

A LIFE OF MATTER AND DEATH

By Brian Aldiss

A Novel in One Chapter

1

Very well. Here I sit looking out over the sea, on this little rag of an island, Uskair. I may as well tell the story, though a new generation, growing up since the Odonata arrived on Earth, will find it incredible.

Do you wonder why I have hesitated until now? Because it isn't really my story. It's my brother's.

Yes, my brother Alec. The Man Who Changed the World, damn him.

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Last year, before I decided to settle here for keeps, my business took me to one of the great northern cities, chief among those of the prosperous world. From the air, it seemed a place of beauty, from ground level often horrifying. From the city's government and economic centre, the destinies of billions of people round the globe were decided, yet the population was still not under control. The problem of the living remained, though the problem of the dead had been solved. To the man who had solved that problem, a statue stood in one of the main squares. On the plinth were the simple words:

ALEC GREYLORN
1975-2026
He Brought a Cleansing Force
To Human Affairs

My brother's figure stood in bronze, and on his shoulder was an Odonata.

Many cities have erected similar memorials. All his fortune went to institutions; only the island came to me, the younger brother he spurned as a liar.

All cities have changed their appearance in the last decade. Even villages and hamlets have changed. Odonatist towers stand everywhere, glass towers

resembling translucent vases. They say that such towers stand in Alice Springs, in Cove, Oregon, in Timbuktu and Petra and downtown Samarkand. The vase towers bring beauty to the ugliest place, and have altered human perceptions of what is sublime. Sometimes as the light of the sun catches them, you see the Odonata fluttering down into them to receive the gifts that mourners leave there.

It is not only the landscape that has changed. So have religions. It is laughable now to imagine a single one of the world's multitudinous dead being burnt by fire or buried in earth.

Much has changed for the better, thanks to Alec's discovery. All the same, there's no glass tower on Uskair.

The Odonata themselves are pretty splendid, I admit. Another generation will grow accustomed to their beauty, and no longer marvel at them. I take a shot at the odd one that flies over Uskair—strictly illegal, I know. In general, their iridescence, their startling speed, remain a joy. It is easy to see why a new religion has grown about them. Besides, people will worship anything.

But the Odonata are not spirits. They scarcely resemble the order of dragonflies after which they were named. Some have been sighted more than thirty feet in length, cruising almost a kilometre above sea level. Wingspans are recorded of up to forty feet.

They are intelligent, although it is an intelligence unlike humanity's. There's no aggression. Odonata have never attacked a living human being. They avoid planes and helicopters. What they do is basic: they fly, feed, breed sparingly and look beautiful. They do good. They inspire musicians. They make me sick.

And it was Alec who let them loose.

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Alec took after my father. He was a man of action. And a boy of action.

He was two years older than I, taller, more handsome, better at sport. On his fifth birthday, he climbed a tall tree until he reached twig level, where he sat contentedly as the wind rocked him to and fro. On the ground far below, Father applauded while Mother cried for him to come down. I stood and licked my ice-cream.

Later, I asked Alec if he liked being perched so high.

‘Oh, no,’ he said.

It was an irritating answer. I believed him to mean that he climbed trees not for enjoyment but because he felt danger was his natural environment. Perhaps he did it to hear Mother scream.

While I was always told I talked too much, Alec was quiet. That was because he was athletic.

We used to go sailing on the estuary when we were boys. Father taught us everything. He taught us how to ride out a storm. That was when my sister drowned. Father wanted her to be buried at sea; Mother did not. They quarrelled terribly over that. I’ll never forget how they quarrelled.

Alec liked sailing more than I. I got seasick. Fortunately, we spent more time mountaineering than sailing. Father was a mountaineer; he made his fortune from the ski resorts on a mountain Grandfather had bought cheaply in Colorado. So we were for ever heading for the rocky interior of continents, to regions of crags and barrenness. Father was at his most hearty in places where there was an echo. Alec liked solitudes too.

Father was a big square man, very freckled and covered with sparse sandy hair. He perspired a lot, he enthused a lot. He liked to sing hymns as he worked his way up cliff faces. He was a schoolboy at heart—as I realized later in life.

He used to tell us that on our expeditions we were ‘confronting the Unknown’. The phrase gave him satisfaction; he used it a lot. Mother—another sandy person, with pretty green eyes — would nod to herself when she heard the phrase, as if in recognition, and smile a little secret smile.

Personally, there were things other than the Unknown I would have preferred to confront. But there’s no doubt this activity stood Alec in good stead when he finally came across the truly Unknown.

When we were not at school, we were under canvas, often as not, and far from the crack-crazed cities of Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were still remote places, and if there were remote places we found them. Although I was no linguist at school, I could still say a few useful words in Spanish, Nepali, Urdu, Carib, Slovak and Bahasa Malay. We often slept under the stars. I knew the word for star in about twenty languages.

So it was that, just before my fourteenth birthday, I found myself with my parents and brother at the foot of an unprepossessing mountain called locally El Jocosó, the Jocund. I had tried many lies and devices to avoid this mountain, including a realistic limp and stories of leg cancer. To no avail. Even my bloodcurdling tale of the Curse of El Jocosó had not prevailed. There I was, there the mountain was.

