole 'man pitting himself against the cosmos through literature' thing, I reckon - do you think? Or is it just that writing stops me talking quite so much? I'm in no danger of Julie reading my Nanowrimo comments, by the way. Julie never reads anything on the Internet unless it has a strictly work-related value. The idea of using the Internet for fun is sort of bizarre in her eyes, about the same as amusing yourself by running up spreadsheets; and let's face it, she gets enough of me live anyway. The more I talk about Nanowrimo, the less likely she is to look at the actual site.

It was quite the tranquil domestic scene yesterday, actually. Normally of an evening we'd be out somewhere or slumped in an amiable heap on the sofa in one or other of our residences, but instead, there I was beavering away, clutching my brow momentarily in the anguish of the creative act, while Julie sat drinking coffee and watching a makeover show.

"You're doing really well," she said, fondly, "Why don't I take you out tomorrow to celebrate?"

"Ooh, I don't know whether I'll be able to," I said roguishly, "I have to keep writing, you know!" And we both laughed.

But never mind that. There's great and most amazing news. The best possible and the most unbelievable. What do you think? After spending the whole evening denouncing an ridiculing Nanowrimo, questioning my motives, ability and sanity, Geoff has decided at the last minute that he too - Geoff himself this is - is going to take on Nanowrimo! Can you believe that? I think it's going to guarantee us some subsidiary amusement. He says it's because he thinks it would be "an interesting challenge", but actually I believe it's because one of the partners at his place who he met in the lift told him he'd love to have a go at something like that. Reading between the lines, I think Geoff was desperate to make sycophantic conversation, and decided he could use me as a suitable example of unbusiness-like behaviour, someone they could join in deprecating. So he told the partner about what I was doing.

But when he began describing Nanowrimo, the rheumy eyes of the old shyster began to come alive: new energy seemed to surge into his flaccid, port-encrusted veins at the idea of this splendid challenge, and suddenly,

with a shake of his jowls, he declared that it sounded a jolly good idea, and that he would have loved to have a crack at something of that sort. So Geoff found himself obliged to drop all the sneering material he had ready to go, and instead start saying earnestly how he too, loved the idea. That's what I think happened, anyway. It's great, don't you think?

Anyway, I had to find out about this, so Julie and I met him in a place of his near Fenchurch Street. A sort of leftover wine bar, by which of course, I don't mean a bar where they serve leftover wine, but a place that somehow got left behind when all the wine bars of the nineties disappeared or turned into restaurants. Geoff's Significant Other was also there – Maureen. Maureen is the quiet, thoughtful type. She rarely says anything, but she often looks as if she might. That said, she isn't bad: I mean like they say I wouldn't climb over her to get to you. I know Geoff is quite proud of her in his way; I think he reckons his girlfriend is, so far as looks go, a notch or two above his station. He also told me once in an unguarded moment that having a woman who shuts up a lot was quite a relief after some of his earlier liaisons. I hope you don't think I sympathise with that point of view; I like to dominate the conversation as much as the next man, but I like to have to fight for it. Maureen's lengthy pregnant silences would drive me mad. I don't think Geoff cares whether they're pregnant or not, so long as they're silences.

"So what's it going to be about?" I asked, and at once realised that I had made a false move, because now there was a good chance I would have to divulge what my own effort was going to be about, something I sort of didn't want to do in front of Julie.

"It's going to be a classic novel." Geoff explained.

"Classical? What, like in Greek or Latin? Lars Porsena of Clusium? That sort of thing?"

"No, a classic novel. You know."

Reader, I won't weary you with the prolonged series of questions which followed, but the upshot was that Geoff, bless his heart, believed that there was a genre of novel known as 'classic'.

"Come on, you know what I mean," he protested, "Ladies in... wimples. Vicars. Masked balls."

"Wimples? It's medieval?"

"No, you know. Maybe I've got the wrong word. Those things that make their skirts stand out."

At this point, Maureen leaned forward and raised her eyebrows. The conversation faltered and fell silent as we waited to see what it was she was about to say. A slight surprise that it should have been the subject of wimples, of all others, that suddenly moved her to communicate, but

there you go. She bit her lower lip with her front teeth, shook her head irresolutely and sat back again.

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey." I remonstrated, "Wimples go on the head. What you have in mind is – well, let's see. There was the cul postiche, known in more homely terms as the bum roll, a kind of bolster which women tied round their waists at the back. Then in a later century, we had the farthingale, a sort of framework which stuck out to both sides, but not, strangely, at the back. Also sticking out sideways but not fore and aft, we had panniers, beloved of Marie Antoinette. They too yielded to the ever-changing dictates of fashion, but in due course there arose the crinoline, a different kind of framework which stuck out all round, but less abruptly than the farthingale. Last but not least, in another age, we had the bustle, a kind of pad which made the bum stick out at the back. Now each of these distinctive mechanisms for making skirts stand out flourished in an entirely different era: which are you on about?"

"John!" said Julie, tugging my sleeve.

"Okay, okay, so I don't know about clothes," said Geoff, a little testily, "I mean my novel is set in the era of, well, Jane Austen."

"Well I can tell you that in the era of Jane Austen, under the supposed influence of ancient Greece, skirts went straight down without any kind of sticking-out nonsense."

"Thanks. I'll make a note of it." he said, tetchily.

"What about your story, then?" demanded Julie, rounding on me, "You haven't told me what that's going to be about."

I sighed, and gave them a quick outline of *The Wolves of Wenham*.

"Why wolves?" demanded Geoff.

"Well, it's based on the story that Lady Jane Pimsey reads about the wolves chasing the sleigh. They actually killed each other, you see."

"I don't really see the analogy," said Geoff, frowning. "The first wolf was killed by the man in the sleigh, and then the others all ate it. You didn't get wolf 2 killed by wolf 3, and all that. And the first wolf was shot, so if you wanted the story to be the same, you'd have to have the old Earl genuinely killed off while he was chasing a Russian."

"That's a bit over-literal, don't you think? Alright, well, I'll change the story about the Russian a bit. I'll have the man sitting around his camp fire, and the wolves will go into a kind of feeding frenzy. Or perhaps I'll put him on a raft, and make it sharks."

"Oh, I thought the wolf bit was actually a true story you'd got from somewhere." said Geoff naively.

"You can't make it sharks," said Julie, "Or you'll have to change the title and make it The Sharks of Suckham."

When we got back, much later, I sat down and started a bit of desultory typing.

"Do you have to do that now?" asked Julie, " I thought you were well ahead?"

"I am a bit ahead, reckoning on 2,000 words a day, with odd days off," I said, "But you have to assume that at some stage writer's block is going to strike, so it's as well to get as far ahead as possible now, while the going's good."

"You were a bit rude to Geoff," she said, "You know you are a bit of a pedant at times. All that stuff about farthingales. You could just have said: you mean crinolines, and left it at that."

"Yes, OK." I conceded, "But you know, I meant to be helpful."

"The first bit wasn't so bad," she agreed, "It was really later on in the evening, when you kind of brought it up again and went on about wimples and the history of, like, female headgear."

"Oh yes," I agreed, "I'd forgotten about that. Sorry."

"And then, later on again, when you started to talk about curly shoes and, what, Krakow? I don't think Geoff even knew what you were talking about, but I sort of pieced together eventually that you were still basically going on about historical costume."

"Christ, I'm sorry." I said, "Interesting, though? No? I just can't believe... I mean Geoff doesn't even read books, let alone *write* them."

"I hope the two of you aren't going to get stupid over this." she said, "You kept telling me it wasn't competitive."

"No, no. Of course. No, good luck to him. But, you know: if you're going to write about medieval costume, you'd bloody well better know something about it. Sorry, no you know what I mean. Anyway, let's go to bed."

We did. Later, lying in the dark, Julie cautiously returned to the constructive criticism.

"You do know, " she said, holding my hand, "I don't like it when you do the pedant stuff."

"Me? Pedant?"

"You know, you hold somebody up about the literal meaning of a word, or you kind of force them to admit they used some phrase without actually knowing the full Greek derivation or something. You don't sound like a particularly nice person when you're doing that."

" I don't do that much, do I? Alright, I won't criticise Geoff's novel any more."

I was up early the next morning and pounding further into Wenham. It's going so well. In the past, whenever I tried to write some fiction, I would look at it the next day and sort of disown it. The words I had laboriously put into people's mouths would seem so appallingly stilted I could hardly bear to read them myself. Either I would give up there and then, or I would go back and essentially rewrite the whole passage from scratch. Repeatedly.

This time is different. The discipline of Nanowrimo means I cannot afford to revise, I just have to keep pounding on: and what I'm finding is that the stuff isn't so bad after all. You go through a phase of thinking it's atrocious, but after 48 hours, you get a more mature perspective. It's really only fairly bad.

Then I saw the wine bottle.

This is one of those things that just drives me mental. In my flat, it's not so bad, but in Julie's, where she is normally the one to clear the table, she habitually makes an exception for the wine bottle. I mean, she takes away the plates, the cutlery, the glasses, but she leaves the bottle with maybe a few dregs, sitting on the table. It's not that she doesn't clear the table properly: it's specifically the empty bottle. It's more as if she believed there was some social rule which said you mustn't take empty wine bottles off the table. This particular one, the one that caught my eye, had been sitting proudly on the centre mat since the day before yesterday. Maybe she thinks it's bohemian in some way, but I ask you, reader, isn't it just weird?

Unfortunately, the way the wine bottle is singled out for this treatment, as though it were an ornament, just makes my blood pressure surge. I can't help it. I couldn't write any more while that thing was on the table, but equally I couldn't remove it myself; that would have been giving in. I'd end up with removal of the wine bottle as my own little personal job, wherever we were: I'd probably end up habituated, you know, fighting with waiters in restaurants over who got to take it out. So when Julie emerged, I had to discreetly mention the wine bottle. I knew it was a mistake, you know it was a mistake, you know that I know it was a mistake, I know that you know that I know.

It was a mistake. But what was I supposed to do?

Chapter Three: Aborted works

I have been less than honest. No, I'm afraid it's true. I said that I had an aborted novel lying somewhere in a cardboard box: in fact, I said it was an earlier version of *Wenham*. Actually, that much is true, but it's more than a little misleading. What I concealed, what I denied by implication, is that I have *three* aborted novels lying in cardboard boxes, in various states of non-completion.

So, besides *Wenham*, there is, for example, *The Mallison Institute*. This is a kind of magic realist thing in which a young man gets a job at a mysterious research organisation which turns out to be reconstructing the Adamic language, the real language of which all others are a shadow. Before we get to the end, there are, you know, hippogriffs in the corridors and ancient Mexican shamans casting auguries in the toilets. The place is eventually destroyed in a manner which we are led to believe is somehow similar to the fate of the Tower of Babel, and our hero is led away by the stern girl in riding boots who has been manning the reception desk throughout but turns out to be the reversionary heir who gets all the money if the Mallison Foundation should ever be wound up. Obviously some element of wish-fulfilment there.

Anyway, I came across *Mallison* this morning as I happened to be looking at the back of the wardrobe, and I read a bit of it, which I should not have done. The thing is, I expected it to be terrible, and it wasn't, not exactly. I expected it to be embarrassingly, toe-curlingly bad, which is what I remember from the last time I looked at it. In fact, it seemed like a pretty decent effort, not meant to be too serious or anything, quite a good piece of work as far as it went and all that. But a good piece of work by someone with no talent whatsoever. Whoever wrote this thing I was reading knew in theoretical terms what they were doing, sort of knew how a plot went, what characters were generally like. Their grammar was fine and they clearly had a fund of quirky general knowledge at their fingertips. They just couldn't write novels. This, superficially, had the essential components of a novel: but it was no more a novel than a scarecrow is a human being.

Now I know I've said that 'wrimo isn't about quality. Your manuscript is not going to make Alexander Pope writhe in posthumous envy. No. It's going to be crap, whichever way you look at it. But between you and me, I was hoping that I would be writing *good* crap.

Now I needed to look at the other abortion lying in the back of the wardrobe, so I hauled it out. This one exists in three different versions, and has no definite title. It's sort of science fiction. This community of people sets off in an interstellar space ship, the first ever built: they suffer all sorts of interesting social and engineering problems, and finally only a couple of survivors make it to the target planet. When they arrive, they find there is a huge welcoming party: they have taken twenty years on the journey, and just after they left someone invented faster-than-light

travel. Unknown to them, streams of colonists have been zooming past them ever since, so instead of being pioneers in the trackless waste they are arriving at a colony which is already more than fifteen years old.

Reading the different attempts at this one I remembered the different characters I had come up with for the protagonist: Horne the cynical drunk; Dr Samow the solemn scientist with the piercing blue eyes; Estrella Morgan the glamorous singer. This was a much more reassuring read, because it really was absolutely terrible. It seemed to have been written as a film script by a pompous, barely-literate teenage Mongolian, and then translated into English and novelised by his six-year-old sister with the aid of dictionary. I felt the encouraging conviction that I could do far better than this steal over me.

However, in one respect the old SF thing was appealing. It had been intended as a sort of interstellar Decameron: as the ship plunged along to its destiny, the characters would tell each other stories. I even had in mind a version of the story about the tub which appears in the original Decameron, echoing one from hundreds of years earlier in Apuleius or somebody. It's also one of the sources for The Miller's Tale in Chaucer. In my version the tub would have been a Morris 1000. My little work would thereby have been bound into a chain of fabulists bouncing stories to each other across the centuries. Rather wonderful, really, and humbling in a good way. If I'd written it.

Anyway, it suddenly struck me that the method of having the characters tell each other stories was ideally suited for Nanowrimo. Instead of having to carry on with a single narrative thread, you could just sit your characters down when the inspiration ran out and have them recite a different story. It was tempting.

But, you ask, you're doing OK aren't you? Your word-hoard is fully up to scratch? Well, yes: the old fecundity is standing me in good stead so far. The problem is, I'm running out of plot. I have a plan, you see, which divides the story up into 25 sections of 2,000 words each. I'm up with the word count, but I have already got through the first eight sections of the plot, and I'm speeding up. At this rate, the story will peter out at about 8,000 words. I urgently need something else to happen, and for the life of me I can't think what.

So one option is that Lady Jane Pimsey, in the snug bar of the Bull, suddenly turns to her faithful chauffeur Charlie and says,

"Charlie, did I ever tell you that story about a Morris 1000? It's from Apuleius or somebody?"

"What, Apuleius, milady? I 'ope as 'ow you'll pardon me presumption, yer ladyship, but I wonder as whether I could 'ave the temerity to prevail on you to relate that particular yarn, if you have a moment, that is?"

"Why most certainly, Charles. Now it seems there was a miller, a rich swindler that gestes helde to borde..."

Pretty desperate, huh? Option 2 is I go back and do a new beginning based on the old SF thing, and then when we're all settled in the interstellar ship, Estrella Morgan says;

"Say, this reminds me of that old story about the Wolves of Wenham. You ever hear that story, Charlie?"

"Oww," says Charlie, for the collapsed bulkhead is crushing his legs, "Sorry, Mayyum, but – aahg! - it's mah layyugs, Mayyum. Mah layyuggs huyyut reyyul bayyud."

"Sure, Charlie, I'll tell it to you if you like. I guess there's this Miller guy, rich more than somewhat and a real gonoph, that has guests to board..."

No, it's not going to work, is it?

Julie and I made up, by the way, after the bottle imbroglio. I grovelled, I acknowledged my shortcomings, I expressed gratitude for the input she had offered which would contribute so much to my personal growth. I stopped only just short of putting the bloody wine bottle back on the table.

"Come on then," she said, "Let's go and have a drink."

"I need to knock out another thousand tonight," I said, sorrowfully, "You go on without me."

She went.

OK, so this is later, and she's back. She ran into Geoff and Maureen. Apparently Geoff is already up to 6,000 words, and steaming along. He let Maureen and Julie read some of it, on condition that they were strictly not to tell me about it.

"So what's it like?"

"Well, let's say I don't think you're going to have much competition so far as literary merit is concerned. A lot of heaving bosoms and slapped thighs and sort of ho, varlet stuff, you know?"

"Heaving bosoms, eh? It's saucy? Erotic, even? Or is it more like *Carry On Casanova*?"

"No, the word that actually comes to mind is *pantomime*. Alright, that's all you're getting. But he does seem to be turning it out at a cracking pace. Mind you, he's taken today off to do it."

"What!" I exclaimed, "He's working on it full-time? That's cheating!"

"I don't see why, really. Anyway, remember – it's not a competition. How many words have you done?"

"Oh, 5,000. But I'll have it up to 6,000 before I finish tonight."

She kissed me encouragingly.

"Well, I need my sleep. I'll see you later."

I'm going to stick with Wenham. What I've realised is that so far, just as I initially forgot to describe Julie to you, I have given no details of any of my characters. We don't know whether Lady Jane Pimsey is blonde, brunette, or redhead: petite or tall, fashionably or casually dressed. Actually, she is Diana Rigg from the Avengers era, but I can't really say that. Or Wenham. What's Wenham like? What would Thomas Hardy have made out of it? Or Dickens? How about this...

The village of Wenham in Norfolk partakes abundantly of the celebrated topological properties of that county, which is to say it is flat. The main street is known as Market Hill, but whether this reflects some slight and long-vanished declivity of the surroundings in former times, or is a manifestation of the sly humour of the inhabitants, would be difficult to determine: in any case it is now as level, and conforms as closely to the altitude of the surrounding country as the most Euclidean of cartographers could demand.

The mighty church of St Botolph, which seems far larger than the population of the village could demand, claims an origin in the twelfth century, though the most substantial part of its substance dates from the fourteenth, and the appearance of the edifice has since been grievously improved by Victorian restorers.

The Bull, a traditional coaching inn, is a half-timbered building of scarcely lesser antiquity than the church, the two institutions sustaining the village and guiding it through the centuries in harmony rather as Gog and Magog, perhaps, have done for the Lord Mayor of London.

I'll come back to that – I don't really see what the Mayor is doing in there, but sometimes that's just how things pop out when you're Nanowrimo bound.

Across the confusion of the snug, Lady Jane perceived a solid, foursquare young man with short blond hair, whose eyebrows had been elevated on the entrance of Lord Fidgett's unruly offspring, and had not yet resumed their customary position.

"That must be Charlie Green," she thought to herself, and took a moment to appraise his figure. He was well-built, in a way which bespoke hard work and his complexion was slightly weather-beaten. His expression was open and honest, courageous without being aggressive, and his relaxed

posture suggested a quiet confidence. She decided to wait a moment and see how he comported himself in this contingency.

Rising easily to his feet, Charlie moved over to where Young Joe grovelled at the feet of his putative feudal lord.

"Get up, Joe," said Charlie, "And you – that's enough. I don't give second warnings, alright?"

The surprised aristocrat sneered back at him.

"Alright then." he said, and made as if to turn away. But soon as Charlie's eyes turned to Young Joe, the Earl whipped round again and launched a fist at his temple.

With a loud slap, the fist was intercepted by the palm of a large, steady hand, which held it firmly for a moment.

"You'd better go." said Charlie, shortly.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Alastair Fidgett, the eldest son of the late Earl."

"I'm the bloody Earl of Wenham." said that individual. His siblings and cronies gathered behind him. "And you need to be taught a lesson." he added, and paused: but then suddenly, he turned on his heel and left, with the whole crew following meekly behind.

"You're Charlie Green." observed Lady Jane, holding out her hand. Charlie looked puzzled, and then shook her hand politely.

"How would you like to be my chauffeur?"

Alright, I know I said Charlie was her faithful chauffeur, and now she's meeting him for the first time, but we can sort that out. Actually I prefer it this way. It'll be quite useful, really, because she can explain things to Charlie, like her search for the Evil Man...

"You see, Charlie, it's a personal interest of mine which I pursue in tandem with my journalistic career. I like to uncover what's behind the whitewash on the sepulchre – that's pretty much what journalists do, I suppose - but I've always wanted to meet a truly evil man, I've met many criminals, of course; but all of them were stupid, or weak, or confused rather than truly, deeply bad. A few of them weren't really bad men in any way at all, just unlucky or misunderstood. I keep hoping, but I'm beginning to think I shall never really find my Evil Man. However, while we're in this area, we may as well drop in on this painter chappie – Oliver Mordaunt, the Abstract Expressionist. He's quite successful – you may have heard of him? His paintings have always seemed to me to speak of

deep resentments, of grudges harboured and nurtured. He may not be the Evil Man, but he ought to be worth a cup of tea."

I think it's going rather well, and I'm going to bed.

Chapter Four: A Short Walk

You know there are sort of groups that meet up? I mean Nanowrimo groups. I suppose it's inevitable. It's quite distressing the way the Internet has developed this social angle these days. I didn't buy a PC in order to interact with human beings, let alone socially, but these days us quiet nerds (alright I'm not really a nerd, but I identify as nerdy) are constantly being interrupted by gangs of garrulous Facebook people tweeting at each other. Anyway, I was looking at all the stuff on the site; there's sort of forums where they exchange messages and stuff. Most of the London ones seem to be from north of the river, which I suppose is no surprise. I'm quite tempted to go along to one of the write-in events or something.

I've made up my mind to go back and take up the SF option after all. It's not too late. I'll write a basic opening piece to get the ship up into space, and then I'll have one of the characters – perhaps I'll make it one of the Wenham characters in their old age - tell a big chunk of the Wenham story, then break it up with different short pieces told by other passengers, and finish Wenham in two more big chunks. Who should it be that gets the honour of relating the Wenham story itself? I think I'll make it Charlie as a very old man. It's going to be a bit odd having lots of short stories in the general framework and one fairly big one, but I think I can kind of weave the thing together by drawing parallels between events in Wenham and events on the ship. There'll be people dying on both, and Charlie can sort of resurrect the old detective skills from his youth or something. I just don't think Wenham is going to stretch to 50,000 words on its own.

This new approach is going to require some tricky bits of reconstruction and a fair amount of new writing just to get me back to where I ought to be.

We're in Julie's place this week. As a rule, we more or less alternate, though it isn't as regular as that, and from time to time we have what she calls Unfriendly Weekends when we each stay in our respective places, not necessarily without seeing each other, but generally spending a solitary evening: in fact these weekends are sometimes the result of an irreconcilable difference over television viewing priorities. Weekdays are more improvised, and it probably splits about 60-40 in favour of Julie's flat. Hers is relatively new: although the kitchen and bathroom are a bit small, her main room is actually a bit bigger than mine. But whereas mine is pretty minimalist, kind of chrome and black leather with just a little bit of really serious wood to lighten things up, she has a lot of furniture that aunts or cousins gave her, shelves covered in ornaments and stuff, so it actually seems more cramped. There isn't anywhere you can take three straight steps without turning or leaning or squeezing past something.

I've got the old laptop set up on the table – there is a little desk, but the table's friendlier - and she's working on some papers opposite. I think it's

a presentation, though why anyone would create some PowerPoint slides, print them off, and then immediately start writing on them with a pen I can't really imagine.

"OK." she says, shuffling them together, "I think I'd better start getting ready."

"Ready?"

"You remember it's Steve and Sue's thing tonight?"

"Oh God! Yes."

"We can't miss it. You know, the election and everything?"

"I know, I know. Honestly, though, it's a bit over the top, isn't it? An election party? Obviously I hate and despise George Bush as much as anyone, but you know, I can wait till tomorrow."

Sue and Steve are old friends: Sue was sort of a friend of mine and Steve was sort of a friend of Julie's before Julie and I started going out. So there's a sort of special relationship, though as it happens it wasn't actually us that introduced them. Over the years I've sort of gone off Sue a bit, to be really honest. She's got into that phase where mortgages and pregnancy tests are all she really wants to talk about. Steve, on the other hand, is a bit of a laugh, and now that he's not really allowed to watch the football any more, his conversation has improved quite a bit.

"What time have we got to be over there?" I asked.

"Seven."

"Seven? That's a bit early. I really need to get this done."

"Weren't you going to get a bit ahead so you'd have time for this?"

"Well, that was the plan, but you know how it goes. Never mind. I suppose I can leave this for once and catch up later. I'm not far behind."

She looked at me thoughtfully but not unkindly.

"Well, I need to be there at seven anyway, because I said I'd help with the dinner stuff."

"Dinner? Don't we just sort of snarf down hamburgers or something?"

"Well, you know Sue. And why not? I don't see any harm in her having a bit of fun if she likes. Anyway, look, if you like you could come along later: but you've got to be there by eight, because that's when the pre-dinner canapés are coming out, and it would be rude to miss those."

“Canapés? Sheesh. OK. Thanks.”

She went away and started getting ready, and I turned back to my spaceship characters.

The project was funded almost entirely by the subscriptions of the passengers. Once the idea was launched, it turned out there were quite a lot of people who, for a range of different motives, were attracted by the idea of leaving Earth. There were idealists who like the idea of setting a new community with a fresh start; there were pessimists who thought the end of Earth’s life was approaching; there were people who wanted to say goodbye to everyone for purely personal reasons; and there were some who assumed that the first settlers on a new world would inevitably become the landed aristocracy of the new world.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was Letitia Durbridge, the world famous opera singer. At the ripe old age of seventy-nine, it was highly unlikely that she would survive the full journey, and if she did, her life on the new planet would be short: but she had decided that this was the way she chose to ring down the curtain on her life on Earth, and the abundant funds with which her sparkling career had endowed her personal coffers made it amply possible for her to provide the subvention required of the subscribers.

The feeling is coming over me that this thing is turning rancid in my hands. Endowed her what with what? I need to put in something to counter the sort of ‘rich opera singer’ stereotype.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was Letty Durbridge. Although she was a world famous opera singer, her down-to-earth Geordie manner dispelled any notion of the haughty diva of legend. Her cheery jokes and friendly manner made her seem younger than her sixty-eight years; too old, you might have thought, for such an adventure, but she had decided in her irrepressible way that ‘an intergalactic beano was the way to go, chuck!’

Beans? Chuck? Come on, come on: get a grip. A bit more realism, here.

Among the stranger motivations for embarking on the trip was probably that of Ellen Durbridge. A moderately successful singer in a backing group which had done a lot of well-paid session work, sometimes for famous bands but more often for toilet roll and detergent commercials, she was now enjoying an old age of modest comfort in a small flat in Cheltenham. She had decided that although she might not even live to see the end of the trip, she might as well spend her last few years, not taking tea with her friends and patronising the local shopping centre, but in a tiny cabin towards the overheated rear of an interstellar exploration rocket.

Yeah. That’s realism, is it? I’m beginning to remember why I had such problems with this stuff the first time round. There’s something about SF that sort of prevents any of the characters seeming remotely real. Not

that that ever bothered Heinlein or Asimov. Maybe I should give up on the realism and give them all names like Fulibel B'bars and Ynxhs Qt'pt

Julie reappeared.

"I'm off then," she said, "Remember to get there by eight o'clock, OK?"

I very nearly decided to go with her. It would have been simplest. But life gets complicated when you're writing stuff, and especially if you need to do 50,000 words within a month. Your priorities insensibly shift, as they do if you get married. I imagine. It's a big commitment, albeit in this case only for a month rather than until death do us part. Anyway, there are places where you can leave a manuscript, and places where you can't. There's just nothing to be done about it, I'm afraid.

On a spaceship like this, the captain is essentially a PR officer. No-one would trust a human being with the fantastically complex task of controlling the trajectory of a ship which was rotating at great speed and constantly accelerating. What the captain had to do was reassure the passengers, boost morale, and listen to complaints about the lack of space and the thoroughly inadequate provision of ladies toilets, which meant there was always a long queue along Deck Three. So Captain Bannister, firm-jawed, blue-eyed, and athletic as he was, was not really equal to the situation when a small asteroid hit the second sector and left a hole the size of a football.

"Steady, everyone." he said.

No, no.

So Captain Newell was not entirely prepared for the challenge which faced him when a particle of interstellar grit travelling at fantastic velocity struck the control room bulkhead and left a hole the size of a soup plate.

When the first mate explained the situation to him, he knocked out his pipe, stroked the grizzled beard which had done so much to get him the job, and got to his feet.

"Well lad," he said, "This is a bit of a turn-up."

A light appeared in the depths of his steely eyes.

"Happen we'll be alreet, though." he observed, and began relighting his pipe.

By now I had pretty much decided that the SF stuff wasn't going to work. It isn't, is it? I would have to ditch all that after all, and find some other passages to insert into Wenham to bulk it up instead. I could have a long flash-back, perhaps, in which the expressionist artist tells the story of how his mother was seduced and betrayed by the old Earl. I don't quite know how this is going to work, to be honest. The Earl has to have married her, but it has to be a secret. Why? Why would the painter wait until his father

was murdered before saying anything about it? Perhaps the police investigation uncovers papers which reveal to him, but not to their leaden brains, the sad old story. I'm going to leave that open for the time being.

I spent some time fleshing this out, and then noticed that it was already 7.30. Switching off quickly, I grabbed my jacket and headed out to the Tube. My mind wasn't really on where I was going: I descended, found the platform, got on the train and took a seat all running on autopilot, and it was only as I climbed out of the station at the other end that I realised I couldn't remember Sue and Steve's address. A check revealed that I had also come out without my mobile.

At point like this, one is faced with a difficult decision, knowing pretty much for certain that whichever decision one makes will seem wrong looking back on it. I thought I might just be able to find the right street without actually having the address. The only alternative was to go all the way back to the flat and start again.

