

PRIVACY PERSPECTIVES

Creative Writing
On the Theme of Privacy

Working Writers' Circle

Edited by Margaret Ford
Consult Hyperion

For the VOME Privacy Project
[Visualisation and Other Methods of Expression]

Funded by the Technology Strategy Board

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Preface

I am delighted to have this opportunity to present an exceptional range of poems and short stories written by Woking Writers' Circle. As part of the VOME project, (Visualisation and Other Methods of Expression) Consult Hyperion invited Woking Writers' Circle to consider the way in which privacy is treated in the online environment.

The project, funded by the Technology Strategy Board, aims to build a greater understanding of the implications of privacy and consent decisions made online. The project places a strong emphasis on working with community groups, to see beyond the purely technical and commercial perspectives. An essential part of the project is to encourage individuals to express their own expectations, experiences and concerns.

I would like to thank Woking Writers' Circle for all their hard work and creative efforts in producing this publication.

Margaret Ford

Cyberspace Invaders

Strolled to Gino's *Internet* café
Seeking out the echoes of the streets
Folk inside deprived of things to say
Eyeing screens from ergo metric seats
Twittered tales to new mates in the world
Kinda stuff to make the toenails curl
Blasé eyes are gazing at the screen
Someone bringing cappuccinos
Carrot cake and cream

Card ID and privacy to boot
Surf the internet now there's a hoot
Facebook pals clicked-on-line today
Blithely giving secret stuff away
Strangers posing dangers on the line
Conmen oozing confidence sublime
Blasé eyes are gazing at the screen
Someone bringing cappuccinos
Brownie cakes and cream

Privacy concerns are most profound
Internet deceivers gaining ground
Tricksters laying silken webs for frauds
Trapping life's most gullible with words
Spider's eyes from satellites near Mars
Watching our *downloading* from afar
Stalkers behind sugar coated screens
Hoaxer - coaxer - *Cosa Nostra*
Reasons to be mean

A.P.Whittick
24.4.2010

PIN

by Luke Johnson

I was lucky. A minute later and I would have missed him. I overheard the receptionist say he was in room three five seven and I heard him ask the receptionist the location of the nearest cash machine. I watched as he took the lift to his room, presumably to deposit his suitcase, and then stationed myself by the window in the pub across the road. To wait in the hotel lobby would have been risky because of the way the receptionist kept glancing at me.

I had given up and was about to leave when I spotted him. It was raining and he was walking briskly. I followed. The rain gave me the excuse to raise the collar of my jacket so when we reached the ATM and I stood behind him half my face was covered. I was wearing glasses which I didn't need, the lenses were plain Perspex, and a brown wig covered my dark hair. He was much smaller than me so it was easy to see his fingers tap the keys. Then I moved aside while he collected his money and headed back the way we had come. For the benefit of the watching camera I put my hands in my jacket pocket as if to feel for a wallet which I could not find. Then I shrugged and made my way back to the pub. There was no need to follow him. I knew where he was staying.

An hour later I re-entered the hotel and took the lift to my room. I had booked in before him under a false name. In my room, I took the small tape recorder head demagnetizer from my suitcase and ran it across the room key-card. Then I left the door on the latch and went down to the receptionist. "Excuse me," I said, "I'm afraid my key-card doesn't work."

"Are you sure you've inserted it properly?"

"I've tried it every which way."

"Let me check it." He took the card and inserted it in a machine behind the desk. "I'm sorry, sir. You are right it does not appear to be working. I'll re-programme it for you. What's your room number?"

"Three five seven."

"Thank you, sir."

I returned to my room, took off my jacket, removed the glasses and fixed a black clip-on bow tie to the collar of my white shirt. I swapped the brown wig for a blond one from my case then I went into the bathroom so I could see my face in the mirror as I fixed the matching false moustache. Satisfied I draped a white towel over my arm went back to the bedroom, collected a bottle of champagne I had injected through the cork earlier with Rohypnol, the date rape drug, and stepped out into the corridor. I kept my head bent to avoid looking directly at the CCTV cameras and hoped that anyone seeing me would think I was just another hotel employee about his business.

I knocked on his door and when he opened it said, "Congratulations, sir, you are our one hundredth guest this month. This is for you with the hotel's compliments." I held out the bottle.

His eyes lit up as he took it. "Thank you."

"Would you like me to open it for you?"

"No thank you I can manage."

He closed the door and I went back to my room to wait.

I returned at three am and let myself in with the re-programmed key-card. He was sound asleep in bed. The half empty bottle was on the bedside table with one of the bathroom glasses by its side. I was glad to see he had opened the champagne. Some in my line of work balk at the idea of using drugs but I knew it would be safer when searching his room. I don't like to have to run or risk violence. His jacket was lying on a chair. I found his wallet in its pocket and removed the card I had seen him use at the cash point. At seven am I checked out of my hotel, went to a different ATM inserted the card and entered his pin. When I checked his account I was amazed how rich he was.

The police car picked me up two hours later and I was taken to the local station. I was led quickly along a corridor to the interview room. The DCI was waiting outside and looked eager. There was little point

in delaying so I handed him the receipt from the cash point, shrugged and watched him enter the room. Then I went along to the observation bay next door and looked through the two way mirror. He had sat down opposite the man from the hotel and the Sergeant next to him was starting the tape machine.

I smiled when the man said, "You can't pin anything on me."

The DCI started by saying, "Can you tell me why a small coffee importer like you can have twenty million pounds in a current account?"

In Tray

by Julian Holdsworth-Brewer

It was much harder to find child pornography on the Internet than I'd anticipated. If the newspapers are anything to go by, then there's hardly anything else on the web, but that wasn't what I found. I tried googling, and that certainly helped me to find a lot of porn, but it wasn't (as far as I could tell) actually child porn. I did find plenty of web sites that claimed to have child porn in spades, but they wanted me to pay and I wasn't going to give my credit card information to people like that. So it was a bit of a dead-end, in the end.

I'd given up on it for a few weeks when I heard something on the BBC, the Today programme I think, talking about that sicko who killed Jamie Bulger, the one they arrested. The BBC said he was using a file-sharing network to send out child porn pictures and videos, the same kind of network that kids use to swap music and films. That hadn't occurred to me before, so I decided to give it a try on Friday. I logged on and started poking around and it really didn't take long at all.

Sure enough, there were thousands of files there, all claiming to be what I was looking for, so I clicked on a whole load with likely-looking titles, and set them downloading. I was a bit squeamish about looking at any of them but I thought I ought to check that they were really child porn of a revolting nature and not just pictures of children, so I opened up a couple to look. Yuk. OK, so they really were child porn. Great stuff. I waited until a few hundred pictures and videos had finished downloading, which took the best part of an hour, then I created a new folder in an obscure corner of the hard disk and hid them all away in it. I put it where no-one would ever look, unless they were some sort of total IT geek installing a new version of Windows or something like that.

Then with my heart very literally pounding, I shut Steve's laptop back down, put my resignation letter in his in-tray, and walked out of his office. I never set foot in Tramwell Redwood Asset Management again.

A Bit of a Lift

by A.P. Whittick

Dan Foster skimmed a daily news paper with blasé eyes. ‘*Afro American blues singer Donna Turner groped by airport staff*’ claimed an eye seeking headline. During routine searching a hand touched an intimate part of her body she alleges to magistrates. Outraged Donna swung a clenched fist. Adding insult to her injured pride it was she who went off to court to receive an ASBO for assault. Hitherto an anglophile, she vowed never to return to the UK again. Dan turned on his iPod for relaxing music to unwind. He refocused to sounds of a creaking trolley which brought smells of savoury breakfast food and diverted his disdain from whiffs of busy toilets and air freshener.

‘Tea or coffee, Sir?’ Enquired the tall cabin attendant described as *Walter* on his ID tab. A flash of white teeth showed from the Ebo’s dignified countenance. Dan savoured the hot liquid, thanking the steward and smiling before peering through aircraft windows at the salmon pink and turquoise dawn sky. A hearty breakfast followed with more hot drinks.

