FOAM
By Brian Aldiss

> ‘There’s nothing for it when you reach the Point of No Return — except to come back.’
>
> E. James Carvell

Many Central and Eastern European churches had been dismantled. The deconstruction of Chartres Cathedral was proceeding smartly, unhindered by Operation Total Tartary.

On the previous day, a guide had taken me round Budapest Anthropological Museum. I had wanted to see the *danse macabre* preserved there, once part of the stonework of the cathedral at Nogykanizsa. Although the panel was in poor condition, it showed clearly the dead driving the living to the grave.

The dead were represented by skeletons, frisky and grinning. The line of the living began with prelates in grand clothes, the Pope leading. Merchants came next, men and women, then a prostitute; a beggar brought up the rear, these allegorical figures representing the inescapable gradations of decay.

As I was making notes, measuring, and sketching in my black notebook, the guide was shuffling about behind me, impatient to leave. I had special permission to be in the gallery. Jangling her keys more like a jailer than an attendant, she went to gaze out of a narrow window at what could be seen of the prosperous modern city, returning to peer over my shoulder and sniff.

‘A disgusting object,’ she remarked, gesticulating with an open hand towards the frieze, which stood severed and out of context on a display bench in front of me.

‘“What is beauty, saith my sufferings then?”‘ I quoted abstractedly. To me the *danse macabre* was a work of art, skilfully executed; nothing more than that. I admired the way in which the leading Death gestured gallantly towards an open grave, his head bizarrely decked with flags. The unknown artist, I felt sure, had been to Lübeck, where similar postures were depicted. The helpful guidebook, in Hungarian and German, told me that this sportive Death was saying, ‘In this

doleful jeste of Life, I shew the state of Manne, and how he is called at uncertayne tymes by Me to forget all that he hath and lose All.'

For a while, silence prevailed, except for the footsteps of the guide, walking to the end of the gallery and walking back, sighing in her progress, jingling her keys. We were alone in the gallery. I was sketching the Death playing on a stickado or wooden psalter and goading along a high-bosomed duchess, when the guide again shuffled close.

'Much here is owed to Holbein engraving,' said the guide, to show off her knowledge. She was a small bent woman whose nose was disfigured by a permanent cold. She regarded the work with a contempt perhaps habitual to her. 'Theme of *danse macabre* is much popular in Middle Ages. In Nogykanizsa, half population is wipe out by plague only one years after building the cathedral. Now we know much better, praise be.'

I was fed up with her misery and her disapproval. I wanted only to study the frieze. It would buttress a line of thought I was pursuing.

'In what way do we know better?'

It is unwise ever to argue with a guide. She gave me a long discourse regarding the horrors of the Middle Ages, concluding by saying, 'Then was much misery in Budapest. Now everyone many money. Now we finish with Christianity and Communism, world much better place. People more enlightenment, eh?'

'You believe that?' I asked her. 'You really think people are more enlightened? On what grounds, may I ask? What about the war?'

She shot me a demonic look, emphasized by a smile of outrageous malice. 'We kill off all Russians. Then world better place. Forget all about bad thing.'

* * * *

The grand steam baths under the Gellert Hotel were full of naked bodies, male and female. Many of the bathers had not merely the posture but the bulk of wallowing hippopotami. Fortunately the steam clothed us in a little decency.

Tiring of the crowd, I climbed from the reeking water. It was time I got to work. Churches long sealed with all their histories in them were to be opened to me this day. By a better guide.

Everyone was taking it easy. Headlines in the English-language paper that morning: STAVROPOL AIRPORT BATTLE: First Use Tactical Nukes: Crimea Blazes. The war had escalated. Everyone agreed you had to bring in the nukes eventually. Hungary was neutral. It supplied Swedish-made arms to all sides, impartially.

The Soviet War marked the recovery of Hungary as a Central European power. It was a godsend. Little I cared. I was researching churches and, in my early forties, too old for conscription.

Wrapped in a white towelling robe I was making my way back towards my room when I encountered a tall bearded man clad only in a towel. He was heading towards the baths I had just left. We looked at each other. I recognized those haggard lineaments, those eroded temples. They belonged to a distant acquaintance, one Montagu Clements.

He recognized me immediately. As we shook hands I felt some embarrassment; he had been sacked from his post in the English Literature and Language Department of the University of East Anglia the previous year. I had not heard of him since.

'What are you doing in Budapest?' I asked.

'Private matter, old chum.' I remembered the dated way he had of addressing people — though he had been sacked for more serious matters. 'I'm here consulting a clever chap called Mircea Antonescu. Something rather strange has happened to me. Do you mind if I tell you? Perhaps you'd like to buy us a drink ...'

We went up to my room, from the windows of which was a fine view of the Danube with Pest on the other side. I slipped into my jogging gear and handed him a sweater to wear.

