

A Journey South - a novelette by John Christopher

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An introduction by Keith Brooke

I can trace my own writing career back to a time as a boy when I first read the works of John Christopher. The details may have become fuzzy over the course of the years, but the feelings inspired in me when I read the Tripods trilogy are still vivid: to use the hackneyed phrase, it was the sheer sense of wonder of Christopher's dystopian future which made such a huge impression. The future was going to be different in ways both foreseeable and surprising, and yet people very like me may be there to tackle the challenges life presented. The books gripped me from the outset, and have never really let go.

I went on from the Tripods to read the usual young adult fare -- Heinlein, Asimov et al-- and eventually to start scribbling down my own ideas for how things might be.

Christopher set the standard with his young adult fiction (a standard I still aspire towards when I write for that age group), and naturally enough his fine oeuvre of adult fiction has sometimes been overshadowed. I'm delighted to be able to include this novelette in infinity plus, but even more pleased that 2000/2001 sees something of a John Christopher revival. The December issue of Spectrum SF included the first instalment of a brand new novel, Bad Dream. And in 2001 Wildside's Cosmos imprint will reissue several earlier novels and a collection of short fiction, which will include "A Journey South".

I hope the story included here will inspire you to go on and find more of Christopher's work.

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I

In the early evening she seemed better. She could not eat anything, but she said she would have a drink with him. He brought the glasses to her bedside and they talked. Not about anything important; there had been a lot of things he had thought of saying while she lay in drugged sleep, but they did not matter now. All that mattered was the two of them, together, continuing a dialogue of more than twenty years. They talked of the month they had spent the previous summer in the Orkneys, tramping through deserted bird-haunted islands. He escaped from the present into that fragment of their past and almost said "We must do it again," before remembering.

When pain once more whitened her face he gave her a shot, and went to the next room to call Grimond. Flickering lights within the sphere coalesced into a face. Grimond said:

"Mike... How is she?"

Starmer told him. Grimond nodded, and his figure receded and distorted as he crossed the room to his diagnostic console. Starmer watched him check the dials which, over a distance of nearly fifty miles, recorded the data of her failing body -- temperature, respiration, pulse rate, blood count and the rest -- summed up and analyzed them. Back in close-up, Grimond

said:

"I'll come over."

"How long?"

"Be with you in half an hour."

Impatiently Starmer said: "Katherine. How long does she have?"

"A few hours. It could be less."

"Don't come."

"But..."

"Is there anything you can do for her that I can't?"

"No. But you should have someone with you,."

"I don't think so. And she'd know why."

"I can think up a reason."

"Nothing that would fool her. Thank you, John. It's late. Get some sleep."

From her bed, she asked: "Was that John?" Starmer nodded. "What does he say?"

"The same as always. We must be patient."

"You have been."

Their hands joined. The wasting was least apparent there: her fingers had always been thin. But they had also been strong, deft, lively, and now were barely capable of answering his gentle pressure. He saw her mouth twitch, and said:

"I'll give you another shot."

"No. It's all right. But..."

"What?"

Her grey eyes, so big in the shrunken face, engaged his.

"I'd like you to send for Martin."

"What do you want him for?"

She said, with an effort: "I want him."

"Perhaps in the morning."

The shake of her head seemed a visible draining of strength.

"Now. Please, darling. Now."

Martin wore his Counsellor's dress of crimson tunic and black cloak.

Starmer resented that though realizing it made no difference: his presence proclaimed his office. After a single look at Katherine, he wasted no time but moved into the ritual. The words were spoken, the responses made, and then it was time for the telling. Starmer wondered if he should leave, but neither said anything and he could not bear to go. She spoke in a low voice, counting beads of memory: names of people, places that had made up the warp and weft of her life. The ones he recognized were bad enough, but it was worse hearing those others in which he had had no part. So much of her life he had not shared, and now never could.

Then the reconciliation. Listening out of a fog of misery, Starmer acknowledged Martin did it well.

"Before the beginning of years

There came to the making of man

Time with a gift of tears,

Grief with a glass that ran.

Pleasure with pain for leaven,

Summer with flowers that fell..."

She listened with closed eyes. Perhaps the words did work magic for her, some kind of hope or healing.

"To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die."

There was no magic for Starmer. He thought of another scrap of old verse, and wanted to shout it:

"Do not go gentle... rage, rage against the dying of the light..."

But that was not in the ritual. The last duty of a Counsellor was the bringing of peace, acceptance, resignation. He forced himself to keep silence. This had to be endured because she had required it. Soon it would be over, and they would be together again, and alone, if only for a brief time. And every second of that time was worth a day, a year, of the stunted life that waited for him, so near and so unwanted.

Then in mid passage Martin checked. Starmer saw her gaze was fixed.

"Rest in peace, sister," Martin said.

"Don't be a fool!" Starmer said. "She's not dead."

Martin made the farewell gesture. He said gently:

"She's dead, Michael."

He saw it was true. He had always prided himself on a stoical acceptance of realities, and knew he must accept this too. The overwhelming bitterness lay in being cheated of that little time together, those minutes he had counted on. He said:

"At the end... she was looking at you, not me."

"Close her eyes," Martin said.

Her flesh was warm to his fingers. When he had done it he looked down at her in silence. Martin said:

"Go to bed. A pill -- two. Three maybe. Leave everything to me."

"No." With an effort, he looked at the Counsellor. "You can go now."

"It's finished," Martin said. "There's a body there, that's all. There are necessary things to do, and I'm accustomed to them."

"I'll see to it. Everything."

"It's not usual. Or wise."

"Leave us."

Martin shrugged. "If you wish. I'll return in the morning."

"No. I don't want you. Or anyone."

"Your neighbours will want to come."

"No-one. Tell them no-one."

"Her friends have a right to mourn her."

"I'm not stopping them."

"In company; with you. Grief needs expression, and is best shared. That has always been understood. And there's a grave to be dug."

"I'll dig it."

"It is the custom..."

"Customs are not laws. Are they?"

"No. But you need help."

"I'll be judge of that."

Martin shrugged. "I'll arrange to have a digger sent."

"Not necessary."

"There must be a burial, you know. That is the law. Burial or incineration."

"I'll bury her."

"Without a digger?"

"Yes."

"That, won't be easy. You're not a young man."

"I'll dig the grave," Starmer said. "And to the regulation depth. Leave me now.

"We must talk some time."

"Some time."

"Call me if you want help."

"Yes. If I want help, I'll call you."

At university, when those of his year had chosen to be administrators, artists, scientists, doctors, counsellors, Starmer had elected to be a gardener. It was a minority activity, and even in that small field the course he followed was not orthodox. He did not join with others in the communes that created and tended the great gardens which people travelled across seas and continents to admire; nor did he, as was usual with those who preferred to work on their own, move on from garden to garden, seeking the countless forms of perfection. He created a single garden, over long years.

The garden itself, neither formal nor studiously informal, belonged to no recognized school and in various ways was defiant of all of them. The house stood on a knoll with woods behind it, and its grounds descended, in erratic sweeps, to the meadowed river which fed the lower water garden. From the air, generally regarded as a crucial test, the whole thing looked awkward and chaotic, not so much unplanned as badly planned. From within though it had a pattern which was known to him.

As it had been to Katherine. He did not have to spend long looking for the spot in which to bury her. There was a point, a hundred yards or so below the house, to which the eye was drawn -- from below and either side as well as from above. He took a spade and dug there.

It was hard work. He had used power tools less than most, but this was grinding monotonous labour. The sun stung the salt sweat on his skin, and then, since it was an English May, sunshine gave way to heavy clouds and driving rain. In the middle of the day he rested, drank beer and ate bread and cheese; then dug again. It was late afternoon when he finished. He brought out her body, weighing so little in its silk winding sheet, and laid it on the sling he had rigged up over the grave. The rain had stopped but the day was dark, the sky thick with ragged cloud. He let go the straps, easing her body slowly into the raw gash of earth. For a moment, as he looked at the little mound of white silk, his mind traced remembered contours.

He said: "Goodbye, my love."

Then, delaying no longer, he shovelled in soil. It was not so bad once the last trace of white had gone.