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We were camped amid the little-visited Calaste chain in southern Bolivia. The mountains are no great height, but the ascents are steep, the country wild, and the snakes prolific— all plus factors as far as my father was concerned. Another irritating item was that the place was swarming with tortoises, clashing against each other in their anxiety to mate. One can only question the wisdom of a god who gave shelled creatures a sex life.

We had experienced great difficulty in procuring bearers and mules, since a small war was raging in valleys and hills. Several rival revolutionary armies were challenging the central government and each other. Father dismissed all this as typical South American ferment, and believed that all would be well as long as we sang a hymn before breakfast.

The fact that we had ventured into disputed territory meant nothing to my father. Guerrillas warned us that the CIA were about to spray the area with a new defoliant and anthrax contaminants. How often have I heard Father, after listening impatiently to similar warnings, exclaim, 'Oh, don't be an idiot — let's get on with it, man!' and stride ahead, swinging a machete.

Men thus instructed often found it easier to get on with it than to try and explain the danger all over again.

So it was that—ill-equipped, ignoring all warnings, and unable to pick up the BBC World Service on our radio—we confronted El Jocosó without guides and in a thunderstorm. Even my mother, normally so placid with her three great boys, was in a bad mood. There had been shelling in Casa Tampica and she had left her hair dye in the Holton Hotel.

'Onward, Christian soldiers!' boomed my father, as he hammered in his first piton.

It was on 8 August that Father suffered his fall. The three of us were scaling an almost vertical face. I was bored. I had just discovered boredom, and it was

magic to me. To my left hand was a small ledge and on it, rather surprisingly, a tortoise appeared.

Pitching my voice to a tone of mild puzzlement, I called, 'What's a rattlesnake doing up here?'

My father looked round, startled. He slipped on the naked rock. The fifi hook attached to his étrier slipped. He reached too violently to grasp it, a tape snapped on the étrier, and he was gone. He slid fifty feet down a chimney, and became wedged there. When we called, he replied, although he soon must have lost consciousness.

Alec and I had been climbing on his right-hand side. We had to pick our way down and scale a different shoulder of cliff before we were able to lower ourselves to where Father lay. By then it was late afternoon.

Shadows began to fill the valleys below us. The sun swung round towards the west and the Pacific Ocean. Once we heard the sound of firing, but the crackle of guns came up to us tinny and diminished. In the mountains, humanity becomes an abstraction. Night approaches fast in those altitudes. Alec and I realized that we would only endanger our lives by trying to extract Father from where he lay and make a night climb with him. We slept on a narrow ledge, clinging to each other. Once in the uneasy hours of dark, I heard my father singing to himself. 'From Greenland's icy mountains ...' He sounded drunk.

It was after noon on the following day before we got a rope round Father and managed to haul him slowly out of the chimney.

He was badly injured.

'Just a scratch,' he said, before passing out again.

His left leg was broken, together with several bones in both feet. The flesh had been scraped from his stomach, chest and face. His right hand was smashed and that shoulder dislocated. There was massive bruising, and he had lost a lot of blood in the night.

'That was all rather spectacular,' he said, as we sat him up and got him to sip some rum.

We had a six-mile descent, down El Jocosó to the little camp by a stream where Mother waited with the mules. Alec and I lowered and carried Father by

turns. We were well aware of him stifling cries of pain, but there was nothing for it but to proceed. Darkness overtook us again. We camped uncomfortably, one on either side of Father, to keep him warm. Although we had little to eat, the water held out, and we bathed Father's wounds, which were beginning to look nasty. The flies were a problem.

The three of us reached the camp by the stream on the following afternoon. Mother wept to see Father's state, and proposed that we set out for Chiguana, the nearest town where we might expect to find a hospital, immediately. Unfortunately, as chance would have it, a few villagers had passed the camp on the previous day; finding they were friendly, my mother traded one of our two mules for a gallon of hair dye. We had only one mule left, an unfriendly beast called Estrelita.

On to the back of Estrelita Father was loaded, and we started off, leaving much of our kit behind. Alec and I were exhausted. Happily, the way was mainly downhill to Chiguana, not far from the frontier with Argentina.

The night was filled with my father's delirium. He called persistently for his old schoolmaster to beat him. We decided in the morning that Alec should press on ahead and try to find a doctor in town, while I came on with Mother and the recalcitrant mule.

What a journey that was! Father appeared to be sinking, day by day. In order to avoid a stretch of forest, in which Mother thought she had heard firing, we crossed an expanse of igneous rock, red, potholed and uneven. The potholes, rarely bigger than Estrelita's hoof, were filled with little brackish puddles in which minute things swam — mosquito larvae.

In one of these potholes, Estrelita's front right hoof became trapped. She bucked and reared in fury in her efforts to get free. We had to calm her and untie my father, laying him down tenderly while we tried to extricate the mule.

'I'll light a fire under her,' I suggested.