OK, I was pretty happy with going straight ahead and left, then right. There was a house with gnomes in the garden, and I had a shrewd suspicion I'd seen it before. Finally, I turned into a street which might be the right one: but which was the house? The truth is that most of the houses round here look pretty much the same.

I thought it was the one with the yellow door. Plucking up as much courage as possible, I rang the bell. It sort of sounded empty, and there was no response, not even after a second ring. So it couldn't be that one. But it could be the green one next door... As my finger was heading towards the doorbell of the second house, I saw a shrivelled old lady staring straight at me through the window of the house with the yellow door. She showed no sign of opening the door, or reacting in any way, but her eyes were fixed on me.

At this point, I admit I sort of lost the courage of my convictions a bit. Even if I spotted the right house, I probably wouldn't be brave enough to ring the door bell. The only real alternative now was to go back to Julie's flat and start all over again. Or not start again, but I'd be in big trouble if I never turned up – big trouble.

I lost a few more minutes by standing around in a state of denial and then I set off back to the tube station again.

Back at the flat, it took me many increasingly sweary minutes to find my address book and locate Sue and Steve's entry, and before I did so it occurred to me for the first time that in my hurry to get out of the flat originally, I had shut off the laptop without saving anything. Manfully resisting the urge to reboot and confirm that I had lost the entire day's work, I went out again and ran down the road back to the tube.

Down into the bowels of the earth again, and this time I had to wait nearly fifteen minutes before a train arrived. I leapt up the escalator at

the other end, shooting about five feet into the air at the top. As I stood panting on the station threshold I had a moment of doubt: although I now had the address, could I actually find my way there without also having a map? It only took a moment for the doubt to dissolve in favour of a firm certainty. No, I couldn't.

"What happened to you?" asked Julie.

"Well... When I eventually got out of the tube I had to ask the way, and then this sweet little boy sent me off in totally the wrong direction until I got to another borough altogether, and actually got the tube back to where I had started from."

"But it's half past eleven! We've all eaten already."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. It's sort of a long story."

"John!" exclaimed Sue, "You made it! Did you get tied up with a cliff-hanger or something? What's the book all about?"

"Well, it's basically a traditional detective story, really."

"I thought there was a spaceship in it?"

I looked at Julie, who raised both eyebrows defiantly.

"Well, I thought about something like that. But now I've sort of taken that bit out. You know how it is. It wasn't really working. It's alright, though; I can afford to lose a few thousand words"

"Oh, well I hope it all goes well. You must let us all read it when it's finished. Come in and have a drink. I've saved you some Obama cake. It's got pecans in"

"Lovely", I said absent-mindedly.

Julie was very reasonable about my late arrival, really, once I'd had chance to give her the full version.

"Oh well." she said, "At least you got all your writing done."

The thing is, all that time I was wandering around the streets, do you know what was really on my mind? Well, yes, finding my way. But apart from that? I was constantly thinking about how much time I was wasting away from my text. See? I've got my priorities straight at last.

Chapter Five: Evasions

So last night there was a small difference of opinion when Julie discovered that as well as having been atrociously late for the election thing, I wasn't planning to go and see the fireworks.

"But you told everyone you were coming," she protested, "I'm sick of having to apologise on your behalf, and this is only the fifth of the month. Come on, You can leave early if you have to."

"No, I won't be able to do any writing if I come back after half a Bonfire Night party. Really, trust me, I know this about myself. I could come along later?"

"Oh no. Not that again. Alright, stay here. But I'm telling people you had to go to the emergency clinic with your unmentionable disease, OK?"

So I sat there alone in my own little place with the opportunity to do a bit of catching up. Where are we? I need to be at about 10,000 words by the end of November 5th, but at the moment I've got 7,000. The minimum I ought to do today is 2,000: that effectively just stops the shortfall getting any worse. Ideally, I'd like to do the whole 3,000 needed to get back on track. So the range is two to three thousand.

3,000 is not realistic, though, is it? The original plan envisaged me having days off, or at least retaining them as a margin for error. I think I have to concede now that I'll need to use that time. If I use weekend days to the full I can make up the deficit then. Let's say two thousand, then. Following the principle of doing the bits I fancy doing first, instead of following chronological order, I'm going to do Lady Emma's long monologue to Charlie about the death of her parents.

I'll just check my email.

Do you find that spam goes in phases? Once upon a time I got nothing but emails that promised to tell me where I could meet real women. Then for a year they offered me fake watches. Then there was a confused period where 'non-accredited degrees' and stock market tips slugged it out with the perennial Nigerians. Now I get virtually nothing but penile enlargement. Are these world wide trends, or are they targeting me specifically?

Anyway, time's a-wastin'. Just a quick glance at a couple of sites.

OK. I'm not sure how that happened, but I spent 40 minutes playing Desktop Tower Defence. I don't know why – I never get anywhere with that thing. I thought it was going to be a breakthrough when I realised that you could open and close parts of the maze and send the attackers all sloshing back through it – I think they call it juggling - but it didn't help that much. Here we go, anyway.

"Always murder cases, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm not really all that interested in other crimes. I've got a bit of a thing about murder, Charlie: always have had since Mummy and Daddy were killed when I was seven. I found them, you see."

"You found your parents dead? My God. I'm sorry."

The mouse ball is claggy again. I don't know how this happens. My mouse balls always get claggy really quickly. I need a paper clip to open the retaining ring – back in a tick.

Well, I don't seem to own a paperclip of any kind. I'll just have to try a biro...

There we are, then. Wasn't actually as claggy as it seemed.

I don't know how far to go with this storyline. You see, the way I conceive it, Wenham would be the first of a long series of stories featuring Lady Jane. Bit by bit, we should learn about her psychological issues, until in the very last novel, she would investigate the long-ago murder of her own parents. I hardly have to tell you, faithful reader, that although she has wiped it from her memory in a dissociative personality crisis, she actually killed them herself.

The way things are going, I'm liable to put all of this into Wenham in a desperate effort to bump up the count, but that really isn't going to work very well.

When you sit here, you can see the edge of the skirting board under the radiator. It's absolutely covered in a layer of what looks like greasy dust. Excuse me a moment.

Yes, yes, I know what displacement activity is. In fact it isn't quite what you think: it's when an animal is subject to two competing stresses and responds with a pattern of behaviour completely inappropriate to either of them: no, actually what I'm doing is just evasion.

The little girl plays happily on the golden beach by herself. A gentle breeze ruffles the fronds of the trees from time to time, but otherwise the sound of the sea is all she can hear when she stands still and listens. She becomes absorbed in the construction of a large sandcastle: not high, but filled with tiny roofless rooms. As she works, she recites the imaginary conversation of the occupants in squeaky voices under her breath. After a while, she notices she is hungry: it must be time for lunch by now? She dusts most of the sand off her hands and walks up the beach. She skips along the boarded walk back to the large hut, where the door stands ajar.

"Mummy?" she asks, looking inside.

Her mother's eyes rest on the little girl's feet. The eyes are held at an odd, strained angle: perhaps because of the position of her mother's head, sideways on a high shelf at the back. Most of her body is behind the door.

No, no.

... perhaps because of the position of her mother's head, lying on the ground with her body twisted awkwardly as though trying in vain to avoid the pool of blood which has poured from the long gash in her throat.

I'm not very good at this sort of stuff. Oh, you'd noticed?

The phone rings, and before I can remember that I deliberately left it set to answer, I have picked up.

"Hello, John Faletcher?" I say. There is a long pause with confused noises.

"Can I speak to... John Faletcher, please?" asks a voice, female, Indian.

"My dear, you already have," I reply in my best Colonel's voice for some reason.

"Sorry?"

"This is John Faletcher."

She now goes into a rapid monologue, emphasising words randomly, or so it seems.

"Mr. Faletcher. I *represent* Livingstone *Facilities*, a leading company in the *field* of modern driveway and hard *standing* replacement. We are carrying out a survey in your area, *at* no obligation to you, and I wondered *whether* you would have time to help us, *at* no obligation *to* you, by answering a few questions."

"Fire away."

"Sorry? I wondered *whether* you would *have* time to help us, *at* no obligation to you, by answering a few questions, Mr Faletcher."

"Yes. Alright."

"Oh, thank you very much, Mr Faletcher, now first of all can I ask whether you are the Home Owner?"

"I am the Home Owner," I declare, in my slow, deep, Master Villain number 2 voice.

"Sorry?"

"I *am* the Home Owner,"

"Sorry?"

"I am the Home Owner." with a touch of menace now, "Do you doubt me?"

"Sorry? Can I ask you whether you are the Home Owner, Mr Faletcher, please?"

"My dear, you already have,"

"Are you the Home Owner, Mr Faletcher?"

"I am the Home Owner."

A short pause, with noises in the background.

"I'm sorry, Mr Faletcher, I think we've got a bad line. I'll ring you back."

I wait, but she does not ring again.

I have three more attempts at Lady Jane's childhood trauma, in between making a cup of coffee, checking yesterday's post, counting all the words all over again and – yes – cleaning the windows.

"I *am* the Home Owner." I murmur self-righteously as I polish. Then I switch the telly on, and it is there that I wake, about 4 in the morning, in front of *BBC Learning Zone: the World of Hard Sums*.

"You were snoring when I came in." Julie remarked rather tautly this morning, "Did you actually write anything?"

"Yes, yes, I'm getting on fine. Well, actually not that fine. I'm having a few small problems: not a crisis yet, but you know, basically I'm running out of plot. I can write the words, but the story's going to peter out at about 15,000 words. I need more complications, more stuff to happen."

"Could I read it?"

"Well... Yes, I suppose so. You probably won't like it. It's a detective story."

"You told me that. Lady Sarah Pimsey."

"Lady Jane."

"Alright, well if you can put it on my memory stick before you leave, I might be able to have a look at it at lunchtime."

“OK. There are actually several different sections, so I’ll give you the overall summary as well. I’m not writing the different bits of the story in sequence, you see: it’s easier this way.”

“Is it? Don’t you get continuity problems when you stitch the bits back together again?”

“It’s a risk, but I think it’ll be OK. Oh, one other thing – don’t show it to anyone else, OK?”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure that letting Julie read it was a good idea. She’s not much of a reader, generally, and it tends to be non-fiction, biographies, that kind of thing. I’m not an avid detective story fan myself (why am I writing one, then?), but compared with Julie I’m Dame Ngaio Marsh. Only still alive, obviously.

So I must admit I fretted a bit as I made my way into Cincinnatus House, where I work. I haven’t as yet attempted to work on Wenham in my lunch hour, and I know that to do so would be dangerous, but no doubt it will come, as will sitting up all night panicking. I know what fate has in store,: I am not deluded.

Cincinnatus House, a horrid modern block, was built by Behemoth, my employer in its sixties heyday. Behemoth is in the food business, loosely speaking: back in the thirties it was a pioneer of the process by which food was turned into a fully industrial product. In those days, the techniques of divorcing the different qualities of the foodstuff – flavour, colour, mouth-feel, texture, keeping qualities, cost – achieving them in totally different ways and then artfully co-ordinating, injecting or compounding the results to achieve the ideal synthesis, were only sketchily understood and flavouring technology as we know it today barely existed. As a result Behemoth did not really do well until the war, when advantageous contracts with the government allowed it to grow somewhat, and years of rationing destroyed the national cuisine and palate. By 1945, Behemoth was ready with bigger factories and more advanced food enhancement, and the punters were ready to eat anything. Latterly, the shine has gone off things a bit as people have tended to trade up to premium products: although making a great success of certain products, like Thai Caesar Sauce and Provencal Taco Salsa, Behemoth has struggled to shed its deep conviction that all it needs to do is turn the elusive ‘premium’ ingredient into a liquid that can be sprayed onto its comestibles, and all will be well again.

Be that as it may, it is in this grey, provisional-looking building that I spend my day attempting to bring order to Kevin’s planned presentation of our Q2 sales data, and asking myself whether I should have kept Wenham strictly to myself. By the time I slink out of the front door, once again muffing the decision over whether to say goodnight to the security guard, the Q2 figures are pretty much as they were, and I’m pretty sure it was a mistake to let Julie see it.

But I misjudged her.

"It actually looks pretty good." she says, sitting on my sofa with a reporter's notebook in her hand, for when it comes to business (and it seems this is business in her eyes) she is nothing if not systematic. Would that she could apply the same orderly habits to her soft furnishings. "Apart from typos and things. It makes sense, it's readable, the plot more or less hangs together. Your clues need work. In fact, you need some clues."

"The real trouble is, there's not enough of it." I explain, "I've tried long evocative passages about the scenery, but even I get too bored to carry on."

"Are there any ideas on that website?"

"Not really. Not that I can see. It's more people asking things like whether men sit down when they wee, and how British people talk. I already know the answers to both of those."

"Hmm. Well, the main action is really the family members killing each other off. Why don't you just add another sibling?"

I can't believe it. It's so simple. There could be ten children. Twenty. Never mind murder, it could be a very slow form of genocide.

"If it were me, I should make it another sister," Julie continued, "I would make her the one, who though led astray, shows occasional signs of decency. There could be a bit of chemistry between her and Charlie, which Lady Jane would get sulky about."

"Lady Jane's relationship with Charlie is purely platonic," I protested, "She is celibate, or possibly lesbian if you insist. In book five, in conditions of great stress and danger, having just narrowly escaped with her life from a burning building, she may lay her head briefly on Charlie's comforting shoulder. That's all."

"Book five?"

"Yes. Of course I don't mean to write the full series, but detective stories come in sequences, so you sort of have to imagine them as fitting into a longer, multi-novel context.. It's like, you know, Trent's Last Case, which was actually meant to be the only book about Trent: it still had to suggest that there was a series, in fact making it seem like the culmination was a cunning marketing trick."

"Well, it's up to you," she said, and smiled.

"But the idea of extending the family is marvellous. I'm really grateful. I'm sorry if I've been a bit of a pain the last couple of days, but I tell you what: when I get to the half-way mark, we'll have a big celebration, OK?"

"You're on."

Chapter Six: Wrimo people

So last night I went to one of their things. The Nanowrimo people.

Julie couldn't believe it.

"Let me get this straight," she said, through clenched teeth, "You virtually missed Steve and Sue's party because you needed to write. You did miss the fireworks because you needed to write. Tonight, though, tonight you can take time off and go out. Just not with me?"

"It's not a night off, it's a write-in," I explained, "You can come if you like."

"Gee, thanks."

She didn't come. You know, it has begun to cross my mind that this Nanowrimo thing might not strengthen our relationship in quite the way I was hoping. Oh well.

It was in this upstairs room in a kind of a coffee place down in Balham, where strangely there seems to be a particularly flourishing community. People sort of get together and talk about what to do with their MC (main character), and even do some actual writing. There were a few characters in attendance, actually.

Richard

He is dark with a beard, and apparently has done it all many times before. He says he'd found the best approach was to have the structure roughed out in some detail first, and set out full details of your characters and locations in advance.

"You have to be careful," he says, "To stick to what you've decided, and make up your mind about the details beforehand. Otherwise, you find character's names change from one chapter to the next, and that sort of thing.

"Like Savonarola Brown." I say. I enjoy telling people the story of Savonarola Brown..

"Indeed,"

"Great story, that."

"Yes, though *Enoch Soames* is really my favourite. I think short stories were really Beerbohm's natural literary form, though I love *Zuleika Dobson* too, of course. That parody, you know...

*Thee'll not vind nor bread nor bed that matches
Them as thee'll vind, roight zure, at Mrs. Batch's . . .*

... but the best bit is where..."

Hey! I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that other people may have read *Zuleika Dobson*, mate...

Mrs Pringle

She is a well-dressed and well-spoken woman, sharp-faced with one eyebrow perpetually raised in what seems a combative way, though I'm not sure she means it like that. Her conversational style supports the impression in any case: she has a way of suddenly turning her head and looking straight at you which is rather disconcerting.

"So this is your first time?" she asks, with a penetrating glance.

"Yes..."

"I see. What are you writing about?"

I give her a vague outline of Wenham, gradually losing conviction as I go.

"So..." she muses "It's a detective story. Is there sex in it?"

"Well, not really."

"Well you must put some in. Sex is what it's all about, after all. My books are always full of it. My view is, if we must write about sex – and we must – we might as well get down to it straight away. That woman you mentioned – your MC – you should get her to take the chauffeur out in the car and give him 'the seeing-to of a lifetime', as the young people say, in a big pile of leaves. Good for three thousand words if you do it right. I can give you a few tips if you have trouble getting started. What I can't stand is people who go all coy about it."

Miss Mouse

That's not her name, obviously, but she mutters it so quietly I can't quite catch it, and she looks so shy I don't like to ask her to repeat it.

"John Faletcher!" she says, gratifyingly. "I think I've heard that name. You put up a lot of comments on the website, in that thread about the different styles of famous authors, didn't you? Those people you were criticising were really stupid, weren't they? There was one who said *Vanity Fair* exemplified the style of Charles Dickens? And then spent a lot of time trying to persuade people he hadn't meant that Charles Dickens actually wrote *Vanity Fair*? I liked your comments."

"Oh, thank you."

"'Faletcher' is an unusual name, isn't it?!"

"Yes. I'm one of the Berkshire Faletchers. An old family, they say, descended from Giacomo Falucci, a Florentine merchant who settled in London during the reign of Henry VIII."

"Really?"

"Well, that's what the family says. The reference books say the name is an illiterate version of Fletcher, originating near Nottingham. You know, I didn't think anyone really read those comments on the site, apart from the minority of egotists like me that actually post them."

"Oh, I read them," she says, "I'm too nervous to post anything, but I always read them. Yours are very good. Very clever. You've obviously read a lot, haven't you?"

"Just the ordinary stuff. But thank you."

I can see now that behind the round glasses she looks intelligent and sensitive. The way she's got her pale brown hair tied up doesn't really suit her: it somehow adds to the impression of self-effacement.

"What's your book about?" I ask encouragingly.

"It's terrible," she says, "It took me so long to make up my mind I only started yesterday. It's called Lady Muck. My MC is born early in the twentieth century: she comes from a poor family, but even as a little girl she aspires to gentility. After, you know, a lot of difficulty and a doomed love affair with Jimmy, a bohemian socialist and war hero, she eventually attains her ambition of becoming a lady of leisure and refinement. She lives long enough to tacitly despise Mrs Thatcher's vulgarity, and pick Jimmy up out of the gutter, where he is lying after being beaten up by a group of young thugs. But I've only written two hundred words yet."

"Sounds a great story, anyway," I say encouragingly. "A bit Catherine Cookson?"

"Not really. I hate Catherine Cookson."

A sudden look of real ferocity comes into her little gamine face.

Steven

He has a jumper on, and has not shaved for a couple of days, I should judge.

"So – have you done this before?" I ask cheerily,

"No."

"Nor me. What are you writing about?"

"Actually, I don't like talking about it. It puts me off."

"Does it? OK. Well, mine's a sort of detective story."

A long silence followed.

"Are you well up to schedule? Is your word count OK?." I ask.

"I don't really keep track until I've finished."

"Oh. I've got a bit behind, one way and another, but nothing I can't catch up on."

Another silence.

Anyway, since I'm not sticking to chronological order, I decide to whack out the very end of Wenham, which I'm pretty clear about. I make my excuses to Steven, who jerks his head in silent acknowledgement, plonk myself down and open a new file in which to work temporarily.

The new Earl of Wenham stood before the congregation at the lectern with an unaccustomed smile on his face, bobbing his head slightly in a way suggestive of a warbler or titmouse.

"Now some of you will know me as that strange artist fellow, a suspicious character," he began, "I can't blame you if you haven't found me agreeable. I haven't liked myself much, to tell the truth. For years I've been living my life under a cloud. Haven't we all? I think there's been some curse on the Fidgett family that has spread its evil influence over the village. Well, I have come to put an end to that, and make amends for all the harm my family has done over the years. Luckily, once I have sold my remaining paintings, I shall be wealthy enough to do the job properly."

"As of today, I am a painter no longer. I have already burnt my easel and brushes."

Lady Jane Pimsey groaned.

"On Monday, I shall begin repairing and restoring the castle: I shall need many workmen and I intend to recruit them all as locally as possible. The school and post office will also be redecorated, and both will re-open at my own expense as soon as we can manage it."

"I intend, with the aid of a grant from the European Community, to turn the gardens of Wenham Castle into a leading tourist attraction. Besides enhancing the village and providing a valuable local amenity, this will guarantee jobs in the longer term not only to employees of the castle, but

to shops and businesses in and near the village – which, I may add, I shall be eager to invest in should it be required.”

“This all represents no more than a beginning. In short, neighbours – and I hope I may soon call you friends - I hereby dedicate my life to ensuring that prosperity and happiness reign in Wenham as they should always have done.”

Lady Jane groaned again.

“And now, will you join me in a hymn?”

“Look,” whispered Lady Jane, “I can’t stand this. You can stay if you like - meet me in the pub when it’s all over.”

Charlie nodded, and standing up, added his voice to those of the excited villagers. He had a good, sound baritone, hitting all the notes with careful accuracy and great attack.

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

THE END

“I always think it’s cheating to put songs in,” said a voice over my shoulder suddenly.

I hate it when people read over my shoulder.

I turned round and there was a round-faced, red-haired individual grinning at me.

Tom

He is dressed in jeans and a plain green shirt.

“I knew of a fellow last year who put the lyrics of all the songs in his CD collection in,” he adds. “He pretended his MC was lying in front of the stereo having a marathon singalong. It didn’t really do him any good, though: it took so long to transcribe the lyrics he would have been quicker to make them up himself. Is this a detective story?”

“Yes, How could you tell?”

“Oh, I think Lady Jane Pimsey has a sort of sound of a whodunnit about her, that’s all. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Not at all. What’s yours about, then?”

"Mine's a detective story, too. It's called *Snarking Asshats*. There's this web forum thing, you see, and everything is going along just fine, and then they notice that the number of posts on the forum is dropping off. Nothing odd there, but it turns out that some former member who'd flamed out and left is now hunting down the members who crossed him and killing them off. He starts to post messages, calling himself The Filter Monkey. It's easy for me, because I just describe some bastard's life and then when I run out of ideas the Filter Monkey comes up and does him in, and I can start afresh with the next target."

"Yes, I might take a similar approach to the Fidgett family. You can always think of some new and exotic way for them to be bumped off."

"That's it. Do you want a proper drink?"

This last question followed so rapidly I was left searching in vain for the thread of the conversation for a few moments.

"I mean, me and some of the folks are going down the pub for a couple of pints. Why don't you come with us?"

"Well..."

"Come on, I just saw you write 'The End' – you can't be needing to do any more writing."

"Well, alright." I said. To be honest, the idea of writing communally seems a little odd: it's inherently a solitary thing. You come out to meet people, don't you? We went to a place called the Granby. If it hadn't been evident before, it became clear now that Tom was the life and soul of the party.

It was some hours later that I made my way back to Julie's flat, where she had already gone to bed. I sat on the sofa for a while, tired but somehow not able to summon the small amount of energy needed to go to bed.

I thought the people I had met that evening confirmed my views about the ambiguity of the psychology behind the whole Nanowrimo thing. The vocabulary was very much that of the marathon run, as though the whole thing were simply a feat of endurance; yet at the same time people were clearly concerned with the possibility of publication. These were people who valued literature; and yet at the same time the whole business of trying to write a smallish novel in a single month suggested an impatience, a desire to be rid of the whole thing. Most of these people would find that the feat was simply beyond them; others would find, as I had found with The Mallison Institute, that they had 50,000 words, but they hadn't, properly speaking got a novel. Neither of those results, by far the most likely, seemed particularly worth the effort, but the point seemed to be that the thing would be done. Many people described the project as a springboard, or a motivating factor, but it was difficult not to suspect that unconsciously they just needed to be confirmed in their

instinctive guess, that literature breeds distress. Richard would know where that quote comes from, the smug bastard.

But another concern thrust itself irresistibly to the surface of my mind. I had added only 400 words to my count today, and two of them had been 'The End'. I'm not superstitious, but it did now occur to me that writing the end of your novel might not be the best way to prepare psychologically for a new burst of the old fecundity.

Chapter Seven: Winning the Booker

Anyway, my morale was hugely improved by Julie's suggestion about Wenham. I now felt that the way forward was relatively clear. It would be easy to add another sibling to the Earl's family, and if necessary I was prepared to go on to add as many as necessary. There is clearly a slight risk that the plot could begin to sag into an incoherent bloodbath in the middle: but one reason why I like the idea so much is that it effectively licenses me to introduce relatively self-contained little episodes, which ought to sustain interest without threatening the structure.

So I was vastly encouraged and optimistic when I sat down to the old laptop in my own pad this evening (After recent experience I've decided it may be more tactful to keep the actual writing out of Julie's way and give her my full attention when I'm over there). Perhaps this explains why instead of adding to the manuscript I immediately began to rough out my speech accepting the Booker prize.

...Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen, and I'm sorry that John Faletcher cannot be here tonight. In fact, ladies and gentlemen, there are some philosophical difficulties over the concept of John Faletcher's physical location. Perhaps the best working approximation I can offer you tonight is that his location corresponds with a high-order conjunctive entity consisting of very many sets of weightings in a conceptual network instantiated in a number of data registers distributed across Europe, North America, and to some extent, India. In short, ladies and gentlemen, the novel which your judges have picked out today as the best offered to them, was composed by an artificial intelligence. You have the honour of being present at one of the great milestones which mark the progress of intelligence and self-consciousness beyond humanity, indeed beyond biology, and onward into new realms. John says 'hi'.

...Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen. This prize is important to me in many ways: as recognition, of course, but also because it carries with it a significant sum of money. For many years now I have nurtured plans for a special project which I have never been able to carry out due to lack of resources: but now your prize will make it possible for me to realise that project, for which I and many readers around the world will, I'm sure, be very grateful. In short, ladies and gentlemen, the prize money you have awarded me today will finally enable me to give up writing forever and spend the next few years drinking myself slowly to death. Cheers.

...Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen, for helping me to expose the falsity of the Western consumerist conception of literature. My novel posed as another of those self-obsessed, middle-class Sunday supplement books which have so often won this execrable prize, another contribution to the conspiracy against the freedom of working class minds when dates back to Richardson if not before: a conspiracy which would enslave language and imagination in the service of commerce and profit. But you, judges, you recognised the satire at the core of my work: you recognised

its call for the outright rejection of the novel as a corrupt, debilitating form. Putting aside satire now, I call on everyone watching to join me in declaring an indefinite moratorium on the publication or reading of any further novels. As part of the process, my own winning work is hereby withdrawn unconditionally from sale, and all remaining copies are to be pulped. Friends, I salute you!

...Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sorry John Faletcher could not be here tonight to accept your prize. Oh yes, I know you can see me here, and that I look just like the photograph on the jacket of the book, allowing for about ten years and lots of make-up. But John Faletcher is not here tonight. Ladies and gentlemen, three years ago, my beloved aunt Lettie Durbridge, whose voice you may have heard in many toilet roll advertisements over the years, offered to sponsor me while I fulfilled my ambition to become a writer. At that stage, she was the only person who displayed any faith in my ability or offered me any support, and then and now I owe her the most profound debt. I vowed that I would repay her trust. I threw myself into doing it the only way I knew: by writing. Oh, not the kind of writing we are gathered to celebrate tonight. No indeed. No-one would read my manuscripts. Instead I had to hone my talents on mediocre hack-work. Translations of instruction manuals for digital watches; ghost written vanity autobiographies; bespoke blog comments for uninteresting celebrities. Not well-paid work, but I did it day and night: at the same time, I poured my anguish into real prose: the prose you have rewarded today. One day, I swore, my aunt should be proud of me and know that her confidence had not been misplaced. Tonight you have vindicated my aunt's faith and crowned my long struggle with success. However... excuse me. Ladies and gentlemen, just five minutes ago I received a message which told me that my aunt had suffered a sudden stroke and passed away. That is why, ladies and gentlemen, my body may be with you, drinking champagne, but tonight John Faletcher is at his aunt's bedside. (A pregnant silence: Mark Lawson half stands and attempts to take the microphone, but I wave him away and raise it again to utter my peroration...)
Joking!

Alright, alright, I shouldn't waste valuable writing time and energy producing spoof speeches. In general, I'm crackinged on in fine style. I'm broadly following Julie's suggestions about the new character, who will be called Fenella. I need to unpick one of the preceding murders slightly: it won't be Camilla who poisons Freddie (posthumously): instead Fenella will do it. In fact, she only means to drug him and give him a scare, since she suspects him of the earlier murders; but his ill-timed foray into the fox farm will do the rest. When she goes for a drive, something goes wrong with the brakes: Jack, before his untimely demise, has created a small brake fluid leak, but taped it up just well enough to survive a couple of uses before bursting, which he correctly estimates will leave her speeding towards a dangerous hairpin bend on a high cliff.

What's that,? Oh yes. I said Wenham was perfectly flat. Alright. speeding towards the treacherous narrow bridge over Wenham Dyke.

Oh, and Charlie is going to be in the car. How does he escape? Well, you may have to read my Booker-winning novel to find out.. The good news is, I'm up to speed with the word count again, or nearly so. So I was able to shut down with a good conscience and head over to Julie's, where we had dinner together – the first time for what feels like a week or more.