The Bird glided down to fold its wings in front of the house, and Martin unclipped his harness and stepped out. Today he was in everyday dress, a blue and white tunic suit. Starmer did not go out to greet him. Martin pulled the rope which jangled the visitor's bell and since no sign forbade entry came inside.

He asked: "How are you, Michael?"

"I'm all right."

"You didn't call me."

"No."

"So I thought I'd come and see you." He was smiling; Starmer said nothing.

"I was wondering what you were planning to do."

"I'm not sure yet."

"I recommend a holiday."

"Yes."

"And preferably not a solitary one." Starmer again made no response. "You need people."

"Do I?"

"Look in that mirror. Four days, and you haven't shaved. I don't think you've washed, have you? Or eaten anything but scraps."

He stayed silent. Martin said:

"Do you mind if I sit down? And pour myself a drink?"

"No, I don't mind."

"One for you?"

"For therapeutic reasons?"

Martin laughed. "If a reason's needed." He poured stiff whiskies for both of them. Sipping, he said:

"Peatier than I'm used to, but I like it. How many bottles have you got through in those four days?"

"I haven't counted. Is it important?"

"No. Your one sensible reaction, in fact. But you would have done better to let friends drink with you."

Starmer made a small gesture of rejection; he was still standing by the window. Martin eased back into the chair, which flattened under him.

"Barricading yourself with isolation can only make things worse. You need people, as I say. Trite, but true. Everyone does in bereavement, but you more than most. I see your sphere has been disconnected."

"People called me. There was nothing I wanted to say. Or could say."

"Some got through to me, as your Counsellor. I thanked them and made excuses for you."

"Good of you."

"She was much loved."

"Yes. By me, also."

"And you yourself have many friends who would like to help. One or two surprised me. I didn't know you knew Leoni."

"We were at university together."

"A great man. The finest of the authenticators. His Roman Triumph last year... magnificent."

Starmer nodded. "He's very talented."

"And, it seems, fond of you. He wants you to stay with him, in Sicily. I think you should go. It will do you good."

"I'll give it thought."

There was a pause before Martin said: "I couldn't help noticing the garden as I flew in. You've had a pretty good shot at destroying it."

Starmer had spent most of a day with a flame thrower, watching flowers and grass and trees, everywhere except in the clearing in which she was buried, burn to ash. He said:

"I made it for her."

"Yes, I understand that. And, of course, you're entitled to do what you like with your property. But I've been talking to John Grimond, Michael; and I must tell you that in his view you could be on the edge of a collapse, and a severe one. I think it would be a good idea to accept Leoni's invitation."

His voice was measured. It was close to being a formal warning. Humanity was freer than ever before in history, but there were limits. Physician

and Counsellor could, by mutual agreement, make an order for restraint; and under restraint there was the possibility, as a last resort, of chemical reorientation. And he was tired. After a pause, he said:

"In that case I'll accept."

"Good. Shall I make you an airship booking?"

"No. I'll bird."

"It's a long way. Over a thousand miles."

"Does it matter? I'm not in a hurry."

Martin looked at him for a moment before giving his professional acquiescing smile.

"No, I don't suppose it does."

II

Starmer spent some hours checking and repairing his Bird. He had burnt Katherine's when he destroyed the garden, and a wing of his own had been scorched. The safety system made the controls inoperable unless every part was sound; there was a way of getting round that but it would have taken longer than the repair. He worked in feverish haste. Suddenly he felt a need to be away.

He was ready by early afternoon. He had re-connected his sphere, but no-one had called. They could have forgotten about him, or Martin could have warned them off. He put a call through to Leoni, and got a young girl who said he was out for the day; he left a message with her.

After checking there was food and drink in the pouches, he climbed in and harnessed himself. The wings unfolded and flapped, slowly at first then faster, their whirr drowning the subdued hum of the motor. In an eddying cloud of dust and ash the Bird headed south, down wind.

At a few hundred feet Starmer levelled off, throttling the wing-beat back to the rhythm of steady flight. The afternoon was warm, the sky clear, but there were mare's tails on the horizon. He passed over familiar landmarks -- the Henderson farm, Grimond's house with its weird conical tower, the irregular silver line of the Thames. Oxford's spires drowsed in the west, tiny under rippling haze.

He followed the valley between the two ranges of the Chilterns, flapping steadily across the plain southwards to the Hampshire Downs. There was little traffic: only one other Bird in hailing distance, and a distant glimpse of an airship chugging east.

The weather started to deteriorate, with a cloud mass moving in fast from the south-west. The wind freshened, and he increased power as he flew into it. He was buffeted by gusts, at times quite roughly. Additionally he felt the need to relieve his bladder and, though he was wearing a bottle, decided to land. He came down in a field on the edge of a deserted town -- from the air a pattern of rectangles just visible through the conquering brush. It would have been a workman's town of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, built to serve the railway, whose crumbling embankment still stretched away north and south.

When he had stretched his legs, Starmer made himself a sandwich and a hot drink. He tipped plastophage on the containers and watched as they crumbled into dust. The cloud cover had brought early dusk; by sensible standards it was too late for a Channel crossing. He ought to spend the night here in his tent, or look for hospitality nearby -- he had seen a house a couple of miles back. But numbness and lethargy had been altogether replaced by restlessness. He got back into the Bird and flapped

away, over the ruins of Southampton and a stretch of the New Forest that offered a glimpse of deer, or maybe ponies; and so across water towards the jagged teeth of the Needles. After that the grey white-crested sea stretched into a darkening horizon.

Rain came, gusts slashing against the visor and momentarily blinding him. He knew he should show navigation lights, but did not bother to switch them on. He could not believe another Bird would be out in this weather; even the airships would have put in to their nearest havens. The rain found chinks in his flying suit, gradually soaking him. He did not mind, welcomed it rather.

Without navigation lights his instrument panel was dark. The sudden sight of a rearing wave, no more than feet below, shocked him. Instinctively he adjusted elevators and increased power, and the Bird lifted.

He wondered about that automatic response. He had told himself there was no point in going on living, and he knew it to be true. It was his body that had acted, against the judgement of the mind, intent on saving its pointless self. But the function of mind was to control body. He had only to cut the motor to drift down, wind tossed, to the welcoming waste of water.

His fingers caressed the switch, but did not pull it. He considered that, abstractly. Physical cowardice again? He did not think so. Whether or not perfect love cast out fear, weariness did. There was simply a feeling: not here, not now. It was, he knew, irrational, but his rational mind accepted it. He switched on lights and increased power, heading south.

More than an hour later the altimeter digits changed from blue to red, indicating earth below. He came down to a view of swishing tree tops in his landing beam, and eventually put down in a field of long dank grass. He stripped off his flying suit and slid his wet body into the tent. It ballooned above and inflated gently beneath him; its glowing warmth dried and soothed him.

He thought about Katherine, as he had done every night since she died. But tiredness was stronger than memory too; soon he slept.

In the morning the weather was still unsettled, but the wind had dropped. He birded south-east over country that was mostly wooded, with patches of cultivated ground. Towards evening another Bird rose beneath him. It seemed to have come from nowhere until he saw the inconspicuous green ramp emerging from a meadow, and realized he had been flying over a factory. The Bird came alongside, matching his height and speed, and the rider hailed him above the flapping of wings. When he responded, the voice called:

"You are English?"

"Yes."

"A long way from home."

"That's true."

"Where do you sleep tonight?"

"I have no plans."

"You must stay with us."

To refuse an offer of hospitality without a compelling reason was unthinkable. Starmer took up position on his right rear. Passing over a broad tranquil river they dropped to a house surrounded by an orchard, the lines of trees glimmering white with blossom in the dusk. The house was modern, its basic beehive shape broken at irregular heights and intervals

by little jutting balconies. There were many windows, all glowing with light. The Frenchman came up as Starmer was unstrapping his harness. "I am Jacques Prideau. And this is my wife, Madeleine, who comes to greet us."

Starmer introduced himself and they shook hands. Prideau was in his early thirties, a tall dark man who moved restlessly. His wife was slow-moving, golden-haired, possibly a few years older. Prideau put an arm across her shoulders as they went in, and she leaned briefly against him.

