

The Motivation

by David Langford

Born in 1953 in South Wales, David Longford has been a bit of gadfly and a bit of Monty Python to the science fiction community for some years now through his fanzine, Ansible, and through his satirical novels and stories. His horror fiction runs from clever parody to grim nightmare. "The Motivation" is one of the latter.

Asked to account for his whereabouts since his last appearance here (The Year's Best Horror Stories: XIII), Langford reports: "Ansible quietly folded, not before picking up a Hugo. Monthly SFIfantasy review column in the British games (God knows why) magazines White Dwarf (to 1988) and GM (1988 onward). Published Earthdoom! with John Grant (1987), a spoof disaster novel in which every disaster happens from polar slippage to invading aliens, and the parody collection The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two (1988), including 'The Thing in the Bedroom' of XIII fame. Sold and collected full payment for another Grant collaboration, Guts, which does for horror what Earthdoom! did for public toilets, but in the end the publishers were too terrified to print it (we keep the money and are selling it elsewhere)." Hope Langford remembered the zombies.

The shop was a rich stew of smells, dry rot and cigarettes and sweat. Its buzzing fluorescent light couldn't cut through the staleness, and the August sun was not allowed to penetrate. As with every branch of this exclusive chain, the display window was painted dead black; the invisibility of its promised BOOKS AND MAGAZINES was full and sufficient advertisement of the stock.

Peter Edgell reminded himself regularly that he was slumming, that this wasn't his true niche in the literary world. An observer, which was it, scanning the customers who fingered BOOKS AND MAGAZINES through their aseptic plastic film. From behind the counter Peter read the customers and savored the emotions that burned as pungently as the shop's smell. Businessmen brimmed with a synthetic heartiness, wielding it like a charm against limp fears. Younger nondescripts let off their little firecrackers of defensive aggression. Those too young were allowed a brief ration of giggles before being chased away; most pitiful were the fossil emotions of the very old, who from long habit cringed furtively and offered token mumbles of "Just getting it for a mate, see?"

Peter welcomed them all, not only because each swing of the door wafted fresh, clean exhaust fumes through the sweaty closeness: with his half a talent, he saw the pornophiles as raw material. One day his special insight would pin them down in some astonishing piece of journalism, a cancellation of his failures at university and everywhere else. Jessica Mitford, Tom Wolfe, what-sis-name in Private Eye -- he'd be with them one day. The thought was so thumbed and worn

that it skidded past like an overly familiar quotation.

Minor hubbub arose as old Benson ejected a gaggle of browsers from the small back room. He swept them managerially before him, exuding a steady dribble of apology and exhortation, as though dealing with drunks or kids where the secret was to keep talking and keep calm. Peter was checking a wad of magazines being returned for credit at the usual vast discount (you riffled very carefully through the clean-limbed poses, and refused them if pages were either incomplete or stuck together). Benson reached past him to the till.

"Lock up half five like usual," he said, passing a grayish handkerchief over a broadly glistening sweep of baldness. His other hand methodically stripped the till of banknotes -- so that when he looked up and added "I'm trusting you, Peter," it was an effort not to snap back, "What the fuck with?"

"See you tomorrow," said Peter, wondering again about the manager: there was nothing to read from him, as though he had no feelings whatever. Perhaps you got like that after ten years in the trade. A roar of traffic and a gale of carbon monoxide swept through the door as Benson slouched out on the weekly errand which was not supposed to have anything to do with Thursday evening's greyhound races.

A dozen or so literary and artistic items changed hands in the final forty minutes of trade, but business was slack without the lure of the back room. It was a milder breed of customer that Peter finally chased out: men whose longings didn't burn as brightly.

He carried the old, battered till into the back, locked it in the concealed cupboard (cunningly papered over, but outlined with a frieze of greasy fingerprints) dedicated to Stronger Stuff. Which left him half an hour before his bus: this had happened before, and Peter had spent the time in unedifying study of 'strong' goods. His eyes had widened several times as he flicked through; the only after-effect had been a slightly reduced appetite for sausage and chips that evening, and a greatly reduced opinion of certain customers.

