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OF THE CENTURY BY *THE INDEPENDENT*

the wasp factory



Iain Banks

author of *a song of stone*

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A N O V E L

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Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
New York London Toronto Sydney

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About Iain Banks



1: The Sacrifice Poles

I HAD BEEN making the rounds of the Sacrifice Poles the day we heard my brother had escaped. I already knew something was going to happen; the Factory told me.

At the north end of the island, near the tumbled remains of the slip where the handle of the rusty winch still creaks in an easterly wind, I had two Poles on the far face of the last dune. One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice. I was just sticking one of the mouse heads back on when the birds went up into the evening air, kaw-calling and screaming, wheeling over the path through the dunes where it went near their nests. I made sure the head was secure, then clambered to the top of the dune to watch with my binoculars.

Diggs, the policeman from the town, was coming down the path on his bike, pedalling hard, his head down as the wheels sank part way into the sandy surface. He got off the bike at the bridge and left it propped against the suspension cables, then walked to the middle of the swaying bridge, where the gate is. I could see him press the button on the phone. He stood for a while, looking round about at the quiet dunes and the settling birds. He didn't see me, because I was too well hidden. Then my father must have answered the buzzer in the house because Diggs stooped slightly and talked into the grille beside the button, and then pushed the gate open and walked over the bridge, on to the island and down the path towards the house. When he disappeared behind the dunes I sat for a while, scratching my crotch as the wind played with my hair and the birds returned to their nests.

I took my catapult from my belt, selected a half-inch steelie, sighted carefully, then sent the big ball-bearing arcing out over the river, the telephone poles and the little suspension bridge to the mainland. The shot hit the 'Keep Out - Private Property' sign with a thud I could just hear, and I smiled. It was a good omen. The Factory hadn't been specific (it rarely is), but I had the feeling that whatever it was warning me about was important, and I also suspected it would be bad, but I had been wise enough to take the hint and check my Poles, and now I knew my aim was still good; things were still with me.

I decided not to go straight back to the house. Father didn't like me to be there when Diggs came anyway, I still had a couple of Poles to check before the sun went down. I jumped and slid down the slope of the dune into its shadow, then turned at the bottom to look back up at those small heads and bodies as they watched over the northern approaches to the island. They looked fine, those husks on their gnarled branches. Black ribbons tied to the wooden limbs blew softly in the breeze, waving at me. I decided nothing would be too bad and that tomorrow I would ask the Factory for more information. If I was lucky, my father might tell me

something and, if I was luckier still, it might even be the truth.

• • •

I left the sack of heads and bodies in the Bunker just as the light was going completely and the stars were starting to come out. The birds had told me Diggs had left a few minutes earlier, so I ran back the quick way to the house, where the lights all burned as usual. My father met me in the kitchen.

‘Diggs was just here. I suppose you know.’

He put the stub of the fat cigar he had been smoking under the cold tap, turned the water on for a second while the brown stump sizzled and died, then threw the sodden remnant in the bin. I put my things down on the big table and sat down, shrugging. My father turned up the ring on the cooker under the soup-pan, looking beneath the lid into the warming mixture and then turning back to look at me.

There was a layer of grey-blue smoke in the room at about shoulder level, and a big wave in it, probably produced by me as I came in through the double doors of the back porch. The wave rose slowly between me and my father while my father stared at me. I fidgeted, then looked down, toying with the wrist-rest of the black catapult. It crossed my mind that my father looked worried, but he was good at acting and perhaps that was just what I wanted him to think, so deep down I remained unconvinced.

‘I suppose I’d better tell you,’ he said, then turned away again, taking up a wooden spoon and stirring the soup. I waited. ‘It’s Eric.’

Then I knew what had happened. He didn’t have to tell me the rest. I suppose I could have thought from the little he’d said up until then that my half-brother was dead, or ill, or that something had happened *to* him, but I knew then it was something Eric had done, and there was only one thing he could have done which would make my father look worried. He had escaped. I didn’t say anything, though.

‘Eric has escaped from the hospital. That was what Diggs came to tell us. They think he might head back here. Take those things off the table; I’ve told you before.’ He sipped the soup, his back still turned. I waited until he started to turn round, then took the catapult, binoculars and spade off the table. In the same flat tone my father went on; ‘Well, I don’t suppose he’ll get this far. They’ll probably pick him up in a day or two. I just thought I’d tell you. In case anybody else hears and says anything. Get out a plate.’

