

THE COMING OF VERTUMNUS

By Ian Watson

One of the most brilliant innovators to enter SF in many years, Ian Watson writes fiction that is typified by its vivid and highly original conceptualization. He sold his first story in 1969, and attracted widespread critical attention in 1971 with his first novel, *The Embedding*. His novel *The Jonah Kit* won the British Science Fiction Award and the British Science Fiction Association Award in 1976 and 1977, respectively. Watson's other books include *Alien Embassy*, *Miracle Visitors*, *The Martian Inca*, *Under Heaven's Bridge* (coauthored with Michael Bishop), *Chekhov's Journey*, *Deathhunter*, *The Gardens of Delight*, *Queenmagic*, *Kingmagic*, *The Book of the River*, *The Book of the Stars*, and *The Book of Being*, the collections *The Very Slow Time Machine*, *Sunstroke*, *slow Birds*, and *Evil Water*. As editor, his books include the anthologies *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Changes* (coedited with Michael Bishop), and *Afterlives* (coedited with Pamela Sargent). His most recent books are the collection *Stalin's Teardrops* and the novel *The Flies of Memory*. He has had stories in our First and Fifth Annual Collections. Watson lives with his wife and daughter in a small village in Northhamptonshire, England.

In the complex, suspenseful, and deliciously paranoid novella that follows, Watson demonstrates, with typical ingenuity and inventiveness, that the best conspiracies are those that go *way* back . . .

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Do you know the *Portrait of Jacopo Strada*, which Titian painted in 1567 or so?

Bathed in golden light, this painting shows us a rich connoisseur displaying a nude female statuette which is perhaps eighteen inches high. Oh yes, full-bearded Signor Strada is prosperous—in his black velvet doublet, his cerise satin shirt, and his ermine cloak. He holds that voluptuous little Venus well away from an unseen spectator. He gazes at that spectator almost shiftily. Strada is exposing his Venus to view, yet he's also withholding her proprietorially so as to whet the appetite.

With her feet supported on his open right hand, and her back resting across his left palm, the sculpted woman likewise leans away as if in complicity with Strada. How carefully his fingers wrap around her. One finger eclipses a breast. Another teases her neck. Not that her charms aren't on display. *Her* hands are held high, brushing her shoulders. Her big-navelled belly and mons veneris are on full show. A slight crossing of her knees hints at a helpless, lascivious reticence.

She arouses the desire to acquire and to handle her, a yearning that is at once

an artistic and an erotic passion. Almost, she seems to be a homunculus—a tiny woman bred within an alchemist’s vessel by the likes of a Paracel-sus, who had died only some twenty-five years previously.

I chose this portrait of Jacopo Strada as the cover for my book, *Aesthetic Concupiscence*. My first chapter was devoted to an analysis of the implications of this particular painting . . .

Jacopo Strada was an antiquary who spent many years in the employ of the Habsburg court, first at Vienna and then at Prague, as Keeper of Antiquities. He procured and catalogued gems and coins as well as classical statuary.

Coins were important to the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperors, because coins bore the portraits of monarchs. A collection of coins was a visible genealogy of God-anointed rulers. Back on Christmas Day in the year 800 the Pope had crowned Charlemagne as the first “Emperor of the Romans.” The Church had decided it no longer quite had the clout to run Europe politically as well as spiritually. This imperial concoction—at times heroic, at other times hiccupping along—lasted until 1806. That was when the last Holy Roman Emperor, Francis II, abdicated without successor so as to thwart Napoleon from grabbing the title. By then, as they say, the Emperor presided over piecemeal acres which were neither an empire, not Roman, nor holy. Of course, effectively the Habsburg dynasty had hijacked the title of Emperor, which was supposed to be elective.

History has tended to view the Habsburg court of Rudolph II at Prague in the late 1570s and 80s as wonky, wacky, and weird: an excellent watering hole for any passing nut-cases, such as alchemists, hermetic occultists, or astrologers—who of course, back then, were regarded as “scientists.” Not that true science wasn’t well represented, too. Revered astronomer Tycho Brahe burst his bladder with fatal result at Rudolph’s court, due to that Emperor’s eccentric insistence that no one might be excused from table till his Caesarian Majesty had finished revelling.

Botanists were very busy classifying plants there, and naturalists were taxonomizing exotic wildlife (of which many specimens graced Rudolph’s zoo)—just as Strada himself tried to impose order and methodology upon ancient Venuses.

Strada resigned and quit Prague in 1579, perhaps in irritation that his aesthetic criteria held less sway over Rudolph than those of another adviser on the Imperial art collection—namely *Giuseppe Archimboldo*...

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My troubles began when I received a phone call at Central St. Martin’s School of Art in Charing Cross Road, where I lectured part-time in History of the Same. The caller was one John Lascelles. He introduced himself as the UK personal assistant to

Thomas Rumbold Wright. Oil magnate and art collector, no less. Lascelles's voice had a youthfully engaging, though slightly prissy timbre.

Was I the Jill Donaldson who had written *Aesthetic Concupiscence*? I who had featured scintillatingly on *Art Debate at Eight* on Channel 4 TV? Mr Wright would very much like to meet me. He had a proposition to make. Might a car be sent for me, to whisk me the eighty-odd miles from London to the North Cotswolds?

What sort of proposition?

Across my mind there flashed a bizarre image of myself as a diminutive Venus sprawling in this oil billionaire's acquisitive, satin-shirted arms. For of course in my book I had cleverly put the stiletto-tipped boot into all such as he, who contributed to the obscene lunacy of art prices.

Maybe Thomas Rumbold Wright was seeking a peculiar form of recompense for my ego-puncturing stiletto stabs, since he—capricious bachelor—was certainly mentioned once in my book . . .

“What sort of proposition?”

“I've no idea,” said Lascelles, boyishly protesting innocence.

I waited. However, Lascelles was very good at silences, whereas I am not.

“Surely you must have *some* idea, Mr. Lascelles?”

“Mr Wright will tell you, Ms. Donaldson.”

Why not? Why not indeed? I had always revelled in paradoxes, and it must be quite paradoxical—not to mention constituting a delicious piece of fieldwork—for Jill Donaldson to accept an invitation from Thomas R. Wright, lavish of untold millions upon old canvases.

One of my prime paradoxes—in my “Stratagems of Deceit” chapter—involved a comparison between the consumption of sensual fine art, and of visual Pornography. I perpetrated an iconography of the latter based upon interviews I conducted with “glamour” photographers on the job. No, I *didn't* see it as my mission to deconstruct male-oriented sexism. Not a bit of it. That would be banal. I came to praise porn, not to bury it. Those sumptuous nudes in oils of yore were the buoyant, respectable porn of their day. What we needed nowadays, I enthused—tongue in cheek, several tongues in cheek indeed—were issues of *Penthouse* magazine entirely painted by latterday Masters, with tits by the Titians of today, vulvas by Veronese, pubes by populist Poussins . . . Ha!

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I was buying a little flat in upper Bloomsbury, with the assistance of Big Brother Robert who was a bank manager in Oxford. Plump sanctimonious Bob regarded this scrap of property as a good investment. Indeed, but for his support, I could hardly have coped. Crowded with books and prints, on which I squandered too much, Chez Donaldson was already distinctly cramped. I *could* hold a party in it—so long as I only invited a dozen people and we spilled on to the landing.

Even amidst slump and eco-puritanism, London property prices still bore a passing resemblance to Impressionist price-tags. Perhaps eco-puritanism actually *sustained* high prices, since it seemed that one ought to be penalized for wishing to live fairly centrally in a city, contributing to the sewage burden and resources and power demand of megalopolis, and whatnot.

Well, we were definitely into an era of radical repressiveness. The Eco bandwagon was rolling. Was one's lifestyle environmentally friendly, third-world friendly, future friendly? The no-smoking, no-car, no-red-meat, no-frilly-knickers, sackcloth-and-ashes straitjacket was tightening; and while I might have seemed to be on that side ethically as regards the conspicuous squandering of megamillions on paintings, I simply did not buy the package. Perhaps the fact that I smoked cigarettes—oh penalized sin!—accounted in part for my antipathy to the Goody-Goodies. Hence my naughtiness in exalting (tongues in cheek) such a symptom of unreconstructed consciousness as porn. Paradox, paradox. I did like to *provoke*.

How many lovers had such a tearaway as myself had by the age of thirty-one? Just three, in fact; one of them another woman, a painting student.

Peter, Annie, and Phil. No one at the moment. I wasn't exactly outrageous in private life.

Peter had been the prankster, the mercurial one. For his "God of the Deep" exhibition he wired fish skeletons into the contours of bizarre Gothic cathedrals, which he displayed in tanks of water. Goldfish were the congregations—was this art, or a joke? Several less savoury anarchistic exploits finally disenchanting me with Peter—about the time I decided definitively that I really was an art historian and a critic (though of capricious spirit).

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Sending a Mercedes, with darkened windows, to collect me could have wiped out my street cred. Personally, I regarded this *as a Happening*.

Mind you, I did experience a twinge of doubt—along the lines that maybe I ought to phone someone (Phil? Annie? Definitely not Peter. . .) to confide where I was being taken, just in case "something *happens* to me . . ." I didn't do so, yet the

spice of supposed danger added a certain frisson.

When my doorbell rang, the radio was bemoaning the death of coral reefs, blanched leprous by the extinction of the symbiotic algae in them. This was sad, of course, *tragic*; yet I didn't intend to scourge myself personally, as the participants in the programme seemed to feel was appropriate.

The driver proved to be a Dutchman called Kees, pronounced Case, who “did things” for Rumbly—as he referred to Thomas Rumbold Wright. Athletic-looking and bearded, courteous and affable, Case wore jeans, Reeboks, and an open-necked checked shirt. No uniform or peaked cap for this driver, who opened the front door of the Merc so that I should sit next to him companionably, not behind in splendid isolation. Case radiated the easy negligence of a cultured bodyguard-if-need-be. I was dressed in similar informal style, being determined not to doll myself up in awe for the grand encounter—though I refused to wear trainers with designer names on them.

Although Wright maintained a corporate headquarters in Texas, he personally favoured his European bastion, Bexford Hall. This had recently been extended by the addition of a mini-mock-Tudor castle wing to house his art in even higher security. The *Sunday Times* colour supplement had featured photos of this jail of art. (Did it come complete with a dungeon, I wondered?)

The mid-June weather was chilly and blustery—either typical British summer caprice or a Greenhouse spasm, depending on your ideology.

As we were heading out towards the motorway, we soon passed one of those hoardings featuring a giant poster of Archimboldo's portrait of Rudolph II as an assembly of fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Ripe pear nose; flushed round cheeks of peach and apple; cherry and mulberry eyes; spiky chestnut husk of a chin; corn-ear brows, and so on, and so on.

The Emperor Rudolph as Vertumnus, Roman god of fruit trees, of growth and transformation. Who cared about that particular snippet of art historical info? Across the portrait's chest splashed the Eco message, *WE ARE ALL PART OF NATURE*. This was part of that massive and highly successful Green propaganda campaign exploiting Archimboldo's “nature-heads”—a campaign which absolutely caught the eye in the most persuasive style.

These posters had been adorning Europe and America and wherever else for the best part of two years now. Indeed, they'd become such a radiant emblem of eco-consciousness, such a part of the mental landscape, that I doubted they would *ever* disappear from our streets. People even wore minia-tures as badges—as though true humanity involved becoming a garlanded bundle of fruit and veg, with a cauliflower brain, perhaps.