The misuse of this art form, he had written conscientiously in one of his notebooks, is a species of Blatant Beast, repelling the assault of our curiosity by revealing far more than we wish to know.

Today, curiosity took him through the back room into the dusty regions of no-customer's-land. There was a toilet stinking of ammonia; a passageway lined with miscellaneous old stock, growing ever more unsalable as mice chewed it into lace... and the grimy kitchen where the mouse-smell was stronger yet, though all that was ever made there was the tea they drank daily from mugs whose brown inner stain exactly matched that of the toilet. A hair-dryer might have indicated some token concession to cleanliness, but was only used for one of Peter's morning chores:

shrink-wrapping the latest literary arrivals.

Peter tugged at the sliding door of the old kitchen cupboard; a beetle ran out as it scraped to one side. Within was the cobwebbed box Benson had mentioned as "good for a laugh." The scrawled caption was simply "DUDS." It had seemed a neat idea, at the time, for one of those articles which one day might find his reputation... an article dealing with what had once been good stout porn, perhaps even Strong Stuff, but which social inflation had rendered as worthless as copper coinage. Peter set great store by ideas and concepts and documentation, a bony framework requiring not too much fleshing out, not too much writing up.

A powerfully musty smell rose as he lifted the flaps of the box. It was stuffed full with the anonymous brown envelopes Benson used for reserve photographs. Peter found himself breathing a little faster, caught in an absurd excitement at the prospect of material, which, as one might put it, not even Benson dared offer for sale. However...

"Tit pictures," he murmured crossly, after a moment. They could hardly market stuff, which would look staid on the racks at W. H. Smith. And the girl's hairstyle seemed alien: she was dated despite nakedness, with even her shape being subtly wrong. Models (in or out of quotes) had evolved a leaner, more predatory look. With waning excitement Peter unearthed poses having all the erotic impact of Victorian family groups; there were even examples of the forgotten art of the pubic airbrush. An envelope marked S/M merely disclosed another of these aphrodisiac lovelies, rendered S/M by the limp whip in her hand.

He flipped faster through the envelopes, not knowing what obscure frisson he'd hoped to find but increasingly certain that it wasn't here. Near the end, though, one caption scrawled on brown manila made him pause. LAMBERTSTOW.

Afterwards, Peter had to remind himself strenuously that he didn't believe in occult premonition. His little extra edge, his half-baked ability to read people's feelings, was of no more use than a polygraph when confronted with inanimate paper. The sudden blank chill must have come from the name, its incongruity here, its short-circuit connection with old memories. Uncle Owen, that was who... and what would he have thought of young Peter amid the BOOKS AND MAGAZINES?

Uncle Owen had lived in Lambertstow, and something unspeakable had happened, and mother had wiped the place from her private map -- freezing at any mention, ignoring her brother's Christmas cards. Yes. More memories trickled back. In Lambertstow village a name had been added to criminal legend, up there with Crippen, the various Rippers, the Moors murderers. The name was Quinn and no one knew quite what he had done.

The envelope contained several smaller ones, white, each with a printed caption whose indefinable tattiness suggested a hand-operated press. Police photographs leaked from Lambertstow horror case. Remains of Kenneth Quinn.

Very violent, for strong stomachs only!! Which left Peter uncertain as to whether the material really was too strong for Benson's hardened clientele, or whether its sale might stir up police interest.

He wasn't sure that he wanted to peer at a corpse, however photogenic, but his inquisitive fingers had already turned back the flap and slid out the first enclosure. A tightening of the gut came even before he could focus on the glossy print; he had never somehow realized that police photographs would be in color. (Why was that? Because they were always in black and white in the newspaper. Of course.) Then he looked at the thing properly, and his first sensation was one of relief.

What lay on the grass under harsh lights was nothing recognizable as human. A long Christmas tree decked with exotic fruits and garlands, tinsel with innumerable points of reflected light; a Dali vision, which through sheer excess, had gone beyond mutilation and deformity. It was odd; perhaps a little disturbing in its abstract forms, but at first glance not at all horrific.

It was a pity, really, that Peter took the second glance.

