theguardian

Can fiction change our view of oil?

A year ago, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig killed 11 men and sent millions of gallons of oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico. We commemorate the occasion by asking eight authors, from Rose Tremain to China Miéville, to give us their fictional takes on the black stuff

Richard Lea

Friday 15 April 2011 10.07 BST

Like all the best ideas, it started over lunch. We were talking about China, or at least our series of stories about and from China, or maybe it was our series of short fiction to mark the fall of the Berlin wall, but someone - it was probably me - was going on about how the world looks a little different through the lens of fiction when Simon Jeffery said we should do a set of short stories about oil.

It seemed obvious when he said it. I mean, it's all around us, seeps into everything we do, but we don't see it, we can't see it, because it's simply everywhere. It powers us into work, takes us on holiday, lights up our homes and cools down our food. It washes us and dresses us and stirs our tea. The computer I'm typing this on - and the computer you're reading it on - is made from oil.

As for the writers, well, some of these seemed pretty obvious, too. One year on from the catastrophe at the Deepwater Horizon, it seemed pretty clear that we wanted to hear from Tim Gautreaux. On this side of the Atlantic Rose Tremain and Joanna Kavenna give the project a firm grounding in contemporary life. And who better to divine where our obsession with the black stuff might take us than China Miéville?

I'm no specialist on literature from the Middle East, but Claire Armitstead pointed me in the direction of Robin Yassin-Kassab, and the translator Peter Clark confirmed it was no coincidence I'd seen work by Saudi novelist Mohammed Hasan Alwan in a couple of recent anthologies of the most exciting new Arabic writing. An African perspective came from one of my favourite authors, Alain Mabanckou, while territory of a different sort is opened up by the graphic novelist Simone Lia.

So here they are, or at least here they will be, with a story a day from now until Good Friday, with Rose Tremain raising the curtain on the series with Captive. Here's where we find out if there really was anything to what I was banging on about in the Guardian canteen. Can fiction change the way we think - can fiction change the way we feel - about oil?

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Oil Oil spills

Covehithe by China Miéville

A trip to the Suffolk coast takes on a new urgency when Dughan decides the time is right for a night-time adventure in this exclusive story from China Miéville

China Miéville

Friday 22 April 2011 11.00 BST

There were a few nights in Dunwich, where the owner of the B&B kept telling her guests they were lucky to have found a room. Walking Dunwich Beach, showing his daughter wintering geese through binoculars so heavy they made her laugh, the man was glad they were not in Southwold or Walberswick. They were not so hemmed in by visitors. Each evening they had fish and chips or pub grub. Each night after she had gone to bed he hacked into next door's wifi to check his messages and monitor the forums.

On Thursday night he woke her. It was not long after midnight.

'Come on lovey,' he said. 'Keep it down. Let's not get anyone else up.'

'I hate you,' she said into her pillow.

'I know,' he said. 'Come on. Don't bring your phone.'

There was not much on the roads. Still, Dughan took them roundabout ways, through Blythborough, on the A145 towards Uggeshall, past still diggers where roads were being widened.

'Where are we going?' the girl asked, only once. She hunkered; she wouldn't ask him to turn up the heating.

Wrentham was on the western rim of the security zone. It went north along the A12, south on the B1127 to Southwold. Within it, in daylight, fields were still worked, for animal feed, and roads mostly open, but those were, legally, indulgences not rights; the area was, in the absence of an official escort, no-go after dark. Exceptional laws applied in that little triangle, the coast a 6-mile hypotenuse, its midpoint Covehithe.

Dughan stopped by a pub garden south of Wrentham. He opened the door for his daughter with his finger to his lips.

'Dad,' she said.

'Hush,' he said.

It was overcast and windy, shadows taking them and releasing them as Dughan found a way through undergrowth to the boundary ditch. They were both quiet as they crossed it. Holding their breath. Beyond, they walked eastward on the edges of the fields. 'Dad,

seriously, you're crazy.' He had a torch but did not turn it on. When the moon came out enough he stopped and took bearings.

'They've got guns,' she said.

'That's why shhh.'

'What'll they do if they catch us?'

'Feed us to wolves.'

'Har har.'

They went still at the sound of a helicopter. The beam passed by half a field ahead, so bright it looked solid.

The air smelt. They could hear echoes. Dughan avoided the hamlet where until recently locals had lived, which had been requisitioned, with only minor scandal. They could see lit windows. They came instead at Covehithe from the north.

He stopped her by the roofless ruin of the church, pointed, heard her gasp. She stared while moonlight got past the clouds to the holed and broken walls, onto a low newer church inside the nave of the old. He smiled. When eventually she was done looking they continued through the graveyard. There was nothing at all frightening about the graves.

This close to the waves the land felt, as the girl said, misbehavicious. A good word to make her feel better. In the leafless trees of this region were cold, random and silent flares of light. Touch the soil, as Dughan did, and as his daughter did too at the sight of him, and it felt greasy, heavy, as if someone had poured cream onto loam.

'Which way are we going?'

'Careful lovey,' he said. 'The ground here...'

'How do you know it's tonight?'

For a while he didn't answer. 'Oh,' he said. 'Bits and pieces.' He looked over his shoulder the way they had come. 'Ways and means.'

'What if they find out?' She pointed at the cottages. She rolled her eyes when he said nothing.

They continued on the road past a sign forbidding exactly this last short walk, on tarmac so old it was becoming landscape. Perspective was peculiar. The smell should have been sappy and muddy and of the sea.

'Look!' His daughter gasped. The road stopped abruptly, rag-edged, fell into nothing. He watched her inch forward. 'It goes right off the cliff!'

'The sea's taking it all back,' he said. 'There used to be a lot more coast here. Careful.' But she had lain responsibly on her stomach at a certain proximity and put only her

fingertips and eyes over the tarmac rim to look down its sheer crumble at the beach.

'Is it still going?' she said. Her voice was faint, she was dipping her mouth below road-level. 'Being eaten?' Dughan shrugged. Waited till she scootched back and turned to him, shrugged again.

He told her they would know within two or three hours if anything was going to happen. He did not say it was only hints and whispers he had to go on, trawlings from bulletin boards. Two names he knew, erstwhile colleagues, both announcing they'd be near Ipswich next week and did any of the old crew want a drink? The latest codes were beyond him, but that query and the night's sudden burst of encrypted chatter had been reasons enough to move.

So, he said, checked his watch and sat with her at the decomposing road-end. He was cross-legged, she with her chin on her knees, hugging them. She kept looking into the sea. The noise of it lulled them as if it were designed to. There was no light but the moon and those occasional sourceless mineral glows. Somewhere some insane bird, not a nightingale, was singing.

All their layers could not keep them warm. They were shaking hard when, after less than an hour, Dughan saw movement on the beach. He motioned for his daughter to stay still and looked through his binoculars at lights jouncing on the shingle. Three sets of headlamps stopped, overlaying each other, illuminating the sea and a strip of the shore.

'It's them,' he said. 'They're setting up. They must've...' The girl could tell his excitement was not wholly enthusiasm. 'They've... we're on.'

He could make out nothing beyond the headlight gaze, and hear nothing but waves. He recced once more but they were not observed. This cliff-top was out of bounds and they, intruders, were alone. His daughter kept watching the water. Dughan wondered if she would complain or ask how long or anything, but she did not. Twenty minutes later, it was she who pointed, who first saw something in the sea.

There were no helicopters now. Nothing so noisy. No downcast beams to light up what was coming, breaking water, way off the coast. It was only moonlit. A tower. A steeple of girders. Streaming, and rising.

The girl stood. The metal was twisted. Off-true and angular like a skew-whiff crane, resisting collapse. It did not come steadily but lurched, hauling up and landward in huge jerks. After each a swaying hesitation; then another move higher, and closer.

The lights on the beach went out. Flame ignited at the tower's tip. Sooty sepia guttering lit the shaft. The sea at its base spread flat and fell away from suddenly rising intricate blockness, black, angled and extrusioned. As if a quarried wedge of the seabed itself had come up to look.

The towerwork was on a platform. In the glow of the thing's own flame they saw edificial flanks, the concrete and rust of them, the iron of the pylon barnacled, shaggy with benthic growth now lank gelatinous bunting.

It was coming at the Covehithe cliff. Under its stains and excrescences were more regular

markings, stencilled warnings. Paint remnants: an encircled H.

Another step - because these were clumsy steps with which it came - and all the main mass was out of the water and raining brine. It waded. Each concrete cylinder leg a building or a smokestack wide. The two on one side came forward together, then those on the other. Pipes dangled from its roof-high underside, clots of it fell back into the sea. It wore steel containers, ruins of housing like a bad neighbourhood, old hoists, lift shafts emptying of black water.

A few waves-width from the beach, it hesitated. It licked the air with a house-sized flame.

'P-36,' the man said. 'Petrobras.'

One of the cars below turned its headlamps back on. The rig shied. Dughan hissed. But the lights quickly dipped and after a moment he said, 'It's probably ok now.'

The platform was at the level of their cliff-top. Now the girl understood its strange ungainliness. On each side, its supports merged at their base, into two horizontal struts, so it moved like a quadruped skiing. What must have been ten feet of water lapped at the struts like a puddle at a child's shoes. The rig facelessly faced north and slide-stamped along the shoreline.

'Quick,' the man said. They took the cliff-edge path, a hedge to their right, the oil platform's tower lurching beside them above its leaves.

'Went down 2001,' Dughan said. 'Roncador field.'

'How many people died?'

'When it sank? No one.'

'Have you... is this the first...?'

He took a moment to stop, to turn and meet her eye. They could hear the flame bursts now. Its straining metal. 'I've never seen it before, lovey' he said.

The path descended. She had been too small when her father left to imagine stories of his exploits, to be proud or afraid. All she remembered were his returnings, an exhausted, careful man who lifted her on to his lap and kissed her with wary love, brought her toys and foreign sweets. When later she had asked him what he had done on those trips, his answers were so vague guilt had hushed her. She did not ask about his injuries.

The rig was slowing. The smell was stronger and the ground, the air juddered, not only in time to its huge steps. Dughan stopped at the last path-end trees. He and his daughter hugged the trunks and watched the oil rig sway in their direction. He held her hand. The girl watched him, too, but he showed no signs of angst, no flashback, no fear.

* * *

On an autumn evening in the earlyish years of the 21st Century, a fishing boat south-east

of Halifax radioed an SOS, under attack - the transmission was unclear. Rescuers found two traumatised survivors in a wash of scattered debris. As they did, the cause of the catastrophe reached the coast. Authorities could not suppress civilian footage of what had come back.

It was the Rowan Gorilla I. That was the first. No Piper Alpha, no Deepwater Horizon; an undistinguished disaster. A tripod jack-up rig lost to storms and hull-fracture in 1988, on its way to the North Sea. Scattered surely by its capsizing and by 30 years below but there, back. Cramped-looking for all its enormity, latticed legs braced halfway through its platform, jutting above it and below into the sea. In the videos the three skyward leg-halves switch and lean creaking towards each other, sway away again like cranes triple-knitting, as it walks the muck on spudcap feet. It staggered like a crippled Martian out of the water and onto Canada.

It shook the coast with its steps. It walked through buildings, swatted trucks then tanks out of its way with ripped cables and pipes that flailed in inefficient deadly motion, like ill-trained snakes, like too-heavy feeding tentacles. It reached with corroded chains, wrenched obstacles from the earth. It dripped seawater, chemicals of industrial ruin and long-hoarded oil.

Ten miles inland, a line of artillery blew the thing apart. Later they made that area a memorial park. Sections of the rig's deck they left unsalvaged, preserved amid flowerbeds.

By panics and fuckups, Dughan's unit had been trapped on the far side of the wounded platform, between the Rowan Gorilla I, they later realised, and the sea. A third of his comrades had been killed. Crushed, torn by wires, caught in its final explosion, bequeathing him years of dreams and memories of trodden men.

The world was still reeling, investigation barely begun, when the Ocean Express, capsized in 1976 with 13 dead, which must have been quietly recomposing itself at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, stood upright in relatively shallow water and strode landward.

Fighter jets scrambled from Eglin inflicted severe damage, slowed it, and the USS Carney torpedoed one of its supports. The rig buckled, tilted and seemed to wait kneeling like a bettered knight. The Carney had shelled it apart.

Dughan saw this from the Carney's deck. He and several comrades had been flown in as advisors to the US navy. He was combatant himself again soon enough, at the return of the Key Biscayne off Australia, and the fire-mottled Sea Quest's attempt to walk into Nigeria.

National governments subcontracted strategy to the UN Platform Event Repulsion Unit: scientists, engineers, theologians and exorcists, soldiers, veterans like Dughan of those first encounters. He learnt the new motions, the vastly swaying skittishness and violence of the revenant rigs. His UNPERU colleagues strove to decode this hydrocarbon Ragnarok. Twice, Dughan boarded pitching, stinking decks to transmit to them close-up footage, from which they learnt nothing. They tried to figure out what economies of sacrifice were being invoked, for what this was punishment. Ruined, lost, burnt, scuttled

rigs were healing on the ocean floor and coming back. Platform, jackup, semi-submersible: all the lost.

After the semi-sub Sea Quest retreated under heavy attack, descending back into the Gulf of Guinea, UNPERU turned its attention and resources to the Ocean Ranger, stalking the Atlantic seabed. So when, shortly after its brief first appearance, the Sea Quest reemerged, and continued its interrupted journey into the oil-fouled Delta, they were not there to intercept. Word reached Dughan and his crew en route to Canada. They came back fast, turning their plane in mid-air.

They were escorted inland by ex-M.E.N.D. guerrillas with peerless local savvy, hastily pardoned by the Nigerian government. They followed the oil rig's mashed-up trail, the rainbow-filmed liquid spoor, the tripod crater prints. In retrospect, certain qualities of the disturbed interior foreshadowed more dramatic instabilities that later petrospectral presences would bring.

Bursts from the derrick known to have been destroyed in the rig's last moments, now heat-twisted but regrown, flared above the forest. The soldiers reached the edge of the clearing the Sea Quest had stamped. They held fire and watched.

Bracing on struts still thick with coraline outgrowths, the Sea Quest settled into the mud. It started its drill. Pushed it into the ground and down.

For a long time it was still but for an occasional swaying tremble of some stuff low-hanging from it. Should we attack? officers kept asking. Dughan shook his head. He checked Unit Beta's images, the Ocean Ranger off the Labrador coast, the tip of its tower a dorsal fin. The stomach-dropping video was proof for which no one had known they were waiting: that below the waves the rigs also walked.

High overhead the Sea Quest's flame was all but out: a dirty smoke plume took its place as cockscomb. 'It's drinking,' one of the soldiers had said to the shake of its pumps. After four hours Dughan sent out a team, joined them when the rig did not respond. Another four and they went closer skill. Eleven hours after the drilling had started, the tower breathed fire again and shook and abruptly pulled its drill from the mud.

The birds that had settled to peck at its deepwater carrion were gone in one cloud. The soldiers made it back to the treeline. The Sea Quest rose on shaft-legs like some impossible dreaming pachyderm. It retraced its stamping passage, trees in its shadow.

The UNPERU team followed. They tried to keep locals away. They were the oil rig's escorts, back to the sea. The platform walked slowly into the water, paused a while in the chop, descended.

* * *

A clutch of dead trees jutted from the scrub like bleached markers of where Covehithe ended. A ribbon of crabgrass separated the sea and shore from Benacre Broad. A cold marsh, a roosting place for birds. The Petrobras approached.

Dughan hesitated and his daughter saw him do so. He wanted to go closer, but there was not enough cover.

The rig. It closed on her and she stopped breathing. It came near enough that she felt the envelope of cold air it brought, smelled abyssal rot and chemical cracking. Spray hit her. The weary factory's spray. It giant-walked by her hiding place sending all those Suffolk birds away, hauled into the fens to squat like a monument that had always been there.

It braced. A percussion of chains, the crack of old shells, and its drill descended.

The first platforms had returned close to where they went down. But then Interocean II had emerged not in the North Sea but in the harbour of a hastily evacuated Oporto, stepped daintily over the seawall like someone crossing a stile. Sedco 135F rose in the Galapagos, far from the Bay of Campeche. The many-legged barge Ocean Prince came up not in Dogger Bank but Sardinia. Revisitors might come, drill, go back to the water, even come up again, anywhere.

Dughan's daughter had got away from him, got closer to the visitor. Had he not noticed her go? Before he knew it, he might have said, she was gone. It might be true. She was pressed against one of the dead trees. Beyond her was Petrobras, like a failed city block. Dughan whispered her name. She watched the dead and come-back rig boring.

He went to her, of course. Exhilarating to exit the treeline. He was quickly there, looking with her through barkless branches. The platform was calm, its fire low. It shivered, only, tinily, all its thousands of tons. Ripples passed over the wetland, not outward but in, circles decreasing, shrinking to that point where the shaft entered the ground.

They watched. After many seconds, Dughan felt something pressed to his back. He had long enough before anyone spoke to be surprised that whoever this was had got so close without him hearing. He blamed the reek and weird industry he was watching. A voice said: 'You move and I'll fucking kill you.'

When the lost rigs of the world came back, old hands claimed they had seen in the motion of the drills something reversed. Dughan doubted it: shuddering was shuddering. But most of the places where the rigs went there were no oil fields. It might have been that they were sniffing other things than oil to sustain them, but that was not so.

'Turn around,' the voice said. The uniformed man who faced them was young and afraid. With a weapon pointed at him, old techniques, muscle memory came back and twitched Dughan's fingers, but he stayed still.

The man scanned them. No RPGs, no mortars, not even smaller arms. They were not oleophobe fanatics here to attack the Petrobras, nor Oil Firsters, here to kill him, his colleagues and all those who came to investigate or exploit, in their parlance, the visitations.

'Who the fuck are you?' The guard glanced over their heads at the shuffling rig. He was whispering, though Dughan knew it would make little difference now.

'We're just here to watch,' the girl said gently. She was taking care of him. 'My dad brought me here to watch is all. Just to see it.'

The guard searched them, cack-handedly. Dughan silently counted the times he could

have disarmed him. The man found only binoculars, torch and cameras. He frowned at their pictures of Suffolk, of Punch-and-Judy shows, of roadside oddities. No contraband sights. 'Jesus!' he said. 'Move, then.'

Behind them the rig shifted and he cringed at the great squelch. 'What are you even doing?' he said when they had retreated to the living trees. 'Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?'

'I'm sorry, it was me,' she said. 'I just really wanted to see it up close and I begged him. I'm really sorry.'

The man wiped his forehead. 'Let me tell you something,' he said. 'Last time there was one of them here, down by Camber Sands?' The Adriatic IV. Dughan didn't say it. 'There was a couple of young lads got in. Got past us. I shouldn't tell you. They were larking about. Taking pictures and that. Anyway you know what happened? They had a dog with them and it got too close, and it spooked the rig and it moved. Midway through.' He waved through the copse. 'It trod on the dog.'

Dughan looked back up at the Petrobras's subdued high burning.

'Now come on.' The guard beckoned. 'Let's get back.'

When their feet hit the beach sand, the girl said to him, 'How long'll it be?' Just close enough to the inlet and troughs gouged by the rig's passing to afford a sightline into the broads, headlights flashed. The jeeps were visible a moment, and people.

'It'll be there half a day at least,' the man said. 'And it's a few months later it'll all kick off.' He even smiled.

'You know,' he said, 'I don't know, you might probably be a bit old for it but there's like a kids' club they have here. They have activities and that.'

'You saw some once, didn't you, dad?' Dughan was not angry when she said that. He marvelled, really, at her.

All its research notwithstanding, UNPERU expressed as much shock as the rest of the world when, over a year after the Ocean Ranger's visit, up from the still-recovering Newfoundland ground into which it had pushed its drill, the first clutch of newly-hatched oil rigs had unburied themselves.

They had emerged into the night, shaking off earth. Stood quivering on stiffening metal or cement legs. Tilted tiny helipads. Tottered finally for the sea.

'How big are they, Dad?' she said.

'You've seen films,' he said. 'As big as me.'

Dughan had gone back to Nigeria. He had waited for months, on the vagaries of gestation. At last the monitors in the delta picked up evidence of subterranean shifts. Over many hours, long before dawn, he had watched unsteady six-foot riglets burrow up out of the forest dirt. Seven of them, of all different designs; buildings, supports, struts, derricks. They waited, swaying like new calves, still wet from their tarry sacs, swinging

umbrella-sized cranes.

He helped to capture two, and to usher the rest safely to the water, where the baby rigs had been tagged and released to scuttle below the waves, escorted by divers as far down as the divers could go. The two captives were taken to hangars where great tanks of brine waited. But they sickened within days and died, and fell apart into scrap and rubble.

The Oporto authorities pumped poisons into the university grounds where the Interocean II had drilled and left the earth slick and soupy. Whether that was what kept its brood from being born was never clear: those eggs were not recovered. In other coastal cities, neonate oil platforms did emerge, to gallop hectic and nervy through the streets, spreading panic.

Only the most violent post-return decommissioning could stop all this, only second deaths, from which the rigs did not come back again, kept them from where they wished to go, to drill. Once chosen, a place might be visited by any one of the wild rigs that walked out of the abyss. As if such locations had been decided collectively. UNPERU observed the nesting sites, more all the time, and kept track of the rigs themselves as best they could, of their behemoth grazing or wandering at the bottom of the world.

'What activities do they do in this club?' the girl said.

'Oh.' The guard shrugged. 'Stuff like, you can see the eggs on a live feed. They'll be digging down to them and they'll put cameras and thermometers and whatever. Sometimes you can even see movement through the shells. And there's colouring books and games and that.' He smiled again. 'Like I say, it's too young for you.'

They laid eggs, so, many people said, they must have sex. There was no logic there. They were oil rigs. Dughan thought the belief exoneration of the strange prurience that endlessly turned on monoliths rutting miles down. An inhuman pornography of great slams and grinding, horrified whales veering from where one rig mounted another, warmed by hydrothermal vents.

'And no one knows what happens to the young, isn't it, dad?'

Other guards came to meet them. Half welcoming, half peremptory. Dughan recognised none. Behind the security were the few tourists lucky to have been nearby, at accredited hotels, when Petrobras's heavy steps had registered on the scanners.

'No one knows yet,' Dughan said to his daughter. 'They're still very young. They're little and the sea's very big. They've got a lot of growing to do.'

A guide was in the middle of a spiel. 'We'll come back in the morning, when it's finished laying,' she said. 'You can bring your cameras then - no danger then if you forgot to turn your flash off.' People laughed.

'What's wrong?' Dughan whispered.

'Do you think it's true what he said?' the girl whispered. 'About the dog? That's horrible.' She made a face. He stared not at the twitching Petrobras P36 with its concrete in the mere, not at its drill ovipositor injecting slippy black rig eggs into England, but at the sea.

'Maybe he was lying to scare us,' the girl said.