As in all beehives the main living area occupied the large central space under the transparent roof, with other rooms in tiers around it. The living room had a homely look, its tidiness plainly due to constant attention rather than fastidious use. One of the first things that caught Starmer's eye was a rocking horse. He said, to Madeleine:

"You have a child?"

She smiled, at him but more at her husband. "Two. Two boys. We are -- fécond. Prolific?"

"And where are my sons," Prideau asked, "that they do not greet me?"

"You kept them up so late last night with the construction set that they needed little urging towards bed this evening." She explained, to Starmer:

"It was Pierre's birthday yesterday, his seventh."

"It is a construction set of a new kind," Prideau said. "Do you know of it? The parts bond permanently except that the bond dissolves from the application of a magnetic stylo. No good for building houses, in case an airship flies low and its motor decomposes the walls, but excellent for a toy."

Starmer felt uneasy, obscurely troubled. The evidence of their mutual physical affection was possibly responsible. Madeleine in no way reminded him of Katherine, but she was a woman, Prideau's woman. They had what he had lost, and the bonus of two small boys asleep in an upper room. No dissolving stylo threatened this house. Death's comet was still light years away, its annihilating blaze no more than a smudge above the horizon. Was it their happiness that disturbed him, he wondered, or their complacency?

As the evening wore on though he found himself soothed by her slow ease, Prideau's livelier garrulousness. Prideau talked of technical matters: his interests were wide, his enthusiasm infectious. Most of it was strange to Starmer -- his life with Katherine had been concerned with books, music, plants -- and he was surprised to find how much he understood.

Madeleine left them at eleven, saying she needed more sleep than Jacques. She urged her husband not to keep their guest talking too late. Prideau asked, perfunctorily:

"You are not tired?"

"Not a bit."

Surprisingly it was true. (And perhaps, he thought, he was glad not to see them go off together to the waiting bed.) He asked a question about a technique Prideau had been describing for tracking reindeer on their Lapland migrations; and Prideau eagerly obliged. It was nearly two before they broke up. Starmer was a little drunk by then -- Prideau, who had been liberally pouring cognac, apparently had an iron head -- and he slid thankfully into the cocoon of his bed.

When he awoke sunlight was strong through the canted windows, but it was not that which had wakened him. He looked and saw the children at his bedside, one of them stretching out a hand to pluck a second time at his

shoulder.

The other carried tea on a tray. Starmer thanked them in inadequate French, and they talked. The bigger boy was Pierre, he of the seventh birthday; Antoine would be six in the autumn. They had Jacques' aquiline features and Madeleine's colouring, but were even blonder; the younger boy's fine hair was almost silvery.

Their mother had permitted them to bring the tea, which Englishmen always drank, because he was the first Englishman they had met. Was it true that in England forests were denser than those in France, with bears and wolves roaming through them?

Starmer said he did not think there were wolves. Bears yes, in the New Forest at least. It was thought they had been turned loose from one of the last of the travelling circuses. They asked what circuses were, and he told them; and about zoos. There had been a time when people kept animals in cages and trained them to do unnatural things. They listened with grave attention.

Looking at their sunlit heads, Starmer thought there could have been bitterness in this also -- a reminder of an older sadness. Originally they had hoped for children. He felt a calm melancholy and thought perhaps it was getting easier; then thought how much Katherine would have loved talking to them, and it was as bad as it had ever been. He hid his pain from the children in pointless talk.

Prideau insisted on Starmer birding to the factory with him before travelling on. It was the European plant for hand-torch production, fully automated and controlled by half a dozen supervisors; in an emergency a single individual could handle everything. Prideau had a personal workshop there; he showed Starmer his tools and equipment, displaying them with loving hands.

It was some time before Starmer got away. He thanked Prideau for the hospitality. Prideau shrugged.

"Our life is quiet. It is good to have someone to talk with. Should you come this way again..."

"I'll be sure to visit you, certainly. But it's not likely."

"We will hope for it. Or perhaps I will travel to England." He smiled.

"But that also is unlikely. I do not have much urge to leave my own small corner."

"I can understand that," Starmer said.

III

Dijon was off his route, but it seemed a good place for buying presents. He had heard it was a busier town than most and this proved true. Derelict areas had been turned into parks, but the centre had dozens of shops, some quite large. He wandered there for a couple of hours and was extravagant over the presents, getting a miniature diamond lathe for Jacques, a silk Kashmiri shawl for Madeleine, and for the boys a toy authenticator, programmed for the battle of Austerlitz.

In the afternoon, heading east towards the Jura, his path was crossed by wild geese flying north to the Scandinavian summer. They were high up, for a time darkening the sky; he fancied he could hear the beat of myriad wings above the flapping of the Bird. Below, lazy rivers wound through fields and woodlands.

He climbed to cross the first range of mountains, and stayed high over the lakes. All cloud had vanished; he advanced through a sky of deep blue

towards the splendid white barrier of the Alps, dazzling in late sunshine. He was alone now with nothing -- neither bird nor Bird -- in sight. A thin thread of smoke rose from a farmhouse chimney, fixed in the still air. Lake Geneva came into view on his right. A tiny speck must be the solitary lake ferry the Swiss still ran. He thought of dropping down to where the vines would be putting out green buds and the meadows preparing to turn white with narcissi. They had spent a spring day there once, and made love on a pine-sheltered spur of rock which looked thousands of feet up to glistening peaks and as far down to the valley's shadowy floor. Between Heaven and Hell, she had said; after they came out of ecstasy into laughter, at the sight of a chamois gravely inspecting them from the next spur.

No, not there.

He reached snow at the Diablerets, tired now and not relishing the thought of crossing this white desert towards the Ticino valley, where he had intended to spend the night. There was a village, a cluster of chalets and a painted wooden church, on the slope that faced the glacier. He dipped the Bird's wings towards it.

Hans said: "A man must come to his middle years before he truly learns to count his blessings. We live in a golden age."

"I do not dispute that," Rudi said. "It is the future about which I am concerned. If our population continues to grow less..."

"To count his blessings," Hans repeated, "and to trust in the providence of God. Would you wish to return to a time when even this land was soiled by the droppings of mass-man? How long did it take to clean our lakes of pollution?"

"But the declining birth-rate..."

"A temporary pause. And the decline has halted."

"It has reached a plateau. There have been such before."

"Michael here was last night in a house with two sons under seven. Two!"

"Statistically that means nothing. There are families with three children, even four. But very few."

They were sitting after supper in the living room which was full of clumsy comfortable furniture, its walls hung with pictures of ancestors and mountains. Familiarity with their high peaks could never breed contempt in the Swiss; they loved them like members of their family.

Hans was in his sixties, spare and red-faced with thinning white hair. His son-in-law Rudi was a fleshier man of about thirty-five, with a square Germanic face. The women were Rudi's wife, Hilde, and his daughter, Maria. The mother displayed the residue of a strong beauty which the daughter still fully enjoyed. She would be around thirty, Starmer judged.

This was the largest chalet in the village, a three-storied building with long balconies bright with flower boxes, and a date, 1825, carved above the door. Supper had been simple -- peasant's soup, cheese fondue and a marzipan pudding -- but ample and sustaining. Now they sat round the table, with coffee and a flask of kirsch.

"We live in a wonderful world," Hans said. "So much is being done, so many parts of the Creator's design being rescued from extinction. The dodo and the passenger pigeon were lost, but hundreds of other species have been saved. The blue whale roams the seas in safety."

Rudi said: "And you see the hand of God in this?"

"What else? Mankind was on course for perdition, taking the rest of

creation with him. Now there is room to breathe, for all manner of things. And with the filth has gone the violence. This is the land in which Servetus, the great pioneer of medicine, was burnt at the stake for heresy. Once these valleys were red with blood, spilled in God's name. Now we live at peace, with one another and with ourselves."

Rudi said: "Mankind is better, I agree, for being numbered in millions rather than billions. But our numbers could become too few."

"Be thankful," Hans said, "and have faith. More coffee, Michael?"

Starmer shook his head. "I shan't sleep if I do."

"You will, in our mountain air! Throughout the world the atmosphere is purer than it was, but ours is the most pure. And a glass of kirsch will balance out the coffee. Then we will all go to bed. Rising early, we do not stay up late." He smiled. "What others see as dullness we count as virtue."