'Fits me to a T. I suppose I couldn't keep it, could I?'

I did not like to say no. As I poured two generous Smirnoffs on the rocks from the mini-bar, he started on his problems. ' "Music, when soft voices die, Vibrates in the memory ..." So says the poet Shelley. But supposing there's no memory in which the soft voices can vibrate ...'

He paused to raise his glass and take a deep slug of the vodka. 'I'm forty-one, old chum. So I believe. Last month, I found myself in an unknown place. No idea how I got there. Turned out I was here — in Budapest. Budapest! Never

been here before in my natural. No idea how I arrived here from London.'

'You're staying here?' I remembered that Clements was a scrounger. Perhaps he was going to touch me for the air fare home. I gave him a hard look. Knowing something about his past, I was determined not to be caught easily.

'I'm attending the Antonescu Clinic. Mircea Antonescu - very clever chap, as I say. At the cutting edge of psychotechnology. Romanian, of course. I'm not staying in the Gellert. Too expensive for someone like me. I rent a cheaper place in Pest. Bit of a flophouse actually.' He laughed. 'You see, this is it, the crunch, the bottom line, as they say — I've lost ten years of my memory. Just lost them. Wiped. The last ten years, gone.'

He shone a look of absolute innocence on me. At which I uttered some condolences.

'The last thing I remember, I was thirty. Ten, almost eleven years, have passed and I have no notion as to what I was doing in all that time.'

All this he related in an old accustomed calm way. Perhaps he concealed his pain. 'How terrible for you,' I said.

'FOAM. That's what they call it. Free of All Memory. A kind of liberty in a way, I suppose. Nothing a chap can't get used to.'

It was fascinating. Other people's sorrows on the whole weigh lightly on our shoulders: a merciful provision. 'What, does it feel like?'

I always remember Clements's answer. 'An ocean, old chum. A wide wide ocean with a small island here and there. No continent. The continent has gone.'

I had seen him now and again during those ten years, before his sacking. I suggested that perhaps I could help him fill in gaps in his memory. He appeared moderately grateful. He said there was no one else he knew in Budapest. When I asked him if he had been involved in an accident, he shook his head.

'They don't know. I don't know. A car crash? No bones broken, old boy. Lucky to be alive, you might say. I have no memory of anything that happened to me in the last ten years.'

Unthinkingly, I asked, 'Isn't your wife here with you?'

Whereupon Clements struck his narrow forehead. ‘Oh God, don’t say I was married!’

He drank the vodka, he kept the sweater. The next day, as suggested, I went round with him to the Antonescu Clinic he had mentioned. The idea was that an expert would question me in order to construct a few more of those small islands in the middle of Clements’s ocean of forgetfulness.

The clinic was situated in a little nameless square off Fo Street, wedged in next to the Ministry of Light Industry. Behind its neo-classical facade was a desperate little huddle of rooms partitioned into offices and not at all smart. In one windowless room I was introduced to a Dr Maté Jozsef. Speaking in jerky English round a thin cigar, Mate informed me we could get to work immediately. It would be best procedure if I began to answer a series of questions in a room from which Clements was excluded.

‘You understand, Dr Burnell. Using proprietary method here. Dealing with brain injury cases. Exclusive ... Special to us. Produces the good result. Satisfied customers .. .’ His thick furry voice almost precluded the use of finite verbs.

Knowing little about medical practice, I consented to do as he demanded. Maté showed me up two flights of stairs to a windowless room where a uniformed nurse awaited us. I was unfamiliar with the equipment in the room, although I knew an operating table and anaesthetic apparatus when I saw them. It was at that point I began to grow nervous. Nostovision equipment was also in the room; I recognized the neat plastic skull cap.

Coughing, Maté stubbed his cigar out before starting to fiddle with the equipment. The nurse attempted to help. I stood with my back to the partition wall, watching.

‘Wartime ... Many difficulties . . . Many problems ... For Hungarians is many trouble ... ‘ He was muttering as he elbowed the nurse away from a malfunctioning VDU. ‘Because of great inflation rate ... High taxes ... Too many gipsy in town. All time .. .The Germans of course ... The Poles ... How we get all work done in the time?... Too much busy ...’

‘If you’re very busy, I could come another day,’ I suggested.

He squinted at me and lit another cigar. ‘I am expert in all science, so many people take advantage of me. Even when I am small boy, I must carrying to school my small brother. Three kilometre to the gymnasium ... Now is shortage of

material, I must do all. This damned war... Many upheaval... Spies and traitor ... Everywhere same ... Today toilet blockage and how to get repair? You cannot be nervous?'

'I have an appointment, Dr Maté. If later would be more convenient...'

'Is no problem. Don't worry ... I treat many English. Get this nurse to move, I explain all.'