Dughan turned and took in the length of Covehithe Beach. They were out of sight, but he looked in the direction of the graveyard, and of St Andrew's stubby hall where services continued within the medieval carapace, remains of a grander church fallen apart to time and the civil war and to economics, fallen ultimately with permission.

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China Miéville's Embassytown will be published in hardback and ebook on 6 May 2011

Topics

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Chez Janette by Alain Mabanckou, translated by Helen Stevenson

Sitting on the terrace in a Louzingou cafe, the talk turns soon enough to the civil war and oil in this new story from Alain Mabanckou, translated by Helen Stevenson

Alain Mabanckou, translated by Helen Stevenson

Thursday 21 April 2011 12.40 BST

I've been back home for a few days, after several years away.

We're sitting at a table on the terrace outside Chez Janette, a bar in the Trois-Cents quarter. It's the busiest place in Louzingou, the Republic of Mboka's political capital.

There are a few people talking in the corner, but they can't hear us. As night falls, their faces gradually fade into the darkness. We've been here nearly two hours, and my uncle seems pleased to meet up with me, after all these years.

The waitress has just come and served us a couple of Primus beers. My uncle is eyeing the girl's backside greedily:

- My dear boy, have you seen that waitress - nice, uh?

I don't answer. He watches the waitress as she makes her way back to the bar, then turns to me:

- This country's changed.

When I look at the big scar running down his face, he says:

- Yes, I know, it's because of the war, dear boy ... it's because of the war, or rather oil ...

He glances over at the people sitting at the back of the terrace, but they're not listening, and my uncle goes on:

- I wonder what our country would have been like if there'd been no oil. A peaceful country? A country with no history? I don't know. We'll never know. God gave us oil, though we're just a small country, with only three million inhabitants. Why did he put all the oil in the south, instead of giving a bit to the north, so everyone at least had a little bit of the cake, and we could stop fighting? Ah well, I mustn't complain, some countries are in real trouble, not a drop of oil anywhere, under land or sea!

He raises his glass, knocks it back in one, and continues:

- Oil is power. Wherever there's war, there's oil. Do countries go to war over water? Imagine a country with no water, will its people survive? Oil brought havoc here, from

north to south. That's the only reason for the civil war.

The waitress puts two more Primus down on the table. My uncle glances at her nicely rounded butt:

- Nice fit lady, eh? Now, where was I? What was I saying?

- The civil war over oil and ...

- Ah yes, while you were away in France, we had a civil war. President Moniato, who was in power, wouldn't accept defeat in the election. He didn't want to hand over power to Solola, who'd been chosen democratically. And why not?

I wondered if he realised I knew all about the war, from the newspapers. Still, I liked to hear him talk.

He became more animated:

- The war was all about gaining control of oil, selling it secretly and buying smart houses in Europe! Oil doesn't belong to the people here, it belongs to the president and his family. The trouble is, Moniato was working with the French. Now, Solola didn't want to work with the French any more, he wanted to work with the Americans. So, the French supported president Moniato, to help him stay in power, but the Americans didn't protect the new president, who'd been democratically elected. The Americans are no fools, they know they can always go and wage war some other place - in Iraq, for instance - and get far more oil than they would here. Why should they fight for a little country with less oil than Iraq?

A taxi's just pulled up in front of the bar. Two women get out, in very short skirts. My uncle and I watch them closely. High heeled shoes. Made up to the nines. They cross the terrace, go to the bar and talk to the owner. We hear the boss say:

- Bring back more money this time! Yesterday was awful!

My uncle says:

- You see that? The war has scuppered everything, everyone has to scrabble for a living. What was I saying?

- About the war, the French, the Americans and ...

- Yeah, we had a civil war while you were away, you know that, it was in all the papers, all over the world. north against south. The northerners were in power, and they didn't want to give up the oil. It was a bad war, dear boy. Arms poured in from everywhere. The northerners asked the Angolans for help, and the French, too, and they came and invaded the south. The people in the south all ran off and hid in the bush. They were dying of hunger, mosquitoes, and tropical disease. Some got eaten by crocodiles and lions. There was war on the ground and war in the air, believe me!

He's been speaking loudly, then realising the other customers had begun to listen in to what he was saying, he lowers it again, before continuing:

- There were military planes flying low over the forest. They began to call the people who'd fled into the bush 'refugees'. The International Community said they must be helped, they needed food, even though you can eat what you want in the bush, like the pygmies do. Pygmies are just a joke, really, they're too small, their stomachs don't get hungry every day like us big guys. Pygmies can go without food and water for weeks, but people our size need to eat every day.

My uncle's eyes are filling up, he looks like any moment he might cry. He looks at his bottle of beer for a moment, then pours himself another glass and says:

- You don't know what went on, it was worse than anything you can have read. It was terrible! I saw it with my own eyes, I was there, I was out in the bush along with the refugees. Sometimes pregnant women gave birth in the bush, because babies must be born even when you have oil, and there's war in your country. The worst thing was, we went on making love, even while the war was killing huge numbers of people. I know what you'll say: why didn't you wait till the war was over to make love? Dear boy, if we'd waited for the end of the war, we'd have forgotten how to make love, and come the end of the war we'd have been making love with animals. It was nothing new: all through history there've been people making love in the time of cholera. Having said that, I don't think cholera had anything to do with oil....

The two prostitutes walk past our table. My uncle doesn't even look at them. His voice grows heavy and sad:

- Things got worse and worse in the bush. One day we heard three helicopters flying over. They were flying low, almost touching the trees. The rumour went round that they were from the International Community. And we could actually see the three helicopters in the sky, with the letters painted in red on the side: PITILOYI. They were from the French company that was producing our oil. Of course! They had come to help us. We all came out of our hiding places, like mice who realise the cat that was chasing them has actually got no teeth, no claws. We began to shout for joy. We danced. We clapped. We embraced. We cried out: Vive la France! Vive la France! Vive la France! And some, in their joy, shouted: Long live America! At last we will make love once again, give birth to our children in our own homes, and not in the bush! War is over, Long Live Peace!

He's waving his arms like a helicopter, and the boss looks over at us from behind the bar, his eyes round with surprise. Once again my uncle lowers his voice:

- Dear boy, I swear, they were there, the helicopters, just metres above our heads. We thought: they're going to throw us sacks of rice, milk, sugar, bread and meat. We all rushed to be the first to fling ourselves on the parcels of food. We jostled and argued, and trampled on the children. The older ones said we must let women and children go first. And d'you know what happened?

Even though I know, I shake my head, to let him continue.

- We saw the helicopter doors open, it was the Angolans. They aimed their weapons at us, and opened fire. From everywhere, birds rose into the air. The gunfire went on and on. People fell, ran, plunged into the river. The soldiers used machine guns, threw tear gas. We didn't know what was going on. And the oldest of the refugees yelled: Take

cover! It's a trap!

From the looks they're giving us now, the customers at the back are not best pleased. But my uncle is caught up in the telling of his story and ploughs on:

- Oh, yes, I was one of the lucky ones. I ran like the devil through the swamp. I didn't look back once. I went into a cave. I stayed there for two days. The country was now in the hands of the northern president, thanks to his Angolan allies. The war was over. When I got back home, my beard was so long it reached the ground. When I walked I looked like a zombie. I had lost almost all sense of direction because there are no streets or avenues in the bush. All you see are trees, mountains, rivers, and you sleep wherever you're sure there are no wild animals ...

The customers at the back of the bar are more shocked than ever, they get up to leave. My uncle leaves off for a moment, as though suddenly afraid. He waits till they've gone, then takes a couple of big gulps before saying:

- So there I was, back from the bush. The country seemed calm again, dear boy. We got on with our lives. We went back to the bars, to the sea, everywhere. Gradually we began to forget what had happened to us. Five years later, we had new elections. The northern president, with the support of the French and the Angolans, was roundly defeated. We jumped for joy. He was practically hounded from the country and went to live in exile in France. Now it was a southerner, Solola, who ruled us. Since he was mad at the French for supporting the northern president, he gave the oil rights to the Americans. Which didn't please the French. Every day, the French went to see the ex-northern-president in his home-in-exile in Paris. The promised him they'd do everything to restore him to power. But we couldn't see how a northerner could become president of our country again. There were Americans everywhere now. They tried to teach us English, but it never worked, because the French had given us their lousy accent during colonisation. We told the Americans they could do what they wanted with our oil, but we refused to learn English. They didn't care either way, they signed their contracts with the southern president, and he signed too, not realising that he was selling off our oil for the future.

Five people in uniform come into the bar and sit down at the back. My uncle looks at them for a few seconds. He lowers his voice, because he knows this time if he talks loud we'll end up in prison. You don't talk about the war here in front of the army.

- Now we must set up new elections. The ex-president from the north has come back to run for office, with the support of the French. But our southern president claims that the right conditions aren't in place. The northern ex-president says they must be held, no matter what. And so they start squabbling ... Don't you want your beer?

I raise my glass, drain it. My uncle does the same and goes on:

- The ex-president brings arms into the country via Angola, and asks the Angolans for help. He says we must get rid of the southern president if he doesn't set up proper elections. Who knows how that will end up. They say they'll be another civil war, but the only thing I know is this, that the people won't get any of what comes from our oil ...

I turn towards the back of the bar. My uncle looks at his watch.

- Time flies! Half ten already!

We pay, and pick up a taxi outside the bar. We're going down the Avenue of Independence, which runs through the middle of Louzingou, I glance occasionally at the scar on my uncle's face. He turns to face me:

- Let's go back to that bar tomorrow. Did you see those two prostitutes? You have one, I'll have the other. I'll pay, don't worry. I bet it's a long time since you had a bit of Louzingan skirt!

I say nothing, I'm almost half asleep. Yes, I'll go back to the bar tomorrow, with my uncle ...

Memoirs of a Porcupine by Alain Mabanckou is published 5 May 2011

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Captive by Rose Tremain

Owen spends what remains of his inheritance on building a set of boarding kennels, in this exclusive story by Rose Tremain. But can the pit-bulls to which his neighbours object bring him anything but trouble? This is the first in a series of stories about oil from writers around the world, including Tim Gautreaux, Joanna Kavenna and China Miéville. Find more over the next week, including a graphic story from Simone Lia, at

Rose Tremain

Friday 15 April 2011 10.18 BST

Owen Gibb grew up on a hundred-acre farm in south Norfolk, with apple orchards and a pond for geese and ducks, and fields of lush grazing for a fine herd of Herefords. Wooden chicken houses, set out across a muddy rise, were shaded by ancient oaks. In the cool dairy, butter was churned.

When Owen's parents died, he had to sell the farm. What remained to him, when all the tax and all the debts had been paid, was a small bungalow, once occupied by his grandmother, and a piece of land, half an acre long, leading down to a quiet road. The new owners of the farm rooted out the apple trees and turned the dairy into a holiday cottage.

Owen knew that it was important, with a legacy as meagre as this, to make an immediate plan for it. Delay would get him nowhere. He was fifty and alone. His only companions were his black Labrador dogs, Murphy and Tyrant, and it was they who inspired his plan.

He designed a set of Boarding Kennels. He'd heard you could make a good living out of people's longing to be rid of their pets, in order to holiday in Spain or Florida - or just to be rid of them, full stop. For that was part of human nature: a longing to be rid of the things you'd thought you might be able to love, and found you couldn't.

All Owen had to do was build the kennels with care, make them solid and comfortable, so that he could designate them "superior". Long before the building work was complete, he'd chosen the wording for his sign: "Gibb's Superior Dog-Homing Facility".

He set the kennels in two rows, running down towards the road, with a green exercise space to the west of them. In each pen, he installed a shelter, made of wood planking and bedded with straw, which reminded him of the old hen houses. The open areas in front, where the dogs could walk round and round - as prisoners do in a yard - were fenced with sturdy chain-link. The flooring was concrete (the only practical solution) but underneath the concrete, Owen laid in a network of heating pipes that would run off the bungalow's oil-fired boiler. "Your pet," Owen heard himself announce to his future clients, "will never suffer from cold in this facility."

He decided, too, that his kennels would be available to all-comers.

After failing to halt his plans at the local council office, the owners of the farm had tried to get him to promise that he wouldn't take in dangerous dogs, but he'd refused. He knew that housing Staffordshire pit-bulls, Dobermans or Rottweilers would put up his Public Liability Insurance premiums. But Owen Gibb was a man who felt some affection for all animals. It didn't trouble him that some of them possessed a harsh kind of nature. He thought he could have grown accustomed to wolves, or even jackals - provided only that there wasn't a whole pack of them: too many to love.

Word circulated quickly around the local area: "Gibb's Superior" was the best and most economical place to board your dog. The food and shelter were good, with the heated floors providing reassurance in winter. The animals got proper exercise twice a week - in rotation according to their breed, size and sex. And, most important of all, if you stayed away longer than you'd agreed, Owen would always "sort something out".

Soon, Owen's booking ledger was so crammed that he began to consider nibbling some land from the exercise space, in order to extend the kennels beyond the thirty places provided at present. It troubled him to turn an animal away, as though this act of his would condemn it to unacceptable suffering, or even death. Because people were hard-hearted: this he knew. If a pet stood between them and their restless desires, they weren't ashamed to have it put down, or turn it out into some wasteland, far from home, to "fend for itself" - whatever they thought that might mean.

Owen drew up plans for ten more units. He hired a plumber to find a way of running a spur off the underfloor heating grid and ordered a second oil tank.

Work was almost ready to begin when, on the first day of a new year - the kennels full to capacity with assorted boarders - a front of arctic weather drove south from Scandinavia and settled over East Anglia.

Snow fell and rested on the frozen earth and piled up on the wooden roofs of the shelters. Owen stood at his front window, watching.

The dogs came out of the shelters and smelled the frosty air and raised their heads into the whirl of snowflakes, trying to bite them as they fell. Though the blizzard was obliterating the path to the road, Owen was exhilarated to see that where it fell on to the concrete pens, it quickly melted. The heating pipes were doing their job.

Owen knew the dogs would still be cold in these conditions - especially the two pit-bulls he'd boarded since Christmas, whose smooth skin appeared almost as vulnerable to Owen as the skin of a man's body - but they'd survive. He'd increase their food ration, shred newspapers to add to the straw, put coats on the pit-bulls and on the overweight little Dachshund bitch called Cherry.

It snowed all day, pausing at night to uncover stars and a deep frost, and began snowing again the following morning. It felt, to Owen, as he worked on the paper-shredding, as though the fat snow would never stop, but keep falling and falling into the heart of the year's beginning, blocking any artery that led to spring. But he and the dogs would endure it together, as the Herefords had endured it through his childhood, as the old apple trees had endured it, motionless in the wind, under their white burden.

Two days later, Owen was woken at seven, in darkness, by the sound of the dogs

howling.

His bedroom was icy. He drew back the curtains and saw snow piled a foot high on the outer sill. He fumbled for the warmth of the radiator under the window, but it was cold.

Owen tugged on a fisherman's sweater, cords and worn slippers and padded to the kitchen, where he knew what he would find: the boiler was out.

The boiler was old, difficult to light. Owen knelt down and took the housing off the ignition box, smelling oil, surprised at how quickly the appliance, which had been burning strongly at midnight, had cooled.

His hands were shaking. The sound of the dogs' howling choked him. Murphy and Tyrant, their tails optimistically wagging, crowded round Owen's crouching figure, and he didn't push them away, but kept them near to him for comfort.

He tried to think clearly. He spoke aloud to the Labradors: "Useless to try to re-light the boiler if snow's piled up on the chimney stack, eh, lads?" he said. Murphy licked Owen's face. Tyrant's tail beat against the boiler-housing. "Boiler'll cut out straight off if there's anything blocking the outflow. So, what's to do, next, Murph? Tyrant? Get a ladder, I guess, and clear the stack. Right? Then come back in and try the old re-lighting procedure. Pray it works."

Owen tugged on heavy socks and boots and his warmest farm coat and opened the back door and Murphy and Tyrant went out to do their business, jumping through the snow to reach a favourite spot.

But Owen stood motionless on the threshold of the door. Hoisting a ladder, clearing snow from the stack: these tasks didn't trouble him. What he dreaded was the sight that awaited him at the kennels. He sniffed the outside air and could guess at a temperature of minus 5 or 6 degrees. Animals without fur succumbed quickly to hypothermia in cold of this intensity. They were howling now, but unless he got the boiler going, they would soon enough fall silent.

He's out in it now. He keeps looking back at his footprints in the snow, leading away from the oil tank, finding it hard to believe what he's just seen.

He carries a bucket of high-protein food. He stands by the pens. Some of the dogs come out from the shelters and try to push through the deep snow towards him. He throws bits of food through the wire. There is no sign of the pit-bulls.

He longs for someone to help him. He thinks wistfully of the days when his parents were alive, companionable voices to console and advise. Because he's trapped. In the night - the coldest night of this winter - somebody came and committed a crime against him. He keeps vainly hoping that he's imagined it, but he knows he hasn't. Silently in the snow, these criminal people unlocked his oil tank and siphoned out every last drop of oil. Every drop.

He believes these criminals are his neighbours, the family who walk the loved land where he grew up, but who detest him and his dogs and want to bring all his endeavours to nothing. He can't be sure it was them, of course, and he believes that he will probably

never get to the bottom of a thing so steeped in hate, but suspicion will linger. The very people who own what should have been his are intent upon his ruin.

He must defy them.

He's called all the oil-delivery merchants he can find in the phone book. Most - because it's the week of the New Year - aren't answering; those that answer say demand for heating oil is so heavy they won't be able to get to him for another nine or ten days.

Owen walks on slowly down the line of kennels. One of the pit-bulls lies dead with his jaw clamped round the chain-link gate, as though trying to bite his way out. The Dachshund, Cherry, is a lifeless, snow-covered mound. Owen shivers as he stares at the fat little corpse. From the bungalow comes the sound of his landline ringing: dog-owners calling from ice-bound stations or airports, asking him to keep the dogs until the thaw comes.

There will be no thaw. This is how it feels to Owen. He and the animals are imprisoned for all time in a frozen world.

He tries to master his shivering and to think clearly. He knows that he has no choice. He will have to bring the dogs inside the bungalow. Twenty-eight dogs.

He'll try to separate them, as he does for their exercise routine, so that they don't constantly mate and fight with each other. But still, their animal natures, confined, confused, will create turmoil around him. Their barking and howling and rampaging will fill his every waking hour and make sleep impossible. Murphy and Tyrant will cower in corners, hide in cupboards, their familiar territory usurped by strangers. And everything that Owen possesses will be torn and stained and brought to desolation.

But there's no other way to save the dogs. No other way. He feels paralysed, as though he's suddenly become ill or old.

He turns away from the kennels and walks towards the house. The howling and whimpering of the dogs resume as they watch him leave.

But he needs a moment of respite. He remembers that he still has electricity. He's going to make himself a cup of tea, something to warm him, at least, before he faces all that he has to face in the coming day.

He fills the electric kettle. He stands waiting for the homely sound of its boiling to mask the noises outside, which now come to him as though from a far-away country, a barbaric place, where there is no order or kindness, the sort of place he'd hoped never to inhabit.

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On Business by Robin Yassin-Kassab

A desert trip to a meeting in Damascus reveals a significant find in this new story by Robin Yassin-Kassab

Robin Yassin-Kassab

Saturday 16 April 2011 00.02 BST

He filled up the tank before he left Kuwait City, filled it again at Qurriyat near the Saudi-Jordanian border. He stopped a couple of times for sandwiches and crisps, otherwise kept on driving through the flat desert with stereo playing and air conditioning humming. They waved him through the crossings after he'd waved his genuine Rolex and his heavy silver rings at them. Including border stops, the journey took eighteen hours. These days the world's a small place, which is one of the Prophet's Signs of the Hour - distances will disappear before the end comes.

Dusk was falling on Damascus when he arrived. Fumes rose from the minibuses and paraffin heaters and from people's cigarettes and swirled up to meet the thickening night. Green lights and minarets shook on either side, and there were potholes in the asphalt. He didn't bother checking into his hotel. He wanted to get straight to business.

He drove towards the mountain, through the centre of town. He followed a highway along the bed of a gorge. Here at last the barren melted against the power of potential fertility. A gurgling stream rushed beside the road, and there were trees and restaurants, sometimes dining rooms fatly bridging the water. He pulled in at a building more contemporary than the rest, a tall building fronted in metal and dark mirrors.

A smartly dressed youth sat behind the reception desk. Stairs to the upstairs rooms rose to the right. Two miniature trees sat potted on either side of the bottom step.

He looked at the youth, and straightaway asked, "Is Miss Dallal here?"

"Miss Dallal?"

"That's right."

"Do you have an appointment?"

He chose not to pull rank. "No I don't."

"Just a moment, please. I'll see if she's not busy."

While he waited he finger-combed his hair in the glass of the door. He'd left his briefcase on the back seat of the car, beside his overnight bag. One kind of business at a time.

She arrived in a black evening dress, holding a matching handbag out in front of her as if

it might explode. Her gaze was intelligent, penetrative. Her body was well-curved but still sober and elegant.

"You wanted me?"

"Miss Dallal?"

"Yes."

He told her his name. "People speak very highly of you," he said. "They say you're the best in the business."

She received his hand delicately. It shook, not quite imperceptibly, within her grasp. He wasn't so sure of himself, even with all these years of experience fitted under his straining belt, even with the insulation of his impressive company title.

"Come on," she said. "Let's have a drink first. Then we can talk." She swished in front of him, leftwards through the swing door to the bar.

A waiter pounced as they entered and ushered them through great wafts of noise to a table. He sat down and took his bearings. In the centre of the circular room women and girls were shuffling and kicking, fingers linked, on a dais. They revolved and paused and continued revolving in a reluctant sort of debke. But more were girls than women, most in their mid-teens, their hormonal and depression-related skin problems overbrushed with pink plaster. Smiles on their faces, their eyes in mid-focus. Knee-length dresses and well-dressed cleavage, or buds of breast on some of them, dark spots erect like goosebumps, like nausea and fear.

One held the microphone and purred a tuneless lovesong to Iraq, her lost paradise. Surging synthesiser and an invisible drum backed her up. Each girl had a thick coil of black hair shimmering against the length of her back or brought over the crown of her head to be bumped and twitched like a curtain.

The place was packed with men who'd driven north from the Gulf states. He was embarrassed when he realised this. Some fanned wads of lira or riyal at the girls' feet or sprayed the notes into strobing smoke. One man danced in front of the dais, shaking his robed hips, shaking his hands above his head, kuffiyeh stretched between them.

He was glad he was wearing his suit. He removed a tissue from the box on the table and wiped his brow with it. His substance becomes liquid at such ambient temperatures.

He ordered whiskey while she sorted through her bag. Lipids rattling in there, lubricants, balms.

He looked her carefully in the eye. "I'm an oil man," he said, irrelevantly.

"Me too," she said, smiling. "I have a degree in petrochemicals. Everybody in our family."