They persuaded him not to travel onwards the following day. Hans was eager to show him their mountains at closer range, and Starmer birded with him and Rudi among the peaks. They lunched at a café in Grindelwald, below the grim north face of the Eiger. As at Dijon, much of the town had been razed, though here not made into parks but turned back to pasture. Starmer thought of it as it had once been, with tarmac roads filled, bumper to bumper, by evil-smelling vehicles. Now what roads remained were little more than tracks. Cows with drowsily tinkling bells grazed meadows where occasional irregular mounds marked the site of old buildings.

They returned without Rudi who was flying east to look at cattle and would spend the night away. Starmer and he shook hands before parting.

"A good journey south," Rudi said. He grinned at the older man. "Do not let him talk you into the ground tonight. When he finds a new audience he exploits it without mercy!"

It was an accurate prophecy. After supper, Hans held the floor again. Starmer was content to let him talk -- chiefly about his beloved country, for him a topic of unending interest, and his family. His ancestors had lived in this valley for six generations. They had been here before the horrors of the twentieth century, and were here still. It was a good record, under the hand of God.

A record, Starmer refrained from pointing out, whose end was plainly in view. Rudi and Maria had been married ten years, and there were no children.

Later Hans spoke of the final throes of the overpopulated world which his grandfather had described to him as a boy: a world crammed with old people crippled by illness or dementia; or merely by age's ordinary incapacities.

His grandfather had been able to remember the passing of the law permitting euthanasia. Some religious leaders had condemned it as an impiety. Now it could be seen for what it was -- the realistic and appropriate way of dealing with an otherwise insurmountable crisis. And an act of mercy, since, with fewer hands to tend more and more who needed help, the old would otherwise have been abandoned to die in misery. Emergencies created special needs. With the balance of generations restored, the voluntary ending of human life could be recognized once more as an anti-social act.

Starmer asked: "Why anti-social?"

"Because we have duties, to others as well as ourselves."

"That's an argument against euthanasia in youth or early manhood. Not

after a life's work has been completed. Surely one is free then of obligations."

Hans shook his head. "Never free. There is always a debt. One leaves things that others must do -- affairs to be cleared up, a body to be buried. And one leaves the unhappy legacy of mourning."

Starmer said nothing. Hans pursued it.

"Do you not agree?"

He said neutrally: "Perhaps you're right."

Hans smiled. "I have tired you with my talking! We will go to bed. Blessed sleep, followed by a new day. Life is good. Each day dawns well."

Starmer left the curtains undrawn; when he put out the lamp, moonlight silvered the room. Blessed sleep indeed, he thought, and an end, if only temporarily, to memories.

He was drowsing but the light tap pulled him back to wakefulness. The door opened and Maria was there. She wore a white housegown, fastened high at the neck. She said:

"I wondered how you were."

"All right."

She looked at him for a while without speaking; then said:

"You are our welcome guest, and one does not ask questions of a guest. But we talked about you last night, Rudi and I. He thought you had a sadness.

He has an eye for sadness."

He shook his head. "No. But thank you for being concerned."

She nodded, smiling. "I am glad. Good night, then."

Suddenly he had a fear of being alone.

"Stay awhile." She looked at him in silence again. "I'd like to talk."

"About what?"

"About you. Tell me about yourself."

She shook her head. "That would be dull. I am not interesting."

He thought: that is what I want -- dullness, and company. Something, someone, who is simply there, alive, but making no demand or claim, offering no involvement. He said:

"Tell me."

She came over and sat on the foot of the bed; it creaked under her weight.

"Where shall I start?"

"Anywhere. From when you were a child."

"I was born here, as you know. The glacier is the first thing I remember: a day of storm, rain and tumbling clouds, then clearing -- blue sky, and the whiteness below it. I was three perhaps, or four."

In the moonlight he saw her frown slightly, with the effort of recollection.

"Other things from that summer too. A fall on the steps outside. I cut my knee on a sharp stone: I have the scar still. A doll I lost. And the finding of it, weeks later, which was worse than the losing. She was bleached by rain and sun, a dead thing."

It was going wrong. Hearing her talk of these simple unimportant things made him aware of her individuality, her uniqueness. It unsettled him. Yet he did not want her to stop. She talked on quietly, but the trivia of her life which he had thought might be salve to his wound were salt instead.

In the middle of speaking about a cat that had gone wild, only coming back to raid the kitchen when the valley's supply of small game gave out, she stopped. In a questioning voice, she said:

"Michael?"

Only then was he aware that his eyes were running with tears. He rubbed his cheek with his hand.

"I'm sorry."

She got up and came towards him. Taking a handkerchief from the pocket of the housegown, she dabbed his face.

"Do not be sorry. But tell me. It will be better if you do."

He did not think it would, but found himself talking all the same -- about Katherine, the garden, the grave. She leaned over him, her hands holding one of his, gently pressing from time to time. When he had exhausted himself and fell silent, she said:

"Is it better?"

He did not answer. She stood up. He thought she was going to leave him and the pang of fear came back. But she was looking at him, her face serious and intent; and he saw her fingers move to the fastener at the neck of the gown. A line opened and extended, and underneath she was naked.

Stepping out of the gown, she opened the sheets and climbed in beside him. He found himself shaking with a different fear.

"It's no good."

"Hush," she said. "It will be."

Her hands held and caressed, her lips brushed face and chest. He saw the white line of the parting in her hair, and its scent was in his nostrils.

Brown eyes were close to his. He said again:

"No good."

She smiled with confidence. "Love me, and be at peace."

He could see one of her feet in the moonlight that fell across the end of the bed: shapely and strong, with the strength of her peasant ancestors. Now he would have wept, but could not. He stared dry-eyed at the ceiling; self-disgust was a choking lump in his throat. She said:

"You are trembling. Are you cold?"

When he failed to answer she got up and rearranged the bed clothes to cover him. Her drooping breasts brushed the sheet as she smoothed it. He said, for the sake of saying something, anything:

"You're beautiful."

She smiled. "I am pleased you think so."

He turned away, unable to bear the encounter of eyes.

"What is it, Michael?"

"Nothing."

One fist was clenched against his face; she opened it with her fingers and stroked his hand.

"You have good hands. I like men's hands that bear the marks of labour."

"These hands buried her. A week ago."

"She would have been glad of it, I think."

"And now betray her."

"Betray?" He was silent. "How does one betray the dead?"

"As one betrays the living. By breaking faith." He paused. "As you have betrayed Rudi."

Her hand did not let go of his. "But no faith is broken. Rudi knows, and approves."

"Of your coming to my bed?"

"Of course. That is why he persuaded you to stay a second night, and found a reason to be absent himself. He knew you were unhappy, and lonely. He

wished me to comfort you, in the best way comfort can be given."

"Comfort," he said. "Is that all it means to you?"

"Comfort, companionship, pleasure." Her hand took his face and turned it towards hers. "Michael, have you been with no other woman but your wife?"

"Since our marriage, no."

"And she? No other man?"

"I don't know." He closed his eyes, trying to blot out present and past alike. "I never knew."

IV

Starmer crossed the Alps in good weather. A high pressure belt was reported stable and likely to persist for some time. He should be able to reach Sicily comfortably in three days.

He stopped the night at Viareggio, and set off the following morning with the intention of pressing on to Rome. Siena entered his mind only to be dismissed. If the shores of Geneva had been too threatening with their memories, how could he possibly bear that?

And yet, perversely, the thought returned. Away to his left stretched the Tuscan hills; rounded, bright green with summer, columned with cypresses. The day was beginning to haze over with heat. He passed over Pisa, the cathedral and broken fragments of the tower splotches of white in a mass of emerald. And almost without being aware of what he was doing he turned the Bird east, to follow the dark streak of the Arno.

A thinner thread branched southwards: the Elsa. Starmer went with it, descending now through the warm air. He could smell the land, the unforgettable scented breath of Italy. He crossed a hill at the valley's end and saw the city, red and ochre against reseda.

He could still overfly; but as he birded lower the roofs parted to show the Piazza del Campo and the slim dominating column of the Torre del Mangio. They drew him irresistibly, and he dropped towards them.

