

" T H E M A N W H O S A W  
T H E F U T U R E "

**or**

" T H E B U T T E R F L I E S "

a t r a g e d y

by paul f savage

: O N E :

the detective and the driver

"...and our reporter is live at the scene of this tragic death. David: what actually happened?"

"Well Mary, it seems that an unknown assailant entered Mrs. Brogans' apartment, a struggle occurred, during which Mrs. Brogans was hit several times over the head with a commemorative paperweight. She lies dead at my feet, her warm blood seeping towards my..."

Robert Arthur flicked off his holoscreen and the gruesome images of Obit TV flickered and faded into a comfortable purple. The look of disgust gradually reverted back to the usual blank ennui. He gazed around his humdrum living room, searching desperately for some activity conducive to imaginative thought. Trying to fight the dull temptation to switch the holoscreen back on, he made his way into the sterile kitchen and began brewing a cup of rich coffee. As the water boiled, the silky blue curls of steam held his attention, his ears listened to the changes in frequencies.

Robert stepped through the open doorway between the kitchen and the living room. He sat down on the neutral sofa, sipping the synthetic coffee. Grimacing, he reached for the holoscreen controller, and almost immediately, a live image of the newly murdered Mrs. Brogans confronted him.

She lay face down beside a sofa exactly like the one Robert himself sat on, the plastic cover matted with her fresh blood. Her hand rested in a drying pool, her delicate hands stained and rigidly curled. The reporter's voice intoned that it appeared the attacker was known to Mrs. Brogans, for there was no sign of an actual break-in. Robert could see the reporter's smartly polished shoes, also stained with Mrs. Brogans' blood. A knock rapped upon his front door, heard faintly and eerily from the holoscreen also.

"Mr. Arthur?" asked the block detective, carelessly waving his indent pass.

"Come in." Robert motioned him into his apartment. The detective glanced at the holoscreen.

"Ah, I see that you are aware of your neighbour's death."

"Yes." Robert sank down upon his sofa and took up his cup of coffee.

"Did you hear anything, Mr. Arthur? Any loud sounds - the sounds of someone being hit over the head with a commemorative paperweight perhaps?" The detective's eyes twinkled behind the wireless spectacles. Robert shook his head.

"I'm afraid that I've been awake for less than half an hour," he explained. "I heard nothing at all."

The detective frowned, and took out his compunotebook. Switching it on, he swiftly typed in the information.

"What time exactly did you rise?" A subtle tone of disdain had entered the detective's voice.

"My clock read twelve twelve." The detective typed in a query to the attending doctor in the adjoining apartment, and waited for the reply. After a couple of seconds, he nodded his head slightly.

"That corresponds to the time of death. Do you remember what you were dreaming about?" Robert's blank face did not betray the irritation at such a fatuous question.

"I don't believe I was dreaming at all, detective," he stated in a neutral tone.

"Indeed," replied the detective, before tutting to himself. A few seconds of silence elapsed before the detective spoke once more.

"What is your occupation Mr. Arthur?" The detective tapped a non-rhythmic beat on his compunotebook, waiting for Robert's reply.

"I'm a Driver."

"Indeed," the detective repeated. Irritation swelled within Robert.

"Detective," he asked, "where are these questions of yours leading?"

"Thankyou for your time, Mr. Arthur. If I need to speak to you again, I'll be in touch." The detective flipped the lid on his notebook and exited Robert's apartment, leaving Robert to his cooling coffee and his holoscreen.

: T W O :

an aside about life on the road

Robert Arthur entered the lift-pod on the seventh section of floor sixteen. The lift's digital display queried the section and floor required, and Robert chose the basement car-park. The display clicked off, and with an almost silent whirr, the lift dropped down through the sixteen floors before tilting and speeding along the sections spaced out in the basement. The pod door opened, and Robert stepped out onto the ill-kept concrete.

The car-park was silent. It was always silent; Robert was only one of two Drivers living in this particular Residential Block, nicknamed The Farm by its residents. Very few people ventured outside anymore: the famed 3rd Nuclear Strike had seen to that; even though any danger of radiation sickness had long since passed, the populace seemed to feel secure locked up in the hundreds of Nuclear Resistant Residential Blocks strewn around the country.

The Residential Blocks, or Nerbs as they were popularly known, had been hastily constructed after the 3rd strike, and the rural and Lesser City residents had been moved in, anticipating more strikes. None had come, and the residents had been given the chance to return home. However, they seemed to enjoy life in these huge self-sufficient blocks, and had mostly stayed. A few strays had returned home, but these people had become loners and outcasts, like the Drivers who acted as couriers between the Nerbs and the Cix, the Commercial and Industrial Complexes which produced the foodstuff and goods that the nerbs would not or could not produce themselves.

