

Vol. 6 No. 6

December 2007

2007



Annual

—e*I*35— (Vol. 6 No. 6) December 2007, is published and © 2007 by Earl Kemp. All rights reserved. It is produced and distributed bi-monthly through efanzines.com by Bill Burns in an e-edition only.



A Great Old One invades Tralala Land

Contents – *eI*35 – December 2007

Cover: “The Horror, the Horror,” by Steve Stiles

...Return to sender, address unknown....25 [*eI* letter column], by Earl Kemp

Hooked, by Mike Ashley

Welcome to Antoinette’s, by Victor Banis

A Child’s Christmas in the Blitz, by Michael Moorcock

Steve Stiles—Personal Choice, A Portfolio, by Steve Stiles

There's a game for every season—ice hockey, basketball, baseball, football. Life soon appears to be a game, and it isn't. In games the object is to win, but in life the object is not to win. The object of the whole world is to preserve the game board and the pieces, and there is no such game.

--Kurt Vonnegut, March 1969

THIS ISSUE OF *eI* is for Steve Stiles, because he really deserves a Hugo. In the strictly science fiction world, it is also in memory of Calvin Demmon.

#

As always, everything in this issue of *eI* beneath my byline is part of my in-progress rough-draft memoirs. As such, I would appreciate any corrections, revisions, extensions, anecdotes, photographs, jpegs, or what have you sent to me at earlkemp@citlink.net and thank you in advance for all your help.

Bill Burns is *jefe* around here. If it wasn't for him, nothing would get done. He inspires activity. He deserves some really great rewards. It is a privilege and a pleasure to have him working with me to make *eI* whatever it is.

Other than Bill Burns, Dave Locke, and Robert Lichtman, these are the people who made this issue of *eI* possible: Mike Ashley, Victor Banis, Jim Linwood, Michael Moorcock, and Steve Stiles.

ARTWORK: This issue of *eI* features original and recycled artwork by Steve Stiles, and recycled artwork by William Rotsler.

Everyone has my sympathy, even those I'm most indignant about. I've never written a story with a villain. I think even the rich and the powerful are capable of great moods of tenderness, brought on by dogs and children. I think everybody's programmed, and can't help what they do. But I'd still oppose the rich and powerful -- that's the way I've been programmed.

--Kurt Vonnegut, March 1969

...Return to sender, address unknown.... 25

The Official *eI* Letters to the Editor Column
Artwork recycled William Rotsler

By Earl Kemp

We get letters. Some parts of some of them are printable. Your letter of comment is most wanted via email to earlkemp@citlink.net or by snail mail to P.O. Box 6642, Kingman, AZ 86402-6642 and thank you.

Also, please note, I observe DNQs and make arbitrary and capricious deletions from these letters in order to remain on topic.

This is the official Letter Column of *eI*, and following are a few quotes from a few of those letters concerning the last issue of *eI*. All this in an effort to get you to write letters of comment to *eI* so you can look for them when they appear here.

Wednesday October 3, 2007:

Steve Stiles opens another door to the outer reaches on the cover. Why is it always Marriott doors that lead to the cold quiet vacuum that is space?

Music and fandom, it seems so natural a mix. As I was once told 'every fan should play the guitar'. I'm not sure why Casio said that other than we were walking by the filk room at some con and there were 40 or so acoustic guit-boxes around that circle. I have no musical talent whatsoever, keeping my musical abilities right in line with most of my other abilities as well! I have to say that The Burlingtons sound like a band I'd enjoy. Certainly that's a great photo of them at the Queen's Silver street party. That is a fantastic gig photo to end the article with. It reminds me of the Door photo book I had when I was in high school where you couldn't make out what was actually happening unless you concentrated but you got the feeling for that moment in an instant.

I don't get to read enough Curt Phillips. He's a fine writer and I hope he turns up more often in the things I get to read. That story about Bond and Asimov is a classic. I remember hearing an NPR interview with Danny Handler (aka Lemony Snickett aka the guy who's owed me five bucks for more than a decade!) where he told the story, though he only used Asimov's name, and then related to advice given to him by someone of the John Updike-echelon of writing. I also find it shocking that Bond managed to sell a story for fifty bucks in the mid-1930s. That's still pretty good pay for a first story today! There's a station out here that plays old radio shows (it's run by a local fan name of Mike Miyaki) and they played Hot Copy episodes about a year ago. I had no idea there was any connection to SF in the writing. I don't know if I've read any Nelson Bond (I certainly own some stuff from that era, but I don't recall his stuff specifically) but I might go fishing for some now.



That's actually one of the MZB pieces I can read all the way through. Too many of her bits I've started and never been able to finish.

The SF Convention world has in many ways given themselves over to the Heinlein worshippers. I'm not among their numbers. I think *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* are

two really fun novels, that a few of his other pieces are worth reading, but mostly I can't even get into anything he's done. I don't know if I've ever made it all the way through a Heinlein novel other than *Stranger*, actually. I've started in on almost all of them and have even flung a few across rooms. It's odd that he's revered as much as he is. That's nearly as odd as the Cult of George R.R. Martin. Budrys' review of *Dangerous Visions* is still the best one ever written. I've read a lot of them and his is the only one that catches the peaks and valleys with exact precision.

Another good issue, but you're Earl Kemp and I expect nothing less!

--Chris Garcia

Wednesday October 17, 2007:

Good question about why *This Island Earth* was not granted a paperback edition at the time of release, and only received the handsome, but less-accessible Shasta printing. It could be that since it was composed of several pulp novelettes, those familiar with the originals would have little desire to own the "fix-up". Could be that since the film version was considerably altered from the former print versions, it might generate squelched feelings among casual purchasers seeking a more literal script adaptation.

Which eases into the question of what was the first sf book tie-in? My vote is for Kuttner's *Dr. Cyclops* in the early 40's. The next in line, of any prominence was possibly *Riders to the Stars*, Ballantine 1954, published under their unique, paperback/ hardback utilizing board covers, arrangement.



It's sobering to read some of the statements regarding Robert Bloch, suggesting that he may be forgotten or overlooked. Are people unaware that Bloch, in his own distinctive way, bridged the gap between the fan and pro communities? That he was as much of a fan wit, as a pro writer of every sort of publishable fiction? That his fame rested in more than just *Psycho*? That he was equally skilled in crass humor and chilling fantasy? That he was tuckerized in Wilson Tucker's *The Lincoln Hunters* as the very feckless "Bobby Bloch"? That he wrote a lengthy piece of unmistakable faan-fiction, and had it published in a pro-magazine ("A Way of Life" from *Fantastic Universe*)? That he graced the fan world through numerous print appearances and was a reliable and engaging presence at conventions?

MST3K "honored" *This Island Earth*, in its sole big screen entry, mainly because it was a relatively obscure production and had never been roasted on their show before. There were other, far more familiar, far more unintentionally hilarious subjects that could have been selected, but paying customers probably would have balked at exchanging cash to view something viewed multiple occasions before.

Stranger in a Strange Land generated more heated and contradictory commentary than any Heinlein book since or after. Budrys alludes to the dichotomy between the first crisp half, and the second, a precipitous descent by Heinlein into a fevered conception of a racy book, totally undermining the valid credentials of the first part. It's unfortunate that one individual, Heinlein, could exert so much raw control over the conduct of a magazine, however Pohl's decision to junk Budrys' review of *Stranger*... is quite understandable, in a strained way.

I view *Stranger* as a profound demarcation between Heinlein's earlier well-received novels, and what

later became an endless series of extravagant self-indulgences. I can well understand someone discovering Heinlein, in his final stage and wondering, with acute dismay why all the acclimation for a long-winded pedagogue who animated wafer-thin characters.

--Mike Deckinger

Saturday October 27, 2007:

Took me a little time, but I got to it eventually. I have the .pdf for *eI34*, and it is time for some comments. I pile them up, and save them for the weekend...

Love the Steve Stiles cover. Anyone else notice the Marriott logo on the door? With teeth clenched, you tell the first fan through the door that he has moved sideways into the improbable, and has stepped into...The Twilight Zone...

And what have I been doing lately? First of all...I shot my part in a short movie. I've written about it before, and it's called *Papoonda*. Sounds vaguely rude? Mission accomplished. It's a short film about a little-known but effective sexual practice, and about half the movie shows a professor-type talking about his researches, and what he has discovered. And, I play the professor. I went to the audition for this film going for the narrator position, and I got the lead instead! I expect the film will be available early in the new year, and will probably be part of a film festival somewhere. More on current events a little later on.



My greetings to Sally Bloch...I met your Dad only once, and it was in London, Ontario, Canada at a convention. The nicest man, and he helped us with a charity auction held to help offset the medical costs for George Alec Effinger, r.i.p. He dutifully signed a shower curtain provided, and it went for a nice sum. He seemed to enjoy his weekend, and he lived up to his essay.

Compare notes with Arnie Katz...Greg Benford says he won't be able to see you at the LA paperback day because of diving in the Galapagos. He said the same thing to me in the pages of *Vegas Fandom Weekly* about missing Corflu Silver! Unless both days are very close together... Hmmm, I smell something fishy, and it's not swimming just off the Galapagos...

I hope Dale Speirs sees the article about Nelson Bond, and the mention of his history of Canadian postal stationery. Dale belongs to a stamp society in Calgary, and I imagine this article would combine two of his interests in a new way. Would a Bond anthology be out of the question at this late date, or does such a thing already exist? Sounds like some good stories should see the light of day one more time.

Wonderful Bradley story...simple, but effective, as all good short stories should be. Many thanks Ms. Bradley...I think we met one time in Toronto at Judith Merrill's old Spaced-Out Library many years ago.

--Lloyd Penney

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred.

--Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*

Hooked

By Mike Ashley

I suppose the appalling winter of 1962/63 played a part in my discovering the science-fiction magazines. Or maybe it was moving to Sittingbourne, in Kent, a godawful town then and scarcely better now. The move separated me from all the friends and locales I had grown up with and the snow—which brought everything to a halt for months—isolated me from exploring much of the Kent countryside and drove me into the town.

I had long been fascinated by science fiction—in comics, on TV, and in books. My Dad read science fiction and used to tell me about books he'd enjoyed. He could never remember the authors' names except for a few—Wells, of course, John Wyndham, Olaf Stapledon, Fred Hoyle—but he'd tell me the stories and it started me wondering about them.

We used to live at Southall in Middlesex which had both a good main library and a good branch library—the latter only five minutes walk from where we lived. So during 1961 and 1962, when I was still 12-13, and before we moved, I began trying to trace the books that Dad had read. At the time I found Stapledon's books incomprehensible, though fascinating, and though I soon devoured Wyndham and Hoyle and a few others (Charles Eric Maine and Eric Frank Russell come to mind) it was Wells's work that most delighted me. Not just his novels—in fact I found those a bit tedious—but his shorter work. Wells's short stories have a wonder and awe about them that became too diluted in novels. His stories filled me with exciting concepts and ideas and converted me once and for all to the treasure of the short story.