"Have you spoken Geoff recently?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, he left a message asking if we wanted to meet him in the Royal Oak tomorrow. I think he wants to compare notes. You're alright with that, aren't you?"

I sensed a slight tension behind the words.

"I don't know," I said, "If he wants to meet, it must mean he's doing well and wants to gloat. He's not going to be asking for my advice."

"I thought you were supposed to doing this in a non-competitive spirit."

"Oh, we are, but from time to time he gets into one of these moods. At school I told him once I was signing up for this expedition to Greenland which one of the more sadistic masters was planning. It was only a joke, but before you knew it, he really had signed up and was even buying the kit. It was really difficult for him to get out of it in the end."

"Oh, how sad. He probably just wanted to go with his best friend."

"No, I think he thought there'd be a chance to show off his skill with knots, or something. Anyway, I suppose I could have a quick half. I still need to catch up a bit if I can."

You're probably getting a very negative impression of my views about Geoff. To be absolutely honest, he's one of those friends you've had so long, it's almost like family; all barriers are gone and you take them for granted. But he has changed over the years, and so have I: we used to be a pair of almost indistinguishable schoolboys, with the same interests, the same haircut, both intelligent, lively and hard-working. Nowadays I do the intelligent and lively, and leave the rest to him. If we met as strangers for the first time now, I don't suppose we'd make friends, which is a strange thought.

In my psychoanalytical moments (don't worry, there aren't many of them) I wonder whether Geoff was permanently affected by the problems they had when his Dad was made redundant. This would have been when Geoff and I were just about to do A levels: his father quite suddenly got thrown out of the company where he'd worked most of his life and basically sat watching television ever afterwards.

It was hard for Geoff because he was one of those boys who idolise their fathers: he used to stand by the car with a sappy expression on his face once a month while his father ritualistically cleaned and tidied it, checking all the spark plugs and unnecessary stuff like that. He was convinced his father was essentially holding Benson and Sons together personally, so the fact that they could just drop him like a hot potato came as a bit of a shock. As indeed it did to Geoff's Dad, who was labouring under a similar delusion himself.

Of course I wouldn't have liked it if my father had been made redundant, but I don't think it would have bothered me quite so fundamentally. I doubt whether it would have bothered my father all that much either, to be honest; he'd just have got another job, the way he did periodically in any case when boredom set in or he thought he was on to something good.

But I think Geoff was left with a worrying sense of impermanence and risk, and a consequent tendency to become a management consultant, not just in his clothing but in his very soul.

The more I think about this, the more convinced I become that I have actually been a bit unfair to Geoff. I feel sorry for him. He deserves sympathy.

Chapter Eight: Wanna Bet?

"I'm really sorry if I seemed a bit combative about this. I do appreciate the way you've taken on this challenge. I should have been more sympathetic. Let's face it, it's not about competition. It's about two old friends, striving together towards the summit of a mountain. Oh. And the other thing it's about. What is it now? That I'm a winner, and you're a loser. Nearly forgot! Where's the loser? There's the loser! Where's the loser? There's the loser!"

This is not me speaking. It's Geoff, speaking to me, while Julie is at the bar.

"Geoff," I respond, thoughtfully, "You are a sad, strange little man, and you have my pity."

"Alright, book boy" he said, in a low voice, "If you think you're hard enough, let's put money on it. First to 50,000, OK? A bottle of Cristal on it from the first to give up. Are you up for it? Do you fancy your chances? Or are you going to concede now?"

"I don't want to bet on it."

"Where's the lo-ser?"

"Oh, fuck you. Alright. Cristal it is."

In case you don't know, Cristal is a kind of champagne that goes for at least £150 a bottle. Vastly overpriced: in fact, it was a bit of girly bet, in my opinion, but I wasn't in the mood to start haggling.

I don't know what brought on this sudden aggression from Geoff. It wasn't as if I'd provoked him or anything. I had asked him politely how the heaving bosoms were coming on, and left it at that. No mention of wimples, no jeering.

Julie came back to the table with a pint of London Pride for me and cooking lager for Geoff. He has no taste where beer is concerned..

"I hope you two are being nice about this stupid writing." said Julie.

"Oh yes," said Geoff, "I'm passing on a couple of tips."

"He wants to have a bet on it." I said..

"Oh, do you have to?" said Julie, pressing her lips together. "What does Maureen think about all this, Geoff?"

"She's not very happy with me at the moment, to be honest." admitted Geoff, "But I've explained that it will help my CV. You know how it is. You

need to put something down about interests and hobbies. Everybody puts reading and walking, and stupid stuff like that; this will be something a bit more eye-catching. I was thinking of signing up for voluntary work, to be honest, just to add a bit of interesting content: but this will be far easier."

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey," I said, in my Voice From The Tomb voice, "Think again, Geoffrey."

"I know you don't care about your career," he said, "But a good CV is really important. When I've retired at forty-five and bought a mansion in the Bahamas, the boot will be on the other side of your face, won't it?"

"No, no, you don't understand. I mean Nanowrimo is poison in a CV, Almost as bad as fell walking."

"What's wrong with fell walking?"

"I'm afraid he's right, Geoff," said Julie, "You see, an employer is usually looking for people who are good team players, who muck in and work hard, and basically believe what they're told and do what they're told. Now fell walking, to take that example, is a sign that you enjoy being on your own a lot, spend a lot of time in solitary thought, and so probably have peculiar ideas of your own. A weirdo, not a team player. Unreliable, unless you need some fells walked, which employers rarely do."

"And Nanowrimo is pretty bad, too, " I explained, "All writing is solitary and thoughtful and original, which is bad enough. But it's also an inherently weird way of writing, involving the Internet, which is also a deadly sign that you're a bit nerdy if not an actual psychopath. If you want to enhance your CV, you should start organising community singing at the local church, or team games, possibly for charity since that will eliminate any idea that you might harbour unpredictable individual motives of your own."

"Well, I can tell you it's gone down pretty well at my firm," said Geoffrey obstinately, but his face had taken on that collapsed look which undisguisably betrays sudden despair.

"Of course, you don't have to put it in your CV, if you don't want to." suggested Julie, comfortingly.

"Go through all this for something that's not going in my CV?" demanded Geoff, "Thanks."

"She's right," I said, "You needn't tell anyone about it, if you don't want to.

"It's too late for that," said Geoffrey, lugubriously, "There's a feature about me in this month's staff magazine. People keep offering to sponsor me."

"I suppose if you took sponsorship and did it for charity, that could look quite good," suggested Julie. Geoff brightened slightly, but then his eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute," he said, "You're just trying to psych me, aren't you?"

"Nope." I said, and drained my pint rapidly, much to Julie's evident incredulity and disapproval.

"I've got to get in another thousand words," I explained.

"Oh come on. You're not really going, now?"

"If it's going to be a bet..." I said.

She sighed irritably.

In fact, faithful reader, I was not going home to work on my work. I was off to meet up with some of my fellow 'wrimos again. But I saw no need to mention that.

I did intend to get a bit of writing in. At the chosen rendezvous, I got myself a half, fired up the old laptop and dived straight in.

"Mr Green?"

Charlie looked up in surprise. Fenella Fidgett had a large briefcase in one hand, and was smiling affably. She stepped forward and took his arm in her hand confidentially.

"Look, I hope you don't mind me saying this," she began, "But I'm really grateful. I know my family isn't exactly popular around here any more, but it seems a bit hard that I should be blamed for everything. It's not exactly pleasant, you know, standing by while your family is gradually wiped out. They all seem to think I did it. You're the only one decent enough to even give me the benefit of the doubt. I just wanted to say... well, it makes a difference. Thank you."

"That's alright," said Charlie, "It, well... that's alright."

"God, you're not waiting for the bus, are you? I thought you were a chauffeur?"

"Yes, well Lady Sarah has taken the car herself today. She said she didn't want me to have to hang around all day while she was talking to her cousin's friend. So I thought I'd get the bus into town for once."

"Oh, you can't do that. You'll wait all day. I'll give you a lift. Come on!"

"Oh, no, that's very kind but I don't really think..."

"No, come on, I insist. The car's just over there. I was going in to town to see the lawyers – see this bag? So many papers to work through."

"I suppose there are," said Charlie, letting himself be led away to where Fenella's small blue car was parked by the green.

Charlie's large frame did not fit very comfortably inside the little car, even when he cautiously let the seat back as far as it would go.

"Alright, now you mustn't watch me driving," said Fenella, promptly stalling, "Having a professional in the car makes me nervous"

"I haven't been a professional very long," said Charlie, wincing involuntarily as the gears clashed. "I'd never thought of being a driver until Lady Sarah asked me if I'd do it, you know."

"So you'll be leaving us when Lady Sarah goes back to London?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Perhaps. I'm sort of on trial, you know."

"You've lived in Wenham a long time, haven't you? I'm sure I remember you being a big boy down in the village before I went off to prep school."

"Perhaps you do," said Charlie. He could almost believe that he remembered a golden-haired little girl staring intently at him as he tinkered with his first motorbike, though if you had asked him half an hour earlier, he would have said that he had never seen the Fidgett children in Wenham until they were all teenagers.

"You won't mind moving, though?"

"No. I don't think so. Of course, I shall miss the place. And the people." Charlie's attention suddenly shifted to the road. "You might want to take this a bit slow," he advised, hesitantly, "That's a sharp turn onto the old bridge. It's got no wall to speak of, and it's a steep drop down Wenham Dyke."

Fenella's face went stiff.

"No brakes." she exclaimed, pumping her foot on the brake pedal.

"Change down!" shouted Charlie, but it was already too late as they hit the low side wall of the old bridge and bounced over it to the long drop beyond.

How the hell am I going to get him out of that one? I can't just say she dies and he survives – too much a matter of pure chance. Is there time for him to throw himself out at the last moment? Not very plausible. Unless... If he could do a sort of back-flip, I suppose...

As the open-topped car tipped over the brink, Charlie's cramped legs straightened, propelling him up and back. His feet came clear of the dashboard, and as the car slipped over the edge, he arched his back in a desperate flop and landed heavily on his back on the roadway. The back of his head hit the ground, and for a moment he was stunned.

"Ay y'alright, boy?" a bearded old man was bending over him.

"I'll be alright," muttered Charlie. Struggling to his knees, he stood up and looked over the edge. The car had turned fully upside down before slamming into the edge of the towpath below.

"Thas done that, I reckon.." observed the old man, penetratingly.

"Hi there. Need a drink?" It was Tom, inevitably.

"No, thanks." I said, "I'm OK. "

"Sure?"

"Yeah, I'm concentrating on the writing here – I'm not going to make a big drinking session of it."

I noticed for the first time that the Mouse was sitting opposite me, and looking pretty unhappy.

"Hello!" I said, wondering how quickly I could get back to Wenham without being rude. "Didn't recognise you at first. You've got a new hairstyle. Nice."

"It didn't really come out the way I wanted," she replied, morosely, "Like the novel, I suppose. Don't you find it strange how you have this really vivid picture in your head of a story, and then when you write it down it seems awful?"

"Of course," I said, "But then it's like drawing a picture, You may be able to visualize it perfectly in your head – that doesn't mean you can draw it. Luckily, in both cases practice helps, and the more you do it the better you get. I believe. Persistence pays"

"Yes, but so does talent." she remarked, sinking her head tragically on to the table.

"Oh, come on, Mouse," I said reproachfully, "I think your hair looks good, actually, if that's any help. It definitely looks better down like that. And shorter, isn't it? I'm sorry – did I just call you 'Mouse'? I'm really sorry. I never sort of got your name. I don't know why I came up with Mouse. I like mice a lot, not that that makes it OK. What is your name?"

"I don't mind being called Miss Mouse." she said, and smiled.

"I'm really embarrassed," I said, with an ingratiating grin. "How's the word count?"

"Three hundred."

"Three hundred?" I was genuinely shocked, and all thought of Wenham left my mind for the time being.

"You think *you've* got problems." she said morosely.

"I remember your story," I said, "*Lady Muck*. It sounded good to me. What's the problem?"

"I just can't work out how the story goes. I've got three hundred words describing the town of Skeggerthwaite where she is supposed to grow up, and I can't work out what actually happens there."

"Can I help? I sort of don't like to suggest anything- it seems like stealing your idea."

"Oh no, if you've got any ideas. It's OK to accept ideas: it's just other people's words you can't take."

"Well, let's see. Just thoughts, you know, probably rubbish. So she's this aspirational eight year old. Every year on Trafalgar Day, Alderman Sidebotham has a children's party at the town hall, but she hasn't been allowed to go because she's never got a nice dress, right? So this year, she works on all these odd jobs, mowing lawns, cleaning windows, and so on, and she scrapes together enough money to go to Morden and Merton the big department store and buy this fantastic thing all full of ribbons and lace, and I don't know, organdie."

"Go on." said the Mouse.

"Right, so she puts on the big dress and sets off. Now when she's not being aspirational, she's a bit of a tomboy, right, so some of the boys sort of jeer at her as she's going, but she just sticks her nose in the air. Then Jimmy, the ringleader, jumps on top of her and they have a wrestling match. She wins and beats the daylights out of him, but she's all completely covered in mud and the dress is ruined."

"This is good," says the Mouse, admiringly, "It's just right for my character."

"OK, obviously she's furious and there's a big row. Her mother tells her she can't go now. Anyway, half an hour later Alderman Sidebotham is at the Town Hall and he hears this little voice addressing him. He looks down and there's this mud-covered urchin, but she insists on talking to him as if she were a smart lady making small talk. The old fellow has a heart of gold and is charmed: he gets her to sit next to him, servants tut-tutting and all that, and gets the story out of her. So he has a maid wash her up

as much as possible, and then at the end of the party he gives her a ride home. He's got this, oh six-cylinder Hispano-Suiza, and as it sweeps past the goggle-eyed boys it sort of sprays the puddle all over them. You can put in some stuff earlier about how all the boys admire this Hispano-Suiza and dream of being able to ride in it, you know."

"That's really good", she say, her eyes shining, "Just what I need. Is a Hispano-Suiza a kind of car?"

Chapter Nine: Nunc Diminimus

A long afternoon in the fourth floor meeting room at Cincinnatus House. It holds eight in theory: there were twelve of us. We'd reviewed the Period 3 reports, we'd heard a long and halting exposition of proposed new statistical software. Now we were hearing a lengthy but fluent exposition of tolerance levels for GM material in food products within the EU. Probably it had something to do with the viability of the new product launch, but my attention was far away by now.

But something was stopping me from drifting fully into dreamland. A word kept coming up that vaguely irritated me. Diminimus. There it was in glowing red Arial on the PowerPoint slide.

"Ah, Bill," I said, tentatively, "It's not, er 'Diminimus'"

Bill, five years older than me but looked at least ten, with his male-pattern baldness and greasy old suit, looked up in surprise and then smiled.

"Oh yes," he said, "Sorry. That's a sort of technical term. I should have explained it. Diminimus amounts fall below the prescribed limit, which means that on certain conditions the authorities disregard them. It means the amounts are so small they're basically OK from a pragmatic point of view. Too small to bother with, in other words. OK, John?"

"Yeah, I understand the idea, Bill," I said, "Just wanted to point out that the term is not 'diminimus'. There's no such word."

"I think there is now, John. I'm afraid we all have to cope with these new jargon words, however much we dislike them."

"No, you see, it's actually two words. The term is 'de minimis'. D-E, one word, M-I-N-I-M-I-S. It's not 'diminimus'. Sorry to interrupt your flow, don't mean to be pedantic."

He smiled a little smile.

"I think you'll find you're wrong, John," he said, "I've got this from a Ministry leaflet."

"Then the Ministry is wrong as well."

"I don't think that's likely. With all due respect, John, I think you'll find the term is 'diminimus'. Why don't you look it up afterwards?"

"Look it up? I don't need to look it up, Bill. The tag is '*de minimis*', and it's a shortened version of '*De minimis non curat lex*', which is Latin, meaning 'the law is not concerned with trifles'. A Latin tag, but not a classical one – it doesn't come from any Roman author, at least not in that form. The

earliest recorded use of it is by Francis Bacon, in fact, and it seems he was basically varying an older tag which does come from Roman sources, namely '*de minimis non curat praetor*'. Now an interesting thing about this particular phrase, you'll notice, is how its meaning changes. The Romans meant, top people don't deal with details: they didn't necessarily mean some lesser magistrate wouldn't deal with the minimal issues. When Bacon used it, he meant that the trifling matters can be ignored altogether: although the law may prescribe a certain payment, if the amounts are trivial, it isn't meant to be imposed rigidly. Nowadays, it's used by civil servants to mean a provision which lays down explicit minima, beneath which things can be ignored. Note that this is quite different from the actual meaning of the phrase; if the law contains actual provisions about trifling amounts, then it actually does *curat* them; instead of an implicit principle, we're dealing with explicit rules. But never mind all that: all I'm saying is, you ought to spell it right. OK?"

"I think you'll find that it may have been spelled that way once, John," said Bill, "But this is how we're spelling it now."

As we filed out, Kevin Johnson leaned towards me.

"Could we have a quick word, John? In my room?"

His room was a kind of cupboard with a specially reduced desk in it, but it was still a token of greatly enhanced status. Kevin was a gangling, sandy-haired man, but he always wore really good suits. They could actually be Savile Row, perhaps, but they were definitely not off the peg. I'd often thought that I'd like to ask him where he got them, but it just seemed slightly cheeky, and I never got up the nerve.

"What was all that '*de minimis*' stuff about?" he asked.

"Sorry, it just annoys me. There's a practical point, too though: if he keeps spelling it wrong he's going to look stupid. Reputational risk. And it is '*de minimis*'."

"As far as I'm concerned it's spelt A-R-S-E-H-O-L-E-S. I mean, fair point about looking stupid, and I'm sure you're right, but you should have let it go. We all know you're clever, and we value all that, but then again, there was John H in that meeting: he did Greats at Oxford or something. He's probably forgotten more about this stuff than both of us have ever known, but he didn't feel the need to make a fuss about it."

"Alright," I said, resignedly.

"The thing is, John," said Johnson, leaning forward, "You're doing pretty well here. If you put a bit of effort in, you could be going somewhere. We were thinking of putting you in for your Manager interview. Normally you'd have to wait a couple of years, but we think you're capable of moving on if you put your mind to it. Don't quote me about this. But it would be a shame if you did anything to put people off you just now, OK?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Thanks."

"OK then. Maybe I can help a bit, if you'll let me." He smiled.

I smiled back, stood up, edged around the chair and made my way out. To be honest, the idea of being helped by Kevin Johnson seemed just a little too good to be plausible. I had the feeling that the word 'help' was being used here in one of its secondary senses, possibly related to the primary sense of the word 'exploit'.

Still, I had a definite spring in my step on my way back to my humble cubicle. To be put in for the Manager interview at this stage of my career would be a really encouraging sign, not to mention the probable increase in my salary of around 15%. And quite a kick in the teeth for my contemporaries in the marketing function of Behemoth. Especially people like Bill, who'd been around the place for donkey's years. It is not enough to succeed: others must fail.

But that evening, as I sat down once more to Wenham, there was no triumph in my mood. In fact, and in short, I was blocked. The blockage appeared to have a number of causes.

Cause 1. It was just absolutely bloody stupid that Charlie should do a kind of Fosbury Flop out of a car falling into the canal and live to tell the tale. I mean, not just implausible, totally, utterly, bloody stupid.

Cause 2. I was just tired. I believe, that my organ of originality is fecund and productive, but you know, there are limits. I just didn't want to force myself to start thinking yet again of what was supposed to happen next or what somebody was supposed to say now. It's not that I don't want to do it at all: I just need, you know, a rest. But a rest is exactly what bastard Nanowrimo will not allow my sore, over-used creative faculty.

Cause 3. Wenham is shit.

Cause 4. I started this whole thing in order to persuade Julie that we should move in together in the fullest sense. Remember? And yet, if anything, it is driving a wedge between us. I never go out with her in the evening, I keep spending time alone with my laptop (please, no sniggering), she doesn't understand or appreciate why I'm doing this.

Cause 5. Statistically, everyone gives up. The Mouse, Tom, Richard: everyone I know who is attempting or has attempted Nanowrimo, has failed. The odds are heavily stacked against me. Do I even want to succeed against that background? To all intents and purposes, anyone who succeeds is a freak.

Cause 6. Wenham is shit.

Cause 7. If Kevin Johnson is be trusted, and up to a point I think he is, I really need to put in a bit of extra time burnishing my reputation at work just now, but there are only so many hours in the day.

Cause 8. I don't like detective stories. I may have given the impression earlier, with my knowledgeable references to Trent's Last Case and Dame Ngaio Marsh, that I was a bit of a buff. I'm not. I have only ever read three detective stories all the way through, and two of those were Sherlock Holmes, which don't really count. So if I don't even like detective stories enough to read them, why in the name of God am I trying to write one? Moreover,

Cause 9. I'm making myself acutely vulnerable here. Normally I spend my life with a protective shield of irony. I just make witty, disparaging remarks about stuff. People can't really tell how serious I am. But when you publicly write a novel, you're basically saying, hey, I think these words of mine are good. OK, you can still do all sorts of post-modern distancing stuff, but in the end you're still saying you think this stuff is good. It might be obvious to everyone else that it's shit. And in fact,

Cause 10: Wenham *is* shit.

At the moment, Geoff and his girly bottle of fizz is all that's keeping me going. Good old Geoff. I knew you wouldn't let me down, mate.

I sit here staring at the small comma-shaped dot of magnolia paint on my old white radiator and try to summon the energy to go on regardless, but disgust and fatigue prevent my troubling the array of white pixels before me. I even begin to toy with the idea of an alternative novel. A Western. It would be called The Zoroastrian. 'Tell the truth and shoot straight, ma'am: that's my creed right there.' Too late for that; too late for anything now but the expansion and completion of Wenham, or surrender.

OK, look. There are reasons why I'm writing a detective story. The form has rules and conventions, which support me when raw inspiration dries up. I can also claim to be parodying the constraints and limitations of the genre if I have to, in order to ward off any mockery which might come my way and provide a secure retreat into ironic detachment.

What gives me a real problem is this idea of the fourth sibling. I thought it was my salvation, but the more I think about it, the less I like it. Three is a good number. It's always three sons in the old fairy tales. Four just looks like milking it. I don't like the character either, with her pushy ways, her designs on Charlie, and her spaniel eyes. What I really need to do is write her out again and carry on from there, but I just have not got the will or the time to do that.

What I'm going to do is write a long digression. The mad old vicar corners Lady Sarah in the chancel one day and tells her a bit of old folklore: the Legend of Wenham. This will prefigure the recent events in the village and provide a crucial clue.

So, the legend says that when a party of Guthrum's marauding Danes came to Wenham, they cut the local lord into pieces and fed him to his own dogs. Godraed his son, taking the coward's way out, fled in the direction of Wales, land of shame for him.

The local Danish leader, Othlac, giver of rings and wielder of the axe, settled in Wenham and ordered that there be given a huge feast for his victorious men. Every cow for miles around was slaughtered and half the Endle Forest, place of elder magic and darkness, was felled to make huge fires for roasting. Oceanic quantities of ale were brought in casks, and the Danes sat down in the open air (to ward off enemy charms) at long tables. They kept their weapons to hand, just in case.

When they'd all eaten and drunk, not their fill, but half the food in the county, a man from Othlac's entourage named Vandrad brought out a board for hnefatafl (which, is a very vaguely chess-like game of that rude and simple era), bidding the heroes make war now with walrus teeth as they had lately done with teeth of iron.

So the fuddled Danes took to the board; but suddenly dispute arose between Ragnar Snout-nose and Brank Ilgursson. Brank insisted that Ragnar had removed one of his men from the board while he was taking a draught of ale. Ragnar not only denied the charge but swore he would nail Brank's head to the prow of his ship if he did not apologise. Unfortunately, there was long-standing bad blood between the men, the result of a clash over the Perismunde, fair daughter of Thorkell Crookback. Vandrad unlocked the subtle word-hoard, reproaching the chiefs for their unworthy anger, and sought to smooth the matter over by suggesting the men should pledge each other, but unluckily, as they stood to do so the missing piece fell incriminatingly from Ragnar's lap.

Within seconds, the kinsmen of both players had seized their arms and joined in a terrible fratricidal battle, the drunkenness of the warriors doing little to abate the lethal qualities of their weapon-play. Othlac stood up and bellowed for order: but at that very moment his head sprang from his shoulders, struck off by a long sword in the hand of Vandrad, cunning traitor he.

For Vandrad, who had insinuated himself into Othlac's party only a few days before, now stood revealed as none other than Godraed, crafty son of the slaughtered English lord: far from Wales, he let out a mighty blast on his horn, summoned from their places in hiding battle-hardened veterans of his father's thegns and the less terrible but more enthusiastic levies of the Fyrd, who together swarmed over the remains of the Danish force, still hard at work consuming itself like the worm Ouroboros, and obliterated it. The arrival of Alfred to contest Guthrum's advance a few days later protected Wenham from any further incursion and the village lived in peace for the next century.

Hm. Think I'll take that out again, actually.

Chapter Ten: Creative discussion

Julie and I decided that, Wenham or no Wenham, we ought to go out for a curry. Eating curries was a big part of our relationship early on: Julie was secretly deeply gratified by the idea that she could eat them hotter than me. To be honest I used to rein in a bit and would rarely go beyond the dopiazza level unless she was attempting the vindaloo, in which case I would sometimes allow myself a deferential jalfrezi, always taking care to fan my mouth a lot.

Anyway, for us a visit to the old Star had a kind of sentimental sweetness to it. The Star was a kind of cliché, with hardboard pointy arches and genuine flock wallpaper. I really believe it was a joke at first, but as the décor got a bit tatty and then was done up slightly blander; as some of the weird pictures got replaced by relatively ordinary ones, there came a point when the owners lost track of their own irony, or perhaps the place changed hands and was taken on by someone who didn't see anything funny about flock wallpaper.

Julie settled her briefcase on the padded bench beside her and took out her mobe, positioning it just to the left of her fork. This was a gesture that still faintly irritated me – as though she were only here until some more important or interesting business turned up – but I had gradually been worn down to the point where I took it for granted.

"So how's it going?" she asked, briskly.

At that precise moment, the skeletal waiter who had been standing vacuously by suddenly leapt into action with the pad, and we had to defer further conversation until we had ordered.

"Things are basically OK. I've got two real problems." I said, "The first is this business of escaping from the car."

"Escaping from the car?"

"Yes. You see, at the moment Charlie does this sort of strange backward leap out of a car that's just about to plunge into the canal..."

"No, I actually meant, how are things going at work. You have been going to work, haven't you?"

"Sorry. Yes, of course. Actually, things are going fairly well."

I told her about the generally encouraging chat I had had with Kevin Johnson. She looked really interested: far more interested, I'm ashamed to say, than I should have been in a comparable titbit from her about her prospects in retail management. Possibly, in fact, she seemed more interested in my career chances than I was myself. I expanded a bit on what had been said, and gave her a quick sketch of the diminimus

episode. At that, a less friendly but more amused look came into her eye. I could see a nugget of advice in gestation and I thought I could guess the gist of it already.

"You see, John," she began, "What you've got to remember is..."

"Seekh kebab?" demanded the waiter, once again choosing his moment impeccably. Again it was a few minutes before conversation could resume.

"What you've got to remember is that nobody loves a smartarse, OK?" observed Julie, "Just play things straight. Keep it simple. Sometimes you get this gleam in your eye, and I just know some piece of smartarsery is coming up. It's sort of alright with me, of course, I'm used to it, but you really don't want to go down that road in a work situation."

"Hell's bells." I said, bitterly "How many times am I going to have to apologise for knowing how to spell? It's true what they say about dumbing down. When I was young, if someone came across a word they didn't know, they'd be interested. They'd look it up, try to remember it. Now when someone comes across a word they don't know, they get all self-righteous. How dare this pretentious pansy use his stupid long word that I don't even know what means it?"

"Sorry, but don't you think you rub it in people's faces a bit at times?" she said, earnestly, "It's not about knowing how to spell, it's about leaping up in someone's presentation, where they're trying to look good, and wrecking the whole thing because they're using a form of words which isn't quite academically correct. You do know what I mean, don't you?"

The trouble is, Julie thinks I don't take my career seriously enough. She's right. In my heart of hearts, I've always prided myself on keeping just a little detachment between me and the company's objectives. I remember being told by one fat old exec when I arrived for some early training that it would be tough and demanding; that they were going to break us down in order to build us up again. My fellow trainees looked serious and determined at this point, and I expect I did too; but what I was thinking was you're not breaking me down, matey, not unless you've got a set of goons and some sort of acid bath in that room behind you. You and your pyramid of desires and your Belbin horoscopes and your Myers-Briggs tea-leaf reading. Where does all this stuff come from? All this stuff that has no academic standing whatever, all this hedge-psychology and washer-woman's cognitive science that forms a strange sub-culture which executives, those superstitious peasants, revere? Whoever found an Ishikawa chart genuinely useful? Who actually got anything but self-deluded incoherent guff out of neuro-linguistic programming? You know of course, that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, Roman, nor an empire: and the same goes for neuro-linguistic programming.