Maté sought to reassure me. They had developed a method of inserting memories into the brains of amnesiacs, but first those memories had to be recorded with full sensory data on to microchip, and then projected by laser into the brain. That at least was the gist of what I gathered from a long complex explanation. While I listened, the nurse gave me an injection in the biceps of my left arm. They would need, Maté said, to append electrodes to my cranium in order to obtain full sensory data matching my answers to his questions.

'I don't really know Montagu Clements well,' I protested. But of course I could not simply refuse to co-operate, could not walk out, could not leave poor Clements without doing my best for him.

Indeed, my eyelids felt heavy. It was luxury to stretch out, to groan, to relax . .. and to fall into the deepest slumber of my life .. .

* * * *

The cathedral in which we walked was almost lightless. My extended senses told me that it was vast. I asked Dr Maté what we were doing there. His answer was incoherent. I did not press him. He seemed to be smoking a cigar; a little red glow formed occasionally as he inhaled, but I could smell no smoke.

In order to keep my spirits up—I admit I was apprehensive—I talked to him as we progressed step by step. 'I suppose you read Kafka, you understand the complexities with which he found himself faced at every turn. As a psychologist, you must understand that there are people like Kafka for whom existence is an entanglement, a permanent state of war, while for others—why, at the other extreme they sail through life, seemingly unopposed. These differences are accounted for by minute biochemical changes in the brain. Neither state is more or less truthful than the other. For some truth lies in mystery, for others in clarity. Prayer is a great clarifier—or was. My belief is that old Christian churches served as clarifying machines. They helped you to think straight in "this doleful jeste of life".'

I went on in this fashion for some while. Dr Maté laughed quite heartily, his voice echoing in the darkness.

'You're such good company,' he said. 'Is there anything I can do for you in return?'

'More oxygen,' I said. 'It's so hot in here. As a church architect, I have visited, I believe, all the cathedrals in Europe — Chartres, Burgos, Canterbury, Cologne, Saragossa, Milano, Ely, Zagreb, Gozo, Rheims —' I continued to name them for some while as we tramped down the nave. 'But this is the first time I have ever entered a hot and stuffy cathedral.'

'There are new ways. Neural pathways. Technology is not solely about ways of conducting war. It brings blessings. Not least the new abilities by which we may see human existence anew — relativistically, that is, each person imprisoned in his own *umwelt,* his own conceptual universe.' He let out a roar of laughter. 'Your friend Kafka—I'd have lobotomized him, speaking personally — he said that it was not only Budapest but the whole world that was tragic. He said, "All protective walls are smashed by the iron fist of technology." Complaining, of course—the fucker always complained. But it's the electronic fist of technology which is smashing the walls between human and human. I exclude the Muslims, of course. Down they go, like the Berlin Wall, if you remember that far back. In the future, we shall all be able to share common memories, understandings. All will be common property. Private thought will be a thing of the past. It's simply a matter of micro-technology.'

I started laughing. I had not realized what good company Hungarians could be.

'In that connection, I might mention that Jesus Christ was evidently pretty au fait with micro-technology. All that resurrection of the body stuff. Depends on advanced technology, much of it developed during that lucky little war against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf. Strictly Frankenstein stuff. Robbing body bags. Dead one day, up and running—back into the conflict — the next.'

Maté was genuinely puzzled. We halted under a memorial statue to Frederick the Great. He had heard of Frankenstein. It was the other great Christian myth which puzzled him. This was the first time I had ever encountered anyone walking into a cathedral who had never heard of Jesus Christ. Explaining about Jesus proved more difficult than I expected. The heat and darkness confused me. I knew Jesus was related to John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, but could not

quite remember how. Was Christ his surname or his Christian name?

My father had been a Christian. All the same, it was difficult to recall the legend exactly. I was better on 'Frankenstein'. But I ended by clarifying Jesus's role in the scheme of things by quoting, as far as I could remember, from a hymn, 'He came down on earth from Heaven, he died to save us all.'

Although I couldn't actually see Maté's sneer, I felt it in the darkness. 'Where was this Jesus when Belsen and Auschwitz and Dresden and Hiroshima happened? Having a smoke out the back?'

Somehow, I felt it was rather sacrilegious to mention Jesus's name aloud where we were. The cathedral was constructed in the form of a T, the horizontal limb being much longer than the vertical, stretching away into the endless dark. Oh, the weight of masonry, felt somehow as pressing on the vertebrae. And, like fossil vertebrae, great columns reared up on every side, engineered to support vast weight, as if this whole edifice was situated many miles under the earth's crust, the mass of which must somehow be borne.

So I say. So I understand it. Yet those stone vertebrae—in defiance of the dull facts of physics—writhed like the chordata, climbing lizard-tailed into the deeper darknesses of the vaulting. It was the cathedral to end all cathedrals.

