

The Hammond Conjecture

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Here is the introduction and first chapter of my novel. If you want to read more, please join my Readers' Club at my website:

www.mbreed.co.uk

PART ONE

I am dead. Floating in a timeless oblivion. No thoughts, no memories. Bliss.

Until: an explosion of sound, light and pain. My mind sinks back to my body. To a body, at least. Its eyelids flicker open...

I sit, paralysed, in a torn and stained armchair smelling of urine – whether the chair or me, I can't tell. An emaciated wild-eyed man with straggly grey hair and beard, sunken cheeks and halitosis stands over me, wielding a brass tray and shouting in my face, his spittle flecking my cheeks. I can't make out the words, though, because of the electric bell ringing loudly on the wall behind him. I have a blinding headache, and a separate ringing in my ears – from being struck with the tray? At my feet a West Indian youth in a loose medical smock lies on the linoleum in front of his wheelchair, a gash on his forehead oozing blood. I try to reach down to him but my muscles fail to respond.

Three burly white-coated attendants are now grappling with the man. Two more arrive through the open doorway, one carrying a straitjacket. He has surprising strength for his scarecrow build; it takes all of them, grunting and cursing, to wrestle the tray from him and the jacket on. The din from the bell shuts off, and in the sudden silence he thrusts forward, shoves his face into mine, and with a gleam of recognition in his eyes he screams again:

“Rozpoznaję cię. Byleś strażnikiem w obozie...”

He spits at me as the attendants drag him away. My left arm jerks as I seek instinctively to wipe the gob from my cheek.

Now I can take in my surroundings. A large room, walls painted an institutional off-white, with cheap wooden furniture. Thick net curtains obscure the windows. The Day Room of a hospital – or of a prison? But those male attendants in their white tunics: they aren't prison warders. This must be a medical institution – an asylum. The other inmates – about a dozen, mostly young, mostly male – are in gowns and pyjamas or, like myself, in tan-coloured cotton smocks. Some are shuffling towards an open door on my right, from which the smell of boiled mutton and cabbage is drifting in – but they move like zombies, their eyes glassy and unfocused, their expressions blank. The rest are either standing in frozen postures, or slumped in chairs or wheelchairs: head on one side, mouth gaping open, with arms and hands twisted or pressed in an unnatural pose. A couple of these living statues have one arm flung out, the wrist and finger joints arched as if in supplication, imitating those Roman mummies engulfed in volcanic ash at Pompeii. Some move their lips or make nervous twitches, but none of them speak, each lost in their own private world.

My personal memory is a blank, like a cassette tape wiped clean. I feel petrified, in both senses of the word: scared witless at the prospect of spending the rest of my life trapped – conscious – inside a body turned to stone. But even as I shiver with fear, I realise that the paralysis is fading: first my neck loosens, then my arms....

The recent commotion, my headache, the stink of overcooked vegetables and body fluids, the stifling heat in the room are unbearable. I push my palms down on the armchair, forcing my body up. Once standing, I shuffle slowly around the unconscious boy and towards the open door on my left. In a deserted entrance hall I spot the front door of the building, but it is bolted, with a large padlock. The air here is just as stale as in the Day Room, but a cool breeze is coming from the stairwell, the staircase winding up around an ancient ironwork lift. As I ascend – clinging to the bannister, moving like a Golem – the strength returns to my muscles. On the landing, I stagger to a further, narrower flight of stairs and continue upward, seeking the source of that refreshing breeze. A sinister creaking sound is coming from somewhere ahead of and above me. I feel a sense of dread as I climb towards it.

At the top of the stairs, a small door of bare wood is hanging open, swinging slightly on unoiled hinges. I push it, step through and come to a halt, dazed and exhausted.

I am on a flat roof at the top of a tower. The sudden sunlight blinds me. I lean forward to grasp the parapet and stare out uncomprehendingly – God knows for how long. Until I hear hobnail boots crashing up the stairs. Behind me, a man shouts in a London accent:

“Hey, you! Hey – you! You! Get away from the fuckin’ edge!”

I manage to look around. One of the attendants, a bullet-headed bully, is pointing at me, panting heavily. He calls back down the stairwell:

“I got ’im! It’s the new enkie. Go and tell Taffy ’e’s Awake. And get another jacket up ’ere, fast!