It was also about this time that I discovered the yellow dustjackets of the Gollancz sf books and they became a signpost to other treasures. It was this way that I stumbled across the first two *Spectrum* anthologies edited by Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest—and I realised that there were other short stories out there, more modern ones.

And then we moved.

I can only compare moving to Sittingbourne to how it must have been in the pioneer days when families moved out from the established towns of the East Coast to settle the rugged American West. There was nothing there. Sod all. Well, okay, a few shops, two cinemas—one of which was still gaslit—and a brand new library. But this library was run by a despot who had decided to ban all Enid Blyton books. Not a bad thing, you may feel, but if Blyton was out then so was anything remotely imaginative. I couldn't find any Gollancz yellowbooks. I could still find Wells's stuff, but I'd read all that. There was Jules Verne—but he never excited me as much, though as that was about all there was I worked my way through his books. There was stuff by John Lymington and thankfully a couple of Arthur Clarke's novels (*Prelude to Space* and *A Fall of Moondust*) but I couldn't find anything by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, or any of the American giants whose works I had discovered via the *Spectrum* anthologies.

At that time my interests were more in ancient history than in science fiction— some may find it hard



Mike Ashley and his wife Sue at St Michael's Mount in Cornwall just a month ago.

to believe that they still are. When I couldn't find any new science fiction to read I turned, instead, to my other interests and was soon lost to the distant worlds of ancient Greece and Rome and Egypt and Assyria and the Vikings.

We had moved to Sittingbourne in November 1962, so it was already bleak, cold, and dark. School was appalling—it's very difficult to fit in when you move to a different school in a totally new area in the middle of term. So the library was my main retreat. Then the snows came. I seem to recall they started just a day or two before Christmas and continued all through January and well into February. I don't think temperatures rose back above freezing until some time in March and there was still snow on the ground in April.

Despite the pleasure of losing myself in the ancient world, and producing huge lists of kings and queens (which I still have), there was only so much I could do at Sittingbourne library. No one had told me you could put a request in for books which they could get from other libraries, and my isolation in Sittingbourne meant that I had yet to learn that there was a brilliant county library in Maidstone—I didn't discover this for another three years!

So on occasions, after school, I would venture down into the town with a friend (John Quattromini, with whom I later produced the fanzine *Xeron*) to see what we could find. There wasn't much to Sittingbourne then. It's a long, sprawling town that follows the old A2 arterial road, which was the even older Pilgrims' Way, and before that the Roman Watling Street, and runs for almost a mile with a miscellany of odd shops. Sittingbourne grew up catering for the medieval pilgrims, and somehow I felt it had never developed beyond that. There were a few second-hand "antique" stores and these always had a selection of old books—virtually none of any interest.

Except that one day I discovered in one of the stores, buried under a pile of bric-a-brac, a selection—maybe a dozen or so different issues—of the British edition of *Astounding SF*. These were mostly from 1958-59, though there were a couple showing the transformation into *Analog* during 1960. There were no prices on them, but it sticks in my mind that they were going for three pence or so each—this is the old three pence, a quarter of a shilling. I think I bought the bunch for three shillings, which wasn't far off all the money I had in those days. But it didn't matter. I had discovered the science-fiction magazines.

I had seen a reference to *Astounding* and other magazines in the copyright acknowledgements in the *Spectrum* anthologies, but at the time that reference hadn't meant much, and all those stories were from the 1940s and early 1950s anyway. It hadn't really registered in my mind that these magazines still existed. Maybe they didn't. Maybe I'd just stumbled across a few old copies.

I wish I could remember the date of this auspicious moment, but I can't. I know that it was early in 1963—the snows were still on the ground and it was damned cold. Darkness was falling and one of the reasons John and I had gone into the store was because there was a one-bar electric fire where we could warm our hands.

The magazines were grubby and one had got a bit damp, but otherwise they weren't too bad. I took them home and started to delve into them. At the time I didn't know that these were abbreviated versions of the true original American edition, or that the issue dates were different, though I soon wondered about this from comments made in the letter column and in the Analytical Laboratory results, which referred to items I didn't have. I also wasn't aware that these issues were not from *Astounding's* best years—in fact the magazine under Campbell was in one of its less inspiring periods at the time. When you've been starved of such material you take what you can get and I enjoyed all of this.

I can remember that amongst the stories were several in the Med Service series by Murray Leinster, which I thoroughly enjoyed, several science articles by Asimov, Heinlein's serial "Citizen of the Galaxy" (though I didn't have all of the episodes), the first of the Stainless Steel rat stories by Harry Harrison, a couple of really odd stories by L. Sprague de Camp, quite a number of stories by Christopher Anvil, which I rather enjoyed, several stories by Bob Silverberg and a whole slew of serials by Poul Anderson. The real frustration with the serials was that I only had odd episodes, including only the first of Anderson's "The High Crusade", and because this had a historical setting the story fascinated me. I was distraught that I didn't have the concluding episodes, and I was also missing episodes of Hal Clement's "Close to Critical" and Gordon R. Dickson's "Dorsai!" (Though I didn't particularly enjoy that one).

What I enjoyed just as much as the stories were the articles and departments. P. Schuyler Miller's book reviews were a delight. You felt he was talking directly to you and just for you, sharing his interests and views. Campbell's editorials seemed pompous, though there was one on the principle of Murphy's Law ("Sod's Law" as most of us know it) which got me thinking, and there was also a spoof article by Mark Clifton, "The Dread Tomato Addiction", which I thought was very clever. I had encountered Clifton's work in one of the *Spectrum* anthologies and he intrigued me. The letter columns were also interesting because although most seemed to be taking issue with some way-out idea of Campbell's (mostly about psionics or some new weird gadget he was trying to build), it was the fact that here were other readers expressing their views on subjects I could find nowhere else.



Thanks to Peter Weston and Harry Bell there's a genuine photo of me from the 1967 Bristol Eastercon, slouched against the wall. Others in the picture include Howard Rosenblum, standing drinking, Derek [Bram] Stokes in front of me looking the worse for drink, Gray Boak seated near the curtains and Keith Bridges nearer the camera, by the guitar. Ghod I look thin there!

Thanks Peter and Harry.
-Mike Ashley

Those few issues of the British edition *Astounding* hooked me on to the science-fiction magazines, but they did more than that. Because I was lacking some of the serial episodes and other issues containing stories that had been mentioned in the letter columns, I determined to track them down.

This was the start of my collecting bug, and I fear it has never left me. The fact that I now have some 40,000 books and magazines is primarily due to that discovery in the old junk shop in Sittingbourne High Street.

Although I ferreted around the same junk shop and one or two others I found very little else of interest. I picked up a couple more issues of the British *Astounding* and a rather tatty British edition of *Galaxy* from 1954 featuring James Blish's "Beep", but that was a one-off find that didn't inspire me. My Dad brought home from work a copy of *F&SF* because he thought I'd be interested in the article by Isaac Asimov. I was, but I was rather more intrigued, in my adolescence, by the opening of Robert Heinlein's serial "Glory Road". But once again, I didn't have any further episodes, and I had no idea where to look.

During the summer of 1963 I made several other discoveries—not of magazines, but of anthologies. There was a small newsagent far up the west end of the town, and a little further away than we usually walked, but which stocked some interesting items. And not just the girly magazines. New English Library, under their Four Square imprint, had just started to reprint British paperback editions of August Derleth's anthologies. They tended to split the larger books in two, so Derleth's *Worlds of Tomorrow* appeared in two halves, one under that title and the other as *New Worlds for Old*. On the whole these weren't such interesting stories, but there were some little gems, such as Arthur Clarke's "The Fires Within", Edmond Hamilton's "The Dead Planet" and Lewis Padgett's "Line to Tomorrow". I found several paperbacks of Clarke's story collections, including *The Other Side of the Sky* from Corgi and, much more importantly, the Ballantine edition of *Reach for Tomorrow*.

The British firm of Thorpe and Porter, which also issued some of the British editions of the US magazines, had started to import American paperbacks which were sold off cheaply at a shilling or 1/6d, and sometimes as little as ninepence. These included not only Ballantine Books, but Pyramid Books, Crest, Tempo, Gold Medal, Belmont, and a few others. Amongst these were the anthologies *Three In One* by Leo Margulies and *Worlds of When* by Groff Conklin, both from Pyramid. These included the longer novellas. Conklin's volume included, remarkably, Chad Oliver's "Transfusion", from one of the issues of *Astounding* I was missing, whilst Margulies's volume had three superb novellas, "There is No Defense" by Sturgeon, "Galactic Chest" by Simak and "West Wind" by Leinster. I was already warming to Simak from a couple of stories I had read, and I can still remember how hooked I was on "Galactic Chest", reading it on a train back from London one day. Soon after this I was fortunate enough to find a very cheap copy of the Faber edition of Simak's *Aliens for Neighbours* in the local Chain Library in Sittingbourne. I devoured that book in less than a week and Simak shot to the top of my mental list of favourite authors. He remained there for many years and is still bubbling around in the top ten.

But to get back to magazines, that same summer, while waiting for a train with my Dad to go down to Ramsgate for the day, I was surprised to find in the W.H. Smith's stall at Sittingbourne railway station a single copy of the August 1963 *New Worlds*. This didn't look anything like the *Astoundings* with the colourful Kelly Freas covers and fascinating stories. *New Worlds* was in its last months under Carnell and he had all but abandoned ship. Those final issues ran very few stories of interest, and what they did run I found almost unreadable. Yet I was fascinated to discover that there was a British sf magazine and, of course, at the time I didn't know it was on its last legs. I thought maybe this was a one-off aberration and the next issue would be better—if only I could find it. That same Smith's didn't stock it the next month (or more likely a solo issue sold before I got there) and I only found it by chance on a trip to Canterbury. That issue didn't entrance me, either.

However, the magazine did open up another world to me. The small ads posted at the back of the issue revealed that there was a British Science Fiction Association and that there was a science-fiction

store in London, Fantasy Centre, in Sicilian Avenue, which I later discovered was run by Leslie Flood. I also discovered a postal service for sf books and magazines, Fantast (Medway) Ltd., run by Ken Slater.

It seems strange now, looking back, that I didn't write to Fantast straight away, or find an opportunity to get up to Fantasy Centre, but I didn't. Other things were occupying my time (king lists and homework, as I recall) and I didn't have much money, either. It would be a whole year before I managed to get to Fantasy Centre and it was in the basement there that I saw my first pulps, crumpled and often coverless copies of *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Astounding Stories*. It seems strange to think now that those issues were only thirty years old at the time, older than that August 1963 *New Worlds* is today. Yet the pulps looked like something from another age—which of course they were.