I mean, I make an honest effort to do my job, and I am committed to success, and I spend a lot of time thinking about what Behemoth really ought to be doing, but the truth is, I should consider myself a lesser

person if I could take the business quite as seriously as I am expected to take it; if I couldn't apply my native common sense to recognising some Geoff-style piece of management theory rubbish when I see it. If that's the price of promotion, I'm ready to do without it. Almost.

I honestly believe that the slight reserve I maintain in my dedication, that little element of objectivity, actually makes me a more useful employee than some eager, conformist team-player. But I know the bosses won't see it like that, and I am aware that at times a faint sense of some lack of enthusiasm, some recognisable signs of an inner dialogue in my head which is not being shared with the group, has done my career some small but influential amounts of harm. They think I'm lazy, and conceited: no, I'm sorry, I know it's hard to believe, but I really think they do.

"Yes," I said, "I know what you mean."

"Alright. So what's the problem with the great novel, then?"

Not the novel, you notice, the great novel. Just a tiny piece of grit in the even running of the conversation.

"Your idea about the extra member of the Fidgett family isn't quite working out for me." I said, "I thought it was going to be good, but I wonder if four is too many. And then I have this problem over Charlie and the car."

"Oh: my idea isn't working out? Remind me, who is Charlie again?"

"Charlie is the chauffeur. You see, I'm killing off Fenella in a car accident, and she offers Charlie a lift – she's sort of friendly towards Charlie – so I have to get him out before the crash. But the best I can come up with at the moment is him leaping out backwards as the car goes over into the canal, and it seems sort of stupid."

"Well," she said, "If it's my idea that's the problem far be it from me to suggest another..."

"Is everything alright?" demanded the waiter.

"Yes, yes. No, wait. My slice of lemon has gone a bit brown on the edge, look? I think it must have been sitting around for a long time."

"Oh, sorry about that, Is everything else alright?"

"Yeah, but... Oh, never mind, yeah, whatever... fine." I turned back to Julie. "Far be it from you...?"

"What?"

"You were saying, far be it from you to suggest..."

"Oh, I mean if my other idea has messed you up, I'd better not suggest another one."

"No, no, sorry, I didn't mean it like that. You were very helpful. It's not your fault. The idea was great. Please do suggest stuff. Really."

"You know," she began, a bit wistfully.

"Are you finished?" asked the waiter. We nodded. He reached across me to take the poppadum basket.

"I thought that since you were spending so much time on this thing we might be able to work together a bit," she continued, "That was what I had in mind when I tried to help. But you're sort of keeping it away from me. You do all the writing at home now: I don't even see you for days on end."

"I thought it annoyed you when I sat there writing." I said.

"No! Well... actually it does, sometimes. A bit. But you know, maybe if I'd got involved it would have been more interesting."

"OK, well I'll come over with my laptop. Or you can come to me."

"No, no it's OK. I think that ship has sailed. Let's just get the damned thing finished now, OK? Let's get it over with."

"You know," I said, "The funny thing is, I really only started doing this for you."

"For me? *I* made you do it?"

"Well, yes. No. Not like that. It sounds stupid now. But I wanted to show you I could see something through to a conclusion. I thought it would help you trust me. And then you might agree to us moving in properly. In one place. Don't you remember me saying something like that, at the beginning."

She looked a little peeved.

"I don't think you said it was for *my* benefit," she said, irritably, "I thought it was a personal challenge. Or it was between you and the cosmos or something. Anyway, the reason I don't want to move in is because it seems like giving in to middle age." she said, slightly irritably, "It's the first stage of *settling down*. I don't want to settle down. Maybe in a while, one day. Not now. I don't want to become *a family*, do you understand? It's got nothing to do with not trusting you. You're really weird sometimes, you know?"

"Sorry," I said. I scratched a pattern in the tablecloth. "You know, I think I'm going to ditch the Nanowrimo thing."

"No, don't drop it because I *made* you, for God's sake," she said. There was a long pause, but finally she smiled "It's weird, but I suppose it's sort of sweet in your own peculiar way. Anyway, you can't let Geoff win the bet."

"No, that's true," I agreed, "Now there's someone who's settled down. I don't know why he and Maureen aren't married already."

"Oh, that doesn't surprise me. I don't think he'll ever marry Maureen. I think he's saving himself for a female senior partner in his firm."

"You're right. In fact, I think he'd consider a male senior partner if he thought the bloke was, you know, a rising star in the wacky world of management consultancy."

"Poor Maureen."

OK, so here I am in front of Wenham again. I need to break this block. I'm going to go straight for it and see what comes out.

"Oh, you can't do that. You'll wait all day. I'll give you a lift. Come on!"

Charlie hesitated. He recalled a difficult conversation he had had with Lady Sarah the evening before.

"Charlie," she'd said, "Look I hope you don't mind if I say something to you. I don't mean to get all feudal with you, but while the investigation is on it's not really a good idea for you to associate too closely with the chief suspect."

"Associate? I've had a couple of chats with her, that's all. I thought I might be able to get some useful information out of her. You know, like you said about how I could be more of an assistant to you, not just a chauffeur. I thought if I could help finish the investigation off, you might be willing to take me on permanently, you see."

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'm not ready to do that, Charlie," she said, "I don't doubt your abilities, and maybe in a year, in a while... But look: the Fidgetts are not nice people. None of them. Half the family has just been slaughtered, and we have no idea whether the killer will strike again. It's not safe for you to get tangled up in all this."

Would accepting a lift amount to getting tangled up, or associating? Charlie wasn't sure. He was pretty sure Lady Sarah wouldn't like it though. Just for a moment it crossed his mind to wonder whether something more than professional concern was at work in her mind.

"No, come on, I insist." said Fenella, "The car's just over there. I was going in to town to see the lawyers – see this bag? So many papers to work through."

He might be a servant, Charlie reflected, but he was not a slave.

"I suppose there are," he said, "alright, then – thank you very much."

Charlie's large frame did not fit very comfortably inside the little car, even when he cautiously let the seat back as far as it would go.

"Alright, now you mustn't watch me driving," said Fenella, promptly stalling, "Having a professional in the car makes me nervous"

"I haven't been a professional very long," said Charlie, wincing involuntarily as the gears clashed. "I'd never thought of being a driver until Lady Sarah asked me if I'd do it, you know."

The roads around Wenham were mostly dead straight, and Fenella put her foot down on the accelerator hard.

"You might want to take this a bit slow," Charlie advised, hesitantly, "That's a sharp turn onto the old bridge. It's got no wall to speak of, and it's a steep drop into the Wenham Drain."

Fenella's face went stiff.

"No brakes." she exclaimed, pumping her foot on the brake pedal.

"Change down!" shouted Charlie, but it was already too late as they hit the low side wall of the old bridge and bounced over it to the drop beyond.

As the open-topped car tipped over the brink, Charlie's cramped legs straightened in a desperate effort to leap free of the falling car: but it was too late. At the crucial moment, it almost seemed that the car had stopped, but it tipped further, right over, and fell upside down on to the tow-path below.

Wow. So that's the answer. I was thinking that Charlie would feature in most of these stories, but evidently it's not to be. Or maybe I can re-jig it later so that this isn't the first one after all.

Anyway, sorry Charlie, but we're back in business.

Chapter Eleven: Revelations

Kevin Johnson, it turns out, is a total bastard. Ever since our little chat, he's been using the prospect of me going in for the Manager interview to extort unreasonable amounts of work out of me. He asked me to do his time-sheet yesterday, which I assumed was a joke, but it became clear that it wasn't. Unfortunately, I don't believe he's lying about the interview: I've had some other little hints, including a kind of hint from John Sopert the Director. So I just have to grin and bear it for the moment.

Sitting there running through the figures I suddenly had this brilliant idea: why not use Excel as a literary medium? You see, the whole idea of hypertext to begin with was that people could produce texts that weren't linear any more, that branched off in all directions: but that never really happened – all we got was links.

But if you put text and pictures into a big Excel spreadsheet, you could make it really three-dimensional. People would read one passage, and then they could scroll down, scroll across, move to the next sheet, follow a link or an instruction, go to a cell reference, whatever. Eventually they would read more or less the same story, but there would be lots of ways of getting it, and different people would read slightly different versions. When you talked to someone about the story, you'd never be sure that you'd actually read the same bits. Some bits could be hidden, like in a game, and you could have progress to other levels for a kind of macroscopic control...

"Alright there, Fletch?" Kevin Johnson asked, breaking in on my train of thought, "Penny for them?"

About six o'clock yesterday he came in and dumped this huge set of proofs on my desk.

"We don't usually do proof-reading, Kevin," I reminded him.

"I know, sorry, but this is a real emergency. They've got to be cleared tonight."

"The other thing is, proof-reading is really a two-person job, you know?" I said, hopelessly. "One to read it out, one to correct?"

"Sure," he replied, "But a man of your cal-aye-ber is worth two ordinary people, aren't you?" He stopped smiling. "You don't have to, Fletch," he said, "But I would be very grateful, if you could."

I hate proof-reading, and I am no good at it. I begin to read the text instead of checking it: I skip ahead without thinking; I mark the wrong bit and have to correct my corrections.

"Get it couriered over when you've finished," said Kevin, breezily, "Or take it yourself in a taxi if you like. You know where they are. So long as they get it before nine this evening, it should be fine."

And with that he had dumped the proofs and gone home. It had taken me until half-past eight.

Obviously this kind of thing is making it difficult for me to spend any time on Wenham, and although I've progressed a bit in the last few days I'm still lagging behind: not much over 16,000 words when I should by now be well over 20.000.

Last night I took the corrected proofs over myself, and after I'd delivered them, I dropped in on Geoff, whose flat was not far away.

"Come in," he said, "I've got something to show you."

He has one of those special stands for his PC and printer – I hate those things myself – and up on the shelf was a pile of A4.

"That's what twenty-five thousand words looks like, mate," he said, "I though you'd like the chance of seeing it because you're not likely to get that far yourself, are you?"

"Jeez," I replied "You're printing it all out? Whatever for?" But I had a fair idea it was entirely for my benefit. There's no denying, that it was a little dispiriting to see all those words actually lying there on the shelf. I moved closer and squinted at the top sheet.

"No reading!" said Geoff, "Hands off!"

The top sheet was almost blank anyway – just the title and Geoff's name and address. The title was 'Captain Simon's Rose', which was reasonable enough, but seemed strange. It seemed strange that Geoff should actually have been able to come up with a completely original story out of his own head: he'd never betrayed even the slightest signs of creativity or imagination before. But there it was: clear evidence that the manuscript contained actual characters and even a plot of some kind.

"Come on," I said, "I want to read about all these heaving bosoms. I am right in thinking there are heaving bosoms in it, aren't I?"

"Oh yes," said Geoff unexpectedly, "Plenty of those. But you're not reading about them. You won't let me read yours, will you?"

"No," I admitted, "Though I'd be prepared to exchange selected extracts? How about that? You must have some good bits you're prepared to show people?"

"Oh no," said Geoff, "I'm not sad enough to start that kind of stuff. Let's stick with the no-reading system. By the way..."

"Yes?"

He put on a condescending leer.

"I know you're a bit behind, what with actually having to work a bit and so on. I feel a bit guilty about putting extra pressure on. I just thought I'd say, if you want to chuck it in now, I'll let you off the bottle of Cristal. Just so long as we're absolutely clear that I won, that I am the better writer, and that in spite of all your arty-farty stuff you can't cut it when the chips are down, of course."

I thought about it. I wasn't quite sure what Geoff thought he was doing, but this was clearly some kind of reverse psychology thing. Only if it was, that meant that by offering me a chance to pull out he was trying to make me keep on with Nanowrimo. Which was odd. Or perhaps it was a double bluff. Or maybe he'd just lost track of his inverted psychology.

"Very humorous. Oh, very funny, Sir!" I exclaimed in my Greenstreet voice, though to be honest I wasn't anything like as sure as I sounded.

"OK," he said, "It's fine with me. Have a seat."

I sat down on the small black leather sofa. Geoff had a small new flat, but he had furnished it rather well by buying up the stuff from the show flat. Somehow, builders of these tiny flats manage to get furniture which looks normal but is 20 to 25 per cent smaller. The rooms all look a good size as a result, until you actually start using them: one ordinary sofa would have filled this room, with no space for anything else. By shrewdly obtaining the stuff from the original show flat, Geoff had saved himself a lot of grief and money and ensured his flat looked good, even if you did still have a noticeable tendency to knock things with your elbows due to there being less room than you expected.

"You know," said Geoff, "I'm actually enjoying this. Not just the pleasure of winning: I'm surprised to find I actually enjoy the process of writing. It's a nice way to relax at the end of the day, knowing whatever rubbish you spew onto the paper is going to be OK."

"You've never been very interested in literature before," I said, "I always had the impression you thought it was a bit gay, to be honest. You don't read fiction, do you?"

"Oh, not much," confessed Geoff, "I read that Simon King book a while ago. And someone gave me Kane and Abel for Christmas. Funnily enough, I think it helps, though. If I'd read a lot of books, I'd be thinking, you know, is this as good as Simon King; is it as good as Harry Potter? As it is, I'm not bothered."

"Maureen reads a bit, doesn't she? Don't you ever read hers?"

Geoff looked serious. He sighed gustily and hung his head for a moment.

"Actually, John, Maureen and I have sort of broken up." he confessed.

"My God, why didn't you say something? When?"

"Oh, a week or so ago. Actually, do you remember that night when we first talked about the Nanowrimo thing? We'd just had a confrontation. I thought she was sort of going to blurt it all out, but she didn't in the end. We had one last conversation after that, and that was it."

"What happened, then?"

"Well," he looked cagey for a moment, "To be honest, she sort of caught me *in flagrante*."

"*In flagrante*? I think that's the first time I've ever heard anybody actually say that. *In flagrante delicto*. Have you been using a thesaurus? Sorry, carry on."

"Do you want another beer?" asked Geoff. I paused for a moment, balancing the obvious need for another beer in the circumstances against the terrible gnat's piss lager which was all Geoff kept in his flat for some peculiar reason.

"OK," I said, "I'll just nip down to the loo while you're getting it."

When we were settled again, Geoff seemed to have lost the thread.

"So?" I demanded, "You were *in flagrante delicto*?"

"The truth is, John, I've been seeing someone else off and on for about six weeks now. Still am."

"Anyone I know?"

"No, no. It's, er, it's somebody from work."

"My God," I said, "You total bastard. It's a senior partner isn't it?"

"What?" said Geoff, looking sincerely pained, "A senior partner? There are only about two that are female – and have you seen them? I'd rather screw a horse. Actually, one of them might be a horse. Part horse, anyway. No, for Christ's sake. She's a cleaner, actually."

"A cleaner?"

"Yes. Her name is Mercedes. See, she always used to come in and empty the waste paper basket, and we'd sort of say hello and smile and everything. I noticed her, of course, you know, noticed she was a cut above the dumpy old cow who used to do it, but nothing more than that. Then one lunchtime we had the Crickson's do."

"Crickson's?"

"Yes. They're the disc people. Look, that doesn't matter, the point is on one of those dos you get seriously bladdered. It's a requirement. The afternoon is a write-off. But for some reason I left my briefcase in the office, so instead of wandering down to Waterloo, I had to roll back into the office. It was after seven by then, and as I sat at my desk, still wearing my coat, in comes Mercedes to do the bins. Well, somehow, instead of just saying good evening, all this stuff sort of came out. I started talking about my problems, you know, how life seemed to be flowing past me, about my father, you know, and Uncle Eric, all that."

I had no idea who Uncle Eric might be, and I was surprised to hear that Geoff felt life was flowing past him, but I didn't want to interrupt at this point, so I kept quiet.

"Well. Somehow this turned into a proper heart-to heart. At some point she started telling me about her life, you know, and I sort of got tired and just sat there listening. So it wasn't just me ranting on. She explained about the, you know, problems she was having: I nodded and looked concerned and all that. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before, so sudden, you know? Next day, I was back in the office as usual, thinking nothing of it, really: bit of a hangover, but that was OK, you know it was in the line of duty or whatever. I got through the day OK, and around seven, in comes Mercedes again. But something is different. I say hello in the good old style, but she comes in, gently strokes my forehead with a smile, leans down and kisses me. I think the truth is, John, to be honest, sometimes I'm a hell of a lot nicer and a hell of a lot better as a listener when I'm totally pissed. That's the only way I can explain it. Anyway, things just went on from there, really."

"What? What? So, every night you've been shagging her across the desk?"

"No, no. You're so crude, sometimes, Faletcher. In the evenings, she has to empty the bins. She's always busy. No, what gradually became the routine was that she would come round here about six in the morning, and after a post-coital cup of tea, we'd go out to the greasy spoon on the corner for breakfast. It's kind of the reverse of the usual deal where you have dinner first, you know."

"My God!" I exclaimed.

"I tell you what, though, John," said Geoff, earnestly, "I'm sorry, but it's been marvellous. It makes far more sense this way. I mean usually, you drag around town, drink a load of wine and stuff, and by the time you're in bed, in the small hours, you're virtually knackered. This way, you wake up, full of energy and expectation, enjoy an interlude of athletic and intense shagging, quick shower, and off for the full English breakfast. If there's a better way to set you up for the day, I don't know what it is. And then you've got the evenings to yourself."

"Except you hadn't, had you?"

"Exactly. I was still seeing Maureen. I managed to keep the system in balance somehow for about a fortnight or so, but it couldn't last. Eventually Maureen came over to give me some shirts one morning, and saw me and Mercedes walking out the door hand in hand. Lucky it worked out that way, really, half an hour earlier and she would have arrived in the middle of the morning session."

"While you were *in flagrante. Flagrante delicto*"

"Yes. *Flagrante* is the word."

"You're still seeing – Mercedes, then?"

"Oh yes. Yes indeed."

I sat back and thought for a moment.

"You know Geoff, in all honesty I have to grudgingly admit that in all sorts of ways I've been underestimating you. I have to say I'm looking at you here with considerably increased respect. But what an utter bastard you are."

He smiled with shy pride.

A tinny little tune began to play somewhere downstairs.

"God, that's my phone," said Geoff, " I thought I put it on answer. Excuse me."

He stood up and hurried down the stairs to where his mobile phone was ringing in his coat pocket. He had put it on answer, but I had turned it back off when I went down for a pee, and it was I who had dialled his number from the mobe in my pocket. As soon as he left the room, I leapt on the pile of manuscript by Geoff's PC.

Now of course, I can't remember the exact words, but it was pretty much like the following.

Prithee then, Sir, what shall your pleasure be?
My pleasure, young wnech, you would know my pleasure? Well
that were a tale indeed.
But prithee, Sir, what would you drink? A firkin of our good
ale, perchance?
A firkin, indeed, a good firkin is what was on my mind, in
good sooth.
Captain, for shame.
No, not for shame, my buxom poppet, It won't be a shame if I
have my way.
The wench drew back in seeming modesty and yet it seemed not

that she was really all that displeased, the way she giggled and everything.

Now I could hear Geoff's voice sounding faintly through my phone.

"Hello?" he said.

Suddenly Captain Simon stiffened. A man had entered the tavern through the door and he was staring at him as if he were some kind of a ghost. He had a black moustache.

Mordred! exclaimed the Captain.

Hello there my young buck said the stranger and twirled his moustache with a devil-may-care mien.

Captain Simon sprang to his feet and put his hand to the handle of his sword.

He twirled his moustache once more and gently eased his weapon from its sheath at his flank.

Oh Captain, Captain, what is it? cried the wench but he paid her no heed.

Draw, Sir! he said, Draw, I say!

Draw, damn you Sir!

I say draw, Sir, an you be a gentleman!

I grabbed the phone and tried to keep reading at the same time.

"Hello, is that Mr Brownie?" I said, in a strangled falsetto.

"Browne."

"Hello, Mr Brownie, I have important news for you, but first I must ask: are you the home-owner?"

Draw for you, knave I don't think I'm not doing that no I'll call my man to deal with your impertinence I fancy. He said with haughty mien.

Draw or by God I'll prick you where you stand, poultroun.

"Yes," said Geoff, "Well, leasehold, but it's like nine hundred years, you know?"

"Mr Brownie," I said – you know, it's surprisingly difficult to make up a convincing spiel while reading something completely different at the same time "What would you say if I told you I could save you five hundred pounds every month. Would you want to know how, Mr Brownie?"

Stand still you caitiff rogue.

"No thank you, I'm not interested." responded Geoff in characteristically dull style. I could hear that he was already coming back upstairs, so with a final glance at the masterpiece of literature, I leapt back to the sofa.

Chapter Twelve: Disagreements

Julie does not believe in Mercedes. She seemed quite annoyed about it.

"Just the name, to begin with," she said, "People who empty the bins in offices aren't called Mercedes any more – not in this country, anyway. They're called things like Ifeyinwa or Fowsia – or Kovacs."

"Kovacs is a surname," I pointed out, "It means 'Smith'."

"Alright, Anya, then. And then think about it from this woman's point of view. She's working hard, trying to get her job done, she's got thirty more offices to do. The supervisor's one step behind her, her mate is going to come in any minute and ask where the plastic sacks are. This bloke in a three-piece suit and overcoat, completely pissed, smelling of stale beer and curry, starts rambling on about how no-one understands him because his uncle Jasper drowned at sea. What, so obviously she drops the bin, goes over just like that, and starts scouring the back of his throat with her tongue? I don't think so."

"I don't think it was quite like that, exactly. He told her about his problems. Then he listened to her problems. Then it was the next night that things kind of kicked off. But I see what you mean. "

"If you ask me, I think this is just Geoff's way of trying to hide the fact that he was dumped by Maureen for being too boring."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, I haven't spoken to her, but what's most likely to have happened?"

"OK, I know, you've got a point. I agree, it is sort of hard to believe. Obviously this is Geoff's version, so I expect it's sort of slanted quite a bit. But there must be a core of truth in it. He told me I could go along to the Miramar for breakfast if I wanted to meet her."

"I'm sure she would just happen not to be there that day. Are you actually going to go?"

"No, too embarrassing. Unless you wanted to come along too? That would make it more of a genuine social occasion and less of a suspicious investigation."

I think she almost agreed.

"I quite like the sound of this regime of early morning screw with bacon and egg to follow," I added, fatally.

"Oh no. I'm not acting out Geoff's breakfast fantasies for you," she said, decisively, "I'm a night person, anyway."

Regretfully, I retired to the little desk in the corner and took out the old laptop.

"Have you got to work?" she asked, not altogether unsympathetically.

"Well, I am supposed to do an analysis of the latest Nielsen figures for Kevin. But I thought I'd get a thousand words in on Wenham first."

"Your Nanoonanana thing? I thought we agreed you wouldn't do that while you were here?"

"Really? I thought you said you hoped we could sort of work on it together?"

She grimaced.

"When I said that I meant more than just being in the same room. But it's not going to happen, is it? Not now. Now, frankly, I'd rather you just got it out of your system as soon as possible, without me knowing any more about it. Sorry. Carry on, though, it's OK – I'm not that bothered."

"No, no." With a slight sigh I opened up the Nielsen data.

Once again Kevin had landed me with a job that took much longer than I might have expected. A national analysis wasn't too bad, but repeating the exercise for each region, and trying to draw correspondences between Nielsen regions and Behemoth regions, and Nielsen trips and Behemoth periods: and then repeating that exercise again for Major Multiples, Symbol Independents, and what have you, was a lengthy and completely pointless process. While national figures were fairly reliable, the fine breakdowns had too great a margin for error to be any real use – as I had explained in vain to Kevin.

"OK, well I'm going to bed," said Julie eventually, and she did.

It took me another half an hour to finish off, and then, after hesitating for a moment, I opened up Wenham for a quick look.

"I've brought you some grapes," said Lady Jane, "Don't worry, you don't have to eat them: their value is purely phatic and conventional."

Charlie looked up at her, sitting by his bedside.

"I'm, er, I'm sorry." he said.

"What for? The only thing you should regret is not putting your seatbelt on. Most unprofessional. The roll bars on those cars are quite effective: if you'd had your belt on, or if you hadn't tried some kind of leap out of your seat at the last moment, you would have got away with a few cuts and bruises and a sore neck, like Fenella."

Charlie grunted.

"I suppose at least this means she's in the clear," he said, "She wouldn't try to murder herself."

Lady Jane shook her head in parodic sadness.

"Charlie, Charlie," she said, "Come now. If anything it's rather incriminating. If you're setting out to kill someone, you choose a method that is at least highly likely to work. But interfering with the brakes on someone's car? You can't tell when the brakes are actually going to fail. It might happen in circumstances that are completely safe, or when someone else is driving the car. There's a good chance the driver will be able to stop safely anyway, especially round Wenham, where the roads are straight, flat, and not very busy. If there is some kind of accident, it's actually quite unlikely to be fatal: more likely running into a ditch, or a glancing collision. Even a head-on prang into the back of a lorry is quite likely to be survived – assuming the people in the car are wearing seatbelts."

"So if you were setting out to kill Fenella, you probably wouldn't choose to mess about with her brakes. On the other hand, if she wanted to make it look as if she was on the victim list, in order to divert suspicion, a showy but fairly risk-free car crash would be a good choice."

Charlie grunted again.

"I can't believe it's like that," he said, "If she was setting out to have an accident, she wouldn't have made such a point of giving me a lift – would she?"

Lady Jane merely frowned.

"Do what the doctors tell you, Charlie," she said, "Get well soon. I need you back."

I'm very relieved to find that Charlie isn't dead after all: it will save me a lot of re-thinking. On the other hand, Fenella isn't dead either, which is going to require a lot of re-thinking, and another means of death. Still, it's all more words, isn't it?

"Your visitor has gone?" asked the nurse, a slender, olive-skinned young girl. "She is a beautiful lady."

"Yes," agreed Charlie, "She's my boss. I dunno – sometimes we seem to understand each other perfectly, and then it turns out we were actually thinking something completely different. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course," said the nurse, "You know men are from Mars and women are from Venus, they say."

"Maybe that's it, er... sorry I didn't get your name?"

"Mercedes." said the nurse with an engaging smile.

No, come on, I'm wasting time now. I save, exit, and switch off, and turn round. At once, my blood boils.

Julie has cleared the table where we ate dinner a few hours before; cleared it of everything, that is, except the empty wine bottle. Rawsley Estate Cabernet/Merlot, since you ask, weighing in at a hefty 14.5% . I grip the edge of the chair hard and try to stay calm.

You may think that I am a trifle unreasonable about this bottle thing. Is it such a big deal? No, indeed not, but it is the very triviality of the thing that makes it so maddening. If she can't see that it is normal, rational behaviour to take the damned bottle off the table; if it doesn't offend her sense of tidiness and completeness, could she not just do it for me? Just this tiny favour of picking up the bottle along with the plates? Is it that much to ask?

But no. No reason has ever been adduced for the leaving of the bottle, no pretext, no excuse. No defence has been put forward. And yet, she clings to the practice as if it were the central tenet of her religion.

I stand up. What I should like to do is pick up the bottle and throw it violently against the wall. I will not do that, don't worry: I'm not that much of a nutcase. The thought of clearing up the glass afterwards is enough of a deterrent for me, never mind the explanation; because although I am furious with Julie, although I feel a keen desire to punish her, there is some timidly rational corner of my mind which does not much fancy the task of explaining to her why I smashed the wine bottle against the wall.

However, to relieve my feelings slightly, I pick up the bottle and wave it around like some angry tribesman with his war-club. I mime the action of smashing it on the edge of the table two or three times, emitting small, vole-like sounds of fury.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" asks Julie coldly, standing in the doorway with folded arms.

Chapter Thirteen: Seasonality

"You've done a good job on these, Fletch," said Kevin Johnson, "The only trouble is, I still don't understand what the fuck is going on."

"Kevin," I replied carefully, "I hope you don't mind if I mention that I'd rather you didn't call me 'Fletch'? I'd prefer to be called John."

"Sorry," he replied, raising his eyebrows, "I only meant to be friendly,"

"I know," I said, "I just don't like the idea that somewhere in your mind I'm bracketed together with Ronnie Barker and Slade prison."

Kevin snorted and smiled.

"Fair enough," he said, "'John' it is then. But anyway, what's happening to Pipenta?"

Pipenta, is the product whose sales figures I had spent so much fruitless time analysing. We stared at a bar chart.

"See, it's sort of OK, but there's nothing happening," said Kevin, always a man to pinpoint an issue with laser-like clarity.

"The problem is, it's got winter seasonality." I said, decisively.

"What?"

"Winter seasonality. Everything else in the market peaks in summer, right? So we've always taken that as a given. All our promotional effort happens in April and May. But the thing is, Pipenta naturally peaks in December. We're promoting at the wrong time of year, and all we succeed in doing is flattening out the natural seasonal peak. Look, compared to everything else, Pipenta shows no seasonality at all."

"Go on," said Kevin, paying careful attention.

"If you look at the market overall, we're getting around a six per cent share by volume – a bit better by value because..."

"...it's a premium product." said Kevin, happily.

"Yes. But if you look at December alone for the last three years, Pipenta's getting 30 per cent. It's actually the second biggest in the market at that time – we've never noticed because the actual sales in December are so small. The thing is, Pipenta is a spicier, hotter product than the rest: I don't think people perceive it the same way as the others: I reckon it appeals to people more when the weather is cold. What we need to do is switch our main promotional push to October and November: I think if we did that you'd see a massive winter peak, and we'd take a bigger annual

share. And think about it. we'd steal a march on the others: instead of competing for shelf space when they're all fighting it out, we'd leave them to it and hit the retailers when no-one else is really bothering. We could get them to treat it as normal that they clear the other brands off the shelves in September and re-stock with seven flavours of Pipenta instead."