Maté and I now stood at the junction of the cathedral's great T. The vertical limb of this overpowering architectural masterpiece sloped downwards. We stopped to stare down that slope, more sensed than seen. Kafka could have felt no more trepidation at that time than I, though I covered my nervousness by giggling at Maté's latest joke. He claimed he had not heard of the Virgin Mary either.

I stood at the top of the slope. With me was another church architect, Sir Kingsley Amis.

'The font is somewhere over there,' he said, gesturing into the darkness. 'But I'd better warn you it's not drinking water. Even if it was, you wouldn't want to drink it, would you?' He gave a throaty laugh.

Both he and I were greatly diminished by Dr Maté, who now made a proclamation, reading from a box. 'We're here now, on the spot you see indicated on your map, adjacent to the pons asinorum. Presently a devil will appear and remove one of you. I am not permitted to say where he will remove you to. We have to keep destinations secret in wartime, but I am authorized to say that it will

be somewhere fairly unpleasant. As you know, the war between humanity and the rest is still on. But Geneva rules will apply, except in so far as fire and brimstone will be permitted on a strictly controlled basis. All torture will be attended by an authorized member of the International Red Cross.'

'How long do we have to wait? Is there the chance of a drink before we go?' Sir Kingsley Amis asked.

'Devil should be here shortly. ETA 2001,' Maté said.

'Shortly' was just another of the euphemisms such as surface in wartime. It indicated an eternity, just as bombs are described as deterrents. 'This'll spoil his day' means 'We'll kill him', and 'God' means 'A ton of bricks is about to fall on you'. Myself, I prefer euphemisms.

Phew, I was so tired. Time in the building was lethargic, with every minute stretching, stretching out in companionship with the night towards infinity. Reality wore thin, bringing in illusion. At one point I almost imagined I was sitting typing while a dreadful senseless war was waged in the Gulf. But the gulf of time I was in was much greater. Forget reality; it's one of the universe's dead ends ...

Interest is hard to sustain, but my feeling was as much of interest as terror. Only those who enjoy life feel terror. I admired all the melancholy grandeur round me, the reptilian sense of claustrophobia. It compared favourably with the slum in which I lived.

At the bottom of the slope before us, a stage became illuminated. You must imagine this as an entirely gradual process, not easily represented in words. A. Pause. Stage. Pause. Became. Pause. Ill. Pause. You. Pause. Min. Pause. Ay. Pause. Ted. Trumpets. It was illuminated predominantly in bars of intersecting blue and crimson.

Funebrial music began to play, brass and bass predominating.

The music, so akin to the lighting, was familiar to me, yet only just above audibility, as the lighting hovered just above the visible end of the spectrum.

These low levels of activity were in keeping with the enormous silences of the cathedral structure. They were shattered by the sudden incursion of a resounding bass voice which broke into song. That timbre, that mixture of threat and exultation! Unmistakable even to a layman.

‘The devil!’ Kingsley Amis and I exclaimed together.

‘And in good voice,’ said Dr Maté. ‘So this is where I have to leave you.’

I was stunned by his indifference. ‘What about that sewing machine?’ I asked. But he was not to be deflected.

Even while speaking, he was shrinking, either in real terms or because he was being sucked into the distance; darkness made it hard to differentiate. However, I had little time to waste on Maté. Attention turned naturally to the devil. Though he had yet to appear on the dim-lit stage, I knew he was going to come for Kingsley Amis.

‘I’d better make myself scarce too,’ I said. ‘Don’t want to get in your way.’

‘Hang on,’ he said. ‘You never know. He might be after you. Depends on whether or not he’s a literary critic’

When the devil arrived on stage, he was out of scale, far too large — ridiculously far too large, I might say, meaning no disrespect. It was hard to discern anything of him in the confused dark. He was black and gleaming, his outline as smooth as a dolphin’s even down to the hint of rubber. He stepped forward and advanced slowly up the ramp, still singing in that voice which shook the rafters.

This struck me as being, all told, unlikely. It was that very feeling that all was unlikely, that anything likely was over and done with like last year’s cricket match, which was most frightening. I trembled. Trembling didn’t help one bit.

I turned to Kingsley Amis. He was no longer there. I was alone. The devil was coming for me.

In terror, I peered along the great wide lateral arms of the cathedral.

‘Anyone there?’ I called. ‘Help! Help! Taxi!’

To the left was only stygian darkness, too syrupy for me to think of penetrating, the black from which ignorance is made. As I looked towards the right, however, along the other widespread arm of the building, something materialized there like a stain: light towards the dead dull end of the electromagnetic spectrum.

All this I took in feverishly, for the devil, still singing, was approaching me still. Perhaps I should apologize for my fears. As a rationalist, I had but to snap my rational fingers, it might be argued, and the devil would fade away in a puff of smoke. To which I might say that, rationalist or not, I had spent too many years in my capacity as church architect investigating the fossils of a dead faith not to have imbibed something of the old superstitions. But — this was more germane — I had a belief in the Jungian notion of various traits and twists of the human personality becoming dramatized as persons or personages. This enormous devil could well be an embodiment of the dark side of my character; in which case, I was all the less likely to escape him.