An observation of G. K. Chesterton's caught up with him later: that one might look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times and be perfectly safe, but to take the thousandth look was to be in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time. Peter thought Chesterton had underestimated the safe exposure period, and sincerely regretted having looked even twice. The second look stirred up dim memories of an anatomy course at college, or those parts of it he'd attended; with his second look, he made the fatal error of analysis. It was fascinating, compulsive, to trace the relation between the long glittering object and what must have been a man; to consider bubbly ornaments in red and gray as something more than inorganic lumps, more than the polished haematite they called kidney ore; to trace what must have been done here and here with surgical delicacy; to wonder -- try not to wonder -- just when in the painstaking process Kenneth Quinn had actually died...

Prints and envelopes spilled to the floor as Peter jerked up from his squatting position. He made it to the sink in time; the sight of his own thin vomit crawling across the stained and spotted enamel seemed relatively wholesome, like those bracing whiffs of outside pollution in the sweaty shop. // I'd seen it in a movie it would have been all right, a guaranteed fake. The rest was a long anticlimax of cleaning, tidying, drinking many mugs of water, which rinsed the aftertaste only partly, from his mouth and not at all from his mind. After which the bus was long gone and Peter walked two miles to his bed-sitter; for reasons which stayed persistently cloudy, he took one packet of the photographs with him.

That night and in the shop next day, he resolutely thought of other things; but from time to time some detail of the material he sold would tweak at his memory and

make him flinch. The hot gloom of the shop was conducive (in idle periods) to thoughts of Lambertstow and his uncle -- his mother's brother, vaguely isolated from the family as "not one of our sort," maternal condemnation of one who remained a mere farmhand while she became a typist and married an accountant.

Peter had enjoyed Uncle Owen: he remembered jokes, erratic conjuring tricks, and hilarious chases in the woods near Lambertstow. He'd been ten, perhaps younger. He'd been eleven when the something happened, and that part of life had gone dark. Uncle Owen had died a few years later but might as well have died then. Thinking back, Peter saw that mere geographical connection with infamy was enough to make mother sever all links, a theater nurse rejecting contact with the unsterile. Her mind worked that way.

He wondered whether he himself had met Quinn in those days of clear air and sharp colors. No memories presented themselves. He fancied that local kids had mentioned Quinn as one of their teachers, and that they'd liked him well enough. Peter at ten had been bored by such chat, impatient to talk about really interesting teachers like his own.

In the evening, the local library kept late hours. Peter spent some time searching through aged newspapers. Their dry old smell was very different from that of the damp room behind the shop, soporific rather than choking. His first guess at dates hadn't been too far out; in a few months the tragedy and mystery would be a decade old. He made notes of such scanty details as the papers gave, and for the fiftieth time began to plan a clever debut in journalism.

Ten years since Lambertstow horror, he wrote.

Motive for ghastly crime never revealed, but Quinn said to be disliked in neighborhood. Strong feelings in Lambertstow got what he deserved, so reporters claimed after probing locals. Body at edge of wood, confused footmarks in grass, several people involved?? Ritual sacrifice etc. etc. hinted as per usual. No evidence. Filed unsolved (presumably), only Quinn somehow left with bad name. How so? Graffiti, local mood, anonymous letters. Smear bid, whispering campaign, and grass-roots stuff. Some called Quinn in parish even changed name, cf. people called Crippen. Definitely impression Q got just deserts. But what did he do?

On a second sheet of scrap paper: Personal. Uncle O mentioned nowhere, no remote connection; Mother didn't even need that much excuse. Papers evasive on details of what was done; no pics (not surprising). Surgical knowledge needed? Artist too, sort of. Maybe approach through doctor.

There was no third sheet, which might have carried such notes as Why am I doing this? And led into a complicated mire. Peter was happy to have something to do, something to test his talent against, something outside the fascinating dead-end of the shop. Working toward truth had to be a virtue, whatever awkward thoughts

came knocking... Some people drove hundreds of miles to gape at seagulls choking and dying in oil slicks; some crowded about road accidents and pointed out to each other the interesting red stains on the asphalt; some holidayed in Germany and were careful not to miss the celebrated resorts -- Buchenwald, Dachau. In his grimy room, which was at least grimy through use rather than decay, Peter remembered and recited his mother's charm against idle speculation:

The centipede was happy quite
Until a frog in fun
Said "Pray which leg goes after which?"
This raised its mind to such a pitch that
It lay distracted in the ditch,
Considering how to run.