The city had recently opened for its season and there were a few people about. Lunch was being served at the café at the top of the Piazza, and he shared a table with an American who asked him if he had been here before. Starmer said yes, though not for a long time.

"I come every summer. The world's most perfect city, by my reckoning. And don't they keep it in wonderful shape? Just think of it -- the entire centre retained just the way it was. And totally unoccupied for half the year."

"Not totally."

"Well, I suppose some of the preservation boys come here. I meant, by visitors."

"It's possible to visit."

"The hotel closes."

"The Custodian will put you up, if you make a special request. We stayed with him."

"In winter?"

"Yes. We had good weather. Cold, but clear."

"I might try it some time. Except it's a long way to come to Europe, in winter."

Starmer nodded. "A long way."

He walked alone through empty streets, climbing the hill to the cathedral but not going inside. Instead he went to the Museo dell' Opera and

upstairs to the Duccio room. The room was empty too, and heavy with a silence that the tiny mumble of the conditioner only emphasized. Nothing had changed. The paintings hung where they had twenty years ago, and for more than a century before that. He stood before the Mesta, with its concourse of saints clustered round the central figure of the Virgin. All that gold, and those flowers of faces framed by their slender haloes. Flesh showed green where pigmentation had been lost, and you could see the specking of worm-holes. For nearly seven centuries after Duccio painted it, it had crumbled little by little. Since then, a halt to deterioration. A man viewing it not just seven centuries but seven millennia hence would find no further change. If any man were left to look. He heard the footsteps, but only turned when the voice spoke close behind him.

"Bellissima. Non e vero?"

Starmer said: "And she still has you to watch over her, Carlo."

Recognition took a moment. When it came, the remembered grin transformed Traporti's hatchet face.

"Michael! After so long. And Katherine -- she is with you?"

"No. Katherine's dead."

Traporti put a hand on his shoulder. "That is hard to believe." He shook his head. "My Pia is also dead, three years since. But Katherine was so much younger."

"You're still Custodian?"

"Yes. It is what I am used to, the work and the city. Are you staying at the Continentale?"

"I only birded in a couple of hours ago. I hadn't decided about staying."

"But you must! With me. You cannot rush away after so long."

"No," Starmer said. "I suppose I can't."

Traporti had kept the same apartment, looking down over the piazza, in a building otherwise unoccupied and sealed. An elevator took them to the fourth floor and a vestibule still filled with exotic potted plants. That had been Pia's hobby; presumably Traporti had continued it.

Starmer had been trying to recall Pia's appearance but could not bring her to mind. In the living room, though, there was a high-relief print which he studied while Traporti was getting them drinks. It was not that she had not been distinctive, with a dark oval face recalling Duccio's Virgin. She was Sienese by ancestry, he remembered, and had brought Traporti here from his home in the Po valley. Yes, certainly distinctive. Strange that, forgetting her so completely, he had recognized Traporti instantly.

"Campari, extra touch of bitters, ice and soda, twist of orange. How is that?"

No, not really strange. He nodded.

"Perfect."

"That month we had, the four of us. I remember it well. I hoped we might meet again."

He shrugged. Starmer remembered too: the calls Traporti had made to them afterwards, his own bleak responses and the Italian's gradual awareness of their being unwelcome. And Katherine's protests, into which he had read so many things, and the eventual silence into which he read still more. With a desolation of insight, he thought: what a bastard I was. And yet, despite that, despite death and grief, the question remained and he hungered for an answer.

Traporti talked without prompting of his life. It was a full one in summer, with the tourists, the hotel and two restaurants, shops, Bird-servicing station, information centre. In the winter it was quieter, but he found enough to occupy him. He hunted still. His eye was not what it had been, but on the other hand game was more plentiful every year. "My freezer is well stocked," he said. "Tonight I shall make you an arrosto misto della caccia. You remember? With a Montepulciano wine." Starmer went to the window. The piazza was pink and white in sunlight, its stones quivering with heat, the tower standing phallic guard. Once the air had echoed with the cries of Ghibelline and Guelph, in that long struggle against Florence during which the Sienese began building a cathedral to outshine all in Christendom, to the glory of God and the City of the Wolf. Until the Black Death came, putting an end both to the patriotic struggle and religious ambition. Yet for centuries after that the city had gone on living, with generations being born, begetting, giving way to new. He called back to Traporti: "Wasn't there talk of reviving the Palio? Nothing came of it?" "No. And it would have been wrong. Preserving buildings is one thing, resurrecting a horse race quite another. The Palio belongs to the past. It is best left to the authenticators."

They sat over the dinner table, against a window, as dusk enfolded the city. They were well down the second bottle of wine. Traporti asked: "If I had not found you in the Museo, would you have looked for me?" Starmer paused before answering, truthfully: "I don't know." "Perhaps providence directed my steps. I visit my Duccios often, but not every day. It is more than a week since I was there last." Starmer stared out silently. The air was full of swallows, clouds of them sweeping round in their final mass flight before settling for the night. A single figure walked down the slope of the piazza and two others, male and female, stood close together by the fountain. The tower was sharp-edged against a purpling sky that held a single star. Water sparkled, gushing from the wolf's stone mouth into the basin where a late loitering pigeon fluffed its feathers. "So beautiful," Traporti said. "Yes." "A beauty of which one does not tire. And to share it is to enjoy it the more. I miss Pia most at such a time as this, when we sat together at the day's end. It has been longer for me than you, of course. One grows accustomed. But to some things, never." Starmer sipped his wine. Undeniably there was peace here, for anyone with the will to claim it. Traporti said: "You are a young man still, Michael. To me, at least. What will you do with your life?" "I haven't decided." "Go back to your garden?" "I destroyed it, before I left." "You could make another?" "I suppose so." When, after a pause, Traporti spoke again, it was in a more earnest tone. "Listen, Michael. Why not stay with me? We have each lost life's companion. It would be a help perhaps for both of us." "Thank you. But I don't think I could do that."

"As well as this apartment I have my villa outside the city. You could make an English garden, here in Tuscany."

"No"

"At least, consider it." He poured the last of the wine. "Visit your friend Leoni, as you plan. Rest and ease your spirit. But you would not think of staying permanently there?"

"No."

"It is a fierce place, Sicily, too fierce for your English blood. Tuscany is different. This has always been a second home for your poets and painters. Bask a while in the Sicilian sun. Then come north again, come here."

Starmer did not answer. The figures had left the fountain and were walking in the direction of the hotel, their hands linked. The woman wore a white dress. In the dusk she was a blur; and young, and beautiful.

Traporti said: "Though I love the city at all seasons, it is best in winter, when one has it to oneself and the streets seem to echo with voices of the past. You remember?"

Starmer drank his wine. "I remember. We'd just married. We'd planned to bird south to Africa, for winter sunshine."

"But you paused here, and we persuaded you to stay, Pia and I."

"You more than Pia."

Traporti laughed. "It was I who did the talking! That was always so. She was a quiet one, my Pia."

"Why?" Traporti looked at him. "Why did you want us to stay?"

"Because it is good, having guests in winter, when no-one otherwise comes to Siena. And we liked you. Why else?"

"That last day..."

Traporti shook his head. "I do not remember. It is twenty years, after all."

Starmer spoke slowly. "I came into this room. I'd been for a final walk round the city, on my own. I entered quietly. You and Katherine were here -- I don't know where Pia was. And you and she were kissing."

"Were we?"

"You looked at me over her shoulder, realizing I was in the room. You smiled, and said: 'I am kissing your wife goodbye.'"

"Your memory is better than mine! For kisses, at least."

"What else?" Starmer asked.

"What do you mean: what else?"

"What else happened, during that month? There were opportunities for you and she to be alone. Did you take them?"

"Strange questions! An English joke?" He studied Starmer's face. "No, not a joke, I think. And not something which comes just now into your mind. You have thought of this before. Those times I called you, after you had gone back to England... the strangeness in your manner. Because of this? It was because of this we did not see you again?"

"I'm asking you: what happened?"

"Why did you not ask Katherine?"

"I did."

"And her answer?"