But we were afraid she might then escape. Mother poured hair dye round the hoof; even that did not act sufficiently as a lubricant to set the poor beast free. Eventually, after dosing Father with more rum, Mother and I sank down exhausted to sleep, leaving the animal to kick and struggle throughout the night.

When I woke, the mule was still stuck. My first thought was for Father. I went to him. In his delirium, he had drunk several potholes dry, and was dead.

The heat on the rock flow became intense only an hour or two after sunrise. Mother and I decided that in the interests of hygiene we could not take Father's body into Chiguana, but must bury him where he lay.

I set to work with the pick. The rock splintered and flew, alarming the wretched mule, whose leg was now badly inflamed. After two hours' work, I had managed only to hack out a shallow hole hardly large enough to bury a tortoise. Father had been burden enough when alive; dead, he was nothing but a nuisance.

While I was still labouring away, my mother screamed in a rich contralto. I looked up. She was staring at a party of five men, heavily armed, who had appeared from behind a rock pile and now stood, several metres away, pointing machine guns at us.

'Are you any good with a pick?' I called.

Evidently they had no English. They wore camouflage uniform and, from the looks of them, had been living long in the jungle. Perhaps that accounted for their nervousness. They would not venture into the open where we stood, but shouted their demands at us.

'What can they want?' Mother asked me. When I had no answer, she addressed them directly, stressing each word for their convenience.

'Who are you? Can't you go away? We have a dead person here. He died of the plague.'

Gun barrels waved at us, but the men stood their ground. One of them, a handsome man scarcely more than an adolescent, shouted something in a high voice. It sounded vaguely political, chiefly because it went on for some while.

'I think he said they are the Chiguana Revolutionary Liberation Army,' I told Mother. 'We'd better be civil. Offer them your hair dye.'

The man was shouting and gesticulating. Now his meaning was clear. They wanted Estrelita. I understood something of his heavily accented Spanish. He said, 'Bring the moke over here and we will not shoot you.'

Picking up a stick, I whacked Estrelita on her rump. She kicked out but still could not move. The more I whacked, the more she kicked, the more the members of the Revolutionary Liberation Army shouted and raged. They clearly

believed I was trying to trick them.

The leader let off a few rounds which went bellowing over our heads.

My mother lost patience. 'Come and get the bloody animal yourself, if you want it,' she yelled.

The revolutionaries charged. Possibly they were accepting my mother's offer; more likely they, like her, lost patience.

Mother turned and ran. I threw myself flat beside the corpse. The mule uttered its insane bray and broke free of its prison at last. Forgetting us, the revolutionaries ran in pursuit, firing sporadic shots as they went. They disappeared over the rocks, often falling.

'We'd better get on to Chiguana,' Mother said, coming up to me, panting.

'What do we do with Dad? We can't leave him here.'

She looked up at the sky, where vultures were gathering.

'Can't we?' she said.

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Alec met us in the cobbled streets of Chiguana with an English-speaking doctor. I practically collapsed in his arms.

The doctor was efficient and kind. His surgery was well equipped. In his care I remained, delirious. I had contracted dysentery, of a type known locally as 'cordillera killer'.

The doctor's house was on the main square of Chiguana, with three steps Up to his door: 'to deter the crippled and the halt', he told me, genially.

I lay for several days in a small wooden room, convinced for some reason that I was on an ocean-going ship. My father made irregular appearances, singing hymns lustily as he climbed a mizzen-mast like a mountain.

Filth and ugly matter poured from my body. A little square woman—to be identified when sanity returned as the doctor's wife—came to change my bedding and cleanse me regularly.

I sat up weakly one morning, and the ship's cabin had transmuted itself into a little square room in an isolated town in South America. Where had the illusion of the ship come from ? Where had it gone ?

The doctor's name was Santos. He was of medium height and middle age, rather a square man, to match his wife, with square capable fingers at the end of square brown hands. His face was open and honest and smiled readily, the generous mouth turning upwards into a handlebar moustache.

'You're back on land again, my lad. You've been raving about galleons and sea creatures.'

'I did believe I was at sea, sir.'

'You gave me orders from the poop deck. The only poop was in your bed.'

'I'm sorry for that.'

He smiled. 'I'm used to humanity's mess. It's my stock-in-trade.'

Dr Santos told me that my mother would pay his bill. She and Alec were staying with a 'grand friend' of the doctor's, a Senor Porua, who lived nearby.

I was strong enough next morning to go and look out of the front window. A market was in progress. A stall selling apricots, peaches and melons stood outside the doctor's house. There were earthenware pots for sale, and men rode through the crowd on horseback. The scene was more reminiscent of the nineteenth century than the twenty-first.

When I remarked on this to the doctor's wife, she explained that the town was under virtual siege, cut off from the central government. The airport had been seized by one revolutionary force and the communication centre by an opposing one. Both forces shelled the town periodically. Chiguana had virtually no contact with the outside world.

My small room adjoined the doctor's surgery. I could hear him bullying his patients in a good-natured way.