"Well done, there, Fl... John," said Kevin, "That makes sense, it makes sense. It all fits, it could be true. Trouble is, we'd have to take a bit of a punt on it, wouldn't we? I mean, if this is right, it could be an absolute breakthrough. But you can't really prove it without trying it, can you? What if it turns out that it's not winter seasonality; what if it turned out that Pipenta is just a bit crap?"

"I think we could make a good case," I said, "There's always the option of setting up some supplementary research. But we wouldn't be spending all that much anyway, would we? There isn't all that much promotion for Pipenta anyway."

"No, but see, if you're right, we want to hit that winter period with everything, first time, as hard as we can. Not just a usual lacklustre half-page in *The Grocer*. We'd do some television in a target region, ideally. And never mind that, we'd have to gear up production big time in the autumn. That can cost you if you get it wrong."

"Wow. Do you think we could swing a big push like that?"

"I don't know, but if you're right I'd want to. And you'd better be right, I'm telling you?"

"Because...?"

"Because I'm going to take the credit for it if you are," he replied with a vulpine grin. "I'm going put this one up at the management meeting."

"Great!" I said, and very largely meant it. I picked up the charts, shuffled them into line and turned to go.

"You'd better run me up a presentation," said Kevin, "Put a lot of the detailed figures in – I won't use them, probably, but you never know. I'll need time to run through it so it'll have to be ready first thing tomorrow. You weren't doing anything tonight, were you?"

"No sweat," I said, calmly. I had foreseen this: I had spent most of the day 'running up' the presentation in advance, before I sprung my theory on Kevin. But I wasn't going to give it to him now – he'd want to change it all round. I'd give it to him at ten o'clock tomorrow morning (me looking hassled and tired) too late for any changes if he wanted to prepare beforehand.

At home alone that evening, I contemplated ringing Julie, but decided to let things lie a bit longer. We had had a truly tremendous row. At first I was on the back foot, taken by surprise over the bottle thing; but then I began to get annoyed all over again, and in the end I left and came back here. This morning, it all seemed pretty stupid, but there's a sort of a limit to how quickly you can back-pedal from some of these things. I was ready to back-pedal though, I had caved in internally. Although outwardly Faletcher was maintaining a fine show of defiance, inwardly he had already conceded that he was just going to have to become the damned bottle-collector after all. Just not quite yet.

One good thing was that I had a clear evening to forge ahead with Wenham. I took out the old laptop and a strange reluctance sort of welled up and over me. It's not that I couldn't think of what to write; it's not that I'm too tired or distracted. I just do not want to do it. I don't want to. Do not want. But I must.

As I sat irresolute, the phone rang. Julie?

"Hello?" said a voice, "It's Tom. You fancy a pint tonight? A few of us are going to get together in the Angel. Just a drink and a bit of mutual support."

"Thanks," I said, "A drink and a bit of mutual support sounds pretty good to me, but I've really got to catch up a few thousand words more."

"Bring the laptop with you," he suggested, "Several people are doing that. There's wi-fi and everything."

"Oh, what the hell. OK then." I conceded. I might as well be unproductive in a pub as unproductive on my own, after all.

The Angel is a nice pub, a sort of modern reinterpretation of an old-fashioned London pub, with wooden panelling and brass all over, but wallpaper and furnishings slightly lighter and jazzier than a genuinely old place would have. Half-a-dozen serious ales on tap, but since we were probably in for something of a session, I wouldn't be venturing on anything too strong.

The 'wrimo people were not hard to spot: they'd commandeered a sort of alcove at one end. Tom saw me approaching, and waved. I had taken the precaution of getting myself a pint already; the convention of the round did not seem to be much observed on these occasions.

"How are you?" I said as I sat down on a stool, "How's the word count?"

"Oh, thirty-five thousand," he said, "But it's no good."

"Why not? That sounds pretty good to me."

"Well, the thing is, it all comes from an intensive burst on the first weekend. I was up to 29,000 by the end of the first week, but really I've got nowhere ever since. I really need some new methods of murder for the Monkey to use – you remember?"

"Yes, I remember the gist. You can't have run out of murder methods, surely?"

Tom wrinkled up his face in distress.

"It's not that I've run out, exactly," he said, "It's just that everything I write seems so bloody stupid, do you know what I mean? I wrote out this long screed on the first day, just churning it out, you know, in a kind of fever of creation or whatever, and I thought I was doing really well. But now I read it and it's just... well. Every sentence I have a character say just seems unreal, not what any live human being could ever possibly say, you know? And now, when I sit down, the same feeling comes over me; all the murders seems like something made up by an eight-year old. I know they're not meant to be taken seriously, and I know it doesn't really matter, but it just creates this kind of barrier, you know what I mean?"

He did look really worried. I'd never thought Tom really cared about the writing, except as an excuse for going down the pub – but it seemed he did after all.

"Don't panic though," I said, "If you've got thirty-five thousand words under your belt, you're ahead of the game. You can afford to slow down for a while."

"Yeah..."he said resignedly.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned. It was Miss Mouse.

"I know this is a bit of a cheek," she said, "But you were so helpful the other time. I've been writing the end section of 'Lady Muck' – would you mind if I read some of it to you?"

"No, OK." I said, and Tom raised his hand in a gesture of acquiescence. Mouse pulled up a stool and sat down.

"OK, so my MC is now a rich old lady, and she's out for a walk, OK?"

As she strolled along the footpath, Mary considered, thought about what her daughter had said. It was true that her daughter was made in her own likeness, was an assertive, successful woman, was well-dressed and well-spoken, had a business empire of her own making. Her son was an artist, was an unsuccessful one too, was a waster of money, was a drinker, was a failure really, did always depend on her for money and help. Yet in her heart of hearts she could not deny, could not gainsay, what her daughter had said, the accusation. She loved both her children, loved them unconditionally, loved them with a burning fire, and yet James

was always special, was the apple of her eye, no matter what he might do.

Yet she could never tell her daughter the truth, which she now for the first time acknowledged to herself. She loved James because he was not the offspring of Edward her husband, as was her daughter, but instead the product of that cherished, mad, strange fling, that episode of passion, with Jimmy: and it had always been Jimmy she really loved. Through their lives his Socialism and her socialising had driven them apart, had caused furious quarrels, had led to many bad words and bad feelings. But the strength of their quarrels flowed from the strength of their doomed love.

As she approached the underpass by the ring road, Mary heard voices shouting beneath the ground. She hesitated, but not for long, for it seemed someone was in need of help, urgent help, help to save their lives, perhaps, and she could not stand by. Descending into the stinking tunnel, lit by one dirty, flickering strip light, she saw three youths kicking what seemed to be a bundle of rags on the floor, but it was a man. A down-and-out, a tramp, wrapped in an old brown coat, had fallen victim to the vicious youths, had been knocked to the ground and was being kicked. For just a moment, Mary felt fear: should she retreat, should she go back, should she seek the assistance of the police, should she retire to safety?

But that was not for her. She had no hope of driving the violent youths off with blows, with physical retaliation, but she summoned all the authority, all the natural command which her life had given her, and in a loud voice, a commanding voice, she spoke out.

"Leave that man alone!" she said.

The youths looked up from their vicious work perturbed and puzzled. They stared at her for a moment, and for a moment the issue hung in the balance, for a moment it seemed they might turn on her. But the moment passed, and so did they.

Mary approached the old tramp and bent over him. He wore a flat cap, and as he raised it she lifted her hand to her mouth in shock.

"Jimmy!" she said, "Well! I never thought you would end up dossing in some underpass. What are you doing here?"

"I'm not dossing anywhere, woman!" exclaimed Jimmy angrily, and she noticed for the first time that his brown coat was clean, he wore a white shirt and his old tie, his old red tie, so dear to him.

"I've moved into the old folks place up the road," he said, indignantly, "It's a decent place, apart from being full of stupid old women. Like you. What the hell are you doing here, if it comes to that?"

"Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy!" she said. "Oh Jimmy!"

She helped him to his feet and took his arm.

"Come back to my place and have a cup of tea, Jimmy," she said, "We have a lot to catch up on."

"Good!" I said, enthusiastically, "I liked the bit about his socialism and her socialising."

"Is that the end of the story?" asked Tom, "You've finished already?"

"No, far from it," said Mouse, "All I've got is about a thousand words of the beginning, five thousand describing her fling with Jimmy, and a thousand words of the end. I'm relying on a real concentrated burst next week. I'm really going to go for it."

"Amen to that," said Tom, morosely.

Chapter Fourteen: Reconciliations

Lying in the dark, I stretched my hand gently across the bed to touch Julie's side.

"I'm awake," she said.

We had made it up that evening. I had turned up on the door step with a bunch of flowers. I know it's a bit of a crummy way of doing things, but being a bit crummy is OK sometimes, even essential.

"What are those for?" she demanded.

"A token," I replied, "Their significance is purely phatic."

Once inside, I apologised, promised to mend my ways, and generally abased myself. It wasn't difficult. It seemed that Julie wanted to forget the whole thing as quickly as possible.

Now, lying there in the dark in the small hours, I apologised again.

"I'm sorry about all that bottle stuff." I said.

Julie sighed.

"It's OK," she said, "I'm sorry too." She paused. "I know you've got a thing about tidiness, but I couldn't understand what the big fuss was."

"I know," I said, penitently.

"But what really got me was later on. The anal bit."

"The *anal* bit? I don't remember..."

"Well, you'd wound me up quite a lot by then, and I accused you of being anal, and you said, did I even know what anal meant, and I said it means arsehole, arsehole, and you said no, no, what you're referring to is Freud's theory that over-strict parenting causes the child to seek to retain its excreta for fear of making a mess, and that this leads in later life to... et cetera... and that I was accusing you of wanting to retain your shit, but who the hell was it who wanted to retain shitty bottles on the shitty table, and I shouldn't bloody well use words if I couldn't be arsed to look up properly what they meant."

"Oh yeah, that." I said, blushing invisibly in the dark.

"You really need to cut out this Stephen Fry crap, you know?" she observed. I didn't answer.

"It's a very male kind of thing," she said, "You're, you know, fairly enlightened for a man, but that is just such a macho thing. Using words to show off with. Listen to me, telling you all this stuff. Watch me win this argument. Look what a clever little boy I am. Women just don't do that. It's definitely a gender thing."

There was a protracted pause.

"You're not going to tell me that 'gender' is a grammatical term, and that while words have gender, people have sex, then?" she asked.

"No." I said, firmly, just a little nettled.

"It's your hormones, I suppose I should try to be understanding. But it's incredibly annoying, sometimes." she said, taking my hand.

"I'm sorry," I said, but with just a little less enthusiasm than before. A longer silence followed, while we stared at the ceiling.

"OH. MY.GOD!" I exclaimed, sitting up suddenly.

"What?"

"I left the laptop in the pub. Oh my God! I can actually remember standing up and walking away while it was still down by the side of the chair. Oh my God! Should I ring the pub?"

"The *pub*? So you went to the pub?"

She turned over unhappily.

"Yes, yes, I did. Well this bloke Tom... It was only a quick one... Do you think I should ring them?"

"Look, it's three o'clock," she pointed out, "You can't do anything until the morning. Don't worry, they've probably got it behind the bar."

"All of the Nanowrimo stuff is on it," I said, "I never backed it up or anything. Oh my God!"

I collapsed on to the bed again.

"Maybe this is a kind of sign from my subconscious that I should give up after all." I said.

"Another thing Freud had a theory about? Look, don't take this the wrong way, but I've been thinking maybe it would be better if you gave up after all. I never see you these days, and when I do, all you're doing is typing. I know I said you should finish, but, you know, I'm beginning to wonder."

"Yeah, me too," I said, a trifle bitterly, "I've got problems with it anyway. I can't seem to get Charlie out of the hospital."

I must have slept some more that night, but I really don't remember doing so. Not for the first time, I wished that I could stop uselessly thinking about things I couldn't do anything about. I had very little time to do anything about the laptop the following morning, either: it was the day of Kevin's big presentation, with me as bag-carrier, and I needed to be in Behemoth's dingy halls early. A phone call to the Angel revealed that they had not found a laptop in the bar.

In some ways, my problems were helpful: they stopped me worrying about the presentation. Though it wasn't the laptop that really preyed on my mind so much as what Julie had said the night before. Kevin, normally a picture of sang-froid, was showing some slightly endearing signs of actual nervousness, shifting from foot to foot as we waited outside the Boardroom. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Break a leg," I said, as we were ushered in, and he smiled faintly at me.

Julie would certainly have seen this meeting as a male kind of ritual, a *gender thing*, I reflected, as we settled in. There were the high status males, led by John Sopert, sitting in judgement, and here were two little gangs – Kevin's and George's – who were going to shout and shake their spears at each other until one or other side retreated.

What Julie didn't understand, I thought to myself, was what a precious cultural asset this adversarial business was. In China or India, in any proper civilisation, the King had an army that did what he said. Ideas were approved or not approved by authority, and the only way new ones could get in was if the Chief Vizier just happened to be an original genius. Whereas in the West, we were still a bunch of barbarians quarrelling over the wreckage of Rome. Everything was decided by a fight between two sides. But that meant that in any argument, the two competing authorities cancelled each other out: and that created, for the first time in human history, a window for the truth to get in, for disputes to be swayed by the actual evidence. That's where all the great achievements of the West came from. And it was a macho kind of thing, but so what?

Kevin had done his opening, tension-dispelling joke, and his settling introduction. Now he was beginning to tell them what he was going to tell them. Then he would tell them. Then he would tell them what he had told them. Say what you like about Kevin, he does it by the book.

You see, I'm not brooding over what Julie said or anything, but you know, you've got to dance the dance. It's a battle. It's like some grand confrontation; a great decisive battle: the Men of the West versus the filthy Orc bands; and may the best side win...

I suddenly roused from a vague meditation.

"John, you did the figures on this?" said Kevin. "Bill is suggesting there actually is a summer uplift in the distribution figures for last June?"

I looked up and saw he was beset by great Troll warriors on three sides while I let the sword sleep in my hand.

"The June figures? Is that a genuine rise?"

"Perhaps John thinks the rise is diminimus." offered Bill. They chuckled.

"That's what they used to call it, Bill," I said, "But I think you'll find that what we're calling it now is 'Fuck all'." A bigger laugh, and the gnome fell back.

"I think those are some figures you brought with you, Bill," I said, "but those are on a different universe. You've got packaged Mueslis in one and not the other. In fact, I think if you compare the figures from the same dataset, you'll find that instead of a rise, you've got a fall of 5.76 percentage points. Do your sums agree with that?"

I knew and he knew that I couldn't work out the figures to two decimal places that quickly: but I banked on him not being able to contradict me. If he could, I was sure the figures would still be in my favour, and the net effect would be the same, since either way he'd be confirming my theory.

"Nuh, OK" he said, after a pause.

The Orc's ugly head went spinning from his neck, and Kevin and I stood triumphantly shoulder to shoulder while the filthy spawn of Mordor cringed and scuttled.

"OK, John, well done," said Kevin later, when we had retired once more to his tiny office. "You did OK once you woke up."

"Thanks. A shame they wouldn't take a decision, though. Nothing's going to change."

"Well, not this year, anyway. But we made a good impression. You've done yourself no harm, and I've enhanced my reputation as a caring mentor." He must have noticed a slight hint of incredulity in my face, because he went on "Look, I know you think I'm just a slave-driving bastard, but the thing is John, you need to do the work if you're going to get anywhere. You've got great potential, but you need to focus on the job, instead of farting around on the internet all the time. By the way – you haven't got time to write novels, OK? Don't fuck around with novels. Not if you want to get your manager interview."

I felt slightly winded.

"How do you know?" I asked, "About the novel?"

"Look, you've put your real name online on that site, it could be Googled by anyone. That's pretty stupid, frankly. Not that most people here would be likely to Google your name, or come across it any other way. For that matter signing up for Nanowrimo isn't a disciplinary offence so far as I know. But I don't think it would go down well, do you? They'd think you were doing it in working time, using these superlative machines we have here. Am I right?" he smirked, "Anyway, it's a risk, and an unnecessary one. You're not going to write a successful novel – no, come on - but what you're risking is a really decent career. You know that, don't you?"

"I was going to give up the Nanowrimo thing, anyway." I said.

"Good. You did well today. Just focus, that's all. Focus."

He was right, no doubt, but I found it difficult to concentrate for the rest of the day. I sat at my desk, toying with emails and pretending to look at figures. I was confused. The fact that Kevin was telling me to stop naturally predisposed me to carry on; but the fact that he had found out about my Nanowrimo membership was sort of shocking, and I couldn't deny that he was right about the potential risk. Could he really have found out by chance Googling? The vision of Kevin solemnly searching for my name was a bit disturbing. I wish I had one of those names you can't Google, like Ed Link or Lol Key.

At last the hours rolled round and I set off for home, still feeling a little unsettled and vulnerable. We had agreed that Julie would come round to my place that evening, and she was already there when I arrived: in fact, she met me at the door.

"Who's Miss Mouse?" she asked, and once again I felt the metaphorical blow to the stomach which goes with the discovery that people know more about you than you realised.

"Did you see her on Nanowrimo?" I asked, confusedly.

"On Nanowrimo? What does that mean? She's in your novel? No. What are you talking about? Who is this person? Minnie Mouse?"

"She's one of the Nanowrimo people," I explained, neutrally, "One of the people who go to these writing sessions, and so on. I've met her there a couple of times. It's a nickname. I don't even know her real name."

Julie raised her eyebrows just detectably, and handed me a post-it note.

"Well, she rang. She got your number from somebody called Tom. She's got your laptop. If you give her a ring on this number, you can arrange to pick it up."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, with genuine relief and not-so-genuine jollity, "She must have noticed I'd left it behind. That's a relief."

"You're still giving up on the Nanoo thing, aren't you?" Julie asked.

"I think I've got to. Kevin at work knows about it now. All for the best, probably. I'll have to buy Geoff his bottle, though."

"Maybe it's worth it."

"Yeah, I'm beginning to think so."

Chapter Fifteen: Giving Up

So, I will never complete the journey that is Nanowrimo. I feel sad but free. It's nice to think I don't have to churn the words out, but I do feel a sense of something almost like bereavement. Until I decided to stop, I felt fed up with the whole thing, but as soon as I made the decision, I started to regret it. And there is one uncongenial task to be completed as a consequence.

After work, I went round to Geoff's with a bottle of Cristal. I was fairly confident he would be in, since the new regime, if that was the truth, allowed him his evenings free for browsing Internet porn, or whatever Geoff did when he was alone.

Sure enough, he opened the door, but at the sight of the bottle his face fell.

"What's that?" he asked.

"You win, Geoffrey," I said, "I'm giving in."

"Hey, you can't do that now... look, come in."

I followed him upstairs and sat down on his tiny sofa.

"You can't give up, John," he said earnestly, "Not yet. It's not been going so badly, has it?"

"Well, I have a few problems," I said, "I seem to be stuck with Charlie in the hospital and Fenella still alive... uh, those are two of my characters. But also, I've sort of promised Julie I'd give up. And this bloke at work knows I'm doing it, and has warned me I'm getting into trouble."

"Christ," said Geoff, "Now hang on. Let's not be hasty here. Do you want a beer?"

"No thanks," I said.

Geoff waved his finger in the air which seemed to be an indication that he understood but had thought of something else. He went over to the tiny cabinet and took out a bottle of Glenfiddich.

"Geoff!" I protested.

"No, come on," he insisted, plonking down two tumblers which, to be quite honest, could have been more perfectly clean, "A shot of this won't do you any harm."

He poured two glasses, pulled up a chair, settled himself and looked at me thoughtfully.

"I'm sure Julie doesn't really want you to give up," he said, "She may have said so when she was in a bad mood or something, but honestly I'm sure she'll change her mind. Doesn't she always tell you off for not finishing things? Like that internet thing you were going to do. What was it? Kick-ass something."

"Yes, but..." I began, and interrupted myself, "Hang on, though, Geoff – why do you want me to carry on? You should be cock-a-hoop, shouldn't you? This means you've won the bet. That was what you wanted, wasn't it."

"Yes, I suppose it was," he said thoughtfully, taking a sip of whisky, "I suppose it sort of seems different now. And the other thing is, if you don't carry on, I won't have any motive for finishing myself. I've actually been a bit stuck the last few days, you know. I haven't really written anything much since you came round here last. Been a bit busy, really. You could probably catch me up if you put in a little effort."

He gestured at the pile of manuscript, which did look exactly the same as it had before.

"See, that's a point you ought to consider," he added, "Who's to say I'm going to finish? If neither of us finishes, it will be a draw."

"Sort of," I agreed, "But I think the terms of the bet were that the first person to give up loses. And I'm the first one, there's no real argument about it. You won fair and square."

"Mmh. I think you're wrong. It wasn't first to give up loses, it was first to 50,000 wins. I'm not there yet. Surely it's a cheek this bloke from your office telling you that you can't do it. Is he your boss? Is there a policy that employees shall not be novelists? Is he claiming that copyright will accrue to them under the terms of your contract? I can't understand it at all. The people where I work are all for it. They keep trying to sponsor me, and I have to keep telling them it's not for charity. Are you sure this bloke is really speaking for your firm?"

"Oh, I think so. It isn't really him that's telling me; he's just drawing my attention to the fact, which I know quite well for myself, that my having a time-consuming hobby, and one which I might be tempted to pursue in idle moments at work, is not going to go down well. It's not that they'd sack me or anything, it just might stop me getting my interview so soon, that kind of thing. I know he's right, really."

"I don't think it's any of their damn business what you do in your own time," said Geoff, with surprising vehemence. "Think of all the time you'll have wasted if you stop now. Think of all those words that are never going to be used."

"Well, probably no-one was ever going to read them anyway," I pointed out, "And who knows, I might go back to it and finish the thing in the end. I just can't afford to do it to the Nanowrimo timetable."

"Why don't you give yourself a bit of time to think about it? You might feel differently in a day or so. Don't give up yet. I won't take this now, you keep it until you've really thought about this.."

I shook my head in puzzlement and looked at Geoff.

"You're a strange bloke," I said, "How's Mercedes?"

"Now look, don't change the subject. Promise me you'll think about it a bit."

"Well, I'm happy to keep the bottle for another couple of days if you really insist."

"Well done. Cheers." He took another sip from his tumbler, "Mercedes hasn't been round recently. She seems to be busy a lot at the moment."

"Problems?" I asked, sympathetically.

"I don't think so, not really. She has problems, though, things she keeps having to sort out. Don't ask me, it's all you know, I'm like this, and then they're all like that, and so I said and she goes and they said. I think perhaps she'd be happier if she could see me in the evenings and at weekends, you know?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

"No, not really. No. It'll all be fine in the long run."

"Julie... Julie finds it hard to believe you've got this woman coming in every day before breakfast."

"Well, not every day," admitted Geoff, "Did I give the impression it was every day? To be honest, John, not that it's any of your business really, I think we've only really done it three times."

"Only three?"

"Yes, but it's a pretty serious relationship. She has other commitments at the moment, that's all."

"Other commitments? What, you mean another boyfriend?"

Geoff frowned irritably.

"Family commitments," he said, "Family commitments... sort of thing."

"I don't know. No offence, but it seems an unusual kind of relationship"

"It is a bit complicated at times," said Geoff, darkly "It turns out she's quite a complicated kind of person. But like I say, we'll sort things out, I'm sure."

I was walking down the old track to the river when Charlie appeared from behind a tree, and gave me a small wave of recognition.

"What are you doing here?" I said, "You're supposed to be in Wenham."

"Yes," he said – his voice was deeper than I had imagined it, and he sounded more like a Dorset man than someone from the fenny country of Wenham. "But I thought this would be easier for you, since you know it so well."

That seemed to make sense. We strolled along companionably towards the river bank.

"Are you getting on any better with Lady Jane?" I asked.

"Yes, things are OK," he said, "It turns out she's quite a complicated kind of person."

"She seems to be sort of jealous of you," I said, "Which is a bit odd, because I'm sure it wasn't my idea. It just seems to have got into the text somehow."

"Yes, that happens," he agreed, "She seems to think I'm going to get mixed up with Fenella. The other day when Fenella rang up about my laptop, there was a definite look of suspicion there. But I would never be so stupid as that. She ought to realise."

Charlie bent down and picked up a small flat stone, which he sent skimming across the river. It bounced six times.

"I could never do that," I admitted, "Never even one bounce."

"You just need to focus," he said, and threw another. The river seemed to be much wider than I remembered it being.

"Oh," I said, "I remember what I was going to ask you. How am I going to get you out of the hospital?"

"I don't see any problem about that," said Charlie, seeming slightly surprised, "I could discharge myself if you like. You could say it was because I was eager to get back on to the case. You know. Or if you find that bit difficult, you could just cut to a scene where I'm already out. The one where I find Fenella's body, say – that's be good."

"You're going to find her body?"

"Well, I presume so. More pathos that way, more drama. But you're the author, aren't you?" He grinned. He was actually a rather amiable bloke in the flesh; big, but not such a looming presence as I had imagined he would be.

"You can't find her body after you come out of hospital. That doesn't make sense Unless...How does she die?"

"She was in a crash." he said, shortly and decisively, as though I were being stupid.

I began to feel worried.

"God, I'd forgotten," I confessed, "This is all no good. I'm not going to write it. I've given up."

Charlie turned to me a face which was filled with incredulity and anger. It was such an angry face it hardly looked like him any more. He turned his back on me and stamped over to where a small kind of brick building stood – just like a park-keeper's hut or something. He opened the door, but I followed him and grabbed his sleeve.

"Where are you going?" I asked, "You can't go in there."

"I am the home-owner," he said, angrily, and slammed the door behind him.

As I looked around I realised that the reason the river had seemed wider was because it was a different river altogether. I had though that this place was a combination of the fields behind our house when I was at school with a river in Portugal – the Tagus? But it was not - it was somewhere else, somewhere I didn't know at all. I was lost.

"Help! You've got to show me the way back!" I shouted, but the hut door was locked.

With a perceptible jerk, I awoke in my own bed, in the dark. Julie was asleep beside me.

I stared up at the ceiling and began to calm down. There is something distinctly weird about feeling guilt towards an imaginary character of your own creation. I mean, if I wanted, I could put a little postscript on Wenham where Charlie and all the other characters expressed their sincere pleasure over the fact that the story would not be completed. But there was no doubt I did feel strangely guilty, in a way which having my imaginary characters traumatised and murdered, something I'd done enough of by now, had never caused.

Actually, Charlie would certainly have faced his own fictional death with much more stoicism and loyalty than he had displayed in the dream. I found myself beginning to wonder whether the dream Charlie was the real Charlie or not. Now that I thought about it, dream Charlie had had black brylcreemed hair, which wasn't right at all. So which was the real Charlie? Unfortunately that was not a question I could get my mind round in any appreciable sense. That way madness surely lies.

Come to that, this whole dream seemed like a worrying sign of mental turmoil – actually another good reason to stop writing, if that's what it was going to do to me. Now I couldn't sleep because my mind was racing, although goodness knows I was tired enough.

I got carefully out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Picture your author, sitting stark naked on the toilet: stark naked but for headphones which he has plugged into the radio behind him in order to listen inaudibly to the World Service, which at the moment is broadcasting *The Ticket*, an arts review programme which is actually quite interesting and sort of comparable to Radio Four's *Front Row*, which I often catch in the evenings. Perhaps one day *Wenham* will be reviewed on programmes like these, but then I remember yet again that *Wenham* is never going to be finished. My lost baby!

I don't altogether like the way the whole thing keeps rolling round my mind. I go through periods when I'm convinced I gave up in the nick of time, that somehow there was some bad juju in the whole project which was taking me down into the grip of some frightful curse. Then just when I've got that settled, I fall prey to the conviction that *not finishing* is bad luck, that it's actually *that* which is going to blight my life, and that I must, must start again quickly before the opportunity recedes from my reach. There's only a very small period in which I could conceivably change my mind about this. In a way I wish it was over already.

And it is, it is. Morally, it is.

Chapter Sixteen: Not Giving Up

"Hello!" says Mouse, opening the battered front door of the Victorian terrace where it seems she lives, "Come in. Would you like a coffee?"

What I hadn't expected somehow was that she would be sharing, and that two of her flatmates would be sitting on their worn-out old sofa looking at me with undisguised interest.

"You're John, then?" says one of them, a thin brunette with a wide smile, "I'm Anna. This is Claire. We've heard all about you. You must be very clever to write all this stuff."

"No, you wouldn't think so if you'd read it," I reply, perhaps a little too smartly, but they both laugh politely.

Are they students? The place has that kind of a look, with a Klimt poster blu-tacked to the wall. The wallpaper is very faded, and the furniture is old without being really retro – second-hand, I would guess. But it's all in apple-pie order, and I can see from here that the books on the plank bookshelves are divided into fiction and non-fiction, with the fiction alphabetical by author. I wonder what approach has been used for the non-fiction.

Mouse brings me a mug of coffee, though I had actually said I didn't want one. It's boiling hot too, so there's no possibility of downing it quickly. Actually, I find I don't particularly want to hurry off, anyway.