But that discovery wasn't until September 1964. Before then, there was one other door that *New Worlds* opened. Les Flood, who wrote some of the book reviews, reviewed two anthologies edited by Sam Moskowitz—*Exploring Other Worlds* and *The Coming of the Robots*, both published by Collier Books in the States. It would have made more sense to have ordered it from Fantast but in my youthful ignorance I decided to order it at the local branch of W.H. Smith's.



Those not acquainted with Smith's will have little idea how dreadful their stores were—still are for that matter—but they pretty much had a stranglehold on book outlets in Britain and had done for years. Even in Southall, where I had grown up, the only bookshop I knew was Smith's. It didn't stock many books, but with no other comparison, I assumed that's how things were. There was a better Smith's at Ealing, in West London, that I liked to go to. When I was nine I had broken my right arm and each time we visited the hospital for x-rays and to check over how the fractures (three of them) were mending, my Dad and I would stop off at the Ealing Smith's and I'd come away with something. At that time it was usually a book of interesting facts or a puzzle book. But it instilled in me the habit of popping into a Smith's to check over their shelves. Thankfully these days there are far better bookstores, but to a naïve young teenager stranded in Sittingbourne, the conditioning was still there that if I wanted a book I went to Smith's. So I ordered the two Moskowitz anthologies.



I can't recall exactly when this was. The books had been reviewed in that August 1963 *New Worlds*, but I don't think I ordered them straightaway. It was probably in September, or maybe early October. I had ordered stuff from Smith's before and they usually took only a week or two. I hadn't given any thought to this being an American book. Since it had been reviewed in a British magazine I assumed copies were available over here. But weeks passed and grew into months. I used to check each week, but after a while gave up and assumed it was never going to arrive.

Then one day I was in the store and one of the assistants who I had kept asking about the books noticed me and told me the books were in. I was astounded. Christmas had come and gone, spring had passed and summer had arrived. The day was 13 June 1964—I know that because I wrote it inside the books, in a moment I triumph. I paid for them and went home delighted. I was impressed straightaway at the quality of the books—how they looked—how they smelled. I don't think I'm alone in delighting in the particular smell of new books. It used to be

possible to identify a publisher from the smell of their paperbacks—certainly Ballantine Books and Penguin. These were Collier Books, good solid productions with thick card covers.

What captivated me most of all was Moskowitz's introduction and the separate introductions he wrote to each story. Derleth's anthologies used to have some useful story introductions, but not much else, and the anthologies by Conklin and Margulies and others I was acquiring, were sparse on additional notes. But Moskowitz spared nothing. His introductions revealed vast histories of the robot and space stories, mentioned tales written hundreds of years ago, as well as reprinting stories from the pulps. Here was stuff from the thirties and forties from *Astounding Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.

That did it for me. Moskowitz had opened that final door, revealing a history and pedigree for science fiction. This was a parallel to my fascination for ancient history. I loved to know how things became like they are now and what got us all here. I find it fascinating to work backwards through history, seeing time ravel-up and discovering the origins of things. Now I could apply that same interest to science fiction. The hunting and collecting bug was already there, but Moskowitz gave it a depth and a purpose.

And I haven't stopped since. The dark, cold winter had turned into summer.

- - -

Special thanks to Harry Bell, Jim Linwood, and Peter Weston for furnishing photos for this piece.

Ideas or the lack of them can cause disease.
--Kurt Vonnegut

Welcome to Antoinette's*

by Victor J. Banis

"You'll have to go now, Victor," the woman behind the counter said. "I've got to close."

He had been staring at a print on the coffee house wall: a Thomas Kincaid inn, mullioned windows, pink and white flowers lining the walk, and a woman smiling beatifically from the open doorway. Welcome to Antoinette's, the plaque said.

"Sure," he said, and drained the last of the long-cold coffee from the bottom of the paper cup, hoping she might offer a free refill, but without much hope. She hadn't charged him for the original fill.

He realized belatedly that she had called him by name. Did he know her? He glanced over to where she was busy filling a paper bag with rolls from the shelves. She looked familiar—but he was too hungry, and too tired, his memory had gone to sleep while he struggled to keep body awake.

"Here." She came from behind the counter and set the bag in front of him. "It's the old rolls, they'll just throw them out when they open after Christmas."

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"Well, you've been sitting here long enough, we could be old friends." She smiled. "It's Karen. Karen Delvecchio."

Which rang no bells in his benumbed mind. "Thanks," he said, setting the bag on his lap, as if she might change her mind and try to take it back.

She saw him glance again at the print of Antoinette's. "Maybe you should be looking at that one instead," she said, indicating a print near the register. He glanced at it: little bottles, filled with notes. Heavenly Messages, it was titled.

"I don't get that one." He got up, slipped into the light windbreaker, and donned the thick parka over that. The temperature outside had been hovering at about twenty degrees earlier; by now, it was probably more like zero. "I don't know what it means."

"Maybe *that's* what it means," she said. "Maybe Heavenly messages aren't supposed to be writ large, so we can take them in at a casual glance. Maybe we're supposed to have to work on them."

He shrugged. "Maybe. I like Antoinette's better, though. A cozy restaurant, warm food, a fire burning. Nothing to puzzle over." He started toward the door.

"Wait, here," she said. She dipped her hand into the tip jar on the counter, pulled out a handful of bills, and thrust them at him.

"What's this?" he asked, staring stupidly at the money.

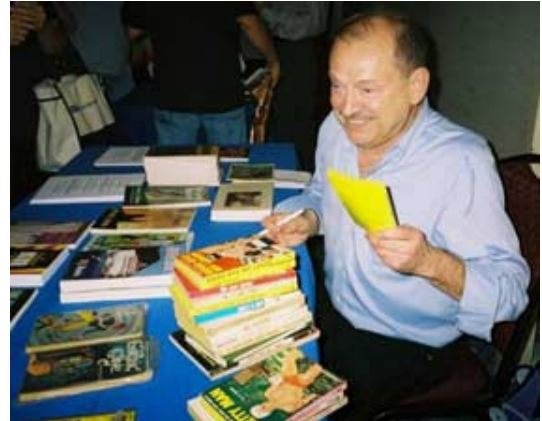
She gave him a pale smile. "Maybe it's one of Heaven's messages," she said. "Merry Christmas."

He knew he ought to say the same back to her, but the words wouldn't come. Merry Christmas?

Nothing merry about it, that he could see.

"Goodnight," he said instead, and went out. He heard her lock the door, eager to go home, to spend the rest of Christmas Eve with her family. He couldn't blame her. It wasn't her fault he didn't have a home to go to, or a family to share it with. The sign said they closed at eight o'clock and it was after ten now. She had stayed late as it was, to let him nurse that free coffee, and put off the inevitable. He knew that he ought to be grateful, but the gratitude was sour in his mouth.

The inevitable was colder even than he had anticipated. It had begun to snow, and a devilish wind spit the snow in his face and seemed to slice right through the parka. He didn't have gloves, and it was too cold to carry the paper bag of rolls barehanded. He tucked it inside the parka, and looked at the bills she had handed him. All ones, eleven of them. He shoved them and his hands into his pockets, and thought, *I could get something hot to eat, if anything's open. The Seven Eleven, maybe? Or, better yet, the tacky motels on Winchester.* Maybe he could persuade a night clerk to let him have a room on the cheap. Hey, it was Christmas Eve, wasn't it, as everyone kept reminding him?



Victor Banis and progeny at Gary Lovisi's New York Paperback Show, October 2007.

He veered off in the direction of Winchester, cutting through the deserted mall. The night was preternaturally still. The steakhouse next door was closed, and the Office Max across the street. Everything was closed, everyone was at home.

Not quite everyone was home, as it turned out. He saw someone sitting on the curb a few feet away, and slowed his steps. These days you had to be chary of strangers at night, even on Christmas Eve. The bad guys didn't take holidays off.

It was an old man, though; he certainly did not look a threat. What he looked, was wracked with despair—and cold. He was in his shirtsleeves, despite the bitter cold.

He hesitated, thinking he would slip on by, hopefully unnoticed. But when he got closer, he could hear that the old man was crying, great heaves that shook his body and sounded like the muffled wail of a coyote in the silent night.

"Are you okay?" Victor asked, coming closer.

"Okay? Now there's a laugh," the old man said without looking at him. "The damn bastards! They took everything. Took my coat, took the few pennies I had in my pocket, took my pint of Jack. Everything. And on Christmas Eve, too."

"You were mugged?"

"Three of them, their damned britches hanging halfway down their butts. Little punks. If I'd been twenty years younger...."

What could he say? He was no stranger himself to life's misfortunes. Still..."What are you going to do?"

"Do? What can I do? Sit here and cuss, is all I can see."

"You'll freeze to death. It must be close to zero by now."

The old man did look at him then. He stared, stared in particular at the blue parka, as if judging its warmth. Victor pulled it closer about himself. The old man saw the gesture, and shrugged, and put his head in his hands. There was blood on his cheek, apparently where someone had struck him.

Damn. "Here," Victor said aloud, unfastening the buttons with numb fingers. He slipped the coat off, and thrust it at the man. "Take this."

"Just means you'll freeze to death instead of me," the old man said, but he took the coat, and hurriedly slipped his arms into the sleeves.

"No, I've got this windbreaker, see, it's warmer than it looks, actually. And some other stuff under it, it's what they call layering. Honest, I was thinking about taking the coat off, anyway, it was too warm."

The old man got the coat buttoned. He stood up, brushing snow off his pants. If he recognized the lies, he chose to ignore them.

"Glad to have it," he said.

"You could still freeze," Victor said.

"I know a place," was all he said. He started to walk, but he looked back and said, "Merry Christmas," before he disappeared into the darkness and the swirling snow.

Merry Christmas, again. Why did people say that, when there was nothing merry about it? You'd think they would choke on the words. You'd think that old guy in particular would choke trying to get them out.

He put his head down and began to walk again, in the opposite direction, shivering in the windbreaker and cursing himself. What a damned fool thing to do. The old man was right, he'd be the one now to freeze to death, unless he could make it to one of those motels, persuade somebody to make Christmas merry instead of just wishing it.

He plodded through the snow, the bag of food under his arm, hands deep in the pocket of his trousers, half frozen already, trying to think of things to distract himself.

He had his head down against the wind, so he almost didn't see the car, sitting half off the road, until the man swung the door open, and said, "Excuse me, sir, I wonder if I could ask you something?"

Victor jumped, startled, and took a quick step backward, his foot sliding in the snow, so that he almost fell.

