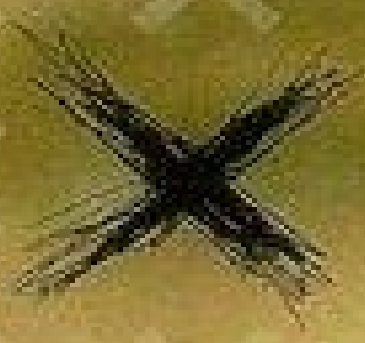
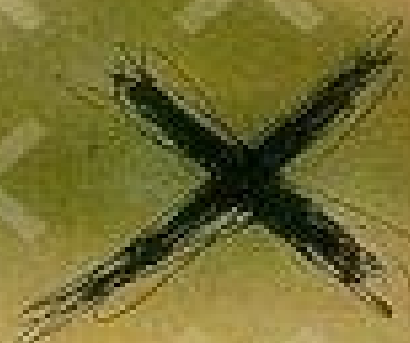


COMPLICITY



IAIN BANKS

"Literate, passionate and well-paced, *Complicity* succeeds as both an absorbing entertainment and a chilling examination of accountability in a morally bankrupt world."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

v1.0 : 14 Jun 2001 : By HugHug. Underscores for italics.

COMPLICITY

n. 1. the fact of being an accomplice, esp. in a criminal act

A few spliffs, a spot of mild S&M, phone through the copy for tomorrow's front page, catch up with the latest from your mystery source - could be big, could be very big - in fact, just a regular day at the office for free-wheeling, substance-abusing Cameron Colley, a fully-paid-up Gonzo hack on an Edinburgh newspaper.

The source is pretty thin, but Cameron senses a scoop and checks out a series of bizarre deaths from a few years ago - only to find that the police are checking out a series of bizarre deaths that are happening right now. And Cameron just might know more about it than he'd care to admit ...

Involvement; connection; liability - *Complicity* is a stunning exploration of the morality of greed, corruption and violence, venturing fearlessly into the darker recesses of human purpose.

'A remarkable novel ... superbly Grafted, funny and intelligent' *Times*

'A stylishly executed and well produced study in fear, loathing and victimisation which moves toward doom in measured steps' *Observer*

'Compelling and sinister ... a very good thriller' *Glasgow Herald*

'Fast moving ... tightly plotted' *Sunday Times*

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CHAPTER 1 : INDEPENDENT DETERRENT

You hear the car after an hour and a half. During that time you've been here in the darkness, sitting on the small telephone seat near the front door, waiting. You only moved once, after half an hour, when you went back through to the kitchen to check on the maid. She was still there, eyes white in the half-darkness. There was a strange, sharp smell in the air and you thought of cats, though you know he doesn't have cats. Then you realised the maid had pissed herself. You felt a moment of disgust, and then a little guilt.

She whimpered behind the black masking-tape when you approached. You tested the tape securing her to the little kitchen chair, and the rope holding it against the still-warm Aga. The tape looked just as you'd left it; either she hadn't been struggling or she had but it had had no effect. The rope was good and taut. You glanced at the shaded windows, then shone your torch at her hands, taped to the rear leg of the chair. Her fingers looked all right; it was a little difficult to tell because of her dark olive Filipino skin, but you didn't think you'd cut off her circulation. You looked at her feet, tiny in the low-heeled black slippers; they appeared healthy too. A drop of urine fell and joined a pool on the tiled floor beneath the chair.

She was quivering with fear when you looked into her face. You knew you looked terrifying in the dark balaclava, but there was nothing you could do about that. You patted her shoulder as reassuringly as you could. Then you went back to the telephone seat by the front door. There were three phone calls; you listened to the answer-machine intercept them.

'You know what to do,' his scratchily recorded voice said to each caller. His voice is quick, clipped and vaguely upper-class. 'Do it after the beep.'

Tobias, old chap. How the devil are you? Geoff. Wondering how you're fixed next Saturday. Fancy a foursome out at sunny Sunningdale? Give me a tinkle. Bye.'

(beep)

'Ah ... yes, ahh, Sir Toby. Mark Bain again. Ah, I rang earlier, and the last couple of days. Umm ... well, I'd still very much like to interview you, as I've said, Sir Toby, but, well, I know you don't usually give interviews, but I do assure you I've no axe to grind, and I do very much appreciate, as a fellow professional, what you've achieved, and would genuinely like to find out more about your views. Anyway. Clearly it is up to you, of course, and I do respect that. I'll... ah, I'll try your office in the morning. Thank you. Thank you very much. Good evening.'

(beep)

'You abrupt old bastard, Tobes. Give me a ring about that diary story; I'm still not happy. And get that bloody car phone repaired.'

You smiled at that one. That rough, colonial voice, its commanding tone contrasting with the Harrovian chumminess of the first message and the whining, working-class Midland entreaties of the middle one. The proprietor. Now there was a man you'd like to meet. You glanced up into the darkness towards the wall at the foot of the stairs, where there are various framed photographs. There is one of Sir Toby Bissett with Mrs Thatcher, both smiling. You smiled, too.

Then you just sat there, breathing carefully, thinking, keeping calm. You took the gun out once,

reaching round under your thin canvas jacket to the small of your back and easing it from between shirt and jeans. The Browning felt warm through your thin leather gloves. You snicked the magazine out and back in again a couple of times and ran your thumb over the safety catch, making sure it was on. You put the gun back again.

Then you reached down, pulled up the right leg of your jeans and slipped the Marttiini out of its lightly oiled sheath. The knife's slim blade refused to glint, until you tipped it just so and it reflected the little, flashing red light on the answer-machine. There was a small greasy smudge on the steel blade. You blew on it and rubbed it with one gloved finger, then inspected it again. Satisfied, you slid the knife back into its leather sheath and rolled the denim back down. And waited until the Jaguar drew up outside, engine idling in the quiet square, bringing you back to the present.

You stand up and look through the spyhole in the broad wooden door. You see the dark square outside distorted by the lens. You can see the steps down to the pavement, the railings on either side of the steps, the parked cars sitting at the kerb and the dark masses of the trees in the centre of the square. The Jag is right outside, beyond the cars at the kerb. Street lights reflect orange on the car's door as it swings open. A man and a woman get out.

He's not alone. You watch the woman straighten the skirt of her suit as the man says something to the driver and then closes the Jaguar's door.

'Shit,' you whisper. Your heart is pounding.

The man and the woman walk towards the steps. The man is holding a briefcase. It's him: Sir Toby Bissett, the man with the quick, clipped voice on the answer-machine. As he and the woman reach the pavement and make for the steps, he takes the woman's right elbow in his hand, shepherding her towards the door you're looking through.