Case slowed and stared at that hoarding.

“Rudolph the red-nosed,” I commented.

Somewhat to my surprise, Case replied, “Ah, and Rudolph loved Archim-boldo’s jokes so much that he made him into a Count! Sense of humour’s sadly missing these days, don’t you think?”

My driver must have been boning up on his art history. The Green poster campaign was certainly accompanied by no background info about the artist whose images they were ripping off—or perhaps one ought to say “recuperat-ing” for the present day . . . rather as an ad agency might exploit the Mona Lisa to promote tampons. (*Why is she smiling . . . ?*)

“Those paintings weren’t *just* jokes,” I demurred.

“No, and neither are those posters.” Case seemed to loathe those, as though he would like to tear them all down. He speeded up, and soon we reached the motorway.

Under the driving mirror—where idiots used to hang woolly dice, and where nowadays people often hung plastic apples or pears, either sincerely or else in an attempt to immunize their vehicles against ecovandals—there dangled a little model ... of a rather complex-looking space station. The model was made of silver, or was at least silver-plated. It swung to and fro as we drove. At times, when I glanced that way, I confused rear-view mirror with model so that it appeared as if a gleaming futuristic craft was pursuing us up the M40, banking and yawing behind us.

Down where my left hand rested I found power-controls for the passenger seat. So I raised the leather throne—yes indeed, I was sitting on a dead animal’s hide, and no wonder the windows were semi-opaque from outside. I lowered the seat and reclined it. I extruded and recessed the lumbar support. Now that I’d discovered this box of tricks, I just couldn’t settle on the most restful position for myself. Supposing the seat had been inflexible, there’d have been no problem. Excessive tech, perhaps? I felt fidgety.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” I asked Case.

“Rumby smokes in this car,” was his answer, which didn’t quite confide his own personal feelings, unless the implication was that these were largely irrelevant amongst Wright’s entourage.

Case ignored the 60-mile-an-hour fuel-efficiency speed limit, though he drove very safely in this cushioned tank of a car. He always kept an eye open well ahead and well behind as if conscious of possible interception, by a police patrol, or—who knows?—by Green vigilante kidnappers.

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Bexford Hall was in the triangle between Stow-on-the-Wold, Broadway, and Winchcombe, set in a wooded river valley cutting through the rolling, breezy, sheep-grazed uplands.

The house was invisible from the leafy side road, being masked by the high, wire-tipped stone boundary wall in good repair, and then by trees. Case opened wrought iron gates electronically from the car—apparently the head gardener and family lived in the high-pitched gatehouse alongside—and we purred up a winding drive.

Lawns with topiary hedges fronted the mullion-windowed house. Built of soft golden limestone around a courtyard, Chez Wright somewhat resembled a civilian castle even before his addition of the bastioned, bastard-architectural art wing. A helicopter stood on a concrete apron. A Porsche, a Jaguar, and various lesser beasts were parked in a row on gravel. A satellite dish graced the rear slate-tiled roof, from which Tudor chimneys rose.

The sun blinked through, though clouds still scudded.

And so—catching a glimpse en route of several people at computer con-soles, scrutinizing what were probably oil prices—we passed through to John Lascelles' office, where the casual piles of glossy art books mainly caught my eye.

Having delivered me, Case left to “do things” . . .

Lascelles was tall, willowy, and melancholy. He favoured dark mauve corduroy trousers and a multipocketed purple shirt loaded with many Pens, not to mention a clip-on walkie-talkie. On account of the ecclesiastical hues I imagined him as a sort of secular court chaplain to Wright. His smile was a pursed, wistful affair, though there was that boyish lilt to his voice which had misled me on the phone. His silences were the truer self.

He poured coffee for me from a percolator; then he radioed news of my arrival. It seemed that people communicated by personal radio in the house. In reply he received a crackly splutter of Texan which I hardly caught.

Lascelles sat and scrutinized me while I drank and smoked a cigarette; on his littered desk I'd noted an ashtray with a cheroot stub crushed in it.

Lascelles steeped his hands. He was cataloguing me: a new person collected—at least potentially—by his non-royal master, as he himself must once have been collected.

Woman. Thirty-one. Mesomorphic build; though not exactly chunky. Small high breasts. Tight curly brown hair cropped quite short. Violet vampiric lipstick. Passably callipygian ass.

Then in bustled *Rumby*—as I simply had to think of the man thereafter.

Rumby was a roly-poly fellow attired in crumpled bronze slacks and a floppy buff shirt with lots of pockets for pens, calculator, radio. He wore scruffy trainers, though I didn't suppose that he jogged around his estate. His white complexion said otherwise. His face was quizzically owl-like, with large spectacles—frames of mottled amber—magnifying his eyes into brown orbs; and his thinning feathery hair was rebellious.

He beamed, almost tangibly projecting *energy*. He pressed my flesh quickly. He drew me along in his slipstream from Lascelles' office down a walnut-panelled corridor. We entered a marble-floored domed hall which housed gleaming spotlit models. Some in perspex cases, others hanging. Not models of oil-rigs, oh no. Models of a Moon base, of spacecraft, of space stations.

Was Rumby a little boy at heart? Was this his den? Did he play with these toys?

“What do you think about space?” he asked me.

Mischief urged me to be contrary, yet I told him the truth.

“Personally,” I assured him, “I think that if we cop out of space now, as looks highly likely, then we'll be locked up here on Mother Earth for ever after eating a diet of beans and being repressively good with ‘Keep off the Grass’ signs everywhere. Oh dear, we mustn't mess up Mars by going there the way we messed up Earth! Mess up Mars, for Christ's sake? It's *dead* to start with—a desert of rust. I think if we can grab all those clean resources and free energy in space, we'd be crazy to hide in our shell instead. But there's neopuritanism for you.”

Rumby rubbed his hands. “And if Green propaganda loses us our launch window of the next fifty years or so, then we've lost forever because we'll have spent all our spunk. I knew you'd be *simpatico*, Jill. I've read *Aesthetic Concubines* twice.”

“*Concupiscence*, actually,” I reminded him.

“Let's call it *Concubines*. That's easier to say.”

Already my life and mind were being mutated by Rumby . . .

“So how did you extrapolate my views on space from a book on the art

market?" I asked.

He tapped his brow. "I picked up on your anti-repressive streak and the perverse way you think. Am I right?"

"Didn't you regard my book as a bit, well, rude?"

"I don't intend to take things personally when the future of the human race is at stake. It is, you know. It is. Green pressures are going to nix everyone's space budget. Do you know they're pressing to limit the number of rocket launches to a measly dozen per year *World-Wide* because of the exhaust gases? And all those would have to be Earth-Resources-relevant. Loony-tune environ-*mentalists!* There's a *religious* fervour spreading like clap in a cathouse. It's screwing the world's brains." How colourfully he phrased things. Was he trying to throw me off balance? Maybe he was oblivious to other people's opinions. I gazed blandly at him.

"Jill," he confided, "I'm part of a pro-space pressure group of industrialists called The Star Club. We've commissioned surveys. Do you know, in one recent poll forty-five per cent of those questioned said that they'd happily give up quote all the benefits of 'science' if they could live in a more natural world without radioactivity? Can you believe such scuzzbrains? We *know* how fast this Eco gangrene is spreading. How do we disinfect it? Do we use rational scientific argument? You might as well reason with a hippo in heat."

"Actually, I don't see how this involves me . . ."

"*We'll* need to use some tricks. So, come and view the Wright Collection."

* * * *

He took me through a security-coded steel door into his climate-controlled sanctum of masterpieces.

Room after room. Rubens. Goya. Titian. And other lesser luminaries. . .

. . . till we came to the door of an inner sanctum.

I half expected to find the Mona Lisa herself within. But no ...

On an easel sat...a totally pornographic, piscine portrait. A figure made of many fishes (along with a few crustaceans).

A female figure.

A spread-legged naked woman, red lobster dildo clutched in one octopus-hand, frigging herself. A slippery, slithery, lubricous Venus composed of

eels and catfish and trout and a score of other species. Prawn labia, with legs and feelers as pubic hair . . . The long suckery fingers of her other octopus-hand teased a pearl nipple . . .

The painting just had to be by Archimboldo. It was very clever and, mm, persuasive. It also oozed lust and perversity.

“So how do you like her?” asked Rumby.

“That lobster’s rather a nippy notion,” I said.

“It isn’t a lobster,” he corrected me. “It’s a cooked freshwater crayfish.”

“She’s, well, fairly destabilizing if you happen to drool over all those ‘We are part of Nature’ posters.”

“Right! And Archimboldo painted a *dozen* such porn portraits for private consumption by crazy Emperor Rudolph.”

“He *did*?” This was astonishing news.

“I’ve laid hands on them all, though they aren’t all here.”

Rumby directed me to a table where a portfolio lay. Opening this, I turned over a dozen large glossy colour reproductions—of masturbating men made of mushrooms and autumnal fruits, men with large hairy nuts and spurting seed; of licking lesbian ladies composed of marrows and lettuce leaves . . .

“You researched all the background bio on Strada, Jill. Nobody knows what sort of things our friend Archy might have been painting between 1576 and 1587 before he went back home to Milan, hmm?”

“I thought he was busy arranging festivals for Rudolph. Masques and tournaments and processions.”

“That isn’t *all* he was arranging. Rudy was fairly nutty.”

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s quite fair to Rudolph ...”

“What, to keep a chained lion in the hall? To sleep in a different bed every night? His mania for exotica! Esoterica! Erotica! A pushover for any passing magician. Bizarre foibles. Loopy as King Ludo of Bavaria—yet with *real power*. The power to indulge himself—secretly—in orgies and weird erotica, there in vast Ratzen Castle in Prague.”

I wondered about the provenance of these hitherto unknown paintings.

To which, Rumby gave a very plausible answer.

When the Swedes under the command of von Wrangel sacked Prague in 1648 as their contribution to the Thirty Years' War, they pillaged the imperial collections. Thus a sheaf of Archimboldos ended up in Skoklosters Castle at Balsta in Sweden.

“Skoklosters *Slott*. Kind of evocative name, huh?”

When Queen Christina converted to Catholicism in 1654 and abdicated the Swedish throne, she took many of those looted art treasures with her to Rome itself—with the exception of so-called *German* art, which she despised. In her eyes, Archimboldo was part of German art.

However, in the view of her catechist (who was a subtle priest), those locked-away *porn* paintings were a different kettle of fish. The Vatican should take charge of those and keep them *sub rosa*. Painters were never fingered by the Inquisition, unlike authors of the written word. Bonfires of merely lewd material were never an issue in an era when clerics often liked a fuck. Nevertheless, such paintings might serve as a handy blackmail tool against Habsburg Emperors who felt tempted to act too leniently towards Protestants in their domains. A blot on the Habsburg scutcheon, suggesting a strain of lunacy.

The cardinal-diplomat to whom the paintings were consigned deposited them for safe keeping in the crypt at a certain enclosed Convent of his patronage. There, as it happened, they remained until discovered by a private collector in the 1890s. By then the convent had fallen on hard times. Our collector relieved the holy mothers of the embarrassing secret heritage in return for a substantial donation . . .