'Of course you're ill. Look at the way you live. Your house is a pigsty. Cease to neglect your wife and she may not neglect your home. You eat too much. You smoke too much. You drink too much. You go to the whores of the Calle

Minotauro. You have guinea pigs in your bed.'

That night I dreamed I was on a ship again, and Alec was captain. But when I awoke I was sane.

I washed myself and walked out the back of the house. The ground was steep, and soon gave way to the cemetery. Among the graves were small tombs like English beach-huts which, in the Catholic way, sheltered the remains of whole families, their likenesses memorialized in framed photos on the carved stones.

Remember my age and make allowance for it. I was just an English schoolboy. I remarked on what to me was exotic to the doctor over a hasty breakfast of coffee, bread and cheese.

'What's odd?' he asked, smoothing his moustache with a linen napkin. 'A surgery, like a chapel, should be near the cemetery. I cure no one. For all my medicaments, the peasants all wind up there, under slabs, sooner or later.'

'Does not that make you melancholy, sir?'

'For all these people's piety and prayers, they finish up out there, in decay. Worms get them all in the end. Do you think that makes the priests a bit less jolly?'

I saw he liked simply to converse. I was astonished. I had never met such a characteristic before. That was part of my inexperience.

After the surgery closed, he loved to drink wine and talk. To my ears, much of the talk was about death, a subject which made me nervous. I said something to that effect, in a churlish tone — manners are something else we have not learnt at that age.

'I've nothing against death,' said the doctor, ignoring my tone and answering in good humour. 'If we didn't all turn into disgusting lumps of decaying meat, men would be even more arrogant than they are. Civilization is the art of concealing the corpse in us. The Church conspires towards the same end. There's too much pomp in funerals. We need a better way of disposing of bodies—something less ostentatious.'

This remark, which struck me as silly and offensive at the time, was to be recalled later. Reminded of my defunct parent, I said, 'Father believed in the Resurrection.'

The doctor laughed. 'My grand friend Porua has visited Italy more than once. He enjoys all this renaissance art, full of noble statesmen, florid gestures and people being resurrected. Yet what are people under their fine robes? Just matter — matter in decay.'

I noticed he himself dressed well.

'Sir, my position in the world is precarious enough. I don't wish to know what it is to be mortal, thanks. I intend to live for ever.' Despite the boast, I spoke rather miserably.

'What you want is a woman, young feller-me-lad. I'll get you one when you're fully recovered. You have a sound prick on you, as I've observed. I'll find it a billet in a few days.'

At the mention of its name, the member referred to leaped up in hope. I was recovering.

Next evening, I was drinking his wine. Perhaps it made me too outspoken. Night had fallen over Chiguana and, as the doctor's wife had predicted, the Lower Bolivian Liberation Force had driven through the town, firing randomly and inspiring fear in all.

'Well, it's not so bad,' said Santos. 'Only one old woman killed, and she with a frightful goitre and her husband long ago disappeared in the hills. We've known worse. There's a treat on Saturday. I'm going to take you to the Bioskop to see a great old film from ancient days. Charlie Chaplin, in *Modern Times*.'

'That's ages old,' I said, contemptuously. 'Sentimental rubbish.'

He jumped up, spilling his wine. 'What, you dare say that, you impudent young frog? You dare call *Modern Times* rubbish?'

I was alarmed, but stood my ground. 'I just don't like Chaplin.'

'Then what an unfeeling little brute you are to be sure. The comedy, the poverty, the pathos, the loneliness, the hope — all beautifully in balance... If you don't enjoy that then you have no feeling for your fellow men.'

'He's not half as funny as Buster Keaton.'

'You dare say that in my house! Chaplin grasped the whole complexity of

the human heart, its goodness, its beastliness—and you dare call that rubbish! Jesus!’

He grasped my collar. I struck out feebly in self-defence and hit him across the chest, which increased his rage. Next moment, I found myself frog-marched out to his front door. He kicked it open and flung me down the three steps into the street.

It was my fourteenth birthday.

* * * *

Alec and my mother had taken shelter under the wing of Santos’s ‘grand friend’, Porua de Madariaga.

Porua’s house was large, rambling and decaying. At the time, I took this decay merely as a sign of the times; I was comfortable with decay. I liked my room, reached by an open staircase, at one end of the mansion. It looked out over a garden so long overgrown it was returning to jungle. Porua’s vineyards, long the source of the fortune of the de Madariaga family, were in the hands of one or other of the revolutionary parties.

While my mother attempted to sort out our family finances — no easy matter with the capital, La Paz, virtually divorced from all communication — I took on a job of work for Porua.

In his great house, almost bereft of servants and filled with damp, glooms and moulds, Porua lived like a soldier under siege. He was a tall man, heavy in build, his hollow voice making him sound empty, like an old wooden drum. Yet his great blue jowls appeared sufficient fortification against the world; while so immense was his dignity that it was some while before I realized he spent his nights in the arms of my recently widowed mother.

She, poor woman, had at last found a grown-up man, and showed her pleasure by fawning on Porua. Callowly, I was disgusted by all this; I avoided my mother and threw myself into the job of telling lies for *La Clava*.