Local color was the thing. On the Exeter train, he skimmed the only book about the case, which the library could offer. *He Must Be Wicked To Deserve Such Pain*; an essay on enormity. Though the title quotation, which Peter thought might be Shakespeare, summed up neatly enough that feeling about Quinn, he found the text disappointing. The aristocratic lady author was more concerned with a generic "sickness of society," and with how shops like Benson's led inevitably down the primrose path to this sort of thing, than with the event itself. Like the magazines Peter sold, she promised more than could ever be delivered. He slapped the book shut in irritation, in guilty disappointment, on the closing quotation: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must remain silent."

Local color, he told himself, and wondered if he were telling the truth. One should be able to sit at ease in north London and read up on anything. But during the long wait for a bus at Exeter, he had to admit to himself that it would be interesting to try and reach Dr. Janice Barry, mentioned in the papers as the Lambertstow GP. Certain questions might have gone unasked, ten years back, and he wanted to ask them. The prospect was utterly terrifying; but proper reporters had to ask people awkward questions and so he supposed he must as well. He wore mirror sunglasses, which he hoped would give him confidence by making him unreadable.

Coffee on the train had left a sour taint in his mouth, which as the leisurely bus wobbled through suburbs and lanes gave him an illusion of having recently vomited. Flies buzzed in the smoky heat of the upper deck, aimless and happy. Peter crushed one against the window.

Lambertstow was bigger than remembered; defying the cliché of childhood haunts seeming absurdly tiny when revisited. The village had grown, or had been blotted out, its approaches a maze of new estates. Peter rode through layers of accretion to the old High Street at the heart of it all, and peered uncertainly at ordinariness. So late, so long after the event, all witnesses scattered or lost in hiding places ten years deep... The phone directory was the obvious starting point, he

decided doggedly as a post office caught his eye; then he gnawed his lip, recalling countrywide directories filling long shelves in London. Still, here he was, after all.

"Bloody hell," said Peter with feeling, a few minutes later. The local directory listed no Dr. Barry.

Asking after "the doctor" led him by stages to an ivied house whose brass plate said. "Dr. Jonathan Sims." After ten years, was it too late to enquire? He pushed through the door into a cool smothering gloom which felt almost ecclesiastical, and groped blindly to a reception window. "I wanted to ask..." the logical lie came to him in a burst of confidence, "about my uncle, Owen Walker, used to live here... I wanted to find Dr. Barry and, er... you don't know?"

The dark-haired woman at the window gave him a tired smile, behind which Peter read a hot flash of exasperation. "I'll ask Dr Sims," she said. And after a pause of unintelligible intercom noises (did real reporters have tricks for coping with that?): "Dr. Barry used to run this practice. Dr. Sims says she's been at a private nursing home for some time. I don't know whether I should, but perhaps if I gave you the address?"

"Please. It's a... an important family matter."

Amazed by this success, Peter took the slip of paper with effusive thanks, and left. The moist heat was like a blow in the face as he closed the door behind him. The address was in Surbiton.

Local color, he reminded himself. To the scene of the crime, yes, definitely. He'd copied a sketch map from one of the papers; the streets seemed to have randomly stretched, contracted, and tilted on hidden hinges to new angles with one another, but eventually he saw the fatal stand of trees. When they first appeared, peeping over a terrace of harsh new brick, they looked uncompromisingly ordinary. Where was the atmosphere of doom? It was only a small patch of woodland (Peter remembered it as larger -- so he had been here once), straggling up a slope just too steep for cultivation. Another obscure thought surfaced: absurdly, he'd been half-prepared to find some plaque or marker -- "The Atrocity of The Decade Took Place On This Spot."