“It’s a watertight story,” concluded Rumby, blinking owlishly at me. “Of course it’s also a complete lie ...”

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The dirty dozen Archimboldos were forgeries perpetrated in Holland within the past couple of years, to Rumby’s specifications, by a would-be surrealist.

I stared at the fishy masturbatress, fascinated.

“They’re fine forgeries,” he enthused. “Painted on antique oak board precisely eleven millimetres thick. Two base layers of white lead, chalk, and charcoal slack . . .” He expatiated with the enthusiasm of a petrochemist conducting an assay of crude. The accuracy of the lipid and protein components. The pigments consisting of azurite, yellow lead, malachite . . . Mr Oil seemed to know rather a lot about such aspects of oil painting.

He waved his hand impatiently. “Point is, it’ll stand up under X-ray, infrared, most sorts of analysis. This is perfectionist forgery with serious money behind it. Oh yes, sponsored exhibition in Europe, book, prints, postcards, media scandal. . . ! These naughty Archies are going to fuck all those Green Fascists in the eyeballs. Here’s their patron saint with his pants down. Here’s what red-nosed Rudy really got off on. Nobody’ll be able to gaze dewy-eyed at those posters any more, drooling about the sanctity of nature. *This* is nature—red in dildo and labia. A fish-fuck. Their big image campaign will blow up in their faces—ludicrously, obscenely. Can you beat the power of an image? Why yes, you *can*—with an anti-image! We’ll have done some-thing really positive to save the space budget. You’ll write the intro to the art book, Jenny, in your inimitable style. Scholarly—but provocative.”

“I will?”

“Yes, because I’ll pay you three quarters of a million dollars.”

A flea-bite to Rumby, really . . .

The budget for this whole escapade was probably ten times that. Or more. Would that represent the output of one single oil well for a year? A month . . . ? I really had no idea.

Aside from our crusade for space, smearing egg conspicuously on the face of the ecofreaks might materially assist Rumby’s daily business and prove to be a sound investment, since he profited so handsomely by pumping out the planet’s non-renewable resources.

“*And* because you want to sock Green Fascism, Jill. And on account of how this is so splendidly, provocatively perverse.”

Was he right, or was he right?

He was certainly different from the kind of man I’d expected to meet.

Obviously I mustn’t spill the beans in the near future. *Consequently* the bulk of my fee would be held on deposit in my name in a Zurich bank, but would only become accessible to me five years after publication of *Archimboldo Erotico* . . .

Until then I would need to lead roughly the same life as usual—plus the need to defend my latest opus amongst my peers and on TV and in magazines and wherever else. Rumby—or Chaplain Lascelles—would certainly strive to ensure a media circus, if none such burgeoned of its own accord. I would be Rumby’s front woman.

I liked the *three quarters* of a million aspect. This showed that Rumby had

subtlety. One million would have been a blatant bribe.

I also liked Rumby himself.

I had indeed been collected.

And that 750K (as Brother Bob would count it) wasn't by any means the only consideration. *I approved.*

As to my fallback position, should the scheme be—ahem—rumbled . . . well, pranks question mundane reality in a revolutionary manner, don't they just?

That was a line from Peter, which I half believed—though not enough to stage a diversion in the National Gallery by stripping my blouse off, as he had wished, while Peter glued a distempery canine turd to Gainsborough's painting, *White Dogs*, so as to question "conventions." I'd balked at *that* proposed escapade of Peter's ten years previously.

This was a political prank—a blow against an insidious, powerful kind of repression; almost, even, a blow for art.

Thus, my defence.

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I took a copy of the erotic portfolio back with me to Bloomsbury to gaze at for a few days; and to keep safely locked up when I wasn't looking at it. Just as well that Phil wasn't involved in my immediate life these days, though we still saw each other casually. I'm sure Phil's antennae would have twitched if he had still been sleeping with a strangely furtive me. Being art critic for the *Sunday Times* had seemed to imbue him with the passions of an investigative journalist. Just as soon as *Archimboldo Erotico* burst upon the scene, no doubt he would be in touch ... I would need to tell lies to a former lover and ensure that "in touch" remained a phrase without physical substance. Already I could envision his injured, acquisitive expression as he rebuked me for not leaking this great art scoop to him personally. ("But why not, Jill? Didn't we share a great deal? I must say I think it's damned queer that you didn't breathe a word about this! Very *peculiar*, in fact. It makes me positively *suspicious* . . . This isn't some kind of *revenge* on your part, is it? But why, *why?*")

And what would Annie think? She was painting in Cornwall in a women's artistic commune, and her last letter had been friendly ... If I hadn't offended her with my porn paradoxes, then attaching my name to a glossy volume of fish-frigs and spurting phallic mushrooms oughtn't to make too much difference, unless she had become radically repressive of late . . .

In other words, I was wondering to what extent this escapade would cause a hindwards reconstruction of my own life on account of the duplicity in which I'd be engaging.

And what about the *future*—in five years time—when I passed Go and became three quarters of a dollar millionairess? What would I *do* with all that money? Decamp to Italy? Quit the London grime and buy a farmhouse near Florence?

In the meantime I wouldn't be able to confide the truth to any intimate friend. I wouldn't be able to afford intimacy. I might become some pursed-smile equivalent of Chaplain Lascelles, though on a longer leash.

Maybe Rumby had accurately calculated that he was getting a bargain.

To be sure, the shape of my immediate future all somewhat depended on the impact of the book, the exhibition, the extent of the hoo-ha . . . person-ally, I'd give the book as much impact as I could. After all, I did like to provoke.

* * * *

I returned to Bexford House a week later, to stay two nights and to sort through Rumby's stock of material about Archimboldo, Rudolph, and the Prague Court. I have a good reading knowledge of German, French, and Italian, though I'm not conversationally fluent in those tongues. Any book I needed to take away with me was photocopied in its entirety by Lascelles on a high-speed, auto-page-turning machine. Pop in a book—within five minutes out popped its twin, collated and bound. The machine cost twenty thousand dollars.

A week after that, Case drove me to the docklands airport for a rather lux commuter flight with him to Amsterdam, where I examined all the other Archimboldo "originals"; although I didn't meet the forger himself, nor did I even learn his name. The paintings were stored in three locations: in the apartment of Rumby's chosen printer, Wim Van Ewyck, in that of the gallery owner who would host the show, Geert de Lugt, and in a locked room of the Galerij Bosch itself. In the event of premature catastrophe, the entire corpus of controversial work (minus the fishy masturbatress at Bexford House) wouldn't be wiped out en masse.

Presumably the printer didn't need to be in on the conspiracy. What about the gallery owner? Maybe; maybe not . . . *This*, as Case impressed on me, was a subject which shouldn't even be alluded to—nor did Mijneer de Lugt so much as hint.

The other eleven Archimboldos were even more stunning at full size in the frame than in colour reproduction. And also more . . . appalling?

I returned to Bloomsbury to write twenty large pages of introduction. Less would have been skimpy; more would have been excessive. Since I was being

fastidiously attentive to every nuance of the text, the writing took me almost three weeks, with five or six drafts. (“Put some feeling into it,” Rumby had counselled. “Smear some vaginal jelly on the words.”)

The task done, I phoned Bexford Hall. Case drove the Merc to London the same evening to courier the pages personally. Next day, Rumby phoned to pronounce himself quite delighted. He only suggested a few micro-changes. We were rolling. Our exhibition would open in the Galerij Bosch on the first of September, coinciding with publication of the book.

And of course I must attend the private showing on the last day of August—the vernissage, as it were. (I did hope the varnish was totally dry!)

While in Amsterdam, our party—consisting of Rumby and Case and Lascelles and myself—the Grand Hotel Krasnopolsky because that hotel boasted a Japanese restaurant, and Rumby was a bit of a pig for raw fish. I wasn’t complaining.

We arrived a day early in case Rumby had any last-minute thoughts about the layout of the show, or Case about its security aspects. So the morning of the thirty-first saw us at the Galerij Bosch, which fronted a tree-lined canal not far from where dozens of antique shops clustered on the route to the big art museums.

The high neck gable of the building, ornamented with two bounteous sculpted classical maidens amidst cascades of fruits and vegetables—shades of Archimboldo, indeed!—incorporated a hoisting beam, though I doubted that any crated paintings had entered the loft of the gallery by that particular route for a long time. Venetian blinds were currently blanking the three adjacent ground-floor windows—the uprights and transoms of which were backed by discreet steel bars, as Case pointed out; and already Mijnheer de Lugt, a tall blond man with a bulbous nose, had three muscular fellows lounging about in the large, spot-lit exhibition room. One in a demure blue security uniform—he was golden-skinned and moon-faced, obviously of Indonesian ancestry. The other chunky Germanic types wore light suits and trainers.

A high pile of copies of *Archimboldo Erotico* stood in one corner for presentation that evening to the guests: the media people, museum directors, cultural mandarins and mavericks. Particularly the media people.

And my heart quailed.

Despite all the gloss, mightn’t someone promptly *denounce* this exhibition? We were in liberal Holland, where the obscenity in itself would not offend. Yet wouldn’t someone cry “Hoax!”?

Worse, mightn’t some inspired avant-garde type perhaps enthusiastically

applaud this exhibition as an ambitious jape?

De Lugt seemed a tad apprehensive beneath a suave exterior. He blew that snuzzle of his a number of times without obvious reason, as though determined to be squeaky-clean.

“Ms. Donaldson, would you sign a copy of the book for me as a souvenir?” he asked. When I had obliged, he scrutinized my signature as if the scrawly autograph might be a forgery.

Maybe I was simply being paranoid. But I was damn glad of this dry run amongst the exhibits.

Case conferred with the security trio quietly in Dutch. They smiled; they nodded.

* * * *

The wet run that evening—lubricated by champagne to celebrate the resurrection of long-lost works of a bizarre master, and contemporary of Rabelais—went off quite as well as could be expected.

A young red-haired woman in a severe black cocktail dress walked out along with her escort in shock and rage. She had been wearing an Archimboldo eco-badge as her only form of jewellery, with the word *Ark* printed upon it.

A fat bluff bearded fellow in a dinner jacket, with an enormous spotted cravat instead of bow tie, got drunk and began guffawing. Tears streamed down his hairy cheeks till Case discretely persuaded him to step outside for an airing.

Rumby was bombarded by questions, to which he would grin and reply, “It’s all in the book. Take a copy!” One of the great art finds, yes. Casts quite a new light on Archimboldo, that emotionally complex man.

So why had Mr. Wright sprung this surprise on the art world by way of a private gallery? Rather than lending these paintings to some major public museum?

“Ah now, do you really suppose your big museum would have leapt at the chance of showing such *controversial* material, Ladies and Gentlemen? Some big city museum with its reputation to think about? Of course, I’ll be perfectly delighted to loan this collection out in future ...”

I was quizzed too. Me, in my new purple velvet couturier pant-suit.

Geert De Lugt smiled and nodded approvingly, confidently. Naturally Rumby would have paid him handsomely for use of his gallery, yet I was becoming

convinced that Mijnheer De Lugt himself was innocent of the deception. He had merely had stage nerves earlier.

* * * *

We stayed in Amsterdam for another five days. Press and media duly obliged with publicity, and I appeared on Dutch and German TV, both with Rumby and without him. So many people flocked to the Galerij Bosch that our Security boys had to limit admittance to thirty people at any one time, while a couple of tolerant police hung about outside. Our book sold like hot cakes to the visitors; and by now it was in the bookshops too. (“At this rate,” joked Rumby, “we’ll be making a fucking *profit*.”)