The Cix also raised the animals of the country: some concentrated on the pastoral creatures such as cows goats and chickens, whilst others raised sheep and deer for slaughter, packaging and distribution. It was Robert's job to pick up these and other goods, then deliver them around the Extended District to the Nerbs.

Occasionally he would act as chauffeur for one of the Counsel members, or more rarely, for one of the Senators, the New American leaders who sometimes visited the country. But today, he was merely going for a spin through the deserted roads of the Old City, maybe taking in a bit of countryside.

Robert breathed in the musty air of the basement car park, and coughed. He surveyed the hundred or so silent cars, choosing which one to take. He and the other Farm driver, an old man by the name of Jenkins, had meticulously revamped most of the cars here, and had converted the engines so that they ran on oxygen; they had solved the age-old problem of running out of petrol, and as long as they kept the engines clean, the cars could theoretically run forever for nothing. He selected an old Ford Mustang, a gift from a particularly generous senator. He had called it Maisie, and so the name had stuck.

He spun out of the car park into the empty streets, and let rip. The onboard computer bank was silent. Robert activated the vast network database, and activated the music store. Strains of The Hammerklavier came from the speakers as the car entered the old city centre. The empty husks of shops looked grotesque as they bathed in the warm sunlight. Robert wound down his window and allowed the wind to circulate and cool.

He passed the huge abandoned shopping mall, and impulsively skidded through the huge gap where the automatic doors had once allowed the hordes of shoppers in. The piano piece finished, and an old Rock'n'Roll song came on. Robert whistled along as he spun through the bright white halls, approaching speeds of forty miles an hour. He screeched into the old Woolworth's, reminded briefly and painfully of an old girlfriend who had worked there. He gave up on trying to recall her name, and spun back out and into the hall.

He pulled the car to a halt, stepped onto the dead ground, and lit a cigarette. He sat down beside the dried-up fake lake, and picked up a couple of the old bronze coins. The touch was rough. He turned one over in his hands, and studied the miniature portrait of the old queen: she had not survived to the Third Strike; except for her oldest son, the entire near royal family had perished in the Second Strike.

Flicking his cigarette into the empty pool, Robert stood up and got back into his car. Another Rock'n'Roll song played as he left the old mall behind.

: T H R E E :

meeting maisie

The Mustang glided across the dusty roads of the countryside, the window wound full down. Ethereal piano music floated out and into the clear & biting air. The digital display read:

Artist: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
Title: Piano Sonata in F-major  
Track: Two

The music played slowly, with sad ripples sending shivers to the scattered trees spread like lone sentries. Robert accelerated hard, as if attempting to escape the loneliness. Melancholy welled within him, he drummed his fingers to a faster harsher rhythm. However, he could not force himself to change the music: he found the feeling of sadness strangely addictive. Pleasurable even. He passed a rustic roadsign, rusty and flaky. With difficulty, he managed to decipher the old town and village names. As the late afternoon sun faded behind wild green hills, Robert pulled the car into a small track, and stopped beside a long abandoned barn.

The last bars of the movement died away as Robert stretched his legs on the overgrown verge. His muscles ached as he bent down to pull out a long stalk of grass to chew on.

This had become his ritual, an attempt to recreate the long summer days before any of the strikes, of hot clear days when he would laze about in fields bathing in the hot flood of heat beating down from the heavens. His ritual almost let him transport himself back to the days of peace and happiness, when life needed no meaning, no boundaries to restrict the pleasure of idleness.

Collapsing onto the soft ground, Robert closed his eyes and let his senses go. A rogue bee fuzzed nearby, and in the distance, a tractor hiccuped through endless furrows of dark soil. All around, a veil of merged aromas collected and drew over him to form the deep countryside. Gradually, a darkness descended, and Robert turned over and fell further asleep.

He was awoken by an insistent tapping on his shoulder. After seeping seamlessly into his dreams, the images in his mind receded, leaving the tapping a solitary force, which caused his mind to snap into consciousness.

Robert blinked several times, his eyes slowly focusing through the gloom of dusk. An image of a young woman formed, her eyes wide, seeming like twinned moons in the dark sky. When she realised he was awake, she withdrew her arm, and silently open-eyed him.

Robert spat out the damp stalk, and pushed himself into a sitting position. The woman viewed him shyly and unconfidently. Finally she spoke.

"Please...can you help me...please."

Taken aback, Robert stuttered for a reply.

"Help you? How? What's wrong? What are you doing out here...who are you?"

The woman looked confused at the rapid questions. She tried to answer, but no answer came. She fought back her frightened tears, and Robert's natural reaction was to comfort her. He stood her up, and took her, hands on shoulders, to the car.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to calm her. "What's your name?"

He sat her in the passenger seat, and knelt beside her, taking her hands in his.

"Maisie," the young woman mumbled, still quietly half-sobbing in fits.