'Shit!' you whisper again, and glance back down the side of the stairs towards the hall and the kitchen where the maid is and where the window through which you entered is still half open. You hear their footsteps on the pavement. The skin on your forehead prickles beneath the balaclava. He lets go of the woman's elbow, switches the briefcase to his other hand and reaches into a trouser pocket. They are halfway up the steps. You start to panic, and stare at the heavy chain hanging at the side of the door by the bulky Chubb. Then you hear the sound of his key in the lock, startlingly close, and hear him say something, and hear the woman's nervous laugh and you know that it's too late and you become calm, standing away from the door until your back is against the coats on the coat-stand, and you slide your hand into the pocket of the canvas jacket and it closes round the thick weight of the shot-filled leather cosh.

The door opens, towards you. You hear the Jag's engine purring away. The hall light comes on. He says, 'Here we are.'

Then the door closes and they are there in front of you and in that instant you see him turned slightly away, putting his briefcase down on the table beside the answer-machine. The girl - blonde, tan, mid-twenties, holding a slim briefcase - glances at you. She does a double-take. You are smiling behind the mask, putting one finger up to your lips. She hesitates. You hear the answer-machine spin back, squeaking. As the girl starts to open her mouth, you step forward, behind him.

You swing the cosh and hit him very hard across the back of the head, a hand's width above his jacket collar. He collapses instantly, falling against the wall and down over the table, dislodging the answer machine as you turn to the girl.

She opens her mouth, watching the man crumple to the carpet. She looks at you and you think she's going to scream and you tense, ready to punch her. Then she drops the slim briefcase and holds her shaking hands out in front of her, glancing down once at the man lying still on the floor. Her jaw is trembling.

'Look,' she says, 'just don't do anything to me.' Her voice is steadier than her hands or her jaw. She glances down at the man on the carpet. 'I don't know who - ' she gulps, eyelids fluttering nervously. You watch her trying to speak through a dry mouth. '- who you are, but I don't want anything... Just don't do anything to me. I've got money; you can have it. But this isn't anything to do with me, right? Just don't do anything to me. Okay? Please.'

She has a refined voice, a Sloane voice, a Roedean voice. You half-despise her attitude, half-admire it. You glance down at the man; he looks very still. The answer-machine lying on the carpet clicks to a stop at the end of the tape. You look back to her and nod slowly. You move your head to indicate the kitchen. She looks that way, hesitating. You point towards the kitchen with the cosh.

'Okay,' she says. 'Okay.' She walks backwards down the hall, hands still in front of her. She backs into the kitchen door, swinging it fully open. You follow her through and turn on the light. She keeps walking backwards and you hold up one hand to make her stop. She sees the maid in the chair tied to the stove. You motion her to another of the red kitchen chairs. She glances at the wide-eyed maid again and then seems to come to a decision, and sits.

You move away from her towards the working surface where the roll of black masking-tape sits. You cover her with the gun as you push the balaclava away from your mouth and pull out a length of tape with your teeth. She looks calmly, steadily at the gun, some of the colour gone from her face. You keep the gun pressed into her waist as you loop the tape round her slim, gold-braceleted wrists. You keep glancing through the doorway, down the length of the hall to the dark shape crumpled at the front door, knowing you are taking an extra, unnecessary risk. Then you put the gun away and secure her dark-stockinged ankles. She smells of _Paris_.

You put a ten-centimetre strip across her mouth and leave the kitchen, putting the light out and closing the door.

You go back to Sir Toby. He hasn't moved. You remove the balaclava and stuff it in a jacket pocket, lift your crash helmet from behind the coat-stand and put it on, then take him under the armpits and haul him upstairs, past the framed photographs. His heels bump on each step. Your breath sounds loud inside the helmet; he's heavier than you expected. He smells of something expensive you can't identify; a strand of his long grey hair falls to one side, onto his shoulder.

You drag him into the sitting room on the first floor, shouldering the door to the hall closed as you enter. The room is lit only by the street lights outside, and in the semi-darkness you stumble and almost fall over a coffee table; something falls and breaks.

'Shit,' you whisper, but keep pulling him towards the tall french windows looking out over a small

balcony onto the square. You prop him against the wall by the side of the windows and look outside. ~~couple pass on the street; you give them two minutes to leave the square and wait for a couple of cars to pass,~~ then you open the windows and step outside, into the warm Belgravia night. The square seems quiet; the city is a faint background roar in the orange darkness beyond. You look down at the marble steps leading to the front door and the tall, black spiked railings on either side of them, then you go back in, take him under the armpits again, lift him through the windows and prop him against the stone parapet of the waist-high balcony.

A last glance around: a car passes across the top of the square. You hoist him up so that he's sitting on the parapet; his head tips back and he moans. Sweat dribbles into your eyes. You feel him move weakly in your arms as you manoeuvre him into the right position, glancing down at the railings, three or four metres below. Then you tip him backwards over the edge.

He falls onto the railings, hitting with his head, hip and leg; there is a surprisingly dry cracking, crunching noise; his head twists to one side and one of the railing spikes appears through the socket of his right eye.

His body sags, arms hanging to each side of the railings, over the marble steps and the stairwell leading to the basement flat beneath; his right leg hangs over the steps. There is another faint crunching noise as the body spasms once and then goes limp. Blood spreads blackly from his mouth over the collar of his white shirt and starts to drip onto the pale marble of the steps. You back away from the parapet, glancing from side to side. Some people walk into the far end of the square, maybe forty metres away, approaching.

You turn and go back into the sitting room, locking the windows and avoiding the coffee table and the broken vase lying on the carpet. You go downstairs and walk through the kitchen, where the two women sit tied to their chairs; you leave via the same window you entered by, walking calmly through the small back garden into the mews where the motorbike is parked.

You hear the first faint, distant screams just as you take the bike's key from your pocket. You feel suddenly elated.

You're glad you didn't have to hurt the women.

It's a clear cold October day, fresh and bright with a few puffy little clouds scudding above the mountains on the chilly breeze. I look through the binoculars towards the shallow slant of Helensburgh's grid-pattern streets, then move the view up to the slopes and woods behind, then track left, across the hills on the far side of the loch and the mountains beyond. Further round still, towards the head of the loch, I can make out the gantries, jetties and buildings of the naval base. There are some distant shouts and the noise of hooters over the buzz of boat and helicopter engines; I look down to the little spit of shingle straight across from me, where a few hundred demonstrators and locals are gathered, stamping their feet and waving banners. A chopper clatters overhead. I look out into the firth, where another three helicopters are circling above the black mass of the submarine. The tug, escorting police launches and circling inflatables move slowly into the mass of CND boats. A Jet Ski cuts across the view on a wall of spray.

I put the glasses down and let them hang from my neck while I light another Silk Cut.

I'm standing on the roof of an empty freight container on a bit of waste ground near the shore in a village called Roseneath, looking out over the Gare Loch, watching the Vanguard arrive. I lift the binoculars again and look out at the submarine. It fills the view now, black and almost featureless, though I can just make out the different textures of the hull's sloped and upper surfaces.