"What the hell?" he swore aloud, his arms windmilling.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," the stranger said. He was short, and thin, and needed a shave, and his clothes looked like he had been sleeping in them. "It's just, my family and me, we got stuck, we were on our way to my wife's family, for Christmas, only we run out of gas, and we got no money, and I was wondering if you could spare a dollar or two?"

Victor's fingers automatically clenched the wad of ones in his pocket. "No, I got nothing," he said. "Sorry."

"That's okay," the man said resignedly. "It's hard times, ain't it?" He turned back to the car, and then looked at Victor again. "You look powerful cold, in that puny jacket. Maybe you ought to sit here in the car with us for a spell. There's no heat, except from our bodies, but it's out of the wind, at least."

"No, I—" Victor started to say, but a fierce gust of wind swept over him just then, seemed to go right through him. How far was it to those motels, anyway? A mile? Two miles. Maybe a rest would do him good.

"Yes," he said instead. "I'd be grateful."

"Glad to share what we can," the man said. He opened the back door for Victor to slide inside. A small boy sat in the far corner, eyeing him warily as he got in. The man got in behind the wheel and closed his door. There was a woman in the front seat, too. It was eerily quiet inside, as if they had shut out not just the wind, but the sound of it, too.

"My name's Don." He offered his hand across the seatback and Victor shook it.

"Mine's Victor," he said.

"This is my wife, Ellie, and that's our boy, Robbie." The wife nodded and smiled wanly at him. The boy only continued to stare.

"Where were you headed?" Victor asked, more to make conversation than because he really cared.

"Pennsylvania," Don said. "My wife's mom, she's got a farm there, said we could live with her a bit if we could make it there. We started yesterday, figured we had enough for the gas, but then a tire went, and we had to replace that, and there went the last of our gas money. It's a good sixty miles or more yet. I could probably make it, walking, but Ellie, she's expecting, she'd never make it, nor the boy, and I can't just leave them here."

Victor saw the boy's crutch, then, shoved into the corner behind him. He looked down at the one shriveled leg. No, of course, you couldn't walk sixty miles on a crutch.

The boy saw his glance and gave him back a scornful look. "Daddy, I'm hungry," he said.

"I know, son, I know," Don said. "We'll just have to wait, is all."

"I've got some food," Victor said impulsively. He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Husband and wife looked over the seat at him, but Robbie stared meaningfully at the white paper bag.

"It's just some old rolls and stuff," Victor said. He shoved the bag at the boy, feeling resentful, and somehow outmaneuvered. "Here. Take it."

Robbie snatched the bag from his hand and tore it open. "There's all kinds of rolls and things, Ma," he said. He started to take one, and looked at his mother. "It's okay, ain't it? He said we could."

"You sure?" she asked, looking directly at Victor. He wanted to change his mind, say, no, I think I will

keep them for myself after all, but her voice and her look were so plaintive, he nodded his head and said, "It's okay. Someone gave them to me. I'm just passing them on."

The boy took a cinnamon roll and handed the sack to his mother, and she took a scone, and passed the bag to her husband. He wolfed down a Danish and the bag went round again.

"You don't want none?" Don asked, crumbs stuck to his lips.

Victor swallowed. "No, I ate just a little bit ago, thank you. You folks go ahead."

They did, eating in silence, chewing frantically. He wondered how long it had been since they ate. The bag was empty in a minute or so. He watched regretfully as Don crumpled it up and dropped it on the floor by his feet.

"Well, I reckon we won't starve, at least," Don said. "We are surely grateful to you for sharing."

"Yes, we thank you mightily," Ellie said, and fixed her eyes on her son. "Robbie?"

"Thank you," he mumbled with no sign of sincerity, licking the last ghost of flavor off his fingers.

"This place you're going, in Pennsylvania," Victor said, "How much gas do you think it would take to get there?"

"Not too much. This old bus, she eats gas, but even so, I expect ten dollars worth would see us there," Don said. He sighed, and looked at the frosted-over windshield. "Might as well be ten thousand, though, I guess. There's nobody out tonight. You're the first person to come by in an hour or more."

They sat in silence for a long time. Victor thought of the money in his pocket, and those motels across town. Even if he could get to them, there was no guarantee that anyone would rent him a room for what he had, and once he got there, he'd be that much further away from anywhere else. If he went the other direction, he could probably make it to the Seven Eleven. He could get hot coffee there, and a hot dog, and probably they would let him hang out for a while, maybe the rest of the night, if he caused no trouble.

He took the crumpled bills out of his pocket. "I've got," he said, and paused to count them, as if he didn't know exactly how many there were. "I've got eleven dollars here. I could let you have seven of them, if you think that will be enough."

Don's eyes widened hopefully. "I expect it might. Anyway, if we got within a couple of miles, we might be able to hoof it the rest of the way, or maybe I could get there and bring somebody back for them. Her mother's got an old pickup, or she might even have a can of gas. For sure we could get close enough. Only...." He took his eyes off the money and looked at Victor. "Only, it don't seem right, taking your money. I mean, we already ate your food, and seeing as that's all you got."

"Oh, that doesn't matter, I've got some place I was headed, I just have to get there. Here." He handed Don seven dollars, and then added another one to them. That left him three. That would get him a coffee and a hot dog, or a donut, anyway.

"Well, if you're sure?" Don gave his wife a look. She licked her lips and held her breath. "I've got a gas can in the back, I'll walk to that station we passed a bit ago, and get enough gas to drive us there. You want to wait here, in the car? Say, you could come to Pennsylvania with us, if you like."

"No, I got some place I got to go," Victor said. He flung open the car door and got out quick, before the wind could come in after him. Before, he thought grimly, they could wish him a Merry Christmas, but he was too late. Don said it, and then Ellie, and even little Robbie.

"Same to you," he said back, closing the door, and started off. He cursed himself for a fool all over again. Here he was now, in nothing but a light windbreaker, his food all gone, and nothing but three dollars in his pocket. Talk about your Merry Christmas.

He wasn't sure how far he walked, or how long. He was light headed and he could scarcely feel his feet, lifting and coming down in the snow, when a little girl walked up to him, seeming to come out of nowhere. She was dressed in white, and her face was so pale, she could almost have been conjured up by the snow.

"Mister," she said without preamble, "I'm so cold and hungry, and I got no place to go."

"Oh, hell's bells," he said aloud. He ought to have known, he thought angrily, the way this damned night was going. He yanked the last three dollars out of his pocket and thrust it toward her, but to his surprise, she took a step back from him and did not take it.

"It won't work if you resent giving it," she said. "You have to let it go."

"Won't work? Won't work for what?" There was a buzzing in his head, like a host of wasps was in there. He handed the money to her again, but she only shook her head.

He dropped to his knees in the snow and took hold of her shoulders. She felt thin as a bird.

"You are one strange little girl," he said. "I been giving and giving all night, and you're the first one refused to take."

"You have to share it. Not what we give, but what we share, for the gift without the giver is bare."

He smiled into her face despite everything. There was something about her, a luminescence. She almost seemed to glow in the dark and the falling snow.

"I don't understand what you're saying," he said. He had a vague idea there was something else, earlier this evening, that he hadn't understood either, but he was too tired and cold to think straight.

"If you bless it, we will both share in the blessing."

"Well, then, if that's the way of it," he said wearily. "Take it then, and I surely do bless it, and I bless you."

She did take the money then from his frozen fingers. Hers felt oddly warm when he touched them. She closed her eyes and looked down, and seemed to be praying. He closed his too, and tried to do what she said, tried to let the money go, to bless it.

He thought, out of the blue, of his mother, of an incident when he had been just a boy, he couldn't have been more than eight or nine. His mother had loaded up a basket of food from their cellar to take to an aunt who was doing poorly; mostly, in the winter, they lived on what she had put up in the cellar, and seeing the jars disappear from the shelves, he had said, "Won't we need this food before the winter is out?"

She had given him a stern look, and said, "I never have been and never will be too poor to share what I have. That is the worst kind of poverty, that is the poverty of the spirit."

Yes, she was right, and the little girl, too. He had given what he had, but he hadn't let go of it, he hadn't shared it. He had resented everything that he had given, and his resentment had held on to everything even when it was gone from his possession. He thought back on his coat, and made an effort to bless the warmth that it might give that old man, and he thought of the family huddled in their car, and blessed the food he had given them, and the money; and the little girl...he opened his eyes, but she was gone.

Probably she was somewhere looking for shelter, or more likely, something to eat. He hoped she found it before the night got any worse. The snow seemed to be coming down harder now, although, oddly, he didn't feel anywhere near as cold as he had before. He felt hot, if anything. He undid a couple of buttons, and stumbled to his feet. He was light headed, though. He couldn't think where he was, or where he was headed. No place, really, he supposed. He had no place to go, did he, and nothing to do when he got there?

He began to stagger through the snow, singing softly to himself. "What child is this?"

"Mister?"

He looked, and there was the girl again, right beside him. "Why, I thought you had gone," he said. "Why'd you want to hang around, anyway? You ought to be looking for something to eat. The Seven Eleven is open, I bet, if I knew which way that was."

"Come with me," she said, and took hold of his hand.

He held back, but she tugged at him. "Hurry," she said. "This way."

"Well, that's just a back alley," he said, "There isn't going to be anything down that way."

But there was. They came round the corner, and the night fled before the light that spilled out of the windows ahead of them, and the lamp shining over the door, and the sign that said, Antoinette's.

He stopped in his tracks, gaping in astonishment, and while he stared, the door of the restaurant opened, and there was Antoinette herself framed in it, she looked a lot like Karen Dalvecchio. She saw him and smiled, and waved.

"Hurry, come on in," she called to him.

"Little girl," he started to say, but she had disappeared again, and when he looked down, he saw only his own footprints in the snow.

Why, there she was, in the doorway with Antoinette, and as he stared, the others came out and crowded around them, too—the old man, still in the blue parka, and the family from the car, Don and Ellie, he could see now that she was pregnant, and Robbie, balanced on his crutch.

"Come on," they called to him, and "Supper's ready," and "The fire is warm."

"We're all just waiting for you," Ellie said, "Hurry, now."

He did. He began to run, and then he was flying, and they waved and called, and Antoinette laughed gaily and said, "Welcome, come on in, welcome to Antoinette's."

- - -

*"Welcome to Antoinette's" was first printed in *The Main ARtery*, Volume 1, Issue 5, and reprinted in *Life And Other Passing Moments* (Wildside Press, 2007) and is reprinted here with permission of Victor Banis and the publishers.