“Okay, mate,” he says, turning back towards me. “No ’arm done. You just come down wi’ me, okay?” he says wheedlingly, advancing.

I try to speak, but my throat is still paralysed. Then:

“L... lo... – look!” I manage to say. I turn back towards the view. Below me is a wide horseshoe-shaped gravel drive, with substantial red-brick two-storey villas spaced along it, separated by lawns, the grass wilting in the hot sunshine. I felt a sudden rush of *déjà vu*.

“Wh... where am I?” I call back to him, still staring, entranced.

He chuckles behind my back, closer now: “You’re at the fuckin’ World’s End, mate!”

I point down, at some wizened figures moving unnaturally slowly on the lawn outside one of the villas, like actors in a Noh play. “Wh... who are...?”

Then a blunt instrument smacks me on the back of my skull, and oblivion re-descends.

Hospital diary I

Day Four

My physical movement is now almost normal. But I still have no memory of the real world outside. Except that there isn’t a real world outside. Today I realised where I must be.

I am indeed dead. The man on the tower was telling the truth: this *is* the End of the World, for us – the ‘enkies’, as they call us. We are in Purgatory. Or rather, in Ante-Purgatory: the waiting room to the Afterlife for the souls of those who have died violently and unexpectedly, with no chance to confess and repent their sins. The traumatic nature of our deaths explains our catatonic state. These attendants, in their white tunics and plimsolls, don’t behave like angels, but that’s what they must be. The other villas which I saw from the tower must each house their own populations of the newly deceased. Our memories of our time on Earth have been taken away to be judged, after which we will be awakened, to be transferred through St Peter’s Gate – the tall iron barrier which I had glimpsed beyond the gravel drive – to Purgatory proper. There – on that wooded hill on the horizon – our sins will be purged through Fire and Ordeal. That violent attack with the tea tray must have awakened me prematurely.

Meanwhile, now that I can walk and look after myself, the attendants have put me in a room of my own, with a camp bed, shower and toilet cubicle. None of them will answer my questions; they just tell me to “wait till Taffy comes to see yer”. After my first shower I stood naked and stared at my pale body in the mirror. The stranger staring back at me was an Anglo-Saxon male, well-built though the muscles wasted from lack of food and exercise. In his forties, with no distinguishing marks apart from a small circular tattoo on the inside of the left bicep. And if I part the blond stubble on my scalp, I can see traces of curves and circles drawn on the skin in purple ink.

Week Two

I now know my way around the villa. The original late-Victorian building has an L-shaped floor plan, with the entrance hall at the corner of the L. The door to the longer arm leads into the Day Room and beyond it the refectory. The shorter arm, to the right of the entrance, contains staff offices. The segregated dormitories and bathrooms are on the first floor, emitting a penetrating smell of soiled bedsheets and carbolic soap. It’s all a lot shabbier than I would have expected of the World Beyond.

Two single-storey wings have been added at a later stage, converting the L into a rectangle which encloses a weed-filled courtyard garden. At the end of the office corridor you can now turn left into a row of single bedrooms which look into the courtyard; mine is the

third one along, after a French window. This corridor ends in a blank wall – and a final bedroom with a metal-framed door with a peephole. Inside there's a mattress with rubber sheets, and bars on the window. Yesterday I saw the man who attacked me in there: lying naked but for his underpants, muttering to himself while masturbating.

As I was exploring, I noticed that the door to one of the offices was open. On the desk were two blank yellow notepads. I grabbed one, along with a pen, a ruler and some paperclips, and hurried back to my room. I am using the notebook to start this diary, which I keep in the space revealed when the bottom drawer is removed from the chest holding the spare smocks and pants they've given me. I place one of my pubic hairs onto it whenever I return it to its hiding place, so I'll know if it's been discovered while I'm out in the Day Room.

The final wing, across the top of the L, contains the kitchens and laundry – as I discovered from peering through the windows from the courtyard, once I'd used a straightened-out paperclip to pick the lock on that French window. The wing ends in a window with steel shutters: the dispensary for our daily pills. I used one page of the notebook to draw a detailed floor-plan of the building – an absorbing task which helped to calm my fevered thoughts.