‘Just an hour to go before landing at Joburg’, said the man with an Afrikaner accent seated next to Dan. The English student nodded to the white supremacist whose podgy hand he’d been obliged to shake soon after boarding. Petrus Van de Merwer was big on opinions, trivial on tact and selective on fact. Petrus heckled flight attendants for attention being constantly warned to desist from using his mobile phone to other passenger’s annoyance. Petrus’s condescending looks at Walter left no doubt where he stood on matters of racial harmony. He called indigenous Africans *Blecks* being especially vitriolic towards *bleck wimen*. The word *Kaffirs* frequently occurred during his conversations. Dan could only attempt an apologetic glance in Walter’s direction as if to empathise with shared embarrassment.

Much had happened over the past 2 weeks since the death of Dan's grand father. Dan tuned into his iPod again remembering the last time he'd seen *Gramps* alive and Dan allowed recent events to carousel in his mind.

'I'm back Gramps', he'd quietly called to the older man who awoke wincing from post operative pain and trying to move his accident damaged leg with some difficulty.

'*Merlin* behave himself?'

'Good as gold, fell in love with a *Shih Tsu* at the country park - went all waggy tailed and amorous- job dragging him away.'

'That'll give the old dog a bit of a lift. How you doing at Uni?' The old man enquired?'

Dan smiled discretely at Gramps often referred to as '*Bit of a lift Rawlinson*'. At least that's how he was known locally. It was a phrase flexible enough to suit almost any occasion. Even the nurses at the fracture clinic demonstrated their awareness of it when etching with felt pen on his plaster cast the renowned words 'Bit of a Lift.'

Dan shrugged his shoulders after replacing Gramp's recliner pillow. 'Well, to be honest Gramps, I struggle a bit this term with my latest assignment.'

'What's the assignment about?'

'*Privacy*, I have to prepare a questionnaire and do some interviews on how it affects modern society.'

'Privacy eh? Scourge of the modern man. We live in a binary world these days - all ID codes - too difficult for us old-uns.'

Gramps followed the boy's gaze hovering at the framed photograph of his late wife Beth.

'Miss her don't you Son?'

'We all do Gramps – she was such a star. Tell me, you used to help out at the local library didn't you?'

'Until this blasted leg business.'

'What would you tell an enquirer asking about privacy?'

'As in Privacy and Human Rights you mean?'

'Is there any other kind?'

'Of course. Buddhists for example view different levels of living things and all are sacred and entitled to space and being treated with dignity.'

'Like cows you mean?'

'You might be thinking of Hindu's Son – Buddhists certainly abstain from eating meat like various other eastern religions – but Buddhists don't just stop at vegetarianism or being vegans.'

'How?'

'Well they believe that planet earth has some kind of soul and should be treated with spiritual reverence and respect.'

'And you think dignity and respect is part of observing privacy?'

'Certainly. What's that famous Bible quote '*Love thy neighbour as thyself* – and '*do unto others*' etc. Loads of other stuff as well about

loving kindness and helping each other out on this journey of life. The Koran of Islam and the Jewish Torah express similar sentiments.

‘Religion - yuk’.

‘Secular as well don’t forget: New Age, Humanism, Stewardship of the earth etc.

‘Sounds weird.’

‘It isn’t actually weird, just takes a bit of deep thinking about that’s all. Helena Blavatsky’s worth looking at with her views on Anthropogenesis and Cosmogenesis. Everything is interconnected. Think of John Donne and his *No Man is an Island*’ meditation. A deforested corner of the Amazon and the earth’s lungs get congested.’

‘Sounds like a cosmic body and mind Gramps.’

‘Something for you to think about later eh?’

‘We live in such a complex world don’t you think Gramps? Informed consent, cryptology, service users – providers – *help*.’

‘The world has always been complex and life was always tough.’

‘Not for the wealthy.’

‘Especially for them – high perches - long drops.’

‘But all this technology and the complex rules of what we should and shouldn’t be doing with it. The Elizabethans didn’t have all these problems.’

‘Technology’s been around a long time and yes, the old Elizabethans *did* have particular problems with technology. Especially navigational

aids like charting and compasses used in the making of maps. That was leading edge stuff like our hi-tech astronomers today.'

'How?'

'Charts might enrich the purse beyond all manner of expectation for the discoverer of new lands with untapped mineral and human resources.'

'Umm, I see where this is going. Slaves you mean?'

'Precisely.'

'Stalin and Hitler might have struggled with totalitarianism without technology, I remember reading somewhere?'

'I'd agree with that – it's always important to have the right protocols in place for all kinds of technology. Anyway the technology you consider so advanced today will only end up on the scrapheap of obscurity before the blink of an eye. Perhaps even before the end of your life.'

'Do you really think computers will become obsolete?'

'Already going that way with iPods etc. We only have to think how typewriters dominated the workplace in recent history.'

'What about the protocols you mentioned?'

'GIGO and er oh yes - steadfast security systems.'

'GIGO as in Garbage in and Garbage Out?'

'Exactly. Technology and the data produced can only be as reliable as the reliability of operators.'

‘Not forgetting the operator’s honesty no doubt Gramps?’

‘Sure – if we consider a computer simply as a glorified kind of pen....’

‘What like a biro?’

‘Or a piece of chalk or a quill pen – or even a dollop of ochre in the hands of primitive cavemen. It’s the human mind from which thought derives and through which information is processed. Computers are merely our mind’s mechanical work horses.’

‘Gosh that’s pretty profound – came in to take the dog for a walk and ended up having philosophical and theosophical chats on technology from ancient times. Cup of tea? Gramps.’

Dan returned from the kitchen as Gramps was rubbing his problem leg again and grimacing. ‘These painkillers are making me so miserable’, said Gramps. ‘And I can’t believe that hospital lost my medical records. Here, I want you to take this.’ He handed Dan a well filled brown envelope.

Dan peered inside. ‘Jeez Gramps – there’s loads of fifties in here.’

‘Five grand to be precise. Now I want you to have a wonderful time with that girlfriend Sara of yours and family in South Africa.’

‘I can’t accept it. It’s far too much....’

‘It’ll give you a bit of a lift, and you can always keep what’s left for later. Now run along and I hope you’ll have a great flight’, said Gramps. Dan hugged him goodbye with a strange feeling of foreboding as he departed.

An easing of engine sounds indicated that their South African Airways flight was preparing to land. Breakfast containers had been cleared and Captain Scrivener's soothing voice announced an imminent descent over the Gauteng area. Soon they landed at Johannesburg's Tambo International airport. Assisting an old lady with walking difficulties led to Dan being among the last to reach the sweltering tarmac. Dan followed the serpentine queue of others to the arrivals point and the welcome coolness of an air conditioned building. Inching through *Custom's* Dan noticed Petrius Van De Merwer, his face puce as a plum and gesticulating aggressively to black South African officials.

It was a sobering scene as Petrius plus baggage was hauled off by burly Customs Officers. Shortly afterwards Dan saw a tall Zulu of a woman dressed in the white coat of a medical officer. Her long fingered hands were hardly those of a dainty female. She headed straight towards the same small office where Petrius was being incarcerated. The medical practitioner had a resolute look about her, a sort of no nonsense attitude. Dan watched as she twanged a pair of latex gloves setting small plumes of white powder dancing into the bright interior. She stretched the gloves meaningfully over her hands. Then with jaw thrusting determination she reached for a tube of KY Gel from a side coat pocket before entering the detention room. Dan chortled to himself at the irony of it all. Teach old Petrius to be such a pain in the backside thought Dan. *'That'll give him a bit of a lift'*, as Gramps would say. It's certainly given me a bit of a lift as well. And some great new ideas for a privacy assignment at Uni.