"What's happened to you, Maisie? How are you out here?"

"I've been banished by my community for..."

"Community? Near here? The nearest Nerb's fifty miles away at New Gloucester."

She looked up blankly.

"What's a Nerb?"

This question took Robert by surprise.

"You've never heard of a Nerb? A Nuclear Resistant Residential Block : All major new cities have Nerbs."

"I don't live in a city...but I remember the time of the great Holy war fifteen years ago...I was only seven at the time, so I can't recall much; my father told me all about it."

"I was six when the Three Strikes occurred, and there was nothing holy about them."

"It was the apocalypse," the girl replied.

It dawned on Robert.

"You're a Christian!" he exclaimed. "I've heard of you, but I didn't realise any communities still existed."

"My father told me that we were driven out of society like the Jews out of Egypt, and ever since we have been living in small communities in the countryside, waiting for Our Holy Father to lead us out of the wilderness. My father himself has been helping in the task of writing the Third Testament: he's a visionary..." The girl sunk into the black leather seat, weeping more openly. "I miss my father; why did I forsake him?"

"Look, Maisie. Where's the community? You can't survive by yourself out here. I'll take you back, they're bound to repent."

"It's me who should be repenting," Maisie cried.

"Where are they?" he asked.

Maisie shook her head.

"I don't know. I'm lost. Utterly."

"How long ago did they banish you? It must have been quite recently."

"Yes. I don't know. Not long." Robert sensed her becoming more muddled.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" he asked.

"Please. Do you have any cheese or bread?"

"I've got both, I'll make you a sandwich."

"Thank-you. For helping me. I don't deserve it."

As Robert prepared her food, she sank into introverted silence, clutching and wringing her hands together. He looked down at the forlorn girl, and the deep sense of melancholy returned.

: F O U R :

maisie gazing

When Robert awoke early next morning, Maisie's damp hair covered his face like an untidy web. He looked upon her gentle face, at last undisturbed by turmoil; he saw how pretty her oval face was, and her thick curly dark hair lying messy.. There lay dried tears below her eyes, and her lips pouted innocently.

The weak sun cast a pale orange shadow. It drifted across her face, revealing sensual curved cheeks, soft skin. A strange feeling overcame Robert as he gazed down at the sleeping girl, a feeling of affection. He had never experienced affection before, not since before the strike anyway; not since his mother had stroked his hair and whispered quiet lullabies. The remembrance made him feel sad. He tried to take his mind of it, but gazing at Maisie again, the memories began to flood through his mind.

As the tears began to seep through, Maisie woke with a start. Robert quickly averted his eyes, but Maisie drew them back. He smiled weakly.

"Hi - morning Maisie. How do you feel?"

She blinked. Her eyes momentarily became like infinite black holes as she struggled to take in and recall who where what and why. After a minute or so, she seemed to become coherently conscious.

"I'm scared. I don't know what to do...I feel...I feel like nothing."

"Hey, it's okay Maisie," Robert began. He paused, building up the impulse... "I'll look after to you...at least until you know what to do," he added quickly, embarrassed at such apparent obviousness. He waited, trying to gauge her thoughts through her expression.

"I can't burden you; you have your own responsibilities...what is it that you do? If everyone lives in these.."

"Nerbs," he interjected for her.

"If everyone lives in Nerbs, then what are you doing in the middle of the countryside."

"I'm a Driver. I deliver things from the Commercial Complexes to the Nerbs. Nothing exciting, but it keeps me sane and happy. Anyway, I don't have any responsibilities; I wouldn't mind helping you at all - I'd like it."

"I'm not sure..."

"You need someone to look after you, and it seems to me that you can't go back to your community. Still, I could take you there, maybe you can persuade them to take you back."

"No!" Maisie exclaimed. "They would never take me back."

They found a stream nearby, and washed themselves silently. Maisie immersed her hands in the cold water, her fingers dancing. The current swam around her as she let the water cover her elbows. She leant forward, and dipped her head below the surface. Robert watched her from the bank, his bare feet resting in the cleansing water. It seemed like a continuation of a dream recalling childhood. It felt natural to be sitting by a river miles from the cities and Nerbs, to bathe in a sunny day, to listen to the hidden melodies within the rippling river.

He looked up and saw Maisie lying full in the water, bobbing her head up and down. He waved, and she returned it. He thought he could see the water creasing down her arm, following the course of her veins. He lay back in the welcoming grass, and frowned: he sensed that what he felt lay deeper than affection. He did not dare to think what he felt. Within the sorry conditioning of the Nerbs he had never felt so liberated, so easy as he felt now. He had never felt comfortable within the cramped confines of the impersonal blocks. No-one appeared to be happy, contented, affected. And now, as he lay back in the memory grass, he felt these things. It seemed as if Maisie



were a metaphor for freedom, perhaps even of innocent love. A gentle wind breezed across him. He heard Maisie leave the water, and lie beside him. It felt unnecessary to speak. They lay there, the two of them, both lost in their personal thoughts and recollections. For a long time they listened to the breeze rippling across the river and across their bodies.