People have to talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything really meaningful to say. --
Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*

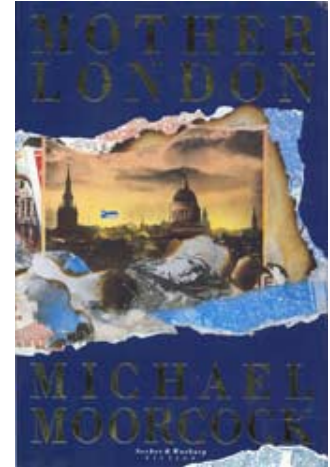
A Child's Christmas in the Blitz

by Michael Moorcock

with images selected by Jim Linwood

Because you said that you were curious about my memories of growing up and celebrating Christmas during the Second World War, I'll tell you. Well, Christmas at that time had a special luminosity, a particular atmosphere which I have never been able to recapture, perhaps because I was born into a world darkened, of necessity, by conflict in which one dull day would be followed by a black, black night sometimes suddenly filled with noise and brilliant explosions.

I remember a tree whose tinsel glowed faintly in the light of a dying fire, standing in one corner of the room where I also slept. Out beyond the blackout curtains, occasionally visible as a momentary glare of yellow light or heard as a screaming drone when some plane spiralled to earth under fire, or the steady thump of the ack-ack, the war in the air pursued its course. I hardly knew why or what was happening. Bombs fell, landscapes changed, and occasionally I was even allowed to watch from a darkened room as the searchlights roamed across clouds and silvery barrage balloons, seeking targets.



I'm sure you feel little nostalgia for those times which are marked for most post-war generations by the war films which followed, whether they were stories of the Resistance or epics like *Von Ryan's Express*, but for me the war years are marked by a sense of domestic warmth and a deep, attractive melancholy which I suspect I am forever attempting to reproduce in my fiction; feelings allied to those that come from what Rose Macaulay describes as 'the Pleasure of Ruins', a romanticism not so much for the vanished splendours of the past as marked by a sense of human aspiration thwarted, of beauty destroyed, of surviving memory, which is the enemy of death.

I might have been able to tell you that Germany was attacking England, but more likely I would have said something about 'dog-fights' and 'us' or 'them'. I was absorbed with my Britain's toy soldiers, miniature hollow-cast models of English Tommies, French poilus and American doughboys locked in conflict with the ultra-masculine Germans, in their pointed helmets, whom I imagined flying the planes that I passed through the beams of my battery-powered searchlights, re-enacting under our steel-strengthened dining room table the conflict which would very much decide my family's fate.

Actually, I always liked the French infantry best, perhaps for the colour of the uniforms, then the English, then the Americans. I must have learned enough not to admire the Germans, who, of course, wore grey, for me never an attractive colour. Even my fleet of tiny battleships seemed dull and though they were distinguished by name and type on the cigarette cards I had inherited from my father's neatly collected sets ('Modern British Warships', 'Our Modern Navy', or 'Our Maritime Heritage') I never could summon much interest in them. The planes at least had brown and green camouflage and could be given thrilling noises as they closed in on their targets.

Of course my army wasn't exactly up to date, any more than our real armies had been in 1939. It consisted chiefly of my father's boyhood collection added to by what had been presented to me at birthdays and Christmas. I had rather more cavalry than was currently in action, a lot of auxiliaries dressed as cowboys or red Indians and rather a preponderance of French zouaves, whose uniforms were considerably more romantic. There were a bunch of rather crudely cast solid metal 1914

machine-gunners. A couple of motorcycle dispatch riders. And a bunch of farm and zoo workers, who were ready, I suppose, as the final line of defence. There was a certain egalitarianism amongst them, I will admit. Sets of British soldiers, usually six to the box, consisted of two running men, two kneeling and firing men, two standing and firing men. More elaborate sets would include perhaps two machine gunners, an officer with a sword, two men lying down and firing. They had identical opposite numbers in the German, American and French armies, in identical poses. The cowboys were often armed only with pistols and the Indians with tomahawks.

Before the war began, there had been a natural tendency for manufacturers, mostly Britain's (though there were some inferior makers who tended to supply the bulk of the cannon fodder), to match both infantry, cavalry and artillery exactly one for one. There were, to be sure, no anti-aircraft gun-crews other than British. They came with each gun or searchlight, specially modelled to operate their machines. They sat in little bucket seats to wind their range-fingers, or stretched their tiny arms to operate firing mechanisms. There was something of a dearth of airmen, too, all of whom were either English or American and far too big to enter the cockpits of the planes I sailed over their heads.

The dull thump of guns was echoed by my own childish imitations: "*Bam! Bam! Kerrrump!*"



The red boxes that the tiny materiel had arrived in became houses, aircraft hangars, barricades. The dark floral carpet was fields and cushions were hills. As the bombs outside whined down, I would crawl into a world bounded on four sides by heavy wire mesh into which had been let a small door. The mattress and pillows were a haven for my other comforts, the soft toys—patchwork rabbits, curly furred dogs, Mickey and Minnie. Even then I was identifying with the Mouse. Not the middle-class, long-trousered Mouse of sanitized 1950s Disneyland, but the original, aggressive, trickster Mouse whose ancestors were Brer Rabbit and Tom Sawyer. That Mouse sported an evil grin and took cunning revenge on his enemies, mostly muscular cats and dogs in baggy pants supported by a single strap.



Christmas 1944. Homemade bunting, red, green, gold, silver, hanging in every room of the house. The candles flickering to life on the tree, wax dripping over the holders. You had to be careful. Many a house was destroyed by its Christmas candles. First a trip to Kennard's the big, grey Portland Stone department store in Croydon. They had made the most of little, as we had done at home. And suddenly I am looking in awe at an intense colour. I can't take my eyes off it. A colour I have never seen before. If it spelled a word, I wasn't aware of it. Besides, I couldn't

read. It is the sign over Santa Claus's grotto. Neon, rescued from some prewar hoard. A gorgeous, unworldly colour. A heavenly colour. I focussed on it as others might have focussed on gold nuggets or streaks of silver in a mine. I was looking at indigo. Glowing, pulsing indigo. Even as I passed under the sign into Santa's grotto, all scarlet and white, with a big green tree festooned with the square fruit of brightly wrapped packages, I could not take my eyes off it. Indigo. Not until I saw *Fantasia*, the following Christmas, would I ever witness such intense colour again. Indigo. And then the enveloping scarlet, soft as my mother's furs, of Santa as I sat on his knee and demanded ponies and—and

something else. What is it, young man? What do you want?

I wanted indigo. I wanted to swallow or be swallowed by that colour. With Mickey Mouse and Santa Clause and a long-legged homemade Teddy Bear indigo will always mean Christmas to me. My birthstone, according to some, is Blue Zircon, Blue Topaz or Lapis Lazuli. Blue for a boy, the blues and birthdays, for a memory more vivid than flame shuddering up from a ruined house, of thick, black smoke coiling across a blue, late summer sky. Blue for mother's eyes. Blue for peace. Infinite indigo.

That Christmas, haunted by the memory of indigo, Mickey Mouse would be the first movie I ever saw. I woke up on Christmas Day, just after dawn, unable to sleep for the excitement. The smoke of heavy coke and what little wood we had left. Distant voices. Busy voices. Savoury smells from the kitchen. My mother was up already and my father was doing something outside. I had been dimly aware of activity. Within me built a rising chord of anticipation. I pushed back the covers. The fire in my room was no more than a glow, a few rubies glittering amongst the pale ashes. I crawled out from under the steel-strengthened table and was getting into my dressing gown and slippers just as the door opened and my mother came in. My mother. Dark eyed, loving beauty. My constant.

"It's a white Christmas," she said. "We're having a white Christmas." It's the first I remember. She went to the big French windows and pulled back the heavy curtains so that I could see into our garden. Mrs. White, our next-door neighbour, came in. She was holding a red-wrapped parcel. She was laughing. Big, heavy flakes were coming down so thick you could hardly see through them. But outside there was a shape. A dim figure moving about on the lawn, under the bare apple trees. Santa? No, it was too late for him. He would have come and gone with his sleigh and his reindeer when it was night, his passage muffled by the already settling snow. Who was it?



My mother laughed. "It's your daddy," she said. "He's gone mad."

My father was out there rolling the snow into huge balls. One for a body, one for a head. He had made a Christmas snowman. As I watched he put pieces of anthracite in for eyes, a stick of dowel for a nose and another for a cigar sticking out of his lopsided mouth. A snowman. What else? I knew what to expect from Christmas. There was no such thing as disappointment. Not then. I watched wide-eyed as my mother got me out of my pyjamas and into my little boiler suit, a miniature of the kind Mr. Churchill wore (though I heard later his were silk). And then she led me into the next room, the sitting room, where the tree rose so tall to the ceiling, topped by a tinsel fairy, the branches covered with crimson balls and little, pale tinkling bells. With red, green and white candles, each in its own little tin holder, clipped to a branch.

But this I had already seen. What was new were the green, red and silver wrapped boxes. The strangely shaped thing lying on the floor beneath them. And in the grate was a fire so lively and bright, sending its light skipping from golden globe to silver bell, so that the whole room seemed full of movement, full of a warmth and a merriment, a completeness which denied everything in the world outside, where grey reality reared up through the thickening snow doing its best to hide the ruins, the anti-aircraft guns, the craters and the dull, dull blackouts, the eye sockets of houses that would never live again. White as icing on a poisoned cake, it grew thicker and thicker while inside my father came stamping in, laughing as he did more rarely these days, his white breath rising around his head like a halo, slapping his gloved hands together, stamping his feet on the thick, wheat-coloured doormat to knock the already melting snow from his clothes, eagerly taking off his overcoat

and hat as he shouted ‘Merry Christmas’ to Mrs. White. “Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!”

My father, smelling of soap and brilliantine and cologne sat down on the floor with me between his legs and helped me unwrap presents as our black and white Welsh collie, Pat, came running in, half-dried by my mother, to sit panting by the fire and watch, half an ear cocked to the radio playing carols and dance music. “There’ll be bluebirds over, the white cliffs of Dover... I’m going to get lit up when the lights come on in London... Silent night, holy night...”



Of course, there was a box of soldiers. Red-coated ones this time, in the formal uniforms of the Scots Guards, in bearskins, marching with their shouldered guns. Not the most useful troops, but welcome nonetheless. A field gun, complete with tiny shells, fired by means of a spring-lever. A Rupert Annual from Mrs. White, with that little bear always running towards some far horizon over perfect downs and welcoming woods, towards some wonderful adventure from which he would always return to the security of Mr. and Mrs. Bear and their beautiful cottage. Some Quality Street chocolates, wrapped in gold, silver and coloured cellophane, a picture of a dashing 18th century soldier and his lady on the box, bought with carefully hoarded ration-coupons, some

bullseyes, bigger than my mouth, all brown and black and white stripes. And then the piece-de-resistance—the mysteriously wrapped monster in red paper and tied with silver string—a scooter! A big, solid, wooden scooter, painted dark green and post-office red. A scooter like no other child I knew had ever owned. A huge, solid machine, with beautifully running rubber-tyred wheels. A scooter I could only run up and down the hall, unable to go out with it until the snow had melted. My father had made it, of course, as he made everything. It was meticulously finished, perfectly painted, aerodynamically designed as he made everything. You could smell the fresh paint on it, mingling with the smell of burning wood and coke from the fire, the cooking smells to which my mother dashed every so often to supervise the lunchtime turkey.