During spare hours, I wandered round town with Case. Rumby mainly stayed in his suite at the Krasnopolsky in phone and fax contact with Bexford and Texas, munching sushi. I nursed a fancy that Chaplain Lascelles might perhaps lugubriously be visiting the Red Light District to let his hair and his pants down, but he certainly wasn’t getting high on any dope. Me, I preferred the flea-market on Waterlooplein, where I picked up a black lace shawl and a slightly frayed Khasmiri rug for the flat back in Bloomsbury.

I noticed a certain item of graffiti on numerous walls: *Onze Wereld is onze Ark*.

“Our world is our Ark,” translated Case.

Sometimes there was only the word *Ark* on its own writ even larger in spray-paint. I couldn’t but recall the badge worn by that pissed-off woman at the party in the gallery. Pissed-off? No ... *mortally offended*. Obviously, *Ark* was a passionate, punning, mispronounced allusion to ... who else but Emperor Rudolph’s court jester?

When I mentioned this graffiti to Rumby, he almost growled with glee.

“Ha! So what do you do in this fucking *ark* of theirs? You hide, anchored by gravity—till you’ve squandered all your major resources, then you can’t get to anyplace else. Sucks to arks.”

* * * *

We all few back to England on the Sunday. At seven a.m. on the Monday the phone bullied me awake.

Lascelles was calling.

Late on the Sunday night, a van had mounted the pavement outside Galerij Bosch. The driver grabbed a waiting motorbike and sped off. Almost at once the

van exploded devastatingly, demolishing the whole frontage of the building. As well as explosives, there'd been a hell of a lot of jellied petrol and phosphorus in that van. Fireworks, indeed! The gallery was engulfed in flames. So were part of the street and a couple of trees. Even the canal caught fire, and a nearby houseboat blazed, though the occupants had been called away by some ruse. The two security guards who were in the gallery on night shift died.

And of course all the Archimboldos had been burnt, though that seemed a minor aspect to me right then . . .

Case was coming pronto to pick me up. Rumby wanted us to talk face to face before the media swarmed.

Two hours later. I was at Bexford Hall.

Rumby, Lascelles, Case, and I met together in a book-lined upstairs study, furnished with buff leather armchairs upon a russet Persian carpet. The single large window, composed of stone mullions, seemed somewhat at odds with the Italianate plasterwork ceiling which featured scrolls and roses, with cher-ubs and putti supporting the boss of an electrified chandelier. Maybe Rumby had bought this ceiling in from some other house because it was the right size, and he liked it. The room smelled of cheroots, and soon of my Marlboro too.

“Let’s dismiss the financial side right away,” commenced Rumby. “The paintings weren’t insured. So I’m not obliged to make any kind of claim. Hell, do I need to? The book will be the only record—and your fee stays secure, Jill. Now, is it to our disadvantage that the paintings themselves no longer exist? Might someone hint that *we* ourselves arranged the torching of the gallery before independent art experts could stick their fingers in the pie? I think two tragic deaths say no to that. Those poor guys had no chance. T. Rumbold Wright isn’t known for assassinations. So, ghastly as this is, it could be to our advantage—especially if it smears the ecofreaks, the covenanters of the Ark.”

What a slur on the ecofreaks that they might destroy newly discovered masterpieces of art for ideological reasons in a desperate effort to keep the artist pure for exploitation by themselves. When people saw any Archimboldo badge or poster now, they might think, *Ho-ho* ... I was thinking about the two dead guards.

Lascelles had been liaising with Holland.

“The Dutch police are puzzled,” he summarized. “Is this an outburst of art-terrorism? A few years ago some people revived a group called the SKG—so-called ‘City Art Guerillas’ who caused street and gallery trouble. They never killed anyone. Even if the couple on that houseboat were kept out of harm’s way to make the attackers seem more benign, De Lugt’s two guards were just slaughtered . . .

“Then what about these Ark people? The loony fringe of the Dutch Eco movement *have* gone in for destructive industrial sabotage—but again, they haven’t caused any deaths. This is more like the work of the German Red Column, though it seems they haven’t operated in Holland recently. Why do so now? And why hit the gallery?”

“To hurt a noted Capitalist, in the only way they could think of?” asked Rumby. “No, I don’t buy that. It’s got to be the Ecofreaks.”

“The ecology movement is very respectable in Holland.”

Rumby grinned wolfishly. “Mightn’t be, soon.”

“Ecology is government policy there.”

How much more newsworthy the destruction made those naughty paint-ings! How convenient that they were now beyond the reach of sceptical specialists.

“I don’t suppose,” said I, “one of your *allies* in the Star Club might conceivably have arranged this attack?”

Drop a ton of lead into a pond.

“Future of the human race,” I added weakly. “Big motivation.”

Rumby wrestled a cheroot from his coat of many pockets and lit it. “You can forget that idea. Let’s consider *safety*. Your safety, Jill.”

I suppose he couldn’t avoid making this sound like a threat, however benevolently intentioned—or making it seem as if he wished to keep my free spirit incommunicado during the crisis . . .

“Someone has bombed and murdered ruthlessly,” said Rumby. “*I’m* safe here.”

“Yes, you are,” Case assured him.

“But you, Jill, you live in some little scumbag flat in any old street in London. I’d like to invite you to stay here at Bexford for a week or two until things clarify.”

“Actually, I can’t,” I told him, with silly stubbornness. “I have a couple of lectures to give at St. Martin’s on Thursday.”

“Screw them. Cancel them.”

“And it isn’t exactly a scumbag fat.”

“Sorry—you know what I mean.”

“At least until there’s a communiqué,” Lascelles suggested to me. “Then we’ll know what we’re dealing with. It’s only sensible.”

“Don’t be *proud*,” said Rumby. He puffed. The cherubs above collected a tiny little bit more nicotine on their innocent hands. “Please.”

And some more nicotine from me too.

“You don’t need to feed some goddam *cat*, do you?” asked Rumby.

“No ...” In fact I loathed cats—selfish, treacherous creatures—but Rumby probably wouldn’t have cared one way or the other.

In the event, I stayed at Bexford. Until Wednesday afternoon. No news emerged from Holland of any communiqué.

Could the attackers not have *known* about those two guards inside the gallery? So now they were ashamed, and politically reluctant, to claim credit?

Unlikely. You don’t assemble a vanload of explosives and napalm and phosphorus, make sure there’s a getaway motorbike waiting, and bail out the occupants of a nearby houseboat, without checking everything else about the target too.

Lascelles was stonewalling queries from the media. (“Mr. Wright is shocked. He grieves at the two deaths. He has no other comment at present . . .”) Stubbornly, I insisted on being driven back to Bloomsbury.

* * * *

My little flat had been burgled. My CD player and my TV were missing. Entry was by way of the fire escape door, which had been smashed off its none too sturdy hinges. Otherwise, there wasn’t much damage or mess.

I hadn’t wished Case to escort me upstairs; thus he had already driven away. Of course I *could* have reached him on the Merc’s car phone. Yet this was so ordinary a burglary that I simply phoned the police. Then I thumbed the Yellow Pages for an emergency repair service which was willing to turn up within the next six hours.

The constable who visited me presently was a West Indian. A couple of other nearby flats had also been broken into the day before for electrical goods, so he

said. Was I aware of this? He seemed to be pitching his questions towards eliciting whether I might perhaps have robbed myself so as to claim insurance.

“Fairly *neat* break-in, Miss, all things considered.”

“Except for the door.”

“You’re lucky. Some people find excrement spread all over their homes.”

“Did that happen in the other flats that were burgled?”

“Not on this occasion. So you reported this just as soon as you came back from—?”

“From the Cotswolds.”

“Nice part of the country, I hear. Were you there long?”

“Three days.”

“Visiting friends?”

“My employer.” Now why did I have to say *that*?

Blurt, blurt.

“Oh, so you live here, but your boss is in the Cotswolds?”

“He isn’t exactly my boss. He was consulting me.”

The constable raised his eyebrow suggestively.

Obviously he believed in keeping the suspect off balance.

“You do have a lot of expensive books here, Miss,” was his next tack.

Yes, rows of glossy art books. Why hadn’t those been stolen—apart from the fact that they weighed a ton?

“I don’t suppose the burglars were interested in art,” I suggested.

He pulled out a *Botticelli*, with library markings on the spine, from the shelf.

“This is from a college library,” he observed.

“I teach there. I lecture about art.”

“I thought you said you were a *consultant*...”

By the time he left, I was half-convinced that I had burgled myself, that I habitually thieved from libraries, and that I was a call-girl who had been supplying sexual favours to Mr. X out in the country. Would these suspicions be entered in the police computer? Did I have the energy to do anything about this? No, it was all so...tentative. Did I want to seem paranoid?

Bert the Builder finally turned up and fixed the door for a hundred and thirteen pounds . . . which of course the insurance would be covering. Otherwise the job would have cost just sixty, cash.

I did manage to look over my lecture notes—on Titian and Veronese. I microwaved a madras beef curry with pilau rice; and went to bed, fed up.

The phone rang.

It was Phil. He'd been calling my number for days.

These weird long-lost Archimboldos! Why hadn't I told him anything? And the terrorist attack! What had happened? Could he come round?

“Sorry, Phil, but I've just had my CD and TV nicked. And the helpful visiting constable thinks I'm a hooker.”

I was glad of the excuse of the burglary.

* * * *

Towards mid-morning my phone started ringing, and a couple of Press sleuths turned up in person, pursuing the art bombing story; but I stonewalled, and escaped in the direction of St. Martin's where, fortunately, no reporters lurked.

At four in the afternoon I stepped out from the factory-like frontage of the art school into a Charing Cross Road aswarm with tourists. Beneath a grey overcast the fummy air was warm. A sallow Middle Eastern youth in checked shirt and jeans promptly handed me a leaflet advertising some English Lan-guage Academy.

“I already speak English,” I informed the tout. He frowned momentarily as if he didn't understand. No points to the Academy.

“Then you learn *cheaper*,” he suggested, pursuing me along the pavement.

“Do not bother that lady,” interrupted a tall blond young man dressed in a lightweight off-white jacket and slacks.

“No, it’s all right,” I assured my would-be protector.

“It is not all right. Any trash is on our streets. They are not safe.”

He waved, and a taxi pulled up almost immediately. The young man opened the door, plunged his hand inside his jacket, and showed me a small pistol hidden in his palm. Was he some urban vigilante crusader pledged to rescue damsels from offensive encounters? I just didn’t understand what was happening.

“Get in quickly,” he said, “or I will shoot you dead.”

Help, I mouthed at the Arab, or whatever.

In vain.

I did as Prince Charming suggested. Did *anyone* notice me being abducted? Or only see a handsome young man hand me enthusiastically into that taxi?

The driver didn’t look round.

“Keep quiet,” said the young man. “Put these glasses on.” He handed me glasses black as night equipped with side-blinkers, such as someone with a rare hypersensitive eye ailment might wear. Only, these were utterly dark; I couldn’t see a thing through them.

* * * *

We drove for what seemed like half an hour. Eventually we drew up—and waited, perhaps so that passers-by might have time to Pass on by—before my abductor assisted me from the cab. Quickly he guided me arm in arm up some steps. A door closed behind us. Traffic noise grew mute.