Private Space

Seated in the Hospice
Grounds I make my notes
The sycamore, the daffodils
And people in white coats
There are wooden benches
With their name plates too
And when I think of them
Your smile comes through

The seasons change the
Angels who are working
Here they come and go
The sycamore will shed its
Autumn leaves the daffodils
They too will lose their glow
But you who came to languor
With that precious smile
Your lasting grace on us
Bestowed for more than
Simply just a while

A.P.Whittick
24.4.2010

by Julian Holdsworth-Brewer

While I was waiting in a hotel lobby in Johannesburg, back in 2007, I noticed a kerfuffle. A group of taxi drivers were talking animatedly, with much gesticulating. When I got into my taxi, I asked the driver what was going on, and he told me that one of the drivers – I'll call him Steven -- had just made a lot of money because he'd been driving someone around for three days.

Apparently, Steven had picked up a Russian gentleman at the hotel. The Russian had come down to Johannesburg to invest in a company that he had been contacted by on the Internet: let's call it Acme Extraction. Having decided to go ahead and invest money in this company, he had flown down to Johannesburg and spent a day at the company finalising the deal. He had then spoken to his bank to instruct them to go ahead with a funds transfer. Since it would take a couple of days for the money to come through, he had gone off sightseeing and shopping -- as Acme Extraction was paying his bill at the hotel, he was enjoying a pleasant break. When the time came to go back to the company to have the first meeting post investment, the promised limo failed to arrive. The Russian gentlemen got one of the hotel drivers (Steven) to take him to Acme's offices. When they got there, they found out that Acme Extraction did not exist and the office that they had had the meeting in had been rented for a couple of days only. The guy pulled out a picture of him signing the deal with three officials of Acme and asked if anyone recognised them.

Steven told me that as soon as he saw the picture, he knew the guy would never see his money again because he recognised the people in the picture as Nigerians. Steven told me that Nigerians run all sorts of

scams in South Africa, including (so he told me) forging 200 rand notes on an industrial scale.

They drove to the bank where the Acme's account was: it had been closed and the money was gone. At this point, Steven told me that the Russian gentleman started crying. After a while, they drove to the big police station in Morningside to report what had happened. The police assured the Russian that if they came across these Nigerian gentlemen then they would arrest them. The disconsolate Russian went back to the hotel, only to discover that he, not Acme, was responsible for the bill. The next day he had Steven drive him to a couple of other addresses that he believed to be associated with Acme. Steven told me that they weren't even offices, just random residential addresses. So the Russian then had Steven drive him to the Russian embassy in Pretoria where apparently he was told that he was not the only person to have been defrauded. He went back to Johannesburg and eventually caught a flight home, considerably poorer.

It was like "The Real Hustle" but in real life. And it made me think about the way we trust other people because not only the company, but the people, the offices and the paperwork had all been fake.

Many times, every day, we take people on trust and that makes us vulnerable. Who says you are you, or I am I? If I showed you my driving licence or passport, would that tell you who I am? The average man in the street has no way of checking whether a licence is real or not, and it's surely no more difficult to forge a driving licence than to rent a bogus office for the day.

How do you know what is real? When you go to a meeting with a financial advisor, how do you know they are a financial advisor? When you move house and go to your new dentist, who seems like a nice chap, how do you know he is really a dentist? If that sounds improbable, I refer you to this story from The Times (4th March 2005): "A failed asylum-seeker who set himself up as a dentist and treated more than 600 patients despite having no medical qualifications was jailed for two years yesterday". The fraudster, a Mr. Omid Amidi-Mazaheri, took the identity of a dead dentist. If you saw the medical certificate on the wall, would you challenge the doctor to prove he is the

subject? (This reminds me of the Robert Schimmel joke: “Would you like a shot of novocaine?” / “No, I’d like a shot of you getting a diploma”.)

But here’s the thing. If I want to verify that you are who you say you are, I need to access some information about you. If I need your name and address, your credit rating or your bank details, then that means I have to have some personal information. But giving out your personal information means the more people know it, so it then becomes easier for someone else to pretend to be you, doesn’t it?

There may be a way around this, though. Just as I buy things on eBay by checking how many “stars” the seller has rather than by checking with the local council or some central register, perhaps technology is providing a way to ask whether I should trust you without asking anything about you. Are your eBay stars your personal data? They certainly aren’t private.

Maybe the future is Facebook and its ilk. The wisdom of crowds. We won’t trust anyone, we’ll trust everyone.

An Otherworlds Affair

by Diana Reed

Stupid accidents happen.

Los Alamos, 1946. An experimenter brought two beryllium and plutonium spheres close to each other, approaching criticality. All that held them apart was a screwdriver. It slipped.

Tokaimura, 1999. Workers mixed highly enriched uranium with nitric acid by hand. Then they poured it by the bucket-load into the sedimentation tank. It reached a critical mass, leading to a sustained chain reaction.

May 2041, South Hinksey. Builders working on the partially-decommissioned Oxford University Research Reactor discovered a number of unmarked containers in a deep basement. They piled them in a goods lift. The exact content of all the containers is unclear, but the result was a chain reaction and a release of radioactivity into the atmosphere.

...

On the day of the Oxford accident the wind was from the southwest, bringing slow-moving clouds and persistent heavy rain. Centuries of history and meaning could do nothing to protect its stone and concrete towers.

To the north of the city, in the Norham Gardens annex of the Earth Sciences Department, Alessandra Tremayne was working on the sea bed.

A square of green weed stands out against grey mud. Not a chance, this deep. Note anomaly, do not incorporate.

The North Sea got updated once a week with information from licensed trawlers. The cost of forwarding the readings used to track shoals of fish was nothing compared to the value the designation ‘research boat’ had when it came to bargaining for quotas. But there was no incentive to improve the quality of information.

A square of rock from the Dogger Bank massif. It slopes more steeply than the surfaces around it. Hypothesised. Alessandra brings up previously known points. A small sprinkling, mostly distant. With a quick leg-kick Alessandra re-oriented herself to see from different angles. Redraw.

A figure cartooned from Japanese manga faded into Alessandra’s field of vision.

‘Hi – how’s it going?’ Charles asked.

She felt her lips smile. His avatar, coming from the mundane, made no pretence at realism but still reminded her of his real, physical presence close by, most likely at one of the older VR stations next to the WayIn booth.

‘OK. Coffee after?’ she asks. The sound is jarring, and forces her to be aware of the artificiality of her situation. Her wetsuit and flippers are not congruent with her mundane physicality – she is wearing ordinary clothes in the real world – but she has no helmet and is breathing without difficulty,

‘Love to – but I’m booked in for knowledge-sharing when you finish. Any chance that’ll be soon?’

‘Shouldn’t think so,’ she said.

‘You’re supposed to leave time for clean-up and reset.’

‘Hypocrite. Where are you going?’

‘Sun Yat-Sen. China.’

‘That’ll give you a headache. And it’s the middle of their night.’

‘Duty. Please, Alessandra. I’ll love you forever ...’

The Manga avatar in front of her looked noble and cute. She loved him forever already.

‘No.’

‘It’s an emergency, the lab’s on fire, you’ve got to withdraw ...’

‘Cecile – lock Charles out. No admission this session,’ she said.

The figure of a young teenager appeared from nowhere, and folded the cartoon avatar into nothingness.

‘Thank you,’ Alessandra said.

Cecile has been her ‘spirit guide’ since Alessandra’s first went into Otherworlds. Some people change or remodel their guides constantly. Alessandra liked Cecile to stay the same.

‘My pleasure,’ Cecile said, and was gone.

Charles Ho, sitting at the VR station, took off gloves, shades, and earphones, and turned off the hush-barrier. The team’s only full-immersion state-of-the-art WayIn filled one corner of the open-plan workspace, taking up almost the whole of the converted Victorian villa’s ground-floor. The lights above the door were still showing full local use, and as the gusty wind fell he could hear the gentle susurrations of its systems over the rain tapping the windows.

There were only six people in the building: Charles and Alessandra; a fourth-year undergraduate who had stayed to use the second VR station after a supervision session with the project leader; Doctor Tinmouth herself; and a couple of office staff on the second floor. Charles decided against polishing his CV further while waiting for the booked slot to meet his Chinese contact. Networking was encouraged under knowledge-sharing protocols, but Doctor Tinmouth might not consider that included looking for new employment opportunities.

In her room one floor up from Charles, Jackie Tinmouth heard feet hurry down the stairs. Samantha Cossiter pushed through the half-open door without knocking.