Those are the colours of that first Christmas I remember in detail. Indigo, deep green, scarlet, gold and the blanketing white snow. I’m sure I enjoyed our Christmas lunch and was happy to show off my presents to my uncles and aunts and their American friends from the airfields who began to arrive through the afternoon. There was the smell of tobacco, of beer and whisky, gin and sherry, the loud, happy laughter of my uncles, telling mysterious jokes which made my mother and her sisters squeal with mock outrage, the radio playing Bing Crosby and Carol Gibbons’s Royal Canadians, comic patter and crooning, the upbeat tempo of Harry James and Benny Goodman, of Glenn Miller. Coming in on a wing and a prayer—I’m dreaming of a White Christmas—Jingle-bells—and the carpet and furniture rolled back against the walls so that my mother and father, uncles and aunts could fox-trot until the evening when one of our American guests would start to set up the movie projector and there would be Mickey Mouse again, the first movies I had ever seen, in flickering black and white projected against a slightly crumpled bedsheet. I have never since enjoyed a cartoon as much. The projector and movies were borrowed from the American base. Everyone loved them. Silently Mickey flew planes in amazing patterns, captained a steamboat, serenaded Minnie.

Only the Americans weren’t in civilian clothes. They were glamorous, attractive men whose uniforms were smarter than our own, who produced chewing gum and candy at will from their infinite pockets. They had brought me Captain Marvel comics. Unlike the black and white English comics, these were in full colour. Captain Marvel, with his white hussar’s cloak trimmed with gold, in his red suit with

the yellow flash across his chest, looking exactly like Fred MacMurray whom I would later see in *Double Indemnity*, as powerful and benign an image as Santa, able to fly, to knock the evil scientist Sivana for six, given his powers by someone who actually looked a bit like Santa, the kindly old scientist Shazam. Captain Marvel was part of the Christmas pantheon. I loved Captain Marvel, who seemed pleasantly, even stupidly human, and I hated the rather pious, humourless Superman whom I had never seen, as I had seen Captain Marvel, handing out presents from the Christmas tree.

My family had opened their homes to the American flyers, some of them friends of my RAF uncle who had disappeared while ferrying a spitfire in Rhodesia and was disappointed to be found in the Bush by rescuers. He hadn't wanted to be rescued, he admitted to me many years later, he had enjoyed his African Christmases and had several African wives, extraordinary status in the village, and no chance of being shot at. He was already burned across his face and body, from where his Spitfire had been shot down in flames and he had had to bale out. And his wife, one of my mother's many powerful sisters, he confided, was a bit of a harridan, though she had seemed very friendly, I thought, to our American visitors. He remained the most handsome man I ever knew, the living exemplar of the modestly heroic flying ace.



My father wasn't a combatant. Like most of the other men in my family he was excused military service. Some were too old, or unfit or, as in his case, were doing necessary war work. I grew up in what was essentially a matriarchy. One of the first fictitious characters I ever identified with was Jo March of *Little Women*. Jo March had known how to celebrate Christmas. She's introduced to us discussing the subject. "Christmas isn't really Christmas without presents..." I would later see Judy Garland play her. Or was it my heart-throb June Allyson? Those girls also had an absent father, away fighting for the Union in the American Civil War. Mine, of course, wasn't fighting. I think he was already involved in one of the several affairs he enjoyed as the only good-looking young man at Phillips, the electrical firm where he worked on the radar which was helping us beat the apparently overwhelming Nazi forces. (A couple of Christmas later, his presents to me consisted of sheets of linen taken from his drawing offices, a box of pencils and a ruler. Looking back, I can assume he had missed the shops. It was, after all, on a Christmas Day that he had told my mother he was spending the holiday with his mistress; that he was leaving her).

I would never see my father on Christmas Day again.

I have to admit I mostly remember my father in terms of the Christmas presents he gave me—his own collection of cigarette cards, his on toy soldiers, his beautiful, multicoloured marbles, his watercolour box, the tricycle and the full size Norton motorbike frame and untired wheels which he told me he was working on for me. He had also given me a Hornby clockwork train set which he took back in order to trade it for the bike frame. I remember one sharp December afternoon standing beside him in his workshop at the end of our garden, near the underground shelter we hardly ever used.

"This is going to be yours," he assured me, as I held the oilcan for him. "You can have it for Christmas when you're sixteen." My birthday was a week before Jesus's, I knew. But I also understood his promise to be an abstraction. I knew the bike was really his and that, even if I was old enough to ride it at that time so far, far into the distant future, I probably wouldn't. He hadn't been able to resist it. "Your father loved bikes more than he loved us," my mother would tell me.

Even dressed as Santa, my father would reveal himself by his neatly pressed flannels, his fastidiously

clipped fingernails. In spite of my uncle, the RAF hero, my father was the embodiment of elegant masculinity for me from his neatly cut fair hair to his smartly polished brogues.

At some point in time between Christmas and New Year's, I got the train back again. I don't remember what happened to the Norton. A busy trade would often occur between the children of the neighbourhood. Some time after Boxing Day, when I swapped my tricycle with a neighbour's child for a different clockwork Hornby locomotive, my mother had stepped in and stopped the deal. After the train set was returned, I never saw the Norton again. It disappeared with the melting snow. I later wondered if this was one of the issues which had led to his leaving us on Christmas Day 1946. I had little affection for him at that time. I felt no pain at his departure, probably because he lacked the nerve to tell me he was leaving. Besides, all boys of my age had absent fathers. Many of them, like me, would grow up in mother-run homes.

But that first Christmas I remember, the bombs grew infrequent. The decorations were still up when my mother and I mounted the electric tram, whose brass rails sliced through the remains of the slushy snow, to go up to the centre of the city, to visit my Uncle Jack at 10 Downing Street. He hadn't been able to spend Christmas with us, so we went to lunch with him and my Aunt Ivy, a rather pious Christians who didn't believe in too much pleasure. Uncle Jack had been on duty. He worked for Churchill. "Happy New Year, my boy!" beamed the old warrior-drunk, puffing avuncularly on his vast cigar and smelling strongly of tobacco and brandy. I think he would have offered me a glass of brandy if my mother hadn't been with me. He did, however, give me the benefit of his wisdom that afternoon. "Never be tempted to vote Liberal," he said.



After tea with my uncle we went to Oxford Street and Regent Street, where the big toy shop was and where I could spend the money I had been given for birthday and Christmas. My Uncle Jack always gave me a ten shilling note. With this and my other cash I could replenish my miniature armies. This was the equivalent of an FDR loan to the British military. My mother couldn't afford to buy me more than a box at a time, mostly restricted to infantry, though she might add the occasional tank. But with my Christmas wealth I could add to my cavalry, to my Indians and my cowboys, perhaps to my anti-aircraft batteries.

Then, as we left Hamley's or Gamages or one of the other emporia supplying my reinforcements, my heart would leap with pleasure at the sound of the aircraft siren, warning us of an attack. I knew what this meant. One of the rarest of pleasures. To my enormous delight, we were forced to descend into the underground, to the depths of the Central Line, and join our fellow Londoners, some of whom lived there almost permanently. It would mean I could sleep on a platform with all the other people who would rather risk being buried alive or drowned than remain overhead in the dangerous, blacked out streets. I used to hope for a bombing raid so that we could enjoy the adventure, the subterranean camaraderie and what didn't seem like a false security.

Back at home, the Christmas holidays were still in force. My father disappeared again. From Boxing Day to the first full week in January we were free not only to play with our new planes, Roy Rogers cap pistols or other treasures, we were let out, wrapped tightly in little coats and scarves and mittens, to explore the surrounding destruction, a wonderland. There was only one condition. If we heard an

air-raid siren, we were to come straight home. As my father's snowman melted into the back garden, I followed older friends over ruins which became defensives, Nevada hills, the Sheriff of Nottingham's castle. We climbed through the piled snow-topped rubble filling doorways, found staircases still intact, mounted them with practised balance as they swayed beneath our feet, reaching the second storey where whole rooms remained, sliced as if with a knife, everything in perfect condition—bathrooms, bedrooms, store-rooms—and if we were lucky we found unlooted booty, including toys, saucepans, kettles and books. Christmas made us greedy for more and more wealth.

We became adept as high-wire artists at crossing the beams, all that remained of destroyed floors and roofs, glancing insouciantly down at the broken rooms some of which were still decorated for Christmas, with trees and tinsel. But these did not interest us. We learned to unroll lead from roofs and gutters, which the older kids hoarded or sold to scrap metal dealers. The dealers made us put the lead into shopping bags or baskets so that our trade went unnoted. Churches were by far the richest source of lead, especially those which had stained glass windows. The coloured glass was sometimes picked up before Christmas to make decorations. But we searched constantly for the Holy Grail of any boy's collection—a piece of shrapnel which was more than tortured metal twisted like barley sugar sticks, but recognisable as part of a plane. What we longed to find were whole pilots, whose goggles and parachutes, flying suits, helmets and perhaps even pistols we could scavenge.



We grew up instinctive scavengers. Vulture chicks hunting for choice tidbits, for treasures we could carry home and show off to our parents and friends. We worked with busy efficiency and concentration, desperate to get the most we could before the Christmas holidays were over.

The snow never lasted for long in the city. For a while it gave a pristine, pseudo-virginity to our wrecked landscapes. As it melted, the old reminders of our situation, all the symbols of destruction, began to re-emerge. And, as school loomed, we became all the more frantic. How we longed for an unexploded anti-aircraft shell or a bomb or other ammunition to complete our Christmas collections. Shell cases were common currency and generally disdained. We had learned how to clamp the live shells and then set off the firing pins by putting a nail against them and striking them with a hammer. We tried to dig out the graphite, the powder, to make our own guns. Nobody seemed to think there was anything unwholesome in our warlike pursuits. Or perhaps their imaginations didn't stretch to how we were entertaining ourselves. Presumably, they had no idea how long the war would last. We might need those skills when we were adults.