I am woken at 7am and taken to breakfast, then I have to spend the morning in the Day Room with the other inmates. There are ten of us 'enkies': seven men, three girls. The room is blessedly quiet as they assume their petrified poses, no flicker of emotion in their faces. There are only two men older than me: Pelé and Stiller. They are always together, sitting against the wall opposite my armchair. Pelé will stay motionless for hours, but when an attendant pulls him by the arm, to go for food or to the toilet, he leaps up like a toddler, before subsiding into the shuffling gait which they all walk with. And Stiller: I don't know if that's really his name, or if the nurses call him so because he sits even stiller than Pelé. Nothing will rouse him from his catatonia. It's as if he had been fixed by Medusa's gaze. But his eyes are bright, and staring straight ahead: focused unblinkingly on me. It's very unsettling.

The rest are adolescents; the youngest is Mary, who can't be more than fifteen or sixteen. She's small and thin, has a pretty face but with an emotionless gaze, vacant eyes, slack mouth. In the Day Room she's usually sitting fondling something: a ball of wool, a soft toy. I join them in spending the day sitting dumbly, but I am busy composing this diary in my mind, preparing the details for my eventual debriefing.

To be honest, I find the routine comforting, despite – or because of – my confusion. No need to worry which clothes to wear, who to meet, what to say. The same meals, at the same times each day. Though I can't stand hearing the slurping and open-mouthed chewing of the 'enkies'; after I threw a plate of soup at one of them, the attendants now let me take my food back to my room to eat in peace.

Yesterday after lunch I was checking the light fitting for concealed microphones when there was a knock on the door and without waiting for an answer it was opened by a short, tubby dark-haired man with a broad face, clean-shaven, and twinkling eyes behind rimless spectacles. He entered, gave me a friendly smile and perched on the bed. He was wearing a worn tweed jacket giving off a reassuring odour of stale pipe tobacco, and a stethoscope dangled from his neck like a badge of office.

"Hello, boyo. Wonderful to be able to talk to you, at last. Sorry I couldn't get to you sooner, I was... called away. I'm Dr Jones, the Chief Consultant," he said in a musical voice, holding out his hand. "And you are?"

I'd been giving a lot of thought to this question. "I'm Hugh," I said as I shook his hand, with rather more confidence than I actually had.

"Oh, are you indeed? Hugh who?"

"Just Hugh."

Is that really my name? Or did I imagine it, from the attendant shouting 'Hey, you!' at me, on the tower?

"Righty-ho, Hugh it is. You comfy here?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But I have to know: what Ordeal will I face?"

He looked mystified. "I beg your pardon?"

"In Purgatory. We're all dead, aren't we? Being judged for the Afterlife in Heaven – or Hell."

I explained my theory. Dr Jones burst out laughing. "Is that what you think, boyo? Goodness gracious me – what a one you are, to be sure. No, you're alive still, in the real

world. But you contracted a nasty illness: a form of encephalitis. This is an isolation hospital. Don't worry, you're in good hands."

Encephalitis: so that's why the attendants call us 'enkies'.

"First of all," he continued, "I have to apologise for Nurse Blenkinsopp – he can be rather... impulsive at times."

"You mean the foul-mouthed bastard who coshed me when my back was turned, up on the tower?"

"Yes. He's quite familiar with oaths – just not the Hippocratic one. He explained it all to me: he was scared you were going to jump off."

"He's ex-Army, isn't he? All these attendants are."

"They're male nurses, not attendants. But yes – they mostly have a military background. How could you tell?"

"Oh, the physique, the vocabulary, the propensity for sudden violence.... The haircut."

"Ah," he sounded quite excited. "You look like you have an Army background yourself, boyo. Is that where you got that tattoo?" He pointed at my left arm, protruding from the short-sleeved smock. "Is it an O, or a zero – or just a circle?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Who am I? I can't remember – and I can't think straight. What am I doing here? Among all these basket-cases?"

"Now Hugh, don't get agitated. Up until last week you were a 'basket case' yourself. Don't you feel any sympathy for those poor souls?"

I was puzzled. "I don't know them. What would be the point, when I can't do anything about it? You're the doctor."

"Alright, never mind. Anyway, you responded very quickly to the treatment. Quite a wonder-drug, levodopa. Then it only needed the combination of sensory stimuli – the alarm bell and the violent attack by Ivan – to bring you out of your catatonic state. You Awakened, as we say."