‘Look at the internals,’ Samantha said. ‘I’m getting my daughter out of school.’

Sam was pulling on her coat, and before Jackie could make sense of what was said the woman had hurried down the stairs and out into the rainy morning. Sirens could be heard in the distance, joined by the wail of other alarms set off by well-meaning administrators, putting into effect emergency procedures that took their employees out onto rainy car-parks and open spaces to stand and be counted, unsafely distant from the buildings that would give them short-term protection.

‘Wait - ’ Jackie said, too late, as she switched her slate to messaging and read the heading and opening paragraph overlying every other screen. The woman’s colleague, moving more slowly – but still with some urgency, putting on coat, grabbing umbrella – could be heard coming downstairs. Jackie headed out onto the landing.

‘Nobody go out!’ she called.

The undergraduate came into the hall – he had recently close-cropped his hair as if he was a WayIn user, and for a moment Jackie couldn’t tell him apart from Charles. The front door was flapping open.

‘Close the door!’ she called down. ‘Don’t go out! Don’t let anyone go out!’

Then, to the second woman: ‘Ann! Make sure all the windows are closed. And keep watching for news.’

Jackie hurried from room to room, checking who was in. On the ground floor, she saw the light over the door of the WayIn cubicle.

‘Alessandra?’ she asked Charles, who was sitting back and moodily contemplating his own spired fingertips.

‘Yes. I’ve told her she’s over-running.’

‘It’s an emergency. Get her out.’

‘She’s locked me out. Do you want me to hit the button?’ he asked almost petulantly, looking at the glassed-over panel allowing access to the last-resort mechanism that would unceremoniously remove the helmet, retract wires from the eyes, eject the traveller from Otherworlds without warning or closure, with the shock of a car-crash mitigated by air-bags – alive, but stunned and potentially damaged.

‘No, I’ll get through to her. You make sure every scrap of data we have here is fully backed up. Then read the emergency all-staff on the slates. We get this right, and we stay safe.’

...

Three months later. Safe, but not sound. Out at sea, clouds blanked the horizon, wasting rain on a cold coastal current from the north. In the harbour, autumn sun sparkled on white concrete, glittered on the water, the little waves slapping against the side of the fishing boats moored by the quay, most unloaded now and waiting for the tide. Alessandra imagined herself floating slack, a dead mermaid dragged through darkness and spilled onto steel tables for the village women's knives. Fantasy drove out reality, the emptiness of coming home destitute and alone.

'Not thinking of jumping, Miss Tremayne?'

She turned and found a dark, thick-set man standing beside her. Peaked hat, jacket with fraying braid, workman's trousers. She did not want to talk to someone in a uniform. Or to anyone else in the village.

'Doctor Tremayne,' she corrected him. 'I'm quite all right, thank you.'

He smiled, and his face looked younger. She knew him, now. Harry. Harry – what? They had been at school together, the village school, in the one big class, overlapping for a year or two before she went to boarding school. He had been the tough one, the smart one, the one who stopped her being top in maths, though she was top in everything else that mattered. In the last year, all the girls took boyfriends, and she made sure she got him. She even said she would marry him.

She realised she was staring at him, the wisps of dark hair escaping from underneath his cap, the lines already crinkling around his eyes.

'What do you reckon to our new complex, then?' he asked conversationally, following her gaze away to the Malporth Pride unloading her catch.

A wide tube snaked into the hold, sucking the fish into a holding barrel three times as high as the man operating the machine. From there a steady flow, sorted automatically by size, shape and colour, passed through to the new fish cellars, a controlled environment visible behind long windows that framed the bloody lines of steel tables, gutters to the

side to catch blood and innards, insulated carriers at the end for table fish, kind by kind. Women in white overalls with white caps sat or stood, slicing and filleting with a variety of sharp knives.

‘It still looks a bit – primitive?’

He shrugged. ‘Best for here. We don’t handle that much. Quotas are down all the time. When there are fish at all.’

‘There seem to be plenty today.’

‘They’re a right mix-up, though,’ he said. There was a harshness to his voice. This part of the Duchy missed out on the soft, west-country burr. ‘Cod, pilchard, salmon and God knows what else.’

‘Perturbations of the deep ocean flows,’ she said, not expecting an informed response.

‘I read your paper,’ he answered. ‘The one about the Iceland Baffle, where your name was, with Tinmouth and Ho.’

‘Did you?’ she said, surprised into eye contact. ‘What did you think of it?’

‘I didn’t like it. I mean, it was a good paper. But the melt-water bit. You should have laid it on the line more. It’s bloody frightening, what’s going on.’

‘That isn’t our job,’ she said. ‘That’s speculation.’

‘Then call it a hypothesis,’ he said. ‘That’s respectable enough isn’t it, Doctor Tremayne?’

She laughed briefly, unable even to feel safe in her intellectual superiority. She could feel the warmth of his body between her and the wind; smell the damp wool of his coat.

‘Call me Alessandra,’ she said.

‘And I’m Harry. Harry Owen-Brown.’

‘I remember.’

‘Hal to my friends. Which I hope you’ll be. Terrible thing, this Oxford business, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ she said bleakly, the momentary lightening of her mood obliterated. ‘That’s why I’m home, you know that.’

‘You’ll get another job.’

‘I suppose there’ll be something.’

But that wasn't the point, she was thinking, not the whole point. Oxford, gone. The stones still there; the buildings, uninhabitable. An accident. A senseless, foreseeable, accident. It felt worse, even more unfair, that she was just another undistinguished victim, one of the thousands displaced by the radioactive plume..

'So where will you go? Someone said Japan?'

'I don't know where you got that from.'

'It was on the news, research teams going on together, spread through the world community?'

'If they said it on the news it must be right.'

His silence forced her to continue.

'China. Jackie Tinmouth and Charles Ho – they've got their papers. Do you know what they told me? "Pressure of work does not allow us to process your application for the time being."'

'Well – you can wait a bit, can't you?' he said.

'That means never. It's different if you're a big name. Or if you've got the right ethnicity. I don't suppose they'd even let me make the tea.'

'You're not qualified for it, are you?' he said. She did not immediately understand, did not expect a joke.

'Qualified to make the tea, I meant. Wake up!' he said.

'I'm not qualified for anything now, am I? No use to anyone.'

'You'll get another job,' he repeated.

'You're the first person I've told, about China. I haven't told Dad. I had to think first.'

'You just heard?'

'After lunch. Not even person to person. Written message. I don't know why I'm telling you ...'

'Perhaps it's easier, talking to a stranger?'

'You're not really a stranger, are you?' she said. 'You knew who I was, when you came over.'

'I thought you didn't remember,' he said, for the first time awkward, spontaneous. 'Tell you what, though, Sandy, come back to the office while I sort out one piece of paperwork, then we can go to the Oak and Anchor. Catch up, see how we go.'

She had forgotten the nickname, and did not like it. She was twenty-six and felt so old. Like a piece of shapeless plastic washed up on the sand, abandoned.

‘Unless you’ve got something else to do?’ he asked, but he knew she hadn’t. How quickly he had moved from ‘Miss Tremayne’ to ‘Sandy’, to this proposition, which she recognised for what it was.

As in a time of war, her feelings flipped from blank nihilism to a desperate grasping for human contact, life, hope.

‘No. I’ve got nothing else.’

Compared to most around here, he didn’t look that bad in the uniform. What was it, Harbourmaster? No, that was an older man, Mitchell something. Mitchell Jenkins. Assistant Harbourmaster, it said on his badge. But what’s in a name? They’d amalgamated police and coastguard and suchlike years ago.

He was not like Charles. Charles would never have worn a uniform, never have shortened his name to Chas as Harry had to Hal. Charles would never have stood close enough to impose a sense of possession, as Hal did now, although she and Charles had been lovers for the past two years.