The protesters' inflatables buzz round the perimeter of the sub's satellite system of escorting boats, trying to find a way through; the MOD inflatables are larger than the CND boats and they have bigger engines; the servicemen wear black berets and dark overalls while the CND people wear bright jackets and wave big yellow flags. The huge submarine in the centre moves forward in their midst, ploughing sedately towards the narrows. The RN tug is leading the submarine in, though not towing it. A grey fisheries patrol boat follows the flotilla. The big helicopters bark overhead.

'Hi you; give us a hand up, ya bastart.'

I look over to the edge of the container and see the head and arms of Iain Garnet. He waves.

'Following our lead as usual, eh, Iain?' I ask him, hauling him up from the top of the same oil-drum I used.

'Fuck off, Colley,' Garnet says amiably, bending to dust off the knees of his trousers. Iain works for our Glaswegian competitor, the Dispatch. He's late thirties, getting heavy round the waist and thin on top. He's wearing what looks like a late-'seventies skiing jacket over his crumpled grey suit. He nods at the cigarette in my mouth. 'Can I take a fag?'

I offer him one. His face wrinkles with disdain when he sees the packet but he takes one anyway. 'Jeez Cameron, really; Silk Cut? The cigarette for people who like to think they're giving up? I had you down as one of the last of the serious lung abusers. What happened to the Marlboros?'

'They're for cowboys like you,' I tell him, lighting his cigarette. 'What happened to your fags?'

'Left them in the car,' he says. We both turn and stand there, looking out across the blue-glittering waves at the small armada surrounding the giant submarine. The Vanguard is even bigger than I'd expected; huge, fat and black, like the biggest, blackest slug in all the world, with a few thin fins sticking here and there as an afterthought. It looks too big to fit through the narrows in front of us.

'Some fuckin beast, eh?' Iain says.

'Half a billion quid's worth, sixteen thousand tonnes -'

'Aye, aye,' Iain says wearily. 'And long as two football pitches. You got anything original though but?'

I shrug. 'Not telling you; read the article.'

'Big wean.' He looks around. 'Where's your man with the Instamatic and the dodgy model-release forms?'

I nod towards a small speedboat waiting near the entrance to the narrows. 'Getting a fish-eye view. What about yours?'

'Two,' Iain says. 'One here somewhere, the other one sharing a chopper with the Beeb.'

We both look into the sky. I count four Navy Sea Kings. Iain and I look at each other.

'Cutting it a bit fine with the helicopter, aren't they?' I ask.

He shrugs. 'Probably arguing about who tips the pilot.'

We both stare out at the sub again. The protesters' boats are constantly charging in towards the Vanguard, only to be headed off each time by the MOD boats, bulging rubber hulls bumping off each other and then bouncing over the chopping waves. Preceded by the tug, the Trident sub's bulbous nose moves smoothly towards the narrows. Ratings wearing yellow life-jackets stand at ease on the deck of the huge ship, some in front of the tall conning tower, some behind. The people on the spit of land across from us are shouting and jeering. A few might be cheering.

'Give us a shot of your binocs,' Iain says.

I hand him the glasses and he squints through them as the Navy tug leading the sub moves slowly through the narrows. *_Roisterer_*, says its nameplate.

'How's things at the *_Caley_* these days, anyway?' Iain asks.

'Oh, same as usual.'

'Wow!' he says, taking his eyes away from the glasses and looking shocked. 'Steady now; sure you want to say that? We're still on the record, you know.'

'You'll be on the fucking *_Record_*, you hack.'

'You east-coast boys are just jealous of our computer system because ours works.'

'Oh, sure.'

We watch the long, grossly phallic shape slide into the narrows, its tall hull obscuring the crowd of people on the spit of land across from us. Little capped heads sticking out of the top of the conning tower look over and down at us. I wave. One of them waves back. I feel a strange, guilty happiness. The helicopters are noisy overhead; the swirling pattern of CND and MOD boats is compressed by the narrows; the inflatables dance and bob around each other, bumping together. It looks a bit like spastics trying to dance an Eightsome Reel, but that isn't an image I'd use in the article.

'Some demo down in London yesterday, eh?' Iain says, handing me back the binoculars.

I nod. Last night I watched television pictures of the drenched crowds as they wound slowly through the London streets, protesting against the mine closures.

'Yeah,' I say. I grind the cigarette out on the container's rusting roof. 'Six years too late to do any good.'

people realise Scargill was right.'

'Aye, he's still a bumptious cunt, though but.'

'Doesn't matter; he was right.'

'That's what I said; a right bumptious cunt.' Garnet grins at me.

I shake my head and nod at the fisheries boat tailing the small fleet squeezing its way through the narrows. 'What do you think; would you say that boat's bringing up the rear, or bringing up the stern? mean, we are talking nautical here.'

Iain squints at the ship as the huge bulk of the submarine continues to slide past us. I can see him trying to think of a remark, thinking there must be something on the lines of, No, it's bringing up its dinner, or something equally strained about a nautical remark, but they're both poor-quality leads and he obviously realises this because he just shrugs and takes out his notebook and says, 'Search me, pal'

He starts scribbling squiggles. Garnet must be one of the last of the shorthanders; few people of our generation trust in Pitman any more, preferring to rely on Olympus Pearlcoders.

'You still off-diary this weather then, Cameron?'

'Yeah, a roving news-hound without portfolio, that's me.'

'Uh-huh. Hear you've got a tame blemish on the face of the body public feeding you morsels these days, that right, Cameron?' Garnet says quietly, not looking up from his shorthand notation.

I look at him. '_What_?'

'A massive harbour breakwater,' he says, grinning toothily at me.

I stare at him.

'A facial blemish,' he says. 'A breakwater; a small insectivorous subterranean furry animal. No get it? He shakes his head at the grossness of my ignorance. 'A _mole_, ' he says patiently.

'Oh?' I say, hoping I appear suitably mystified.

He looks hurt. 'So, is it true?'

'What?'

That you've got some mole in the security services or something equally hush-hush feeding you tasty stuff about some big story in the offing.'

I shake my head. 'No,' I tell him.

He looks disappointed. 'Who _told_ you this, anyway?' I ask him. 'Was it Frank?'

His brows go up, his mouth makes an O and he draws in a breath. 'Sorry, Cameron; can't reveal my sources.'

I give him a pained look, then we both turn to watch the submarine.

There is a faint, distant cheer as one of the CND inflatables finally manages to break through the encircling military boats, evades the police launches and speeds in to bump into the sloping black stern of the Trident submarine, sliding briefly up onto its rump like a gnat trying to mount an elephant, before being chased away again. A TV crew capture the moment. I grin, feeling vicariously pleased for the protesters. After a while the tall grey shape of the patrol boat Orkney hums past, following the huge submarine.