"Ivan? You mean the Pole?"

Dr Jones frowned. “What makes you say that he’s Polish? Do you speak Polish?”

“I don’t think so.”

“All we could understand from him are Communist slogans – we assumed he was Russian.

“Anyway,” he continued, “now that you’ve Awakened I’ll be seeing you regularly. You’ll find that your reasoning and your memories gradually return – you probably won’t be conscious of it at first. Is there anything you need?”

“I need answers, Dr Jones! Who am I, how did I get here? Do my family know I’m here? Do I *have* a family? What has...”

The Chief Consultant held up his hands, shaking his head and smiling sympathetically. “All in good time, Hugh – all in good time. What you need now is peace and quiet to speed your recovery. I’ll tell the dispensary to give you something to calm your mind. Oh, what’s this?”

He picked up from the desk the floorplan I had drawn, and examined it. “It’s very good. It looks pretty accurate. All the details: of the furniture, the windows. I’ll keep this, if I may. Are you trained in draughtsmanship?”

“No – or, I don’t know. I don’t know anything,” I concluded miserably.

After a pause: “So, I ask again – is there anything else you need?”

I tried to think. “Well: that overgrown garden,” I gestured towards the window, “really needs someone to look after it, doesn’t it? And I’d find the work quite... therapeutic, is that the word? I can clear the weeds, sweep the path – it’d become a place for the other patients to relax in.”

“Oh yes – jolly good idea! I’ll get you a key for the French window – then you can go out there whenever you want.”

I immediately took a shine to Dr Jones – but after he had left I started to wonder. Do Welshmen really keep saying ‘boyo’? Was his jovial bonhomie a little too good to be true? Like an actor playing a part...?

Later

Last night I had a vivid dream; perhaps I will be able to recall my past through dreams. Frustratingly, I can only remember a fragment – and that can't be a flashback, because it doesn't make sense...

I am on an ocean-going liner. The great vessel is rocking gently from side to side as it surges silently ahead. I leave the cocktail bar and cross the Promenade deck, where other passengers are playing quoits. I reach the picture windows on the side of the ship and look out: a blue cloudless sky. I look down: hundreds of feet below me there is a featureless sand desert roasting in the sun.

Week Three

“Why don't you try writing things down, boyo?”

This was the third of my regular sessions with Taffy (as the attendants call Dr Jones behind his back). He pushed a yellow notepad and ballpoint pen across the desk to me.

“It'll help you to sort it all into a logical order. Here...” he reached to the bookshelf behind him, “take this book on Creative Writing, too. Creative writing is a proven therapy for mental trauma.”

Over the past week flashes of memory had drifted in and out of my consciousness, but disjointed and confused. One recent fragment in particular got me worried, despite all the sedatives they are pumping into me. Is this really an isolation hospital, as he claims? Or...

“Am I in a hospice, Doctor? With dementia? Are you going to despatch me soon?”

He looked genuinely puzzled, which was reassuring. “No, you're not in a hospice, or an asylum. And no, you're not in any danger. We don't conduct euthanasia here. What peculiar ideas you do have, to be sure.

“Look, if it's any reassurance, let me quote you something about the effect of levodopa, the drug we've been giving you.”

He stood up and turned to his bookcase, running his finger along the spines. While he was distracted, I leant forward, retrieved a torn envelope from the waste paper basket, and quickly stuffed it into my pocket.

“Aha!” Dr Jones turned back, holding a well-thumbed paperback, and opened it at one of the pages marked with strips of paper. He started to read:

“The anamnestic powers of L-Dopa seem to be among its most remarkable effects, those which indicate most clearly the nature of ‘Awakening’. The quality of reminiscence induced by L-Dopa consists of the sudden, spontaneous and involuntary recall of significant moments from the personal past, recalled with such sharpness, concreteness, immediacy and force as to constitute, quite literally, a re-living or re-being.

“There, that’s what you’ve got to look forward to, see? You’ll soon be remembering your past better than I can my own!

“Right – you know the routine by now.”

I put my forearm out on the desk while Dr Jones busied himself with a hypodermic syringe.

“Good,” he murmured as the liquid entered my bloodstream. “We seem to have found the optimum dosage for you.

“And now, the couch. Just lie back, relax, close your eyes and listen to the sound of my voice....”