I went to the cupboard and took out a plate, then sat down again, one leg crossed underneath me. My father went back to stirring the soup, which I could smell now above the cigar smoke. I could feel excitement in my stomach – a rising, tingling rush. So Eric was coming back home again; that was good-bad. I knew he’d make it. I didn’t even think of asking the Factory about it; he’d be here. I wondered how long it would take him, and whether Diggs would now have to go shouting through the town, warning that the mad boy who *set fire to do* was on the loose again; lock up your hounds!

My father ladled some soup into my plate. I blew on it. I thought of the Sacrifice Poles. They were my early warning system and deterrent rolled into one; infected, potent things which looked out from the island, warding off. Those totems were my warning shot; anybody who set foot on the island after seeing them should know what to expect. But it looked like, instead of being a clenched and threatening fist, they would present a welcoming, open hand. For Eric.

‘I see you washed your hands again,’ my father said as I sipped the hot soup. He was being sarcastic. He took the bottle of whisky from the dresser and poured himself a drink. The other glass, which I guessed had been the constable’s, he put in the sink. He sat down at the far end of the table.

My father is tall and slim, though slightly stooped. He has a delicate face, like a woman’s, and his eyes are dark. He limps now, and has done ever since I can remember. His left leg is almost totally stiff, and he usually takes a stick with him when he leaves the house. Some days, when it’s damp, he has to use the stick inside, too, and I can hear him clacking about the uncarpeted rooms and corridors of the house; a hollow noise, going from

place to place. Only here in the kitchen is the stick quieted; the flagstones silence it.

~~That stick is the symbol of the Factory's security. My father's leg, locked solid, has given me my sanctuary~~ up in the warm space of the big loft, right at the top of the house where the junk and the rubbish are, where the dust moves and the sunlight slants and the Factory sits – silent, living and still.

My father can't climb up the narrow ladder from the top floor; and, even if he could, I know he wouldn't be able to negotiate the twist you have to make to get from the top of the ladder, round the brickwork of the chimney flues, and into the loft proper.

So the place is mine.

I suppose my father is about forty-five now, though sometimes I think he looks a lot older, and occasionally I think he might be a little younger. He won't tell me his real age, so forty-five is my estimate, judging by his looks.

'What height is this table?' he said suddenly, just as I was about to go to the breadbin for a slice to wipe my plate with. I turned round and looked at him, wondering why he was bothering with such an easy question.

'Thirty inches,' I told him, and took a crust from the bin.

'Wrong,' he said with an eager grin. 'Two foot six.'

I shook my head at him, scowling, and wiped the brown rim of soup from the inside of my plate. There was a time when I was genuinely afraid of these idiotic questions, but now, apart from the fact that I must know the height, length, breadth, area and volume of just about every part of the house and everything in it, I can see my father's obsession for what it is. It gets embarrassing at times when there are guests in the house, even if they are family and ought to know what to expect. They'll be sitting there, probably in the lounge, wondering whether Father's going to feed them anything or just give an impromptu lecture on cancer of the colon or tapeworm when he'll sidle up to somebody, look round to make sure everybody's watching, then in a conspiratorial stage whisper say: 'See that door over there? It's eighty-five inches, corner to corner.' Then he'll wink and walk off or slide over on his seat, looking nonchalant.

Ever since I can remember there have been little stickers of white paper all over the house with neat black biro writing on them. Attached to the legs of chairs, the edges of rugs, the bottoms of jugs, the aerials of radios, the doors of drawers, the headboards of beds, the screens of televisions, the handles of pots and pans, they give the appropriate measurement for the part of the object they're stuck to. There are even ones in pencil stuck to the leaves of plants. When I was a child I once went round the house tearing all the stickers off; I was belted and sent to my room for two days. Later my father decided it would be useful and character-forming for me to know all the measurements as well as he did, so I had to sit for hours with the Measurement Book (a huge loose-leaf thing with all the information on the little stickers carefully recorded according to room and category of object) or go round the house with a jotter, making my own notes. This was all in addition to the usual lessons my father gave me on mathematics and history and so on. It didn't leave much time for going out to play, and I resented it a great deal. I was having a War at the time – the Mussels against the Dead Flies I think it was – and while I was in the library poring over the book and trying to keep my eyes open, soaking up all those damn silly Imperial measurements, the wind would be blowing my fly armies over half the island and the sea would find and sink the mussel shells in their high pools and then cover them with sand. Luckily my father grew tired of the grand scheme and contented himself with firing the odd surprise question at me concerning the capacity of the umbrella-stand in pints or the total area in fractions of an acre of all the curtains in the house actually hung up at the time.