'Orkney,' Garnet says thoughtfully. 'Orkney ...'

I can almost hear his brain working, trying to make a connection with tomorrow's big Home News event, when the report into the Orkney child-abuse fiasco will be published. Knowing Garnet, a comment involving seamen is far from out of the question.

I keep quiet, trying not to encourage him.

He throws his cigarette butt away. Perhaps misinterpreting the gesture, somebody at the stern of the Orkney waves at us. Iain waves cheerily back. 'Aye, get yer cox'n, lads!' he calls, not loud enough for anyone on the boat to hear. He sounds pleased with himself.

'How amusing, Iain,' I say, stepping to the edge of the container. 'Fancy a pint later?' I jump down via the oil-drum.

'Going already, are you?' Iain says. Then, 'Na. Got to interview the Faslane Commander and get back to the office.'

'Yeah, I'm heading for the base too,' I tell him. 'See you there.' I turn and walk across the waste ground towards the car.

'Don't give us a hand down then, ya snobby Edinburgh bastart!' he calls.

I hold up one hand as I walk away. 'Okay!'

I pass the submarine a minute later as I drive out of the village and towards the head of the loch and the naval base on the far side. The submarine looks oddly, menacingly beautiful in the bright sunshine, a blackly gleaming hole in the scape of land and water. I shake my head. Twelve billion quid to take out some probably already empty silos and incinerate a few tens of millions of Russian men, women and children ... except they aren't our enemies any more, so what was always obscene - and definitively, deliberately useless - becomes pointless; even more of a waste.

I park the car for a while on an elevated stretch of the road past Garelochhead, looking down the loch and watching the submarine approach the dock. There are a few other cars parked and groups of people watching; come to try and get some of their tax-money's worth.

I light a cigarette, winding the window down so I can blow all that unhealthy smoke away. My eyes are smarting with tiredness; I was up most of last night, working on a story and playing *Despot* on the computer. I look around to make sure nobody's watching, feel inside my North Cape jacket and take out the little bag of speed. I dip a moistened finger in the white powder in one corner and then suck the finger, smiling and sighing as the tip of my tongue goes numb. I put the bag away again and continue smoking.

... Unless, of course, you counted the Trident system's use in geopolitical economic terms, as part of the West's vast arms build-up; the build-up that broke the communist bank, finally devastating a Soviet system no longer able to compete (it bankrupted the US, too, turning the world's greatest creditor nation into the world's grossest debtor in two easy presidential terms, but a lot of dividends had been paid out in the meantime, and the debt was something for the next few generations to worry about, so fuck 'em).

So as communism disappeared and the threat of total, global holocaust evaporated and just left us with everything else to worry about, and as those enticing Eastern markets opened juicily up and the old ethnic hatreds pressured into solution under the Comrades bubbled and frothed themselves up to full bursting pressure ... maybe this giant black slug, this potentially city-fucking, country-fucking, plane-fucking prick sliding up between the thighs of the loch could take some of the credit.

Hell, yes.

I start the car, feeling charged and alert and justified again, fully firing on all cylinders and just fizzing with the good great god-damn Gonzo juice of the determination to get down to that there nuclear submarine missile base and cover the story, as the blessed St Hunter would say.

At the base - past the peace camp where protesters wave placards, past the dense-meshed fences topped with rolls of razor-wire and through the tank-stopping gates, after showing my press accreditation and being directed to the relevant building for the press briefing and typing part of the story into the lap-top while waiting for everybody else to arrive - the naval officers answering the questions look fresh and fit and seem decent and polite and somehow regretfully but steadfastly sure that they are doing something that's still important and relevant.

Later, the protesters in the peace camp outside - most wearing layers of droopily grubby cardigans and ancient combat jackets and sporting dreadlocks or side-shaves - seem just the same.

I drive back to Edinburgh listening to Gold Mother with the speed wearing off fast, tailing away like an engine losing revs all the way along the M8.

The news room of the Caledonian is busy as usual, crowded with desks and shelves, partitions, bookcases, terminals, plants, piles of papers, print-outs, photographs and files. I thread my way through the maze, nodding and saying hello to my accomplice hacks.

'Cameron,' Frank Scare says, looking up from his terminal. Frank is fifty, with bouffant white hair and

a complexion that succeeds in being moderately ruddy and childishly smooth at the same time. He talks with a sing-song voice and, after lunch usually, a slight lisp. He likes to remind me what my name is whenever he sees me. Some mornings, this helps.

'Frank,' I say, sitting at my desk and squinting at the little yellow notes decorating the side of the terminal screen.

Frank sticks his head and shoulders round the other side of the screen, providing an unambiguous visual cue to the fact that he still thinks coloured shirts with white collars are neat. 'So how's the late component of Britain's vital and totally independent deterrent, then?' he asks.

'Seems to work; it floats,' I tell him, logging onto the system.

Frank's Biro taps delicately at the topmost of the little yellow notes. 'Your mole rang again,' he says. 'Another wild-goose chase?'

I glance at the note. Mr Archer will phone me again in an hour. I look at my watch; about now.

'Probably,' I agree. I check my Olympus Pearlcorde has a blank tape in it; the recorder lives beside the phone and gets to listen in on any potentially exciting calls.

'You're not moonlighting, are you, Cameron?' Frank says, bushy white brows furrowing at me.

'What?' I say, putting my jacket over the back of the chair.

'You haven't got two jobs and this mole is your excuse for getting out of the office, have you? Is it?' Frank asks, trying to look innocent. His Biro continues to tap against the side of the terminal screen.

I take hold of the end of the Biro and gently push it away, directing Frank back towards his own seat. 'Frank,' I tell him, 'with the imagination you've got, you should work for the Sun.'

He sniffs and sits down. I scroll through the e-mail and the wires for a bit then frown and stand up, looking over the terminal at Frank, who's sitting with his slim fingers poised over the keyboard, chuckling at something on the screen.

'What did you tell Iain Garnet about this so-called mole?'

'Did you know,' Frank says, sounding mischievous, 'that Yetts o' Muckart becomes Yetis o' Muscat under the spell-check?' He grins up at me, then his expression becomes serious. 'Pardon?'

'You heard.'

'What about Iain?' he asks. 'Did you see him there today? How is he?'

'What did you tell him about this "mole"?' I peel the note off the screen and wave it at Frank.

He looks innocent. 'Aren't I supposed to say anything? Well, I didn't know,' he protests. 'I was talking to him on the phone the other day; must just have come up in conversation. Terribly sorry.'

I'm about to say something when the phone rings with an outside call.

Frank smiles and makes a lobbing, pointing motion with his Biro. 'That might be your Mr Archer now,' he says.

I sit down, lift the receiver. The line is terrible.

'Mr Colley?' The voice is machine-like, synthesised-sounding. I don't doubt it's Mr Archer but I could believe I'm talking to Stephen Hawking. I switch the PearlCorder on, stick its earpiece in my ear and put the microphone attachment over the telephone earpiece.