Her eyes were green and flecked with gray. His eyes began to water. Blue gusts of smoke blew between them. Carbon and hydrogen were thick in this atmosphere.

The bottle arrived with two glasses.

"I've been to Iraq," he said.

"Lucky you."

"I was lucky. I enjoyed it. It was before you invaded us."

"I didn't invade anybody."

"Forgive me, Miss Dallal," he chuckled. "You know what I mean."

"So where did you go?"

"I worked at the Rumaila field."

"My father worked on the Rumaila field."

He unlidded his eyes. "Really? What was his name?"

"Ahmad Shujaat."

"No! Abu Jasim? What a coincidence! I worked with him. He was a respected man. I know him well. Tell me how he is."

"He's dead, God have mercy." She said it in a very flat and even tone, with the usual smile on her lips.

"My God. What happened?"

"Somebody shot him."

His next question died in his throat. He took a swallow of whiskey. "God have mercy. But your mother is alive?"

"She is, thank God."

"Thank God. And in good health I trust. You must send my best wishes."

"Send them yourself. That's her over there..."

He followed her slender finger across the jumping heads of the crowd to a woman who sat in the shadows. A late middle-aged woman in a white hijab, stiff-lipped, dessicated by tension, rigidly respectable. The only woman in the room wearing hijab. Scornful of the humid heat, she also wore a long blue overcoat. He looked at her briefly, hard, and then, for a long time, he stared at the table.

"Don't you want to say hello?"

"I never met her," he said. "The time isn't suitable." He sipped the whiskey. "Jasim, your brother. Is he alright?"

"No. God have mercy."

He tapped the glass against his teeth.

"He was in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said, and then more wistfully, "do you think there's a moral lesson in it?"

His brow sank in confusion. "A moral lesson?"

"It depends on the place, I suppose, and why he was there. As well as the time..."

She talked and she kept talking. She talked as if she were compelled to let it out, all that material accumulated inside her and crushed into fuel for her speaking.

The corpses were trapped in her soul as in a sealed tomb. No worms in there to eat the memory and only the hardiest of bacteria, so putrefaction had been a slow business. The gases released during the process were caught, concentrated, and the remaining black essence had been distilled to an ever blacker, ever more tarry substance. This roiled and sludged between her spine and her sternum, under immense pressure. Now that a breach had been opened, it spurted upwards through her throat.

He let her go on, nodding, not properly listening, blinking smoke from his lashes. It was difficult to hear because of the music. He poured and sipped, drank until his chest was burning. Soon he would steer her back to business.

But he didn't need to. She abruptly broke off and leant in close, laying her hand on his thigh. Surprised, he tensed the muscle there, shifting his bulk a little so the splayed-out flesh wouldn't seem so flabby.

"It's time to start the negotiation," she said.

He swallowed. "I want everything," he blurted next. He frowned at the table as he said it.

"You can have everything you want for twenty thousand."

"I haven't changed my dinars yet."

"The equivalent then."

"That's fine," he mumbled.

She stood up. "Come on. Let's go upstairs."

They left the salon arm-in-arm. Miss Dallal's mother followed at a distance.

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Oil Field by Mohammed Hasan Alwan, translated by Peter Clark

A young boy finds his village transformed by the oil wells he can glimpse from the roof of his house, in this new story from Mohammed Hasan Alwan, translated by Peter Clark

Mohammed Hasan Alwan, translated by Peter Clark

Monday 18 April 2011 13.44 BST

When Ja'far's father went to work for SakOil, I asked my Dad about these oil fields everyone was talking about. He told me they weren't that far from our village. That evening I kept on asking and asking him about them, and eventually he took me up to the roof of our house. He pointed with his slender hand to the eastern horizon, where five spots of light flickered uncertainly.

"There," he said gently, "under each of those flares is an oil well."

I was obsessed with these lights, staring at them like a moth which tries to steer by the stars, hoping that I could fly straight toward them. Over on the other side of the roof, the washing hung damp in the still air. An ant crawled over my foot, heading for a dark corner. I kicked it away - I wasn't going anywhere. I stood up and followed my Dad back down to our living room like a disappointed Sufi.

Yet my faith never vanished. All that hot, damp summer, I spent many hours looking at the flickerings of those flares as if I was some religious novice. They were like some great show, the gas squeezing up from the depths of the oil well to be consumed in flame against the intense black horizon, like some great dragon. I could hardly step onto the roof without looking to the east and counting those flares like a catechism. Every time one appeared I rushed to my Dad, a lucky astronomer who has sighted a new star in the sky. Dad never shared my excitement.

Every morning I would watch the men setting off to work in those oil wells. Some went in cars to the SakOil headquarters wearing suits, though whenever they were in the village they wore the local thawbs. Others gathered at the vegetable souk where large buses took them to the distant fields. These wore blue overalls and long leather boots and carried yellow safety helmets.

They were all enchanted for me, all heading for the mystical oil fields early in the morning and coming back at sunset. Out there they were subduing the earth, extracting oil, feeding those flares, discovering the impossible and mixing with Americans. In short, they were playing major roles on the world stage every day. And they weren't just setting light to those flares above the oil wells, they were providing fuel for our village as well. When they got back they were full of illuminating stories, stories I collected up in my mind as if they were relics of an immortal saint.

I treasured the tales cousin Sulaiman told when he came back from Bahrain for my grandmother's funeral. He had worked on the first pipeline project, when American women were roaming the streets without covering their heads. "People used to be more accepting," he said with a sigh. The men nodded.

Once Ali, our neighbour, said he was one of the workers crowded around the king in the black and white photograph of a recently-discovered oil field hanging proudly on his sitting-room wall. I didn't know he had been this close to royalty, so I asked which one was him. He said he was hiding his face because taking photographs is haram. My Dad said it was past my bedtime.

Ja'far used to live in the street opposite our house. His Dad would spend three days without a break in the oil field, and then come home to spend a couple of days with his wife and children before setting off again. Ja'far told me his Dad boarded a fast boat that took him from the port of Ras Tannura to an off-shore oil rig in the Safaniya field in the middle of the sea.

Ja'far became my best friend. Every day I heard a different story from him about his Dad. I didn't ask myself whether a story was true or not - anything was possible for his Dad. All I wanted was one day to work in an oil field myself, and to have a son who would be as proud of me as Ja'far was of his Dad.

My Dad didn't work in the oil field. He taught at the deaf and dumb school at the end of our street. He spent his day with children who could not speak or hear, and so I could hardly expect him to bring home any interesting tales. When Dad came back with a bag of fresh hamour from the fish market and a bag of cabbage leaves from the souk, I'd be at the other end of the village, playing football with Ja'far. When his Dad got back from the oil rig he would greet me with a warm handshake. And one day he gave me a small medallion stamped with SakOil. I guarded it like a jewel from Paradise.

One afternoon after prayers, Ja'far told me that he had some important news. His Dad would no longer be working in the Safaniya field. He was being transferred to a new oil field in the middle of the Empty Quarter. This meant that instead of boarding a fast boat he would be taking a plane owned by SakOil into the desert, translating him ever closer to heaven.

I asked Dad that evening whether the flares we could see from our rooftop were in the middle of the sea or in the middle of the land. He replied with a laugh, his hands thrown up as if he was surrendering.

"My boy, keep calm. One day you'll see them at our front door."

"At our front door?" I almost shouted.

He nodded, but he didn't say any more.

That night I dreamed about oil wells. I was up on the roof of our house singing the praises of the flares to a group of people down below, but I didn't recognize them. The flares came closer and closer, and I carried on praising them loudly like a devoted sorcerer. They flickered even brighter and came right up to me in a circular wave of stars and fire. I bent down to the closest flare and reached out to touch it. My hand pierced the

flare smoothly. It felt so cold. I kept my hand within the flame.

I dreamed of the oil wells many times after that night, and it seemed as if my dreams were coming true. As the oil fields developed, the wells sprung up nearer and nearer to our village. Ja'far moved to al-Dammam - his mother muttering about the dangers of asthma and bronchitis - but I didn't mind. Soon the wells were so close we could see the workers moving around the base, or climbing up to adjust the machinery.

I was dreaming of the wells last night. My kid sister was coughing again, shaking and crying in the darkness as she struggled for air. She had woken up my mother as well, who came in with a drink of water and sat down beside her, stroking my sisters' hair and humming an old song. I lifted my head from the pillow.

"Do you think father knows anyone who could help me find a job at SakOil?" I asked.

She stopped singing and looked up.

"Go to sleep," she said.

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Topics

Original writing Fiction Oil Oil spills Energy

Barthelme by Joanna Kavenna

It's about time someone sorted this oil business out. Joanna Kavenna brings us the exclusive story of the world's first truly ethical oil company

Joanna Kavenna

Tuesday 19 April 2011 00.01 BST

I got myself an oil-drilling platform. Oh, I'd inherited a bit of money from Great-Aunt Sylvia. They told me it was a million a day to hire it. Never mind, I said, it's worth every penny. It's about time someone sorted this oil business out, I said. If we simply can't stop using the filthy stuff, then we need decent people running it. We need the world's first truly ethical oil company, I said. If no one else will do it, it'll have to be me, I said.

I got myself a ship and towed my drilling platform right up north, up where the compass starts to spin round-and-round. Someone told me there was nice clean oil up there, virgin territory, accessible now the sea ice had started to melt. I ended up in this sketchy village on a wind-lashed coast, it had a name like Quaassoorrqq. I talked to all the locals. They were terribly worried about pollution and global warming, they said. Relax, I said, mine is going to be the nicest cleanest oil that was ever produced, and I'll tell you what, how would you like a swimming pool, and a school, and some cosy new houses to replace those shacks you're living in? At first they didn't quite believe me. I said, look, we'll split the whole thing, you get half, I get half, my expenses are pretty high, but still, I'm a decent-minded person and I absolutely want to do the right thing. They said, really, a heated swimming pool? Of course, I said. And a roller rink if you like. Whatever you want. Fifty-fifty, that's the deal, I said.

So they went to their government and their government said, really, fifty-fifty and a swimming pool? I don't know what sort of cowboys you've dealt with in the past but this time everything's different, I said.

I got myself a license. Now it's all legitimate, I said. I gave jobs to the locals, so they could see from the start just how fair and ethical things were going to be. I paid them well, I gave them a generous holiday allowance. I promised them lavish bonuses in the event that we struck oil. I'm deeply concerned about your work-life balance, about ergonomic stress, about time with the family, I said.

We sat out on the platform, in the formerly frozen ocean. We had some useful-looking pipes and some huge levers and a big control room filled with buttons. I had brought along a bright spark, to tell me how everything worked. The sea changed colour every hour, like a show-off, trying to attract attention. One moment it was pink and the next it looked like hammered silver. Then it went pea-green and then it was purple. Icebergs floated past. Some of them were as big as houses. The bright spark said, yes, the ice is millions of years old, it comes from the Greenlandic ice cap, it's been there forever. But now it's melting, he said. Well, that's sad, I said. But let's not get too sentimental. You

know, that's what ice does in the end. It melts, I said.

I got myself a tract of forest. The best way to offset my carbon emissions, the bright spark said. Okay let's do it, I said. When we found our first trace of hydrocarbons I bought a few more thousand hectares of forest, and when the oil really started coming I bought the biggest stretch yet. I believe passionately in ethical fossil fuel extraction, I said. No expense spared, I said.

I got myself a significant oil find. Deep under the ocean bed, we found commercially viable oil. Well, that's what happens if you do things the right way, I said. Fortune smiles on you, I said. We had a little party on the deck. Champagne in plastic cups. What a great thing this'll be for Quaassoorrqq, the locals said. Heated swimming pools and roller rinks, they said. Fifty-fifty, fair as anything, I said. The ice melts, and look what you find, I said. Liquefied death, the bright spark said. Liquefied death, what do you mean? I said. All those little animals and plants, he said, crushed into mulch, that thing you call oil. It's just death. Well, let's look on the bright side, I said.

I got myself a Greenpeace boat, it came out to hound me. I took my loudspeaker, shouted back at them. You don't understand, I'm a nice guy, I said. Look, I bought the biggest forest I could find, I said. The people of Quaassoorrqq trust me. Everything fifty-fifty, I said. The Greens went, and we all sat watching the bergs again. The bright spark said, once there was a berg, it sailed as far as Manhattan Island. It turned up by the Statue of Liberty, he said. That's just wonderful, I said. What did they do with it then? They cut it up and put it in their pina coladas, he said. It fizzed like anything when it went in the drinks. All that ancient air, trapped in the ice for thousands of years, and then one little pina colada, POP, he said.

I got myself a vicious storm. Waves like I'd never seen before, slamming onto the deck. Two of the locals drowned and the others said it was the something god of the ocean, punishing us. I respect your religion with all my heart, I said. And yet, I don't think the something god of the ocean would object so wildly to the ethical extraction of fossil fuels. Let's not jump to conclusions, I said. I sent the bodies back to the shore, paid out far more than I had to. I wrote letters of condolence to the families. I'm more sorry than words can say, I said.

I got myself some bad news. My forest had died, they said. Acid rain. Came from the big city, they said. All my carbon credits had been wiped out, they said. Well, get me another forest, I said. Nothing by halves. I intend to do this properly, I said.

I got myself a building team, and sent it over to Quaassoorrqq. I told them to start work on the new swimming pool. Nordic design, saunas and steam rooms. You're going to love it, I said. I gave the whole town a bonus. Ethical fossil fuel extraction, I said.

I got myself a little oil spill. It was a freak accident. It really wasn't much at all, but the foolish seabirds landed right in it, and then there were some sad-eyed seals, their fur matted with the stuff, and I heard the whales weren't looking too great either. The Greens came out again, more furious even than before, trying to mop up the wildlife. I'm awfully sorry, I said. Here, can I make a donation to your clean-up operations? I never meant to hurt anyone, I said. It turns out there's a fundamental problem with the far North. If you spill just a tiny bit of oil, scarcely any at all, it sits out there on the ocean for

years. There's not enough warmth to evaporate it away. Well, how was I meant to know that? You can't be expected to know everything, I said.

I got myself a mysterious sickness in the local population. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with me, I said. They had an unhealthy diet anyway. Too much meat. They need to eat more vegetables, I said. A few of them died and then the rest slouched around for weeks, they could hardly get out of bed. It was the something god of whatever punishing them, they said. So I called a local meeting, came all the way back to the shore. It's all under control, I said. So we've had a couple of accidents. I paid their families, I wrote letters. I'm sorry about the oil spill and it really won't happen again, I said. They were looking suspicious, they wouldn't even meet my gaze. Fifty-fifty, I said. Relax, I'm a nice guy, I said.

I got myself a bizarre nocturnal accident. I was under a lot of pressure, all that money I'd spent, and now the cost of cleaning up the oil spill, and paying off the families of the sick and dead. I couldn't sleep one night, ergonomic stress, the swell was savage, so I went to get some air on the deck. The creepy northern lights, pulsing above me. They had really started to get on my nerves. I must have dozed on a bench. I was clutching a harpoon gun when I fell asleep, that was the mistake I made. Just a little harpoon gun, I'd bought it as a joke. I never meant to fire it, I said. But something startled me, I woke up suddenly, the poor guy didn't stand a chance. The harpoon went straight into his head.

I got myself some general condemnation. I was a danger to the local people, they said. I'd splashed oil all over their coast. I'd poisoned and murdered them, they said. Just a tiny little spill, I said. A dreadful misunderstanding, I said. I was guilty of criminal mismanagement, they said. Well, that really hurt. I'd been nothing but generous. I'd made a fifty-fifty deal, I'd given them bonuses, work on the Nordic swimming pool was almost finished, I said. We don't want your blood money, they said. Blood money! I've never been so insulted in my life, I said. Look, I'd be the first to concede that there are some bad people in the fossil fuel industry, I know that as well as you, but I'm an ethical extractor of fossil fuels, I said. Your license is revoked, they said. You've got to be kidding, I'm not going anywhere, I said.

I got myself an ultimatum from an international court. I had a week to leave the area or they'd take action, they said. But don't you think you're being a bit hasty, I said? The bright spark said, I think it might be time to go home now. Perhaps you're in danger of outstaying your welcome, he said. The locals all left the platform. I'd prepared a little speech, thanking them for their work, saying what a pleasure it had been, collaborating in this innovative cross-cultural way, how I hoped this would be the first of many such ventures. They went silently into their boats. Well, some people have no manners, I said.

I got myself a no-win situation. Either I left or Interpol would scupper my platform, they said. Well, that seemed unethical on all sides, such a waste of resources. Someone has to be high-minded, I said. So I towed my little oil platform all the way down to the south again. The police came by boat to intercept me. Well, this is a waste of taxpayers' money, I said. Why don't you go and catch some proper criminals, I said.

I got myself a spell in prison. I was lucky it wasn't worse, they said. The bright spark stopped returning my calls. Another fair-weather friend, I said. I had no choice but to sell my forest to a multi-national logging company who wanted the wood to make coffin lids.

That pained me deeply, but my debtors had to be paid, they said. At least in jail you can't spend any money, I said.

I live in Sidcup now. I like it here, the sky is always grey. No dancing green lights and no showy pink sea. Job Centre Extra Plus found me a position as barman at the local golf club. Not quite what I had in mind, I said. In general I like to work with the under-privileged, I said.

I overheard two regulars discussing a business venture. Uranium, one of them said. It's the future. But the thing about uranium is that most people who do it are fundamentally not very nice. Lacking in basic morals, if you know what I mean. Uncivilised. So this friend of mine has an idea to do ethical uranium mining, he said. The most decent-minded uranium extraction in the world, he said. You pay the workers at the mine a good wage, you give them a load of perks, you build the local community a brand new disco dance hall, anything they like. No more people in ankle chains, dropping dead of cancer, no more horror stories about three headed puppies, he said.

I thought I really had to stop him. I wanted to say, don't even try, they'll never thank you. Don't even bother, I almost said. But I opened my mouth and the words came out wrong. Liquefied death, I said. For a moment, the bar went quiet. Then someone said, Is that one of your new cocktails? And everyone laughed.

Liquefied death, let's have some of that, they said.

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Topics

Fiction Original writing Oil Oil spills Joanna Kavenna

Gone to Water by Tim Gautreaux

A year on from the Deepwater Horizon disaster, this specially-commissioned story is set in Louisiana, where Pa Claude and Jackie are going out fishing on the bayou

Tim Gautreaux

Wednesday 20 April 2011 13.38 BST

The dawn looked more like a sunset. The horizon was a luminous peach-colored line, and rising above it were gray commas of cloud with copper bottoms, each the size of a small town. The old man came onto his back porch holding a cup of coffee and looked east over the sound, his great grandson dawdling behind, hands in his pockets, a willowy boy of nine. Claude Ledet was eighty-eight, his skin a sun-eroded fabric of pale craters and burgundy spots. He looked down to his little wharf hugging the island.

"We goin fish today, down to the mouth of the river."

"The river?" The boy's voice sailed high in the question.

"The Mississippi," his great grandfather snapped. "Don't you know nothing?"

The boy grinned, goofy and sweet. "I know it's a long way off, Pa Claude. For your boat."

The old man turned west, looking for weather. Sometimes he would see what was there, sometimes his mind would layer memories over the present, and he would see what was there last year, or the decade before that, or sixty years earlier when he'd built his little frame house high up on pilings. The day before, he'd seen the big wooden oyster lugger The Two Sons go by, loaded down, and he'd waved at his cousins Henry and Rene where they sat on the deck sorting what they had dredged up from their lease, even though Henry and Rene had been dead of old age for many years and The Two Sons lay sunk and rotting in Lake Borgne. Sometimes he saw things from several different decades at once, steam tugs, coastal sail boats, brand new Chris Craft mahogany yachts, jet skis carrying windblown children racing above the swells, time-wandering images floating side-by-side and overlapping like a bowl of fresh shucked oysters.

Claude looked down at the boy. "Why you here?"

"Aunt Brenda couldn't come stay with you today. She's at the doctor with the flu."

"That oldest girl couldn't come?"

"Suzie?"

"That's right. So many come around to visit with me I can't keep 'em straight."

The boy gave him a long look. "Great-aunt Suzie's your daughter."

The old man nodded west. "Get two rods off the porch and my box. I'm goin bail the skiff."

"Her friend's husband got killed in that rig accident about three weeks ago. It's a big mess out in the Gulf."

"My radio's burnt out and that damn television don't make no sense to me at all."

"Everybody's talking about it. You haven't heard?"

Claude put a hand to his stubbly chin. "We need some crackers and potted meat and a jug of water."

The boy settled a baseball cap down on his curls. "I didn't know we were going fishing."

Soon the two of them were in a plank skiff being pushed east by Claude's five-horse Champion, a smoky old outboard he had to pull on ten times before it would even pop, the first tugs on the rope making only the noise of a startled hen. The twelve- foot boat rattled and wandered but managed after a while to get up to ten miles an hour as it cut between the big shrimp company dock and an incoming corporate trawler.

The boy looked back at the vessel as the wheelman leaned out of the cabin to watch them. "Pa Claude, you sure you want to go all the way to the river?"

The old man didn't answer as he watched for the pass that led to the gulf, which he saw after a minute and turned into, and then two minutes later turned back out of when three foot rollers caused the skiff to buck and sway. They began to follow the grassy back of the island where there were no houses, still headed east, a longer but calmer route.

After several miles they began to pass oil company canals cut into the marsh on both the left and right, and the motor hit a stump, hard, jumping up and puttering in open air until Claude could find the kill switch. As he replaced the propeller's shear pin with a cut nail, the boy asked them what a stump was doing out in open salt water.

"Aw, Jackie, this used to not be water."

The boy brushed dark hair under his cap. "What was it?"

"Ha. Land, you little fool. You see how what we in now looks like a lagoon? Years ago it was a long narrow cut, not a hundred feet wide." He looked up from his work. "All this was land. Over there was camps, but they fell in the water every one. A farmer grew

sugar cane in a sure-enough field over there. I remember a road. The world's meltin away on account of all these rig canals."

"Maybe you ought to stay off the shore out of these stumps," the boy said quietly.

"Yah. I'll go out further in the old way."

In another five miles the island fell away to the right and they stopped in open water. "The chop ain't too bad." Claude pointed to a long concave shore a mile off to the northeast that had been cut into with five canals. "We can head over there and then skin down that long bank south of it and around past the jetties at the mouth and anchor in a little hook inside the rocks where it'll be calm. That's where them redfish hide." He looked across the water again. "This used to be cypress trees, here. Even a little high ground."

The motor idled and both of them studied a broad whitecapped channel they would have to cross. Something other than bitter marsh smell hung in the air. The great-grandfather pushed a lever on the motor and the skiff slowly gained speed. They rocked through a rough place, shipping only a couple gallons of water because the old man still knew how to play the swells.

Close to the crescent of marsh and out of the big currents, the boat cut into rusty water topped with an engulfing stink like that of a steaming refinery. "What the hell," the old man yelled over the motor.