Finally Maisie spoke.

"I feel better now. Come on, let's go."

: F I V E :

the truth about yahweh

The narrow country roads blazed by in a dizzying whirl to Maisie; her stomach knotted when they arced around tight corners, and leapt up and down hills like a private rollercoaster. It was as if her thoughts could not keep pace with the speed of the car; she lay back on the hot leather seat, eyes lightly closed, still confused and frightened by her exile. But as she lay & thought, a new feeling arose within her - a feeling of anger and resentment. Maybe Robert was right, maybe there were no real reasons for her dismissal.

"Do you believe in God?" she turned and asked him, eyes still half-closed.

"Not the God you believe in, no," he told her after a few moments thought.

"Well what do you believe?"

"I'm a Universalist - I believe in the Natural Power of the Universe, the energy that never fades, the consciousness that pervades it all."

"But isn't that God?" she asked, perplexed.

"No." He paused again to arrange his thoughts before continuing.

"The God you worship, Yahweh, is an old Hebrew War God that Moses discovered; a God of evil destruction who instructed his worshippers to massacre other races who did believe in him. He was only a minor God, one of many. Sorry, that was a bit harsh."

"S'okay," Maisie mumbled.

Underneath, her resentment seethed. Yet it was not violent. Paradoxically she felt no anger, her calm resentment rested easily within as she mulled over Robert's statement.

"I didn't know that - it is true, isn't it? You're not making it up?"

Robert laughed.

"As I remember, there were, sorry are, two types of Christian: the ignorant and the conspirators. The conspirators know the truth, and they destroy or veto what goes against their system of belief. The sludge that has been manipulated to fit in with their faith they feed to the ignorant who blindly accept it as truth. It was Saint Paul who began the great myth of Jesus being the literal Son of God & Saviour of Mankind. Remember, he had a Romanised mind. When Jesus talked about Resurrection and turning water into wine, he was only speaking metaphorically. People within his group, the 'baptised' were considered alive, whilst those outwith his little group were considered dead. Lazarus, for example, became a member, then quit when he became fearful of his life, before finally resolving to join the group again: so he was 'brought back from the dead.' Paul didn't grasp these concepts, hell he'd never even met Jesus: to him, an outsider from Rome, it seemed as Jesus *had* performed miracles. But Jesus was just a mercenary, travelling from town to town trying to rally people to his cause, the liberation of his perceived homeland. The New Testament, where it hasn't been manipulated, is just a collection of eloquent propaganda speeches. It's funny that: for centuries we worshipped a humpbacked dwarf with no relevance to our basement lives. Jesus would have loved it. Did you know his name was actually Joshua, and that the thief Barrabas was actually his brother Jacob? Jesus & Barrabas both mean the same thing: Son of God."

Maisie looked at him, eyes filled half with awe and half with confusion.

"How do you know all this?"

"I learnt most of it at school: since it seems you never went to school, I guess you were never taught it."

"No. My father taught me."

"There you go; we're all subject to our education. We're taught whatever appears to be true at the time. Most people don't evolve with information. it goes against their schooling.

Education is an evil thing. Without it, there would be a lot less prejudice. I for one, try to ignore my educational upbringing."

"But I thought you learnt all that at school."

"Only some of it. When I read up more thoroughly on the subject, I discovered my teachers told the truth; not all of the truth, but at least they didn't tell any lies. I think. Who can say? I don't know." He paused, feeling awkward.

"Sorry to dish this all out to you, Maisie. I don't much get a chance to talk to people. They're all obsessed with the television screens. They have no time to think when there's so many good programmes." He tried to hide his sarcasm. His resentment was not so calm as Maisie's.

"Do you mind if I put on some music."

"No, not at all. That would be nice. All I've ever heard are hymns."

Robert put on Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto Number Two, and let the violent romance engulf him as they headed into nowhere.

: S I X :

Cerbes

They drove on for about six hours before reaching the vast underground Cix Cerbes, built beneath the ruins of York. They passed through the mangled decaying outer wall, once a protection when weapons had barely reached the stage of the rifle & pistol. Robert always became amused when he witnessed the trivial defences, laughable in the face of the Strikes. Today, however, he failed to notice the wall at all.

They travelled through the once beautiful city, reaching the burnt-out remnants of the cathedral. The gaping hole where the kaleidoscopic stained-glass window, huge and inspiring, had once held the breath of the passing hordes. Beneath the cathedral lay the sprawling Cerbes, a corridor of rooms & machinery manned by twenty Kickers, the nickname given to Cix workers.