"Are you going to have a big party when you've all finished?" asks Anna.

"Well, I think some celebrations are certainly planned," I say, "But I won't have anything to celebrate, I'm afraid. Actually, I've decided to give up. I can't finish the thing in time after all."

This evokes an immediate chorus of protest, especially from Mouse. I don't think I've ever provoked such effusive displays of disappointment before in my life. Perhaps I haven't been living right.

"But you're way ahead of me," she says, "Way ahead! And I'm not giving up."

"It's not that, really" I explain feebly, "I'm sure I could finish. Well, reasonably sure. There are other reasons. I don't think me doing it is going to go down well in my office, for example. It could get me into trouble."

"That's ridiculous. It's only a few days more, really. If they don't like it, why don't you pull a sickie?" says Claire, "I would. Like a shot."

"Well the other thing is, I'm a bit stuck with the story. This character who ought to be dead is still alive. You see, she has to be killed off by someone who's already dead, and it was going to happen because they'd messed up the brakes of her car before they were dead, but she seems to have sort of escaped."

"I don't understand," says Anna.

I find myself sitting down and explaining the whole plot of Wenham. I quite enjoy it, actually: they're a very appreciative audience and pay careful attention. I think I'm even getting a bit of quiet appreciative murmuring. That is surely a bit more than I deserve, but you know – I'm a man who hasn't had that much appreciative murmuring in his life.

"I think," says Mouse, "you just need to go back and rewrite the earlier bits. Charlie doesn't get in the car, and she does die. That's all. You don't have to do it now, just make a note somewhere and carry on as if you'd revised it already. It doesn't matter for Nanowrimo if there are gaping inconsistencies in the plot – after the month is over, you can go back and sort them out at leisure."

I think about it. She's quite right. I'm being too much of a perfectionist. I can't remember now why I ruled this option out, though I'm sure I must have done. Of course I don't have to worry about details. That's not the true 'wrimo spirit. But...

"The trouble is," I say, "I sort of promised I'd stop."

"Who did you promise? Who wanted you to stop?" demands Anna. This is a bit difficult to answer – I don't really want to blame Julie, or expose to these strangers the kind of difficult discussions we've been having. Alright, and to be honest I don't want them to get the idea I'm sort of under her thumb, either.

"Your girlfriend?" asks Claire.

"Well, er. It's true Julie isn't altogether happy – she thinks I spend too much time writing and on the Nanowrimo site. Are you, er, members of it?" I say, nervously.

"Oh no. But we've been told all about it." she replies, archly. "You're quite a star of the forums, aren't you?"

"No offence or anything," says Anna, "But I think your girlfriend should be backing you up, not trying to get you to stop."

"Well, you know..." I say.

"Yeah," says Claire, "She should be supportive, shouldn't she? It's not fair on you, is it? Why don't you carry on? It's only until the end of the month, anyway. It's so close. Surely you can carry on just till then."

"Yeah, we want to read the story," says Anna, "Will you publish it, in a proper book?"

"Well, it's not that easy, really..."

"You could self-publish..." suggests Mouse, "Lots of people do that."

By the time I leave, with my laptop, I have virtually promised to go on with Wenham after all. And why not, really? When I get back to the flat, I plug in the laptop and fire it up to make sure everything is OK. Just a little look at the last chapter?

As the sound of the departing ambulance faded, Lady Jane put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. With an effort he took his eyes off the crushed car lying by the canal below, and looked at her.

*"Well," he said shakily, "I suppose she's off the list of suspects now."
"Not a bit of it," said Lady Jane, "Perhaps she committed suicide in a fit of remorse. Perhaps she meant it to be a non-fatal accident, meant to divert suspicion away from her. Perhaps she did kill the others, and someone else altogether killed her."*

"Someone else? Who stands to inherit now?"

"Ah, now you're thinking logically again. And that turns out to be a good question. I've just discovered that the late Earl had another child."

Back on track, back on track. But I still have a problem with plot - there's still not enough of it. I'm approaching 35,000 words now, but the story is rapidly approaching resolution, and I've written the ending already. I'll be surprised if it stretches beyond 40,000 at the rate I'm going.

I wonder whether I could insert yet another member of the family? I think I may have to go back and sort of bulk up the text by inserting flashbacks or something. I could start with a sort of potted biography of the old Earl.

The sixth Earl acceded to the estate at the exceptionally youthful age of 23, when his father suffered a fatal accident while hiking in the Dolomites. Whereas the father had been a man of considerable business ability and careful habits, the young Earl spent well rather than wisely, and did not, as he himself often declared, have the right sort of brains for going over account books.

He was, accordingly, ill-prepared to meet the challenges which punitive death duties and a general falling-off in the profitability of his neglected investments raised for him. During the minority of his children, matters ran on from bad to worse, but for a long time, by selling off his Scottish lands and other assets, the Earl was able to keep up appearances to some extent.

Finally, however, it became clear to him that if he continued in his present course, he would be facing absolute bankruptcy within a very few years. The Earl had no idea of being able to increase his income by better management of the estate, nor by embarking on new business ventures, as many of his peers and contemporaries had done in similar circumstances, and indeed it may be doubted whether his talents would have proved equal to these endeavours had he attempted them.

Instead, however, he devoted himself to the practice of stringent economy and retrenchment, closing down much of the house and subsisting with a single faithful servant. In this way, he was able to achieve a degree of economic stability. Oates, who was promoted to the status of butler without any increase in pay, cooked and washed for the Earl, cleaned the house to the extent he could, and took on the general administration of what was left of the household. A dull but competent man, Oates was not unduly concerned about the low pay he received, since he considered the whole estate to be his in practice. He enjoyed nothing more, once the Earl had retired to bed, than spending a quiet hour sitting in the Earl's chair in the grand dining room with a cigar and a glass of port. He never took holidays – where would he have wanted to go, and what would the Earl have done?

Imagine then, the Earl's feelings when he came down one morning to see what had become of his cup of tea, and found that Oates had quietly suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage the evening before and was lying stone dead on the kitchen floor.

The Earl could scarcely contemplate the idea of taking on a new servant, and he had a shrewd idea that the number of applicants for such a post would in any case be small. He therefore decided, with some trepidation, to effect a further small economy by looking after himself. This ambitious project went, not well, but better than might have been expected, at first.

I heard Julie's key rattle in the lock, and started guiltily.

"Hello?" she said, poking her head round the door, "You got it back then?"

"Yes," I said, "All present and correct."

Julie paused and her eyes focussed on the screen.

"Are you...?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorry," I said (don't apologise, you idiot – what are you apologising for?) "I sort of thought I'd give it one more go.

Julie came into the room with a depressed expression and sat down heavily. She heaved a deep, almost a theatrical sigh. There was going to be no more appreciative murmuring for me, it seemed.

"I thought we'd agreed..." she said.

"Well, yes, but I thought – it's only another few days really. Why not see it through to the end?"

"Because, because... oh. We need to sort things out, John. You've got to understand..." she broke off, irresolutely.

"Isn't it best to just get this thing out of the way?" I said, "And then I'll make it up to you in December. I promise. In fact, look, we said we'd celebrate when I got to the half-way mark, and I'm past that now. Why don't we have a celebration tonight? I'll take you out for a curry or something."

She shook her head and sighed. She looked so miserable for a moment that I wanted to go and hug her. But I didn't.

"No," she said, "No, I don't really want to celebrate. Look – if you want to carry on, that's up to you, but I don't want to spend the next two weeks sitting here with you just tapping away all the time. Let's make it an unfriendly month, OK? Then we'll meet up in December and sort things out."

There was something about that 'sort things out' that I didn't like the sound of, but I couldn't really complain. The truth is, I was ready to be sorted out myself. I still wanted it all to be over; but I had to finish.

"Alright," I said, "But let's start the unfriendly stuff tomorrow, eh? Look, I won't do any more of this tonight. Stay tonight."

"No," she said, "You carry on. It's alright. Give me a ring when you're finished, OK?"

She stood up and marched back out of the door.

Am I doing the right thing,? Ah, you never commit yourself; you're so diplomatic with that enigmatic smile. You will of course have noticed the irony that I only started on this whole thing as a means of helping to persuade Julie she should move in with me, or me with her; but the net result so far seems to have been to move her out for the rest of the month, and perhaps worse.

But isn't she just a bit unreasonable? Is it so annoying that I should do a bit of typing in the evening for a few days? Is that a deal-breaker in any reasonable person's book? If it was for work, I'm sure she wouldn't object. And it is only for a month. What's the big problem about it? We talked about it, we discussed it. She seemed happy about it at first. Alright, uncomprehending, but happy. If I give in now over something so minor, will I have my leisure hours subjected to approval and supervision ever afterwards? What if I want to take up golf one day?

I'm sorry, you know how it is with me – I try to be a philosopher, but cheerfulness keeps breaking in. I'm a superficial kind of guy, on the

surface. See, I can't stop with the jokes even now. But don't think I don't take this seriously. It's the most important thing in my life, it really is, and I'm not talking about sodding Nanowrimo.

Chapter Seventeen: Discovery

I went round to see Geoff again. It was odd: I felt obscurely guilty about deciding to continue with Wenham, as if it were somehow cheating; but I thought it was best to go round and tell him. He looked completely taken aback to see me, almost apprehensive. I was not a welcome visitor, it seemed.

"John? You haven't come to give me that bloody Cristal again, have you?" he asked.

"Au contraire, Geoffrey." I replied, "The race is back on. I'm going to finish Nanowrimo."

"Oh! Well, good! Good! You changed your mind? Well done. I mean, it's good that you're trying, though of course I'm still going to win."

We paused on the step.

"Er, come in." he said at last, reluctantly I thought.

Geoff led the way upstairs, and once again we settled ourselves. I couldn't help glancing over at the pile of manuscript. It didn't seem any bigger, and I could almost swear that there was a thin layer of dust on the top sheet. Was Geoff's inspiration finally drying up, perhaps?

"Do you want a quick beer?" asked Geoff, "Only I'm going out a bit later."

"With Mercedes? She's graduated to the evenings at last?"

"Yes – I mean yes, it is her. Actually, I'll just go and give her a quick ring if you don't mind: we didn't fix up when we were going to meet."

He hurried downstairs.

An opportunity? Shall I have another little look? At Geoff's manuscript? No, no, I shouldn't. I really shouldn't. What, you think I should? Really? I'm surprised at you – I had you down as a more scrupulous kind of person. Still, if you insist, I suppose I'm powerless to resist...

Draw for you, knave I don't think I'm not doing that no I'll call my man to deal with your impertinence I fancy. He said with haughty mien.

Draw or by God I'll prick you where you stand, poultron.

Stand still you caitiff rogue.

At that a strange figure appeared and leapt between them twirling his moustache.

Enough he cried back there now.

And who the hell do you think you are Mister our hero ground out between gritted teeth.

Oh but you know me well. I 'ave no need to introduce myself to you monsieur I am Capitaine Renault of the Mousketaires. I see indeed that you know me. But what is zis what are these swaords Gentlemen we ave other feesh to fry ave we not? I say this stops 'ere.

And by golly, it did. The rest of the page was blank. I turned the page: the next one was a completely blank sheet. And the next one. I picked up a big handful of pages and riffled them. All blank. Snowy white virgin sheets. It seemed – I had a quick look back at page one – it seemed that Geoff had in fact completed no more than about four hundred words of utter drivel. A wave of relief, shock, disbelief, and belief swept through me.

He reappeared in the doorway, saw the manuscript in my hand, and froze on the spot. It wasn't turning out a very tranquil evening for Geoffrey.

"This is a gripping yarn of yours, Geoff." I remarked.

"It's all on the computer," he said, hesitantly, "I didn't print it out, that's all. Just thought it would give you a fright if I showed you a big pile of pages, you know."

"Geoffrey," I said, "Your pantaloons are aflame, Geoffrey."

He looked abashed.

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey, Geoffrey." I remonstrated, "Geoffrey. This is all you've written, isn't it? Come on now. Look me in the eye."

"Alright," he said, coming into the room and slumping down on the small sofa, "You win. I can't do it. I could no more write a novel than ride a woolly mammoth down Lombard Street, as you put it. It's true. Sorry."

Did I really say that thing about mammoths? That was a bit unkind, really. And not true. It's increasingly thought to be conceivable that viable mammoth DNA might be found which could be cloned using elephants. But Geoff writing a novel?

"But Geoff, what was the point? You have to register your words with the 'wrimo people. You can't hand them a big bundle of blank paper."

"Well," he said, wearily, "At first, I just didn't want to admit that I couldn't get anywhere. I thought I might catch up. But then I thought so long as I kept up a front, you know, it would encourage you to keep going. That was why I came up with the bet. I thought it would encourage you to focus, you know, help you stay motivated. I would never have taken the champagne off you, at the end of the day. That's why I wouldn't take it

the other day, and tried to get you to carry on. Successfully, too, it seems. I really only wanted to help, all along."

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey," I said, "You big, fat, liar!"

"No, this is the truth" he protested, " I wanted to encourage you, be a sort of pace-setter, a sort of sparring partner. Is that so bad?"

"Forsooth, thou takest the biscuit, Geoffrey; yea, verily."

"Come on, I meant well."

"Draw, Sir!" I said, dancing about in front of him with one arm thrown up and the other clutching an imaginary foil "Draw, I say! Draw, damn you Sir! I say draw, Sir, an you be a gentleman!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Geoff.

"Draw, an you be a gentleman, or I shall spit you where you sit like a spiced apple at Bartholomew Fair, forsooth."

"Oh God." said Geoff, helplessly.

"By my halidom! 'Odds bodikins! Gadzookers! God's pieces, Sir! Ow!" I had forgotten that Geoff's flat offered little room for swashbuckling, and banged my elbow on the wall.

"You want a quick beer?" offered Geoff, "Come on."

"Alright then, you lying bloody liar, you sad failing talentless ungifted lying bastard, " I consented, "You snivelling illiterate faithless incapable liar. We might as well."

Actually, I felt exultant. My lack of faith in Geoff's abilities had been triumphantly vindicated, and my own astonishing literary gifts looked all the better by contrast. I felt much better about myself. I felt much better about Wenham. And I felt a whole lot better about Geoff. Now he couldn't write to save his life, I really liked him again.

We sat and had a friendly glass of frothy warm cat pee: Geoff seemed relieved, too. He offered to pay me for the Cristal ("You don't really want two, do you?"), but seemed to change his mind when he heard how much it had actually cost me and the subject sort of dropped.

He obviously wanted me out, so I didn't hang about. On the way back to the Tube station, I was virtually walking on air. I may have done a couple of dance-like steps. It's certainly the case that I nearly collided, in quick succession, with an old man holding a newspaper, a small boy, and a plump, bad-tempered looking young woman with unsuitably large earrings, who turned and looked at me sharply. But I was immune to all disapproval for the time being.

Back at home I threw myself into Wenham with renewed enthusiasm.

At the back of the house stood a long low barn. A little gate gave direct access to it from the side road, and it was that way that Lady Jane went, with Charlie bringing up the rear. A small door on a simple latch led into the barn: Lady Jane opened it and put her head inside.

"Coo-ee?" she called. There was no answer, so she stepped inside. Charlie followed.

They stood in a sort of anteroom. half the height of the barn, with two deep sinks, old chairs, and a table against one wall with a sheet draped over it. There were drips and splodges of paint everywhere. To the right were a pair of high double doors, one of them just ajar.

"Hello, there? Oliver?" called Lady Jane. "He should be here. I spoke to him only yesterday, He seemed quite alright about it. He knows my cousin Archie in London. I wonder if something is wrong.

"You don't think...?"

"No, no, Charlie, I don't think he's been murdered. For heaven's sake. Oliver? Hello? Are you there?"

Again there was no answer, so she and Charlie pushed the double doors aside.

Inside was a large space: about half the barn. The roof had been replaced with glass, and there was extra strip lighting round the whitewashed walls, some of which was switched on. Even though the sunlight streaming in through the roof was weak and watery, the overall impression was one of stepping into a warmer, more Mediterranean climate. Stacked in piles around the walls were twenty or thirty canvases. Two large ones were hung on the walls, and another stood on an easel, with its back to them. A tea-chest covered with paints, brushes, bottles and tools stood beside it.

All at once, the artist's head popped out from behind the canvas on the easel, blinked, withdrew, and immediately popped out again. The resemblance to a small bird was so striking that Charlie immediately thought of a cuckoo clock.

"Hel-lo?" said the artist, warily.

"Jane Pimsey?" said Lady Jane, "I rang yesterday? You said I could drop in?"

The artist's face smoothed out into a smile.

"Oh yes, of course," he said, coming out from behind the easel and wiping his hands on a rag, "I'm so sorry. When I get caught up in a painting, I forget everything."

"These are wonderful pictures," said Lady Jane, shaking his hand, "But – forgive me if I'm confused – I went to an exhibition of yours in London five years ago – I thought you went in for abstracts?"

"Yes," said Oliver, "I was a rather austere abstract expressionist at the beginning of my career. But one day I was reading the preface of a book by Calvino. He explained how for years he had written fiction with a political commitment, a social critique, always grittily realistic; then one day it just came to him that he was doing it out of duty and actually he didn't have to. He could write anything he liked. He could write the books he'd really like to read: the adult equivalent of the fairy stories and legends he'd loved so much as a boy. So he did, and went in for the sort of intellectual magic realism which is what we really know him for, of course. Now I found that inspiring. I asked myself, are you abstaining from figurative art merely out of a misplaced sense of duty? I decided to give myself a holiday. I took an enormous canvas and said: now I can paint whatever I like. There was no doubt in my mind what that was: I just threw the paint on. And I've never looked back. My figurative pictures have done quite well, actually: I'm afraid I'm becoming quite obscenely rich."

They chuckled politely while Charlie wondered what quality it was that rendered a chauffeur invisible, and whether he was glad he had it.

"That's the very first one over there," said Oliver, "I shall never sell it."

They turned and looked. Hung beside the double doors they had come in through was a vast canvas depicting what seemed to be a dragon. Much of the picture was misty dark grey-green smoky swirls; but the face of the monster, angrily looming forwards as though to swallow the observer, part of a scaly wing and a huge clawed foot, stood out in nightmarishly clear detail.

"Blimey!" said Charlie, unthinkingly.

"Oh yes," said Lady Jane, "I like that. Could we see some of the others?"

"By all means." said the artist politely. He pulled out a canvas from one of the stacks by the wall.

"Bloody hell!" said Charlie.

"It's basically two Blemmies fighting," explained Oliver, "You can sort of see that this one has had some bits of skin and muscle pulled right off him, but he's coming back strongly."

"I thought blemmies were fish?" remarked Charlie. Oliver glanced at him impatiently.

"No, no: these are Sternophthalmoi," he explained, "The people with no heads who used to appear on medieval maps and in traveller's tales. They had their faces on their chests, you see."

"It makes me think of Goya." said Lady Jane.

"Really?" said Oliver, "That's excellent. Thank you. I could have no higher praise."

He pulled out another canvas.

"Christ!" said Charlie

"This is a Gryphon." Oliver said with an insincere smile at Charlie.

"That pile of... Those things it's tearing at... are they human?" asked Charlie.

Oliver merely raised his eyebrows.

"Extraordinary," said Lady Jane.

Oliver pulled out another canvas a few inches and hesitated.

"Oh, I didn't mean to show you this one," he said, "I should put this one away. Well, never mind. It's a portrait, you see, of the late Earl of Wenham, depicted as Cronos."

He pulled it fully out.

*"Oh, **fuck!**" said Charlie, involuntarily.*

"Charlie?" said Lady Jane, "I forgot to tell Mrs Moreton that we'd be in for dinner tonight. Would you mind going back and telling her, please? No need to come back for me – I'll walk."

Chapter Eighteen: Spreadsheets

Things have quietened down at Behemoth following the big excitement of Kevin's presentation. Kevin himself is away this week. I've got three different projects I need to work on, but none of them has a deadline nearer than the end of next week. I think I might be a bit of an adrenaline junkie: I certainly can't take very seriously a deadline that is over a week away.

Earlier on, John Sopert the Director called me into his office – a proper office, this one, with a full-sized desk and everything. Sopert is one of those immensely dignified people who are frightfully nice even though they are obviously amazingly posh.

"Thanks for coming - nothing to worry about, John," he said, with an air of affected bonhomie, "This isn't – ahuh! - a crisis meeting or anything. Perhaps that's disappointing, actually? We all love a bit of crisis management around here, don't we? I keep saying to my managers, I want more completer/finishers, er, guys: give me a few completer/finishers. But they never do. Anyway, no; this is just a chat. It's always been my intention to keep up with our younger execs, but I'm afraid it's a policy more honoured in the breach than the observance. But you're my guinea-pig, John. I'm going to try to have quarterly chats with all of you in future."

"OK," I said, inanely, bonhomising back at him to the best of my ability.

"How do you feel about last week?" he asked, looking at me keenly.

"Well, I'm quite happy really, I mean obviously it's frustrating when you can't convince people," I began,

"Oh, I wouldn't say we weren't *convinced*," he interrupted, "I enjoyed the presentation. I thought it was illuminating. And you made a good contribution. Certainly. No, I wouldn't say we *weren't convinced*, John."

"Well, I mean, it's a shame we didn't get the go-ahead on the winter strategy," I said cautiously, and waited to see whether he would insist that, in a very real sense, we had got the go-ahead. Just not the go-ahead to do anything. But he merely raised his eyebrows in a 'well-let's-not-jump-to-conclusions' style.

"But I enjoyed doing the presentation, and obviously it was a valuable learning opportunity for me."

"Ahuh," he agreed, "yes.", as though I'd put my finger on a rather obscure but tremendously important point. "Yes, indeed."

"I'm still convinced that my analysis of the seasonality is basically right, " I said cautiously, "But I'm looking forward to helping to develop the strategy in other ways."

"Good, good. You're a promising young man, John," he confided, "Personally, I think you have some definite potential. But at times, you know, it's a bit difficult to know what to make of you."

"Really?"

"Ahuh. At times you seem very reserved, lost in your own thoughts, you know, just going through the motions. I don't quite know how to put this, but there are times – I hope this doesn't seem negative - when it almost seems as if you aren't very interested in what you're doing."

"Gosh."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. And then, on other occasions, you know, you sort of come out with *guns blazing*."

"Do I?"

"Oh yes, blazing. Look at that time you made the point about, what was it? *De minimis*. Quite right, of course. But you see, I wasn't even there, but I've still heard all about how passionate you were."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"We like passion. I'd go so far as to say we need our young execs to be passionate. If you're not passionate, where's the future of Behemoth? No, I like the passion. But sometimes too much?. A bit of aggression is good. In this world, John, you won't get anywhere without a bit of aggression. But you have to know how to moderate it, you see. You have to – what was that phrase? You have to know how to *dance the dance*, if you follow me."

Oh bugger.

"I think I do."

"That said, I do believe, *myself...*" (...in spite of what everyone else says...) "... that you've got real potential. Now John. Kevin has suggested to me that you might be ready for a manager interview. I must ask you – do you think you would like to go in for that? Do you feel ready?" He looked at me intently, as though great matters hung on my response.

"Yes," I replied, trying not to show what a stupid question I thought it was, "Yes – I think I am ready."

"Good. Good. Well, I think you've got real potential." he declared.

He sat back in his chair and looked at me steadily. Time passed. The silence began to get oppressive.

"Er, I..." I said,

"Thanks for dropping in." he interrupted, sitting forward suddenly. And the chat was over.

Things were quiet back at my desk. Kevin was away for a week, so there was no-one to badger me, and not much real work to do. I found myself waiting impatiently for someone to send me an email. I surfed the net negligently, picking up an interesting site about self-publishing which I nevertheless couldn't be bothered to read. I copied the address for later. Then I took to fiddling with a copy of a spreadsheet charting advertising spend for six different products.

Twelve o'clock. A bit early for lunch, perhaps, but then it saves queuing. I wandered out, got a Pret sandwich from round the corner, and brought it back to my desk. While eating the sandwich, I ran up a completely meaningless three dimensional chart out of the data from the spreadsheet, and then changed the colours and values so it looked like a model landscape – a flat blue area with yellow sloping up from it, then green, brown, and on top of the solitary sharp peak, a touch of white.

It always annoys me the way people always leave two blank sheets when they use Excel. It's because the default is three sheets (used to be more, I think) when you start a new file, and most people round here are at best only dimly aware that those tabs lurking at the bottom indicate other sheets which can be deleted, named, selected, copied and all the rest. You could actually stick some text in a big text box on page 2, and no-one would ever read it.

The drawing room at Wenham Hall smelt of mildew, and the furnishings felt cold and unaired. The sunlight streaming in through the two tall windows was full of dust motes, and in one corner an unused vacuum cleaner of ancient pattern leaned abandoned against the panelled wall.

In all probability the room had not seem such a large or lively gathering of people since the late Earl's distant youth. A small deputation from the local police, headed by D.I. Cuffley, sat in a group at one side of the hearth; Mr Popplewell, the late Earl's solicitor, was ensconced on the sofa in solitary splendour; and three sombre-looking members of the Pasholme family, now the presumed heirs, kept their own counsel in the rear. A number of local creditors, elderly villagers and former servants who considered themselves to have an interest in the estate, were scattered about the room on dining chairs brought in from the next room. There was even one of Lady Jane's many cousins standing by the window, a dignified lady called Lettie Durbridge, holding a brochure with a rocket on the cover.

"I'm very grateful," said Lady Jane, standing before the imposing Adam fireplace, "to you all for agreeing to come here today. I have made certain discoveries which I should like to share with you."

A thrill of expectancy ran round the room.

"First of all, who poisoned the fourth Earl of Wenham? We've established now beyond reasonable doubt that there should have been no-one else in the house that night. There are no signs of forced entrance, and in any case, how would an intruder force the Earl to drink from a glass which visibly contained hemlock leaves?"

"We've also established that the Earl was seen by Sergeant Derrick down by the pond earlier that evening. This is the only place near Wenham where water hemlock is known to grow. The only possible conclusion is that the Earl put the hemlock in his own drink. Suicide? Possibly, but death from water hemlock is quite unpleasant, not a likely method to choose, unless the victim had confused it with the hemlock concoction which Plato describes as being responsible for the death of Socrates. We know, moreover, that the Earl was in the habit of drinking whisky infused with mint. The balance of probability is that in the absence of his faithful manservant, the Earl simply made a tragic mistake."

"But the Earl's children presumed he had been murdered, and by someone he trusted to prepare his nightcap. In their minds, it could only have been one of their number. If it were the eldest, then he too surely deserved the same fate; if it were a younger sibling, he or she would surely seek to eliminate the elder claimants. The game was on."

"We now know how at least three of the Earl's children were responsible for the deaths of one or other of their siblings, and how the so-called Wenham wolf-pack destroyed itself through a campaign of internecine murder."

"Who then, is to blame for the death of Fenella, the last member of the family and probably the only one innocent of murder herself? The mystery is compounded by the fact that all the probable beneficiaries, the natural suspects, are dead. The Pasholme cousins were all far from the scene until today and all have alibis."

"However, I have discovered that the Earl had another son."

There was a shocked murmur, and surprised glances were exchanged. Only Oliver Mordaunt, the artist, looked unsurprised.

"Two years ago," explained Lady Jane, "Oliver here discovered his dead mother's diary. From this, and from papers he found with it, he uncovered for the first time the secret of his own paternity. The Earl had embarked on the seduction of Miss Mordaunt his mother, at that time the village school-teacher. In order to have his wicked way with Miss Mordaunt, an honest and virtuous woman, the Earl had secretly gone through a bogus

marriage ceremony with her. Mr Dundas, a friend of the Earl who was somewhat in his debt at the time, played the part of a priest on the occasion, something he now regrets. He has described the Earl's scheme in a letter written from Eastbourne, where he now lives in retirement."

D.I. Cuffley rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Oliver Mordaunt," he said, " I arrest you for the..."

"Just a moment, please," interrupted Lady Jane. "Oliver investigated the circumstances very thoroughly and he discovered that what the Earl intended as a bogus marriage, intended only to overcome young Miss Mordaunt's scruples, was in fact legally valid under an old statute intended to protect young women against just this kind of deception. I am satisfied that his conclusion is correct. It follows that he was always the legal heir: the Earl was a bigamist and his other children were in fact, bastards."

A hubbub broke out: D.I.Cuffley remained uncertainly on his feet.

"Excuse me!" said Lady Jane, and order gradually returned. "It follows that Oliver had no financial motive for killing his illegitimate half-siblings. All he had to do was come forward with the documents he had discovered, and he would be the heir. It may seem strange that for two years he failed to do so. Indeed, he failed to do so even when the Earl died, and the supposed heirs arrived. Could it be, Oliver, that you resented the way your mother had been treated? Did you plan a grand humiliation for the false Fidgetts? And when they started to kill each other, did you decide to stand by and let it happen, rather than bring their murderous aim to bear on you? Did you, in fact, enjoy the sensation of having your revenge, a bloody revenge, without lifting a finger?"

Oliver was unmoved. His lip curled slightly, he raised one eyebrow, and replied:

"Schadenfreude is not a crime, Lady Jane."

And then, atrociously, he smiled.