We mounted a broad flight of stairs, and entered an echoing room—where I was pressured into a straight-backed armchair. Immediately one hand pressed under my nose, and another on my jaw, to force my mouth open.

“Drink!”

Liquid poured down my throat—some sweet concoction masking a bitter undertaste. I gagged and spluttered but had no choice except to swallow.

What had I drunk? What had I drunk?

“I need to see the eyes,” said a sombre, if somewhat slobbery voice. “The truth is in the eyes.” The accent was Germanic.

A hand removed my glasses.

I found myself in a drawing room with a dusty varnished floor and double oak doors. A small chandelier of dull lustres shone. Thick blue brocade curtains cloaked tall windows, which in any event appeared to be shuttered. A dustsheet covered what I took to be a baby grand piano. An oblong of less faded rose-and-lily wallpaper, over a marble fireplace, showed where some painting had hung.

On a chaise lounge sat a slim elegant grizzle-haired man of perhaps sixty kitted out in a well-tailored grey suit. A walking cane was pressed between his knees. His hands opened and closed slowly to reveal the chased silver handle. A second middle-aged man stood near him: stouter, bald, wearing a long purple velvet robe with fur trimmings which at first I thought was some exotic dressing gown. This man's face was jowly and pouchy. He looked like Goering on a bad day. His eyes were eerie: bulgy, yet bright as if he was on cocaine.

My abductor had stationed himself directly behind me.

On a walnut table lay a copy of *Archimboldo Erotico*, open at my introduction.

Shit.

"My apologies," said the seated gent, "for the manner of your coming here, Miss Donaldson." He gestured at the book. "But you owe me a profound apology—and restitution. Your libels must be corrected."

The fellow in the robe moved closer, to stare at me. His fingers wiggled.

"What libels?" I asked, rather deeply scared. These people had to be nutters, possessed by some zany fanatical motive. Well-heeled, well-groomed nutters were maybe the really dangerous sort. *What had I drunk? A slow poison? Would I soon be begging for the antidote?*

"Libels against a certain Holy Roman Emperor, Miss Donaldson. Thus, libels against the Habsburg dynasty . . . which may yet be the salvation of Europe, and of the world. Very *untimely* libels." The gent raised his cane and slashed it to and fro as if decapitating daisies. "I am sure you will see reason to denounce your fabrications publicly ..."

"What fabrications?"

He stood up smoothly and brought his cane down savagely upon my book, though his expression remained suave and polite. I jerked, imagining that cane striking me instead.

“These! These obscenities were never painted by Rudolph’s court artist!”

“But,” I murmured, “the looting of Prague...Skoklosters Castle...Queen Christina’s chaplain...”

He sighed. “Lies. All lies. And I do not quite know why. Let us discuss art and history, Miss Donaldson.”

“She is deceitful,” said the fellow in the robe, always peering at me. “She has a guilty conscience.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “The local mind-reader?”

The stout man smiled unctuously.

“Herr Voss is my occultist,” explained the gent.

“Oculist? You mean, optician?”

“My *occultist!* My pansophist. The holder of the keys to the Unknown. And my name happens to be Heinrich von Habsburg, Miss Donaldson ...”

“Oh . . . ,” I said.

“I shall not burden your brain with genealogy, except to say that I am the living heir to the Holy Roman throne.”

Genealogy indeed. “I thought,” said I, “that your Roman throne couldn’t be inherited by virtue of blood—”

He cut me short. “You misunderstand divine right. What the Electors bestowed wasn’t rightly theirs, but God’s, to give. God finally vested this title in the Habsburg family. Let us discuss *art* instead. And *sacred history*.”

This, His Royal Heinrich proceeded to do, while the keeper of the keys contemplated me and my guard hovered behind me.

* * * *

Rudolph and his father Maximilian before him had been astute, benevolent rulers, who aimed to heal discord in Christian Europe by uniting it under Habsburg rule. They lived noble and honourable lives, as did Count Giu-seppe Archimboldo. His supposed fantasias possessed a precise political and metaphysical significance in the context of the Holy Roman throne. The aesthetic harmony of natural elements in the *Vertumnus* and in the other portrait heads bespoke the harmony which would bless

Europe under the beneficent leadership of the House of Austria . . .

Jawohl, I thought.

Ever-present, like the elements themselves, the Habsburgs would rule both microcosm and macrocosm—both the political world, and nature too. Archimboldo's cycle of the seasons, depicted as Habsburg heads wrought of Wintry, Vernal, Summery, and Autumnal ingredients, confided that Habsburg rule would extend eternally through time in one everlasting season. Under the secular and spiritual guidance of those descendants of Hercules, the House of Habsburg, the Golden Age would return to a united Europe.

Right on.

In due course of time, this happy culmination had almost come to pass. The "Great King," as predicted, nay, propagandized by Nostradamus, loomed on the horizon.

When the Habsburgs united with the House of Lorraine, and when Marie Antoinette became Queen of France, the House of Habsburg-Lorraine was within a generation of dominion over Europe—had the French Revolution not intervened.

What a pity.

Throughout the nineteenth century the House attempted to regroup. However, the upheavals attending the end of the First World War toppled the Habsburgs from power, ushering in chaos . . .

Shame.

Now all Europe was revived and reuniting, and its citizens were ever more aware that the microcosm of Man and the macrocosm of Nature were a unity.

Yet lacking, as yet, a *head*.

A Holy Roman Imperial head.

Early restoration of the monarchy in Hungary was one possible ace card, though other cards were also tucked up the imperial sleeve . . .

Archimboldo's symbolic portraits were holy ikons of this golden dream, especially in view of their ecoinjection into the European psyche. Those paintings were programming the people with a subconscious expectation, a hope, a longing, a secret sense of destiny, which a restored Habsburg Holy Roman Empire would fulfill.

“Now do you see why your obscenities are such a libelous blasphemy, Miss Donaldson?”

Good God.

“Do you mean to tell me that *you’re* behind the Archimboldo eco-campaign?” I asked His Imperial Heinrich.

“The power of symbols,” remarked Voss, “is very great. Symbols are my speciality.”

Apparently they weren’t going to tell me whether they simply hoped to exploit an existing, serendipitous media campaign—or whether some loyal Habsburg mole had actively persuaded the ecofreaks to plaster what were effectively Habsburg heads—in fruit and veg, and flowers and leaves—all over Europe and America.

“You broke into my flat,” I accused the man behind me. “Looking for some dirt that doesn’t exist because the erotic paintings are genuine!”

Blondie slapped me sharply across the head.

“Martin! You know that is unnecessary!” H. von H. held up his hand prohibitively—for the moment, at least.

“You broke my door down,” I muttered over my shoulder, thinking myself reprieved, “and you stole my CD and TV just to make the thing look plausible. I bet you burgled those other flats in the neighbourhood too as a deception.”

Martin, on his *own*? Surely not . . . There must have been others involved. The taxi driver . . . and whoever else . . .

“Actually, we broke your door *after* the burglary,” boasted Martin. “we *entered* with more circumspection.”

Voss smiled in a predatory fashion. “With secret keys, as it were.”

Others. Others . . .

They had blown up the Galerij Bosch! They had burned those two guards to death . . .

I shrank.

“I see that the magnitude of this is beginning to dawn on your butterfly mind,” said the Habsburg. “A united Europe must be saved from *pollution*. Ecological pollution, of course—a Holy Roman Emperor is as a force of nature. But moral

pollution too.”

“How about racial?” I queried.

“I’m an aristocrat, not a barbarian,” remarked Heinrich. “The Nazis were contemptible. Yet plainly we cannot have Moslems—Turkish *heathens*—involved in the affairs of Holy Europe. We cannot have those who besieged our Vienna in 1683 succeeding now by the back door.”

Oh, the grievances of centuries long past. . . Rumby and his science Star Club suddenly seemed like such Johnnies-Come-Lately indeed.

Science . . . versus imperial *magic* . . . with ecomysticism in the mid-dle ...

“I just can’t believe you’re employing a frigging *magician* to gain the throne of Europe!”

“*Language*, Miss Donaldson!” snapped the Habsburg. “You are corrupt.”

Voss smoothed his robe as though I had mussed it.

“You’re a creature of your time, Miss Donaldson,” said H. von H. “Whereas I am a creation of the centuries.”

“Would that be *The Centuries of Nostradamus*?” Yes, that was the title of that volume of astrological rigmarole.

“I mustn’t forget that you’re educated, by the lights of today. Tell me, what do you suppose the *Centuries* of the title refer to?”

“Well, years. A long time, the future.”

“Quite wrong. There simply happen to be a hundred quatrains—verses of four lines—in each section. You’re only half educated. And thus you blun-der. How much did your American art collector pay you for writing that introduction?”

Obviously Rumby would have paid me *something* ... I wouldn’t have written those pages for nothing . . .

“Three thousand dollars,” I improvised.

“That doesn’t sound very much, considering the evil intent. Is Mr Wright being hoaxed *too*?”

Again, he slammed the cane on to my book.

An astonishing flash of agony seared across my back. I squealed and twisted round—but Martin was holding no cane.

He was holding nothing at all. With a grin, Martin displayed his empty paws for me. Voss giggled, and when I looked at him he winked.

It was as though that open volume was some voodoo doll of myself which the Habsburg had just chastised.

The Habsburg lashed at my words again, and I cried out, for the sudden pain was intense—yet I knew there would be no mark on me.

Voss licked his lips. “Symbolic resonances, Miss Donaldson. The power of symbolic actions.”

What drug had been in that liquid I swallowed? I didn’t *feel* disoriented—save for nerves and dread—yet I must be in some very strange state of mind to account for my suggestibility to pain.

“We can continue thus for a while, Miss Donaldson.” Heinrich raised his cane again.

“Wait.”

Was three quarters of a million dollars enough to compensate for being given the third degree right now by crazy, ruthless *murderers*—who could torture me symbolically, but effectively?

I experienced an absurd vision of myself attempting to tell the West Indian detective-constable that actually my flat had been broken into by agents of a Holy Roman Emperor who hoped to take over Europe—and that I was seeking police protection because the Habsburgs could hurt me agonizingly by whipping my words . . .

Was I mad, or was I mad?

The room seemed luminous, glowing with an inner light. Every detail of furniture or drapery was intensely *actual*. I thought that my sense of reality had never been stronger.

“Okay,” I admitted, “the paintings were all forgeries. They were done in Holland, but I honestly don’t know who by. I never met him. I never learned his name. Rumby—Mr. Wright—hates the ecology lobby because they hate space exploration, and he thinks that’s our only hope. I have a friend at the *Sunday Times*. I’ll tell him everything—about how the paintings were a prank. They’ll love to print that! Wright will have egg on his face.”

“What a treacherous modern creature you are,” the Habsburg said with casual contempt; and I squirmed with shame and fear.

“Just watch for next weekend’s paper,” I promised.

“At this moment,” said Voss, “she believes she is going to do what she says—and of course she knows that our Martin can find her. If she breaks her word ...”

He peered.

“Ah: she’s relieved that *you* cannot reach her from a distance with the whipping cane.

“And she wonders whether Martin would really kill her, and thus lose us her testimony...”

No, he *wasn’t* reading my mind. He wasn’t! He was reading my face, my muscles. He could do so because everything was so real.

More peering.