There was only unkempt grass. He sat with his back against a tree, and watched the shadows lengthen. Local color: Today it may seem unremarkable, even dull, but... Useless. He slid out the monstrous photograph and frowned; its repulsion was dimmed a little by familiarity, but he didn't care to look too long.

On -- this -- spot, he thought fiercely, trying to make himself feel more, trying to do the impossible and read a place. There must be some aura... some stain. Now that he'd looked again at the picture, he could see how the landscape might be considered in a different light, changing in the mind's eye, going bad. From under the

trees came a sweet-sour whiff of rotting leaves, and this no longer seemed quite natural. The sluggish air pressed close. Puffy white clouds were wobbling overhead, bulging down at him, disgusting in their nearness and intimacy. The sky, he realized, was stretched tightly just above him; the constricted horizon barely allowed room to breathe. He could not breathe. He could not move. On this spot...

The pulpy ground was ready to engulf him; something glistening and wet was surely just behind, moving with exquisite delicacy and pain under the trees, coming to him. Peter shivered in a cage of shadows. Here in this small, cramped, horrid countryside he found his eyes fixed, frozen, on a tiny mess in the nearby grass (perhaps a bird-dropping), which had become the oozing, lazily turning hub of all the world's vileness...

Peter lurched upright, stomach churning. Automatically, shakily, he began to walk away, his intention of exploring the trees forgotten. This was local color? He'd never felt troubled before with too much imagination, had never been able to read a place. Think, think of something else.

...how interesting to analyze this: a small horrible thing is so much more repulsive than a large. Cf. the failure of giant insects and suchlike in all those movies. A small, fascinatingly yucky thing like whatever was there in the grass. Or like a photograph.

Peter shook his head violently. Walking briskly and without a pause into the village, he tried to shut out all the unspeakable facts for a moment, and probe the motives behind it all. As always, he failed. How could Quinn, how could anyone, deserve that? "Oh, Quinny's okay," the sniggering Lambertstow kids had told him ten years back. The village went by in a blur. Funny you never ran into any of the old kids these days. On the London train he sneered at himself as a coward and an incompetent, but with a deeper sense of comfort, a satisfaction at having read or even for a moment imagined the supposed horror of that locality. This was the insight, which could take you to the top.

At home he wrote it all down as local color, and didn't sleep too well afterwards.

Next day was Sunday, with the heat of fading summer thicker and murkier than ever. Peter fiddled with a much worked-over draft -- *Today I stood on the very spot where the strangely notorious Kenneth Quinn allegedly met his terrible end. Even ten years after the horror, it is not a pleasant place etc.* -- abandoned it, and walked out to telephone the Treetops Private Home from a nearby booth, which did part-time duty as a urinal.

"Treetops, can I help you?" said a pleasant female voice.

"Is it, er, possible for me to have a word with Dr. Barry?"

"One moment." A pause. "There is no Dr. Barry on our staff, are you sure you have the right number?"

"They... told me I could find Dr. Janice Barry at Treetops," said Peter weakly. He should have known, doctors would stick together and hide one another's addresses, frustrate anyone who might ask awkward questions...

"One moment." A longer pause, during which it occurred to Peter that the woman's ordinary speaking voice must be half an octave lower than the strained tones, which drifted with such refinement down the line. "I am sorry. Yes. Miss Barry is & patient at Tree-tops, do you wish to visit her?"

He blinked. It shouldn't be that surprising, now you thought about it, but somehow... "Yes please," he said. "What are your visiting hours?"

The voice sounded a little shocked. "There are no fixed visiting hours at Treetops. You may visit whenever you wish, between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m."

Peter calculated rapidly, and hastily fed in more money. "Hello? Hello? Could I visit at about seven tomorrow evening, please?"

"Certainly. Please could I have your name?"

"Edgell. Peter Edgell. A friend of a friend."

"Thank you."

Monday was a trifle cooler, but still nowhere near comfortable. The shop seemed to attract a higher than usual proportion of nutters, people who wandered in asking for The Times or the latest science fiction magazine; there was even one twerp who, without glancing at the stock, enquired about first editions of James Branch Cabell. (Peter had wondered for a moment whether this was an esoteric code phrase.) Although you knew where you were in the shop and could laugh a little at the customers' feelings, Monday stretched unbearably, each minute longer than the one before, until it was a surprise to see Benson fussing browsers out of the back room and putting an end to the day's literary business.