"Pa Claude, what's that smell?" The boy leaned over to look at the water.

"I don't know, baby. We run up on a little oil, I guess."

But as the skiff slid along, they saw that it was not a little oil they were going though, but a broad deep pool of reddish crude that had blown against the shore and was turning the marsh grasses into tarred pretzels. They saw pelicans trembling about the bank like bronze ghosts strangling under glossy sheets. The slathered skiff seemed lost in a vast storage tank of crude oil, as thick as glue. Looking overboard, Claude saw that the engine's water pump was pulling pure oil and spitting it up in a fuming stench. He killed the outboard, fearing that the very sea around them could erupt into flames.

"This must be some of that blown-up rig's stuff," the boy said.

"What? What rig? The steam plant by North Pass?" The old man was dizzy, afraid, and his mind suddenly went many years off track. To the east he saw more water than he remembered, open Gulf running all the way to the orange triangle marking the eroded mouth of the river. He wondered what had happened to the land, its fish-filled inlets, the shrimp-spawning marsh, the oak groves, the hummocks overrun with white egrets, how a place that fed so richly whoever sailed through it could dissolve, history and graveyard and church and road and home.

They waited. The sun was straight up, it was May in Louisiana, and the heat was cooking the oil to fumes as the skiff stuck in place. After an hour the boy began to vomit overboard. Claude stuck his arm into the water and it came up covered with a black-and-red batter halfway to his elbow. The boy retched again, and the old man himself felt headspun and sick. He pulled the starter rope figuring they should try for open water to the south. Doddering up to speed, the boat dragged through the oil until the bow suddenly rose up on what, a thousand-year-old cypress stump or one of a million abandoned pipelines? The hull rolled high and slid off to the right, dumping Claude Ledet into the terrible slop, and as he went under, his mind came back to a splintered version of the present, and he knew at once that he had to get back to the surface because the boy, he felt sure, would jump after him, and a news account he'd read thirty years before of a grandfather and grandson gone fishing and not coming back in at the appointed time bloomed into his head, because when the sheriff's men dragged the canal the next morning the hooks brought up together the grandfather and a four-year-old boy wrapped tightly in his arms. Sweet Jesus, he thought, give us a hand.

He twisted to get his bearings but could not tell up from down until he felt ten narrow fingers pulling up on his shirt and he knew Jackie was in the water with him and struggling blindly out of some blood kin urge that nobody understands, and now he knew which way was up, so Claude spread his arms, cupped his hands and pulled them both to the sky, remembering not to take a breath too quickly once his head broke the surface. His great-grandson he knew to be a weak swimmer, and the boy had taken in a large amount of oil that was jetting from his nostrils as he coughed into the terrible water. The old man took him by the collar and struggled fifty yards toward shore, slow as a giant water bug, and reaching his depth, walked them in the rest of the way where they fell on a thin shell reef and coughed and puked burning red streamers of oil until they were nearly unconscious with the strain of it. They sat like oiled birds and watched the skiff, which had beached itself far across the open water, back on the island. In another hour the boy began to cry that his skin was burning all over and that he couldn't breathe. Claude had pulled his handkerchief and mopped off the thickest oil from Jackie's face and eyes, but the white skin itself would not come clean and kept the color of thin-smeared tar. The old man stood and walked off the ledge of shells into the grass, but they were miles from any building, and all he could see was the great flat marsh spreading north. Miles away, a ship passed straight out into the Gulf, a helicopter went over at two thousand feet. They would just have to wait.

Claude sat next to Jackie, but it hurt the boy to be touched, so the old man just watched and slept, dozing now and then, rousing with a start and forgetting where he was, who this weeping person next to him was, why his own neck and back flamed and blistered. Around four o'clock they saw a sports fisherman and Claude stood and waved his bony arms. They were taken into a smudged new boat and brought to the landing on the island where an ambulance took them up Highway 1 to the hospital. The old man spent one night there because it took that long for the nurses to scour him and test his blood over and over. Against all prohibitions he walked down the hall past the priest, through a crowd of relatives and friends, or people he guessed were such, to see Jackie, who was

on a ventilator, his eyelids blue, his beanlike fingers cold. Claude waited long to see if the boy would at least open one eye to discover that his great-grandfather was in good shape. But he didn't. The nurses had cleaned Jackie up, but the smell of oil hung in the room like an unwelcome spirit.

A week later, the relatives took Claude's boat away from him, and then his car, which he had not driven in three years anyway. On a Tuesday he woke up and dressed for work at the fish plant, which had been closed twenty years, and his daughter had to tell him to just go sit on the little porch and drink his coffee. He walked down to his wharf instead and stood at the very end, remarking to no one how the land had melted away all around just since yesterday. So much water and no place to go. He turned for a moment and saw his graying daughter seated on a rush chair on the porch, her head down in her hands.

A boat's engine throbbed in his ears and looking again at the water he saw his old uncle, Monsieur Abadie from all the way over in Tiger Island going out in his long skiff propelled by a one-cylinder inboard. On the north side of his uncle raced the fresh-painted Aztec, the sailing lugger owned by the Czechs who lived on the river, and knifing between, but coming in, was The Two Sons, its decks piled high with sacks of oysters, Jackie standing at the very bow, raising his arms and waving with big sweeps of his sun-brightened hands.

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Topics

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The Raft
by Stephen King

It was forty miles from Horlicks University in Pittsburgh to Cascade Lake, and although dark comes early to that part of the world in October and although they didn't get going until six o'clock, there was still a little light in the sky when they got there. They had come in Deke's Camaro. Deke didn't waste any time when he was sober. After a couple of beers, he made that Camero walk and talk.

He had hardly brought the car to a stop at the pole fence between the parking lot and the beach before he was out and pulling off his shirt. His eyes were scanning the water for the raft. Randy got out of the shotgun seat, a little reluctantly. This had been his idea, true enough, but he had never expected Deke to take it seriously. The girls were moving around in the back seat, getting ready to get out.

Deke's eyes scanned the water restlessly, side to side *(sniper's eyes,* Randy thought uncomfortably), and then fixed on a point.

"It's there!" he shouted, slapping the hood of the Camero. "Just like you said, Randy! Hot damn! Last one in's a rotten egg-'"

"Deke -- " Randy began, resetting his glasses on his nose, but that was all he bothered with, because Deke was vaulting the fence and running down the beach, not looking back at Randy or Rachel or LaVerne, only looking out at the raft, which was anchored about fifty yards out on the lake.

Randy looked around, as if to apologize to the girls for getting them into this, but they were looking at Deke -- Rachel looking at him was all right, Rachel was Deke's girl, but LaVerne was looking at him too and Randy felt a hot momentary spark of jealousy that got him moving. He peeled off his own sweatshirt, dropped it beside Deke's, and hopped the fence.

"Randy!" LaVerne called, and he only pulled his arm forward through the gray twilit October air in a come-on gesture, hating himself a little for doing it -- she was unsure now, perhaps ready to cry it off. The idea of an October swim in the deserted lake wasn't just part of a comfortable, well-lighted bull-session in the apartment he and Deke shared anymore. He liked her, but Deke was stronger. And damned if she didn't have the hots for Deke, and damned if it wasn't irritating,

Deke unbuckled his jeans, still running, and pushed them off his lean hips. He somehow got out of them all the way without stopping, a feat Randy could not have duplicated in a thousand years. Deke ran on, now only wearing bikini briefs, the muscles in his back and buttocks working gorgeously. Randy was more than aware of his own skinny shanks as he dropped his Levi's and clumsily shook them free of his feet -- with Deke it was ballet, with him burlesque.

Deke hit the water and bellowed, "Cold! Mother of Jesus!"

Randy hesitated, but only in his mind, where things took longer -- *that water's forty-five degrees, fifty at most,* his mind told him. *Your heart could stop.* He was pre-med, he knew that was true... but in the physical world he didn't hesitate at all. He leaped it, and for a moment his heart *did* stop, or seemed to; his breath clogged in his throat and he had to force a gasp of air into his lungs as all his submerged skin went numb. *This is crazy,* he thought, and then: *But it was your idea, Pancho.* He began to stroke after Deke.

The two girls looked at each other for a moment. LaVerne shrugged and grinned. "If they can, we can," she said, stripping off her Lacrosse shirt to reveal an almost transparent bra. "Aren't girls supposed to have an extra layer of fat?"

Then she was over the fence and running for the water, unbuttoning her cords. After a moment Rachel followed her, much as Randy had followed Deke.

The girls had come over to the apartment at mid-afternoon -- on Tuesdays a one-o'clock was the latest class any of them had. Deke's monthly allotment had come in -- one of the football-mad alums (the players called them "angels") saw that he got two hundred a month in cash -- and there was a case of beer in the fridge and a new Night Ranger album on Randy's battered stereo. The four of them set about getting pleasantly oiled. After a while the talk had turned to the end of the long Indian summer they had been enjoying. The radio was predicting flurries for Wednesday. LaVerne had advanced the opinion that weathermen predicting snow flurries in October should be shot, and no one had disagreed.

Rachel said that summers had seemed to last forever when she was a girl, but now that she was an adult ("a doddering senile nineteen," Deke joked, and she kicked his ankle), they got shorter every year. "It seemed like I spent my life out at Cascade Lake," she said, crossing the decayed kitchen linoleum to the icebox. She peered in, found an Iron City Light hiding behind a stack of blue Tupperware storage boxes (the one in the middle contained some nearly prehistoric chili which was now thickly festooned with mold -- Randy was a good student and Deke was a good football player, but neither of them was worth a fart in a noisemaker when it came to housekeeping), and appropriated it. "I can still remember the first time I managed to swim all the way out to the raft. I stayed there for damn near two hours, scared to swim back."

She sat down next to Deke, who put an arm around her. She smiled, remembering, and Randy suddenly thought she looked like someone famous or semi-famous. He couldn't quite place the resemblance. It would come to him later, under less pleasant circumstances.

"Finally my brother had to swim out and tow me back on an inner tube. God, he was mad. And I had a sunburn like you wouldn't believe."

"The raft's still out there," Randy said, mostly to say something. He was aware that LaVerne had been looking at Deke again; just lately it seemed like she looked at Deke a lot.

But now she looked at him. "It's almost *Halloween,* Randy. Cascade Beach has been closed since Labor Day."

"Raft's probably still out there, though," Randy said. "We were on the other side of the lake on a geology field trip about three weeks ago and I saw it then. It looked like..." He shrugged. "... a little bit of summer that somebody forgot to clean up and put away in the closet until next year."

He thought they would laugh at that, but no one did -- not even Deke.

"Just because it was there last year doesn't mean it's still there," LaVerne said.

"I mentioned it to a guy," Randy said, finishing his own beer. "Billy DeLois, do you remember him, Deke?"

Deke nodded. "Played second string until he got hurt."

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, he comes from out that way, and he said the guys who own the beach never take it in until the lake's almost ready to freeze. Just lazy -- at least, that's what he said. He said that some year they'd wait too long audit would get ice-locked."

He fell silent, remembering how the raft had looked, anchored out there on the lake -- a square of bright white wood in all that bright blue autumn water. He remembered how the sound of the barrels under it -- that buoyant *clunk-clunk* sound -- had drifted up to them. The sound was soft, but sounds carried well on the still air around the lake. There had been that sound and the sound of crows squabbling over the remnants of some fanner's harvested garden.

"Snow tomorrow," Rachel said, getting up as Deke's hand wandered almost absently down to the upper swell of her breast. She went to the window and looked out. "What a bummer."

"I'll tell you what," Randy said, "let's go on out to Cascade Lake. We'll swim out to the raft, say good-bye to summer, and then swim back."

If he hadn't been half-loaded he never would have made the suggestion, and he certainly didn't expect anyone to take it seriously. But Deke jumped on it.

, "All right! Awesome, Pancho! Fooking *awesome!"* LaVerne jumped and spilled her beer. But she smiled -- the smile made Randy a little uneasy. "Let's do it!"

"Deke, you're crazy," Rachel said, also smiling -- but her smile looked a little tentative, a little worried.

"No, I'm going to do it," Deke said, going for his coat, and with a mixture of dismay and excitement, Randy noted Deke's grin -- reckless and a little crazy. The two of them had been rooming together for three years now -- the Jock and the Brain, Cisco and Pancho, Batman and Robin -- and Randy recognized that grin. Deke wasn't kidding; he meant to do it. In his head he was already halfway there.

Forget it, Cisco -- not me. The words rose to his lips, but before he could say them LaVerne was on her feet, the same cheerful, loony look in her own eyes (or maybe it was just too much beer). "I'm up for it!"

"Then let's go!" Deke looked at Randy. "Whatchoo say, Pancho?"

He had looked at Rachel for a moment then, and saw something almost frantic in her eyes -- as far as he himself was concerned, Deke and LaVerne could go out to Cascade Lake together and plow the back forty all night; he would not be delighted with the knowledge that they were boffing each other's brains out, yet neither would he be surprised. But that look in the other girl's eyes, that haunted look --

"Ohhh, *Ceesco!"* Randy cried.

"Ohhhh, *Pancho!"* Deke cried back, delighted.

They slapped palms.

Randy was halfway to the raft when he saw the black patch on the water. It was beyond the raft and to the left of it, more out toward the middle of the lake. Five minutes later the light would have failed too much for him to tell it was anything more than a shadow... if he had seen it at all. *Oil slick?* he thought, still pulling hard through the water, faintly aware of the girls splashing behind him. But what would an oil slick be doing on an October-deserted lake? And it was oddly circular, small, surely no more than five feet in diameter --

"'*Whoooo!"* Deke shouted again, and Randy looked toward him. Deke was climbing the ladder on the side of the raft, shaking off water like a dog. "Howya doon, Pancho?"

"Okay!" he called back, pulling harder. It really wasn't as bad as he had thought it might be, not once you got in and got moving. His body tingled with warmth and now his motor was in overdrive. He could feel his heart putting out good revs, heating him from the inside out. His folks had a place on Cape Cod, and the water there was worse than this in mid-July.

"You think it's bad now, Pancho, wait'll you get out!" Deke yelled gleefully. He was hopping up and down, making the raft rock, rubbing his body. Randy forgot about the oil slick until his hands actually grasped the rough, white-painted wood of the ladder on the shore side. Then he saw it again. It was a little closer. A round dark patch on the water, like a big mole, rising and falling on the mild waves. When he had first seen it the patch had been maybe forty yards from the raft. Now it was only half that distance.

How can that be? How --

Then he came out of the water and the cold air bit his skin, bit it even harder than the water had when he first dived in. "Ohhhhhh, *shit!"* He yelled, laughing, shivering in his Jockey shorts.

"Pancho, you ees some kine of beeg asshole," Deke said happily. He pulled Randy up. "Cold enough for you? You sober yet?"

"I'm sober! I'm-sober!" He began to jump around as Deke had done, clapping his arms across his chest and stomach in an X. They turned to look at the girls.

Rachel had pulled ahead of LaVerne, who was doing something that looked like a dog

paddle performed by a dog with bad instincts.

"You ladies okay?" Deke bellowed.

"Go to hell, Macho City!" LaVerne called, and Deke broke up again.

Randy glanced to the side and saw that odd dark circular patch was even closer -- ten yards now, and still coming. It floated on the water, round and regular, like the top of a large steel drum, but the limber way it rode the swells made it clear that it was not the surface of a solid object. Fear, directionless but powerful, suddenly seized him.

"Swim!" he shouted at the girls, and bent down to grasp Rachel's hand as she reached the ladder. He hauled her up. She bumped her knee hard -- he heard the thud clearly

"Ow! *Hey!* What -- "

LaVerne was still ten feet away. Randy glanced to the side again and saw the round thing nuzzle the offside of the raft. The thing was as dark as oil, but he was sure it wasn't oil -- too dark, too thick, too *even.*

"Randy, that *hurt!* What are you doing, being fun -- "

"LaVerne! *Swim!"* Now it wasn't just fear; now it was terror.

LaVerne looked up, maybe not hearing the terror but at least hearing the urgency. She looked puzzled but she dog-paddled faster, closing the distance to the ladder. "Randy, what's wrong with you?" Deke asked. Randy looked to the side again and saw the thing fold itself around the raft's square corner. For a moment it looked like a Pac-Man image with its mouth open to eat electronic cookies. Then it slipped all the way around the corner and began to slide along the raft, one of its edges now straight.

"Help me get her up!" Randy grunted to Deke, and reached for her hand. " Quick!"

Deke shrugged good-naturedly and reached for LaVerne's other hand. They pulled her up and onto the raft's board surface bare seconds before the black thing slid by the ladder, its sides dimpling as it slipped past the ladder's uprights.

"Randy, have you gone crazy?" LaVerne was out of breath, a little frightened. Her nipples were clearly visible through the bra. They stood out in cold hard points.

"That thing," Randy said, pointing. "Deke? What is it?"

Deke spotted it. It had reached the left-hand corner of the raft. It drifted off a little to one side, reassuming its round shape. It simply floated there. The four of them looked at it.

"Oil slick, I guess," Deke said.

"You really racked my knee," Rachel said, glancing at the dark thing on the water and then back at Randy. "You -- "

"It's not an oil slick," Randy said. "Did you ever see a round oil slick? That thing looks

like a checker."

"I never saw an oil slick at all," Deke replied. He was talking to Randy but he was looking at LaVerne. LaVerne's panties were almost as transparent as her bra, the delta of her sex sculpted neatly in silk, each buttock a taut crescent. "I don't even believe in them. I'm from Missouri."

"I'm going to bruise," Rachel said, but the anger had gone out of her voice. She had seen Deke looking at LaVerne. *"God,* I'm cold," LaVerne said. She shivered prettily. "It went for the girls," Randy said. "Come on, Pancho. I thought you said you got sober." "It went for the girls," he repeated stubbornly, and thought: *No one knows we're here. No one at all.*

"Have *you* ever seen an oil slick, Pancho?" He had put his arm around LaVerne's bare shoulders in the same almost-absent way that he had touched Rachel's breast earlier that day. He wasn't touching LaVerne's breast -- not yet, anyway -- but his hand was close. Randy found he didn't care much, one way or another. That black, circular patch on the water. He cared about that.

"I saw one on the Cape, four years ago," he said. "We all pulled birds out of the surf and tried to clean them off -- "

"Ecological, Pancho," Deke said approvingly. "Mucho ecological, I theenk."

Randy said, "It was just this big, sticky mess all over the water. In streaks and big smears. It didn't look like that. It wasn't, you know, *compact."*

It looked like an accident,, he wanted to say. *That thing doesn't look like an accident; it looks like it's on purpose.*

"I want to go back now," Rachel said. She was still looking at Deke and LaVerne. Randy saw dull hurt in her face. He doubted if she knew it showed.

"So go," LaVerne said. There was a look on her face -- *the clarity of absolute triumph,* Randy thought, and if the thought seemed pretentious, it also seemed exactly right. The expression was not aimed precisely at Rachel... but neither was LaVerne trying to hide it from the other girl.

She moved a step closer to Deke; a step was all there was. Now their hips touched lightly. For one brief moment Randy's attention passed from the thing floating on the water and focused on LaVerne with an almost exquisite hate. Although he had never hit a girl, in that one moment he could have hit her with real pleasure. Not because he loved her (he had been a little infatuated with her, yes, and more than a little horny for her, yes, and a lot jealous when she had begun to come on to Deke back at the apartment, oh yes, but he wouldn't have brought a girl he actually *loved* within fifteen miles of Deke in the first place), but because he knew that expression on Rachel's face -- how that expression felt inside.

"I'm afraid," Rachel said.

"Of an *oil slick?"* LaVerne asked incredulously, and then laughed. The urge to hit her

swept over Randy again -- to just swing a big roundhouse open-handed blow through the air, to wipe that look of half-assed hauteur from her face and leave a mark on her cheek that would bruise in the shape of a hand.

"Let's see you swim back, then," Randy said.

LaVerne smiled indulgently at him. "I'm not ready to go," she said, as if explaining to a child. She looked up at the sky, then at Deke. "I want to watch the stars come out."

Rachel was a short girl, pretty, but in a gamine, slightly insecure way that made Randy think of New York girls -- you saw them hurrying to work in the morning, wearing their smartly tailored skirts with slits in the front or up one side, wearing that same look of slightly neurotic prettiness. Rachel's eyes always sparkled, but it was hard to tell if it was good cheer that lent them that lively look or just free-floating anxiety.

Deke's tastes usually ran more to tall girls with dark hair and sleepy sloe eyes, and Randy saw it was now over between Deke and Rachel -- whatever there had been, something simple and maybe a little boring on his part, something deep' and complicated and probably painful on hers. It was over, so cleanly and suddenly that Randy almost heard the snap: a sound like dry kindling broken over a knee.

He was a shy boy, but he moved to Rachel now and put an arm around her. She glanced up at him briefly, her face unhappy but grateful for his gesture, and he was glad he had improved the situation for her a little. That similarity bobbed into his mind again. Something in her face, her looks --

He first associated it with TV game shows, then with commercials for crackers or wafers or some damn thing. It came to him then -- she looked like Sandy Duncan, the actress who had played in the revival *of Peter Pan* on Broadway.

"What is that thing?" she asked. "Randy? What is it?"

"I don't know."

He glanced at Deke and saw Deke looking at him with that familiar smile that was more loving familiarity than contempt... but the contempt was there, too. Maybe Deke didn't even know it, but it was. The expression said *Here goes ole worry-wan Randy, pissing in his duties again.* It was supposed to make Randy mumble an addition -- *It's probably nothing. Don't worry about it, It'll go away.* Something like that. He didn't. Let Deke smile. The black patch on the water scared him. That was the truth.

Rachel stepped away from Randy and knelt prettily on the comer of the raft closest to the thing, and for a moment she triggered an even clearer memory-association: the girl on the White Rock labels. *Sandy Duncan on the White Rock labels,* his mind amended. Her hair, a close-cropped, slightly coarse blond, lay wetly against her finely shaped skull. He could see goosebumps on her shoulder blades above the white band of her bra.

"Don't fall in, Rache," LaVerne said with bright malice.

"Quit it, LaVerne," Deke said, still smiling.

Randy looked from them, standing in the middle of the raft with their arms loosely around each other's waists, hips touching lightly, and back at Rachel. Alarm raced down his spine and out through his nerves like fire. The black patch had halved the distance between it and the corner of the raft where Rachel was kneeling and looking at it. It had been six or eight feet away before. Now the distance was three feet or less. And he saw a strange look in her eyes, a round blankness that seemed queerly like the round blankness of the thing in the water.

Now it's Sandy Duncan sitting on a White Rock label and pretending to be hypnotized by the rich delicious flavor of Nabisco Honey Grahams, he thought idiotically, feeling his heart speed up as it had in the water, and he called out, "Get away from there, Rachel!"