I don't remember too many dogfights around Christmas, however. I somehow had the impression that the Nazis and the Allies broke for Christmas, much as we did for school. But I had seen some of the fiercest airfighting. For years I thought that watching the Battle of Britain through the windows of our house as the Spitfires and Messerschmitts wheeled and flared in a darkness speared by shafts of yellow light, had been nothing but a false memory, something inspired by watching movies. I put this to my mother a few years ago. "Oh, no," she said, "you saw the Battle of Britain. We were between three airfields, Biggin Hill, Croydon and another one whose name I forget. I used to hold you up to the window to watch the dogfights. They were amazing. And they kept you quiet when you were teething or whatever." Perhaps that's why I've never sought the distraction of war movies. The real thing was so much more exciting. And, in an almost mythical fight, we actually won command of the

skies.

During those quiet Christmas times, when it seemed Hitler's Luftwaffe was permanently beaten, we enjoyed incredible freedom which would be unknown to our own children. In our little grey suits of flannel windjammers and shorts, shirts and jerseys, twice-tied black Oxfords, ties askew and hair sticking up like the wire which jutted dangerously from the blasted remnants of reinforced concrete, we were forever dusty.



That this was the dust of the doomed and the dead never occurred to us. That bodies might still lie undiscovered in those cellars or that the rust on exposed pipes might be blood was never mentioned by our elders and therefore never considered by us. We were told it was dangerous to climb the ruined houses, but we knew anyone could learn that skill. We were told to watch for 'bad men' lurking in the wreckage or in the bushes and copses of the nearby Common and golf-links, so we kept our distance from adults. But the rest of the world was ours as it never would be again. The world was unbordered. All its walls had been smashed down. We came upon large, abandoned houses with stables and outhouses. We ranged through glass-roofed conservatories. We found tools and glue in the workshops. We learned to walk on roofs. The movie *Hope and Glory* catches some of this atmosphere but seemed bland to me compared to the richness of the reality.

When the flying bombs came back the next Christmas we returned to the shelters, the reinforced tables, the dugouts. My grandmother was Jewish, my father unmistakably Anglo-Saxon. She would sit across from him in the big communal shelter, which nobody really trusted. She would hug her thermos flask and her packet of sandwiches as we heard the drone of the V1s overhead, then the sudden silence as their engines cut out, then the shriek of their passage earthwards as they hit Dahlia Gardens and Northborough Road and Mitcham Lane and all the other suburban streets laid out by planners in the twenties, following the course of the railways to build bijou Tudor-style mansions for the upwardly mobile professional classes represented by my father and mother, the first of their families not to live by trade or the work of their hands.

My grandmother knew what would happen to her and presumably her children and grandchildren if the Nazis won. Facing my father in the cramped shelter stinking of sweat and urine she would rock back and forth as if in prayer as we listened to the dull drone of the V1 engines. She had a conceit which she was too intelligent a woman to believe, but she knew it annoyed my father. Her conceit was that if the Germans won the war, then all the Jews would be rounded up, put in concentration camps and killed. But if the English won the war, she insisted, then all the Anglo-Saxons would be rounded up, put in concentration camps and killed.

So she would sit rocking, her finger wagging, grinning into my father's infuriated face. "Better hope the Germans win, Arthur," she would say. "Better hope the Germans win."



It seemed the rockets, when they came, would never stop. British pilots had discovered ways of flying close to the V1s, which were essentially drone aircraft, and nudging them out of the way, but tracing the course of the V2s was almost impossible. And it seemed we were getting more than our fair share of both.

We didn't know at the time that Churchill was deliberately misdirecting those flying bombs, that his departments would report strikes on crucial factories and aeroplane fields when actually all they were hitting were the civilians of South London. As a result of this inspired misdirection, South London received by far the greatest number of strikes. One day the house across the road was a living entity, containing people you knew, who lived much as you did, who tended little rose gardens and wisteria plants and kept their paintwork up to scratch; the next day it would be something else entirely. Something ruined and already in the process of being forgotten. Somewhere to explore, to loot, to roll the lead from. Mrs. Archer and the little Archer girls, whom I still miss and dream about—removed. Their blonde pageboy haircuts and pleated grey skirts, their crisp white blouses and school hats are the originals of images I continue to find attractive. But they had gone before I noticed the intimations of sex. That would come a couple of years later when the war was over and we had moved to a timber yard. The smell of sawdust is almost as erotic for me as the smell of garlic or Mitsouku. Mr. and Mrs. Wall, their pebble-dashed miniature chateau a heap of rubble scarcely worth sifting through, forgotten. 'Auntie' Pat, who had run the corner newsagents and lent me all those wonderful books from her stock—Scott, Stevenson, Ballantine—gone one bright Sunday morning as she laid out the papers ready for delivery.

With my friends, and perhaps with my adult family, I learned never to mourn. To move on. To keep going. To act as if your number was never going to come up. Yet in all other respects we were far from stoical. We always knew, for instance, that we were luckier than the Russians, for instance. 'Mustn't grumble' became a familiar refrain. 'How are you?' / 'Mustn't grumble.' -- "Are your in-laws still living with you?" / "Yes. Mustn't grumble..." It would be a refrain that outlasted the war and allowed restaurateurs, in particular, to get away with horror.

I was sent to infant school in Robin Hood Road, part of the estate planned in that corrupted arts and crafts style which is so characteristic of early 20th century London, a style it shares on a larger scale with Hollywood, where I always feel immediately at home. I was at school long enough to know what boredom meant, because I could already read and write. The headmistress said she would have to have a word with my mother, because I could not concentrate on the primers. I had in fact ruined one by putting it, open, on my brilliantined little head. When she asked what I read at home I said Edgar Rice Burroughs and George Bernard Shaw, which was true. For years I believed that to be taken seriously as a writer one had to have three names.

The headmistress seemed to get even angrier at my answer but she never got to have that word. Over the weekend a V2 dropped out of a pale and silent sky and eliminated the school. I was free. Hitler had saved me. The school was a leadmine and, what was more, not even the headmistress had died. Within a day, little that was valuable remained of its site.

The V2s were worse than anything we had suffered. Morale, which had remained almost hysterically high during the Blitz, began to fray. Hitler knew the power of those massive rockets which could come out of nowhere and kill you before you had time to say a word. They were a cruel weapon. Today, when I hear about the bombardments of Baghdad or other cities, I know how cruel those weapons are. No time to compose yourself for death. No time to say 'I love you' or 'Look after yourself' and no time to find the inadequate safety of those shelters. The only warning you ever had was a few seconds when the yelling tube of explosives was streaking down on your head.



My imagination, however, was informed by those early years, just as my life felt dull after the war's end. I had become used to metamorphosis, of almost constantly changing landscapes, of being able to see for miles. I had become used to the adrenaline rush of the bombing raids and the exploration of tottering ruins, of squeezing up through chimneys, of clambering walls whose only handholds were pits in the brick.

On VE Day, as if he had waited for Hitler to be defeated, my father announced that he was in love with the woman who would remain his companion for the rest of his life.



“I couldn't have loved him much,” my mother said, “because I didn't really mind. My pride was hurt, of course, but I had what I wanted. I had you.” That was how she saw it. She never questioned her own emotions, she never wondered if her sexuality was repressed. She always vehemently defended her own father, whom some thought had ‘interfered’ with her and had been thus thrown out of the house by her mother. She was visibly happy throughout my childhood and would only grow miserable when the time came for me to leave home. She had what she wanted. Her brother and sister-in-law, who had come to live in our house when their own was blitzed, took advantage of my father's leaving. In those days it was not easy for a single woman with a child to rent such a house for herself. So they took over the rent and soon she had left. She went to find a job and in doing so changed my life all the more for the better. Her job was in a timber-yard as a bookkeeper.

Earlier, when my father had gone for good, I found a pair of those brown brogues of his and put my feet into them, feeling as masculine as I ever had, then I went outside in my Wellington boots and joined the people jumping over the fire on which effigies of Hitler and Goering burned in the half-hearted rain. I loved those shoes. I loved the smell of the polish. I found the Cherry Blossom ‘Oxblood’ boot cleaner and I shone them up as proudly as he ever had. I looked forward to the day when they would fit. I suppose Oedipus could not have enjoyed greater satisfaction than I had with those captured shoes.

But my mother must have discovered them, no doubt, because she presented them to him on the first birthday I had after the Blitz when he came to take me off to the toyshop on the back of his BSA. He had forgotten to get me Christmas or birthday presents, of course. Happily my nativity was only a week before the Saviour's, so he could get me both sets of presents at the same time.

I climbed onto his pillion. He gunned the engine. He kicked up the stand. There was a stink of ‘mixture’ as the engine fired. He told me to hold on tight to the belt of his leather jacket and then we were off, roaring through the darkening December streets to the big, usually unattainable toyshop in Streatham, close to the ice-rink, which was usually far too expensive for me, even when I could get there. I don't think he ever felt so guilty again, because he let me have the pick of the store. I bought infantry. I bought imperial Indian cavalry. I bought cowboys and Indians. I bought a ranch house. I bought long-range guns and I bought light cannon. I bought another searchlight, more glorious, more powerful than any I had ever owned before. I bought planes and battleships. And I bought Mickey and Minnie Mouse, who shared my initials and for whom I had developed a profound affection.

We came back with his saddle bags loaded with treasure. My mother insisted that much of it be wrapped for Christmas Day, even though I knew what most of it was. I think it was then that she gave him the shoes. I caught a whiff of Cherry Blossom as she handed him a bag.

The yard was in the grounds of a ruined mansion. There was a small two-room cottage made of corrugated iron, heated by an old-fashioned cooking range. We moved into that. By the winter of 1947 we were still there. I remember the snow being so deep that the path cleared to the outside toilet was actually higher than my head. We made the trip to the toilet as rarely as possible. I still remember the chamber pots and the smell of them.

By the time the war ended, Britain was massively in debt to America, who had only loaned her the money to fight a war they had advised her against pursuing. She was, like the rest of the European powers, in the process of losing her empire. Her returning soldiers, determined to overturn the old order, which they blamed for their troubles, voted in vast numbers for the Labour government and nationalisation of major industries, the implementation of our National Health Service and a whole programme of reform which it would take Margaret Thatcher to dismantle some thirty years later. We could not afford immediate rebuilding and so London remained in ruins far longer than Germany, by then benefitting from the Marshall plan.

When I was fifteen I left school, determined to become a journalist (I had not yet set my sights on being a novelist) and worked for a shipping company in the city. From there I would go down to the countless miles of docks, filled with ships, with loading cranes and warehouses for as far as the eye could see. My way back would take me through a devastated landscape only slowly recovering from the intensity of the Blitz. I could walk from the river into the depths of the city using as my points of reference the same buildings used by my 18th century ancestors. It was possible to stand outside the old Billingsgate fish market, whose porters carried up to fifteen baskets of fish on their heads and were famous for their foul language, and look over to the Customs House. As you climbed the hill up towards St. Paul's, you could see the Royal Mint, the Monument (to the Great Fire of London) and all the other buildings which had miraculously survived the Blitz while more recent structures, from the 19th century, had been totally blasted into rubble. On the artificial hills, like Celtic burial mounds, grew Rosebay Willow Herb, imported from the slopes of Vesuvius by 19th century botanists, escaped from Oxford nurseries and now growing wherever there was the ash it loved. You can still see it, blossoming beside the railway tracks which originally carried it from Oxford to London.