Charles had not contacted her since the evacuation, though Alessandra left many messages for him conventionally, at his parents’ home in Birmingham, and to be relayed by her spirit-guide in Otherworlds. It was Jackie Tinmouth who made sure everyone in her team was checked out medically and had somewhere to go, helped with mundane arrangements when she could, asked what their plans were. It was Jackie who told her, weeks ago, that Charles had already gone to Guangzhou to start setting up the new department.

Hal offered her his arm, and they walked together. In the pub she let him pay; money still came into her bank account, but she did not know for how long.

A full yellow moon hung in the September sky by the time Alessandra got home. It was still warm, the scent of roses strong, and moths flapped around her like small, short-sighted ghosts.

‘All right?’ she heard her father ask, as she walked up the steep garden path. He had brought a chair out onto the porch, as he often did, to enjoy the view across the harbour and out to sea.

‘Fine. You got my message?’

‘Sure. No problem. Had a good time?’

Like being a kid again, saying where you were. But she had nothing, nowhere else to go. And she knew he meant well.

‘We had a drink at the pub and then went along the cliffs.’

‘Good. So long as you weren’t alone. It’s not like it was. Smugglers.’

‘That’s traditional, Dad.’

‘Some smuggling – drugs, stuff like that. Now it’s everything. Food, medicines, tech stuff. I blame Brussels. Put up the barriers, and it’s an incentive to organised crime ...’

‘I was all right. I had the Assistant Harbourmaster with me.’

And a convoy of smugglers and gangsters could have passed us by unnoticed, she thought, hidden in the smooth grassy dip of the old workings above Copper Cove. Her body still felt his hands; soft moistness, the legacy of their love-making, dampening her pants. She did not feel dirty, nor ashamed, but comfortable and excited at the same time.

‘Harry Owen-Brown? I never thought much of him. Now, I’ve got something for you ...’

He reached into his pocket for a small, square envelope and handed it to her. It was fat with tissue paper, wrapping a small silver medal and chain. She looked closely; it showed a man carrying a boy over water.

‘A Saint Christopher,’ Frank Tremayne said. ‘For good luck when travelling.’

‘I remember,’ she said. ‘You had that picture at the shop.’

‘Your mother used to say it gave the wrong impression; my customers shouldn’t need good luck. Wrong, of course, everyone needs luck, as well as good planning.’

Frank Tremayne had been a travel agent, who believed in seeing the places he sent his clients. He sold up before it became plain that the decline of mass tourism was no short-term trend, and had been able to retire comfortably. Now his travel was limited to Otherworlds, mind-

and-machine reconstructions held in the Net. He was the first and only private owner of a WayIn in the village, installed soon after the facility came out to the coast and a box for official use was installed in the old fish cellars under the Harbourmaster's office. Otherworld reconstructions had grown into an obsessive hobby shared with a group of like-minded enthusiasts, beyond the understanding of his neighbours.

'I won't need a Saint Christopher, Dad. I'm not going anywhere.'

'Not going? You must! The team's going, isn't it?'

Calmly, she explained.

'But that wasn't the impression I got from your boss this afternoon.'

'Doctor Tinnmouth? In Otherworlds, you mean?'

'Of course. Her guide was inquiring when you'd be in, and linked us up. We had a good chat.'

'You were talking about me?'

'No! Well, not much. She knew about our group. I took her round part of the Athens museum.'

'What did she think of it?'

'She seemed impressed. Spotted some rough edges. Since she was so interested I showed her your Magdalen Bridge.'

'Dad!'

'I didn't think you'd mind.'

'It's so partial ...'

'She put in a bit of riverside for you. A small upstream section she remembered clearly. I helped her.'

'I wish you hadn't.'

'Don't be so selfish, sweetheart. You should have seen her face. The place meant a lot to her. We got leak-over into rain.'

'Puts a whole new slant on the naturalistic fallacy, doesn't it?'

'Thinking nature responds to our moods? It's an interesting literary parallel, but hardly an original one...'

'So what was the outcome? Am I supposed to contact her?'

'I said you could use the WayIn any time you liked tomorrow. Cecile will know. There's probably a message for you now. You'd know if you'd been here to check.'

They met in Jackie Tinmouth's room at the Norham Garden annex. Cecile took Alessandra there directly, at ten o'clock.

'Try the sofa,' Jackie said. 'It's worked out better than the chair. I must have used it more often. The view from the window's a bit incomplete yet ...'

'You could have the curtains drawn,' Alessandra suggested.

'No, I don't want to do that. This way reminds me of how much there's to do. Come and have a look downstairs at how far we've got.'

Alessandra followed her out onto the landing and down. The open-plan ground floor was much as she remembered it.

'I've kept the VR stations,' Jackie said. 'I know it seems odd, when we're fully immersed, but it's an easy convention for writing or talking to colleagues while you get the information you want to share. But I've changed the WayIn. You just walk in and your guide's waiting for you. Since we're all actually in Otherworlds already I didn't think we had to go through a reconstruction of the mechanics of it; but we don't want people calling up their Guides just anywhere, either - '

'Only one WayIn?'

'You can have as many people in there at one time as you want. The panel on front indicates who's there, and what they're using. And project data can only be accessed or manipulated by going through from here.'

Alessandra opened the door. Cecile smiled at her from a small, windowless room. 'It works,' Cecile said. 'Do you want to go through now?'

'All the data?' Alessandra asked Jackie.

'Just as if you were back in Oxford. The mundane Oxford. Why shouldn't it be? Everything we used was on computer.'

Alessandra stepped back and closed the door.

'Wow,' she said.

'Come back up to the staff room. Have a coffee.'

Jackie led the way up to the first floor.

'What about up there?' Alessandra asked, indicating the stairs leading to the top floor.

‘Not so finished. We may need admin support, so I’m suggesting it’s kept as it was, for now. You can e-mail or ’phone from here, we haven’t even had to change the numbers. White coffee, no sugar?’

They carried mugs back into Jackie’s room. The drink tasted as strong and bitter as ever.

‘Coffee’s good socially,’ Jackie said. ‘But if you’re actually thirsty, this isn’t going to do anything for you. I think we’ll learn not to want it here –’

‘Except, in Japan aren’t they adding IV drips to semi-permanent WayIns? Ones that work when you drink so you stop feeling thirsty?’

‘I don’t think we’ll afford that for a while. We’re only working to current WayIn standards for the moment.’

‘How big is this? Big as the department?’ Alessandra guessed.

‘University wide. All the Colleges have bought in. There are a lot of people working on keeping things going. When you think about it, there’s not much has to be in the mundane.’

‘But how will you manage from Sun Yat-Sen?’ Alessandra asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘With the transmission time-lags. It wouldn’t be practical. You can’t interact properly with the model.’

‘Sorry, I forgot. You don’t know, I’m not going.’

‘What? You’re turning down China?’

‘I’m staying with Oxford. We’ve still got work to do, contracts to carry out – and we can do it from here. You’re still part of the team. If you want to be?’

‘Yes. Absolutely. Who else is in?’

‘I’m looking to recruit.’

‘It’ll be a steep curve for anyone new.’ Alessandra ventured.

‘I know. Charles took a lot of expertise with him. But I’m working on that.’ Jackie said.

By lunch time, Alessandra was ready to take a break from Otherworlds; she was hungry, thirsty, and needed a real toilet.

This morning, she had shaved her head and showered thoroughly from scalp to toes, put on clean clothes. Her skin had forgotten Hal. The

laundry-bin held all external traces of the previous day, from spilled beer, greasy chips, and damp grass. She wanted those feelings back. For the first time in months, she wanted company.

The harbour was empty; only a few dinghies floated in the basin. Alessandra found no one in the Harbourmaster's office, just a cardboard notice on the locked door: 'closed for lunch'.

In the past she had avoided the Oak and Anchor. By the time she was old enough to be a customer, she was set on a different path to the rest of her generation in the village. It was their place, not hers. Where Hal took her last night. As good a starting place to look for him as any.

With the fishing boats at sea, the public bar was almost empty, but as she peered into the saloon she saw a group of four people around the table under the bow window. They seemed to be at the end of their meal – plates and glasses had been pushed aside to make room for cards. There was a couple, the woman either plump or pregnant; and a younger girl who sat opposite them, next to Hal.