Then everything happened very fast -- things happened with the rapidity of fireworks going off. And yet he saw and heard each thing with perfect, hellish clarity. Each thing seemed caught in its own little capsule.

LaVerne laughed -- on the quad in a bright afternoon hour it might have sounded like any college girl's laugh, but out here in the growing dark it sounded like the arid cackle of a witch making magic in a pot.

"Rachel, maybe you better get b -- " Deke said, but she interrupted him, almost surely for the first time in her life, and indubitably for the last.

"It has colors!" she cried in a voice of utter, trembling wonder. Her eyes stared at the black patch on the water with blank rapture, and for just a moment Randy thought he saw what she was talking about -- colors, yeah, colors, swirling in rich, inward-turning spirals. Then they were gone, and there was only dull, lusterless black again. "Such beautiful colors!"

"Rachel!"

She reached for it -- out and down -- her white arm, marbled with gooseflesh, her hand, held out to it, meaning to touch; he saw she had bitten her nails ragged.

"Ra -- "

He sensed the raft tilt in the water as Deke moved toward them. He reached for Rachel at the same time, meaning to pull her back, dimly aware that he didn't want Deke to be the one to do it.

Then Rachel's hand touched the water -- her forefinger only, sending out one delicate ripple in a ring -- and the black patch surged over it. Randy heard her gasp in air, and suddenly the blankness left her eyes. What replaced it was agony.

The black, viscous substance ran up her arm like mud... and under it, Randy saw her skin dissolving. She opened her mouth and screamed. At the same moment she began to tilt outward. She waved her other hand blindly at Randy and he grabbed for it. Their fingers brushed. Her eyes met his, and she still looked hellishly like Sandy Duncan. Then she fell outward and splashed into the water.

The black thing flowed over the spot where she had landed.

"What happened?" LaVerne was screaming behind them. *"What happened? Did she fall in? What happened to her?"*

Randy made as if to dive in after her and Deke pushed him backwards with casual force. "No," he said in a frightened voice that was utterly unlike Deke.

All three of them saw her flail to the surface. Her arms came up, waving -- no, not arms. One arm. The other was covered with a black membrane that hung in flaps and folds from something red and knitted with tendons, something that looked a little like a rolled roast of beef.

"Help!" Rachel screamed. Her eyes glared at them, away from them, at them, away -- her eyes were like lanterns being waved aimlessly in the dark. She beat the water into a froth. *"Help it hurts please help it hurts IT HURTS IT HURRRRR -- "*

Randy had fallen when Deke pushed him. Now he got up from the boards of the raft and stumbled forward again, unable to ignore that voice. He tried to jump in and Deke grabbed him, wrapping his big arms around Randy's thin chest.

"No, she's dead," he whispered harshly. "Christ, can't you see that? She's *dead,* Pancho."

Thick blackness suddenly poured across Rachel's face like a drape, and her screams were first muffled and then cut off entirely. Now the black stuff seemed to bind her in crisscrossing ropes. Randy could see it sinking into her like acid, and when her jugular vein gave way in a dark, pumping jet, he saw the thing send out a pseudopod after the escaping blood.

He could not believe what he was seeing, could not understand it... but there was no doubt, no sensation of losing his mind, no belief that he was dreaming or hallucinating.

LaVerne was screaming. Randy turned to look at her just in time to see her slap a hand melodramatically over her eyes like a silent movie heroine. He thought he would laugh and tell her this, but found he could not make a sound.

He looked back at Rachel. Rachel was almost not there anymore.

Her struggles had weakened to the point where they were really no more than spasms. The blackness oozed over her -- *bigger now,* Randy thought, *it's bigger, no question about it* -- with mute, muscular power. He saw her hand beat at it; saw the hand become stuck, as if in molasses or on flypaper; saw it consumed. Now there was a sense of her form only, not in the water but in the black thing, not turning but being turned, the form becoming less recognizable, a white flash -- *bone,* he thought sickly, and turned away, vomiting helplessly over the side of the raft.

LaVerne was still screaming. Then there was a dull *whap!* and she stopped screaming and began to snivel.

He hit her, Randy thought. */ was going to do that, remember?*

He stepped back, wiping his mouth, feeling weak and ill. And scared. So scared he could

think with only one tiny wedge of his mind. Soon he would begin to scream himself. Then Deke would have to slap him, Deke wouldn't panic, oh no, Deke was hero material for sure. *You gotta be a football hero...* to *get along with the beautiful girls,* his mind sang cheerfully. Then he could hear Deke talking to him, and he looked up at the sky, trying to clear his head, trying desperately to put away the vision of Rachel's form becoming blobbish and inhuman as that black thing ate her, not wanting Deke to slap him the way he had slapped LaVerne.

He looked up at the sky and saw the first stars shining up there -- the shape of the Dipper already clear as the last white light faded out of the west. It was nearly seven-thirty.

"Oh Ceeesco," he managed. "We are in beeg trouble thees time, I theeenk."

"What-is it?" His hand fell on Randy's shoulder, gripping and twisting painfully. "It ate her, did you see that? It *ate* her, it fucking *ate her up!* What *is* it?"

"I don't know. Didn't you hear me before?"

"You're *supposed* to know, you're a fucking brain-ball, you take all the fucking science courses!" Now Deke was almost screaming himself, and that helped Randy get a little more control.

"There's nothing like that in any science book I ever read," Randy told him. "The last time I saw anything like that was the Halloween Shock-Show down at the Rialto when I was twelve."

The thing had regained its round shape now. It floated on the water ten feet from the raft.

"It's bigger," LaVerne moaned.

When Randy had first seen it, he had guessed its diameter at about five feet. Now it had to be at least eight feet across.

"It's bigger because it ate Rachel!" LaVeme cried, and began to scream again.

"Stop that or I'm going to break your jaw," Deke said, and she stopped -- not all at once, but winding down the way a record does when somebody turns off the juice without taking the needle off the disc. Her eyes were huge things.

Deke looked back at Randy. "You all right, Pancho?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"My man." Deke tried to smile, and Randy saw with some alarm that he was succeeding -- was some part of Deke enjoying this? "You don't have any idea at all what it might be?"

Randy shook his head. Maybe it was an oil slick, after all... or had been, until something had happened to it. Maybe cosmic rays had hit it in a certain way. Or maybe Arthur Godfrey had pissed atomic Bisquick all over it, who knew? Who *could* know?

"Can we swim past it, do you think?" Deke persisted, shaking Randy's shoulder.

"No!" LaVerne shrieked.

"Stop it or I'm gonna smoke you, LaVerne," Deke said, raising his voice again. "I'm not kidding."

"You saw how fast it took Rachel," Randy said.

"Maybe it was hungry then," Deke answered. "But maybe now it's full."

Randy thought of Rachel kneeling there on the corner of the raft, so still and pretty in her bra and panties, and felt his gorge rise again.

"You try it," he said to Deke.

Deke grinned humorlessly. "Oh Pancho."

"Oh Ceesco."

"I want to go home," LaVerne said in a furtive whisper. "Okay?"

Neither of them replied.

"So we wait for it to go away," Deke said. "It came, it'll go away."

"Maybe," Randy said.

Deke looked at him, his face full of a fierce concentration in the gloom. "Maybe? What's this maybe shit?"

"We came, and it came. I saw it come -- like it smelled us. If it's full, like you say, it'll go. I guess. If it still wants chow -- " He shrugged.

Deke stood thoughtfully, head bent. His short hair was still dripping a little.

"We wait," he said. "Let it eat fish."

Fifteen minutes passed. They didn't talk. It got colder. It was maybe fifty degrees and all three of them were in their underwear. After the first ten minutes, Randy could hear the brisk, intermittent clickety-click of his teeth. LaVerne had tried to move next to Deke, but he pushed her away -- gently but firmly enough.

"Let me be for now," he said.

So she sat down, arms crossed over her breasts, hands cupping her elbows, shivering. She looked at Randy, her eyes telling him he could come back, put his arm around her, it was okay now.

He looked away instead, back at the dark circle on the water. It just floated there, not coming any closer, but not going away, either. He looked toward the shore and there was the beach, a ghostly white crescent that seemed to float. The trees behind it made a dark, bulking horizon line. He thought he could see Deke's Camaro, but he wasn't sure.

"We just picked up and went," Deke said.

"That's right," Randy said.

"Didn't tell anyone."

"No."

"So no one knows we're here."

"No."

"Stop it!" LaVerne shouted. "Stop it, you're scaring me!"

"Shut your pie-hole," Deke said absently, and Randy laughed in spite of himself -- no matter how many times Deke said that, it always slew him. "If we have to spend the night out here, we do. Somebody'll hear us yelling tomorrow. We're hardly in the middle of the Australian Outback, are we, Randy?"

Randy said nothing. *"Are* we?"

"You know where we are," Randy said. "You know as well as I do. We turned off Route 41, we came up eight miles of back road -- "

"Cottages every fifty feet -- "

"Summer cottages. This is October. They're empty, the whole bucking funch of them. We got here and you had to drive around the damn gate, no trespassing signs every fifty feet -- "

"So? A caretaker -- " Deke was sounding a little pissed now, a little off-balance. A little scared? For the first time tonight, for the first time this month, this year, maybe for the first time in his whole life? Now there was an awesome thought -- Deke loses his fear-cherry. Randy was not sure it was happening, but he thought maybe it was... and he took a perverse pleasure in it.

"Nothing to steal, nothing to vandalize," he said. "If there's a caretaker, he probably pops by here on a bimonthly basis."

"Hunters -- "

"Next month, yeah," Randy said, and shut his mouth with a snap. He had also succeeded in scaring himself.

"Maybe it'll leave us alone," LaVerne said. Her lips made a pathetic, loose little smile. "Maybe it'll just... you know... leave us alone." Deke said, "Maybe pigs will -- " "It's moving," Randy said.

LaVerne leaped to her feet. Deke came to where Randy was and for a moment the raft tilted, scaring Randy's heart into a gallop and making LaVerne scream again. Then Deke stepped back a little and the raft stabilized, with the left front corner (as they faced the shoreline) dipped down slightly more than the rest of the raft.

It came with an oily, frightening speed, and as it did, Randy saw the colors Rachel had seen -- fantastic reds and yellows and blues spiraling across an ebony surface like limp plastic' or dark, lithe Naugahyde. It rose and fell with the waves and that changed the colors, made them swirl and blend. Randy realized he was going to fall over, fall right into it, he could feel himself tilting out --

With the last of his strength he brought his right fist up into his own nose -- the gesture of a man stifling a cough, only a little high and a lot hard. His nose flared with pain, he felt blood run warmly down his face, and then he was able to step back, crying out: "Don't look at it! Deke! Don't look right at it, the colors make you loopy!"

"It's trying to get under the raft," Deke said grimly. "What's this shit, Pancho?"

Randy looked -- he looked very carefully. He saw the thing nuzzling the side of the raft, flattening to a shape like half a pizza. For a moment it seemed to be piling up there, thickening, and he had an alarming vision of it piling up enough to run onto the surface of the raft.

Then it squeezed under. He thought he heard a noise for a moment -- a rough noise, like a roll of canvas being pulled through a narrow window -- but that might have only been nerves.

"Did it go under?" LaVerne said, and there was something oddly nonchalant about her tone, as if she were trying with all her might to be conversational, but she was screaming, too. "Did it go under the raft? Is it under us?"

"Yes," Deke said. He looked at Randy. "I'm going to swim for it right now," he said. "If it's under there I've got a good chance."

"No!" LaVerne screamed. "No, don't leave us here, don't -- "

"I'm fast," Deke said, looking at Randy, ignoring LaVerne completely. "But I've got to go while it's under there."

Randy's mind felt as if it was whizzing along at Mach two -- in a greasy, nauseating way it was exhilarating, like the last few seconds before you puke into the slipstream of a cheap carnival ride. There was time to hear the barrels under the raft clunking hollowly together, time to hear the leaves on the trees beyond the beach rattling dryly in a little puff of wind, time to wonder why it had gone under the raft.

"Yes," he said to Deke. "But I don't think you'll make it."

"I'll make it," Deke said, and started toward the edge of the raft.

He got two steps and then stopped.

His breath had been speeding up, his brain getting his heart and lungs ready to swim the fastest fifty yards of his life and now his breath stopped like the rest of him, simply stopped in the middle of an inhale. He turned his head, and Randy saw the cords in his neck stand out.

"Panch -- " he said in an amazed, choked voice, and then he began to scream.

He screamed with amazing force, great baritone bellows that splintered up toward wild soprano levels. They were loud enough to echo back from the shore in ghostly half-notes. At first Randy thought he was just screaming, and then he realized it was a word -- no, two words, the same two words over and over: *"My foot!"* Deke was screaming. *"My foot! My foot! My foot."*

Randy looked down. Deke's foot had taken on an odd sunken look. The reason was obvious, but Randy's mind refused to accept it at first -- it was too impossible, too insanely grotesque. As he watched, Deke's foot was being pulled down between two of the boards that made up the surface of the raft.

Then he saw the dark shine of the black thing beyond the heel and the toes, dark shine alive with swirling, malevolent colors.

The thing had his foot *("My foot!"* Deke screamed, as if to confirm this elementary deduction. *"My foot, oh my foot, my FOOOOOOT!").* He had stepped on one of the cracks between the boards *(step on a crack, break yer mother's back,* Randy's mind gibbered), and the thing had been down there. The thing had --

"Pull!" he screamed back suddenly. *"Pull, Deke, goddammit, PULL!"*

"What's happening?" LaVerne hollered, and Randy realized dimly that she wasn't just shaking his shoulder; she had sunk her spade-shaped fingernails into him like claws. She was going to be absolutely no help at all. He drove an elbow into her stomach. She made a barking, coughing noise and sat down on her fanny. He leaped to Deke and grabbed one of Deke's arms.

It was as hard as Carrara marble, every muscle standing out like the rib of a sculpted dinosaur skeleton. Pulling Deke was like trying to pull a big tree out of the ground by the roots. Deke's eyes were turned up toward the royal purple of the post-dusk sky, glazed and unbelieving, and still he screamed, screamed, screamed.

Randy looked down and saw that Deke's foot had now disappeared into the crack between the boards up to the ankle. That crack was perhaps only a quarter of an inch wide, surely no more than half an inch, but his foot had gone into it. Blood ran across the white boards in thick dark tendrils. Black stuff like heated plastic pulsed up and down in the crack, up and down, like a heart beating.

Got to get him out. Got to get him out quick or we're never gonna get him out at a*l/... hold on, Cisco, please hold on...*

LaVerne got to her feet and backed away from the gnarled, screaming Deke-tree in the center of the raft which floated at anchor under the October stars on Cascade Lake. She was shaking her head numbly, her arms crossed over her belly where Randy's elbow had gotten her.

Deke leaned hard against him, arms groping stupidly. Randy looked down and saw blood gushing from Deke's shin, which now tapered the way a sharpened pencil tapers to a point -- only the point here was white, not black, the point was a bone, barely visible.

The black stuff surged up again, sucking, eating.

Deke wailed.

Never going to play football on that foot again, WHAT foot, ha-ha, and he pulled Deke with all his might and it was still like pulling at a rooted tree.

Deke lurched again and now he uttered a long, drilling shriek that made Randy fall back, shrieking himself, hands covering his ears. Blood burst from the pores of Deke's calf and shin; his kneecap had taken on a purple, bulging look as it tried to absorb the tremendous pressure being put on it as the black thing hauled Deke's leg down through the narrow crack inch by inch.

Can't help him. How strong it must be! Can't help him now, I'm sorry, Deke, so sorry --

"Hold me, Randy," LaVerne screamed, clutching at him everywhere, digging her face into his chest. Her face was so hot it seemed to sizzle. "Hold me, please, won't you hold me -- "

This time, he did.

It was only later that a terrible realization came to Randy: the two of them could almost surely have swum ashore while the black thing was busy with Deke -- and if LaVerne refused to try it, he could have done it himself. The keys to the Camaro were in Deke's jeans, lying on the beach. He could have done it... but the realization that he could have never came to him until too late.

Deke died just as his thigh began to disappear into the narrow crack between the boards. He had stopped shrieking minutes before. Since then he had uttered only thick, syrupy grunts. Then those stopped, too. When he fainted, falling forward, Randy heard whatever remained of the femur in his right leg splinter in a greenstick fracture.

A moment later Deke raised his head, looked around groggily, and opened his mouth. Randy thought he meant to scream again. Instead, he voided a great jet of blood, so thick it was almost solid. Both Randy and LaVerne were splattered with its warmth and she began to scream again, hoarsely now.

"Oooog!" she cried, her face twisted in half-mad revulsion. *"Oooog!* Blood! *Ooooog,* blood! *Blood!"* She rubbed at herself and only succeeded in smearing it around.

Blood was pouring from Deke's eyes, coming with such force that they had bugged out almost comically with the force of the hemorrhage. Randy thought: *Talk about vitality! Christ, LOOK at that! He's like a goddammed human fire hydrant! God! God! God!*

Blood streamed from both of Deke's ears. His face was a hideous purple turnip, swelled shapeless with the hydrostatic pressure of some unbelievable reversal; it was the face of a man being clutched in a bear hug of monstrous and unknowable force.

And then, mercifully, it was over. Deke collapsed forward again, his hair hanging down on the raft's bloody boards, and Randy saw with sickish amazement that even Deke's scalp had bled.

Sounds from under the raft. Sucking sounds. That was when it occurred to his tottering,

overloaded mind that he could swim for it and stand a good chance of making it. But LaVerne had gotten heavy in his arms, ominously heavy; he looked at her slack face, rolled back an eyelid to disclose only white, and knew that she had not fainted but fallen into a state of shock-unconsciousness.

Randy looked at the surface of the raft. He could lay her down, of course, but the boards were only a foot across. There was a diving board platform attached to the raft in the summertime, but that, at least, had been taken down and stored somewhere. Nothing left but the surface of the raft itself, fourteen boards, each a foot wide and twenty feet long. No way to put her down without laying her unconscious body across any number of those cracks.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Shut up.

And then, tenebrously, his mind whispered: *Do it anyway. Put her down and swim for it.*

But he did not, could not. An awful guilt rose in him at the thought. He held her, feeling the soft, steady drag on his arms and back. She was a big girl.

Deke went down

Randy held LaVerne in his aching arms and watched it happen. He did not want to, and for long seconds that might even have been minutes he turned his face away entirely; but his eyes always wandered back.

With Deke dead, it seemed to go faster.

The rest of his right leg disappeared, his left leg stretching out further and further until Deke looked like a one-legged ballet dancer doing an impossible split. There was the wishbone crack of his pelvis, and then, as Deke's stomach began to swell ominously with new pressure, Randy looked away for a long time, trying not to hear the wet sounds, trying to concentrate on the pain in his arms. He could maybe bring her around, he thought, but for the time being it was better to have the throbbing pain in his arms and shoulders. It gave him something to think about.

From behind him came a sound like strong teeth crunching up a mouthful of candy jawbreakers. When he looked back, Deke's ribs were collapsing into the crack. His arms were up and out, and he looked like an obscene parody of Richard Nixon giving the V-for-victory sign that had driven demonstrators wild in the sixties and seventies.

His eyes were open. His tongue had popped out at Randy.

Randy looked away again, out across the lake. *Look for lights,* he told himself. He knew there were no lights over there, but he told himself that anyway. *Look for lights over there, somebody's got to be staying the week in his place, fall foliage, shouldn't miss it, bring your Nikon, folks back home are going to love the slides.*

When he looked back, Deke's arms were straight up. He wasn't Nixon anymore; now he was a football ref signaling that the extra point had been good.

Deke's head appeared to be sitting on the boards.

His eyes were still open.

His tongue was still sticking out.

"Oh Ceesco," Randy muttered, and looked away again. His arms and shoulders were shrieking now, but still he held her in his arms. He looked at the far side of the lake. The far side of the lake was dark. Stars unrolled across the black sky, a spill of cold milk somehow suspended high in the air.

Minutes passed. *He'll be gone now. You can look now. Okay, yeah, all right. But don't look. Just to be safe, don't look. Agreed? Agreed. Most definitely. So say we all and so say all of us.*

So he looked anyway and was just in time to see Deke's fingers being pulled down. They were moving -- probably the motion of the water under the raft was being transmitted to the unknowable thing which had caught Deke, and that motion was then being transmitted to Deke's fingers. Probably, probably. But it looked to Randy as if Deke was waving to him. The Cisco Kid was waving adios. For the first time he felt his mind give a sickening wrench -- it seemed to cant the way the raft itself had canted when all four of them had stood on the same side. It righted itself, but Randy suddenly understood that madness -- real lunacy -- was perhaps not far away at all.

Deke's football ring -- All-Conference, 1981 -- slid slowly up the third finger of his right hand. The starlight rimmed the gold and played in the minute gutters between the engraved numbers, 19 on one side of the reddish stone, 81 on the other. The ring slid off his finger. The ring was a little too big to fit down through the crack, and of course it wouldn't squeeze.

It lay there. It was all that was left of Deke now. Deke was gone. No more dark-haired girls with sloe eyes, no more flicking Randy's bare rump with a wet towel when Randy came out of the shower, no more breakaway runs from midfield with fans rising to their feet in the bleachers and cheerleaders turning hysterical cartwheels along the sidelines. No more fast rides after dark in the Camaro with Thin Lizzy blaring "The Boys Are Back in Town" out of the tape deck. No more Cisco Kid.

There was that faint rasping noise again -- a roll of canvas being pulled slowly through a slit of a window.

Randy was standing with his bare feet on the boards. He looked down and saw the cracks on either side of both feet suddenly filled with slick darkness. His eyes bulged. He thought of the way the blood had come spraying from Deke's mouth in an almost solid rope, the way Deke's eyes had bugged out as if on springs as hemorrhages caused by hydrostatic pressure pulped his brain.

It smells me. It knows I'm here. Can it come up? Can it get up through the cracks? Can it? Can it?

He stared down, unaware of LaVerne's limp weight now, fascinated by the enormity of

the question, wondering what the stuff would feel like when it flowed over his feet, when it hooked into him.

The black shininess humped up almost to the edge of the cracks (Randy rose on tiptoes without being at all aware he was doing it), and then it went down. That canvasy slithering resumed. And suddenly Randy saw it on the water again, a great dark mole, now perhaps fifteen feet across. It rose and fell with the mild wavelets, rose and fell, rose and fell, and when Randy began to see the colors pulsing evenly across it, he tore his eyes away.

He put LaVerne down, and as soon as his muscles unlocked, his arms began to shake wildly. He let them shake. He knelt beside her, her hair spread across the white boards in an irregular dark fan. He knelt and watched that dark mole on the water, ready to yank her up again if it showed any signs of moving.