'Speaking,' I say. 'Mr Archer?'

'Yes. Listen; I have something new on this thing.'

'Well, I hope so, Mr Archer,' I tell him. 'I'm getting - '

'I can't speak for long, not on your phone,' the mechanical-sounding voice continues. 'Go to the following location.'

I grab a pencil and a pad. 'Mr Archer, this had better not be another - '

'Langholm, Bruntshiel Road. Phone box. Usual time.'

'Mr Archer, that's - '

'Langholm, Bruntshiel Road. Phone box. Usual time,' the voice repeats.

'Mr Arch - '

'I have another name for you this time, Mr Colley,' says the voice.

'What-?'

The line goes dead. I look at the phone, then peel off the microphone attachment as Frank's smiling face appears round the side of the screen. He taps his Biro absently on my keyboard. 'Our friend?' he inquires.

I tear the sheet off the pad and stick it in my shirt pocket. 'Yep,' I say. I log off the system, gather up the PearlCorder and pull my jacket on again.

Frank smiles radiantly when he sees me doing this and clicks something on his watch. 'Off so soon? Well done, Cameron,' he says. 'I think that's a new record!'

'Tell Eddie I'll phone in the story.'

'On your head, my boy.'

'No doubt.' I head for the door.

I do a very little medicinal powder in the gents, then, having so girded my septum, bloodstream and hemispheres in the magic powder, I take the 205 down to Langholm, deep in the western Borders. I compose the rest of the Vanguard article in my head as I drive; it's a Sunday so getting out of the city is easy, but the roads in the countryside beyond are full of crap drivers, mainly little old guys wearing bunnets and staring intently through the steering wheel; I can remember when they all drove Marinas and Allegros but nowadays they seem to be issued with Escort Orions, Rover 413s or Volvo 340s, all apparently fitted with governors limiting their speed to thirty-nine and a half miles per hour. I get stuck in a line of traffic and, after a couple of hairy overtakes which result in various people flashing their headlights at me and which are purely the result of the speed, I decide to slow down, stop shouting at people, accept my lot and enjoy the scenery.

The trees and hills look sharp and vivid in the slanting late-afternoon light, slopes and trunks coated yellow-orange or standing in their own shadows. Crowded House provide the sound track. The sky fades to deep violet before five and the headlights of oncoming cars start to hurt my eyes; obviously I was too conservative with that last medicinal blast. I stop in a lay-by just past Hawick for a booster shot.

Langholm is a quiet little town near the border. I don't have a map of the place but finding Bruntshiel Road takes only five minutes of driving around. I check out the phone box at one end of the street and park the car alongside.

There's a hotel two minutes' walk away; time for a drink.

The lounge bar is dustily ramshackle and has yet to suffer the atmosphere-bypass operation brewers call remodelling. It's moderately busy with a mixture of people.

A double whisky doesn't take too long to knock back, and keeps the system in equilibrium, what with the speed aboard. I've been economising ever since I got my new PC so it's a Grouse instead of a single malt but it does the job. My mobile goes while I'm finishing the whisky. It's the paper, reminding me it's nearly deadline time. I turn away from the inquisitive stares of the locals and mutter into the cellphone, saying I'll be phoning in real soon now, honest. I buy some cigarettes, have a pee and return to the car. I mate the Tosh to the cigarette lighter in the dash and type out the rest of the Vanguard piece by the light of the street lamp above the phone box. I'm yawning but I resist the pull of the little plastic bag.

I finish the story then take out the modem and call the story into the paper. Back in the car, there's still ten minutes until Mr Archer calls. He's usually prompt. I nip back to the hotel for a quick single whisky.

The phone in the box is ringing when I get back. I run in, grab it, and fiddle with the Olympus, clicking it on and untangling the wires, cursing under my breath.

'Hello?' I shout.

'Who is that?' says the calm, mechanical voice. I get the recorder working and take a deep breath.

'Cameron Colley, Mr Archer.'

'Mr Colley. I will have to ring you back later, but the first name I have for you is Ares.'

'What? Who?'

'The name I have for you is Ares: A-R-E-S. You will remember the other names I have already given you.'

'Yes: Wood, Ben - '

'Ares is the name of the project they were working on when they died. I have to go now but I will call back in an hour or so. I will have some more information then. Goodbye.'

'Mr Archer -'

Dead.

Dead is also what the people Mr Archer has been calling me about are. They were all men; their names were Wood, Harrison, Bennet, Aramphahal and Isaacs. Mr Archer gave me the names the first time he brought me on one of these tour-of-Scotland telephonic rendezvous. (Mr Archer does not trust mobile - can't say I blame him.) The names sounded vaguely familiar at the time and seemed to have a weird implicit seriality about them, plus, as soon as he mentioned them, I suddenly thought of the Lake District, without knowing why. Mr Archer gave me the names and rang off before I could ask him anything else about them.

I still have this tetchy pride about remembering things myself, but in the office the following morning I logged into Profile and let it do the hard work. Profile is just a staggeringly gigantic database that probably knows your maternal great-grandfather's inside-leg measurement and how many sugars his wife took in her tea; almost anything mentioned in a broadsheet over the last ten years will be there, will stuff from US, European and Far Eastern newspapers, plus whole oceans of information from a zillion other sources.

The names posed it no problems. The five dead geezers all expired between six and four years ago and they were all connected with either the nuclear industry or the security services. Each death looked like suicide but all of them could have been murders; there was speculation in the press at the time that something murky was going on but nobody seemed to get anywhere. So far all Mr Archer's added to what I could find in the paper's library is some detail about exactly how the men died, and - tonight - that project name: Ares.

I sit in the car for a while, tinkering with the whisky article I've been working on for a while and wondering who or what Ares is. A few people use the phone box. I play some rather pathetic low-level games on the Tosh, wishing I had a decent colour machine with the speed and the RAM and the hard disk to run _Despot_. I roll a joint and smoke that, listening to the radio and then to my k.d.lang tape but it's too soporific and I turn the radio on but it's too inane so I scrabble in the glove-box until I find _Trompe le Monde_ by the Pixies and that keeps me awake better than speed though the tape's

stretched a bit because I've played it so much and so the sound comes and goes a bit but that's cool.

I'm running through the woods at Strathspeld, on a bright summer's day; I'm thirteen years old and while I'm running I'm also looking at myself from outside, as though I'm watching all this on a screen. I've been here many times before and I know how to turn away from this place, I know how to escape from it. I'm just about to do that when I hear a bell.

I wake up and the phone is ringing. It takes me a second to realise I've been asleep, and another second to remember where I am. I leap out of the car and into the box, just ahead of an old man walking his dog.

'Who is that?' says the voice.