The bus was crowded, and stank. The tube was worse. The second bus was less oppressive, rush-hour being past: Peter reached Treetops in good time, perhaps too soon, since he hadn't a very clear idea of what to say.

It was a chubby Victorian mansion, its red and yellow brick impeccably clean; the only tree in sight, though, was some way down the road. A middle-aged woman in a nurse's cap opened the door, her stern aspect launching Peter prematurely into his Me: "Come to visit Doctor -- er -- Miss Barry. She was a friend of my uncle's and I thought I, well, I ought to..."

Her answering smile was like sunlight breaking through forbidding cloud. He read surprised approval, no doubt at finding such nice sentiments in a scruffy youth.

"If you'll just come this way."

The wide hallway smelt of boiled cabbage, only slightly tinged with the inevitable antiseptic. Thick, glossy cream paint covered every surface. Peter followed the nurse up noisy, varnished wooden stairs as she explained in an undertone that Miss Barry sometimes had a little difficulty, if he knew what she meant. "The poor thing wanders sometimes."

Peter wasn't prepared for the room at the top of the stairs. The words "private nursing home" had conjured up images of personal, individual care and attention in comfortably private rooms. This room, whose door said "Hope," was comfortably small, but screens divided it into four cramped segments, each with an iron bed, each bed containing an old woman who lay unmoving. To the boiled-veg and antiseptic reek was added some other smell, sickly and disagreeable.

"Miss Barry!" said the nurse brightly, speaking loudly and very close to the third old lady's ear. "It's Peter Edgell, come to visit you!" She added more quietly, "Ring the bell if there's any trouble," and left.

Peter sat cautiously at the bedside and looked at Janice Barry, whose eyes stared blankly upwards. She could not possibly be more than seventy, but seemed far older. They had dwindled in their sockets, those eyes, like jellyfish withered by a fierce sun; her whole face was shrunken, as though it were a balloon from which a little too much air had been allowed to escape. Her breathing was noisy.

"Miss... I mean Dr. Barry?" No response, but he couldn't stop now, right on the verge of something or other. His newest lie followed straight away. "Do you remember Owen Walker, back in Lambertstow, used to come to you? I'm his nephew, and there was this rumor, I heard he'd been suspected of... what happened there. It was all a long time ago, but I was wondering if maybe you could help me clear things up a bit."

It really did sound feeble. But some trace of animation had crept over the old woman's face at the mention of Lambertstow. Peter bent closer and made himself repeat his non-question. This time the eyes moved... and behind them he read something wary and knowing.

I have the edge on her. She knows something and she can't hide it from me. This is the start.

"You... No one has talked to me about that for a good many years," she said in a slow wheezing voice, a separate act of concentration shaping each word. "Are you from the police again?"

"No no. I'm -- sort of looking into it. Off my own bat. My uncle."

Dr. Barry coughed. "I suppose you want to ask me the, the usual questions?"

Edgell guessed that his queries were not, could not be as original as he'd

hoped. Impatiently he abandoned pretence. Maybe I can surprise her by being blunt, that's the way investigators work.

"The surgical technique," he said flatly.

She smiled. He hadn't thought her face could become any more wrinkled. The animation in and around her eyes was flickering, as though corroded contacts were sparking and smoking, passing power only intermittently. "Did you know I have an inoperable brain tumor?" she said.

Peter blinked, not knowing what to say but reading it as true.

"They tell me I'm just getting old, but I know. Look at me." Her head rocked on the pillow; perhaps she was trying to shake it. "Ah. Quinn was an evil man. Wickedness and corruption, of a sort."

Cautiously, "Then you know why he was... killed?"

She knows something. She really does.

"A brain tumor," Dr. Barry said with satisfaction, or so it seemed. The light in her eyes came on more fully. "Oh yes, the police wanted to know all about that, asked me many a time about surgical training and whether I thought anyone but a doctor could have... But I was a woman, you see. You can't believe what I say."