“She feels a paradoxical affection for her friend . . . *Rumby*. Solidarity, as well as greed. Yes, a definite loyalty.” If only I hadn’t called him Rumby. If only I’d just called him Wright. It was all in the words. Voss wasn’t reading my actual thoughts.

“So therefore,” H. von H. said to Voss, “she must be retrained in her loyalties.”

What did he mean? What did he mean?

“She must be conditioned by potent symbols, Voss.”

“Just so, Excellency.”

“Thus she will not wish to betray us. Enlighten her, Voss. Show her the real depth of history, from where we come. Your juice will be deep in her now.”

Numbness crept over me, as Voss loomed closer. The sheer pressure of his approach was paralyzing me.

“Wait,” I managed to squeak.

“Wait?” echoed H. von H. “Oh, I have waited long enough already. My family has waited long enough. Through the French Revolution, through the Communist

intermezzo . . . The Holy Roman Empire *will* revive at this present cusp of history—for it has always remained in being, at least as a state of mind. And *mind* is what matters, Miss Donaldson—as Rudolph knew, contrary to your pornographic lies! Ah yes, my ancestor avidly sought the symbolic key to the ideal world. Practitioners of the symbolic, hermetic arts visited him in Prague Castle—though he lacked the loyal services of a Voss ...”

The Habsburg slid his cane under the dustsheet of the piano, and whisked the cloth off. Seating himself on the stool, he threw open the lid of the baby grand with a crash. His slim, manicured fingers started to play plangent, mournful Debussyish chords in which I could almost feel myself begin to drown.

Voss crooned to me—or sang—in some dialect of German . . . and I couldn’t move a muscle. Surely I was shrinking—or else the drawing room was expanding. Or both. Voss was becoming vast.

I was a little child again—yet not a child, but rather a miniature of myself. When I was on the brink of puberty, lying in bed just prior to drifting off to sleep, this same distortion of the senses used to happen to me.

The music lamented.

And Voss crooned my lullaby.

* * * *

A bearded man in black velvet and cerise satin held my nude paralyzed body in his hands. He held the *whole* of me in his hands—for I was tiny now, the height of his forearm.

Draped over his shoulders was a lavish ermine cloak.

I was stiff, unmoving.

He placed me in a niche, ran his fingertip down my belly, and traced the cleft between my thighs.

He stepped back.

Then he left.

I was in a great gloomy vaulted chamber housing massive cupboards and strongboxes. The slit windows in the thick stone wall were grated so as to deter any slim catburglars. Stacked several deep around a broad shelf, and likewise below, were mythological and Biblical oil paintings: Tintoretos, Titians, by the look of them . . . Neither the lighting nor the decor were at all in the spirit of any latter-day

museum. Here was art as treasure—well and truly locked up.

Days and nights passed.

Weeks of static solitude until I was going crazy. I would have welcomed any change whatever, any newcomer. My thoughts looped around a circuit of Strada, death in Amsterdam, Habsburgs, with the latter assuming ever more significance—and necessity—with each mental swing.

Eventually the door opened, and in walked a figure who made the room shine. For his face and hair were made of a hundred springtime flowers, his collar of white daisies, and his clothes of a hundred lush leaves.

He stood and gazed at me through floral eyes, and with his rosebud lips he smiled faintly.

He simply went away.

A season passed, appalling in its sheer duration. I saw daisies like stars before my eyes, in an unending afterimage.

Then in walked glowing Summer. His eyes were ripe cherries. His teeth were little peas. Plums and berries tangled in his harvest-hair; and his garment was of woven straw.

And he too smiled, and went away in turn.

And another season passed . . .

. . . till rubicund Autumn made his appearance. He was a more elderly fellow with an oaten beard, a fat pear of a nose, mushroom ears, clusters of grapes instead of locks of hair. His chin was a pomegranate. He wore an overripe burst fig as an earring. He winked lecherously, and departed even as I tried to cry out to him through rigid lips, to stay.

For next came Winter, old and gnarled, scabbed and scarred, his nose a stump of rotted branch, his skin of fissured bark, his lips of jutting bracket-fungus.

Winter stayed for a longer grumbly time, though he no more reached to touch me than had his predecessors. His departure—the apparent end of this cycle of seasons—plunged me into despair. I was as cold as marble.

Until one day the door opened yet again, and golden light bathed my prison chamber.

Vertumnus himself advanced—the fruitful God, his cheeks of ripe apple and

peach, head crowned with fruit and grain, his chest a mighty pumpkin. His cherry and blackberry eyes glinted.

Rudolph!

He reached for me. Oh to be embraced by him! To be warmed.

He lifted my paralyzed naked body from its dusty niche.

* * * *

The crash which propelled me back into the drawing room might almost have been caused by his dropping me and letting me shatter.

For a moment I thought that this was indeed so.

Yet it was my trance which had been shattered.

A policeman was in the room. An armed policeman, crouching. He panned his gun around. Plainly I was the only other person present.

The crash must have been that of those double oak doors flying open as he burst in.

Footsteps thumped, elsewhere in the house.

Voices called.

“Empty!”

“Empty!”

Several other officers spilled into the room.

“You all right, Miss?”

I could move my limbs—which were clothed exactly as earlier on, in jeans and maroon paisley sweater. I wasn’t tiny and naked, after all. I stared around. No sign of von Habsburg or Voss or Martin.

“You all right, Miss? Do you understand me?”

I nodded slowly. I still felt feeble.

“She was just sitting here all on her own,” commented the officer, putting his pistol away. “So what’s happening?” he demanded of me.

How did they know I was here?

“I was . . . forced into a taxi,” I said. “I was brought here, then given some drug.”

“What sort of drug? *Why?*”

“It made me . . . dream.”

“Who brought you here?”

“A man called Martin ...”

He’s the Habsburg Emperor’s hit-man . . . The drug was concocted by a magician . . .

How could I tell them such things? How could I explain about Rudolph Vertumnus . . . ? (And how could I *deny* Vertumnus, who had almost rekindled me . . . ?)

“They were trying to get me to deny things I wrote about the painter Archimboldo ..”

“About a *painter?*”

I tried to explain about the pictures, the bombing in Amsterdam, and how my flat had been burgled. My explanation slid away of its own accord—for the sake of sheer plausibility, and out of logical necessity!—from any Habsburg connexion, and into the ecofreak channel.

The officer frowned. “You’re suggesting that the Greens who bombed that gallery also kidnapped you? There’s no one here now.”

“They must have seen you coming and run away. I’m quite confused.”

“Hmm,” said the officer. “Come in, Sir,” he called.

In walked Phil: chunky, dapper Phil, velvet jacketed and suede-shoed, his rich glossy brown hair brushed back in elegant waves, as ever.

* * * *

It was Phil who had seen me pushed into the taxi; he who had noticed the gleam of gun from right across the street where he had been loitering with intent outside a bookshop, waiting for me to emerge from St. Martin’s so that he could bump into

me. He'd managed to grab another taxi and follow. He'd seen me hustled into that house in North London, wearing those black "goggles." It took about an hour for him to stir up the armed posse—an hour, during which four seasons had passed before my eyes.

The fact that Phil and I were long-term "friends" and that he turned out to be a "journalist"—of sorts—irked the police. The abduction—by persons unknown, to a vacant house, where I simply sat waiting patiently—began to seem distinctly stage-managed ... for the sake of publicity. Nor—given the Amsterdam connection—did my mention of drugs help matters. Calling out armed police was a serious matter.

We were both obliged to answer questions until late in the evening before we could leave the police station; and even then it seemed as if we ourselves might still be charged with some offence. However, those deaths in Amsterdam lent a greater credence to what I said. Maybe there was something serious behind this incident . . .

I, of course, was "confused." Thus, early on, I was given a blood test, about which the police made no further comment; there couldn't have been any evidence of hash or acid in my system.

I needed to stay "confused" until I could get to talk to Rumby.

Peeved Phil, of course, insisted on talking to me over late dinner in a pizzeria—we were both starving by then.

I lied quite a lot; and refrained from any mention of Habsburgs or the Star Club. The Archimboldo paintings had all been genuine. Rumby was an upfront person. Euro Ecofreaks must have bombed the gallery. Must have abducted me. Blondie Martin; elderly man, name unknown; stout man, name of Voss, who wore a strange costume. German speakers. Just the same as I'd told the police, five or six times over. The kidnapers had tried to persuade me to denounce what I had written because my words were an insult to Archimboldo, emblem of the Greens. They had drugged me into a stupor—from which I recovered with surprising swiftness. Rescue had come too soon for much else to transpire . . .

Phil and I were sharing a tuna, anchovy, and prawn ensemble on a crispy base, and drinking red wine.

"It's quite some story, Jill. Almost front-page stuff."

"I doubt it."

"The Eco connection! Bombing, abduction ... I'd like to run this by Freddy on the news desk."

“You’re an art critic, Phil—and so am I. I don’t want some cockeyed blather in the papers.”

“Jill,” he reproached me, “I’ve just spent *all evening* in a police station on account of you.”

“I’m grateful you did what you did, Phil. Let’s stop it there.”

“For Christ’s sake, you could still be in danger! Or...*aren’t you*, after all? Was this a publicity stunt? Was it staged by *Wright*? You’re in deep, but you want out now? Why would he stage such a stunt? If he did . . . what really happened in Amsterdam?”

Dear God, how his antennae were twitching. “No, no, no. It couldn’t be a stunt because the only witness to it was *you*, and that was quite by chance!”

“By chance,” he mused...as though maybe I might have spied him from an upper window in St. Martin’s and promptly phoned for a kidnapper.

“Look, Phil, I’m confused. I’m tired. I need *sleep*.”

Into the pizzeria stepped a stout, bald man wearing a dark blue suit. He flourished a silver-tipped walking stick. Goering on a night out. His bulgy eyes fixed on mine. He swished the stick, and I screamed with pain, jerking against the table, spilling both our wines.

“Jill!”

Phil managed to divert the red tide with his paper napkin at the same time as he reached out towards me. Other customers stared agog, and the manager hastened in our direction. Were we engaged in some vicious quarrel? Wine dripped on to the floor tiles.

Voss had vanished. I slumped back.

“Sorry,” I said to the manager. “I had a bad cramp.”

The manager waved a waiter to minister to the mess. Other diners resumed munching their pizzas.

“Whatever happened?” whispered Phil.

“A cramp. Just a cramp.”

Could one of those Habsburgers have trailed us to the police station and hung around outside for hours, keeping watch till we emerged?

Had I truly seen Voss, or only someone who resembled him? Someone whose appearance and whose action triggered that pain reflex? That agonizing hallucination . . .

* * * *

Phil took me back to the fat in a taxi. I had no choice but to let him come up with me—in case the place was infested.

It wasn't. Then it took half an hour to get rid of my friend, no matter how much tiredness I claimed. By the time I phoned Rumby's private number it was after eleven.

Him, I did start to tell about the Habsburgs.

He was brevity itself. "Say no more," my rich protector cut in. My *Rumby Daddy*. "Stay there. I'm sending Case *now*. He'll phone from the car just as soon as he's outside your place. Make quite sure you see it's him before you open your door."

I dozed off soundly in the Merc. When I arrived at Bexford, Rumby had waited up to quiz me and pump me—attended by Case, and a somewhat weary Lascelles.

I got to bed around four . . .