'Cameron Colley again, Mr Archer. Look - '

'There is one other person who knows about the ones who died, Mr Colley: the go-between. I do not know his real name yet. When I find out I will tell you.'

'What -?'

'His code-name is Jemmel. I will spell that for you,' the Stephen Hawking voice says. It does so.

'Got that, Mr Archer, but who -?'

'Goodbye, Mr Colley. Take care.'

'Mr-!'

But Mr Archer rings off.

'Shit!' I shout. I forgot to record the call, too.

I sit in the car for a while, entering the name Jemmel into the Tosh. It means nothing to me.

I head back to the hotel for a piss and a last drink, another double: one for the road now that the first one's probably out of my system. I haven't eaten since this morning but I don't feel hungry. I force myself to eat some dried peanuts and have a half of Murphy's to wash them down and for the iron. (I used to drink Guinness but I've been boycotting the stuff since those bastards lied about moving their HQ to Scotland.)

In the car I suck a little speed (purely in the interests of road safety - it'll keep me awake), then smoke a joint as I drive away, just to keep things balanced. There's a Radio Scotland programme on at midnight which sometimes does a Tomorrow's Headlines bit right at the end; I listen to it and sure enough they mention our headline tomorrow, but we're leading with the manoeuvring in the Tory party on the run-up to the Maastricht vote. I feel let down, but then they mention that the photograph on our

front page is of the Vanguard arriving at Faslane, so I know my story's there, and with any luck at all it'll be alongside the photo on the front page, rather than buried inside. I experience a modest thrill of news-fix; a dose of journo-buzz.

This is a kind of hit unique to the profession: near-instant in-print gratification. I suppose if you're a stand-up comic, a live musician or an actor the reward is similar and even quicker, but if what you're into is the printed word and the dubious authority of on-the-page black-and-white, then this is entirely the biz. The best fix of all comes from a front-page splash, but a page lead on an odd-numbered page provides a pretty sublime high, and only getting a basement piece on an even page produces any sensation of let-down.

I have another joint to celebrate but it makes me a little drowsy and it takes a definitely-last-of-the-night micro-lick of speed and another fix of *_Trompe le Monde_* to even things up again.

CHAPTER 2 - CHILL FILTER

I'm very tempted to call in at the paper and pick up a copy fresh off the presses, which will be rumbling away now, shaking the whole building. The smell of ink and the greasy feel of the print always powerfully reinforce the news-fix buzz, plus I'd like to check my Vanguard story to see what violence the sub-editors have succeeded in inflicting on it; but as I drive down Nicolson Street suddenly the idea of subs cutting a story about a sub seems wildly amusing and I find myself giggling uncontrollably, making me sniff and sneeze and bringing tears to my eyes. I decide that I'm too wasted to be able to put on a sober face for the print-room boys, so I head home instead.

I get back to Cheyne Street about one o'clock and have the usual enforced tour of Stockbridge By Night looking for a parking place before finding one only a minute from the flat. I'm tired but not sleepy so I have a nightcap spliff and a two-fingers of Tesco's single malt. During the next couple of hours I listen to the radio and watch all-night TV out of the corner of my eye and tinker with the whisky story on the PC and then deliberately do not play *_Despot_* because I know I'd only go and get involved and be up until dawn and sleep all day and not be up in time for tomorrow's job (I have an appointment with a distillery manager at noon), so instead I go back to *_Xerium_* and play that; recreational play in other words, not serious stuff; a game to wind down to, not get wound up by.

Xerium is an old favourite, almost like a pal, and even though there are still a few bits of it I haven't cracked I've never looked for hints or cheats in the magazines because I want to get there myself (which isn't like me) and anyway it's fun just flying around and adding to the map you gradually build up of the island continent the game's set on.

Finally I crash the good ship *_Speculator_* trying - as usual - to find a probably non-existent route between the peaks of the Mountains of Zound. I swear I've tried every gap in those damn hills - hell, I've even tried flying straight *_through_* the mountains, thinking one of them is supposed to be a hologram or something - but I crash every time; there just doesn't seem to be any way of getting through or of gaining enough height to fly over the damn things. There is supposed to be a way into the rectangular territory the mountains enclose somehow, but I'm fucked if I can work out what it is,

not tonight, anyway.

I pass on another attempt and load the slower of my two `_Asteroids_` programs and obliterate a few zillion rocks in glorious wire-frame monochrome until my fingers ache and my eyes are smarting again and it's time for some decaff and bed.

I get up bright and fresh and - after a good five-minute cough and a shower - the only wake-me-up I have is some freshly ground Arabica. I munch some muesli and suck on a quartered orange while I look through the whisky story, which is due in today so this is really my final chance to work on it apart from any last-minute thoughts after seeing the distillery at lunch-time. I sneak a look at my current status in `_Despot_`, too, but resist firing the program up. I stare accusingly at the Tosh's NiCads, which I forgot to charge up last night, then transfer the tinkered-with whisky article to disk and search out some clean clothes from the pile on one side of the bed where I dumped them after last week's laundry run. Leaving the clothes on the bed can sometimes make you think there's somebody there with you when there isn't, which can be comforting but is distinctly sad; you haven't had a fuck for well over a week, this pile of clean clothes on the duvet is telling me. Still, I'm seeing Y in a couple of days so even if nothing else turns up there's always that to look forward to.

There's some mail: junk and bills, mostly. Ignore for now.

Take the bleeper, mobile, Tosh, NiCads and slot-in radio down to the 205; the car has not been broken into or scratched (helps not to wash the Pug). Set the NiCads charging from the cigarette lighter. Take off into a cool blue-whiter; sunshine and clouds. Stop along the road for papers; scan headlines, make sure that no late-breaking story displaced the Vanguard piece and that it's intact (ninety-five per cent a satisfyingly high score), check out Doonesbury in the `_Grauniad_`, then away.

Over the road-bridge and fast through Fife; once up to cruising speed - needle in that 85-to-90 region the jam-sandwich boys ignore unless they're particularly bored or in a `_really_` bad mood - steer with knees while rolling spliff, feeling good in a childish way and laughing at myself and thinking, `_Don't try doing this at home, kids_`. Leave number aside to smoke later; turn left at Perth.

The drive to the distillery takes me along part of the route to Strathspeld. I haven't been to see the Goulds for so long and I half wish I'd started out earlier so I could drop in, but I know it isn't really them I want to see, it's the place: Strathspeld itself, our long-lost paradise with all the aching, poisonous sweet memories it holds. Though of course maybe it's Andy I really remember and miss; maybe I just want to see my old soul-mate, my surrogate brother, my other me; maybe I'd go straight there if he was at home, but he isn't, he's way far north and being reclusive and I must visit him too, someday.