OK, I realise writing at work is a stupid risk, but another thousand words is something I can well use at the moment. At 35,000 words, I still have ground to make up, although as ever my main problem isn't lack of words but lack of plot. With the climactic scene I've just made a start on, Wenham is practically complete, with 15,000 still to come. I pasted in the address of the stuff about self-publishing and emailed the spreadsheet to my home email. Just to be on the safe side, I deleted the original copy of the spreadsheet altogether.

Chapter Nineteen: Long passages about a biscuit

It's finished. It really is finished. Wenham, I mean. The story is told. I knew it was going to happen, and now it has. All the sections of text can be bolted together, and the thing can go down the slipway now. Whether it's any good is another question, but it's incontrovertibly finished. It just isn't 50,000 words long.

I sit here at the trusty old laptop and time passes. As I sit here the end of November is actually getting closer all the time. I can almost feel it breathing down my neck. There's an inflatable snowman outside the motorbike shop. This morning, there was actual snow. December is standing over me the way a curious Tyrannosaurus stands over a little fluffy white bunny. I look around the flat, but there is nothing to distract me. In Julie's absence the place is becoming tidier all the time, and pretty well everything has been cleaned at least once within the last twenty-four hours. Many small objects have actually been sterilised.

"Detective work just does involve a lot of waiting, Charlie." said Lady Jane, "Here, have a magazine. This story about the Morris 1000 is rather clever. It's a sort of updated version of one in Boccaccio: actually there's the same story in Apuleius or somebody..."

Oh God. I'm getting so desperate now that for a few minutes I seriously considered resurrecting the idea that Wenham is a story being told on an intergalactic spaceship. It may come to that. You remember that bit about the Danes? That's back in. It may be guff, but it's words, it's all more words.

I hauled out the corpse of the old book earlier on, the proto-Wenham, my earlier attempt at the same story, just to see if there was anything in it I could salvage. Not words, not words, just ideas. But it's hopeless. Everything that happened in that version has already happened in this one, sometimes twice, in flashback, and in slow motion. I'm stuck trying to find places for random interpolations.

While she was waiting, Lady Jane studied the bookshelves, often a source of information about the personality of their owner. 'Sacred Hunger' by Barry Unsworth: she remembered that one – a Booker prize winner? Through a strange combination of circumstances, a group of slaves and mutineers take over a ship and establish an idealistic multicultural society...Hmm, Gore Vidal, 'Civilisation'...that's the one where the unfortunate Cyrus Spitama, grandson of Zoroaster, gets sent on epic journeys to China, India, and Greece. I wonder if I can remember the details?

Ach. It's the old problem – if it were really just words, any words, it wouldn't be so bad, but somehow I can't quite bring myself to stuff the thing full of completely irrelevant rubbish. That's not the point.

The phone rings, and I snatch it up immediately.

"Hi!" says Tom's voice.

"Ah, Tom," I reply wearily, "I've really got to write, mate. I really have this time. You know?"

"Oh sure," he says, unworried, "Nobody wants to come out any more. Either they've given up and just want to forget the whole thing, or they're still desperately struggling to stay in with a chance. What's your word count now?"

"Nearly 40,000," I reply, "On paper, I'm almost back on target; it really ought to be possible now. But I've run out of story."

"OK. Well I'll be in the Angel if you think your creative juices could do with a top-up. I'm still stalled, by the way."

"Bad luck," I say, "I'll give you a ring in December, anyway, if we don't see each other."

I spend half an hour putting in the text of two more hymns which the villagers sing in the final episode which I've already written. Why aren't there any really long hymns? I put in a story about the little figure of the Wenham Elf which was carved on the North side of the church tower by some anonymous mason in the fifteenth century and is said to bring good luck to couples who have their wedding pictures taken on that side of the church – no I have no idea what I'm on about, either, just give me words! Then I save, switch off, get my coat, and head outside.

I feel a burden of guilt as I trudge down the street. What I ought to do is just sit there day and night until another ten thousand words is on paper, and then I'd be free of the damn thing. I suspect now that part of my own motivation in taking on Nanowrimo was just the desire to be rid once and for all of any idea that it was somehow my duty to try and write a novel. It certainly feels now as if I just need to be shot of the thing, and never write another non-factual word in my life. I've been so stupid. I fell in with a bad crowd, I was led astray. I got hooked, I couldn't stop. But I'm a good boy really. But I've learned my lesson, Your Honour, truly I have. Once I'm clean I'll never touch another book as long as I live.

There has certainly been a big falling-off in the sociability of the 'wrimo folk. When I arrive I can't see a single face I recognize, and I think I must have misunderstood; but in the end I spot Tom sitting in solitary splendour with a pint of Guinness in front of him. He seems unworried, as always, and greets me with his usual warmth.

"How many people does it take to write a Nanowrimo novel?" he asks.

"I don't know: how many people does it take to write a Nanowrimo novel?" I ask.

"You mean you had help?" he asks with mock horror.

"Very good, yeah," I say without enthusiasm. "Actually, that would be good, wouldn't it? I mean, if you could write me a couple of episodes to insert into Wenham, I could easily do you a couple of chapters for Snarking Asshats. Why don't we give it a go? Go on. See, I'm not dictating, but one of your people lives in Delhi, and every day his lunch is delivered to him by one of those special carriers that take home-made stuff out in buckets to the people in offices..."

But Tom has covered his ears.

"Not listening! Not listening!" he repeats.

"Well, you could take the idea," I point out. "You're allowed to take ideas. It's just words you have to drag out of your own brain."

"No, I don't want to be helped. You'll only give me false hope. As the man said, I can cope with the despair: it's the hope that kills me."

"Who was that? Housman?"

"John Cleese."

"Of course, of course. Same again?"

It was a gloomy session to begin with, but as the evening wore on, we managed to stop talking about Nanowrimo. I think I was telling Tom all about The Golden Ass and its relationship to the story of Beauty and the Beast, all in quite unnecessary detail when Miss Mouse suddenly appeared, and it was actually a bit of a wrench to spool back to the burdens of the 'wrimo writer's life.

"Are you OK?" she asked, in a concerned tone, probably arising from the relative lack of bumptious comments from me on the Nanowrimo forums recently. She put one small mouse-like hand on my shoulder.

"Fine," I said, "And you?"

"25,000!" she said, triumphantly, "Of course, it's not nearly enough, but it's a big improvement. I'm not giving up yet. Could I... I know this is awful, but would you mind if I read you a short section, just to see if it sounds alright?"

She read us an episode set during the war- and it's only as I write this I realise I'm not sure whether it was supposed to be WWI or WWII. Our heroine has been stood up and is in tears in Pall Mall, beginning to attract the haughty stares of passing nobs. Suddenly, who should appear but Jimmy, the young boy she wrestled with when small, the bolshy trade unionist who has now somehow attained the rank of Captain and is in full uniform, with medals. He offers her his shoulder and a spotlessly white

handkerchief, and takes her off to a magnificent dance, where he behaves impeccably, speaking in a fake upper-class accent which is probably meant to be satirical but is surprisingly accurate and convincing. In any case, his manner and his uniform have the staff fawning and the chinless aristocrats around them gazing fondly at this sturdy specimen of British manhood.

Our heroine is emotionally vulnerable after the upsets of the earlier part of the evening, and this strange new paradoxical personality – Jimmy, but Jimmy with polished manners and a commission – is deeply appealing to her. They have a wonderful evening which concludes in Jimmy's hotel room, and I'm assuming this is the occasion when the feckless artist son is initiated. They fall asleep in each others arms.

The following morning she discovers that Jimmy is AWOL and has merely 'borrowed' a captain's uniform; however, after a breakneck journey he returns to barracks just in time, where he can resume his post as a private in the catering corps without being court-martialled. It's only later, as a sergeant, that he attains genuine military renown and a medal of his own, by fending off an opportunistic group of German paratroopers while armed only with a spatula and a potato peeler.

It's not bad, actually – I think she's improving with practice - though it's not really my kind of thing. I make a couple of minor suggestions, while Tom merely tells her it's great.

"You two never let people see any of your stuff," she complains. Tom flaps one hand dismissively.

"I never remember to bring it," he confesses, "I never do any writing anyway."

"I haven't got anything new," I say, "I've run out of inspiration. The story's finished, but I need another ten thousand words. I think I might have to introduce another murderess, though that would really mess things up"

"Only another ten thousand? You're doing really well. What about your MC having a Proustian moment, you know, a long passage about a biscuit? Or why don't you put an epilogue on the end?"

I swallow a snide remark about that being the best place to put an epilogue, and consider the idea. There's something to it, you know.

"It's quite a handy thing," she says, "You can just ramble on about what happened to all sorts of minor characters after the main action, and it doesn't matter if the threads don't hang together. And you can make it as short or as long as you like."

"Yes," I say, warming to the idea, "Yes."

It is quite late by the time we all leave, and Tom disappears quickly with a wave.

"Thanks for the suggestion," I say, "That's the second time you've given me a bit of help."

She looks me in the eye and smiles.

"Would you... would you like to come back for a coffee?" she asks.

"I'd love to, but I'd better not," I reply, falling readily into the well-worn script. She looks a bit vulnerable. I smile back at her, feeling like a bit of a bastard for some reason.

"Goodnight," I say firmly, and give her a grateful peck on the cheek.

Early the following morning, while it's still dark, I wake from a dream I can't quite remember with a slight headache, not a bad one considering. Perhaps in some curious way it is partly attributable to the strange decision I made last night to switch from bitter to red wine half-way through the evening. At the time it was supposed to stop me getting a hangover, though I can't quite recall the rationale now. I stare through the darkness at the ceiling, waiting for my brain to sort itself out. Writing of any kind is surely going to be difficult today, as is work, and I briefly entertain the idea of phoning in sick. It's comfortable here in bed, in that ideal state where you are neither fully awake nor properly asleep, though that is gradually being changed by a growing need to pee, probably the reason I am waking up so early.. This at least I can deal with. I roll out of bed in practised style and head for the bathroom and the World Service, my faithful nocturnal companion. It's only now I realise that I don't know where the bathroom is, or the bedroom door. My flat has changed in the night. All at once some memory module coughs into reluctant life in the centre of my brain and I remember.

Picture if you can, and if you can bear to, the figure of John Faletcher in mid-shuffle, naked, his buttocks silvered by the moonlight still streaming through the window, his head twisted back over his shoulder in an uncomfortable way, his face contorted in surprise, his lips parted to emit a soft, low groan of shock, incomprehension, remorse, and recollection, his eyes fixed on the figure of Miss Mouse sleeping peacefully under her duvet behind him.

Chapter Twenty: More revelations

I arrived early at Behemoth in a state of turmoil. I got as far as sitting at my desk and then a kind of paralysis hit me. My brain, reserving only those basic functions necessary for life support, had diverted its resources into running a single sentence through my mind over and over again.

Oh God.

"You alright?"

It was fat Katie, the stupidest of Behemoth's generally rather superior secretaries, but unfortunately the one who worked for the Director.

"Uh? Oh, yeah. Yeah. In a brown study, you know?"

"What?"

"Yes, I'm OK."

"Only, I just wanted to check it was alright."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"No, I mean the spreadsheet."

"The...?"

"The spreadsheet. Was it alright?"

A horrid, impossible speculation entered my mind.

"Which spreadsheet, Katie?"

"That one I took. Oh, you don't know, do you? Sorry. No, you see John was asking if we had a copy of the ad spend figures, and I knew you'd had it, so I came over and you weren't here, but your computer was still on, so I had a look and I took it. Is that alright?"

"Which spreadsheet? Not the... ASP raw data breakdown? The Multistode figures?"

"Yeah, that was the one I think."

"But I deleted that one the other day."

"Yeah, but I looked in your sent mail and you'd sent it to yourself, so I forwarded it to John. The thing is, when I printed it for John, there was all this writing. See, I always check 'print whole workbook', 'coz sometimes people put stuff on other sheets."

This is the woman who can't be bothered to look in her own mailbox, but invariably asks to be sent stuff again. But suddenly, on this one occasion, she comes over, hacks into my computer, looks at sent mail, and finds the one deadly needle in the haystack, and takes care that every bit of it gets printed. Evil is not just a metaphor.

"That wasn't really the right one, Katie – have you still got it?"

"Oh yes, I've still got it. Do you want me to send it back to you?"

"No, just delete that one and I'll dig out the right version for you. Good job you asked me. You know it's a bit out of order, really, forwarding other people's sent mail."

"Yeah, sorry. I thought there was something wrong with it, cause there was all this stuff like a story. When I printed it off, I looked at it, and I thought, he's not going to want this, is he? He just wants the front bit with the figures."

"That's right."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"Good."

"Yeah, I'll tell him."

"You don't need to tell him., do you?"

"Oh, yeah, 'cause in the end I thought better give him the lot, and if doesn't want it he can ignore it. So it was in his overnight papers yesterday. But don't worry. I'll tell him that bit wasn't supposed to be in it. What was it, anyway?"

I groaned.

"It was nothing, Katie, but if you get a chance to take it out without raising the subject, I think that would be good. It'll just annoy him if he reads it."

"Oh," she said, with relish, "He'll have read it. He reads everything. Sorry."

She smiled broadly and half-turned to go.

"Have I got you in trouble?" she asked, cheerily.

There was just nothing I could do. I would have expected a crisis like this to paralyse me with worry, but the thing is, I've already been paralysed with worry for entirely different reasons. What am I going to do,? I think I have to tell Julie about last night. No, it's not stupid: don't raise your

eyebrows like that. I may be a pompous, lazy bastard, but I am honest. I don't want to cheat. Think how much worse it will be if she finds out for herself, and let's face it, with my luck and skill, she's bound to. Oh. come on, let's do it. Let's make the appointment with the dentist. Let's arrange to lance the boil. Let's face it, this bloody morning isn't getting any worse, whatever happens.

I pick up the phone and key the number.

"Julie?"

"John?" she doesn't sound annoyed, just mildly surprised. I cannot deal with this over the phone, of course. This is a matter for face-to-face discussion only.

"Julie, look, I need to see you. Just half an hour? Can I come over?"

"What's wrong?"

"I just want to... I need to... There's..."

"You've done something. Is it to do with bottles? What have you done? Tell me."

"No, no. Just let's have a chat later, OK?"

"No, I'm not doing that. Just tell me what you've done."

I think about ringing off, but then a sudden spurt of anger makes me change my mind.

"Alright, look, I didn't want to do this on the phone, but... Do you remember Miss Mouse?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"Oh fuck, look never mind, let's just leave it for now. I'll speak to you later."

"No, no. Who is she?"

"She's one of the Nanowrimo people. Remember? She had, uh, my laptop."

"And?"

"Well, and I slept with her last night."

A silence. Then, weirdly, she laughed, in an unhappy way.

"Well," she said, "That's about it then, isn't it? That was all we needed to round things off."

"No, no, please. It was just a stupid thing, It's nothing. I'm sorry. It'll never happen again. I just..."

"You just what? Wanted to boast about it? Wanted to upset me at work? Wanted to get in before she rings me herself? What?"

"No... I'm sorry Julie. Please forgive me. Can I see you?"

"You know, John, you really are a bastard. You didn't have to ring me up at work with this. Actually, to be frank, I don't know why you told me at all, unless this is some weird way of dumping me."

"Oh no, look..."

"Look, I've got to go. Don't ring me again. I'll ring you. Tonight. If you actually want me to?"

"Yes, of course, but look..."

She rang off.

Made the right decision there, eh? Handled like a pro. Smooth or what?

I sat staring at the elderly monitor on my desk for the rest of the day, not doing anything, not even reading emails. Nothing happened. No call, no summons from Sopert. I went home.

I'm not a superstitious person, but as I sit here with the completed text of Wenham before me (40,252 words – I'm that close), I cannot help feeling that I brought this on myself by the perverse magic of writing. Above all, I wrote the end first: I actually wrote 'The End': in some strange way, that turned this whole thing into a kind of curse. By writing a downbeat story, I have somehow given a downbeat turn to my life. Don't you think? How else can you explain it, then? Don't look at me like that! If I sound a bit mad, just bear with me. I think I can do something about it.

Epilogue

"Would you put my bags in the car, Charlie?" asked Lady Jane.

"Back to London, then?"

"Yes, I can't really stay here any longer. Have you packed, or are you sending stuff on later?"

"Packed? You mean..."

"You are coming with me, aren't you? You don't have to, but I sort of assumed you would."

She looked at him enigmatically.

"You want to take me on permanently?" asked Charlie, incredulously.

"Oh yes. You did a good job, Charlie. We'll sign a proper contract in London, but I'll pay the same rate I've been giving you here – alright, no, plus ten per cent, London is expensive. And there's a nice flat over the garage – I've got a mews place, you know the kind of thing – which is yours as part of the deal if you want it."

"I didn't think I'd sort of passed the trial period," said Charlie, "You seemed quite cross with me over that bottle business. And then me being friendly with Fenella, well..."

"What I really need, Charlie," said Lady Jane pensively, "Isn't a chauffeur, or an assistant detective. I get into some strange places in my line of work, and deal with some odd people. I need somebody sensible, reliable and, well, rooted in reality. Someone who's, oh, thirty percent Sam Weller, thirty percent Dr Watson, and forty percent Digby."

"Digby?"

"From Dan Dare. You never read it? Well, anyway, you're that kind of rooted chap, Charlie. In my opinion."

"I'm a bit rougher and tougher than that lot," said Charlie, "Unless Digby was a bit of a bruiser, whoever he is."

"No, you are a bit bigger and tougher," said Lady Jane, smiling, "That's not a bad thing, either. Anyway, look, I can't stand here all day discussing your personal qualities. Can you put the bags in?"

"Yus, milady" said Charlie, and smiled. She smiled back unreservedly, and wagged one finger at him.

Then I solemnly deleted the words "The End", though of course it still is the end, but not really the end any more. I'm sorry, I'm babbling. 40,469 words: that's it for today, I'm afraid.

I sat back and looked around my lonely flat. By now every surface was clear and disinfected and the only piece of mess not neatly arranged in a tidy container was me.

The doorbell made me jump violently. I got up and opened the door, and it was Julie. She didn't smile at me, but she was here, at least.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"You've got a key, actually," I reminded her - it was meant to sound better than it did. She came in and sat down on one side of the table. As though programmed, I sat down opposite.

"John," she said, in a business-like way, "This mouse person. Is it serious? Are you seeing her?"

"No, I told you." I said, "I went out to one of their sort of writing things, and I drank a lot, and I was just stupid. It'll never happen again."

"Cause, you know, I'm not saying, but I would understand, if you seriously wanted to sort of move on?"

"No, no. No. No. It's not like that."

"Okay, well look. I've been thinking, and I think I haven't really been fair to you."

No? This is not what I was expecting.

"I haven't been very patient really, and maybe a bit mean. I don't mean everything is alright, but I'm not going to have a row with you now."

Not now.

"What I suggest is that we stick to the plan of getting through the Nanoo thing, only I'm going to try to be nicer about it. Then when it's over, we're going to have to get straight about some things. There'll be... Well, there'll be some difficult things to say. Things you won't like, you understand?"

I nodded emphatically like a toy dog. I really wanted to hear those things I wouldn't like.

"Are you sure you're happy with this? Alright. Now look. You said you wanted to celebrate. Come over tomorrow. I'll cook something. Is that OK? You can... you can bring your laptop if you like. It's OK."

She swallowed. There was a tear in her eye. Mine too.

"Thanks, Julie," I said huskily, "You're wonderful. I don't deserve it. Thank you."

I stood up and moved clumsily round the table towards her, but she stood up too and backed away.

"Not now," she said, "Not today. But I'll see you tomorrow?"

Chapter Twenty-one: A Turn for the Better

"He didn't read it," said Katie, looming up suddenly over my shoulder.

"Uh, whah?"

"He didn't read the spreadsheet with the story in," she explained, "You were really lucky. Only normally he reads everything. But apparently last night he had a leaking pipe in his roof, and spent hours trying to get it patched up. He only read about half of his papers. I took it out again this morning, so you're alright."

Can this be true? Is everything beginning to come up roses? Steely self-control now.

"Oh, that's great," I said, temperately, "It would only have annoyed him. Thanks for that."

"Have you got the proper version?"

"The wha?"

"The proper version, without the story? You said you would dig it out for me."

"Oh yeah. I think I deleted it, You could just delete the second sheet off the other one, the one with the story."

"Oh, sorry, I don't know where I put it. Could you send it to me again?"

"I deleted... Yeah, no, I'll dig out a proper copy and send it to you. OK?"

"OK then. Cheers!"

"Cheers, Katie."

I can't believe the magic of the re-write! As soon as I deleted those fateful words 'The End', and added an upbeat epilogue, my real life immediately started going right again. After she'd gone, I solemnly stood up in my little cubicle and began to sing.

"Zip-a-de-doo-dah! Zip-a-dee-ay! Mah oh ma-ah, what a wonderful day!
Plenny of sunshine, heading mah way..."

"Shut **the fuck** up." said Martin next door.

I shut up – I didn't want anyone taking an interest in why I was so happy. But in my heart, the choir and congregation of Wenham were singing.

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with mercy, and shall break,
In blessings on your head.*

Oh yeah.

I had a surprising amount of stuff to catch up with that day: it's amazing what can build up during a day of total inertia. But I worked with a will, and hurried home eagerly. There was time to draft a few extra words.

"What's going on, Charlie?"

"Wedding, your ladyship. Mrs Botham's younger girl Mary is getting married. Looks like they've just come out of the church."

"Pull up, and let's see." said Lady Jane curiously, "It just shows, you know, we think everything stops when there's a murder investigation, but actually life goes on, doesn't it?"

Charlie pulled up discreetly in the lane and they walked back to the old lych-gate. The bride and groom, already covered in confetti, were having their pictures taken against the grey old stone of the looming church.

Mary, the bride, looked genuinely radiant, much prettier than Charlie remembered: she was in a resplendent white dress with a veil caught back over her head. Even the groom looked happy: normally in Wenham, grooms looked pale and uncertain, oppressed and enfeebled by the powerful oestrogenic magic of the occasion, and perhaps by what they had drunk the night before. But here today Young Joe too really looked borne up by life, as if his dignity and happiness were blossoming with the promise of a new and better life ahead.

"God bless!" said Charlie softly, "May all your troubles be little ones!"

"I'm afraid," said a voice in his ear, "that at least one of them will be. She's pregnant, and he's not the father. It's going to be another illegit Fidgett, they're saying. Freddie's."

Startled, Charlie turned. Lady Jane had a smile on her face which he didn't like at all.

"Sorry," she said, "but that's what they're saying in the village. There's actually more talk about that one prospective birth than all four Fidgett deaths, if you ask me..."

Christ, she may look like Diana Rigg, but that woman really is a cow. She's got a mind of her own, somehow; I'm almost ashamed to have created her. I deleted the last bit – she can keep her village gossip to herself. I am in charge now, and all shall be sweetness and light, in

Wenham as in reality. No further shadows will fall across my manuscript or for that matter, my life. I saved and switched off.

I debated whether I should take flowers to Julie this time. Like I said before, it seems a weak, hackneyed gesture, but I was once told very firmly by Julie that weak and hackneyed gestures are better than none. In the end, I stopped off at the hospital and got some. You can always buy flowers at a hospital.

It seemed as if it were a long time since I had waited in the lift lobby of Julie's block: I almost felt nostalgic. There was a slightly awkward moment when she opened the door and we both wondered whether I was going to try to kiss her, but we were soon sitting down with a glass of prosecco.

"Damn," I said, "I could have brought the Nanowrimo bottle of Cristal if I'd thought.

She looked at me quizzically.

"I'm glad you didn't." she said.

The place was a tip: two weeks' worth of newspapers and magazines everywhere and pairs of shoes under every chair. My experienced eye could tell that Julie had had a quick last-minute clean-up, but to most people it would not have been obvious: Julie's clean-ups usually consisted of arranging the rubbish more artistically. She actually had a stack of banana peels and used coffee filters *sitting on the kitchen counter*.

Leaving stuff on the floor is the key. If you're not a tidy person, your desk and table may get a bit out of control from time to time. Your real problems only begin when you start to use the floor as a storage space. It may not seem much to begin with – just leave a few papers on the carpet by the side of the desk until you've got space – but more dumps become established, they sprawl and spread, and before you know where you are, you're having to pick your way across the room, stepping over used take-away containers and dirty plates, unwashed clothes and unemptied carrier bags, in order to reach the only small spot on the sofa which isn't piled up with tissue boxes and piles of washing.

OK, Julie's place is not like that, but I've seen the early symptoms. As we sat down to dinner, I tactfully shuffled the pair of shoes under my chair to one side. I quite liked the messiness really; it had the sort of endearing quality which women on detergent ads are so struck by when their small sons turn up at the door covered in mud. Know what I mean?

"I've never understood this novel-writing business," Julie confessed, when we had made the first inroads into our whitebait, "Perhaps that's why I've been a bit impatient at times. I mean, not many people feel they could write a great symphony. Not many people feel a frustrated urge to turn

out a great painting. Yet half the world seems to think they're potential Charles Dickens. What is it about novels?"

"I think they look easy," I admitted, "We all write. Not many of us draw, and hardly anyone writes music. OK, we don't write novels, or even fiction, but you know, we write complicated stuff all the time: we feel we have the basic skills in a way we don't when it comes to painting or music. It's the same with singing, probably – too many people feel they can do it."

"There might be something in that," she granted, "But why do people even want to? Surely people realise that they're not going to win the Nobel prize?"

"I don't think so, any more than people realise it's too late for them to be the new Elvis. Hope springs eternal. But there are deeper motives, you know, wanting to create something instead of just absorbing, having something you want to express: I don't know. Why does anybody want to do anything?"

I thought about it for a bit and something else occurred to me.

"The Nanowrimo thing, though, that's like a game. I mean, it's like you set out to complete fifty levels of some game; it sort of gets compulsive. You think you'll just get to the big boss battle at the end of the level, and then you think you'll just have a little look at the next bit. But above all, once you've made some real progress, you can't bear to throw it away. You're hooked, until you can see that screen at the end."

"I don't really know what you're talking about," said Julie, "You mean you've become like one of those people who get up and leave a restaurant half-way through a meal, or wake up at two in the morning, in order to go and play, what is it? World of Lovecraft or something? The people who play until their eyes bleed?"

"Not exactly," I replied, "But I like the sound of World of Lovecraft."

As the meal wore on – and it was a good one, helped out somewhat by Julie having bought most of it in prepared form from Marks and Spencer, not that she's really a bad cook – things kind of settled back towards normality and the initial tension drained away.

As we sat on the sofa with brandy, Julie put on a more serious expression.

"This Mouse," she asked, "It wasn't serious at all? Please be honest. If you think we should..."

"No, no, really: I was just pissed and depressed. I mean, she's nice, but... I was stupid. Oh by the way. Why did you sort of laugh when I first told you?"

She blushed.

"Well," she said, without meeting my eye, "To be honest, it made me think of that book, you know? Los Angeles Without A Map? Where our hero reads about this man who has been arrested for groping one of the characters in Disneyland, and he thinks: surely this is the nadir of sexual desperation, to assault Minnie Mouse? Alright, not fair, but it was what just came to mind. Sorry."

"That must be one of your books," I said; actually, I thought I did remember it.

"We'll need to talk about it all if we're going to sort things out. But not now. Not while the curse of Nanowrimo is still in the air."

"Yeah, I was beginning to think of it as a kind of curse," I confessed.

"By the way, just in case you were wondering, you're on the sofa tonight. If you're staying. Sorry."

I didn't mind. I took it for granted that there was going to be period of political re-education, a time of penitence. The least I could expect, and probably more than I deserved.

"Would it... would it be OK if I just did a few hundred words?" I asked.

She sort of hesitated, and for a moment I thought I'd made a ghastly false move.

"Yes, of course. I'm going to bed, anyway. Goodnight." She gave me a chaste peck on the forehead.

I sat down at the little desk, and with a sigh took out the old lap-top. I had very nearly decided to leave the damn thing behind, so as not to muck up the atmosphere of reconciliation, but the trouble is, missing the 50,000 narrowly would be really stupid – far worse than missing by a mile, or never really getting started. I had reached the point where I was actually slightly ahead of target, a really good place to be at this stage of the game, not something to throw away lightly. I found it difficult to concentrate at first, but then I hit on the idea of a passage early on where D.I. Cuffley makes a first appearance, behaves like a pompous idiot, and generally gets off on the wrong foot.

"May I ask, young lady, by what authority you are conducting this investigation? Are you a police officer?"

Lady Jane smiled, "Anyone can ask questions, Detective Inspector. Can't they?"

"I think you'll find it advisable to keep away from criminal events of this nature," said Cuffley, "And allow the professionals to do their work..."

"Oh no," interrupted Lady Jane, "That would be career suicide, I'm afraid. I'm a bit of a journalist, you see? I don't seem to have my card with me, but you could ask the Commissioner if you wanted to, you know, check my bona fides. I had dinner over at his lovely house the other day: his wife was at school with one of my cousins. It is a lovely house, isn't it? I really think we might do a feature on it."

Cuffley stood silent for a moment.

"I think that would be much more suitable than what you're doing, if you don't mind my saying so." he said. "A nice piece about furniture."