Dr Jones claims that hypnotherapy will unlock my repressed memories – though he won’t tell me what I say under hypnosis.

Back in my room, I examined the envelope. It bore an address which was reassuringly mundane:

Dr E Jones, FRCPsych,
Pavilion 15,
Highlands Hospital,

World's End Lane,
Enfield,
London N21

Now I understood Nurse Blenkinsopp's witticism, about our being at the World's End. I couldn't make out the date on the postmark, but the year looked to be either 1962 or 1982 – neither of which tallied with the period of the memories which are seeping back into my mind.

On the back of the envelope were some scribbled case notes. Most of the words meant nothing to me: 'anomie', 'misophonia', 'anempathetic'. But then, at the end was a phrase in plain English, underlined: 'wildly artistic'. I felt a rush of pride, and gratitude to Taffy for recognising my talent. Tears welled in my eyes.

Later

Last night I woke sweating from a nightmare:

I am walking along a deserted city street at night, flanked by tall granite buildings and a river embankment. Suddenly, just ahead of me a parked car explodes soundlessly in a ball of flames. I am knocked backwards, and shards of glass from the shattered windows of the tenements around me rain down on my face, lacerating my cheeks...

Week Four

I have started work on the overgrown courtyard. It's a relief to escape the fetid misery of the Day Room. A recent spell of wet weather prevented my gardening, so I started trying to set down my memories as Taffy had suggested. But I found I was continually adding to earlier paragraphs I'd written as new snatches of memories appeared, until the pages looked like a palimpsest. I despaired of ever getting them into a coherent order. When I showed Taffy the resulting illegible mess, he wasn't angry, though.

"Just relax, Hugh. Start by writing down one memory in detail. You'll find that this unearths deeper-hidden memories of an earlier time, which you can write in a new chapter – and so on, leading you back to your childhood, your family. It'll be like time running in

reverse. And don't be afraid of using your creative mind to fill in the blanks, keep the flow going; imagine you're writing a novel."

And yesterday it happened: the dam of my memories burst! For Marcel Proust it was the taste of a madeleine cake; for me, that of a rehydrated Vesta prawn curry which they served us for lunch. As I spooned up the overcooked rice with its ersatz flavouring, I found myself transported back to the kitchen of the house in Purley. It was so vivid – like a re-living of the experience, just as Taffy had described it. Then things started to make sense: my military mindset, my skill at picking locks, concealing documents and detecting hidden bugs...

So far it's only a single evening in 1971, though an earlier memory is already struggling to the surface: my arrival in Britain in 1969 – again, just as Taffy had predicted. I joyfully ripped out the pages of scribble. Then, at the top of the first clean page of the notepad, I wrote 'Chapter 1 Home from Dublin' in large spidery letters.

Chapter 1 Home from Dublin

An enemy agent, skulking in the shrubbery bordering the driveway up to the substantial semi-detached house in Barnard Crescent, Purley, shortly before midnight on 11th February 1971, would have seen a nondescript figure in the porch, fumbling with his doorkey. Of course, any suspicious characters should have been picked up by the nightly Neighbourhood Watch patrol long before I arrived.

I had left Purley station along with the other commuters returning home on the last train from Blackfriars. I watched them setting off wearily through the sleet down the dimly-lit Whytecliffe Road. Then I turned along the empty taxi-rank and re-entered the station by the side gate. In the Standard Class buffet I took my time sipping milky tea and smoking a Silk Cut while I watched the waitress tip unpurchased Southern Railway cheese and pickle sandwiches into the bin as she cleared up.

"Ain't got no lovin' arms to go home to, dear?" she remarked sympathetically, dropping ash from her own fag onto the counter.

I gave her what I hoped was a convincing shrug of pathetic inadequacy. When she was ready to lock up I left by the entrance concourse again – deserted now, apart from a gang of Empire Workers who had been bussed in to mop the floors and clean the toilets, ready for the morning rush hour. I looked around the station forecourt for any loiterers who had been there when I first arrived. Satisfied that I was not under surveillance, I set off myself. It was a clear sky with a full moon. The luminous dial of my wristwatch showed it was well past eleven o'clock. After half a mile of tramping through the black ice, I passed Barnard Crescent without pausing, but two hundred yards further on turned abruptly into the other end of the Crescent, and followed it back to reach no. 32 – all the while looking out for tails and monitoring the gardens I passed for hidden observers. This was standard procedure when returning home from a mission – my first as an officer of SIS, the Secret Intelligence Service. As I trudged at last down my own driveway, my boots crunching loudly – too loudly – on the gravel, I felt a *frisson* of excitement, imagining an assassin emerging from the rhododendrons, creeping up behind me, jerking my head back and silently slitting my throat with a single swipe of his – or her – hunting knife.