Robert switched off the ignition, and they alighted before the cathedral.

"Like it?" he asked her. "I came here once as a boy, when the stained-glass window glittered like a thousand dawns; sparkling so many shades of pinks, reds, yellows. Even though I was so little, it moved me." He lapsed into a reverie.

"And look at it now," Maisie finished for him. Robert gave a small mirthless laugh.

"And look at it now," he agreed. "This is it: this is our world." He stopped short, wishing he had held back his bitterness. He felt tired. His emotions lay scattered in his mind, and his head began to ache. Maisie sensed this change in him.

"Don't worry. I'm sure it will get better."

No it won't, he thought. It will never get better. The people have become too dependant, too addicted, to this fragile security they've enclosed themselves within. We all know that we're doomed, that this is the end. Our race is dying, it's been dying for a thousand years, and we've got bored of waiting.

"I hope it will," he said. "I've got to go into the Cix to pick up some food for us. Do you want to stay here and wait while I go down?"

Maisie nodded, and he entered through the large dark entranceway, once host to an impressive pair of solid oak doors, keeping sin in and purity out.

The goliath interior of the cathedral struck him every time. The musty smell of religion still lingered; he could never tell if the faint odour of incense were real or if it were a memory come to haunt him. The air, spawned with powdery fine dust, clung about him like a sheath. Each step he took hollowed out sound, leaving behind an eerie echo, sending shivers throughout his body. The hum of the underground cix vibrated the floor as he seemed to shimmer across it. He glanced up at the ugly hole where the stained-glass had once held magnificence; the strong sunlight without filtered in, and as it cast itself upon the particles of must, they appeared to dance a pagan rite, changing colour like a whim. Robert cast his eyes forward towards the stale altar, a marble slab about ten feet long. As he brushed past it, his hands felt the rough remainders of large Roman candles. In the dim half-light, he could just about make out their bubbling purpleness forming grotesqueries. He moved to the rear of the altar, and came upon the wooden steps leading downwards. Taking hold of the wide wooden handrail, he made his way down into the nerve of Cerbes.

Halfway down, the wooden stairs were replaced by slatted metal steps. Robert caught the smell of oil and bromide. As he came upon a hostile black door, he fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out his micro-computer. Typing in CerbesYork, the screen flashed out a series of numbers and letters, which Robert then typed into a small black screen to the left of the black door. The door slid silently open, and Robert entered Cerbes.

Cerbes lay ahead through a maze of corridors. An occasional door marked the entranceway into one of the large factories. As he did not have access to the factories, Robert had no idea what went on inside them. He had to be content with meeting Overseers in their usually spare offices, taking his vehicle to the ejecting point where goods were loaded on, and that was the extent of his contact with the cix. Apart from the cars he cruised in when not working, he did not have access to the back of his vehicles. Therefore he never knew exactly what it was he was delivering. He never saw the foods or clothes or appliances. He had a checklist on each occasion, but that was scant evidence of what he actually carried in the back of his vans and trucks. He remained deeply suspicious about the goods he carried.

The metallic clatter of his feet rang far into the inner chambers. He walked passed several doors, and had wound his way through many corners before finally reaching the Overseer's office. He touched a blank screen, and moments later a middle-aged, stress-etched face appeared. He recognised Robert and his black office door slid open.

"Hello, Robert. What are you doing here? There are no deliveries for you. Perhaps it's a social call?" The man's hostility hung just below the surface.

"In a way," Robert replied with courtesy. "I need some personal provisions."

The middle-aged man nodded as if he were expecting that response.

"Wait here," he said before disappearing through a side door. The conversations at Cerbes were always non-superfluous and abrupt. Staccato. Robert took a seat and lapsed into a daydream. Presently the Overseer returned.

"What are you driving?" he asked.

"Just a car."

"Fine." The Overseer left the room again, however this time he returned in less than a minute.

"Where are you parked?"

"Just outside the entrance to the cathedral."

"Okay. Return there, and I'll have provisions sent to you in twenty minutes."

Taking this rightfully as his cue to leave, Robert entered again the labyrinth of corridors, seeking out the stairs heavenward.

Maisie lay half asleep by the time Robert returned to the car. She slipped out a drowsy hello as he sat beside her. He gazed down at her, quashing the instinct to smooth her ruffled hair.

"They're sending provisions up for us to make a store," he told her, fidgeting nervously with the steering wheel. Agitation passed through his face as he wondered how the man delivering the goods would feel about finding Maisie. Maybe he should hide her in the back. He dismissed this as foolishness, and returned to the steering wheel. A half-dream flickered through Maisie's face, followed swiftly by a half-smile. He wondered what she dreamt of, hoping she dreamt of him. He felt stupid thinking such thoughts, but he knew that it was hopeless trying not to fall for her. He wound his window down, and watched the light breeze toy with the dust. It was funny to see how clean the streets were; after all there could be no littering anymore - no discarded papers & wrappers to lie in gutters. The street held a dead and sterile emotion. The impersonal wrath of nonexistence stained the empty pavement. As he ruminated blankly, he noticed footsteps clacking across the cathedral floor, followed in a few moments by the silhouette of a rather stout man leading a cart with two cardboard boxes on it.