He began to slap her lightly, first one cheek and then the other, back and forth, like a second trying to bring a fighter around. LaVerne didn't want to come around. LaVerne did not want to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars or take a ride on the Reading. LaVerne had seen enough. But Randy couldn't guard her all night, lifting her like a canvas sack every time that thing moved (and you couldn't look at the thing too long; that was another thing). He had learned a trick, though. He hadn't learned it in college. He had learned it from a friend of his older brother's. This friend had been a paramedic in Nam, and he knew all sorts of tricks -- how to catch head lice off a human scalp and make them race in a matchbox, how to cut cocaine with baby laxative, how to sew up deep cuts with ordinary needle and thread. One day they had been talking about ways to bring abysmally drunken folks around so these abysmally drunken people wouldn't puke down their own throats and die, as Bon Scott, the lead singer of AC/DC, had done.

"You want to bring someone around in a hurry?" the friend with the catalogue of interesting tricks had said. "Try this." And he told Randy the trick which Randy now used.

He leaned over and bit LaVerne's earlobe as hard as he could.

Hot, bitter blood squirted into his mouth. LaVerne's eyelids flew up like windowshades. She screamed in a hoarse, growling voice and struck out at him. Randy looked up and saw the far side of the thing only; the rest of it was already under the raft. It had moved with eerie, horrible, silent speed.

He jerked LaVerne up again, his muscles screaming protest, trying to knot into charley horses. She was beating at his face. One of her hands struck his sensitive nose and he saw red stars.

"Quit it!" he shouted, shuffling his feet onto the boards. "Quit it, you bitch, it's under us again, quit it or I'll fucking drop you, I swear to God I will!"

Her arms immediately stopped flailing at him and closed quietly around his neck in a drowner's grip. Her eyes looked white in the swimming starlight.

"Stop it!" She didn't. "Stop it, LaVerne, you're choking me!"

Tighter. Panic flared in his mind. The hollow clunk of the barrels had taken on a duller,

muffled note -- it was the thing underneath, he supposed.

"I can't breathe!"

The hold loosened a little.

"Now listen. I'm going to put you down. It's all right if you -- "

But *put you down* was all she had heard. Her arms tightened in that deadly grip again. His right hand was on her back. He hooked it into a claw and raked at her. She kicked her legs, mewling harshly, and for a moment he almost lost his balance. She felt it. Fright rather than pain made her stop struggling.

"Stand on the boards."

"No!" Her air puffed a hot desert wind against his cheek.

"It can't get you if you stand on the boards."

"No, don't put me down, it'll get me, I know it will, I know -- "

He raked at her back again. She screamed in anger and pain and fear. "You get down or I'll drop you, LaVerne."

He lowered her slowly and carefully, both of them breathing in sharp little whines -- oboe and flute. Her feet touched the boards. She jerked her legs up as if the boards were hot.

"Put them *down!"* He hissed at her. "I'm not Deke, I can't hold you all, night!"

"Deke -- "

"Dead."

Her feet touched the boards. Little by little he let go of her. They faced each other like dancers. He could see her waiting for its first touch. Her mouth gaped like the mouth of a goldfish.

"Randy," she whispered. "Where is it?"

"Under. Look down."

She did. He did. They saw the blackness stuffing the cracks, stuffing them almost all the way across the raft now. Randy sensed its eagerness, and thought she did, too.

"Randy, please -- "

"Shhhh."

They stood there.

Randy had forgotten to strip off his watch when he ran into the water, and now he marked off fifteen minutes. At a quarter past eight, the black thing slid out from under the raft again. It

drew about fifteen feet off and then stopped as it had before.

"I'm going to sit down," he said.

"No!"

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm going to sit down and you're going to watch it. Just remember to keep looking away. Then I'll get up and you sit down. We go like that. Here." He gave her his watch. "Fifteen-minute shifts."

"It ate Deke," she whispered.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

"I'm cold."

"Me too."

"Hold me, then."

"I've held you enough."

She subsided.

Sitting down was heaven; not having to watch the thing was bliss. He watched LaVerne instead, making sure that her eyes kept shifting away from the thing on the water.

"What are we going to do, Randy?"

He thought.

"Wait," he said.

At the end of fifteen minutes he stood up and let her first sit and then lie down for half an hour. Then he got her on her feet again and she stood for fifteen minutes. They went back and forth. At a quarter of ten, a cold rind of moon rose and beat a path across the water. At ten-thirty, a shrill, lonely cry rose, echoing across the water, and LaVerne shrieked.

"Shut up," he said. "It's just a loon."

"I'm freezing, Randy -- I'm numb all over."

"I can't do anything about it."

"Hold me," she said. "You've got to. We'll hold each other. We can both sit down and watch it together."

He debated, but the cold sinking into his own flesh was now bone-deep, and that decided

him. "Okay."

They sat together, arms wrapped around each other, and something happened -- natural or perverse, it happened. He felt himself stiffening. One of his hands found her breast, cupped in damp nylon, and squeezed. She made a sighing noise, and her hand stole to the crotch of his underpants.

He slid his other hand down and found a place where there was some heat. He pushed her down on her back.

"No," she said, but the hand in his crotch began to move faster.

"I can see it," he said. His heartbeat had sped up again, pushing blood faster, pushing warmth toward the surface of his chilled bare skin. "I can watch it."

She murmured something, and he felt elastic slide down his hips to his upper thighs. He watched it. He slid upward, forward, into her. Warmth. God, she was warm there, at least. She made a guttural noise and her fingers grabbed at his cold, clenched buttocks.

He watched it. It wasn't moving. He watched it. He watched it closely. The tactile sensations were incredible, fantastic. He was not experienced, but neither was he a virgin; he had made love with three girls and it had never been like this. She moaned and began to lift her hips. The raft rocked gently, like the world's hardest waterbed. The barrels underneath murmured hollowly.

He watched it. The colors began to swirl -- slowly now, sensuously, not threatening; he watched it and he watched the colors. His eyes were wide. The colors were in his eyes. He wasn't cold now; he was hot now, hot the way you got your first day back on the beach in early June, when you could feel the sun tightening your winter-white skin, reddening it, giving it some

(colors)

color, some tint. First day at the beach, first day of summer, drag out the Beach Boys oldies, drag out the Ramones. The Ramones were telling you that Sheena is a punk rocker, the Ramones were telling you that you can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach, the sand, the beach, the colors

(moving it's starting to move)

and the feel of summer, the texture; Gary U.S. Bonds, school is out and I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers, girls in bikinis on the beach, the beach, the beach, oh do you love do you love

(love)

the beach do you love

(love I love)

firm breasts fragrant with Coppertone oil, and if the bottom of the bikini was small

enough you might see some

(hair her hair HER HAIR IS IN THE OH GOD IN THE WATER HER HAIR)

He pulled back suddenly, trying to pull her up, but the thing moved with oily speed and tangled itself in her hair like a webbing of thick black glue and when he pulled her up she was already screaming and she was heavy with it; it came out of the water in a twisting, gruesome membrane that rolled with flaring nuclear colors -- scarlet-vermilion, flaring emerald, sullen ocher.

It flowed down over LaVerne's face in a tide, obliterating it.

Her feet kicked and drummed. The thing twisted and moved where her face had been. Blood ran down her neck in streams. Screaming, not hearing himself scream, Randy ran at her, put his foot against her hip, and shoved. She went flopping and tumbling over the side, her legs like alabaster in the moonlight. For a few endless moments the water frothed and splashed against the side of the raft, as if someone had hooked the world's largest bass in there and it was fighting like hell.

Randy screamed. He screamed. And then, for variety, he screamed some more.

Some half an hour later, long after the frantic splashing and -struggling had ended, the loons began to scream back.

That night was forever.

The sky began to lighten in the east around a quarter to five, and he felt a sluggish rise in his spirit. It was momentary; as false as the dawn. He stood on the boards, his eyes half closed, his chin on his chest. He had been sitting on the boards until an hour ago, and had been suddenly awakened -- without even knowing until then that he had fallen asleep, that was the scary part -- by that unspeakable hissing-canvas sound. He leaped to his feet bare seconds before the blackness began to suck eagerly for him between the boards. His breath whined in and out; he bit at his lip, making it bleed.

Asleep, you were asleep, you asshole!

The thing had oozed out from under again half an hour later, but he hadn't sat down again. He was afraid to sit down, afraid he would go to sleep and that this time his mind wouldn't trip him awake in time.

His feet were still planted squarely on the boards as a stronger light, real dawn this time, filled the east and the first morning birds began to sing. The sun came up, and by six o'clock the day was bright enough for him to be able to see the beach. Deke's Camaro, bright yellow, was right where Deke had parked it, nose in to the pole fence. A bright litter of shirts and sweaters and four pairs of jeans were twisted into little shapes along the beach. The sight of them filled him with fresh horror when he thought his capacity for horror must surely be exhausted. He could see *his* jeans, one leg pulled inside out, the pocket showing. His jeans looked so *safe* lying there on the sand; just waiting for him to come along and pull the inside-out leg back through so it was right, grasping the pocket as he did so the change wouldn't fall out. He could almost feel

them whispering up his legs, could feel himself buttoning the brass button above the fly --

(do you love yes I love)

He looked left and there it was, black, round as a checker, floating lightly. Colors began to swirl across its hide and he looked away quickly.

"Go home," he croaked. "Go home or go to California and find a Roger Corman movie to audition for."

A plane droned somewhere far away, and he fell into a dozing fantasy: *We are reported missing, the four of us. The search spreads outward from Horlicks. A farmer remembers being passed by a yellow Camaro "going like a bat out of hell." The search centers in the Cascade Lake area. Private pilots volunteer to do a quick aerial search, and one guy, buzzing the lake in his Beechcraft Twin Bonanza, sees a kid standing naked on the raft, one kid, one survivor, one --*

He caught himself on the edge of toppling over and brought his fist into his nose again, screaming at the pain.

The black thing arrowed at the raft immediately and squeezed underneath -- it could hear, perhaps, or sense... or *something.*

Randy waited.

This time it was forty-five minutes before it came out.

His mind slowly orbited in the growing light.

{do you love yes I love rooting for the Yankees and Catfish do you love the Catfish ves I love the

(Route 66 *remember the Corvette George Maharis in the Corvette Martin Milner in the Corvette do you love the Corvette*

(yes I love the Corvette

(I love do you love

(so hot the sun is like a burning glass it was in her hair and it's the light I remember best the light the summer light

(the summer light of)

afternoon.

Randy was crying.

He was crying because something new had been added now -- every time he tried to sit down, the thing slid under the raft. It wasn't entirely stupid, then; it had either sensed or figured out that it could get at him while he was sitting down.

"Go away," Randy wept at the great black mole floating on the water. Fifty yards away, mockingly close, a squirrel was scampering back and forth on the hood of Deke's Camaro. "Go away, please, go anywhere, but leave me alone. I don't love you "

The thing didn't move. Colors began to swirl across its visible surface.

(you do *vou* do *love me)*

Randy tore his eyes away and looked at the beach, looked for rescue, but there was no one there, no one at all. His jeans still lay there, one leg inside out, the white lining of one pocket showing. They no longer looked to him as if someone was going to pick them up. They looked like relics.

He thought: *If I had a gun, I would kill myself now.*

He stood on the raft.

The sun went down.

Three hours later, the moon came up.

Not long after that, the loons began to scream.

Not long after *that,* Randy turned and looked at the black thing on the water. He could not kill himself, but perhaps the thing could fix it so there was no pain; perhaps that was what the colors were for.

(do you do you do you love)

He looked for it and it was there, floating, riding the waves.

"Sing with me," Randy croaked. "I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers... I don't have to worry 'bout teachers... I'm so glad that school is out... I am gonna sing and shout "

The colors began to form and twist. This time Randy did not look away

He whispered, "Do you love?"

Somewhere, far across the empty lake, a loon screamed.

Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World

Sheena Wilson

The fingers of my right hand freeze into a claw gripping the steering wheel. I'm only wearing one glove. I couldn't find the other in my rush to get him buckled into the backseat. The digital thermostat on the dash glows blue in the pitch black of the early morning and I read "-23 degrees Celsius: 6:53 a.m." Inside the car the eerie silence of the dark and frozen morning is interrupted only by the harsh and laboured sounds of his breathing. He's finally stopped panicking, which has only seemed to constrict his airways further. He's been shouting at me to help him.

"Mama, my neck hurts. I can't breathe."

"Breathe as deeply as you can. Calm down, bud. Screaming and crying only make it harder for your body to get oxygen. See. That's better. Breathe deeply."

Now that my four-year-old is so quiet, I listen anxiously to his rapid intakes of air, calling to him repeatedly so he'll answer me in his tiny little-boy voice so I reassure myself he hasn't passed out from lack of oxygen. I cannot see him in my rear-view mirror.

His cheruby little body, cloaked in a grey winter coat, is slumped over. In the darkness I search for his silhouette against the black leather seat. But his little figure has been absorbed into the dark cold morning behind me. The urgent need to get him to the doctor overwhelms me. I try to focus on what I can control and listen to the motor's hum and the groaning of the car's frozen metal body as its internal parts grind against one another. I put the car into gear and start backing down the driveway. Under the tires, I can hear the crunching of snow and the breaking apart of ice as it cracks and splits open. Inside the car, the indicator clicks rhythmically, only slightly faster than his breathing, as I turn onto a deserted roadway.

They are calling this cold snap the "Polar Vortex." Not that we aren't used to these frigid temperatures in Edmonton. The concern this time is that the cold is being caused by a shift in the jet streams. Arctic air is being pushed south. This phenomenon can create unexpected warm waves as well. These dramatic and unseasonal fluctuations in weather are, apparently, all going to be part of our new normal on an increasingly warm planet.

There are no cars on our quiet residential road at this time of the morning. I turn right. Right again. Then left. And now we are on Baseline Road, a major arterial route headed into the city. I join hundreds of commuters, but this morning I won't be going as far as them. I can faintly hear radios playing in the cars next to me. The darkness around me is broken up by the convoy of illuminated dashboards, myriad headlights and running lights. I share the road with small commuter cars, SUVs, mini-vans, and large pickup trucks. Despite the variety of makes that drivers use to indicate their class, income levels, and lifestyle—their level of cool, their brand-associated worldliness advertised by their gleaming hood ornaments—in the pre-dawn light, each vehicle looks identical when compared. Ahead of me, I notice several freight trucks slow down. I imagine they carry produce and other merchandise to the strip-mall shopping

complexes and low-rise office and industrial buildings banking the north side of the road. And I look in the rear-view mirror to glimpse my ill little boy.

The rattle of his laboured breathing inside the quiet of the car juxtaposes the roar of traffic outside. Each machine resonates at a different pitch against the frozen ground, sending reverberations and emissions to bounce off commercial buildings on the right, and the facing eight-foot sound barrier wall designed to protect neighbourhoods from the noise and hopefully the pollution, not to mention the associated impact on their residential property stickers. This road will only get busier in the next hour. But this morning I'm not only worried about the flow of traffic and any potential disruptions that might slow my progress to the doctor's office, I'm also intensely aware of what all these vehicles have in common. The acrid-smelling exhaust they spit from their tailpipes is sucked up by my own car, making it harder for my boy to breathe. I think about shutting off the heat to avoid drawing into the car any more of the chemical cocktail of polyaromatic hydrocarbons and polycyclic aromatics and benzene and arsenic and formaldehyde and nitrogen oxides and carbon dioxide. But it is too cold to do that. The bitter-cold air stings the inside of my nostrils, and the caustic heady smell of burned gasoline and diesel chaffs my respiratory tract as the air moves into my healthy lungs. I feel choked. Suffocated. My chest is heavy. Is it empathy for my baby in the backseat or the oppression of the invisible particulates swirling around us in puffs of white and grey and darker-grey warmth, visible this morning only as they crystallize upon contact with the frozen black morning air outside their combustion engines, that cause me these visceral reactions?

"Are you ok Honey?" I ask.

Silence. ... but I can hear him rasping for air.

"Honey? Answer me! Honey! Are you ok?!"

I strain to see him in the review mirror. The air is choking him.

"I'm ok Mama."

He sounds quiet. And small and weak. This is what worries me: he is a robust boy who runs and dances and jokes and entertains everyone. Dashing from one spot to the next, giving quick hugs and stealing kisses from his little sister, and playing and fighting and playing some more with his older brothers. I usually have to tell him to slow down.

As we crawl toward the intersection where I'll eventually need to turn left to get to the doctor's, we are stopped at yet another light and I look off into the distance. I can see the incandescent acres of the Imperial Oil Strathcona and Suncor Energy refineries with their multiple looming red and white stacks out of which are being dissipated the flammable residues of over 320,000 barrels of refined crude a day. Huge flares go up into the morning sky. And in the foreground, squatting just on the other side of the highway, are the enormous round Enbridge tankers decorated with Canada geese flying in formation. Those tankers hold oil in various stages of refination that will eventually be burned off into the atmosphere, here or elsewhere around the world. These industries flank my regular morning commute for about thirty city blocks, some backing up onto the once scenic North Saskatchewan River. All of this is just part of the Industrial Heartland project, where we try to carve out a life for ourselves and our kids.

"Are you ok sweetie?"

"Yes Mama," he murmurs.

Left. Right. Right again. Now I'm in a commercial district of our suburb, vacant at this early hour. The quiet of the morning is a contrast to my urgency. I turn into an almost barren parking lot. It is covered in frozen snow that twinkles under the streetlights. I pull up in front of the doctor's office that opened three minutes ago. Another woman rushes from the only other car in the parking lot to the warmly lit glass-fronted doctor's office. She shields herself against the blowing wind by pulling up her hood and bending forward; she half runs, half walks, outstretched arm grabbing the metal door handle. She whips into the foyer. The sound of the door-chimes is quickly smothered by the gales blowing in from the northwest over Refinery Row. My son and I are more cumbersome in our pursuit. I'm not sure whether I should carry him or have him walk. He is limp from the lack of oxygen and tired from the effort of trying to breathe. In the end, I help him out of the car and we walk together slowly, hand-in-hand, in the -35 wind-chill. The quiet from outside has followed us into the warm enclave of the waiting room, and the sound of my son's wheezing is unmistakable. The other woman says, "Poor baby" and I briefly explain.

"Some kind of asthma attack, I think."

She smiles at him and he returns her attention with an impish look and a flirtatious grin. A glimpse of his vibrant personality peeks out, despite how terrible he feels and how hard he labours to breathe. A moment later, he crumples onto the floor of the waiting room and puts his head on the chair, meekly crying. I try to soothe him by rubbing his back and he crawls onto my knee. There is a sign on the wall that reads *A Place of Happiness.*

* * *

Inside the doctor's office, I apologize.

"Sorry to come without an appointment."

The doctor smiles kindly at my comment. Distracted as he places his chilly stethoscope onto my son's warm chubby chest, a few inches below the soft spot in the centre of his collarbone. I watch my little boy's flesh pulse every time he takes a breath. I'm still tired from a sleepless night worrying and waiting. I'm also listening to his breathing to try to determine whether it has gotten better or worse since the middle of the night. I'm listening for some hope that it has, at best, and for something to alert the doctor to, at worst. Suddenly, the doctor is giving me a lot of information and instructions that I find overwhelming:

"This is a typical asthmatic wheeze ... you did the right thing ... the next two hours are critical ... we need to treat aggressively ... the triggers are five-fold: infection, allergies, cold, exercise, smoking ... we'll need to treat aggressively so that he won't have to be on bronchodilators for his whole life ... studies show that this is very effective ... a series of oral steroids and inhaled steroids ... did you get that? Two weeks for the one, four days for the other, as needed for the third."

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that again?"

He does.

"I'm sorry, there are two medications, or three?"

"Three. The two steroids—one oral and one inhaled—and the bronchodilator to be administered as needed. Got it?"

"Yes," I say and apologize again. "This is all just a bit overwhelming and I haven't had much sleep, and I couldn't decide whether to take him to the emergency room last night or not and ..." my voice trails off.

The doctor demonstrates how to use the diffuser, placing the little mask over my child's nose and mouth: "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10." This isn't how I thought my little guy would master his numbers: counting his own breaths.

"London Drugs is open. Go there immediately. If he isn't breathing more easily in two hours take him to Emergency at the Stollery Children's Hospital."

* * *

I bundle my son up and we head out into the cold again, bracing ourselves against the chill. His breathing has improved after the dose of bronchodilator. I buckle him into his car seat. His colour is better.

"Where are we going now Mama?"

"To get your medicine," I smile.

I'm relieved he seems to be taking an avid interest in the world around him. I feel I can stop listening so keenly to his breaths. I relax slightly and turn on the radio. A CBC interviewer is discussing the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline hearings and the discontent many people have expressed about the consultation process. A lawyer for resource companies including Enbridge is talking: "Certainly from my vantage point I don't see an inherent weakness in that process . . . What the courts have actually said, very clearly, is that the balancing act between societal interests, on the one hand, and Aboriginal interests, on other, are to be decided by government."[1]

Societal versus Aboriginal? Typical! I think to myself. *Could someone please explain to me where the interests of 'society' end and where other interests begin?* Before I can hear much more about the lawyer's vision of our society that doesn't include Indigenous interests, or even my own, a phone call comes through over the car's Bluetooth, interrupting the broadcast as one concerned caller after another checks in with us. It turns out that London Drugs is, in fact, still closed, and as I drive around from pharmacy to pharmacy, trying to find one that is open, my son and I both provide updates and chat with his father, his grandparents, and with a close auntie-friend with severe asthma who can empathize. A cacophony of loving voices asks pointed questions, gives advice, and expresses concern.

"No one in the family has asthma. Why would he have asthma?"

"Is it an allergic reaction? Something he ate?"

"You should keep buying as much organic food as possible, and avoid pesticides and other chemicals."

"Have you been avoiding dairy and sugar and wheat?"

"Vitamins? Have you been giving them regularly? "

"I've heard that if you give your child too much Tylenol, they can develop asthma. Have you given him a lot of Tylenol?"

"It might not be a good idea to give him the steroids. They can't be good for him."

"Infant exposure to common house dust can cause asthma. But your house was always quite clean when he was a baby and you didn't have carpet in that place."

"Of course, don't over-sanitize or a child's immune system doesn't develop properly."

"I sent you a website that gives you a list of things you can do to help control your child's asthma."

"This can be very serious. He should always have a puffer with him. Apparently several hundred people die of asthma in Canada every year."

"I read on the Asthma Society of Canada facts and statistics pamphlet that experts are struggling to understand why prevalence rates world-wide are, on average, rising by fifty percent every decade."

Finally, we pull into the parking lot of a pharmacy that is open at this early hour.

"Is this the breathing store Mama?"

Again, I smile, trying to be reassuring. "It is the pharmacy. There isn't any such thing as a breathing store, Love."

"Are they going to help me breathe better?" my four-year-old asks earnestly.

"We'll get you some medicine here and we'll hope that it opens your airways. But we all just have to breathe the oxygen that is in the atmosphere. It is invisible but all around us."

"Too bad they don't have a breathing store Mama."