Porua had three cars. They mouldered outside the *casa*, a-thirst for the gasoline which no longer arrived in Chiguana. He rode to work every morning on a fine stallion. I followed on foot to the offices of his newspaper.

With most other lines of communication knocked out by the civil war,

Porua's *La Clava* played an important role in informing that isolated community. Not only had the various guerrilla movements cut all land means of communication; the staff of the paper, including the reporters, had left to join one side or another in the hills. Some would say this made him the ideal publisher of a newspaper.

So I respected him, and was glad to work long hours in his stuffy little offices, learning better Spanish and the workings of a paper; learning also something about Porua, whom I studied with almost servile interest. This was my first real relationship with a grown man beyond the charmed circle of father, uncles, cousins, in which Alec and I had previously moved.

The coldness of his character shocked me. While Porua would spare a fly buzzing against his window pane, he was never better than harshly civil to anyone he considered his inferior. He was unsparing of anybody who worked for him. Only to his great black horse, which he rode about the town, did he show affection. I failed to see how tolerant he was of me, with my callow questioning of everything: I flinched under the coldness of his eye, yet did not perceive his isolation.

We sometimes worked almost till midnight, with a subeditor, to get out the next edition of the paper. I could hear gunfire in the hills on occasions when I walked home. In response to some implied criticism I made of his treatment of the sub-editor, Porua regarded me in a sneering silence and then said. 'Why should I have regard for my fellows? Consider the stories we print in our columns. Are they not bulletins on the nastiness of mankind? Murders, theft, rape, calumnies, graft — our daily bread. Not one grown man, aristocrat or peasant, is worthy of respect when you really know him. Women are little better, only weaker in carrying out their ill intentions. Dogs shit in the street, children in their trousers. Only the horse has nobility.'

I was secretly thrilled by such misanthropy, arguing that such views were in conflict with his profession of Christianity, for Porua was a regular churchgoer.

He gave a short laugh, as hollow as his voice.

'You've much to learn. Christ was a fool to die for men. That's my opinion. What improvement did he make in the world? The sight of him hanging on the Cross—are we really supposed to worship that, defeat and death? Christ's preachings have merely made us more aware of the darkness surrounding us. I have a scorn of him.'

He made a curt gesture.

‘My visits to the church are to set an example to the brute population of Chiguana. They need a fear of heavenly retribution to keep them in order. Sometimes I also enjoy the music and the wailing. I am not entirely averse to the compositions of Monteverdi.’

He left the room abruptly, with the air of a man who has revealed too much of himself. I returned to the clutch of reports on my desk.

My father’s nature had been sunny. To Father, every man had been ‘a good chap’. The darkest villain was ‘a rather jolly fellow’ in Father’s book. I remembered a banker friend of my parents who was on trial for having raped his twelve-year-old niece; Father had tut-tutted and said, ‘I suppose he could not help himself.’ This lack of judgement, of the judgemental impulse, was revealed in Chiguana as weakness.

It was a part of becoming adult that I grew aware of the great invisible universe of personality which controls us as surely as do physical laws. This dawning knowledge made me aware of my isolation. I needed the woman Santos had promised me to share experience with. My state was an unhappy one compared with the other members of my family: my mother had become attached to the grim Porua, and Alec had formed a liaison with Nuria.

* * * *

Nuria was the daughter of the de Madariaga family. She had an older brother, but he was studying architecture in Italy. Their mother had died when they were little more than infants and, I gathered, it was from that moment that Porua’s misanthropy had set in.

Nuria’s was a solemn beauty. She was not lively as are many girls of eighteen. She was studious, read much, and liked to talk about the cosmos. Her face was pale, her eyes grey, and therefore quite startling, her mouth prettily shaped, indenting at the corners in a permanent half-smile. Oh, I often studied that face covertly! She wore her dark hair in plaits about her head. She had a penchant for long grey velvet dresses which marked her, in my youthful estimation, as foreign and sophisticated.

‘I mean to go to Italy one day, as my brother has done,’ she told me, when I discovered her on a stone bench in the garden, reading a book. ‘That is why I read Dante now. Do you read Dante?’

‘No. Never. At least, I don’t think so.’

‘I am teaching your brother.’

Alec had never before shown any interest in Dante — or in women. He and I, together with that great boy, my father, had spent our lives in a world of eternal boyhood, being good chaps and climbing or sailing. Now Father had gone, and here was Nuria, with a strong physical presence, as challenging in her way as her father.

The poisonous philosophies of both Santos and Porua were banished by the sight of the latter’s daughter in her grey dress, red book in hand.

My relations with my mother were also marked by coolness. She resented my dislike of her relationship with Porua. Once, when I told her a lie about what I was doing, in order to evade hostile questioning, she said, severely, ‘You’re growing too like your father.’ I thought about that for an hour before deciding to ignore her, as Father always did.

As I rarely watched TV or read newspapers, my knowledge was scanty. There had been a story about secret arms deals with a Middle Eastern country involving the suicide of a French diplomat, but I recalled no names or figures.