You didn't need to make an effort of the imagination to feel the psychogeography of the place. I have often wondered if the Frenchman who created psychogeography and the wonderful philosophy of *dérive*, Guy Dubord, had witnessed what I had witnessed in London. The very bones of the city, all her history, from Roman times to the present, were exposed and clearly visible. Here was Defoe's city

and Johnson's city and Smollett's city, while the city of Dickens, who had turned London into a character, a monstrous entity, was in ruins. Where great warehouses had loomed over black water, now there were green hillocks where, at weekends, Londoners enjoyed their picnics. Where diseased warrens of slums had existed, an indictment to all civilised beings, Hitler's incendiaries had allowed the new socialist government to build attractive estates, designed by idealistic architects, not all of whom, as they later admitted, were misguided followers of Le Corbusier. Some built curving terraces, echoing the half-timbered lines of Tudor streets though without the chi-chi ersatz nostalgia which had characterised South London. Others erected monuments to the people, intended to bring sunlight and sanitation to all.

Even at their most brutal, the new estates were an improvement on the rat-runs thrown up in the 19th century to house the wage-slaves servicing Britain's imperial commerce. And in those noir-ish times, when every young man desired nothing much more than a trenchcoat and a battered fedora, when Graham Greene, John Loder and the bitter-sweet romantics of the London literary scene came into their own. They were hard times. Poor times. It always seemed to be raining. Even in the Ealing comedies you felt that the rain had only stopped for about ninety minutes and would continue again the moment *Hue and Cry* and *Passport to Pimlico* began to roll their credits. Disenchanted men, old before their time, smoked moody cigarettes and lounged unhappily on the Thames embankment, brooding on lost love and forgotten ideals. Colour seemed almost obscene, an outrage. The late forties and the fifties were black and white years of *Odd Man Out* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*. All my girlfriends wore black and thought a lot about suicide. The novelists and playwrights, the so-called Angry Young Men, people like Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, expressed themselves with bitter laughter. They were still old enough to have swallowed the imperial myth which had betrayed them. By my generation, we had never accepted such myths in the first place and had no particular argument with our fathers, no inclination to shake our fists and yell 'Damn you, England!'. And the poets—Betjeman, Larkin and the rest—wallowed in nostalgia, in melancholy, equally disenchanted, seeking the certainties of their boyhood. Larkin in particular could not bear the idea of being rescued from the black and white world and when it threatened to explode into colour, as it did in the sixties, going from monochrome to Technicolour like Dorothy's transportation from Kansas to Oz, he resisted, he grumbled and he sought out the pockets of gloom which even today can be found in the remoter parts of the British provinces.

The Angries were probably not the only ones to yearn for the camaraderie of hopelessness. Many missed the years of anxiety and austerity. For my own part I was delighted to escape the grey years, when one's only choice of trousers was grey flannel or green corduroy. I embraced the sixties. From 1963 to 1976 was my (rough) decade. I knew we had discovered ourselves in a golden age and that it would not last. I became determined to enjoy that age while it did continue.

The metamorphosis of Blitzed London became the Chaotic landscapes of Elric the Albino. As in need of his soul-drinking sword as Chet Baker was in need of his junk, he witnessed the death of his Empire, even conspired in it. The adrenaline rushes of aerial bombardment and imminent death informed the Jerry Cornelius stories where London's ruins were recreated and disaster had a celebratory face. And the Holocaust became the background for the black comedies of my Colonel Pyat books. We tried to create a new literature which expressed our own experience—Ballard of his years in the Japanese civilian camp, Aldiss of the terrors of being a boy-soldier in Malaya—all the great writers who contributed to my journal *New Worlds* were rejecting modernism not from any academic attempt to discover novelty but in order to find forms which actually described what they had witnessed, what they had felt. By 1945, Proust and Joyce and even Eliot felt as if they belonged to the 19th century, even if they were indeed that century's greatest products. By 1945, we knew what had happened in Auschwitz and Dachau. We did not mourn the passing of liberal humanism or indeed of our humanity. We sought new ways of expressing them. We found humour in the H-Bomb,

we made jokes about Vietnam, we sought our models not in the great moderns like Mann or Faulkner, but in earlier centuries, in the work of Grimmelshausen, Smollett, even Balzac. I myself unearthed a hero in George Meredith, marginalised by the modernist literary critics because he looked back to the 18th century for his models and in so doing spoke to those of us who found ourselves at last in the 21st.

All this experience, all this fiction, all this philosophy had its origins in what for me were the Blitz years, my years of childhood, when I was as unaware of any impending doom as a new-born lamb in a field knows nothing of the slaughterhouse. Circumstances made me something of an autodidact, unable to settle at any school for very long, expelled from a couple. The schools were always glad to see me go. I learned from reading and not knowing what was respectable literature and what was not. I read everything. I became an enthusiast for the blues, in common with many of my generations, and learned some of Woody Guthrie's licks from Jack Elliot. I met Big Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Their music was the music of hard times and though I don't pretend a white Londoner shared the same experience as that of a black Clarksdale share-cropper, that music did find an echo in my soul so that I was also privileged to enjoy the enthusiasms and pleasures of Rock and Roll from its earliest years. I am decidedly a child of my times. And I did inherit some enthusiasms from my father, though we saw so little of each other. It was my father, after all, who left behind the Edgar Rice Burroughs and George Bernard Shaw books, which were amongst the first I read. And he left some jazz records which ultimately led me to the blues. He then did me a great favour by leaving me to the love of my egalitarian mother and the man who fell in love with her (though I suspect never shared her bed) whose name was Jellinek.

Ernst Jellinek had helped Jews escape from Germany and Austria, going in and out of those countries to save as many as he could. Two of my friends, she a Jewish poet, he a Jamaican sculptor, had been trapped in France when the Germans arrived and, I learned from them, it had been the man who had become my unofficial guardian, Ernst Jellinek, who had helped them get across the Pyrenees and from there eventually into Portugal and back to England. If my father had been faithful, I would never have had such a model of quiet, philosophical heroism as Ernst Jellinek. I would never have understood that there is nothing wrong with sticking to one's ideals, to following one's altruistic instincts while remaining, in his case, a practical business man. I have never ceased to be grateful to my father for finding love outside the home....

I don't remember my parents ever quarrelling, though I think I remember a few intense, whispered exchanges. One day when I opened the newspaper I found a piece cut out of it. I believe my mother must have done that. Probably a report of the separation proceedings. People avoided divorce in those days, because it was so hard to obtain.

When I was eighteen, my father came to see me on my birthday, as usual. He gave me an LP record, of T-Bone Walker and we went out for a Christmas drink. Back in his car, he cleared his throat with some embarrassment and told me that he had taken out an endowment policy for me, to help with my education or perhaps marriage when I was 21. I told him that I was earning good money (I was already a successful journalist) and to keep it for himself. Without another word, that's exactly what he did. My own children's birthdays he was always a bit hazy about and it never occurred to him to transfer the policy for their benefit. He remained an emotionally lazy, rather likeable man, who tended to change jobs whenever he was promoted to management, because he could not take the responsibility. But he was an obsessive record keeper.

My father and mother never divorced. It would have involved too much trauma in those days. My father set up home with his mistress and in time she changed her name to his by deed poll. Many years later, when both were in their seventies, my father decided to apply for a divorce. He was afraid

of my mother. The first I heard of it was when my mother phoned me, sobbing, to ask if I had spoken to my father recently. Although I saw more of him than she knew, I had not, as it happened, seen him for a while.

“What’s the trouble, mum ?”

“He wants a divorce,” she said. “I got the papers from his solicitor this morning. Why would he want a divorce after all this time?”

Not long afterwards came the expected call from my father. “Um—does your mother live in Gratwicke Road ?”

He had discovered what I had known for over a decade, that by chance they were living about quarter of a mile apart in the same seaside town of Worthing. I had often wondered what would happen if they met. His solicitor, it emerged, was at the bottom of her road. And he was terrified.

They were both so emotionally overwrought by this event that I found myself acting as the mediator in my own elderly parents’ divorce, calming both of them down, assuring that neither had sinister or greedy motives.

“If he thinks he’s not going to give me that two pounds a week, he’ll have to fight me for it,” she declared. She had settled, out of pride, for the minimum support which he had always sent late, but never missed a payment.

And so the knot was severed at last. This time I did not receive a visit to the toyshop, but he did offer to give me the family bible. I said that he should hang on to it. That I would have it when he died. I had it expensively rebound for him as a Christmas present.

As it happened, he gave the bible to my cousin, forgetting that he had promised it to me. When he died, I found photographs of all my family except my mother and myself and discovered that his father had remembered everyone in the neighbourhood in his will, but not me. I had been ‘vanished’. My mother and I had been an embarrassment, evidence that he and his mistress had been living a lie. I also found every driving license he had ever owned and, neatly stored in cardboard boxes, the stub of every postal order he had ever bought to send to the court for my mother’s and my support. I also discovered that in his youth he had been a passable artist and while I had always assumed that I got my own taste for the arts from the Jewish side of the family, I also discovered, thanks to another friend, that my great-great-great aunt Rachel Moorcock had been a passable poet who had published a book of memoirs and a book of poems in her lifetime.

Outside, the all-clear sirens begin to blast through the early morning light. It’s Christmas Day. I get up and find that my mother is already building a fire in the grate. She kisses me and wishes me a Merry Christmas. There are all my presents arranged around the bushy little tree with the candles burning on it.

“Which one shall I open first?” I ask her.

She smiles and shakes her head. “You choose.”

I know what I want. The large box. I rip the paper off it and see the familiar maroon red beneath. Slowly I take the top from the box and stare down at the camouflage green of the long-barrelled anti-aircraft gun. I remove it from the box and begin to set it up, settling it on its stand. Soon it is pointing

menacingly towards the ceiling.

Once again, Londoners will be able to rest easily in their beds tonight.

Copyright © 2007 by Michael Moorcock. All rights reserved

I'm paranoid as an act of good citizenship, concerned about what the powerful people are up to. I suspect them of making money any way they can. It intrigues me that people want to be rich, and I try to imagine what they do when they are rich.

--Kurt Vonnegut, 1963

Steve Stiles Portfolio Preview

MAINSTREAM III



KRATOPHANY