"That there was nothing." He could not conceal bitterness. "No more than a friendly kiss."

"You did not believe her?"

"I didn't know."

"You poor chap." The English expression sounded ludicrous, but Starmer had no urge to laugh. "And what would it have mattered, anyway?"

"Never mind that. Tell me!"

Traporti drained his own glass. "Were there other times you had such doubts, during your life together?"

"Yes."

"And her replies about those?"

"The same."

"With the same effect, no doubt. She was very beautiful, your Katherine. And -- simpatica. Men would always be drawn to her beauty, be warmed by her smile. You demand to know about that first time -- here in Siena? I tell you: nothing happened. Nothing beyond what you saw -- a kiss of good friends, in parting. So, I have told you. Are you reassured?"

Starmer did not speak. Traporti went on:

"No, because you cannot believe me either. And reasonably so: if we had shared a bed, she and I, what good would it do to say it now, and make a liar of her? Therefore you ask, but do not listen. That is the sadness."

The piazza was empty. All the swallows had gone, and the sky was beginning to be full of stars.

"We all suffer loneliness," Traporti said. "I too, in my beautiful city.

But my loneliness is from outside me. Yours is within, Michael. I pity you for it."

V

Starmer lay on a ledge of rock, with sunlight pink beyond his eyelids. The heat both numbed and entranced him. He thought how good it would be to lie like this forever, hearing only the quiet slap of water below, drained of everything but an inner core of consciousness.

The sound of Leoni scrambling up the rocks was an irritant which he would have liked to ignore but could not. The shadow of his body fell across Starmer, and a drop of cool water splashed his arm. Leoni said:

"You should take a dip, Michael. It is perfect."

"Perhaps later."

"Look down there," Leoni said. "See how clear. Every pebble visible, through five metres of water."

Reluctantly Starmer sat up, shading his eyes with his hand. Leoni squatted beside him. He had kept himself very fit; his body could have been that of a man in mid thirties, black-haired, strongly muscled.

They were alone. The youngsters who worked as voluntary servants simply to be near Leoni had been excluded: Leoni was making a point of devoting himself to his guest. It was unnecessary and a bit exhausting, but kind; and Starmer felt an obligation to respond. He duly admired the sea which was indeed crystal clear, tinged a light blue directly below but deep cobalt further out. Outcroppings of rock gleamed through it. He said, pointing to one of them:

"An odd sort of reef, that."

"That? Not a reef. A wreck."

"A strange shape for a ship. Almost square."

"Landing craft," Leoni said. "E.C.T." He delighted in displaying his knowledge of unusual facts and terms. "From the Hitler war. The British and Americans landed troops along this coast."

"Might you do something on that?"

Leoni shook his head. "I'm interested in the twentieth century, but not in

their wars. All very massive and shapeless -- dull." He stood up and stretched. "Sicily has known more interesting invasions. The Athenian expedition, for instance. The Athenian fleet was trapped in Syracuse harbour behind a boom, and their soldiers driven into a river between high banks. A river of blood by nightfall. The survivors -- citizens of Athens, who had listened to Pericles in the Assembly urging them on to victory -- were sold as slaves. Demosthenes died in that battle. Yes, I might well do it, some time."

Leoni had always shown an artless delight in talking of his work. He didn't actually claim to be the world's greatest authenticator, but no-one listening could have doubted he believed it. But he had been like that even as a student. For Leoni, fame had always been not only worth any effort but something certain of attainment.

After he had temporarily exhausted the subject of himself, Leoni returned to the delights offered by the local waters and this time Starmer acquiesced to his urgings. They swam round the headland to a cave that opened into a grotto. Inside in the dimness the water's surface shimmered with distant reflections of the outer world. Hauling himself up onto a flat rock and giving Starmer a hand to follow, Leoni said:

"The word 'grotesque' comes from grotto. Or, in Italian, 'grotta' -- a cave. But by a peculiar derivation. When the Emperor Nero's palace in Rome was first excavated, they found frescoes of the school of painting fashionable in his time. Because they were discovered in what seemed a cave, the style of painting was named 'grotta-esque'. Interesting, don't you think?"

Another small jewel out of Leoni's mental treasure chest. Starmer said: "Yes. Very interesting."

A maglev line ran along the five miles between beach and villa, further indication of Leoni's affluence. The car, riding on its force lines just clear of the ground, was open, providing a pleasant breeze, rich with the scent of oranges.

The villa, growing out of the hillside, was complexly structured. It was surrounded by a formal garden at the end of which, concealed from view by evergreens, stood the two-roomed huts in which his acolytes slept. They had their meals in the villa, though not, except on special invitation, with their host.

Starmer ate with Leoni and his wife Elvira. He had met her a couple of times before and been slightly puzzled by her. Where Leoni was garrulous and full of nervous energy, she had a cold stillness and rarely smiled. She was, he would have said, handsome, but her movements were graceless -- unfeminine. When she spoke, which was not often, her voice was dry, slightly harsh.

But previous encounters had been away from the villa. Seeing her here, Starmer realized what she meant to Leoni. She ran the place and everything connected with it with efficiency and authority. And she subordinated herself and all else to a single end: the protection of Leoni's genius. The disciples, initially vetted by her, were of both sexes. A couple of the girls were pretty, and Starmer wondered if she counted procuring as part of her office. But he quickly realized that if so he had the gender wrong; it was the young men Leoni stroked and petted.

Starmer was dubious at first about her reaction to him, but her devotion to Leoni's wishes was absolute, his whims enforced with her iron. Starmer

was well looked after in this house of luxury. His clothes were taken away the first night and replaced with brightly embroidered silk robes similar to the ones Leoni wore about the house, and servants consulted him constantly, in fact excessively, as to his requirements.

Food was exquisitely prepared and served. Apparently it was a fad of Leoni's to dine, a week at a time, in the manner of other lands or ages. This week, in Starmer's honour, the fashion was Elizabethan England. Roast swan provided the main dish on the first night, suckling pig on the second. Realism was pursued to the extent of serving the meats on saucers of bread rather than plates, with fingers as the principal implements for eating. It was slightly messy, but the silver finger-bowls with their floating rose petals were constantly renewed.

Starmer wondered again as he spooned up syllabub about Leoni's reason for inviting him. Out of compassion over Katherine's death he had presumed, but now that scarcely seemed adequate as an explanation. They had been friends of a sort in their youth, but there had been little contact since.

And Leoni, as the monologue he was presently delivering on the presentation that had won him last year's Kutsuni prize demonstrated, remained a thorough-going egotist. Not, surely, a man to offer refuge to an old acquaintance in his bereavement for simple humanity's sake.

Leoni's studio was on three floors, and constituted the centre and apex of the villa. The top two were working premises - one above ground level, looking across the garden, the other artificially lit and soundproofed. Below that again, and twice the size, was the combined library and showing room. Its focal point was the ur-sphere, a bubble of crystal ten feet in diameter.

Some days after Starmer's arrival they assembled there: Leoni and Elvira, Starmer, the disciples. Leoni had completed a new work and this was to be its first showing. There was an air of excitement and anticipation.

As the room lights dimmed, the ur-sphere glowed with a milky radiance from which a city skyline slowly took shape. The sphere was of madisonite, totally reflectionless: spectators looked directly and without distortion into a microcosm.

Leoni's subject this time was not one of the historical set-pieces for which he was famous, but a more intimate study: of metropolitan life at the height of the pollution era. From the besmogged skyline he dipped into close-ups of automobiles packed in rows in ugly streets, their horns snarling and wailing, garbage cans overflowing with filth, a rat scurrying away from a hunchback who choked in a paroxysm of coughing before lighting up another cigarette. You saw the grey face, the yellowed fingers, heard the wheeze of breath, and smelt the stink of stale tobacco for an instant before the conditioner whisked it away.

There was a backing track based on popular songs of the period, in particular those composed -- Leoni informed them -- by two men called Lennon and McCartney; airing his knowledge further with the information that they had been performers as well as composers, strolling players one might say. The music was nostalgic, most effective in a minor key. One song recurred in snatches, from a melancholy voice whose nasal tone, Leoni observed with a laugh, was probably due to blocked sinuses, a common disability of the age.