The cart banged noisily down the stone steps, awaking Maisie from her reverie. A startled look flashed across her face before being composed into a more serene expression. The man looked curiously at her, a slightly lecherous smile playing across his cracked dry lips. His brow wrinkled as his smile widened. He turned his attention somewhat begrudgingly towards Robert.

"I see you've got a passenger, eh?" he croaked, his voice oscillating from a resonant bass to a crackling tenor. His salacious smile became a knowing expression that only the ignorant possess.

"Where'd you pick'er up then?" His eyes darted hawk-like between the two, restless and eager.

"I rescued her," came Robert's short answer. He changed the subject, disinclined to speak about Maisie. "Do you need a hand with those boxes?"

Replying no, the man trundled his cart around to the back of the car. Robert opened the boot from inside, and the stout man placed the boxes in with a couple of thumps. Robert signed for them, and when the man's attempts to pursue a conversation were proved futile, Robert watched him grumble away back inside the cathedral, muttering in his disappointment. Robert watched with vacuous disinterest for several moments. Returning from his thoughts, he smiled at Maisie and started the engine.

: S E V E N :

episode in a graveyard

York lay two hours behind when Maisie began to cry.

Her tears were not loud, nor were they the kind of tears in which dwells self-pity. She had begun crying because she was losing her faith. The words Robert had spoken earlier began to seep through her nurtured defences, the neural pathways deliberately instilled by her father and his kin. Her tears were fresh and hot, collecting with a sharp taste upon her soft lips, then moving downwards to drip roundly from the arc of her chin.

The ever-shifting landscape rolled humbly across her sightless vision as she inwardly attempted to create defences for her religion. Robert sensed this, and, grasping desperately for a word of advice or consolation, could only stare glumly at the twisted road ahead, searching for the solution within the maze of snaking waves.

"I know it's hard for you, Maisie, but you're intelligent. Be strong; I know I sound patronising, but you shouldn't fight against yourself. I told you what I believe to be the truth, the facts as I know them. I may be wrong, but my instinct agrees with me... I have books you could read: they explain it so much better than my rambling... I shouldn't have just sprung it on you - it was insensitive. Selfish of me. I'm sorry." He felt awkwardly guilty, afraid that Maisie would turn on him and blame him. Rightfully, he thought. Her silence haunted him. He felt moved to continue apologising, and maybe explain more about how he felt.

"I imposed my view on you. It's just that Christianity caused the Three Strikes. The corruption and stubborn defiance stopped the European society from developing for centuries; humiliating or killing any deviants who thought differently. Its ancient evilness fills me with disgust." He noticed that his grasp on the steering wheel had hardened, and his hands were whitening around the knuckles. He relaxed his hands, controlled his breathing to calm himself, and turned to look at Maisie.

It was if she hadn't even heard his words. Her face retained it's faraway glaze, and the path of tears had dried to an empty riverbed. He noticed that her breathing had become slightly faster, more violent. He could hear her breathing, forcing itself staccato through her nose. She looked more beautiful in her spiralling emotion, and as this thought flickered through Robert's mind, his guilt intensified.

He could not be sure if the tension he felt were self-contained. He tried to think positively to lighten the mood, but the atmosphere began clogging his nerves, bringing on his childhood claustrophobia. He knew that this tension would be seeping through the car, undoubtedly enveloping Maisie. He felt the need to escape. He squirmed in his sweat, his reddening deeper by the second. He pulled over.

"I'm sorry, Maisie. I'm trying to help you, but all I'm doing is getting myself more confused." He felt regret sweeping through his body, a bittersweet sensation causing a tingling behind his eyes. Self-facing anger swelled within and dispersed itself like a violent tide. He opened the door.

"I need to be in the open: I can't breathe in here."

He started walking. Through an overgrown field, wild grain swathing the thick brown earth. It felt soft underfoot, seeming as if he were walking on crumbling clouds. The stalks brushed against him, soft and soothing. As he trod on, the anger subsided, replaced once more by a gentler regret. His eyes began streaming as he realised that he, like Maisie, had begun to lose faith. He could not understand anything anymore. Life confronted him in all its complexity and enormity, and the vision of it had started driving his mind past the edge of reason. His fragile logic, precocious and erratic, quailed as it was confronted and shamed into fraudulence.