Nor did I.

As I took a pace or two to my right, starting to run towards that faint dull promise of escape, a vision distantly revealed itself. Fading into being came a magnificent palladian facade, lit in a colour like blood, with doric columns and blind doorways. Nothing human was to be seen there—no man to whom I might call. If the burrow to my left represented the squalors of the subconscious, here to my right was the chill of the super-ego.

I ran for it. But was hardly into my stride when the singing devil reached me. I screamed. He snatched me up .. .

... and bit off my head.

* * * *

To any of you with decent sensibilities, I must apologize for these horrific images. You may claim they were subjective, private to me, and should remain private, on the grounds that the world has nightmares enough. Perhaps. But what happened to me was that my head was bitten off almost literally.

My memory was wiped.

It’s a curious thing suddenly to find oneself walking. Imagine yourself in a cinema. The movie begins. Its opening shot is of some character walking, walking across a featureless landscape. Photography: grainy. The shot immediately holds your interest, perhaps because our ancestors right back to the Ice Age were great walkers. Now imagine that you’re not sitting watching in your comfortable stalls seat: you are that character. Only you’re not in a movie. You’re for real, or what we call real, according to our limited sensory equipment.

Your life has just begun and you're walking across what turns out to be Salisbury Plain. It's cold, there's a hint of rain in the breeze. The place looks ugly. But walking is no trouble. It's everything else that's trouble.

Like how you got where you are. Like what happened. Like what your name is. Like who you are. Even like—where are you going?

Night is closing in. That much you understand.

What do you do? You go on walking.

Over to your right in the distance, half-hidden by a fold of land, is a broken circle of stone monoliths. You kind of recognize it, although no name comes to you. It's the ruin of a Stone Age cathedral, taken out in the war with the Neanderthals, cobalt against the overpraised English countryside.

You continue as dark continues to fall. Your legs keep working, your pace is unvarying. You become slightly afraid of this remorseless body, asking yourself, Is it mine?

Dusk gathers about you like a coat when you climb a fence and reach a road. There is almost no traffic on the road. You try to thumb a lift from the cars as they approach from either direction, sweeping you with their headlights. Past they go, never pausing. Bastards.

The fourteenth car stops. A woman is driving. A man sits beside her. They ask where you want to go, and you say Anywhere. They laugh and say that is where they are going. You climb in. You huddle on the back seat, unable to answer any of their well-meant questions.

They think you are a loony, and drop you in the nearest village. You are inclined to agree with their judgement. You wander hopelessly along the road, then, frightened, back into the village. The village is called Bishops Linctus. By now its streets are deserted. Lights glow inside the pub, the Gun Dog, but, with no money in your pocket, you are afraid to enter. There are countries where you might enter and be looked after in a hospitable way; you do not feel that could happen in England.

A young man in gum boots saunters along the road with a shotgun under his arm. He stares at you hard as he passes. He returns and addresses you. He is guarded but friendly. He seems not to believe you have lost your memory. Nevertheless, he takes you along to his house, which is one of a line of council

houses on the edge of the village, just before the plain recommences its reign.

His old mother greets you. She is surprised, saying that Larry never speaks to anyone. He tells her to shut up. You stand there, back to the kitchen wall, while she fries up Larry's favourite meal, which is sausages and mashed fish fingers. You and Larry sit and eat at the table. It is good.

He has a room he calls His Room. It is locked. The old woman interrupts to say it is full of guns. He says to shut up. He tells you he is a farm labourer or sometimes a brickie. At present he is out of work. He lets you doss on the floor of his bedroom. The place is full of gun magazines, and there is a Kalashnikov in Larry's bed. He sleeps with it.

You express your gratitude.

'I like helping people,' Larry replies. He puts out the light.

You lie there on the floor. Despite all your worries, you feel pleasure and comfort in those words of his, 'I like helping people.' And so you sleep.

Only you're not in this movie. This is my movie. I'm for real — or what I call real, according to my limited sensory equipment.

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Morning. When I woke, Larry was already up and about. I could hear his mother shouting at him. For a few seconds, I was living with this present situation. Then the edge of the abyss reappeared. I could remember nothing further back than the time I was walking over that miserable plain.

When I got up, the old woman gave me a cup of thin instant coffee. I stood with her against the sink. She had a canary in a cage.

'It's Kevin. We call it Kevin. I think it's a girl. One of the family, aren't you? Keeps me company. Say hello to Kevin. I wash it every Saturday, under the hot tap. It likes that. Don't you, Kevin? You like a nice wash under the hot tap. It's one of the family. Sing for your mummy then. Who's a good Kevin?'