* * *

Newly equipped with a bagful of pharmaceuticals sitting in the passenger seat, some of which I've already administered to my son right inside the pharmacy, I wait to merge onto Baseline. I shoulder-check left in the northwesterly direction of the city. The rising sun in the east lights up distant fields of snow interrupted by the crisscrossing of Anthony Henday Drive and Baseline Road, eventually meeting up with Yellowhead Trail and the Trans-Canada Highway speeding towards hundreds of thousands of kilometers of networks. Over the black ribbon of asphalt, lined by newly erected transformer towers in the recently installed power-corridor, I can see the smoke stacks belching the stink of waste left over after extracting and refining that precious black-gold that drives our luxurious standard of living, that drives up the property values in our neighbourhoods, and that drives our false sense of power over the world and ourselves. There is no mistaking that we are having an effect, but it is not an impact we seem able to navigate.

I'd like to think that if I follow all the advice that I've been given this morning that I will be able to manage my son's asthma for him. I desperately want to believe that if he takes the steroids, he'll outgrow this malady. But this morning the cold air seems to be forming a blanket over the city. Far from comforting us, this ice fog is trapping

particulates so they cannot rise into the atmosphere. And, as I look into the dawn, I realize that there are influences penetrating and infiltrating and dissipating and diffusing and seeping into my son's life that are far beyond my control. Despite social constructions of me as his mother, which suggest that I'm either to blame for his health or that I can manage it—by labouring to achieve increasingly high standards of domestic hygiene and by making appropriate consumer choices—I know that scouring our home and feeding him the best organic nutrient-dense foods available for consumption are feeble attempts to mitigate the fallout of what is really feeding our current political-economy. And I know that it is not only my son, but all of us, who are suffocating.

For the second time this morning, my fingers claw the steering wheel and I feel an empathetic heaviness in my chest. As my heart rate rises and finally syncs with the frantic clicking of the indicator, I merge into the steady flow of traffic. I take a deep breath to calm myself. If all goes well, tomorrow the skies will clear and the winds will shift, blowing in new directions.

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[1] *The 180 with Jim Brown*. CBC. Radio One, Calgary. 31 Jan. 2014. Radio. (http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/podcasts/the180_20140131_97908.mp3). For more details about this podcast in the context of larger media-issues, see Wilson, Sheena. "Petro-Intersectionalities: Oil, Race, Gender & Class." *Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics.* Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger, eds. NY: Fordham UP, forthcoming 2015.

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE TOWERS

SPECULATIVE FICTION IN A POST-9/11 WORLD

EDITED by Douglas Lain

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CONTENTS

"There was a young lady who died right over there, trapped under these big chunks of . . . Sorry. It breaks my heart because I saw her for two or three years, then she just faded. There was no one here to invoke her, to bring her back and remember her. So now she's gone, maybe forgotten, forever."

Others who died have also faded from the ritual over the years—most notably the bombers themselves, who were often the target of fruitless attacks by grieving survivors. All but one are gone from the square now. Only bomber number two remains. His widow, Deirdre, stands in front of the place where he appears each year, flanked by three Mawt-Kom City police officers. She never speaks and has never taken part in reading the names or ringing the bells.

In earlier years, some families and survivors protested her right to take part in the haitai, making well-publicized threats. Sadana has advocated on her behalf since the beginning, finally bringing about an uneasy peace between the mourners. Deirdre's grief is private, some families concede, and of a different measure than theirs.

Each year she stands close enough to see into her husband's eyes, to mark the moment when he went from partner and father to martyr and murderer. When asked, six years ago, why she came, she said she was looking for a way to forgive him. And she'll keep attending, she says, until that forgiveness comes.

Sylvia Aloli, National Radio News.

Brian Aldiss is a Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award-winner. His first published science fiction story appeared in The Observer *newspaper in 1954 and was entitled "Not for an Age." His short story "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long" was the basis for the Stanley Kubrick/Steven Spielberg motion picture* A.I. Artificial Intelligence, *and his 1973 nonfiction book* Trillion Year Spree *is perhaps the definitive history of the science fiction genre.*

"Pipeline" tells the story of an amoral and confident employee of Butterfield-Chuu-Wolff, the biggest consortium on the face of the planet. It takes the reader on a journey from Turkmenistan to Turkey.

PIPELINE

Brian Aldiss

Carl Roddard paced up and down the chamber of the Interior Minister. The floor was tiled. The sound of his footsteps drowned out the screech of the noisy air-conditioning.

The Interior Minister sat placidly behind his desk. He smoked a cigarette. Behind him hung an oil portrait of President Firadzov, smiling. He looked up at the ceiling of the chamber. Beyond his narrow window, the sun ruled over the city of Ashkabad. Ashkabad, the capital of the Central Asian republic of Turkmenistan, was where the pipeline began.

Roddard ceased his pacing and confronted the Minister across his desk. He said, "Minister, your position is untenable. You do not have it in your power to nationalise the pipeline. Particularly at this late stage."

The Minister flicked ash. "We understand the pipeline is American. But it runs for the first seventy-two miles through territory that is Turkmenistan. Neither fact is under dispute. It is fitting that our forces protect this stretch from terrorism."

A stale odour permeated the chamber, as if it smelt ancient deceits.

"You don't have the fire power," Carl told him. "You don't control the air. Besides, our contract was drawn up nine years ago. This wild claim was not mentioned at that time. Why bring this absurd difficulty up now?"

With a slight smile, the Minister replied, "There has been regime change since then."

He rose to his feet. "Now this meeting will close, Mr Roddard. No oil will flow through the pipeline until this matter of sovereignty is resolved. My government will not permit me to turn on the tap till then. Good day."

Carl's auto was waiting in the shade of the Ministry. He told the driver to take him to the American quarter. Once through the blazing streets, and the various check-points, he went straight to the Embassy.

Carl was a big man who thought big. He had been in Central Asia, on and off, for nine years. He was Chief Architect of the Pipeline Project, and employed by Butterfield-Chuu-Wolff, the biggest consortium on the face of the planet. Still he took his problems to the American Ambassaor to Turkmenistan, Stanley Coglan.

Stanley was with his wife, Charlotte, and just finishing lunch. He stood up, wiping his mouth on his tabel napkin.

"Hi, Stan, Charlie! Sorry to break in."

"Have a chair, Carl. Good to see you. You want something to eat? How was it with that snake of an Interior Minister?"

Carl drew up a chair. "Not good. They've set us up." He told Stanley of his meeting. "The essence of it is their demand to nationalise the first two hundred miles of the pipeline. It's meaningless—and they know it."

Stanley looked thoughtful. "So what are they after, springing this on us? Can't be money. Money is going to pour into this little tinpot state once the taps are turned. So why do they delay?"

"Search me. National pride?"

Charlotte looked over her shoulder to see that no servants were lingering. She said, "And what will they do with all the money? If precedents are anything to go by, they will not invest it on the infrastructure of the country, on much needed hospitals and better housing. No, it'll go into explosives."

Stanley told his wife, mildly, "Darling, these are not Arabs we're dealing with. Central Asians are rather different."

Charlotte shrugged. She poured Carl a glass of wine. He sipped it gratefully. The wine was imported from Italy, like many supplies in Turkmenistan.

The ambassador swivelled in his chair to stare out of the window. Beyond the small garden, a sentry stood armed and alert at the gate. "Have you spoken yet to the top brass at Butterfield-Chou-Wolff?"

"No. I drove straight here. BCW would probably want to give in. We can't do that. Suoyue has to be in our hands from start to finish. It's Security." With a tinge of sarcasm, he had used Suoyue, the common Chinese name for the pipeline.

"Of course, Firadzov is behind this," Charlotte said, thoughtfully. Firadzov, the President of Turkmenistan, was the victor of a coup earlier in the previous year.

"Not a cockroach moves without Firadzov's say-so," Stanley replied. He gazed at his wife.

"So? Ziviad Haydor."

Both men looked at her blankly.

"Ziviad Haydor," Charlotte repeated. "That rare thing, a powerful Turkmen dissident. Funded by Moscow, naturally. Come on, guys, when Firadzov took over, and was gunning for him, Haydor ran here to us for sanctuary."

Carl remembered. "Moscow has no use for Firadzov. They wanted the oil pumped north to Moscow, as in Soviet times, when they owned this dump. This guy Haydor was Moscow's man. Where is he now? Syria?"

Stanley thumped the table. "He's still here! One of our permanent lodgers. He lives in couple of rooms in the annexe. No one else will have him. Where can he go? The Arabs hate him even more than the Ruskies, because they think he did a deal with us. Of course, Firadzov would kill Haydor if he got half a chance."

Charlotte said quietly, "We could do a trade . . ."

The two men looked at each other. Then they both grinned.

Carl Roddard had himself driven to the offices of Butterfield-Chou-Wolff on the edge of town. Big initial letters BCW loomed on the facade of a square concrete building. It was ringed with a double protective fence. Nearby, the road led to a spot where the city abruptly stopped. A red-and-white painted metal pole was down. Beyond it, the great desert began, stoney and drab. The barrier kept out various camels, who stood hopelessly, staring in at this outpost of civilization.

After thrusting his biometric card in the entry-slot to the building, Carl took the elevator to his offices on the fourth and top floor. It was blessedly cool in BCW, where the air-cond unit worked. His assistant, Ron Deeds, greeted him. Preoccupied, Carl went to study the map of the area on the far wall.

A silver marker pen depicted the pipeline running a thousand miles from East to West. It started just outside Ashkabad, to cross the frontier with Northern Iran at the town of Gifan. At the frontier was a fortified pumping station, marked as at Milestone 72.

Ron came over, looking serious, tousling further his untidy fair hair. "The BCW committee met this morning," he said in a low voice. "It's looking not good. The world is waiting for the opening of the pipeline next week. BCW don't want hitches. They were on the air to Washington and Beijing this morning, saying they would acceed to Firadzov's demand for nationalisation of the first stretch of pipeline. They will take over control. We'll just have a watching brief."

Carl scowled. "We can't let it happen. Look, Ron, we're going to do a trade. We think it will work. I need your help, okay?"

"Sure. What can I do?"

"We buy Firadzov off with a well-known dissident in our keeping. This nationalisation idea is just a bluff. We'll call their bluff. We give Firadzov the dissident, he stops this nonsense. After all, Firadzov needs the oil flowing as much as we do."

"What do I do?"

Carl began wagging his finger as if counting. "One, we can't let anyone know the Embassy is involved in this deal. Two, we need you because you are British. Three, you drive round tonight and we have everything ready. Four, you take the dissident, whose hands will be tied and whose legs will be shackled, to the gates of the Interior Ministry. Tanks and major fire power will be there to protect you. Five, you speak over the intercom to the Interior Minister offering him the deal. Call off this nationalisation ploy immediately and you hand over the dissident they want like mad. Okay? Will you do it?"

Ron had begun to look dubious during this speech. "Very dicey. Who is this dissident guy any way?"

"His name's Haydor, Ziviad Haydor."

Ron let out a whistling breath. "Him? Carl, you can't hand Haydor over to that bastard Firadzov! Haydor is a hero of the people. It was

Haydor who represented the chance of a better life for everyone. Firadzov would torture him to death!"

"Look, Ron, Haydor is a spent force. That issue's closed, okay? It's worth one life to get the damned oil flowing, isn't it?"

Ron stuck his fists in his jeans and turned his back. "It's treachery, Carl. We swore to protect Haydor only a year since. Sorry, I want no part of it."

Carl grabbed Ron's shoulder. "Can't you see what's involved? This is no time for scruples!"

"Take your hand off me," Ron said. "I can't do it."

"Fuck you! Then I'll do it myself!"

He did it himself. It worked. Carl Roddard was hooded as he handed over his prisoner to the Interior Ministry. Ziviad Haydor disappeared into the regime's torture chambers. Next morning, President Firadzov himself spoke on television. He stated, "Regretably, an attempt was recently made by unreliable elements to seize control of the oil pipeline. We of course recognise the legitimacy of the present international construction company to operate the pipeline for the benefit of all concerned. I have personally supported this great international venture, which affirms the greatness and importance of our dear nation, Turkmenistan.

"Unreliable elements involved in this attempted illegal appropriation of property have been arrested, including the Minister for the Interior. They will stand trial at a future date."

Stanley Coglan and Mr Freddie Go from the Chinese Embassy shook hands with Carl in a brief ceremony. After which they toasted each other in champagne.

"We must reward you somehow, Carl," said Freddie Go, his face crinkling in the friendliest of smiles.

"I didn't want anyone to adopt my baby," said Carl, thus mystifying his Chinese friend. "My marriage has collapsed, Freddie. Margie refused to live here in Ashkabad with me. She's in England now. I'm hoping to patch things up, now that the oil is at last about to run."

"Okay," said Stanley. "We'll charter you a special plane right into London Heathrow—with our best wishes."

Carl, smiling, shook his head. "A bigger favour even than that, Stan, and Freddie. I want to be the first guy ever to drive along the whole length of Suoyue, all the way to the Med."

"Do we let him?" Stanley asked Freddie.

Freddie pretended a sigh. "Can we stop him?"

Carl Roddard shook hands with his Chief Engineer in farewell before climbing into his car. Behind them lay the first pumping station and the opening stretch of pipeline. The all-steel pipe had cathodic protection—the negative electric charge running throughout the length of the pipe. The pipeline and its associated roads stretched for over one thousand miles, covering some dangerous territory.

Carl left Ashkabad, the capital city of Turkmenistan, early that morning. He kept himself well-armed, and tucked a revolver into the auto's front compartment. The Pipeline Road began outside Ashkabad on its long journey westwards. Carl had programmed his car accordingly, and was travelling at an average of ninety miles per hour.

With him in the car was Donna Khaddari. Donna had taken a Luckistryke and was sitting quietly, smiling to herself. Carl's secretary was ill; she had sent her sister Donna instead. A pretty girl, thought Carl, approvingly. They had passed Gifan, where they crossed the frontier between Turkmenistan and Iran.

To the right of the speeding vehicle—to the north—the coast of the Caspian Sea was visible. Dead ships lay there aslant, stranded, beached for all time, bones merely of boats that had once sailed from Baku in Azerbijan to Bandar-e Shah in Iran. Now the sea itself, whose waters had been syphoned off in the construction of the pipeline and its attendant highways, was wan, white, waveless, shrinking from its forsaken shore.

To the south of the highway, the Elburz Mountains rose, their rainy slopes thickly forested, except where new roads had cut fresh scars through the trees.

Carl, vacationing from his engagement to contractors Butterfield-Chuu-Wolff, kept his eyes on the highway ahead. It curved little, it swerved little, it climbed on gentle inclines, only to dip again, always following beside the armour-plated oil pipeline. Where the pipeline went, monstrous, shining metal-black, there the road went. Where the road went, there sped Carl's auto, streamlined as a fish. And on the north side of the great pipe, there a twin road went, designed to carry traffic eastwards.

At present, though, the twin routes were empty of traffic. The great highways were not yet officially open. Only Architects-in-Chief travelled them. Together with a few military vehicles. Carl concentrated on recalling details of his conversation with Coordinator Mohamed Barrak before he left Ashkabad. He had voiced a complaint that the consortium to which he belonged was filling the pockets of the dictator, Firadzov.

He regarded Barrak as yet another corrupt native official, one of a kind with which BCW had become used to dealing. Barrak had grown distant and formal. He clasped his hands over his white jacket and his ample stomach. The vodka was getting to him.

He spoke of historic necessity. The need of the West to draw on Central Asian oil overrode other considerations. Yes, Firadzov was rather—shall we say, overbearing?—well, dictatorial; but he controlled a country that floated on oil, and those vast reservoirs were needed to sustain the greedy West. A West, Barrak might say, also dictatorial. When the oil was flowing, the West would no longer have need of oil from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, such as Iraq and Kuwait.

Then Barrak had abruptly changed the subject, demanding to know why Carl Roddard suddenly needed leave to go to England.

"My ex-wife has moved to England from Savannah. She lives with her brother in Oxford. I need to see her again."

"You are planning to remarry?"

"That remains to be seen." None of your business. He disliked Barrak and his pompous manner. Barrak liked to speak of the pipeline as "this great engineering achievement," as if he had built it himself.

Carl Roddard had broad shoulders and a broad base. He sat hunched in a narrow chair, saying nothing. He was drinking vodka with Barrak in a more-or-less westernised tea house in the European quarter of Ashkabad. Although the Turkmen were Muslim, or faintly Muslim, their seventy years under Russian domination had taught them to drink vodka like Cossacks. Carl did not tell the other man he had two young sons wandering about somewhere in the eastern United States, kicking up hell.

Barrak had not enquired why Carl wished to drive the length of the pipeline road instead of flying. Everyone involved in the grandiose project desired to drive the whole length of it one day. Perhaps even Barrak felt the itch.

The car sped ever on. Carl's great tanned face was immoveable as he half-listened to a remastered ribbon of music from the long-dead Django, cool as a dingo in December. Donna appeared to be listening. She sat close to Carl, saying nothing.

He gazed at the landscape he had helped forge. The highway undulated over northbound rivers pouring down from the mountain slopes. It followed the great coffin of the oil pipeline, by far the strongest feature of the moribund natural scene. Haze overhead filtered sunlight down evenly, shadowlessly; as the distance indicators flashed by; the scene resembled a computer playscene.

The pipeline would, in a sense, unite East and West. Yet it was Carl's absorption in the mighty project which had broken up his marriage to Margie. That could be put right, maybe. He would try. He regarded himself as a good fixer. Results were in the lap of the gods.

Gigantic yellow-painted Chinese constructors toiled along in parallel with the pipeline. They were preparing to build a third lane on the westbound route. The great project was yet to be completed. High overhead, geostationary satellites saw to it that the project was not interfered with.

The auto map was signalling fifty miles to Amol-Babol when Donna said, "I need a coffee."

"Right behind you."

"No, I need to stretch my legs. I have long legs, you know."

"I have noticed."

"Stop at Amol-Bobol, please, Carl."

Amol-Babol was first stop after Ashkabad, the site of a big pumping station. As they had had to show their biometricards to enter the pipeline road, so they had to show their biometricards to get off it. The barriers swung up, the steel teeth sucked themselves down into the roadway and they drifted through.

After the auto was douched with germicidal wash, it parked itself and the couple were free to walk.

Amol-Babol was situated on the coast. Ships manoeuvred in the overcrowded harbour. Tehran was no more than sixty miles away, south over the Elburz Mountains. Amol-Babol was a newly compounded city, a transitory refuge for many of the men and women of all nationalities who worked on the pipeline. They included American, Australian, French, Spanish, English, Kurdish, Japanese and certainly Chinese. Many were soldiers, clerks, prostitutes, thieves, adventurers.

The chaos of Amol-Babol was preferable to the deadness of Firadzov-ruled Ashkabad.

At least Firadzov had cooperated with the constructors of the gigantic pipeline. The gross egotist he was regarded the pipeline as his

memorial. He already had a pipeline, but it ran northward to Moscow, and Moscow paid peanuts compared with what the West would pay. Everything was a question of money.

A big transporter aircraft was thundering down on the Amol-Babol airport even now, bringing in more workers, more machinery.

The permanent civilian population consisted of a small clique of Iranian, Indian and Chinese bureaucrats, sitting at the top of the pile, then mainly of Kurds and other Iranians, with a scattering of Afghans. These latter, the poor, had set up stalls and markets through which Carl and Donna now strolled. Here were the world's electronic gadgets, blinking, winking, chirruping, together with bright cheap Chinese-manufactured toys and clothes. Oriental music shrilly played.

Donna bought a deep blue T-shirt bearing the elegantly complex Chinese symbol, Suoyue, for 'Pipeline'. At another stall they sat and drank a rich Sumatra coffee. No alcohol was permitted anywhere along the course of the pipeline; it was a condition on which the Chinese had insisted.

Carl took Donna to the Pipeline Consortium H.Q. in A-B Square, to say hello to his friend and colleague, Wang Feng Ling. Ling embraced Carl, kissed Donna's hand, and ordered tea to be brought. Ling as ever was neatly dressed in a well-tailored suit. His hair was immaculate. He wore a gold ring on one of his long artistic fingers. His smile was warm and sincere.

"How is life in Ashkabad, Carl, dear chap?" he asked. "Dear chap" was his favourite form of address.

"Dull as ever. Even the camels are bored."

"With that particular time-expired Central Asian dullness?" Ling smiled at the recollection.

"The new dictator is slightly better than the old dictator. Firadzov accepts bribes with a better grace . . ."

Ling nodded his sympathy. "Unfortunately the new dictator in Uzbekistan is not slightly better than the old dictator, dear chap. However, we maintain long and tedious talks."

Carl gave a short laugh. "You still have hopes, then." He had learnt to talk obliquely to Ling.

Ling raised his cup and smiled at his friend. "Hopes? You mean plans? Certainly the Suoyue can be key to both East and West."

Indeed, even the Westerners on the pipeline road referred to it as the "Suoyue," the Chinese word for "key." Westerners were interested only

in piping the oil of Central Asia to the West, bypassing the Arab states; but the Chinese were major players here, and the Chinese had plans to extend the Suoyue eastwards, beyond Turkmenistan to China itself.

As had always been the case, Chinese intentions were not clearly understood in the West.

"Any problems on your stretch of the pipe, Ling?"

"Your president, Julian Caesare, may cause problems, dear chap, if he continues to exacerbate Islamic problems in Iran."

"Well, the Consortium has a century's concession on this coastal strip."

"Religion always has contempt for any concession."

"You're right there."

As—thought Carl, shaking hands on leaving—Ling was so frequently right. Staunch nationalist though he was, he had begun to believe that the Chinese were actually a superior race. The superior race.

He did not say as much to Donna when they reentered the bazaar. Or when they climbed into their auto. Or when they were once again travelling on their way westward on the Suoyue. The great pipeline in its protective casing appeared to go on for ever. Every so often, a pumping station straddled the pipe. Dominating the stations were small strongholds, bristling with masts and fully manned, fortified against those enemies of the West who would seek to block the flow of oil.

Carl remembered he had visited Hadrian's Wall in the North of England, stretching from east coast to west coast, where he studied how the Romans had attempted to keep out the barbarians. The Suoyue might bear a Chinese name, but the essential elements of its design lay in the West, and had its links with ancient Rome.

The Caspian fell away, leaving its lassitudes behind them. Climbing, they crossed the forty-ninth line of latitude. Kurd patrols were in evidence here, driving US army vehicles with Kurdish flags attached to their aerials. The aerials whipped in the wind. The Kurds had been paid off; the patrol now fired their Kalashnikovs into the air by way of greeting to the speeding car.

The weather became colder and an inclement wind blew. Clouds were torn to shreds. The climate remained mild inside the auto. Carl and Donna sat close, elbows all but touching.

Pilotless planes, controlled from Diyarbakir, screamed overhead, low to the ground. Higher overhead, they occasionally saw the heavyweight

BWA, the Broad Wing Aircraft that also kept up a contunuous patrol.