Hal looked up, his eyes met Alessandra's, and his immediate smile brought back the intimacy of the night before. Then the smile was gone, and his face polite but distant as he stood to greet her, and introduce her to his friends.

'Doctor Tremayne – Alessandra – do you remember Meg? And her partner, Philip Barleston?'

The man nodded, but stayed seated. Hal stepped out from behind the table to shake her hand, holding it between his for a moment longer than necessary.

'I had to see you ...' Alessandra said quietly. She wanted to talk to him alone. These people were irrelevant, a nuisance.

He drew another chair up to the table next to his, briskly instructing the girl to move up. She barely shifted in her seat, letting Hal's chair knock against hers. Nevertheless she carefully moved the cards, realigning them to her slightly changed position.

'You haven't introduced me,' the girl complained.

'This is Emlee Jenkins. My boss's daughter. She's been helping out with the office this summer, but she's going off to be a nurse.'

Alessandra realised that Emlee could be – almost certainly was – at least eighteen. She was small, with neatly cut brown hair framing a round, pretty face.

‘Isn’t he charming? Really knows how to make a woman feel wanted ...’ she said, blowing Hal a kiss.

‘Can I get you a drink, Alessandra?’ Hal said.

While he went to the bar, Emlee patted the seat next to her. ‘Why don’t you sit down? You look tired.’

‘Do I? I’ve been in Otherworlds all morning - ’

‘I don’t know how you can bear that. VR’s fine, I like VR, we go to Newquay to the VR there, lot of us together, but I couldn’t get on with skull-caps and wires in my eyes ...’

‘Won’t you have to? If you’re going to train as a nurse?’

‘Most places don’t make you. I don’t like the idea of taking risks.’

‘It’s quite safe if you’re properly trained and the WayIn’s well maintained.’

‘It’s not just your health, it’s your soul. They can steal bits of it, then do stuff with them, in Otherworlds.’

‘That’s not how it works. You can take an aspect of personality and copy it, but - ’

‘Souls are something different though, something holy. Take a bit of something holy and it’s still holy. Like those hologram things, you know? A flake of your soul’s got everything about you, everything you are, down in that one little bit. Sometimes it goes into monsters. Sometimes it goes back into real people’s heads - ’

‘That’s absolute rubbish. It doesn’t happen.’

‘Maybe not here, but it does in India and China and places like that,’ Emlee insisted.

‘I thought you were growing your hair back?’ Meg interrupted, nodding towards Alessandra’s bare skull.

Alessandra was glad to turn away from Emlee’s nonsense. What a small place Malporth was, she thought. Yes, she had allowed a fuzz to develop. She had been depressed, and not careful about herself.

‘No, it’s not really practical.’ she answered the woman.

‘Otherworlds is a flash in the pan,’ Philip said. ‘It’s a dead end. Stuck on the bleeding edge and never getting anywhere. How many people use it? No-one round here-’

‘Except Hal,’ Emlee said, as Hal came back with Alessandra’s fruit juice – for Alessandra wanted to get back to work that afternoon. She had been looking for company, but not this company.

‘What’re you saying about me now, Emlee?’ Hal asked.

‘That you’re brilliant, of course. Passed your proficiency first off. But you don’t go into Otherworlds except when you have to.’

‘I can see that.’ Alessandra asked, looking at Hal’s helmet of hair, at least half an inch long.

‘This?’ he said. ‘I shave it when I need. I know Emlee has strong views. But if you want to get on in my line of work, you’ve got to do Otherworlds.’

‘We managed all right before,’ Philip said. ‘Let’s just live in the real world and cope with our real problems. Eh?’

The comment was directed at Alessandra, but Hal responded.

‘That’s just a slogan. I’m afraid I’ve got to get back to work.’

Alessandra made quick excuses and followed him out into the sunlight.

‘I’d like to talk to you,’ she said.

‘Not now. I’ve a load of stuff to do.’

‘All right,’ she said, stopping dead. ‘I’m not going to chase you.’

She turned away, not allowing herself to feel the disappointment of her expectations.

Now he followed her. ‘I haven’t much time. Really,’ he said.

‘You know I told you about China? I met Doctor Tinmouth this morning, but she’s Professor Tinmouth now -’

‘It was a mistake? You’re going?’

‘No. It’s all going to be in Otherworlds, all Oxford, all the University. Everyone can come in from anywhere in the country. I can work from here, from Dad’s WayIn.’

He looked at her as if her words made no sense.

‘Colleges are communities, not buildings,’ she said. ‘So are Departments.’

‘But it isn’t real. You start doing your experiments in there and what use are the results?’

‘Most of the work isn’t like that. Most of it’s analysing data, talking, working things out. All the actual hard information’s coming from outside, from satellites, ground stations, buoys. It all goes into the net. Same net that makes Otherworlds.’

‘That’s all very interesting,’ he said. ‘But I really have got to get back to work.’

‘So last night was just a fucking one-off. OK.’

She stood independent, puzzled, but not asking him for anything. He felt again the intense desire to capture and hold her that he had been unable to articulate or act upon when she had left for her first boarding school, returning in the holidays changed, remote, not one of them any more. When she did not want him, he wanted her. He hugged her to him, kissed her as he had the night before, told her he loved her, that she was his clever lady, and that she should never leave, leave Malporth or leave him.

...

The ability to keep congruence between your mundane body and your physical presentation in Otherworlds is a basic skill, essential for the ‘proficiency’ test that all new users must pass before being allowed full access to Otherworlds.

Full access allows divergence. People change and disguise themselves. Increasingly, people play games; present as super-heroes, chimaeras, or simply as more attractive, younger, than they are in flesh. But most authorities agree it is a sign of a healthy, balanced personality to be willing to maintain congruence for all serious purposes.

At first, Alessandra drifted out of congruence quite innocently. Her working wardrobe had been abandoned in her rented flat now within the exclusion zone. Even if she could retrieve her shirts and well-cut skirts, jackets, and tailored trousers, they would not be safe to wear. But she decided she could still wear them to work, in Otherworlds. They existed

in the mundane, as much as when she was dressing herself in them every morning. There was no need to order more for Malporth. The few fixed waistbands she had felt uncomfortable, and in the village she chose slacker, less well fitting things to wear.

In Otherworlds her clothes fitted. There was no change, nothing to notice. And Alessandra said nothing.

In the mundane, Hal noticed. Lucky or unlucky to fall pregnant so fast? He chose lucky, and asked her to marry him. Agreeing felt obvious. Marriage was a comforting convention, increasing her acceptance in the village. She did not want to bring up a child alone. It would have a father as well as a grandfather.

...

Alessandra never wore her wedding ring in Otherworlds. Here's one reason. Charles Ho came back to Oxford. He walked into Norham Gardens two months after Jackie brought Alessandra back to work. 'Honey, I'm home ...' he said teasingly.

Alessandra flung her chair back and was in his arms without thought. They were strong, wiry. Charles was shorter than Hal, more slightly built.

'I'm back. Have you missed me?'

'So much! So, so much! We got some of your notes, but they're not exactly complete. We've been struggling to get straight. When did you get back?'

'Yesterday. Didn't Jackie say anything?'

'Just that we might be getting some sort of info system from you, in lieu of notice. We'd be grateful for anything - '

'Yeah? Well here I am, all yours ... ' he said, and kissed her on the lips. 'I have so missed you. Promised myself to get back to you. And here I am.'

He did not look quite as she remembered him. His clothes were well made and stylish, in an unfamiliar way. He had always been open and optimistic; but now, when the smile left his face for a moment, she saw

anxiety and doubt. Alessandra felt awkward with him, and pulled away, not knowing what to say.

‘They’re calling it a secondment – good choice of words, don’t you think?’ he said, filling the silence.

‘Why didn’t you write? Or ’phone?’

Charles shrugged.

‘I’ve been up and down. Couldn’t think straight.’

‘I’ve been there. Yes. And then you just have to, well, get on with things,’ Alessandra said.

‘But I’ve come back now. Because of you.’

‘I can’t – I can’t see you. Not in the mundane. It’s too late,’ she said.