‘Make them up,’ Porua said. ‘We have to enlighten our readers. They are so insensitive to matters of veracity that accuracy is no virtue.’

So I made up my stories. There was the fictitious crisis involving tourists dying of food poisoning in Portugal, and another concerning a foreign minister who vanished without trace in Budapest, and there was the Chilean dope smuggler arrested in Miami who was found to have sixteen wives.

These reports had at least a grounding in real events, or my memory of them. But I soon had to rely more and more on my imagination. So the news became more and more sensational. Porua made no complaint. Nor did our readers.

One day we carried a headline SECRET OF IMMORTALITY DISCOVERED. It was the story of a German scientist working on seaweed in South Korea who had found how to elude death. A small queue formed in the dusty street outside our office doors to ask for the scientist’s address. Then Porua gave his short laugh and said, ‘Why should those pigs wish to live a day longer?’

One evening after night had fallen, I returned alone to the Porua mansion. Lightning flickered noiselessly in the western sky. I had been drinking in a bar with the sub-editor, who had become a friend. The town lay dead, exhausted after the day's heat. Some eternal quality in the atmosphere seized me and I stood silent, listening to dogs barking distantly in the hills.

A figure moved on a balcony above my head. It emerged from Nuria's room. The man came down the steps and began to cross the courtyard. I saw it was Alec, walking slowly as if in a daze, his right hand held up to his nose and mouth, his eyes downcast.

He saw me, apparently without surprise, and spoke tonelessly. 'This night I am in Heaven.'

There was no pause in his stride. He did not look directly at me. He simply walked on towards his own quarters.

How my heart sank at his words. I understood their meaning and was full of jealousy. Next day, *La Clava* carried the bloodthirsty story of how the king of one of the United Arab Emirates had murdered his brother for love of a gorgeous American woman named Maria Nuria Nussberg.

As far as I can tell, Alec never went with a woman again, or had dealings with women. It was as if that one experience had been so charged with meaning it had for ever changed something in his being.

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It was a blow to Alec — I too had my regrets — when Mother got papers and money through from La Paz. Suddenly we were preparing to return to the real world; Mother, advised by Porua, was bargaining for mules in the market. I was reluctant to leave, being in the midst of fabricating a sensational case in which a Soviet spy ring had been discovered in Israel and an old ex-Nazi had admitted that he had helped liaise in secret South African military strikes against the colony on Mars. A pretty grey-eyed woman was being held, pending enquiries.

When bidding farewell to Porua, I tried to extract from him some word of praise for my activities on behalf of his paper.

'You are no better than our readers,' he said, fixing me with a look it took me years to forget. 'You found an opportunity to lie and seized on it avidly. You

took pride in your lies. Do you consider that warrants praise?’

We made our way past the strongholds of the revolutionary armies to Antofagasta on the coast. At the sight of the Pacific Ocean, Alec was overwhelmed. Tears burst from his eyes when we were leaving South American soil and stepping aboard the cargo ship that would deliver us in Panama. The tears fell like raindrops on the deck, and he would not speak.

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Within a year, Alec, with his share of Father’s money, had bought himself this small island of Uskair, off Barra in the Outer Hebrides. Perhaps he had already formed a notion of sailing alone round the world.

I lost touch with him. When I had finished with university, I qualified as an ecologist. In no time, I was established in the small world of the university as lecturer.

Someone once said to me, ‘Nature creates women, but society has to make its own men.’ I still think of Porua de Madariaga as a real man.

Alec became a real man. Somehow my father and I remained in boyhood, not developing, turning into big hairy ageing boys. So we were popular, and courted popularity, because we happened to be the sort of person society preferred, neotenic, for ever in the larval stage.

I married a big hairy freckled jolly girl called Ruth. We have three children, all girls. Ruth is Chairperson of the local Consumers’ Association.

Just the other month, I met my mother in Kensington High Street. I was going to walk by, but she grasped my sleeve.

‘Why do you hate me?’ she asked. ‘You and Alec?’ She does not get on well with Ruth. She was looking much older.

Alec never married. Instead, he sailed alone round the world.

He was twenty-five when he began the voyage. In his thirty-two-foot ketch, *Nuria*, he set out from the small harbour under the shoulder of his Hebridean island. He was gone from sight of man for eight months. He slipped away one dawn. Five islanders, the total population of Uskair, not counting his dogs, waved him on his way. It was Father’s ‘confronting the Unknown’ again.

Although we took little heed of his departure, Ruth and I watched Alec being interviewed on TV when he returned.

‘I was fortunate in my choice of boat, and my equipment gave me little trouble. All the electronic tackle performed without hitch. You just need to want to sail on for ever ... No, not for the notoriety, for the experience, for one’s own sake. I reckoned that I needed to chance everything on a — well, it’s a bit like roulette, when you feel an inexplicable urge to stake everything on one number . . . Yes, of course I was scared occasionally. It doesn’t matter. Some of those waves at the bottom of the world - I mean you can tell by the look of them they have come from the beginnings of time and will roll right over you and go on rolling for ever. Afterwards ... I suppose I have told myself I must be a lunatic. But after all, other men have done it. Captain Slocum did it at the end of the nineteenth century.’