Now, while I stood safely in the porch stabbing my doorkey at the lock, the moonlight behind me suddenly disappeared. The only illumination came from the low-wattage bulb in the hall, percolating through the coloured-glass insert in the door. I stepped back out into the garden and looked up at the sky, entranced. The moon and a broad swathe of stars had been ripped from the sky. As I stared, a pair of tiny flashing navigation lights appeared on the edges of the void, green and red, drifting slowly through the darkness. Then another pair, as the vast black shape passed overhead – and only now I became aware of a low hum as the idling Beardmore turboprop engines approached, and then receded with a gentle drone. Finally the tail of the gigantic craft was overhead, the moon reappeared, and I watched the silhouette of the thousand-foot-long twin-hulled airship as it nosed down toward one of the mooring masts at the Croydon KE8 Aerodrome, just beyond Chamberlain Avenue. I could even make out moving pinpricks of light glowing on the rear smoking deck, slung beneath the illuminated tailfin with its stylised Springbok logo. This was the weekly South African Airways service up the east coast of Africa, which had left Durban three days previously, due into Croydon at

9pm but running late. I had made my own voyage on this same vessel, the *Pride of Bloemfontein* eighteen months previously, taking me reluctantly to my new life in Britain.

Snapping out of my reverie, I got the front door open, and entered my house – my father’s house. As I passed the elephant’s foot umbrella stand in the hallway, I checked my reflection in the mirror above it. When we first met, Phyllis – my girlfriend-cum-lodger – told me flatteringly that I was a fine example of the Aryan racial type described by Prof Günther of Jena: a narrow face, pronounced chin, blond hair and widely spaced pale-coloured eyes. But all I saw, nowadays, was a veined nose, puffy cheeks and a body going downhill before I even reached thirty. A far cry from the dark, cold, lean and predatory secret agent which my idol Sean Connery portrayed as James Bond. Perhaps I should cut back on the beer.

A soft snoring came from upstairs.

My parents had taken their Polish housekeeper Krystyna with them when they moved to Devon, and I still hadn’t got around to replacing her. Phyllis’s domestic talents lie more in the bedroom than the kitchen, so I was not expecting to find a gourmet meal awaiting me.

In the kitchen I dug out a bottle of Newcastle Brown from the stash at the back of the pantry, then found the remains of a reconstituted Vesta prawn curry in a saucepan on the stove. I splashed water into it, warmed it up on the gas hob and took it to the table, eating it straight from the pot. This is what I’ve been reduced to, I thought bitterly. The miniscule cardboard-textured crustaceans became lodged between my teeth, and my mind drifted back to the fabulous seafood curry we were served on the second evening of the voyage, out of Mombasa:

Heading north towards Berbera and Alexandria, the airship passed low over a sprawling encampment of tents and shanties marooned in the red dirt. Odours of woodsmoke and raw sewage reached in through the observation window where I stood.

“Malagasy refugees.” The Purser, in a fresh linen jacket, had joined me. “Poor sods. But it’s no excuse for terrorism.”

He went on his way down the Promenade deck, ringing his xylophone to call us to dinner.

Airship travel is not as glamorous as the glossy features in Empire Pictorial would have you believe. The cabins are cramped and draughty, with walls of paper-covered Styrofoam so that one loudly-snoring passenger can (and did) keep the whole deck awake. For ablutions there’s a small aluminium foldaway sink in each cabin, the showers on B Deck produce only a brief trickle, and as for the toilets.... But all this was forgotten the following morning, when I crossed the Promenade to gaze down through the slanted observation windows. In a cerulean sky an already-fierce sun was warming the endless sand dunes of the Sahara a thousand feet below; I experienced a kind of epiphany. Eventually the smell of Eggs Benedict from the dining room became irresistible....