‘What’s the matter? Alessandra, what is it?’

‘There’s someone else. I’m engaged. And – and I can’t leave him. Not now.’

He held her gently to him: ‘It’s all right. It doesn’t make any difference. We can be together here.’

‘I went home, to Malporth. I didn’t think there was anything left for me. The Professor tracked me down, got me a Fellowship, but I’d met Hal again...’

‘The Professor. Is she in yet? I need to tell her I’m here.’

Jackie Tinmouth caught Alessandra in the staff room later that day.

‘Are you OK with Charles being back like this?’ she asked.

‘It’s a bit awkward, but yes, it’s fine.’

‘You’ve talked to him about it, then?’ Jackie persisted. What’s it to do with her? Alessandra thought. I’m not her student. I don’t need her to look after my morals.

‘Of course we’ve talked about it. It’s OK. We’ll just stick to being colleagues in Otherworlds.’

‘Good. That’s fine. I was worried that perhaps - ’

‘I’d rather not discuss it, Jackie. It’s fine. Honestly.’

‘Just one more thing – we’re all trying to make everything as normal as possible, especially for new colleagues. So we won’t draw their attention to Charles, all right?’

‘Of course not.’ Alessandra said. She wondered briefly and indignantly what the Professor was implying, but then a new batch of results came in with a highlighted anomaly, and Alessandra put Jackie’s uncharacteristic intrusiveness out of her mind.

Having Charles back, that was a gift. Working with him made everything easier, he had so much background knowledge of the project, knew automatically how to handle the model when new information needed to be incorporated. With Alessandra, he was persistently charming and attentive – constantly at his best, she could not fault him. She did not talk about her mundane life and he did not press her, or talk about himself. Perhaps this was maturity, she thought. Coming through disaster and growing up.

‘Can you spare a half hour or so?’ he asked one morning. ‘I’ve got something to show you.’

‘I guess so. What is it?’

‘Come with me. Outside.’

Norham Gardens was well on its way to full reconstruction, after the university authorities had ruled on a methodology for public spaces. The light of a heavy grey December day made the old houses look heavier, the later additions and adaptations more clumsy than when the trees and shrubs were in leaf. Charles took her across the road to the path that ran by a sidewall, and a door that when unlocked led into a small hall. He switched on the lights. She saw bright walls to each side and descending red-carpeted stairs between blonde wood banisters. Charles took her hand, raised it to his lips, and led her down.

‘How did you get this?’ she asked.

‘My university had to buy the space, in the mundane, from its owner. That wasn’t too hard – not much demand for houses in the exclusion zone. But then the Proctors spent months arguing about what alterations we could make. What do you think?’

‘It’s wonderful. I wish we could really be here ...’

The sub-basement had been opened up into one large open-plan space. Long, double glazed windows looked onto a small, private paved area; ground-level was at eye-height just beyond, over a stone bank

softened with ferns. Sofa, chairs and coffee table clustered by the window, and there was a bowl of flowers – freesias, purple and white – that filled the warm air with their scent. Against the inner wall Alessandra saw a large double bed, made up hotel-style with bright patchwork patterned cushions and throw over plumped white pillows and duvet. ‘It’s as real as I’m going to get,’ Charles said.

There was a mirror on the wall behind him. She saw herself, in the absurd white dress Meg and Emlee had scavenged second hand and altered to fit her, holding a small bouquet of late flowering roses from her father’s garden. In the village now she was Mrs. Owen-Brown.

Charles moved to kiss her. It surprised her, both because he had made no attempt until then to cross the distance she had put between them on his first morning back, and because now he did so tentatively, as if a rebuff might not be easily shaken off. Responding was comfortable, natural. She let her arms fold him in an embrace, her hand cupping the back of his neck and gently running up over his skull.

Until she felt the scalp, and in that a dimple, a round-shaped difference. She tried to look but he held her in front of him. There was nothing to see, she knew already.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘A plug. European WayIns - wires through the eyes - it’s dead-end tech. Chou Mitsu developed it at Sun Yat-Sen. Very new. But about a thousand times better.’

‘And no-one can see it?’

‘In the mundane? Of course they can. It’s quite a fashion statement. If you can afford it.’

‘Then why can I only feel it?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps because it’s new, I’ve hardly seen it myself?’

‘You’ve been here ages ...’

‘Does it matter?’

Charles touched her jacket, and it slipped from her shoulders. The fastenings of her blouse were undone. His own clothes began to fall from him in a graceful sketch of undressing.

‘I don’t know about this ...’

‘Don’t you want to? I think you do,’ he said, and the mirror showed him moving to stand behind her, stroking her neck, reaching down to her bare breasts.

‘There’s Hal...’ she said.

‘Your fisherman?’

‘He’s not a fisherman.’

Assistant Harbourmaster. She completed the thought but did not say it. It did not sound much, but Assistant Harbourmaster was something, was quite a lot, in the village. Hal could be proud of what he was, and she found she did not want to betray him by talking him down.

‘Don’t tell me you love him?’

She did not know if it was love, or if it ever had been love, but they had settled into a relationship that worked.

‘It wouldn’t be the same, if there was someone else. If either of us went with anyone else.’

‘Most people would say this doesn’t count.’

‘Doesn’t it?’

‘You’re in Malporth. Anything that happens here, only happens in your mind. You can’t get pregnant, or catch HIV, or even get love-bites on your pretty skin unless you think them there yourself - ’

‘They’d say it’s sad,’ she said, her head moving backwards to yield more of her neck to his tongue. ‘Or disgusting’.

‘Villagers. Forget them.’

The bed felt as comfortable as it looked. Its sheets stayed white and clean, no matter how often they returned to the apartment. The freesias never died, but were replaced by the right flowers for the season, as Christmas passed, then New Year, and spring came round again.

The North Atlantic/North Sea Ocean Currents project was back on track, contracts met, and with every hope of continued funding. Jackie Tinnmouth recruited fresh staff from the older universities – Oxford on most external ratings now being the newest. Weekly project meetings could be tough, but the team was getting results.

After one of these sessions Jackie held Alessandra back: ‘I notice Charles is doing most of the initial analysis now,’ she said.

‘Yes. He’s put in an incredible number of hours. I can’t match him.’

‘You shouldn’t try. So you’re coming up with the reconciliations and handling the bigger picture?’

‘A lot of it was his to start with, from before the accident.’

‘OK. That’s interesting. How are you finding things, on a personal level?’

‘It’s personal.’

‘Yes. I understand you might feel that way. But I’m the one most responsible for your welfare, so I want to know.’

‘It’s fine. We’re fine.’

Near the end of April Alessandra got out of bed in the morning and was humiliated by a gush of clear liquid which she immediately told herself was urine; she had slept too deeply and her bladder had become over-full; it was three weeks before the baby was due. She dressed, then wiped the floor. Hal had gone to work early, and her father was already in the garden, so she breakfasted quickly alone, then went to the WayIn.

When he came in from the garden for his mid-morning cup of coffee, Frank Tremayne looked in to check that she was at work. Something gave him pause – she lay on her right side on the couch, in the classic safe positions with her nine-months pregnant stomach bulging against the mattress and her left leg brought forward, bent at the knee. There was tension in her body, and her breathing was uneven. He came closer, and put a hand on her swollen belly. It was tight, but then slowly became softer.

Frank did not know what to do. Contacting Hal might get him into trouble with his daughter, when she came back. There was tension between the couple over the hours she worked, not helped by Alessandra’s unwillingness to prepare for their child’s birth. She kept her appointments with the midwife, accepted second-hand baby clothes. She appeared to listen to advice from Meg, and thanked Hal’s mother for the family crib now waiting in Alessandra’s childhood bedroom, next to the room that she and Hal now shared. He saw her impatience with it all. As soon as she could, she escaped back into Otherworlds.

‘You can’t have the baby in Otherworlds,’ Hal objected.

‘Why not? Surgeons have done operations on patients while they’ve been in Otherworlds and they haven’t even needed anaesthetic,’ she had answered.