I was watching through the window, as Larry loaded boxes of ammunition into the back of an old battered Land Rover.

His mother caught my glance. 'He's going into Swindon to try and get a job.

You stay here with me. He's a dangerous driver, is Larry. We'll go down and see Dr Roberts. She's a sympathetic woman—trained in London, she was—and she'll help you.'

Larry was looking preoccupied. His movements were slow, his gaze abstracted, as if he were composing a poem in his head. Without glancing back at the house, he climbed into the cab of the Land Rover. Nothing happened. I went to the window to watch, obscurely thinking something was wrong. The back of his head could be seen. Motionless. Not trying to start the vehicle. Just sitting there in the driver's seat.

The council houses followed the curve of the road, which wound up a slight incline. Beyond the houses was open agricultural land, the plain. The village lay in the opposite direction. From the last house, three hundred yards distant, a woman emerged, wearing an old blue raincoat and pushing a baby's push-chair. She had a scarf tied over her head and was evidently going into the village to shop.

Larry moved as she drew nearer. The window of the vehicle wound down. A rifle muzzle protruded from it. A shot sounded.

The woman in the blue raincoat fell to her knees, still clinging with one hand to the push-chair.

As three more shots rang out, the push-chair blew apart. The woman's face was covered with shreds of baby as she fell on the road.

Larry's mother had seen at least part of this. She was drying a plate on a tea towel. She dropped the plate, ran from the kitchen, and opened the front door.

'No, no, Larry! Stop it, you fool. Whatever do you think you're doing?'

Larry had descended from the Land Rover after firing the four shots. He moved slowly, with a sleep-walker's lethargy. With that same lethargy, he snugged the butt of the rifle into his shoulder and fired at his mother. She was blown from the porch back into the passage. He fired two more shots into the house. I ran to the bedroom and heaved myself under the bed. fighting blindly with the magazines. I was sure he was after me.

There the police discovered me, four hours later, lying in a pool of my own urine.

So it was that eventually I found myself in a hospital in Swindon close to

other victims of Larry Foot. After shooting the woman from the council house and her baby, and his mother, Larry had walked into Bishops Linctus and shot dead the first three people he met, wounding several others. bishops bloodbath screamed the tabloid headlines. The quiet little affair roused much more excitement than the Soviet War (in which British troops were involved) then reaching one of its many climaxes outside Tbilisi. Why had Larry done it? The explanation given was that he had always been keen on guns. Presumably the same explanation would cover the Soviet War.

Armed police from Bishops Magnum and Salisbury shot Larry down behind the Shell garage. He had liked to help people, poor Larry. At least he gave a little pleasure to the bloodthirsty readers of the *Sun.*

This incident got me swiftly—in an ambulance—into the realm of professional medical scrutiny. Within a few days, I again had an identity. I was Roy Edward Burnell, a university lecturer and specialist in church architecture. I had written a learned book, *Architrave and Archetype,* a thesis linking human aspiration with human-designed structures, cathedrals in particular.

The chief medico in charge of my case, a Dr Rosemary Kepepwe, entered my hospital room smiling, bringing with her a copy of my book. 'We're getting somewhere, Roy,' she said. 'We'll contact your wife next.'

I smote my forehead. 'My God, don't say I'm married.'

She laughed. 'I'm afraid so. At least you were married. We'll soon have her tracked down — and other people in your past. What is the last thing you remember before the white-out?'

* * * *

Even to me, her attitude seemed amateurish. When I said something of the sort, Dr Kepepwe explained that most of the original staff of the hospital were serving with British troops in Operation Total Tartary, in Murmansk, Usbekistan, the front in the Caucasus, and the new revolutionary area opening up round Lake Baikal. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had created a tremendous demand for medication.

'My husband was a brain surgeon,' Kepepwe said. 'The best husband a woman could have. David won the Isle of Wight Sea-Fishing Trophy two years in succession. Everyone respected him. We have three children, one of them at Eton and one now working as a waiter in a Little Chef off the M25 at the South Mimms

Service Area. But David volunteered to serve with Total Tartary. I had picked up a bit of surgery from him, of course, so here I am.

'You were quite lucky to get here. Salisbury Plain is all mined these days.'

'Lucky me,' I said. But it appeared I did not know how lucky. I had marvelled that it was such a quiet hospital, and ascribed this to efficiency. Not so, Dr Kepepwe explained. I was the only patient in there. All the other wards were empty. Civilian patients had been turned out three days earlier, as the hospital prepared to receive wounded from the Eastern theatre of war.

'Anyhow, I'd better take your details,' Dr Kepepwe said, reluctantly. 'Then I'll bring you a cup of tea. What did you say was the last thing you remembered?'