"It's like living in a sci-fi dream," Carl remarked to Donna.

They passed the ruins of a village that had been demolished to make way for the pipeline. Only a minaret remained standing, a solitary sentinel to a vanished way of life.

As the landscape grew wilder, dusk became thicker. When night encompassed the solitary vehicle, Carl followed an old life-saving habit, lowered his seat, opaqued the windows and went to sleep.

Once he was soundly asleep, Donna depaqued the windows again to watch an electric storm over the mountains ahead. No thunder accompanied the flashes. Great sheets of lightning appeared and disappeared silently, ghosts of the stratosphere. Their reflected light ran off the sides of the pipeline armour like water spray.

She too slept, waking when the hitherto unnoticed tone of the auto changed. The car travelled on electromagnetic force; although it was without wheels, a new resonance suggested new conditions.

From the windows, Donna saw a glitter of water on both sides far below them. The sky had cleared. The night was now comparatively cloudless, and a crescent moon shone on the water. She woke Carl.

"Where are we? What's this?"

He glanced at the auto map to confirm his understanding.

"We're crossing Lake Urmia. It's a lovely spot, about forty miles wide in places. Lots of geese and water birds here."

"We're crossing on a bridge, are we?"

He heard the nervousness in her voice, and was surprised.

"Yes, we've just avoided a high mountain. I forget its name. Some people would say we were in the middle of nowhere."

"But I can see lights down below. A long way down there!" She was half-standing, to peer below the bridge.

"The people down there are also in the middle of nowhere, even if they don't realise it. There are quite a few islands in the lake. Relax, Donna!"

To calm her, he said, "I went fishing with Ling off one of the islands, once, in the early stages of construction. The supports of this bridge are founded on some of those islands. The people got paid for the disruption to their lives. They went and built a new mosque with the money, instead of a new hospital. They think like that."

"So we are still in Iran, or where?"

He was looking down at the village lights, small below, remembering the immense pike he and Ling had caught. They had spitted it, cooked it over their fire, and ate it. He remembered the taste of it.

"We're travelling a dramatic stretch of northern Iran. Some way to our north there's Azerbijan and Armenia. It's earthquake country. The Suoyue runs on shock absorbers over this stretch."

Donna remarked that for once she could see the ribbon of the parallel road running eastwards.

He said that the roads here were built on separate bridges for safety reasons.

She fell silent, perhaps awed by the magnitude of the engineering feat that had built Suoyue. Nor was she unaware of the years of political discussion, contrivance and bribery that had gone into the groundwork before building started. The pipeline project had ruined her life and her family's. Only when China had signed on to play a major role in the construction had the consortium Butterfield-Chuu-Wolff gained the financial incentive in which to function.

Her family had been one of those that lost out in the wheeler-dealing. Donna's father, Awal al-Khaddari, had lost his home and his business and had comitted suicide. Donna had had to work for the negotiators throughout the desperate years, and had gone to bed with some of them, in order to keep her family in bread.

The structure, despite furious Arab protests, was hailed as a great advance in world trade. It was touted as a unifying force, whatever had happened to Donna's and other families. Still the West remained worried about Chinese motives. Some things never changed.

The car was slowing. They were moving through dense forest. The replay on the auto map showed that they had passed along the northern frontiers of Iraq. Barriers protecting the pipeline road itself had gone down when they crossed the next national frontier. They were now about to enter Diyarbakir.

Turkey had become a member country of the European Community some years ago, despite its murky reputation regarding human rights. The feeling was inescapable that they were now in more friendly territory. Turkey was a secular state, despite its numerous Muslim inhabitants. So it had been since the day of Kemal Ataturk.

But at the feed road, when they slotted their biometricards into the gate computer, the gate did not open. Carl spoke over the phone.

"Please be patient. Please remain where you are," said a recorded message. "Your needs will be attended to as soon as possible."

"Oh shit," Carl exclaimed. "A certain lack of information there . . ."

"There's a problem . . ." Donna was increasingly nervous.

Above them, the armour-encased pipe ran into the base of a towering metal structure as big as an aircraft carrier. Diyarbakir was the last and largest pumping station before Suoyue ended its monstrous length at the new Turkish terminus port of Mersin.

Three police on amoured motorbikes appeared, sirens screaming. They wore blue helmets. They halted on the other side of the gate and the lead police officer spoke over the barrier. Carl showed his identification.

The officer apologised with more formality than warmth.

"What's the problem?" Carl asked.

"A strike twenty-five kilometres from here, sir. The road's out."

"How's that?"

"Shell or mortar fire. Maybe nuclear. One of these Islamic terrorist groups."

"Bastards!"

The officer ignored the remark. He had other problems. "You have to wait here for a while."

"Take me to Chief of Suoyue Police, Tinkja Gabriel."

The mention of the Police Chief produced smart action. Carl and Donna were escorted immediately into the fortress. The very name of Tinkja Gabriel was a passport. Carl said to Donna, "I'll be a while with Tinkja. Can you keep yourself amused?"

"I'll try." She gave him a sly contemplative smile. Carl had once had a brief but passionate affair with Tinkja. Donna, he knew, had a cousin in Diyarbakir, working in the Logistics Division. Under all the militaristic activity of the project lay human affection, human relationships, human need.

They parted. Carl took an elevator to the Police control tower. He was stopped and body-searched before getting into the express elevator and when leaving it on the ninety-first floor—as if he could have made himself a bomb on the way up.

As he entered the great circular office, he saw Tinkja immediately, and drank in her appearance, her long dark hair swept back and knotted at the nape of her slender neck, her high-nosed hawkish profile. She

was wearing a khaki uniform, looking severe, leaning slightly forward to speak into a microphone, despite the body mike dangling round her elegant neck.

She saw him immediately. Her dark eyes flashed. She gestured towards her inner office. She went on talking.

The room was crowded. People at desks spoke quietly to their screens, machines clattered. On one wall was an electronic map of the entire Suoyue with its sweep of roads, from Ashkabad to Mersin on the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. LCDs indicated the whereabouts of items of traffic, of the pilotless strike planes and of the BWA drifting above the pipeline.

He waited in Tinkja's office. Tinkja was an Israeli of German-Romanian extraction, with royal blood on the Romanian side. Carl and she had met in France, when he was seconded to an EU architectural partnership. They had fallen in love and taken a brief—all too brief!—holiday in the Auverne. Never had conversation, never had love-making, been sweeter. A time of unbelievable empathy. Never he had been so close to another human being. Carl allowed himself to recall those times as he looked about the room. It was in apple-pie order. On one wall hung two framed lines of verse from a poem called "Gates of Damascus":

Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear,
The Portal of Baghdad am I, the Doorway of Diyarbekir

He smiled to himself. He had once claimed that this was the only occasion Diyarbekir had been mentioned in English poetry. Evidently Tinkja had not forgotten.

From the window, the great forward organisations of the revolutionary Suoyue project could be seen. Miles of barracks and stores and yards and linking roads contained moving vehicles and personnel. A nearby services restaurant flew the flags of many nations. More distantly, a newly built railway linked the centre with distant Angora, the Turkish capital.

Tinkja entered the room briskly. "Sometimes I could nuke Washington," she said. She spoke as if she had only just left the room and Carl Roddard.

By way of greeting, she went to Carl, shook his jacket roughly, clasped him, snapped a smile, and then turned away.

She stalked over to a speaker system and said, "Hospital Emergency Service. Ron Habland, report to me please. Ron Habland." Then she

looked at Carl, arms folded across her chest, her tense expression relaxing only slightly.

"I hear the road has been blown," he said, in an equally no-nonsense way. "How did that happen?"

"We want to know who blew it," she said. "The strike occured only at 13.05 hours. I have no time to stand here and chat, sorry. Washington is already bleating. Beijing will be next."

He glanced at his watchputer. It was 15.15. "Can I help?"

"Of course not." She said again, as if to herself, "We must know who blew it. There's no Arab nation which doesn't hate the Suoyoe. Or it could be a local group of disaffected Turks, displaced by the pipeline. Or the damned Kurd dissidents. We have to know what we're up against."

Carl said, "We're up against most of the men in the Middle East. So, the road's already being rebuilt?"

"Whoever they were, they had posession of field nuclear weapons. Yeah, they're fixing your precious road."

An arbitrary tap at the door and a small man with well-greased hair, wearing green overalls, came in. This was Ron Habland from the hospital emergency services. "Ron runs the morgue," she said in a brusque aside to Carl. She did not make an introduction.

Habland regarded Carl suspiciously. In fact, Carl had met Habland two years ago, in Ashkabad, but the man failed to recognise him, so tense was he. He bore the not-unfamiliar air of those who thought that, in a region which had never known democracy, no one could be trusted.

Tinkja addressed the grim-faced newcomer. "Ron, you probably know already that one of our pilotless planes immediately strafed the terrorists. They were up in the hills, not a kilometre away. It's too bad. We needed at least one of them alive for questioning."

"Those planes are too damn efficient," said Ron. "We need troops on the ground. Even Spanish troops would do."

He pulled a face and turned a thumb down.

"I need you to get a contingent to go and collect up anything you can find of their bodies or parts of bodies. Toes, even. Legs. Heads. Clothing. Weapons. Support gear. The route they came from. Anything they dropped on the way. Go with the contingent."

"Glad to," said Ron, with a slight bow.

"Anything you can find. Back here soonest."

He said, "Once the oil starts to flow, the Arabs can go back to their fucking camels."

"My sentiments exactly." Tinkja gave Ron a grin as he departed, before she turned to switch over a TV screen.

"A bitter little man," she commented. "Lost a leg three years back, though you wouldn't think so to look at him."

"I'd think he was on the brink of a breakdown."

"Let's hope not today . . ."

Looking over Tinkja's shoulder, Carl saw the scene at the damaged road, filmed from one of the satellites. A missile crater was surrounded by rubble and twisted metal for a distance of perhaps two miles. Wrecking and repair vehicles were already at work, clearing the site, relaying foundations. The pipeline and its casing appeared to be unharmed.

"At least they missed the pipeline."

She said, "Yeah, that's what they would have aimed for. The shits probably believe that oil is already coming through . . . Now I have to call Beijing. Sorry, Carl, I have no time for you. You better scram."

"Okay." He thought, She's glad to have an excuse. Of course she has another lover by now. She would never be without a man for long, not a woman like this. He sighed. At least she had once been his. And he hers.

"Your road will be fixed soonest—open again maybe by eighteen hours. Not too much delay. 'Bye."

She turned and began to make her Beijing call. Carl quit without saying good-bye.

It was 15.50. As Carl approached his auto, Donna emerged from a nearby archway, accompanied by a dark slender man in a worn grey suit. Carl was immediately alert at the sight of a stranger. This stranger, though seemingly young, had a deeply lined face. He wore a thin black moustache over thin lips.

Donna was neatly dressed and composed, although there was something about her body language Carl mistrusted.

He said as she approached, "You've heard about the strike on the road. Why do they hate us so much?" She made no answer to his remark.

"You look like shit. What's up, apart from the road?"

It was not the sort of comment she usually dared to make.

"Oh, the past—the past remains. Who's this with you?"

They were having one of their conversations . . .

As she gave a half-smile, her teeth very white in her black face.

"He doesn't have a name, Carl."

The thin man came close and stuck a gun in Carl's ribs.

Subdued Chinese music played somewhere in the background.

Carl delivered a swift knee to the man's testicles, but the man was alert, chopping the knee down. He gave a hard jab with his free hand to Carl's midriff, which winded him with pain. It was hard to credit that this was happening in the police precinct. A previous thought came back to him: in a region that had never known democracy, no one could be trusted. At some level there was police connivance involved here.

"Walk!" the thin man commanded.

As they went towards the side of the building, Carl looked about for CCTV. The nearest camera was plastered over with spray paint, still dripping. Then they were round the corner.

Still breathless, he asked Donna, "This is your cousin? What do you hope to get out of this?"

"Shut up and walk," she said.

The thin man punched Carl again. "You, fucker, you give Ziviad Haydor to the enemy, to your fucking friend Firadzov. Now you pay."

They were walking fast. It was hard to believe that this had happened in the police precinct.

Cops were everywhere, mainly men hurrying to get into wheeled cars. There was a crisis on on the pipeline road. So the thin man and his prisoner slipped away. No one took any notice of them.

They reached a fast road crossing. On the other side, Carl was pushed into a tall building with an ancient crumbling facade. Sweet smell, not pleasant, greeted them inside. They started down a flight of steps, some rather broken. Carl turned suddenly, striking the thin man across the face with a violent blow.

The gun went off. The bullet whistled past Carl's ear. Donna chopped him across the neck with a sharp blow from the edge of her hand. He fell, and went tumbling down the remaining steps.

They were after him and on him. They hit and kicked him, cursing in their own language.

He was then frog-marched down a stone corridor. A side door was unlocked and he was kicked into darkness, so savagely that he sprawled on a damp and filthy floor. The door slammed behind him.

Carl lay there, groaning and breathing hard. After a while, he pulled himself up and leant against a wall.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, he saw there was a choked grey light filtering from a grating in the corner of the cell. Calming his breathing, he listened. Someone or something was breathing nearby.

He moved. The cell was larger than he had at first assumed. In the far corner, away from the light, a man was hanging.

Cautiously, Carl stepped nearer.

"Hello!"

There was no reply, but the man raised his head slightly.

Carl now saw that he was suspended by his wrists by ropes attached to steel rings set in the stone ceiling.

"How long have you been here like this?"

The answer came faintly in a foreign tongue.

"You poor bugger, hang on and I'll get you down."

In their rage and anxiety, Donna and her cousin had not searched him. He drew the knife from the sheath strapped to his lower leg and, reaching upwards, sliced through the ropes.

He caught the body as it fell, to lower it gently to the floor. He knelt by it. He gently massaged the injured wrists.

Again the man muttered something.

As Carl sheathed his knife, he reassured the man as best he could. The poor fellow had been forced to relieve himself and stank.

An idea struck him. He peeled off his outer jacket and forced the injured men into it. Taking the man by his shoulders, he dragged him into the darkest corner and propped him sitting against the wall. He then stood waiting alertly by the two severed ropes.

The minutes crawled by. His resolution did not fail. When he heard footsteps in the corridor outside, he leapt up and seized the ropes in his two hands. As the cell door was opened, he hung his head as if unconscious.

It was the thin man, Donna's cousin, who had entered. He grunted as he took in the recumbent figure, before turning his attention to the hanging man. He came closer.

Carl threw himself on his captor. They fell together, the cousin striking his head on the floor. Carl slammed it again against the stone slabs. The cousin did not move.

With a quick look into the corridor, where a guard of some kind stood distantly, Carl dragged the unconscious man to a position under

the grill in the wall. By standing on his chest, he could now gain leverage on the grill. Fragments of rust came away in his hands. He heaved and felt a slight movement.

"Rotten—like everything else in this damned place," he said to himself.

He pushed hard, and pushed again. One of the bars crumbled away. He rattled the grating. It gave. He heaved it to one side. Clasping the sides of the hole, he made a mighty effort and heaved himself up into daylight. Once he had an elbow on the ground, he knew he had made it.

Another struggle, kicks against the inner wall, and he was free.

Breathing heavily, he stood up, having to lean for a moment against an ivy-clad wall to look about him.

He was in a neglected courtyard. Brambles and other weeds sprouted from among flagstones. At one end of the courtyard was a wrought iron gate, through which uniformed men could be seen. Ducking low, Carl sprinted to the opposite wall. He clutched at a thick woody stem of ivy and hauled himself up. Beyond the wall was a busy street with shops, restaurants and a cinema. Many men, the majority wearing robes, strolled about, indolent in the heat.

Carl dropped down onto the road, picked himself up and walked rapidly away. His plan was to enter a restaurant and there call Tinkja—until he realised he was covered in filth, picked up from the floor of the prison cell.

As he was walking rapidly to the end of the street, a taxi eased slowly beside him, a decrepit old vehicle with a turbanned Sikh at the wheel.

"Taxi, sah?"

He trusted no one in Diyarbekir, but there seemed nothing for it but to get in. Besides which, he liked and trusted Sikhs and their religion. He climbed into the back of the vehicle and told the man to take him to police H.Q.

"I will leave you by the gate, sah."

As he paid off the taxi driver in dollars, two black police cars came roaring from the yard and drove away down the road the taxi had taken.

He called Tinkja from reception. "I need a wash and some clothes."

She sounded surprised. "You are still in the dissident prison."

"No I'm not."

"I sent cars for you."

"I'm here in your reception area. How did you know about the prison anyway?"

She explained that she had planted a bug on him earlier, afraid he might meet with trouble. It was on his jacket, sticking like a burr. The jacket remained in the cell.

"I don't do this for everyone," she said. "But come on up."

Now the crisis on the wrecked highway was under control, the elegant Tinkja actually escorted him in his new clothes down to where his auto was parked. She blew him a kiss with her neat leathery hand.

"Don't come back, Carl, okay?"

"You could say life is rather like a long long road," he said lightly, as he climbed into the car.

"Except you can repair a long long road," she said. Carl let her have the last word.

There were indications that the architect's car had been searched. A rear-view mirror had been deflected, a seat had been reoriented. The revolver was still in place. There was also an elusive scent, which Carl recognised as coming from a fingerprint spray.

It was all a safety precaution, part of the life they led. He thought nothing of it. Trust was not in it.

Once he had fed in his biometricard, the car moved slowly along the feed road to the pipeline highway. Still it ran slowly. Power had been reduced. He was travelling at 50 mph.

At about Denghuo (or Station) Thirty—lights blazing because there was a drab overcast—the helicopters started hovering. They were painted wasp-coloured: Chinese Suoyue Military. The auto moved still more slowly.

Intense activity ahead. Gathered around a fair-sized crater demolishing the stretch of the road were huge BCW excavators, construction units, cranes, concrete-sprouters and other vehicles, among which wheeled cars moved like beetles. Emergency cabins had been erected. On a mountain to the south of this activity there was also movement. Tanks had been called in, plus a large number of military personnel in a variety of coloured helmets.

Carl stopped the vehicle. He took binoculars from the front locker and was about to get out when the machine said, "Do not leave your vehicle, Carl Roddard!"

But he did leave it.

Barely had he raised the glasses to his eyes than a siren sounded and an armoured vehicle came howling up. A Chinese captain jumped from it before it had stopped and came at Carl in a run, levelled carbine aimed at him.

"Hold it!" said Carl. He half-raised his hands. "I'm Architect-in-Chief of this entire road, Dr. Carl Roddard."

The captain's hostility was not relaxed. Still pointing the weapon, he said, "I don't care who you are, sir, get back in your car!"

"Hey, I have every right to—"

"You have no right. Please get back in car fast!"

Increasingly angry, Carl said, "Lower your fucking gun, will you? I want to speak to your—"

"This is military area." He came close, prodding Carl with the muzzle of his gun. "Please return into your car fast and right now."

Carl did as he was told.

The captain became less confrontational. Staring down at Carl, he said, "Is radioactivity here. I want see your biometric details. Where is young lady you had earlier?"

"Locked up by now, I'd guess. Back in Diyarbekir."

Carl handed over his card for inspection. The captain scrutinised it for several seconds, before processing it through a hand-held checker. He nodded, handed it back. When he spoke again, his tone was more moderate.

"We have an accident here. The road is down. You must go by temporary road. You will follow this military vehicle along. Do not deviate." He indicated a car just behind his car.

"Follow? For how far?"

The captain managed a rictus of smile. He slung his carbine over a shoulder. "Not too far. Do not attempt to deviate. Then you get back on the proper Suoyue road. Other people coming here we turn away. You official are lucky."

"What, you mean lucky to be nearly fucking shot?"

"Get on your way, sir. Never lose your temper."

The captain nodded curtly, and returned to his vehicle. A second vehicle pulled out and signalled Carl should follow. A large red sign on its rear announced LEADER VEHICLE, just so there should be no mistake. Carl followed.

The leader vehicle led on to an improvised road, which skirted the disaster site in a wide bow. Carl watched guys in radiation suits climbing from the crater. No doubt they checked on the kind of missile that had been fired, on its composition and where it had been manufactured.

They had to halt. A signal was against them. The driver of the other vehicle came back and had a word with Carl, seeming curious about him.

Carl said to the newcomer, "We may be witnessing the beginning, not the end of a crisis. This bunch of terrorists got themselves killed. You can bet others will come along."

"Just as well you're going on leave, then," replied the man.

"What do you know about that?"

"It's not only oil that travels along this here pipeline." He added that he had been told Carl would meet a reception when he arrived at the terminal in Mersin.

The Go signal came through.

It was a slow ride. Night was coming on. But once they left the site of the nuclear strike behind, the Leader Vehicle brought Carl back to the proper highway. The driver gave him a cheerful wave and departed back the way he had come.

Ordinary civilian police directed him onto the pipeline road. Once again he was speeding through Turkey westwards. Now there were military patrol cars parked or bumping along beside the highway

Carl stared out indifferently at the barren landscape. Beggars, ragged men and woman, gesticulated to him or simply stood inert, some holding out begging bowls.

"Fat chance you've got!" Carl exclaimed. Yet Turkey had benefitted greatly from joining the EU; of course, that would apply only to the big cities.

An ambulance was loading in a prostrate woman and baby on a stretcher into the rear of the vehicle. Then he had flashed past. The tiny cameo of drama and fate was lost far behind. In no time, they were approaching a well-lit bridge. Together with the pipeline, they crossed the youthful River Firat, once known as the Euphrates.

In just over three hours, Carl's auto descended to Turkey's southern coastal plain. The waters of the Mediterranean appeared, flat, faintly gleaming. From here on to its terminus at Mersin, the great armoured pipeline ran on reinforced stilts, and the two motorways, the eastbound and the westbound, ran together in parallel.

The newly constructed airport was at Mersin, on the outskirts of the growing city. This was where the great thousand-mile thrust of metal ended. Carl would soon be seeing his ex-wife again; that matter would certainly need some sorting out. Either she would see sense or she wouldn't.

Although it was midnight, Mersin was still extremely busy, preparing for the moment when the pumping station began operations and Central Asian oil began to pour into waiting Western tankers, to quench the inexhaustible Western thirst for oil and more oil.

He climbed from the car. He could see an Allied American plane gleaming under searchlights on the runway. The Stars & Stripes were flying. They were symbols of home. An official welcoming party clustered behind the barrier, waiting for him, holding flags and placards. One placard read, "LESSEPS WAS A PIKER COMPARED TO U." He felt only fatigue, not elation. He had had a job to do. Another job lay ahead.

As he approached the crowd, a woman called out shrilly, "Come back safe, Carl."

He gave her a grin. A nice-looking young woman.

She clutched his arm as he pushed by. Perhaps she sensed his scepticism. "Maybe things will be better when you return."

He grinned into her smiling face and said, "And by then, if I can quote a friend, 'The Arabs may be going back to their fucking camels'."