For once Frank was glad when Meg called in unexpectedly, with her son asleep in his push chair. She parked him in the front hall, and followed Frank to where Alessandra lay. There was now blood staining her loose trousers, and pooling on the leather of the couch.

‘She wants to come out of there,’ Meg said. ‘Can you get through to her?’

‘She doesn’t make it easy.’

‘Emergency exit?’

‘Not if I can help it.’

A long, harsh shiver began to tighten Alessandra’s body.

‘Well, you’d better do something. And we need the midwife.’

Alessandra wanted sex. Half way through the morning she and Charles went across the road to his flat. But he could not satisfy her. What she felt, repeating itself more insistently with each contraction of her labouring mundane belly, could not be pain, but the profound unease of suppressed trauma. She clung to him, and he could do nothing for her.

The doorbell rang.

‘Take no notice,’ Alessandra said. ‘I’m not moving.’

The doorbell rang again.

Charles pulled away from her, stood up, and walked to the stairs, becoming dressed as he went. Jackie Tinmouth was already on the landing.

‘How did you get in?’ Alessandra asked.

‘I’m your team leader. This has to stop.’

‘It’s private,’ Alessandra said.

‘Nothing to do with Charles is private, you should know that. Alessandra, you’ve got to exit. Your father says you’re in labour, and the midwife’s coming.’

‘Is Dad here? He can’t be, I’m using the WayIn - ’

‘He telephoned. When he couldn’t get you, he called me.’

‘He’s panicking. The first stage goes on for ages, and I’ve only been here a couple of hours.’

‘I still think - ’

‘I don’t need to be there for the first stage. All you do is relax, breath, let the cervix open; my body can do that better for itself.’

‘Let her stay,’ Charles said. ‘I want to be with her.’

‘You want? You don’t count.’

‘Stop it! How can you say that?’ Alessandra protested.

‘Easily. He hasn’t changed in all these months. Not had a single new thought.’

‘I’ve done good work.’ Charles objected.

‘I’d have him deleted – I will get him deleted - ’

‘Wait,’ Alessandra said, pulling herself up to sit on the edge of the bed. ‘Where are you now, Charles? In the mundane, I mean?’

‘I’m here, baby. In Oxford.’

‘But Oxford’s empty. The real Oxford. Jackie, what’s going on?’

‘But we talked about it,’ Jackie said. ‘You were OK with it...’

‘Look, you know I’m setting up a new department in China?’ Charles said.

‘You were, but - ’

‘Sun Yat-Sen’s got the best Net studies unit in the world. You’ve heard of it?’

‘The Chou-Mitsu Institute - ’

‘Yeah. Well, they’ve got the first working full personality downloader. It all fitted so well. I was thinking of you all the time, and Jackie was practically begging me to come back and keep things going here, so it all fitted for everyone. And here I am.’

‘It’s my fault. I left it to him to tell you ... ’ Jackie said.

‘You’re not really here?’

‘Of course I am. This is me, isn’t it?’ he said, sitting next to her and holding her to him.

‘You’re in China.’

‘I am also in China. I have a body in China.’

‘Meanwhile Charles Ho in China is busy getting on with his life.’ Jackie said.

‘I came because I cared about you.’ Charles said.

‘You came because I needed you, and Chou-Mitsu were carrying out field tests.’ Jackie said.

‘Does that matter?’ Charles asked Alessandra. ‘I agreed to it for you.’

‘You’re just a sort of postcard, sent because you felt bad about leaving?’

‘I feel like me. Do you think I’m not me?’ he said.

‘Alessandra, you have to go home.’ Jackie said.

‘So what happens if you want to go back? Can you?’ Alessandra asked, ignoring the woman and speaking to Charles.

‘This stream of consciousness, this set of experiences that’s me, now, could in theory sometime be merged with a fresh down-loading, or even re-imprinted in the mind of the original - ’

‘In your dreams ... if you dream - ’ Jackie said.

‘The technology isn’t quite there yet. Not safely. But it will be as if I had lived two lives, simultaneously.’

‘I’ve seen Charles several times, the real Charles. He doesn’t even ask after you, Alessandra. He - ’

Instantly, without even a flicker of warning to accommodate human expectation, Cecile was in the room, standing between them.

‘They’re pulling you out, Alessandra. Hal’s authorised the emergency over-ride. Try to relax and go with it.’

‘No! I can’t ... they can’t ...’ – but Alessandra was gone without trace.

She felt pain, push dear, push, it’s time to do some work now go tell the Doctor he’s got to come Hal. Come on you lazy cow, we’ve got to get this show on the road.

Alessandra struggled to see through bloody tears, though the feeling was dim compared to the pain of the child’s head pressing lighting flashes of agony against the dark swell of pain, the overwhelming orgasms sweeping through her, instantly in the storm without experiencing the journey there. She screamed, and reached for the helmet.

‘Oh shit!’ said the midwife. ‘Don’t you dare! Go with it, dear, go with it. Bear down now. Now! Is the Doctor coming, Hal? I’m not carrying the can for this one - ’

But their son was born safe and beautiful, and Alessandra, though tired and sore and shocked, recovered fast enough to care for him and feed him; and find herself tied to him day and night as if, as Hal’s mother said, their souls had not yet separated. Alessandra would have looked for some less blissful metaphor.

Jackie Tinmouth said Alessandra should take ‘at least six months’ maternity and sick leave. ‘Don’t even visit us for three months. You mustn’t use a WayIn until your eyes are healed,’ she said.

‘Three months is so long - ’ Alessandra objected.

‘Three months is nothing. It’s a minimum.’

‘She’s right,’ Hal said. ‘I’ve been looking at the figures. And after that you have to go slowly, be careful. You probably shouldn’t work full-time again.’

He liked the Professor. She had taken the trouble to travel from her mundane home in Manchester to visit Alessandra in Malporth, showing real care for her people, and then stayed several days in the area. Hal asked Jackie about her work, and she listened attentively to his observations of the effect of water temperature fluctuations on the coast. He asked Alessandra whether she thought Jackie would like to stand god-mother to young Harry, but Alessandra had not thought about baptism.

‘I’m working to get you a plug. If you want it.’ Jackie said, when she was alone with Alessandra.

‘If I want it? That’d be great! But it’d cost a fortune, and I can’t go to China...’

‘There may be a facility in Europe in the next year. It’s not certain, and I thought I’d let you talk to Hal. But I’m pretty sure we can get Chou-Mitsu to pay. They supplied the Ho Ident experimentally.’

‘We took him ...’

‘You could argue he was still their responsibility. Every moment could, in principle, have been monitored. And they let you come to harm.’

‘It wasn’t Charles’ fault.’

Jackie shrugged: ‘But if we can persuade them to give you a plug instead of fighting over compensation...?’

The day before she went back to full-time work, Alessandra called in on Norham Gardens. Charles was in the WayIn and she followed him to the seabed. She was amused to see him in wetsuit and goggles.

‘It’s how I work best,’ he said, defensively.

‘You used to try to make us think you were superhuman. Now you have to try for human,’ she said.

‘I feel just as I always have, Alessandra. You’re planning to go to China, aren’t you?’

‘You love me.’

‘Professor Ho doesn’t give a damn about you now.’

‘You went off to China and left me behind. But you came back’

‘The night before I came back to this Oxford, the plug was new, it was quite sore. I was worried about the pain going on. And then I worried about how I would feel about other things. I had pictures. I thought about you, remembered you.’

‘Trying to fake it, so that you could pick up where you left off?’

‘There was a time – quite a short time – when I’d thought I loved you. I got back to that.’

‘So maybe the real you will get back to it again.’

Charles laughed at her. He sounded entirely like himself. Then he said: ‘Today’s my last day.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘No-where. Jackie agreed I shouldn’t be here, when you start back at work.’

‘They can’t just delete you, can they? It’d be like, a bit like murder – ’

‘They’ll probably stop me, rather than delete, I think’

‘But do you think?’ she asked. ‘Are you actually there at all?’

‘You decide. I didn’t ask you to come today. But you’re here. I just want you to know, I’ll love you forever.’