The story concerned two young men employed as clerks in a vast factory-office. Their idealistic views were contrasted with the sordid

actuality of their environment. One boarded in a grimy bed-sitting room in a decaying tenement, run by a harridan of a landlady and permeated by foul cooking smells and the raucous blare of radios through thin walls. The other lived with his family: war-crippled father, slatternly mother, sister reeking of cheap scent and looking for cheap sensations; younger brother a heroin addict, injecting himself in a lavatory cubicle. There were gasps at the naked realism of that scene.

Their friendship had homosexual overtones, but the only specific reference came in a scene where, talking high-mindedly on a park bench at night, they were confronted by a policeman who threatened them with a charge of indecency, and extracted all the money they had as a bribe for not proceeding with it. Their real bond was a shared disgust for the world that surrounded them and a determination to escape from it.

The story dealt with the obstacles that fate and their time put between them and their aspirations. They had hopes of acquiring a smallholding, remote from the areas of pollution, but needed capital to buy it. Attempts to achieve this honestly were frustrated; on the other hand, there were temptations towards easy crooked money. The sister had become the mistress of a gang-leader; the young brother offered them an opportunity to push drugs.

Eventually, with the aid of a benevolent early conservationist, they achieved their objective. But that evening, taking a final walk through the city's mean streets in a choking yellow fog, a fight between blacks and whites spilled out from a grimy bar and engulfed them. The mob dispersed to the shrilling of police whistles. The fair-haired boy was left cradling his friend, stabbed and dying, in his arms.

There was a coda. The blond boy left the city, heading for the rural paradise they had hoped to share. From the wheel of his modest pick-up truck, he could see fields and distant hills. But behind him on the motorway two snarling sports cars diced at over a hundred miles an hour. Rocketing past him, one skidded; he tried desperately to avoid the collision but could not. The cars locked together and burst into flame. As the crash of metal subsided into a shocking stillness, with smoke rising in a dark plume from the wreckage, the nasal voice swelled up ironically: "I believe in yesterday..."

The ur-sphere faded, and room lights came on. Praise was unanimous, and ecstatic: the best thing Leoni had done, an incredible work of art... a quite perfect authentication of the late twentieth century.

Leoni offered a modest disclaimer. "Not perfect. There are minor anachronisms. The solid-fuel fire in their office is from earlier."

"Dickens..." someone suggested.

"Well, more that period, though they lasted beyond it. But not to the time of that sort of office."

"The effect, though!" That was a young man with a red quiff. "The glow of the coals, and the acrid smoke..."

"As you know," Leoni said, "I've always believed in a balance between art and authentication -- that sometimes one needs to sacrifice one, at least in a minor degree, for the sake of the other. And exaggeration is also permissible, within limits. Take the incident in the park. The police were corrupt, but it's improbable that blackmail would have occurred in so blatant a form. One is compressing, you understand -- pointing things up." A girl said: "Actually it counterpointed the scene with the two capitalist bosses -- illustrating the way corruption permeated society from top to

bottom."

The discussion, or panegyric, went on for some time. Eventually Leoni made a small gesture of tiredness, perhaps of satiety, and Elvira seized on the cue. She told them, in her clipped dry voice, that it was time to permit the Maestro to relax. These first showings were always a strain.

They accepted the dismissal obediently, and she went with them. Starmer rose to leave too, but Leoni asked him to stay. When they were alone, he said:

"I feel tired. Make me a drink, would you?"

Leoni was drinking Scotch, possibly as another gesture of respect for his guest. When he took him the glass, Leoni said:

"Not having one yourself?"

"Not just now."

Leoni stretched, and sighed. "These affairs do take it out of me. The first reactions."

"I suppose they do."

Leoni was silent for a time; then said abruptly:

"I never understood why you didn't become an authenticator."

"Insufficient talent."

"But you did have talent, when we were students. Some of the stuff you did before specialization showed great promise, and imagination. In fact you were the only one in our year whose work I thought could eventually be better than mine. Why did you give it up?"

"I thought I'd rather be a gardener."

There was a pause again. Leoni's posture, lying back in the chair, was strained. He asked Starmer:

"My authentication -- what did you really think about it? You were the only one who made no comment."

"Elvira didn't."

"Elvira." He shrugged. "The only one." He came forward in his chair. "Tell me what you thought. Honestly."

His eyes fixed on Starmer with intensity. In that moment Starmer knew the reason for his being asked to stay here. Katherine's death had been the excuse. The explanation went a long way back, to the days when even Leoni had been unsure of himself. He had been summoned to testify to unquestionable success, and to put old doubts to rest. It was necessary that his praise should be added to the acclamation of the disciples.

Leoni's peace of mind required it.

And it was something, surely, not too difficult to provide. One could call it a return for hospitality. Under the expectant gaze he started to frame the clichés. But he could not utter them. Echoing Leoni, but in query, he said:

"Honestly?"

"Of course!"

"I thought it was cleverly done, in places brilliant; but false."

Leoni was stung and showed it. "False?"

"To its subject."

Leoni said, heavily sarcastic: "I didn't realize you were an expert on late twentieth-century metropolitan life!"

His anger was moderated by self-confidence. He would have researched exhaustively, as he always did. Starmer said:

"I'm sure the physical details were right, except in deliberate errors, like the coal fire, where you knowingly sacrificed accuracy for effect."

"You condemn that?"

"No. I was thinking of something more important."

Leoni held up the glass and looked at him across it.

"Perhaps you could specify?"

"Your characters were unconvincing."

"In what way?"

"In every way that matters. They belong to this time, not that. Like the philanthropic conservationist."

"Are you trying to tell me," Leoni said in a tolerantly contemptuous tone, "that there were no generous conservationists in the twentieth century; and no poor devils who wanted to escape from those hideous conurbations?"

"No. I wasn't thinking of the views they expressed. They were unconvincing because they were unreal -- pallid, passionless. Creatures of a dying culture. Our culture."

"But the twentieth century was a classic example of decadence! You must have read Marez -- the parallels he draws with the late Roman empire..."

"I said dying, not decadent. Decadence normally carries the seeds of new growth. Our society doesn't."

"But that's absurd!"

"We scavenge on our ancestors. The old art forms are dead, or exist merely as pastiche. Authentication is all we have to offer, and it's purely parasitic."

"Parasitic? Because it takes the past as its subject?"

"It goes deeper than that. There used to be a perversion called voyeurism, in which people took sexual pleasure from watching the activities of others. It doesn't exist, of course, in the sanitized world of today. But authentication is voyeurism of a more pitiable kind. It flourishes in a world emotionally so impoverished that it has to conjure up ghosts from the despised past, and suck some kind of vitality from them. Except that it's all an illusion. You get nothing from ghosts but emptiness. Do you know what Henry James said about art?"

"Late nineteenth-century novelist," Leoni said. "An American, who chose to live in England. No, I haven't read him. His work was confined to a limited milieu, I understand."

"And not one offering much scope to the authenticator. Yes, a precious man perhaps, writing about precious people. But he said one unprecious thing -- that the flower of art only blooms where the ground has been well manured. As a gardener I can appreciate that."

"But you destroyed your garden, didn't you?"

Leoni was smiling, uncomplicatedly cheerful again. He had not got the praise he'd sought, but being able to categorize Starmer as a misfit, an aberrant, made up for it.

"Perhaps you understand destruction better than you do creativity!"

Starmer said: "I make no claims for myself. Yes, I destroyed it."

VI

Looking up by chance, Starmer caught sight of a distant dot in the sky. He assumed it was a traveller following the coastline towards the resort fifty miles south; but the dot grew in size, approaching the island.

Judging by the green and white of the wings the Bird came from Italy; but it was Martin who got out.

He said: "How are you, Michael?"

"Well enough. As you see." Starmer had been briefly puzzled, but the

explanation was obvious. "A bug?"

Martin nodded. "Inside the wing arch."

"So you've been tracking me since I left England?"

"Yes."

"And like a conscientious Counsellor have come to inspect your wandering sheep. It's a long way to travel on a pastoral visit."

Martin smiled. "And the final lap in a hired Italian Bird. They gear them for a different kind of flying than I'm used to. More than a little tricky. I airshipped to Trieste and picked it up there."