He looked modest when he said all this. It was the irritating Alec I remembered as a boy, perched twig-high in a tree.

‘The best thing about it? You escape the twenty-first century. The Southern Ocean is absolutely apart from man — I mean in time as well as space. The seas are high and grand and you’re in the rushing air all day, surrounded by stars at night, and the whole universe might be yours. You share it with dolphins and whales and albatrosses and the lonely satellite orbiting overhead. Oh, when you’re down there, everything is worth it, everything . . .

‘Sure, yes, it’s good to come home. One of the most moving things of the whole voyage was when I saw Uskair loom out of the mist. In all the previous months, I had rarely seen land, never wanted to. But there was my island, Uskair. And as I changed tack, the harbour came into view round the headland, with the hill rising behind it, where pines grow in a sheltered spot, and then I could make out the white walls of my house through the binoculars. I was sure my dogs would be waiting for me. That was a great moment.

‘No, I shall never do it again. Not twice. That would be tempting providence ...’

With his manly modesty, my brother became something of a hero. He came to my university, lectured, and met Ruth and the girls. He seemed uncomfortable with us. Later, after Mother died, we heard he was looking for a sponsor and planning another solitary voyage.

It was on that second voyage he encountered the Odonata.

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Alec's autobiographical book, *Far from Land*, was published before he sailed. In view of what was to come, one passage is particularly striking:

In the Southern Ocean, in that great reverberating blue-green world I shared with nature, I became intensely aware of the way in which men and women have trapped themselves within cities. Cities re-create in concrete the restrictions humanity has imposed on its spirit. The land had been left behind. The world chokes with people, living and dead. On Mars, the colonists are repeating the errors of Earth. We pollute our globe on an increasingly massive scale because something has died in us.

Our civilization has become a cage in which we choose to imprison ourselves. In that great clean ceaseless world towards the Antarctic, all this became clear to me. I saw then that we shall die, wish ourselves into extinction, unless we find a new course. I would have been content then to die myself, rather than take my body back eventually to encumber the continents with yet another corpse.

In *Nuria II*, Alec sailed back to that distinct world of high oceans. He was again his own master. I suppose few of us have imagination enough to project ourselves into his place. I am convinced that a special kind of solitary mind is required to endure such a voyage.

He was on latitude fifty-six, somewhere to the south of Heard Island, when he sighted wreckage on the water ahead. Something like a fin protruded from the water. Alec took it at first for a whale. Nearer, he thought it might be the tailplane of an aircraft, possibly Australian. A figure clung to it.

The wreckage was sinking gradually. The *Nuria II* made slow headway. The figure waved. Alec waved back.

Evidently the wreckage was becoming unstable. The figure suddenly jumped into the water. As it did so, Alec saw that it appeared deformed. He said later that the body was curiously broad, rather like a turtle's. There the resemblance to a turtle ended, for, after one or two splashes, the figure disappeared below the waves.

When Alec reached the spot, the wreckage lay waterlogged below the

surface, sinking slowly deeper. He saw lettering on it he could not make out, although he had the presence of mind to record the scene on a video. Of the figure there was no sign. Drifting nearby, however, was a sort of transparent inflatable dinghy, low in the water, resembling a cocoon. Alec pulled it in with a boathook, and got it on deck with some difficulty.

Peering through the transparent cover, he saw what appeared to be bundles of bandages. He believed it was a kind of first-aid package from a life-raft which had failed to inflate. After tying it to the mizzen-mast, he did not investigate further.

This indifference on Alec's part has been the subject of comment. My belief is that my brother wanted no intrusion from the outer world. It disturbed his peace of mind. His wish was to be alone in the deserts of ocean, as others crave the solitude of deserts of sand.

He had taught himself to sleep in brief snatches. He thought he heard noises in the night but did not bother to look. At dawn, he found that the transparent covering had split and thirty white insects had emerged on deck, each the size of a rabbit.

His impulse was to kick the creatures into the sea. Their very oddity deterred him from doing so. To discover a new species would be a wonderful thing. He continued with his tour of inspection, in which every knot, cleat and screw came in for daily scrutiny.

With the sun shining on them, the insects became more active, and climbed the mainmast. My brother observed them, and captured them on video. Their bodies are carried on ten multi-segmented legs. Their heads have a horizontal split which gives the appearance of a visor. Within the split, vari-coloured eyes can be seen. The creatures might pass for terrestrial were it not for the thick twisted cable-like sensors which connect head and tail and run on either side of the body, lending a machine-like appearance.

Clustered at the top of the mast, the insects became immobile. Alec lost interest. The wind was freshening and he took in the mizzen-sail. When he next looked, great winged things were circling his boat. The backs of the insects were splitting, and new forms emerging from the husks — the adult forms we know as Odonata. The larval stages remained clinging to the mast, to blow away in the next gale.