. . . leaving Rumby aiming to do some serious phoning. Had Big Daddy been breaking out the benzedrine? Not exactly. Rumby always enjoyed a few hours advantage over us local mortals. So as to stay more in synch with American time-zones he habitually rose very late of a morning. A night shift duo always manned the computer consoles and transatlantic satellite link. In that sense, Bexford never really closed down.

I'd already gathered that *crisis* was somewhat of a staff of life around Rumby—who seemed to cook up his own personal supply of benzedrine internally. During my previous two-day sojourn, there'd been the incident of the microlite aircraft. Thanks to a Cotswold Air Carnival, microlites were overflying Bexford at a few hundred feet now and then. Rumby took exception and had Lascelles trying to take out a legal injunction against the organizers. Simultaneously, there'd been the business of the starlings. Affronted by those microlite pterodactyls, and seeking a new air-base for their sorties, a horde of the quarrelsome birds took up residence on the satellite dish. Their weight or their shit might distort bits of information worth millions. What to do? After taking counsel from an avian welfare organization, Rumby despatched his helicopter to collect a heap of French *petard* firecrackers from Heathrow to string underneath the gutters. So my stay had been punctuated by

random explosive farts . . .

* * * *

I woke at noon, and Rumby joined me for breakfast in the big old kitchen—antiquity retrofitted with stainless steel and ceramic hobs. A large TV set was tuned to CNN, and an ecologist was inveighing about rocket exhausts and the ozone holes.

“Each single shuttle launch releases a hundred and sixty-three *thousand* kilograms of hydrogen chloride that converts into an atmospheric mist of hydrochloric acid! So now they’re kindly promising to change the oxidizer of the fuel—the ammonium perchlorate that produces this vast cloud of pollution—to ammonium *nitrate* instead—”

As soon as I finished my croissant, Rumby scuttled the cooks—a couple of local women—out to pick herbs and vegetables. He blinked at me a few times.

“Any more sightings of flowerpot men? or Habsburgs?” he enquired.

“That isn’t funny, Rumby. It happened.”

He nodded. “I’m afraid you’ve been given a ringbinder, fill.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve been talking to one of my best chemists over in Texas. Sally has a busy mind. Knows a lot about pharmaceutical.” He consulted scribbles in a notebook. “The ring in question’s a molecular structure called an indole ring . . . These rings *bind* to synapses in the brain. Hence, ring-binder. They’re psychotomimetic—they mimic psychoses. Your little pets will proba-bly stay in place a long time instead of breaking down. Seems there’s a lot of covert designer drug work going on right now, aimed at cooking up chemicals to manipulate people’s beliefs. Sally had heard rumours of one drug code-named *Confusion*—and another one called *Persuasion*, which seems to fit the bill here. It’s the only explanation for the hallucination—which came from within you, of course, once you were given the appropriate prod.”

“I do realize I was hallucinating the ... flowerpot men. You mean this can continue . . . indefinitely?”

“You flashed on for a full encore in that pizza parlour, right? Whiplash! Any fraught scenes in future involving old Archy could do the same. Media interviews, that sort of thing—if you disobey the Habsburg view of Archy. Though I guess you mustn’t spill the beans about them publicly.”

“They told me so. How did I get away with telling *you* last night?”

“They were interrupted before they’d finished influencing you.” He grinned. “I guess I might be high enough in the hierarchy of your loyalties to outrank their partial hold on you. Media or Press people wouldn’t be, so you’d be advised to follow the Habsburg party line with them. Maybe you could resist at a cost.”

“Of what?”

“Pain, inflicted by your own mind. Distortions of reality. That’s what Sally says. That’s the word on these new ring-binders. They bind you.”

The more I thought about this, the less I liked it.

“How many people know about these persuader drugs?” I asked him carefully.

“They haven’t exactly featured in *Newsweek*. I gather they’re a bit experi-mental. Sally has an ear for rumours. She’s part of my research division. Runs a search-team scanning the chemistry journals. Whatever catches the eye. Any tips of future icebergs. New petrochemical applications, mainly.” He spoke as if icebergs started out fully submerged, then gradually revealed themselves. “She helped dig up data on the correct paint chemistry for the Archies.”

How frank he was being.

Apparently. And how glib.

“So how would a Habsburg *magician* get his paws on prototype persuader drugs?” I demanded.

Rumby looked rueful. “Hell, maybe he *is* a magician! Alchemy precedes chemistry, don’t they say?”

“In the same sense that Icarus precedes a jumbo jet?”

One of the cooks returned bearing an obese marrow.

* * * *

Impulse took me to the kitchen garden, to brood on my own. The sun had finally burned through persistent haze to brighten the rows of cabbages, majestic cauliflowers, and artichokes, the rhubarb, the leeks. An ancient brick wall backed this domain, trusses of tomatoes ranged along it. Rooks cawed in the elms beyond, prancing about those raggedy sticknests that seemed like diseases of the branches.

Had the old gent whom I’d met really been Heinrich von Habsburg? A Holy Roman Emperor waiting in the wings to step on the world stage? Merely because he

told me so, in *persuasive* circumstances?

What if that trio in the drawing room had really been *ecofreaks* masquerading as Habsburgs, pulling the wool over my eyes, trying to bamboozle me into confession?

Did puritanical *ecofreaks* have the wit to stage such a show?

How much more likely that the Star Club, with its presumed access to cutting-edge psychochemistry—and a penchant for dirty tricks?—was responsible for the charade, and for my drugging!

Whether Rumby himself knew so, or not.

Wipe me out as a reliable witness to my own part in the prank? Eliminate me, by giving me an ongoing nervous breakdown?

Would that invalidate what I'd written?

Ah no. The slur would be upon ecologists . . .

And maybe, at the same time, *test* that persuader drug? Give it a field-trial on a highly suitable test subject, namely myself? The Club's subsequent aim might be try similar *persuasion* on influential *ecofreaks* to alter their opinions or to make them seem crazy . . .

In my case, of course, they wouldn't wish to turn me into an eco-groupie . . . Thus the Habsburg connection could have seemed like a fertile ploy.

Was there a genuine, elderly Heinrich von Habsburg somewhere in Germany or Austria? Oh, doubtless there would be ...

The vegetable garden began slithering, pulsing, throbbing. Ripe striped marrows thumped upon the ground, great green gonads. Tomatoes tumesced. Leeks were waxy white candles with green flames writhing high. Celery burst from earth, spraying feathery leaves. Sprouts jangled. Cauliflowers were naked brains.

The garden was trying to transform itself, to assemble itself into some giant sprawled potent body—of cauli brain, leek fingers, marrow organs, green leaf flesh . . .

I squealed and fled back towards the kitchen itself.

Then halted, like a hunted animal.

I couldn't go inside—where Rumby and Case and Lascelles plotted...the

downfall of Nature, the rape of the planets, the bleeding of oil from Earth's veins to burn into choking smoke.

Behind me, the vegetable jungle had stilled. Its metamorphosis had halted, reversed.

If I thought harmoniously, not perversely, I was safe.

Yet my mind was churning, and reality was unstuck.

In my perception one conspiracy overlaid another. One scheming plot, another scheming plot. Therefore one reality overlaid another reality with hideous persuasiveness. Where had I just been, but in a *vegetable plot*?

I couldn't go into that house, to which I had fled for safety only the night before. For from inside Bexford Hall invisible tendrils arched out across the sky, bouncing up and down out of space, linking Rumbly to star crusaders who were playing with my mind—and to whom he might be reporting my condition even now, guilefully or innocently.

On the screen of the sky I spied a future world of Confusion and Persuasion, where devoted fanatics manipulated moods chemically so that Nature became a multifold *creature* evoking horror—since it might absorb one into itself, mind-meltingly, one's keen consciousness dimming into pulsing, orgasmic dreams; and from which one could only flee in silver ships, out to the empty serenity of space where no universally linked weeds infested the floating rocks, no bulging tomato haemorrhoids the asteroids . . .

Or else conjuring up a positive lust for vital vegetative unity!

I slapped myself, trying to summon a Habsburger whiplash of pain to jerk me out of this bizarre dual vision.

I must go indoors. To sanity. And beyond.

The ring-binder was clamping more and more of me; and my mind was at war. I was scripting my own hallucinations from the impetus of ecofreak ideology, exaggerated absurdly, and from the myth of the Holy Roman Empire ... I was dreaming, wide awake.

And Case stood, watching me.

“You okay, Jill?”

I nodded. I shouldn't tell him the truth. There was no truth any more; there was only potent imagery, subject to interpretation.

Certain bedrock facts existed: the bombing, the deaths in Amsterdam, my abduction . . . Event-images: that's what those were. The interpretation was another matter, dependent upon what one believed—just as art was forever being reinterpreted in the context of a new epoch; and even history too.

Persuasion—and Confusion too?—had torn me loose from my moorings, so that interpretations cascaded about me simultaneously, synchronously. I had become a battlefield between world-views, which different parts of my mind were animating.

With dread, I sensed something stirring which perhaps had lain dormant ever since humanity split from Nature—ever since true consciousness of self had dawned as a sport, a freak, a biological accident . . .

“You sure, Jill?”

You. I. Myself. *Me*.

The independent thinking entity, named Jill Donaldson.

I wasn't thinking quite so independently any longer. An illusion of Self— that productive illusion upon which civilization itself had been founded— was floundering.

“Quite sure,” said I.

I, I, I. Ich. Io. Ego.

And Jill Donaldson hastened past him into the kitchen, where one of the cooks was hollowing out the marrow. The big TV set, tuned to CNN, scooping signals bounced from space, shimmered. The colours bled and reformed. The pixel pixies danced a new jig.

The countenance of Vertumnus gazed forth from that screen, he of the laughing lips, the ripe rubicund cheeks of peach and apple, the pear-nose, the golden ears of corn that were his brows. Oh the flashing hilarity of his berry-eyes. Oh those laughing lips.

With several nods of his head he gestured Jill elsewhere.

Jill adopted a pan-face.

She walked through the corridors of the house, to the front porch. She stepped out on to the gravel drive.

Ignition keys were in the red Porsche.

Jill ought to be safe with Annie in a colony of women. Rudolph Vertumnus was a male, wasn't he?

A hop through Cheltenham, then whoosh by motorway to Exeter and on down into Cornwall. She would burn fuel but keep an eye out for police patrols. Be at Polmerrin by dusk . . .

* * * *

The Porsche wasn't even approaching Cheltenham when the car phone burred, inevitably.

She had been counting on a call.

A stolen bright red Porsche would be a little obvious on the motorway. So she had her excuse lined up. She was going to visit her brother—in Oxford, in roughly the opposite direction. She'd be back at Bexford that evening. Brother Bob was a banker. Let Rumby worry that she was going to blab to him to protect her 750K investment, about which she no longer cared a hoot. Let case and some co-driver hare after her fruitlessly towards oxford in the Merc.

The voice wasn't Case's. Or Lascelles'. Or even Rumby's.

She nearly jerked the Porsche off the road.

The voice was that of Voss.

"Can you hear me, Fraulein Donaldson?"

Hands shaking, legs trembling, she guided the car into a gateway opening on to a huge field of close-cut golden stubble girt by a hawthorn hedge. A Volvo hooted in protest as it swung by. A rabbit fed.

"How did you find me, Voss—?" she gasped. Horrid perspectives loomed. "They told you! They know you!"

The caller chuckled.