Once I’d finished the curry and the beer, I went upstairs to wash as briefly as possible. Sitting in six inches of tepid water in the bath, I shivered as an icy breeze blew in my face from the overflow above the plughole. As I had done every day since arriving in Britain, I wondered how long I could bear to live in this dark damp country with its dull hidebound people, its stifling insularity despite all the lip service paid to the Empire. But I had burnt my bridges: I couldn’t return to South Africa. Or India. All because of the moment when my ‘black mamba’ rage had wrecked my Army career. As I shivered I fantasised again that I was back on the *Pride of Bloemfontein*, listening to my fellow-passenger Bob describing his salvation from death in the Libyan Desert in 1941, as we watched the North African coastline sliding past below us:

“Twenty five thousand of us there were, Aussies and Hindoo regiments as well as us Brits. All surrounded down there in Tobruk, with Rommel and Graziani poised to launch the assault and slaughter us all. Then sudden-like it was over. The Armistice was announced on the BBC. Every

night even now, when I says my prayers, I remember Halifax and Prince George, who signed that treaty.”

I pulled out the bathplug, stood up shivering and reached for the worn-thin towel on the cold radiator. Out on the landing, I opened the door of Phyllis’s bedroom, crossed to the bed and joined her, attempting to pull the sheet and blankets towards me without waking her. But the bedsprings creaked loudly as I climbed in, and she groaned and murmured, “You’re back, then?”

“Yes.”

“How was Ireland?” she asked sleepily.

“Wet,” I responded, praying that she would not ask further. That would bring back the nagging dread which had been gnawing at my mind all day – that innocent lives may have been lost as a result of my incompetence.

“Ummm.” Phyllis turned towards me, then sniffed disapprovingly and rolled onto her back. Had I not washed thoroughly enough? Or was it the Newcastle Brown? We lay there in silence, not touching.

“Anything new, while I’ve been away?” I asked. I should have known better.

“Well,” she was fully awake now. “The washing machine broke down. Again. It’ll be a fortnight before Mr Kaczinski can get round to repair it, so you can look forward to trips down to the laundrette.”

“Why is it always me who...?”

“Because it’s your house. I’m just the lodger, remember?”

“Oh, and your brother called. He’s invited himself here for Easter – and he’s bringing a friend. I’ll be away, though. There’s a eugenics conference in Zürich, and I’ve had a paper accepted. I applied for an exit visa today; Sotherby, the Institute Director has approved it. In fact, it was his idea that I go. I catch the BEA flight from Heathrow on the 4th.”

“That’s good, you’ll enjoy the break. Now come here, love...” I leaned over to peck her on the cheek, and then started to work one hand underneath her winceyette nightie. I’m not a great one for verbal foreplay.

“Oh, piss off, Hugh,” she sighed, roughly pushing my hand away. Who says that romance is dead, eh?

Again, we lay for a while in silence. Then:

“I can’t stand Number Five,” she finally muttered in a strained voice.

Phyllis likes to do that: she’ll come out with some gnomie utterance, and expect you to know immediately what she’s on about. If I confess ignorance, she gives me such a pitying look. I know I’m not up there with Bertrand Russell, but I can’t stand a woman telling me I’m thick. So I pondered. What could she have against the number 5? I tried to think. Wait a minute: who lives at Number 5 Barnard Crescent? I started matching house-fronts to faces and names.

“You mean Duncan – the insurance salesman? The one who brings his Alsatian along on the Neighbourhood Watch patrols? Oh, I know the gossip: that he hid out in France to escape National Service – but that was back in the ’Fifties. You can’t....”

“Chanel No. 5. I can smell it on you. You’ve been shagging some posh totty, haven’t you?” she sniffed. “Not that it’s any of my business – I’m only the lodger, after all.”

She gave a melodramatic little sob, quickly stifled, and rolled away from me, pulling the sheet, blankets, eiderdown and candlewick bedspread with her.

I lay shivering in the dark for a few minutes before getting out and crossing the landing to my own room. There, lying in bed with the electric underblanket switched on, the warmth seeping into my back, a stupid grin crept over my face – a grin I’d worn on-and-off throughout the long journey: the coach from Dublin to Belfast, the eight-hour ferry crossing, and then the evening express from Liverpool up to London. I closed my eyes, and was back again in the Presidential Suite of the Westbury Hotel – with Alex.