"As I said, a long way."

"I gather you left Leoni fairly suddenly."

"Yes. I thought you might get a call about that."

"You said one or two odd things, according to him."

"Only odd? I criticized authentication as an art form, and his work in particular. Surely that qualifies as raving insanity?"

Still smiling, Martin said: "I thought your criticism was directed more towards the modern world in general."

"That too."

"You feel we lead impoverished lives compared with our forebears. We lack the primitive luxuries of overcrowding, disease, violence, war. Isn't that it?"

"It's a way of putting it."

They stood not far from a small grove of olive trees, whose leaves flickered from grey-green to silver-grey in a breeze from the sea. The sky was mostly clear but there was high cloud to the west. Starmer had a feeling that the weather, perfect during the week he had been here, might be on the point of breaking.

"Do you mind if we sit in the shade?" Martin asked. "I find this heat a bit extreme after ten days of steady rain in England."

They sat on warm powdery earth under the shivering olive trees; nearby a lizard was immobile in a patch of sunlight.

Martin said: "Can we talk about Katherine?"

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"Does that matter? Let's say I don't want to discuss her, with you or anyone."

"Haven't you already done so?"

Starmer looked at him keenly. "Did you have a call from Siena as well? Or was it the other way round? Checking up on my contacts?"

"I was thinking of further north than Siena."

"Maria? You have been thorough. And presumably they've been talkative."

"What you must try to understand," Martin said, "is that people are concerned for you. You may not see things their way, but you should accept that they mean well."

"Mean well? Oh yes, I accept that. Did she tell you how that particular episode ended -- with me pumping my seed into her? Not that it matters. Infertile seed into a barren womb. A betrayal lacking even biological justification."

"Betrayal seems important to you." Starmer was silent. "I gather you revealed doubts, to both Maria and Carlo, over the possibility that Katherine may have known other men sexually during your marriage." He ignored Starmer's gesture of revulsion. "Would you like to have the doubts resolved?"

"They can't be, now."

"You forget: I was her Counsellor too."

Starmer looked away. "I'm not interested."

"Why? Because you're afraid of what you might find out?"

The lizard twitched, then turned again to stone. Starmer said nothing.

"Let's talk about you then, instead of Katherine. I've been going through your record. You had the usual routine analysis at eighteen. It doesn't seem to have been very satisfactory in your case."

"No. Not on either side."

"You were recorded as uncooperative. Would you accept that as accurate?"

"I wouldn't reject it. The whole business struck me as pointless."

"According to your analyst you had an underlying pregenital neurosis, to which you'd made a good superficial adjustment."

"Kind of him to say so."

"Neuroses are practically unknown now, under normal conditions of nurturing. Yours was traumatic in origin. Your analyst felt you had good ego strength and had adjusted well, so he did not pursue it when you refused therapy. In point of fact, he had information on the cause of your disturbance which he kept to himself."

"Why?"

"He felt it would not have helped at that stage to discuss it with you."

"And you feel it would now?"

"It might. The circumstances were distinctly unusual. You were an only child and your mother had a fatal cerebral haemorrhage when you were eight months old. Normally you would have been picked up within an hour, and intensive surrogate care would have minimized deprivation. But your father was away, you and your mother alone in the house, and the alarm system was defective. It was thirty-six hours before you were found. Your physical condition was poor, but could be put right. The emotional wound was a more difficult problem. Thirty-six hours is a long time to a baby, and you were at a critical stage of interrelating. The wound healed superficially, but not at a deeper level. You developed the neurosis which is responsible for your basic mistrust of relationships."

"Explaining," Starmer suggested, "my failure to count my blessings as a member of the late twenty-first century elect?"

"That would seem probable."

"And the remedy? I'm sure you have one."

"Analytical therapy."

"Why should you think I would be more inclined to accept it now than when it was first offered?"

"You're older, and one would hope more sensible. And you need it. You've been hurt badly, Michael. Bereavement is painful for anyone. It was worse for you because it reactivated the original feeling of loss, of being abandoned."

"And my reward for cooperativeness? Adjustment to society: healthy relations with my fellow men -- and women?"

"Yes."

"But perhaps I don't want that. Perhaps, despite the poor prognosis, I managed to have one good relationship in my life; and perhaps it was so good I don't want any other."

"You're talking about your love for Katherine?"

"Just that."

Martin rubbed his hand in the dust. An incongruity, Starmer thought: those

sensitive white fingers had nothing in common with this ancient soil.

Martin said, after a pause:

"Do you remember the words you spoke, when you realized she was dead?"

"No. I don't remember much of that day."

"You spoke them to me. You said: 'She was looking at you, not me.'"

"Did I?"

"Was that an expression of love, or resentment? Like your jealousy of Carlo, and the nagging doubts about other men. You were faithful to her through twenty years of marriage."

"In your view, that was wrong?"

"Shall we say -- unusual? And yet within days of her death you had sexual congress with another woman, a stranger. Out of physical need? Surely not. You'd been continent for far longer periods -- during the months in which she was dying, for instance. So why then?"

He leaned forward, and the shifting leaves dashed his face with sunlight.

"You called it betrayal, but might not reprisal be the better term? There was a core of resentment inside that love you cherish. Dying, she abandoned you, as your mother had done. And you hated her for it; and wanted to get even. But the hatred wasn't anything new. It had been there all the time. It was there when you were first married, that winter in Siena."

The olive branches shook in a sharper breeze. It would probably rain before dark.

"I don't say these things to hurt you," Martin said, "but to help. You're in distress, and you don't have to be. But first you have to understand."

"I understand," Starmer said. "I wonder if you do."

"What?"

"Of course there was hate along with the love. Odi et amo: a young poet said it a long time ago. 'I hate and I love.' He went on to say: 'I do not know why, but I know I feel the pain.'"

"The pain can be cured. That's a promise."

"Yes, I'm sure it can. Just as, on a larger scale, those other things were cured: the violence and disease and war. Perhaps I prefer the sickness to the remedy."

"Because you yourself are ill."

"By your standards. Not by mine. Keep your sane and healthy paradise of balance and harmony. I'll take the depths; and the heights."

"So you choose the pain?"

"If you put it that way, yes."

It was some moments before Martin spoke again. He asked:

"Are you planning to stay on the island?"

"For the time being. Unless an air-ambulance happens to put down. I realize you can always score a technical victory. Analysis may require cooperation, but drugs don't."

"In my view," Martin said, "you are not a danger, either to yourself or society; which would be the only valid justification for action of that sort."

"Thank you."

"We're not monsters, you know."

"I do know. It might almost be better if you were."

"You have all you need, from the material point of view?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll leave you in peace. You know how to reach me if you want to."

"Yes."

Martin stood up, and Starmer did the same. The lizard skittered away to a crevice in the rocks. Martin said:

"I notice you've been doing some digging over there."

"Another garden?"

"Probably."

"I'd like to see it when it's finished."

"It never will be," Starmer said. "That's the point."

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John Christopher's new novel, *Bad Dream*, is serialised in the magazine *Spectrum SF*, starting in #4, December 2000.

Christopher was born in Liverpool in 1922, and has published around 50 novels under various names.

His science fiction novels include *The Death of Grass* (1956), *The World in Winter* (1962), *A Wrinkle in the Skin* (1965) and *Pendulum* (1968) -- several of his novels will be reissued by Wildside's Cosmos imprint in 2001.

His children's sf and fantasy books include the *Tripods* trilogy (1967-68) and the *Sword of the Spirits* trilogy (1970-72). His work has appeared under the names Hilary Ford, William Godfrey, Peter Graaf, Peter Nichols and Anthony Rye, as well as under his real name, Samuel Youd.

"*A Journey South*" was originally written for the anthology *Last Dangerous Visions*, which has yet to appear... The story eventually found first publication in the British magazine *Interzone* and will be reprinted in John Christopher's short story collection, published by Cosmos in the summer of 2001.

Elsewhere on the web:

John Christopher at Amazon (US) and at the Internet Bookshop (UK).

Find out about *Spectrum SF*, the magazine serialising John Christopher's latest novel, *Bad Dream*.

John Christopher's ISFDB bibliography.

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