I told her. I had gone to South America to view some of the ecclesiastical architecture there. I arrived in Buenos Aires and checked into my hotel. I remembered going up in a gilt elevator. And then—white-out. The fear of standing on the edge of a great abyss overtook me.

Dr Kepepwe saw the expression on my face. 'Don't worry—you're not alone, Roy. How does it feel ?'

'An ocean. A wide ocean with a small island here and there. No continent. The continent has gone.'

As I spoke the words, some strange thing struggled in my mind. A name almost came back to me, then died.

So I waited. Waited to be restored. To pass the time I had access to the hospital library on VDU, together with TV and video. Also the new media craze, the NV, or nostovision. Laser projectors could beam whole programmes into the mind, where the programmes became like your own lived memories, though they faded in a few days. In view of my deficiencies, I avoided the NV and stuck to the library; but little I read remained in my mind.

What sins, what meannesses, what grave errors I had committed in the previous ten years had been forgiven me. I waited in calm without apprehension.

Dr Kepepwe assured me active steps were being taken to trace those who had been intimate with me during the ten blank years: my parents, my academic colleagues. The confusions of war, the tight security covering the country, made communication difficult.

When she left in the evening, I wandered through the great empty building. In the dark of the long antiseptic corridors, green LEDs glowed, accompanied often by hums or growls. It was like being in the entrails of a glacier.

On the desk in Rosemary Kepepwe's office stood a photograph of her husband David, very black, smiling genially with a large fish on a scale by his side. I wondered about their lives; but there was nothing on which to speculate. She was little more to me than an embodiment of kindness.

Only my slippered footsteps on the stairs, the tiles. I was a ghost among the ghosts of multitudinous lives whose CVS, like mine, had been lost. Who had lived, died, survived? A phrase came back uncomfortably from the white-out, 'the sorry jeste of Life'.

But, I told myself as I took a service elevator up to the roof, I should not think in the past tense. Any day now and the hospital would be filled again with the living—the military living, harpooned by their wounds, poised on the brink of a final white-out. They would survive or not, to accumulate more memories, happy or sad as the case might be.

On the roof, the installations of air-conditioning plants painted black by a city's grime lived and breathed. I stood on the parapet, looking out over the town of Swindon, willing myself to feel less disembodied. The stars shone overhead, remote but always with promise of something better than the brief rush of biological existence. As I drank them in, a roar of engines sounded.

Three B-52 Stratofortresses flew overhead, from the west towards the eastern stars.

I went downstairs again, to my ward, my nest in the glacier. I must wait. Waiting did not require too much fortitude. One day soon, Dr Kepepwe would do the trick — with luck before the war-damaged moved in to supplant me in her attentions.

The days would pass. Help would come.

Indeed, the days did pass.

And then Stephanie arrived.

Stephanie was a vision of delight, tall, fine-boned, aesthetic of countenance,

walking easy and free inside a fawn linen suit. Hair tawny, neat, almost shoulder-length. I admired the way she strolled into the ward, doing quite determinedly something not to her taste. With a cautious smile on her face. And this lady had been my wife. I could have forgotten that? I could have forgotten all the times we had enjoyed together, where we'd been, what we'd done? So it seemed. My head had been bitten off.

Like most gusts of pleasure, this one brought its pain. She sat facing me: calm, sympathetic, but at a distance I had no way of negotiating, as I listened dismayed to what she revealed of those islands, that lost continent.

Stephanie and I had married eight years ago, only four weeks after meeting in Los Angeles for the first time. We were divorced five years later. Here indeed, I thought, must lie some of those sins, meannesses and grave errors. She broke this news to me gently, casting her clear gaze towards the window in preference to seeing my hurt. The hospital authorities had tracked her down in California, where she was enjoying success as a fabric designer and living with a famous composer of film music.

'You don't owe me anything,' she said. And, after a pause, 'I don't owe you anything.'

'It's good of you to come and see me. The war and everything, and that jumbo blown out of the skies over the Atlantic…'

A small laugh. 'I was interested, of course. You're a bit of medical history.'

'We had no children?'

She shook her head. 'That whole business was the reason for our falling out.'

'Shit,' I said. A long silence fell between us. I could have crossed the Sahara in it. 'Did I ever—I mean, since we split up—did I ever — did we communicate at all?'

'It was final,' she said. 'I didn't want to know. I like my new life in the States. What you did was up to you, wasn't it? But you did send me postcards. Generally of draughty old churches here and there — of the kind you used to drag me into when we were together.'

'You can't beat a good old draughty old church,' I said, smiling.

She did not return the smile. Perhaps the woman lacked humour.

'I brought a couple of your cards along in my purse,' she said. I noted the Americanism as she dipped into her handbag. She pulled out one card and handed it over, extending it between two outstretched fingers—as if amnesia was catching.

'Huh, just one card. I tore the others up, I'm afraid.' That, I thought, was a little unnecessary pain she had no reason to inflict.