Standard stuff, really, bit of a cliché even, but then those are the easiest to write. After about an hour, I saved and switched off. Julie had switched off most of the lights and cleared the table. Except for the wine bottle. The wine bottle. *The wine bottle.*

Faletcher's eyes bugged out of his head as if he was about to undergo explosive decompression in a vacuum. As he sat in the tiny chair, he seemed to age visibly, and to feel the sudden onset of some serious degenerative disease, affecting his co-ordination and his breathing. His face went pale, and then at once went red. With a low moan, he stood up in a twisted, half-hunched posture, staring at the bottle fixedly. Small spasms ran through his frame, and he made a strangled noise like the kind of thing Dr Jekyll might have come out with while trying desperately not to turn into Mr Hyde. He limped towards the table like Quasimodo, and then, suddenly, the conflict seemed to resolve itself. He straightened, paused for a moment as if gathering his breath, picked up his jacket from the peg in the hall, opened the door softly and slid out into the night.

Chapter Twenty-two: Difficult conversations

"Good morning!" said Julie, "Sleep alright?"

I gradually resumed consciousness and pieced together the essential memories I needed for a coherent answer,

"Yeah, not too bad, considering," I answered, levering myself up off the couch.

"There's coffee if you want it. I'm off in about ten minutes. OK?" she glanced sideways "What's that?" she asked, staring at the table.

The wine bottle still stood there, but in it was a single red rose.

"It's just a rose." I said, "Well, I say 'just', but I had to ransack about twelve gardens last night to find it. Your neighbours are probably going to think the Yeti's moved into the neighbourhood."

She clicked her tongue, shook her head, and left. I'd hoped for a better response, I admit.

I felt pretty good that day, in spite of a relative lack of sleep. I was back in control. But there was an unwelcome task ahead of me, and as the evening approached my spirits began to droop again.

It was only as I picked up the phone that I realised there was another difficulty. I still had no idea what Mouse's actual name was. How could I ask for her if someone else picked up the phone? But I wanted to speak to her, to sort things out. I didn't want just to avoid answering the phone for the next month. Never mind, with any luck, she'd answer the phone herself.

"Hello?" said a voice, uninformatively. I wasn't even completely sure it wasn't her, but I didn't think so.

"Hi!" I said. What now? "Er, this is John..."

"Hello! Did you want to speak to Phillipa?"

Phillipa! Aha! My strategy was succeeding.

"Yes please."

"She's not here any more, I'm afraid."

"Not there?"

"No, she moved out."

"She moved out? Really? When was this?"

"Oh, last February, She went back to Shropshire. Haven't got a phone number, but I think we've got an address if that's any use."

"No, no thanks, that's...OK. Well..."

"Sorry. Bye!"

So much for that. I replaced the phone in confusion. What the hell was I supposed to do now? Luckily Mouse took matters into her own hands and rang me about ten minutes later.

"Was that you speaking to Anna just now?" she asked, "Why did you ask for Phillipa?"

"I didn't, I didn't. Don't forget... I still don't actually know your name."

"It's Cecilia."

"Thanks. Hello, Cecilia."

"Hello. How are you?"

"I was wondering... Could we meet in the pub again, tonight?"

"Oh, I should think so! Same one, about seven?"

"Yes, that's great." I said, wondering immediately why I thought so.

After that conversation, I sat in front of the laptop for forty minutes, but it was no good. I actually began to revise the last section I'd written, which is a bad sign. You don't revise. Don't revise. Don't.

As I approached the pub, I felt really sick, and it was worse when I saw Mouse sitting there, happy, waving at me. I liked her. She was nice. I wanted to be friendly. I didn't want to upset her. Or was it vanity to think she'd be upset?

I got drinks and sat down.

"I just... I wanted to say..." I began.

She understood instantly, without a coherent sentence being spoken. She went stiff: I could see whole structures of assumptions and hopes turn instantly to choking dust inside her. A look came over her face, a look of fury, a look I hadn't seen since I had suggested her story was like one of Catherine Cookson's.

"You don't want to see me." she said, coldly.

"I feel like a total bastard..."

"You are a total bastard."

"Uh, yeah. Well. I'm sorry. You're great, I really, really like you, but you know, I'm sort of in a relationship."

"Oh yes. The wonderful Julie. I've heard all about her. Good luck to you. You do realise she's probably just about to dump you?"

"Oh, look... Don't let's do this. Don't..."

"I felt sorry for you, but it'll serve you right. Oh, what's the point?" she stood up.

"Mouse," I said, "Don't..."

"Cecilia!" she hissed, snatched up her bag, and left. I sat back and sipped sadly at my pint. I didn't really know how I could have handled things any better. Apart from not sleeping with her in the first place, obviously.

And then she was back again, angrier than ever.

"And you know what?" she said, "You know what? Your story is crap. It's crap. It's full of clichés, the characters are corny and flat, the plot doesn't make sense; there are no clues... it's full of irrelevant digressions, all the characters sound like you - you pompous git - it's all dialogue with no description, the motives don't ring true, the chronology is contradictory, and the names of characters change half-way through...the names are all stupid as well... your MC is a boring male fantasy..."

The spirit of Nanowrimo rose strongly in me.

"Yes," I said, conclusively, "All of that is true. But none of it matters, because you know what? **It is fifty thousand words long.**"

"To think I said I liked it!" she hissed, "To think I actually listened to your ideas!"

"Look," I said, "Let's not do it like this. I understand why you're angry, but let's not make a meal of it. I tell you what. Just hit me, OK? Get it over with." I held out my cheek as if for a slap, but much to my surprise she punched me, and, she got some surprising force behind it for such a slightly-built person.

"Ow, shit!" I said, involuntarily. It hurt like hell, really, far worse than I'd bargained for. But I think it did relieve her feelings for a moment. She sort of pursed her lips in a job-well-done sort of way.

Everyone in the pub was looking at us now, and the landlord was putting down the glass he had been polishing as if he might just come over.

"Sorry," she said, insincerely, "But you deserved it." She stalked out quickly.

"Sorry!" I said to the bar at large, "Sorry! You know... sorry!"

You know, I'm a reasonable sort of bloke. I'm ready to accept the karmic harvest of my personal turpitude. But really, you know? I take up a friendly offer, I politely decline anything more: in this day and age, is that grounds for outrage? Just asking.

Anyway, I stayed where I was for a while, under the landlord's beady eye, just finishing my drink, giving Cecilia plenty of time, if she were so inclined, to pop back and point out that my poetic imagery was rubbish, or my use of metaphor and simile was weak.

It was fairly clear to me that I wouldn't be served another drink in this establishment this evening, and that in fact I had probably overstayed my welcome already. I had the strong impression that the landlord thought it was better to let me leave quietly than throw me out, but that if it came to it, he was by no means averse in principle to the latter alternative. But I rather felt the need of one more drink. I went outside and phoned Geoff on the off-chance. He was slow to answer.

"Fancy a pint?" I asked, when he did, "I've had a difficult session here."

"Difficult session?" he answered angrily, "Oh, you're having difficult sessions, are you?"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing. Sorry. I can't come out. Er... she's here."

For a moment my confused brain conjured an image of Cecilia giving Geoff a thorough briefing on my failure to exploit to the full the literary opportunities offered by litotes and zeugma.

"Who, Mercedes?" Even in my depressed state, my interest in Geoff's obliging girlfriend was soon reawakened.

Geoff grunted irritably.

"She's been here for two hours already. She wants me to listen. She says she wants advice, but I'm not allowed to say a word. Between you and me, I think the only way through, the only way my ears can cope, is for me to get totally rat-arsed again, the way I was the first time."

"The first time?"

"The first time she unloaded all her damn issues about... oh you know. Oh fuck, look John, I really can't talk like this, with her upstairs. It's just mad. I'm sorry. Really. I've got to go. Sorry, mate. Really. Bye."

O, the mutability of human fate. One minute a man is enjoying an uncomplicated regime of sex and cooked breakfasts, the next his happiness is dashed and he finds himself being required to spend his evenings listening sympathetically to a range of female relationship problems. I mean, isn't God supposed to be a man? I couldn't help feeling though, that in a limited way Geoff was getting what he deserved for falsely representing himself as a good listener, a reckless step which is all too easily taken in the early stages of a relationship.

I walked home contemplatively and plonked myself in front of the laptop. I really need to press on here – there's a definite possibility that I can finish ahead of schedule, before the actual last day of the month – and wouldn't that be great? But in spite of myself, I can't help thinking about what Mouse said.

Are the names of my characters stupid? OK, Fidgett is a fairly whimsical name for the Earl's family. But what Mouse, OK Cecilia, probably doesn't realise is that I stole the name from Osbert Lancaster. It's the name of the aristocratic family in Draynefleete. Surely no-one – no-one who's read James Knox's book, at any rate - is going to tell me they think Osbert Lancaster is stupid?

OK, the clues are a bit deficient. They don't really amount to a knock-down case. Mind you, Agatha Christie's clues weren't all that good. She was a devil for the late revelation which solves the case and which the reader hadn't been given a hint about. So I understand. To be honest, I've never actually read any Agatha Christie.

Wenham makes sense to you, doesn't it,? Oh, I forgot. You haven't actually read it. Only the bits I've quoted. You know there's lots of other stuff in it, all good stuff? And you've read enough to know it makes sense, haven't you?

"What you have to remember, you see," said Lady Jane as they sped towards London, "Is that we're not in a detective story. In those things, it always happens that the case produced by the detective is enough to secure a conviction; or the guilty parties confess, faced with the overwhelming evidence, or they kill themselves. So everything is wrapped up neatly; they never end up knowing who it is but unable to get a guilty verdict."

"In real life, it's not like that. Poirot would never have secured a single conviction in the real world. People don't confess, and they don't obligingly kill themselves just because you happen to have correctly accused them. It's not as easy as that."

Charlie digested this for a few moments.

"Still, though" he said, slowly, " the Wenham murders. It so happened that they actually did kill each other off, leaving no-one to be tried. So that is a real world case where things were wrapped up neatly, isn't it?"

"Charlie," said Lady Jane, "Come on now. It may be neatly wrapped up, but do you really think they killed each other?"

The car lurched just perceptibly sideways as Charlie absorbed this.

"You mean they didn't? But that was what you said – you convinced everyone that that was what happened. And then if they didn't, you mean there is a single murderer after all? Is it...?"

"It was a complex case, granted. If this is a story we're living in," said Lady Jane, darkly, "there's been more than one person who thought they were the author. More than one who thought they could dictate the course of events. But they miscalculated. You know, Charlie, I'm not a big believer in traditional resolutions, and I don't always see a need for the actual killer to be brought to book..."

Oh no, look, this is somehow drifting away again. The story's over, complete. We're not looking for another twist. We're just bulking out the word count. Is that OK with you, Lady Jane? You know, I was a bit worried when Charlie started getting into my dreams, but at least it wasn't her. Maybe it serves me right for imagining a character who is more clear-sighted and intelligent than I am. I've got Sherlock Holmes syndrome – you know how Holmes was basically sharper and more resourceful than Conan Doyle, and wouldn't allow himself to be killed off, even when Doyle, in desperation, wrestled with him and they fell over the Reichenbach falls together. That's not happening here, Lady Jane – sorry. I know she's trying to mess me up. She doesn't like the happy ending – that sort of thing is not to her taste. Tough luck.

No: I am master here, and I decree that there will be no more negative reflections. It's still partly a superstitious thing I admit – I half-believe that what I'm writing is influencing my real life somehow. If things are bad in Wenham, they turn bad with me, and vice versa. I know that's a bit mad. Put it down to a month of continual creative and emotional stress. But that's only half of it. The other half is a new kind of ethical commitment. An author has a kind of responsibility to his characters, don't you think? Or am I just losing it?

Chapter Twenty-three: A Problem

"I gave him that spreadsheet."

"You *what?*"

"I gave him that spreadsheet. Only he asked for it again, and you never got me another copy, so I had to find my copy and give him it." said Katie, resentfully.

"Did you delete the sheet with the story on?"

"No. I can't start mucking about with documents – I just used it the way you sent it to me."

"Actually I didn't send it to you. You took it out of my sent mail."

"Well, whatever. He's got it now, anyway."

I moaned and clutched my head, and she turned away.

"Katie, wait. Has he actually read it?"

"I don't know. It's in his reading folder."

"Could you go back and delete the second sheet? Could you? You know it'll only annoy him. I'm not just asking to save my own skin. Alright, mainly to save my own skin. But not just."

"No, if he thought I was editing stuff he'd asked for, he wouldn't like it. He gets really upset if he thinks people are trying to manipulate him. It's your own fault – you promised you'd get me the original version, didn't you?"

"If I get you another copy of the proper one now, immediately, could you swap them – I mean before he reads them?"

"I don't know whether I can. He might have read it already. Well, I might be able to, I suppose. But you'll have to be really quick. He's going to start looking at his stuff any time now."

As soon as she had gone I started frantically searching. I usually accumulate dozens of copies of any given document, as I get re-copied into different circulations. I ransacked my own emails and files, but I just didn't have it. Not a sniff. With insane, self-destructive tidiness I'd even cleaned out my sent mail. I checked the circulation of the original, which was still on a forwarded email in the depths of my inbox. Only about six people had it, one of whom was John Sopert himself (no point in asking Katie to retrieve it though); one was Kevin, still away, and one was me. One of the others was from a research organisation who would probably try to charge me for an additional copy, and one was in hospital with a

broken leg. The other, my last best hope, was Bill. My old friend the headless troll. Clearly it was my day today.

I hurried up one floor to the land of the faded blue cubicles – I lived in the sea of green. By great good fortune Bill was in place, staring myopically at a turgid-looking document on his screen as if hoping it would speak to him.

“Bill,” I said, without ceremony, “Have you still got that spreadsheet on the Multistode spend? You know the one.”

“Hmm? Hello young man. What do you want?” He looked up unsmilingly and raised one condescending eyebrow.

“You remember the spreadsheet with advertising spend we discussed the other week? Have you still got it? Could you send me a copy?”

“The Multistode? I thought that was finished with. OK. I’ve probably still got it somewhere. Not sure where. I’ll have a look when I’ve finished this and send it on if you like. What do you want it for, anyway? Didn’t you keep it yourself?”

“No, that’s the problem. The thing is, Bill,” I gripped the edge of his cubicle. “I gave John Sopert a messed-up copy and now I need to get the correct one before he sees it, or he’ll have my proverbials for garters, you know? I sort of need it now. I’d be very grateful. Please, if you would.”

“Oh.” he said, looking me up and down. “I see. Got ourselves in bother again, have we? Honestly John, and I’m not being in any way personal here, but you know you want to get a grip of this sort of thing, mate. One of these days...” He paused for a moment’s reflection. He enjoyed making me wait, but finally some last shred of decency came out; or perhaps he decided that in the long run giving me the thing would piss on my chips in some deeper and more effective way than withholding it. Or perhaps he thought John Sopert would in some way blame him if he didn’t provide a copy. In any case, he sat forward with a sigh. “Let’s have a look then... Oh yes. Here it is. There. Sent. Happy bunnies again?”

“Thanks Bill.” I said, fervently.

“Good luck.” he said, and then, with all the scorn his tiny twisted body could hold: “Mr Minimus...”

I ran back to my own desk, checked the spreadsheet. I wouldn’t by any means have put it past Bill to have somehow sabotaged it, but he hadn’t, and it hadn’t somehow acquired a copy of the extra sheet through evil magic. It was OK. I emailed it off to Katie. Then I ran back along the corridor to the little anteroom she occupied.

“Have you got it?” I asked, “Can you replace the other one?”

"No," she said, "It's no good. Too late. And you got me in trouble, didn't you?"

"I what?"

"See, after I spoke to you I thought perhaps I was being a bit mean. So I thought I'd help you out. I deleted the second sheet. But then he comes out and he says that's not the one he wanted. He says he wanted the one with the fictional material. It turns out he did read it the first time even though he had the plumbing problem. He says it takes more than water through the drawing room ceiling to stop him reading his papers. So there was actually no point in bothering about it anyway. It was too late in any case. But now he thinks I'm trying to pull some sort of fast one, or that I don't know what I'm doing. All through trying to help you out."

I had a vision of Mrs Sopert frantically moving buckets and attempting to shore up the house while her husband sat gravely immersed in his business circulars, lifting his eyes only to suggest fondly but firmly that all the noise wasn't helping his concentration very much darling?

"Thanks for trying." I said, hopelessly.

I set off back to my cubicle, feeling numb. I was doomed, doomed. There was no getting around it. I didn't know in what form the storm would break over my head, or when, but clearly it was only a matter of time now. In fact, I hadn't long to wait at all: before I had quite reached the illusory security of my cubicle, a heavy hand descended on my shoulder. I very nearly squealed in fear, I was so tense.

"John? Come with me a moment, would you?" It was Sopert himself, and his tone dispelled any idea that he was going to congratulate me on a brilliant bit of writing, or ask where he could sign up for Nanowrimo. I trailed behind him the long and weary way back to his office.

"Right, John: I'm guessing you know that this is about the spreadsheet you sent me inadvertently, ending with, er, internet fictional material," he said once he'd settled himself. "Now you may be wondering why I didn't speak to you sooner. The fact is, I've been talking to our HR people. If their advice to me had been slightly different, John, we wouldn't be having this conversation, and you'd be clearing your desk. Understand? And don't think that scenario has altogether gone, John, because in my mind it hasn't. It's still very much a possibility."

"However, the HR people tell me that since the material in question is not explicitly pornographic, does not appear to breach commercial confidentiality, and is not offensive hate speech or unacceptable in other ways, it is technically not in breach of our Acceptable Use policy, and is not therefore a disciplinary matter in those respects. They suggested instead that the waste of company time and resources implied by this – material – is instead a management issue."

"You see," I began.

"No, you wait a minute," he interrupted, "You listen to me. What makes this very much worse in my eyes, John, is that this misdemeanour is internet-related. The text here includes a web-site address, and I am forced to conclude that it was your intention that this, er, material of yours was to be uploaded to a chat room. I'd like to know exactly what – ahuh! – you thought you were doing."

I breathed in and out. It was time to put aside all dignity and decency and grovel.

"I'd like to make a clean breast of this, John," I began, "To begin with, I must confess I've been going through a difficult time with my girlfriend."

"Ahuh?"

"One of the problems is that, well, she's a very creative person, whereas I'm sort of totally focussed on work and my career you know? I had to sort of show that I had a creative side too. So I'm afraid I started writing this, er, short story. She sort of insisted. It was her idea, really. I mean totally."

"But it took me an awfully long time, and I hated it really. I had promised I'd finish it, so I had to, but I really just wanted to be done with it. Well, the other day, when I was reviewing the spreadsheet, in my lunchtime of course, I just thought, I can't concentrate properly for worrying about this wretched story. Julie's not going to be happy unless I finish it. So I thought, why don't I take ten minutes, get the whole thing out of my system and be done with it? Then I can really get into the analysis of these figures. I realise now it was stupid, and I really regret it, but I've learned from the experience. I was sort of under pressure, you see. It really won't happen again."

"And what about the, the chat-room?"

"Oh, that address isn't a chat-room. It's a site about publishing stories. I wanted to show it to Julie, my girlfriend, to er, to show how hopeless, how pointless and stupid it all was. I'm just sorry that in a vulnerable moment, I let myself be led astray in the first place."

"Ahuh. Well, I'm glad at least that you've chosen to be honest. I think I understand the position. You can't afford this kind of thing, John, I hope you realise that. I'm surprised that you'd let yourself be led astray like this. I'm very disappointed. But I think I understand, at least. Now I've spoken to a couple of people about you – it's a shame Kevin isn't here but I know his views – and a pretty consistent picture emerges. You're a talented young man, but there's a problem of attitude. One of your senior colleagues said to me that you were very clever, but he didn't quite know whether you had taken on board the positive culture we like to foster at Behemoth: the ethos of Total Improvement. I need to make a decision

here. We're a civilised organisation. People values are very much part of our vision. So I'm not going to sack you. But my expectation is that you will want to look for other opportunities over the next few months. Let me make myself clear. I think that in the best interests of your career you need to be working for someone else by 1 April. I'm not going to spell it out any more than that – just don't be here, alright? We don't want to have to explore that territory. Now you can go. And it's none of my business, but if I were you, well - I'd get myself a new girlfriend, to be quite honest."

I stood up and turned to go.

"Oh: since you were looking at the Multistode spend, what do you make of it?" he asked.

This was bizarre. As if we were straight back to normal. A wild hope that this was just a test, that I hadn't been irrevocably fired, sprang up in my mind, matched at once by a desire to tell the conceited old fool where to put his Multistode. No, no: play it cool. Cool. I couldn't remember anything about the figures. For the moment I couldn't even remember who Multistode were.

"There are several aspects, really..." I began, limply.

"Ahuh?"

"But in the end if you were to sum it up as a headline it would be, er" – fingers tightly crossed – "Slide Of Distribution; Outturn Falling Fast."

"Muh?" he raised an eyebrow, "Slide of distribution?"

"Basically A Slide To A Reduced Distribution."

"Well," he said impatiently, "You're right about that, anyway. As far as it goes. Thank you."

So much for that. As I collapsed back into my cubicle, I was actually trembling. My reserves of nervous energy were at a low ebb, and as the last trickle was diverted to essential life support functions my self-esteem shields flickered and went out. The warm duvet of ego-protecting delusion which we all normally carry round with us fell away from me and I had a rare and painful moment of self-knowledge. I was contemptible, without dignity or decency. Servile attempts to lie and divert the blame to others while trying to convince myself there was something ironically witty about it, that was me. Attempts to blame Julie, who had displayed such patience, who had given me opportunities to be a better person, all spurned in favour of febrile showing off.

Those acronyms – acrostics? – initialisms? -were a pretty crap thing to have done. Childish rudeness, cringingly concealed, and, the characteristic Faletcher icing on the cake, a footling attempt to make myself feel clever.

Sopert could sack me, but he couldn't humiliate me: no, I did that to myself. I had two choices there. I could have frankly told him to piss off, or I could have risen above it and behaved with calm indifference. But I couldn't do the former for fear of being thrown out before I had a new job, and I couldn't do the latter, full stop. That's the kind of thing you have to be a man to do, my son, and I failed; I failed in myself, of my own doing. I can't do that man stuff. You're just going to have to start calling me Peter Pan. Did you notice the self-esteem coming back on line there?

There were some other things to worry about now, of course. It might actually be a good thing to leave Behemoth; it doesn't look good to hang around too long in one job. But I'd need luck. Any prospective employer would get suspicious at any sign of haste. They might pick up some problematic vibe. For that matter, Behemoth might give me a rubbish reference. I don't think it would be the Sopert way to give me a really bad one, but a bit of studied restraint, or one allusion to how I hadn't quite achieved perfect harmony with the local corporate culture and I'd be doomed. Any mention of internet activity would be equally damning. I should, in fact delete my Nanowrimo membership altogether now.

OK, I'm still here. I'm not giving up. This is the lesson of Nanowrimo, I'm discovering: as in novelising, so in real life: it takes effort, but you can write your own story. I mean to do so. This is my story, and whether or not I am to be the hero of it, I'm damn well going to be the author. As I took control of Wenham, so I shall take control of my own life. Well done, me.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The End

The end is nigh. It's nearly over. It seems hard to believe, but less than 500 words now stand between me and the summit: Nanowrimo!

It's been tough along the way, I acknowledge. The rest of my life has taken a number of knocks while I've been closeted with the laptop. But I've grown, I've learned to value my own qualities, and I've learnt that I must take charge of my own life. A new life and a better, more mature Faletcher lie ahead.

And you know, I'm actually quite pleased with Wenham, too. It's going to need a lot of revision, obviously, and probably some expansion. Not to mention some editing. It pains me to think of cutting it back down to about 30,000 words, but it's going to have to be done before I start adding again. So there's a long way to go, but let me be quite honest and open; I really don't see why, at the end of it, there shouldn't be a half-decent, perhaps even a viable book come out of it. Don't worry, I'm not back on the Booker prize tack, and I realise it may just be the euphoria of completion that's speaking here, but at the end of the day, when all's said and done, taking everything into account... why the hell not?

I rang Julie earlier on and told her that within about an hour, all being well, the thing would be done, and asked her to come over and celebrate. So now, the last little insertion into the text...

...is done. No, I'm not going to give you a sample of it this time. It's a kind of inverted Hardy passage where I go on sopfully about how in spite of the dullness of the landscape round about Wenham, there's a property in the soil that brings good out of bad, and how the three years of blight fertilise the land for the seven years of plenty that follow. Alright, it might be a bit out of key with some of the other stuff, but I'm determined to put a bit of optimistic uplift in, and not merely because I've developed this superstitious fear about the story having some kind of ghastly influence over me. I'm free of it now, anyway.

Right on cue, Julie rang the doorbell – I told her she should use her key – and came in.

"So it's really finished?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it. Well, I have to upload the stuff and get it counted officially, but the writing is done."

"Congratulations!" she said, and kissed me on the cheek. "I'm really impressed with your determination."

"Have a seat," I said, "I'll open the champagne."

"Wait a minute," she said solemnly, "Come and sit down. We need a talk first."

Clearly I had to sign up to a few basic protocols before anything as frivolous as champagne intervened.

"I didn't want to go through this while you were still doing your writing thing," she said, "It didn't seem fair. But now we have to get on the level."

She took a deep breath.

"First, I slept with Geoff."

"Geoff? What? *Geoff?* Geoff Browne? You *slept* with *Geoff?*"

"Yes, Geoff. Oh come on, don't look like that. Is Geoff so awful? He's supposed to be your friend."

"Yes, he is, isn't he? I don't...Is this... is this sort of in revenge for the Mouse?"

"No – it happened before that."

"*Before?* But why didn't you say... Oh, is this why you didn't give me much of a hard time? But you were definitely post-Maureen, right?"

"Look, the details don't matter. If you must know, it was only about three times."

"About three times... My God, you're Mercedes, aren't you? Mercedes, the reliable, comfortable ride..."

"There is no Mercedes, John," she responded irritably, "That was just some bizarre idea of Geoff's, supposed to help keep you from noticing anything, or something.. I told him I didn't like it."

"You went to the Miramar and had breakfast with him, though, didn't you?"

"What has breakfast got to do with it?" she exclaimed.

"OK, OK. I don't care about the breakfasts. I'd rather you admitted to the breakfasts and denied the sex, to be perfectly honest."

"Look, I'm sorry."

"Jesus," I said, "And the reason he wanted me to carry on with Nanowrimo was so I wouldn't be spending any time with you..."

"No, you're being totally paranoid." she said.

"My God," I said, unable to help myself, "You told me there were heaving bosoms. I just didn't realise it was yours we were talking about."

That did not go down very well. So at last I shut up.

"The second thing is," she said grimly, "you and I are splitting up. Look, I'm not, you know, in a relationship with Geoff. I probably won't see him any more. That's not what it was about. The thing with Geoff, well... it was partly, I don't know how to explain it, just a way of persuading myself that my life needed moving on – can you understand that?"

Yes, I understand that alright. It's the new double standard. If I play away, it's a contemptible betrayal and shows my piggish male nature; if you play away, it's a deeply felt emotional exploration of personal potential, something in fact, which I could learn valuable life lessons from if only I could rise above myself sufficiently to contemplate it with the required reverence. That's it, isn't it?

"Yes," I said, "I think I sort of do. So I'm what you're moving on from, is that right?"

"I really thought we might salvage it," she said. "Until the other day. It was that rose in the bottle that did it, made me realise it was basically no good."

"The rose? But that was meant to be apologetic, a tender gesture, a friendly joke. I meant it to be *nice*."

"I'm sorry, but it looked sarcastic to me, and it still does. I can't *help* forgetting the bottle, for God's sake. But you couldn't lay off the smartarse stuff, could you? You couldn't just *leave it*."

There were tears in my eyes, but I had to think clearly. I knew a lot might depend on what I said. Obviously the situation was not retrievable here and now. Things had to play themselves out, this was not a conversation which could be turned away from its planned destination. If I protested, if I got angry, above all if I said anything else that could possibly, in any way at all, be construed as *smartarse stuff*, I would just destroy the last remaining long-term chances. Instead, a little late in the day, I had to do my best not to slam any more doors, and leave the way back as open as I could.

"I'll only say this once," I said, in a slightly strange voice, I noticed, "But I mean it more than I've ever meant anything. This is a mistake. I love you."

I think it had some impact, possibly left some trace. We sat in silence for a minute.

"Alright, well I'm going now," she said at last, "We can speak again later if you want to, but you must accept that I'm not going to, you know, have a

row about it, or a detailed post mortem, or a shouting match. And of course, there'll be some things to sort out, stuff to move. See you."

"Goodbye." I said.

So here I am. At the end, it's just me after all. Perhaps that was always the way it was meant to be. I can have a glass of champagne – Geoff's Cristal in fact, though he never actually paid for it. Or perhaps it's best to leave the bottle standing there in the middle of the table forever. Like Miss Havisham's cake. The weird thing is that as I sit here the thought that comes to mind is: Lady Jane Pimsey must be laughing her head off at this one.

Still I made it, didn't I? The summit of Nanowrimo. Plant the flag, old man. It's cold up here, and a trifle lonely, but you can see a lot of things you couldn't see from down there. Was it worth it all? I lost a month of my life; what I would have called my best friend; the chance of promotion; my job, a substantial chunk of my sanity; and finally my girlfriend.

But Nanowrimo came through. It delivered as promised. Because look what I *have* got. Fifty thousand words of unpublishable crap.