And he couldn't unravel the complex knot of feelings he was reading in her. "They thought a woman couldn't have done what was done, is that it?" he said, wondering if the old dear really were delirious.

"No more she could, I said, I told them, unless she had, oh, crowds of helpers. They believed that... Quinn was a vile man, you know. That's all I know, officer. I really cannot assist you any further. Those poor children. They must never know. It was a work of art... Do you play rugby? My brother was very fond of rugby once."

The room seemed to be growing colder, full of harsh, ragged breathing. Peter remembered his own great-aunt, so vague in the present decade, so diamond-sharp when speaking of the past. He felt so close; he leaned closer still. "Why was it done? What had Quinn done?"

"He must be wicked to deserve such pain... did you read that book? A very silly book." She breathed again, deeply, and exhaled with a long shudder. "My diagnosis is certain, I'm afraid. Prognosis negative. NTBR... I can feel it pressing. It presses in different colors. Why, officer, I don't know anything at all about Mr. Quinn except that he wasn't much liked in the village...No. The things he did. They were very shameful. The things he wanted to do. His name shall be blackened forever and ever amen." It was a long speech, and took a long time.

"Dr. Barry, it is blackened -- somehow. It is. People called Quinn changed

their names. You remember, because of the whispering. Did you -- ?" It was there, so close, he could read it but couldn't understand it: a foreign language of emotion.

She was speaking again, more feebly now. The faulty contacts might be passing current, but the power-source itself was failing. "You are all... so... silly. If I wanted to I could tell you half. I shouldn't tease you like this. Did you ever hear tell of the Mary Celeste?"

Peter couldn't decide whether that was relevant, or mere wandering. If only he'd brought a cassette recorder. "Yes?"

"They remember it to this day because nobody knows the how or why. They can't forget it, poor dears. So many of us, if you believe that. And if there's never a word about what Quinn... just, you see, just the hints, if everything is handled just so... Forever. You're not the doctor."

"Please," he whispered, as the feelings he couldn't read faded with her voice. "Please tell me."

For the sake of my brilliant future career.

She giggled, protected from the entire world by her inoperable brain tumor. (NTBR she had said -- not to be resuscitated -- was that already written in some folder here?) For a moment her fading eyes were those of a little girl.

"Shan't," she whispered. "You wouldn't want to spoil it all?" And began to laugh, a small weak laugh that hardened into a sort of spasm, a glistening line of saliva running from the corner of her mouth as the shriveled body trembled in private glee.

His final attempt to spy on her secrets read nothing that made sense: a fading Rorschach pattern of feelings, a meaningless bright symmetry like a Christmas tree. Peter pressed the bell-push. The nurse appeared and dismissed him from the bedside with a flick of her eyes.

"You can't believe anything poor Miss Barry says," she warned in a low voice as he left the room. Now, perhaps, was the moment for shrewd questions and even a small bribe -- anything to learn more of those so-called wanderings and ravings. But, studying the nurse's stern competence and impatient eyes, reading the professional hardness, which made Treetops endur-able, he quailed at last.

"Goodbye," he mumbled, and felt as the big door closed behind him that he was leaving under a faint cloud.

And so I left the dying Dr. Barry, who will surely take the monstrous secret of Lambertstow with her on her painful descent toward the solution of that other, final question which remains eternally tantalizing until it is answered.

Peter leant back from the typewriter, unsatisfied but with a sense of having partly avenged his frustration. He had at least had the last word.

"Quinny's all right," the Lambertstow school kids had told him in the long ago. "He's a fantastic guy, gives you things and all. You know. You ought to meet him." Had he been able to read people back then? Kids were so boring, self-centered, anyway.

Peter stared at the blank wall of his room and shrugged; the mystery was unyielding! Monolithic. Pulling the painfully typed sheet from the machine, he filed it carefully with all the other notes and outlines for articles he thoroughly intended to write, one day very soon. Perhaps when he could afford a word processor; that should solve his productivity problems. Perhaps.

Meanwhile, there was always his private gallery of the emotions, where offbeat feelings and longings came to disport themselves for Peter Edgell's dispassionate amusement. There was always the shop.