And inevitably, as he thought of life, so the terror of death also confronted him, with its darkness blinding and mocking. It was if death deliberately scared him, kept him wilfully in base ignorance of all its glories. Life and death. What are they but a discrimination of consciousness? The hot sunrays melted into his thick hair, matting it. His awareness left him, and he found himself as a camera tracking his trek through this lonely field. In the distance he spied Maisie sitting forlornly beside the car, her arms around her knees, face staring sadly at the infinite map of road. He returned to follow himself, like watching the movie of this scene. He watched himself merge into the grasses, his blond hair becoming the stalks of grain.

As his temperature rose, he removed his blue tee-shirt, discarded it carelessly into the field. His torso, oiled by the heat, became heavy, and his head began to throb in rhythm with his heartbeat. His breath tightened with his chest, and although he walked in the wide expanse, his claustrophobia descended and encircled him like an expectant vulture. With each beat of his heart, with each painful pulse within his head, he felt himself moving inexorably towards the edge of his consciousness. Panic began overwhelming him. He convinced himself that he lay on the verge of collapse. The brightness of the colours began to be too much for him. So vivid, they ate into his vision so that he thought blindness would surely strike him at any moment. Before his awareness returned, it spotted an old fenced graveyard, and upon its descent, it guided him unconsciously toward it.

He reached the flaken metal gate of the graveyard, and mechanically pushed it. The groan of unoiled hinges shrieked into his head, painfully drilling into him. In confused panic, he stumbled aimlessly from gravestone to gravestone, wide-eyed with the terrible confrontation of death. He fought violently inwardly to retain his wakefulness, feeling sure that if he collapsed then that would be the end of his earthly existence. We are subtly taught to fear death, he managed to think. For upon that foundation, it is simple to build any fear we like. It is fear which keeps us in check, stops us rebelling against ourselves. That is why we allow ourselves to be repressed by the thinly disguised tyrants who head our shambles of a democracy. Robert thought that insanity accompanied his death. As he fell to his knees and clung to an old bright grey headstone, he marvelled that he could still think above all the mad turmoil banging inside his head. As he gazed blindly at the stone, he found that he couldn't grasp its concept, he could not understand what it was he clung to. His mind swam in and out on the tide of mental overthrow.

He lay in his half-collapse, his tightening fingers gripping the hard stone. A thick liquid stream of sweat rolled slowly down the valley of his spine, tracing the inverse line, and disappearing beneath his jeans. Like a crippled messiah, he slipped into a painless trance: this scene of unreality glazed his eyes and his head, stretching elastic and light, tried vainly to commit suicide. From within his dreamworld, Robert heard the tortured scream of the graveyard gate.

Maisie stood behind him, frowning in confusion. Silence bonded them for minutes, before Maisie reached out a tentative hand and placed it upon his shoulder. Seizing this communication, Robert released his insane grip on the gravestone, and collapsed into a welcoming embrace. They clung to each other, desperate in their loneliness and bewilderment. Time slipped away unnoticed, leaving them discreetly to their vital communion. Their mutual search and discovery. Soon they would continue their circular journey, but for now they belonged at that place at that moment; bliss in the abyss.



: E I G H T :

season

As darkness fell, a faint chill roamed the air, and they started back to the car. They paused momentarily to collect the discarded shirt, and walked wearily to the roadside. They climbed into the car, and Robert put some calming music; Albinoni's Adagio. Enwrapped in dolorous memory, the melody dwelt directly in their hearts. Robert repeated his apology from earlier on. Maisie smile at him, sweet and wistful.

"I needed to be told." She turned to face the fading verge. "I don't want to be ignorant for the rest of my life. If I have been rejected by my faith, then it is better that I reject it also. I need to be guided, and," she turned to face Robert. "And I hope that you will guide me."

Robert smiled, and gave a laugh which sounded almost happy.

"I'll be your guide as long as you be my guide." They both laughed, and as the piece of music came to an end, he put on something happier.

They drove on.

As their journey progressed, the confusion began naturally to dissipate. They both recognised their ignorance, but they were not afraid to teach themselves. They felt unhurried in each other's company, unafraid to project their incipient thoughts. Several hours into their continued progress, Robert turned silently to face Maisie. He lingered over her beautiful rounded face, white and burnished, like an exquisite star. Her bambino eyes, pure and so dark so that their shine lost itself within its own solitude. He so desperately wanted to reach out and stroke the soft creature. The shivers passing through his body jerked harmoniously along his attenuated tendons, sending a poignant message to his brain. "We are Universal," he whispered to her. As she gazed at him, nervousness washed through him. He looked sharply into the road ahead, his cheeks reddening with restlessness. She asked him to repeat.

"We are Universal," he restated.

"I know what you mean. Religion sometimes sails so close to the truth."