The card, crudely coloured, showed a picture of a church labelled as St Stephen's Basilica, although I saw immediately that architecturally it was not a basilica. I turned it over, glanced at the Hungarian stamp, and read the few words I had scribbled to Stephanie, only three weeks earlier.

'Budapest. Brief visit here. Making notes for lectures as usual. Need some florid Hungarian architecture. Trust you're well. Have met strange old friend—just going round to Antonescu's Clinic with him. Love, Roy.'

I flung my arms round Stephanie and kissed her.

* * * *

I went back to the Gellert. There, not entirely surprisingly, was Montagu Clements, still wearing my sweater.

He raised his hands in mock-surrender. 'Pax. No offence meant, honest, old chum. Since I lost my job I've worked as a decoy for Antonescu, luring on innocent foreigners who come here to take advantage of low Hungarian prices. Economic necessity and all that.'

'You had your hand in the till — now you've had it in my mind. Stealing a memory is like murder, you miserable slob.'

'Yes, and no doubt it will be legislated against when nostovision becomes less than a seven-day wonder. Till then, Antonescu earns a modest dollar from his bootleg memory bullets. They're short of hard currency, the Hungarians. Let me buy you a drink.'

I almost threw myself on him. 'You've poisoned my life, you bastard, you'd probably poison my drink.'

He was very cool. ‘Let’s not fall out. You have a contempt for me. Think how I might feel about you. I’ve had to edit ten years of your memories, a lot of which weren’t edifying. You should be happy to be rid of them.’

‘I see, Clements—The FOAM Theory of History. ..Never learn anything. Just bloody forget. Haven’t you ever heard that saying about those who forget history being doomed to repeat it? Why do you think the world’s in such a fucking mess?’

He remained unmoved, ‘I have no idea, old boy. Nor, I suspect, do you, for all your academic posturing. Without wishing to hurt your feelings, your last ten years were full of crap. But there — everyone’s last ten years were full of crap…’

We were standing in the baroque foyer of the hotel, which had been built in the great European hotel age during the peaceful years preceding the First World War. I gestured through the doors, through the glass of which traffic could be seen crossing the Szabadsag Bridge. Beyond lay the dense Magyar thoroughfares, the grandiose piles of masonry, where fat profiteers sweated over their calculators.

‘I was already on my way to the police, Clements, *old boy.* Don’t pretend we’re friends. You had me dumped on Salisbury Plain, don’t forget.’

Clements turned on one of his innocent smiles. ‘Just think, it could have been the Gobi... I interceded on your behalf. Be British, old chap—let’s compromise. Let’s do a deal.’

‘What deal?’

He said, ‘We could discuss business better in the bar. You want your memory back, eh? Don’t go to the police and I’ll bring you your memory this afternoon. Agree? Say three-thirty, after I’ve taken my customary nap. OK?’

So I agreed on it. I agreed, thinking I would go to the police later. Clements turned up at 3.55.

We sat at the upstairs bar with two tall glasses of iced white Eger wine, for which I paid. He produced in the palm of his right hand two slender plastic spools, which I recognized as nostovision bullets, ready to be inserted into the head-laser.

‘I had some trouble getting these, old chap. How about fifty dollars each?’

‘Maybe you really have lost your memory or you’d know I wouldn’t fall for that. Hand them over. Why two bullets?’

He took a reflective sip of his wine. ‘Antonescu’s at the cutting edge of psycho-technology. We have to know our customers. They’re mainly in America and the Arab World. It’s a specialized market. We boiled your memory banks down into two categories—the rest we threw away, sorry to say. There’s your speciality, church architecture and all that. That spool has a limited but steady sale to academics — a tribute to all the knowledge you had packed away. I suppose you’ll be glad to get that back. Surely it’s worth fifty dollars to you?’

‘Come on, Clements, what’s the other bullet?’

‘A hundred dollars, old chum? It’s all your life and activities with a woman called Stephanie. Very erotic stuff, believe me. Very popular in Saudi Arabia.’

I threw my wine in his face and grabbed the two bullets.

I leave it to you to decide which bullet I played first.

* * * *

The Soviet War continues. Heavy fighting in the Caucasus despite bad weather conditions. Radio reports said that Alliance forces used chemical and bacteriological weapons in the Kutaisi area. Questioned, American General ‘Gus’ Stalinbrass said, ‘What the heck else do we do? These assholes don’t give up easy.’

Last night, four Georgian soldiers crossed the Tbilisi lines, found their way through a minefield, and gave themselves up to a British journalist, Dicky Bowden. One of the soldiers was a boy of fourteen.

Bowden said, ‘Starved and disaffected troops like these are all that stand between our advance and the Caspian Sea.’

He was confident that the war would be over in a week or two. Say a month. Maximum two months. A year.