I pass through Gilmerton, a wee village just outside Crieff, where I'd turn off for Strathspeld if I was heading that way. Used to be there was a collection of three identical little blue Fiat 126s sitting facing the road here outside one of the houses; they were there for years and years and I always meant to stop off here and find the owner and ask him, Why have you had these three little blue Fiat 126s sitting outside your house for the last decade? because I wanted to know and besides it might have made a decent story and over the years there must have been `_millions_` of people who've passed this way and wondered the same thing, but I never did get around to it; always in a hurry, rushing past, anxious to get to the tainted paradise that Strathspeld's always been to me ... Anyway, the three little

blue Fiat 126s disappeared recently so there's no point. Guy seems to be collecting transit vans these days. I felt hurt, almost grieved when I first saw that house without the three little cars outside; it was like a death in the family, like some distant but friendly uncle had copped it.

I play some old stuff from Uncle Warren for the same nostalgic reasons I came this way.

Deep in the glens at Lix Toll there's another automotive roadside attraction standing outside the garage there; a bright yellow Land Rover about ten foot tall facing the road, not on wheels but on four black triangular tracks like the bastard cross of a Landy and a Caterpillar earth-mover. Been there a few years now. Leave it another few and I might go in and ask them, Why have you -?

Sweep past, in a hurry.

The distillery is just outside Dorluinan, hidden in the trees off the Oban road, across the rail line and up a narrow lane through the forest. The manager is a Mr Baine; I go to his office and we do the usual distillery tour, through the damp, half-enticing smells and the kiln heat and past the gleaming stills, past the gushing glass cupboard of the spirit safe until we end up in the chill darkness of one of the warehouses, standing looking out over rows of broad-backed barrels, gloomily lit from above few small, grimy armoured skylights. The roof is low, supported by thick, gnarled wooden struts resting on widely spaced iron columns. The floor is compacted earth, hard as concrete after a centuries of use.

Mr Baine looks worried when I tell him about the article. He's a bulky, droopy-faced highlander in a dark suit with a Technicolor tie that makes me glad I'm facing him here in the soft darkness of the warehouse, not outside in the sunlight.

'Well, basically just the facts,' I'm saying, grinning at Mr Baine. 'That back in the 'twenties the Yanks objected to their whisky and brandy going cloudy when they added ice to it, so they told the distillers to fix what they regarded as a problem. The French, being the French, told them what to do with their ice cubes, while the Scots, being British, said, Certainly, here's what we'll do ...'

Mr Baine's wounded-spaniel looks take on an extra tier of unhappiness as I tell him all this. I know I shouldn't have taken that micro-lick of powder while we were going through earlier, but I couldn't resist it; there was an irresistibly appealing getting-away-with-it promissory glee about sticking my finger in my mouth, then my pocket, then my mouth again and as Mr Baine talked and I looked interested while my tongue went numb and the chemical taste thickened in my throat and this firingly, chargingly addictive illegal drug did its business while we walked round this perfectly legal, government-financing drug facto

So I'm gibbering but it's good.

'But, Mr Colley - '

'So the distillers brought in chill-filtering, lowering the the temperature of the whisky until the oils that cause the cloudiness come out of solution and then straining the stuff through asbestos to remove the oil; only that removes a lot of the taste as well - which you can't put back - and the colour, which you can put back, using caramel. Isn't that right?'

Mr Baine has a hangdog look. 'Ah, well, broadly,' he says, clearing his throat and looking out over the ordered sea of barrel-backs disappearing into the gloom. 'But, ah, is this going to be, um, a what-do-you-call-it? An expose, Mr Colley? I thought you just wanted -?'

'You thought I just wanted to do yet another article on what a grand, beautiful country we live in and how lucky we are to produce this world-renowned, dollar-earning drink and isn't it life-enhancing used in moderation and just generally great?'

'Well, well... it's up to you what you write, Mr Colley,' Mr Baine says (I have raised a smile). 'But, ah, I feel you might be misleading people by emphasising things like, well the asbestos, for example; people might think there's asbestos in the product.'

I look at Mr Baine. Product? Did I hear him say product?

'But I'm not going to be suggesting that at all, Mr Baine; this will be a straight, factual article.'

'Aye, aye, but facts can be misleading out of context.'

'Uh-huh.'

'You see, I'm not sure about the tone - '

'But, Mr Baine, I thought you were in sympathy with the tone of this article. That's why I'm here today; I was told you're thinking about producing a "real whisky", with no chill-filtering and no colouring; a premium brand, using the cloudiness and the oils that are left in as a selling point, basing the ads on it, even - '

'Well,' Mr Baine says, looking uncomfortable, 'the marketing people are still looking into that - '

'Mr Baine, come on, we both know the demand's there; the SMWS does a roaring trade, Caddenhead's shop in the Royal Mile - '

'Well, it's not that simple,' Mr Baine says, looking even more uncomfortable now. 'Look, Mr Colley, can we talk, you know, without you reporting it?'

'You want to talk off the record?'

'Aye; off the record.'

'All right.' I nod. Mr Baine clasps his hands under his suit-clad belly and nods in a serious manner. 'Look, ah, Cameron,' he says, dropping his voice, 'I'll be honest with you: we have thought about test-marketing this premium brand you're talking about, and using the lack of chill-filtering as a Unique Selling Point, but... You see, Cameron, we couldn't survive on that alone, even if it did work, not for the foreseeable future at any rate; we've got other considerations to take into account. We'll probably always have to sell the vast majority of our product for blending; that's our business, that's our livelihood, and as such we rely on the goodwill of the firms we sell to; firms much, much larger than we are.'

'You're saying you've been told not to rock the boat.'

'No no no.' Mr Baine looks distressed at being imperfectly understood. 'But you have to realise that a great deal of the success of whisky has to do with its mystique, the ... the image the customer has of it as a unique, high-value product. It's almost mythical, Cameron; it's the uisgebeatha, the water of life, as they say ... It's a very strong image, and a very important one for the Scottish export drive and national economy. If we - as, frankly, a very junior player in all this - do anything that conflicts with that image - '

'Such as putting the idea into the public's head that all the other whiskies they can buy are chill-filtered and/or caramel-coloured - '

'Well, yes - '

'- then you'll rock the boat,' I say. 'So you've been told to shelve the new premium brand or forget about ever selling whisky for blending again, and so going out of business.'

'No no no,' Mr Baine says again, but as we stand there in the chilly gloom of the spirit-fragrant warehouse, surrounded by enough maturing hootch to float a Trident submarine, I can see that the real answer even off the record is yes yes yes, and I'm thinking, Yay! A conspiracy; a cover-up, arm-twisting, blackmail, corporate pressure on the little guy; this could be an even better story!

You enter through the back door using a crowbar; the door and the lock are both heavy, but the frame has rotted beneath its layers of paint over the years. As soon as you're in you take the Elvis Presley mask from your day-pack and slip it on, then pull the surgeon's gloves from your pocket and snap those on too. The house feels warm from the afternoon; it faces south and has an uninterrupted view out over the links of the golf course towards the estuary, so it catches a lot of sun.