"Yet always steers perversely towards controlling the believers," Robert added. "There is no god figure. We are all part of the Universal Force; the consciousness that never ceases to Be. We are so afraid to face ourselves and our thoughts that we feel the need to instil a patriarch to govern us and answer to. I answer to no-one but myself."

Maisie laughed in agreement.

"So we live forever."

"Eternally," Robert replied, laughing also. Then a click and they gazed into each other's eyes. Hers large and sensual, his deep and loving. They held each other internally, replacing vision with solicitude. Too much they thought, too much for our fragile minds to breed.

The dark red sky began to lighten when they decided to stop and rest. They found an old barn like the barn by which they discovered each other, and surrendered themselves to the simple pleasure of sleep. During the night when they stumbled into half-dream half-wake, they found themselves in an innocent deep embrace. As each awoke they left themselves, and the pale dawn found them as the night had left them: in each other's arms. Legs entangled,

The sun shone through the meridian when they were finally plucked out of dreamtime. Past far off fields and surrounding hills, rain blanched the air, thin broken sheets breeding with earth to create life. The sky whitened, hounding the dark spectre of night until they gave themselves over to light. The rain faded slowly as it passed through the horizon, seeking new land to fertilise. Robert followed the fluffy cumulus above, his eyes shaded from the sun by an arched hand. Maisie stirred beside him, and before she woke fully, he gently released her from his arms and

stood up, scrunching the lush grass beneath. The softness massaged his feet, slightly tickling. He felt Maisie's hand stroking his leg, slowly lowering until they caressed the top of his feet with the upside of her fingers. Robert closed his eyes and smiled to receive such a simple act. He expected to panic at such intimacy, but instead his sense of wellbeing seemed to liquefy his insides, coating his inner self with an emotion stimulating and enchanting. Through his closed eyes, the sun beat green rays. When his mind threatened to cast dark shadows across his perception, he remained calm. As her fingers slim gently dug into him, he could see the electric flashes across his vision, crackling violent blue. The slash of energy frightened him, but still his calm refused to be dominated. He allowed his hand to blindly find Maisie's, and as they touched so they merged.

"I'm glad I found you," he murmured quietly as the conquered electricity faded to a sensuous tingling. His nervousness too began to fade as he began feeling more at ease.

"I'm glad you found me," she whispered back as the conquered electricity seeped into her eyes; as they gazed into each other the defeated crackle swept between them; virtuous in being conquered. The camera of Infinity zoomed silently out and the sun became their only witness.

: N I N E :

the return

After several hours roaming in the old ford, they noticed that the air sweeping through the open windows had begun to change. It became sharper and distinctive in taste.

“D’you feel that?” Robert asked Maisie, a wide smile embracing his face.

Maisie took in a lungful of air. A playfully thoughtful look spanned her face.

“The air cuts my throat,” she decided finally. Robert laughed.

“That’s the sea cutting your throat; don’t you find it refreshing.”

“I don’t know about that,” Maisie replied. “Maybe when I get used to it.”

The car began climbing a valley side enveloped with luscious & sturdy trees. As the crumbling tarmac cracked underneath, the air became more base, attaining a distinctive aroma.

“The air’s full of life!” Maisie exclaimed. “I can smell so many things that my brain can’t work out anything!” She gave out a childlike laugh, sending a shiver through Robert’s spine.

“Over this hill,” he confided, “lies freedom; thousands and thousands of miles of freedom - further than we can see.”

The anticipation mounted as the car climbed the long straight hill. Even Robert, who had spent many hours on the awaiting beach, felt it in the knots of his stomach.

The trees gave way majestically as they crested the valley.

Two hundred yards further on, the road dived steeply into the deserted promenade. A rackled old pier defeated by time man and water. Crumbled stone that had once defended against the onslaught of tide. Wide-eyed, they travelled down, down into freedom.

The sand burned hot beneath their bare feet scampering across the expanse. Each grain brandishing the sole in a confirmation of feeling. The wind breathed luxuriant across their bare bodies. Cartwheeling, their hands momentarily rooted in the smooth roughness. The murmured threat of the waves lapping the shore.

As they neared the water’s edge, and the sand became damp and packed, footsteps imprinted and drowning. They dived into the sea still cartwheeling. Their bodies crashed magnificently against the current. Cool and wet. Their skins tingled, arms gathered infinity in their embrace. They allowed themselves to drift outwards, their backs massaged, their eyes entertained by the slowly setting sun and its cloud companions. They rolled and reeled as their bodies danced with each other and the water. They dived down to the eternal bed, trailing their hands through the underwater life. They enveloped in a helix as they spiralled through life. Waves of ecstasy washed their thoughts. Their circuits accepted the water conductor. Their brains prepared for the leap into the Universe. All they had learnt on earth flashed through their minds, discarded and left to rot with their bodies. What are we? they thought. All they knew disappeared. Only solutions.

Holding each other, they kissed the tide.