The adults are beautiful and metallic. Shimmering moiré tints in fugitive

pink, blue and green suffuse their wings, while their bodies appear clad in abalone and mother of pearl. Their wingspan exceeds that of an albatross. Although they metamorphose like terrestrial insects, they have a lung-bladder which sucks in air or extracts oxygen from liquid. Along their flanks are arrays of proprioceptors which in part act like external arteries. These Odonata may never have been on Earth before, but they circled the *Nuria II* in an assured way and then set off northwards towards Australia with leisurely beats of their wings.

Glistening wing colours could still be seen after the insects themselves had faded into the blue.

Alec monitored a variety of radio signals, but rarely responded himself. However, he did consider this event important enough to send a report to an Australian station on Lord Howe Island.

Nothing more was seen of the Odonata for a couple of years. In that time, they adapted to the new environment, established themselves, and bred. In saying this, I subscribe to the generally held view that the creatures are of extraterrestrial origin. The notion that they were mutated terrestrial insects does not bear inspection. We may never be certain, but it seems most likely that the Odonata were part of a cargo in a trans-stellar vessel which crashed on Earth by accident. If it had not been for my brother, the Odonata would have drowned, just as the turtle-shaped biped drowned.

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After two years, Odonata sightings in Australia began to mount, to be met by incredulity from the rest of the world. Next, sightings were reported in the Philippines and Singapore and Malaysia. The first living specimen was caught in a suburb of Sydney, where it was perched under a hedge, devouring the carcass of a dead dog.

At this early stage in the Odonata's existence on Earth, such incidents led people to believe that Odonata killed dogs, other animals, and even humans. Scare stories abounded. In consequence, the creatures were exterminated whenever possible.

Still they spread. In the following year, they were sighted in India, spreading rapidly north. They were sighted in China, where those who attempted to eat them reported them to be tasteless or unpleasant. Within eighteen months, the Odonata appeared in Africa, southern Europe and in South America. At this time, serious attempts were made to eradicate 'the new plague', as a phrase of the

period went. The attempts failed, and soon the whole world was confronting the unknown.

Photographs of Odonata were to be seen everywhere. They were regarded as both beautiful and terrifying. Already, their arrival stirred fresh religious beliefs. In some quarters, they were regarded as being sent by God to destroy man.

A more scientific approach to the problem was forthcoming. As clouds of the invaders reached Texas, a UN factfinding commission reported that the Odonata (it now became their official name) lived for only seven months in their adult winged phase. In that time, they fed exclusively on carrion; specimens kept in captivity refused to sample any living thing.

Almost concurrently, a report came from Bombay that the Odonata had been observed all over India, feeding on the corpses of Parsis. The burial customs of the Parsi sect involve dead bodies being exposed on a grating at the top of a Tower of Silence. All that is mortal of the body, except the skeleton, is devoured by vultures and the ubiquitous kitehawks of India, after which the bones of the departed fall through the grating into the tower below. Word even came out of Tibet that the Odonata had been assisting at sky-burials, where corpses are left in sacred mountainous places for the attention of scavenger birds.

Before the Odonata invasion, the morbidly repressed cultures of Europe and the United States were unable to face death, or to discuss the subject with the same openness of the inhabitants of India and the East. But the ever-mounting numbers of their dead were, in fact, a subject for concern. Millions of people had a horror both of burial and of cremation. Europe, in particular, was filling with old graveyards. The immense graveyard in Queens, New York, was famed as a particularly depressing city of the dead.

Almost spontaneously, people began to dispose of corpses via the Odonata. Some say the idea originated in Greece or Turkey as a tourist stunt. Others speak of a Spanish grandee who offered up the corpse of his lovely young wife in this way, hoping in his grief that her elements might be dispersed about the air. Yet others say that the poor countries of Africa put out their corpses to be devoured — by creatures regarded with superstitious awe—as the least burdensome method of disposal. Yet others accused bankrupt nations of Eastern Europe of adopting ‘Odonata funerals’ as a way in which the state could economize on electricity and wood.

All these developments certainly happened within a few months of each other. Once fear of the glittering new flying things was lost, they became

worshipped. They were clean creatures which did not excrete during their lifetime. They did not ruin crops or attack living things. They would not enter buildings. When they died, their carcasses were not corrupt, and contained useful minerals in small but quantifiable amounts. In the air, they introduced an element of beauty and grace.

It was inevitable that new religions should develop round them. As the Odonata became generally revered, so the tall towers grew up round the world's cities. Cities vied with each other to build more beautiful towers. None was built higher than six hundred metres, for the Odonata were low fliers. To the top of Odonatist towers the dead of all nations were taken, to be exposed to the four winds — and to the Odonata. As the habits of death changed, so did the habits of life.

Since then, a curious peace has descended on the world. No major wars have been waged, and few minor ones. Just as the dead might be said to take readily to flight, so the living found their spirits lifted. An unsuspected shadow had faded and gone.

Alec died suddenly in his sleep one night. His hair was white, as my daughters reported when they went to view the body before it was given to the Odonata.

Now he is known as The Man Who Changed the World, and there are statues to him everywhere. No one remembers he had a younger brother. But Ruth and I have inherited Uskair, and that's worth something.