"I'm merely the voice of *Vertumnus*, Fraulein. My image is everywhere these days, so why shouldn't I be everywhere too? Are you perhaps worried about the collapse of your precious Ego, Fraulein?"

How persuasive his voice was. "This has all happened before, you know. The God of the Bible ruled the medieval world, but when He went into eclipse *Humanity* seized His sceptre. Ah, that exalted Renaissance Ego! How puffed up it was! By the

time of Rudolph, that same Ego was already collaps-ing. Its confidence had failed. A new unity was needed—a bio-cosmic social unity. The Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph sought to be the *head* of society— hence the painting of so many regal *heads* by the artist you have libelled. Those biological, botanical heads.”

“I already know this,” she said.

“He would be the head—and the people, the limbs, the organs. Of one body! In the new world now a-dawning life will be a unity again. The Emperor will be the head—but not a separate, egotistic head. Nor will the limbs and organs be separate individualists.”

“You’re telling me what I know!” Aye, and *what she most feared*—namely the loss of Self. Its extinction. And what she most feared might well win; for what is feared is potent.

“Who are you? What are you?” she cried into the phone—already suspecting that Voss’s voice, the voice of Vertumnus, might well be in her own wayward head, either ring-bound or else planted there by alchemical potion.

She slammed the hand-set down on to its cradle by the gearshift lever, thumbed the windows fully open, and lit a cigarette to calm herself. Whispers of smoke drifted out towards the shorn field.

A mat of golden stubble cloaked the broad shoulders of the land. A ghostly pattern emerged across the great network of dry stalks: a coat of arms. The hedge was merely green braiding. Her car was a shiny red bug parked on the shoulder of a giant sprawling being.

Angrily she pitched her cigarette through the passenger window towards the field, wishing that it might start a fire, though really the straw was far too short to combust.

She drove on; and when the phone seemed to burble again, she ignored it.

She smoked. She threw out half-burned cigarettes till the pack was empty, but no smoke ever plumed upwards far behind her.

* * * *

Half way through Cheltenham, in slow-moving traffic, she passed a great billboard flaunting Rudolph Vertumnus. *WE ARE ALL PART OF NATURE*, proclaimed the all too familiar text.

Evidently unseen by other drivers and pedestrians, the fruity Emperor shouldered his way out of the poster. A pumpkin-belly that she had never seen

before reared into view. And marrow-legs, from between which aubergine testicles and a carrot cock dangled. Vertumnus towered over the other cars and vans behind her, bestriding the roadway. His carrot swelled enormously.

Raphanidosis: ancient Greek word. To be fucked by a giant radish. To be radished, ravished.

Vertumnus was coming.

A red light changed to green, and she was able to slip onward before the giant could advance to unpeel the roof of the Porsche and lift her out, homunculus-like, from her container.

Even in the heart of the city, a chthonic entity was coming to life. A liberated, incarnated deity was being born.

No one else but Jill saw it as Yet.

Yet everyone knew it from ten thousand posters and badges—wearing its varied seasonal faces. Everyone knew Vertumnus by now, deity of change and transformation; for change was in the air, as ripe Autumn matured. The death of Self was on the horizon.

When she reached the motorway, those triple lanes cutting far ahead through the landscape opened up yawning perspectives of time rather than of space.

Deep time, in which there'd been no conscious mind present at all, only vegetable and animal existence. Hence, the blankness of the road . . .

Soon, a new psychic era might dawn in which the sovereign virtue of the conscious Self faded as humanity re-entered Nature once again—willing the demise of dissective, alienating logics and sciences, altering the mind-set, hypnotizing itself into a communal empathy with the world, whose potent figurehead wasn't any vague, cloudy Gaea, but rather her son Vertumnus. Every eating of his body—of fruits and nuts and vegetables and fishes— would be a vividly persuasive communion. His royal representative would reign in Budapest, or in Prague, or Vienna. His figurehead.

The phone burred, and this time Jill did answer as she swung along the endless tongue of tarmac, and through time.

“Jill, don't hang up.” *Rumby*. “I know why you've skipped out. And you must believe it ain't my fault.”

What was he talking about?

“I’ve been the well-meaning patsy in this business. I’ve been the Gorby.”

“Who was *he*?” she asked mischievously. Here was a message from a different era.

“I’m fairly sure by now that my goddam Star Club *was* behind the bombing *and* the ring-binder. Didn’t trust me to be *thorough* enough. The whole Archy situation was really a lot more serious than even I saw. Those damn posters were really imprinting people on some deep-down level—not just surface propaganda. These are power-images. Fucking servosymbols—”

“You’re only *fairly* sure?” she asked.

“What tipped you off? Was it something *Case* said? Or Johnny Lascelles? Something Johnny let slip? I mean, why did you skip?”

Something Case or Lascelles had let slip . . . ? So Rumby was becoming a tad paranoid about his own staff in case they were serving two mast— Rumby himself, and some other rich gent in that secret Star Club of theirs ... A gent whom she had perhaps met in that drawing room in North London; who had caned her at a distance . . .

“Come back, Jill, and tell me all you know. I’m serious! I need to know.”

Oh yes, she could recognize the authentic tones of paranoia . . .

“Sorry about taking the Porsche,” she said.

“Never mind the fucking car. Where are you, Jill?”

She remembered.

“I’m going to Oxford to see my brother. He’s a bank manager.”

She hung up, and ignored repeated calls.

* * * *

Polmerrin lay in a wooded little valley within a couple of miles of the rocky, wind-whipped North Cornwall coastline. Sheltered by the steep plunge of land and by oakwood, the once-derelict hamlet of cottage, now housed studios and craft workshops, accompanied by a dozen satellite caravans. Pottery, jewellery, painting, sculpting, candle-making . . .

Kids played. Women worked. A few male companions lent an enlightened hand. Someone was tootling a flute, and a buzzard circled high overhead. A

kingfisher flashed to and fro along a stream, one soggy bank of which was edged by alder buckthorn. Some brimstone butterflies still fluttered, reluctant to succumb to worn-out wings and cooling nights. The sunset was brimstone too: sulphur and orange peel. A few arty tourists were departing.

Immediately Jill realized that she had come to the wrong place entirely. She ought to have fed to some high-tech airport hotel with gleaming glass elevators—an inorganic, air-conditioned, sealed machine resembling a space station in the void.

She was too tired to reverse her route.

* * * *

Red-haired Annie embraced Jill, in surprise and joy. She kissed Jill, hugged her.

Freckled Annie was wearing one of those Indian cotton dresses—in green hues—with tiny mirrors sewn into it; and she'd put some extra flesh upon her once-lithe frame, though not to the extent of positive plumpness. She had also put on slim, scrutinizing glasses. Pewter rings adorned several fingers, with scarab and spider motifs.

One former barn was now a refectory, to which she led a dazed Jill to drink lemonade.

“How long has it been, Jilly? Four years? You'll stay with me, of course. So what's *happening*?” She frowned. “I did hear about your book—and that awful bombing. I still listen to the radio all day long while I'm painting—”

“Jill's drugged,” said Jill. “Vertumnus is reborn. And the Holy Roman Empire is returning.”

Annie scrutinized her with concern. “Holy shit.” She considered. “You'd better not tell any of the others. There are kids here. Folks might worry.”

They whispered, as once they had whispered confidences.

“Do you know the *Portrait Jacopo Strada*?” Jill began. She found she could still speak about herself in the first person, historically.

Presently there were indeed kids and mothers and a medley of other women, and a few men in the refectory too, sharing an early supper of spiced beans and rice and salad and textured vegetable protein, Madras style, while Vivaldi played from a tape-deck. The beams of the barn were painted black, and murals of fabulous creatures relieved the whiteness of the plaster: a phoenix, a unicorn, a Minotaur, each within a mazelike Celtic surround, so that it seemed as if so many heraldic shields were poised around the walls. Tourists would enjoy cream teas in here of an

afternoon.

* * * *

Sulphur and copper had cleared from a sky that was now deeply leaden-blue, fast darkening. Venus and Jupiter both shone. A shooting star streaked across the vault of void; or was that a failed satellite burning up?

Annie shared a studio with Rosy and Meg, who would be playing chess that evening in the recreation barn beside the refectory. The whole ground floor of the reconditioned cottage was studio. Meg's work was meticulous neo-medieval miniatures featuring eerie freaks rather than anyone comely. Rosy specialized in acrylic studies of transparent hourglass buildings set within forests, or in crystalline deserts, and crowded with disembodied heads instead of sand.

Annie *used* to paint swirling, luminous abstracts. Now she specialized in large acrylic canvasses of bloom within bloom within bloom, vortexes that sucked the gaze down into a central focus from which an eye always gazed out: a cat's, a bird's, a person's. Her pictures were like strange, exploded, organic cameras.

Jill looked; Jill admired. The paintings looked at her. Obviously there was a thematic empathy between the three women who used this studio.

"The conscious mind is going into eclipse," Jill remarked, and Annie smiled hesitantly.

"That's a great title. I might use it."

A polished wooden stairway led up to a landing with three bedrooms.

Annie's wide bed was of brass, with a floral duvet. Marguerites, daisies, buttercups.

* * * *

In the morning when Jill awoke, the flowers had migrated from the duvet.

Annie's face, her neck, her shoulders were petals and stalks. Her skin was of white and pink blossoms. Her ear was a tulip, her nose was the bud of a lily, and her hair a fountain of red nasturtiums.

Jill reached to peel off some of the petals, but the flowers were flesh, and Annie awoke with a squeak of protest. Her open eyes were black nightshades with white blossom pupils.

And Jill Donaldson, whose name was dissolving, was the first to see such a

transformation as would soon possess many men and women who regarded one another in a suitable light as part of Nature.

Jilldona stepped from the brass bed, towards the window, and pulled the curtains aside.

The valley was thick with mist. Yet a red light strobed the blur of vision. Spinning, this flashed from the roof of a police car parked beside the Porsche. Shapeless wraiths danced in its dipped headlight beams. One officer was scanning the vague, evasive cottages. A second walked around the Porsche, peered into it, then opened the passenger door.

“Hey,” said Annie, “why did you tweak me?”

Annie’s flesh was much as the night before, except that Jill continued to see a faint veil of flowers, an imprint of petals.

“Jill just wanted a cigarette,” said Jill.

“I quit a couple of years ago,” Annie reminded her. “Tobacco costs too much. Anyway, *you* didn’t smoke last night.”

“Jill forgot to. Fuzz are down there. Fuzz make Jill want a fag.”

“That braggartly car—we ought to have driven it miles away! Miles and miles.” Yet Annie didn’t sound totally convinced that sheltering this visitor might be the best idea.

Jilldona pulled on her paisley sweater and jeans, and descended. Annie’s paintings eyed her brightly as she passed by, recording her within their petal-ringed pupils.

She walked over to the police, one of whom asked:

“You wouldn’t be a Miss Jill Donaldson, by any chance?” The burr of his Cornish accent . . .

“Names melt,” she told her questioner. “The mind submerges in a unity of being. Have the Habsburgs sent you?” she asked. “Or was it the Star Club?”

One officer removed the ignition key from the Porsche and locked the car.

The other steered her by the arm into the back of the strobing vehicle. She could see no flowers on these policemen. However, a pair of wax strawberries dangled discretely from the driving mirror like blood-bright testi-cles.

For Hannah Shapero