You don't think there's anybody in yet but you aren't sure; there wasn't time to watch the place all day. It feels and somehow sounds empty. You slip from room to room, feeling sweaty beneath the slick latex of the mask. The late evening sun has turned the faint, high clouds over the sea pink and the light falls into every room, filling them with rose and shadows.

The stairs and a lot of the floorboards creak. The rooms look clean but the furniture is old-fashioned and mismatched; cast-off. You satisfy yourself there's nobody in, ending up in the main bedroom of the house.

You're not very happy with the bed; it's a divan. You inspect it, in that reddening gloaming, then heave the mattress off, leaving it propped against the wall. Still no good. You go through to the other front bedroom, which also looks out over the course and the sea; the room smells un-lived-in, even slightly damp. This bed is better; this one has an iron frame. You pull the bedding off and start to tear the sheets into strips.

You look out of the window as you do this, watching a couple of military jets over the sea in the distance. To the right, beyond the railway line, you can see the curve of beach leading out to the wooded point, and catch a glimpse of the lighthouse there, rising above the trees.

Then you see Mrs Jamieson coming through the gate from the road and up the garden path and you

duck down, walking quickly to the door and the top landing. You listen to the front door opening.

Mrs Jamieson comes in and goes through to the kitchen. You remember the creaking stairs. You hesitate for a second, then walk normally to the stairs and go down them with a fairly quick, heavy tread, whistling. The steps creak.

'Murray?' Mrs Jamieson's voice calls from the kitchen. 'Murray, I didn't see the car - '

You reach the foot of the stairs. Mrs Jamieson's white-haired head appears beyond the banister rails to your right, her face turning to you.

You swing round, seeing her start to react, mouth dropping. You already know what you're going to do, how you're going to play this, so you punch her, knocking her down. She collapses to the floor, making little flustered, bird-like noises. You hope you didn't hit her too hard. You haul her up and keep your hand over her mouth as you drag her upstairs.

You pin her on the divan base and stuff a handkerchief in her mouth using the handle of the Stanley knife, then pull a pair of her tights over her head, tie them round her neck and mouth and put her inside the old, heavy wardrobe in the main bedroom, pulling out the few clothes hanging there and handcuffing her to the rail. She whimpers and cries but the gag muffles everything. You pull the tights she's wearing down and tie her ankles together above her sensible brown brogues, then you close the wardrobe doors.

You sit on the divan base, pull off the mask and sit there, breathing hard and sweating. You cool off, then put the mask back on and open the door again. Mrs Jamieson stands, trembling, her eyes through the dark grey mesh of the tights looking bright and wide. You shut the door, then close the curtains in that bedroom and the one with the iron-frame bed.

Her husband arrives half an hour later, parking the car in the drive. He comes in by the front door and you're waiting behind the kitchen door as he walks through; you make a noise, he turns and you punch him, sending him clattering back against the kitchen cabinet, producing an avalanche of willow-pattern plates. He tries to get up so you hit him again. He's very old and you're quite surprised it takes two punches to lay him out, though he's still a decent weight.

You stuff a pair of his wife's panties in his mouth and do the same trick with the tights, over the head and tied round the neck, then drag him upstairs to the second bedroom. You can smell he's been drinking recently; G & Ts, probably. Some cigarette-smoke smell, too. You're sweating again by the time you get him onto the bed with the iron frame.

You tie him to the bed, face down. He's starting to come round. When he's secured, you take out the Stanley knife. He was carrying a light windcheater which you left in the kitchen and he's wearing a blue Pringle sweater with a knickerbockered golfer depicted on the front, a Marks & Spencer's check shirt and a light string vest. You cut his clothes off, flinging them into one corner. His fawn slacks scatter golf tees when you throw them aside; his socks are bright red, his Y-fronts white. His golf shoes are brown and white, heavily spiked and with elaborate tongues and tasselled laces.

You take off your day-pack. You get the pillows from the main bedroom and stuff them and those from this bed under the old man's torso, raising his body from the bed. He's making spluttering,

shouting noises now and moving weakly. You use a couple of rolled-up blankets to bring his rump up further, ~~then go back to the day-pack and sort out the things you'll need. He struggles, as though wrestling with a pinned, invisible opponent. He's making a noise like he's choking but you don't do anything yet. You take the top off the cream.~~

There's a spitting, hacking noise and he must get at least some of the gag out of his mouth because he splutters, 'Stop this! Stop this, I say!' Not the gruff, home-counties voice you recall from the television; more high-pitched and strained, but that's hardly surprising in the circumstances. He sounds less frightened than you expected, though.

'Look,' he says, in something more like his normal voice; deep and no-nonsense. 'I don't know what you want, but just take it and get out; there's no need for this; no need at all.' You squirt some of the cream onto the vibrator.

'I think you're making a mistake,' he says, trying to twist his head round to see you. 'Seriously. We don't live here; this is a holiday home. It's rented; there's nothing of value here at all.' He struggles some more. You kneel on the bed behind him, inside the inverted V of his scrawny, varicosed legs. There are broken veins on his back and upper arms. His shanks look grey and withered; his buttocks are very pale, almost yellowish, and the skin on his thighs, below the level shorts would come to, has grainy, mottled appearance; his balls hang like old fruit, surrounded by wiry grey hair.

His cock looks slightly engorged. That's interesting.

He feels you get up onto the bed and shouts, 'Look! I don't think you know what you're doing. This is aggravated burglary, young man; you - ah!'

You've put the cream-smear tip of the vibrator against his anus, grey-pink and pursed between his spread buttocks. The cream must feel cold. 'What?' he shouts, voice muffled by the gag. 'Stop! What d'you think you're doing?'

You start to work the creamy plastic dildo into him, twisting it from side to side and watching the skin round his anus stretch and whiten as the ivory-coloured plastic slides in; a thin collar of white cream builds up there.

'Ah! Ah! Stop! All right! I know what you're doing! I know what this is about! All right! So you know who I am; but this is no way to - ah! Ah! Stop! Stop! All right! You've made your point! Those women - look, all right, I may have said things I regretted later, but you weren't there! You didn't hear all the evidence! I did! You didn't hear the men who were accused! You couldn't form an opinion of their character! The same with the women! Ah! Ah! _Ah_! Stop! Please; you're hurting! You're hurting!'

You have the vibrator about a third of the way in, not quite up to its maximum girth. You press harder pleased at how much grip the surgeon's gloves give you but half-wishing you could say something though you know you can't, which is a pity.

'Ah! Ah! Jesus Christ, for God's sake, man, are you trying to kill me? Look, I have money; I can - ah! Ah, you filthy bastard - ' He moans and farts at the same time. You have to turn your head away from the smell, but you push the vibrator in further. You can hear seagulls crying outside, beyond the closed curtains.

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