'I'm not answering these questions any more,' I said to him as I took my plate to the sink. 'We should have gone metric years ago.'

My father snorted into his glass as he drained it. 'Hectares and that sort of rubbish. Certainly not. It's a measurement based on the measurement of the globe, you know. I don't have to tell you what nonsense *that* is.'

I sighed as I took an apple from the bowl on the window sill. My father once had me believing that the earth was a Möbius strip, not a sphere. He still maintains that he believes this, and makes a great show of sending off manuscript to publishers down in London, trying to get them to publish a book expounding this view, but I know he's just mischief-making again, and gets most of his pleasure from his acts of stunned disbelief and the righteous indignation when the manuscript is eventually returned. This occurs about every three months, and I doubt that life would be half as much fun for him without this sort of ritual. Anyway, that is one of his reasons for not switching over to a metric standard for his stupid measurements, though in fact he's just lazy.

'What were you up to today?' He stared across the table at me, rolling the empty tumbler around on the wooden table-top.

I shrugged. 'Out. Walking and things.'

'Building dams again?' he sneered.

'No,' I said, shaking my head confidently and biting the apple. 'Not today.'

'I hope you weren't out killing any of God's creatures.'

I shrugged at him again. Of course I was out killing things. How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don't kill things? There just aren't enough natural deaths. You can't explain that sort of thing to people, though.

'Sometimes I think you're the one who should be in hospital, not Eric.' He was looking at me from under his dark brows, his voice low. Once, that sort of talk would have scared me, but not now. I'm nearly seventeen and not a child. Here in Scotland I'm old enough to get married without my parent's permission, and have been for a year. There wouldn't be much point to me getting married perhaps – I'll admit that – but the principle is there.

Besides, I'm not Eric; I'm me and I'm here and that's all there is to it. I don't bother people and they had best not bother me if they know what's good for them. I don't go giving people presents of burning dogs, or frighten the local toddlers with handfuls of maggots and mouthfuls of worms. The people in the town may say 'Oh, he's not all there, you know,' but that's just their little joke (and sometimes, just to rub it in, they don't point to their heads as they say it); I don't mind. I've learned to live with my disability, and learned to live without other people, so it's no skin off my nose.

My father seemed to be trying to hurt me, though; he wouldn't say something like that normally. The news about Eric must have shaken him. I think he knew, just as I did, that Eric would get back, and he was worried about what would happen. I didn't blame him, and I didn't doubt that he was also worried about me. It doesn't represent a crime, and if Eric was to come back stirring things up *The Truth About Frank* might come out.

I was never registered. I have no birth certificate, no National Insurance number, nothing to say I'm alive or have ever existed. I know this is a crime, and so does my father, and I think that sometimes he regrets the decision he made seventeen years ago, in his hippy-anarchist days, or whatever they were.

Not that I've suffered, really. I enjoyed it, and you could hardly say that I wasn't educated. I probably know more about the conventional school subjects than most people of my age. I could complain about the truth about *some* of the bits of information my father passed on to me, mind you. Ever since I was able to go into Porteneil alone and check things up in the library my father has had to be pretty straight with me, but when I was young he used to fool me time after time, answering my honest if naive questions with utter rubbish. For *years* I believed Pathos was one of the Three Musketeers, Fellatio was a character in *Hamlet*, Vitreous a town in China, and that the Irish peasants had to tread the peat to make Guinness.

Well, these days I can reach the highest shelves of the house library, and walk into Porteneil to visit the one there, so I can check up on anything my father says, and he has to tell me the truth. It annoys him a lot, I think, but that's the way things go. Call it progress.

But I am educated. While he wasn't able to resist indulging his rather immature sense of humour by selling

me a few dummies, my father couldn't abide a son of his not being a credit to him in some way; my body was forlorn hope for any improvement, so only my mind was left. Hence all my lessons. My father is an educated man, and he passed a lot of what he already knew on to me, as well as doing a fair bit of study himself into areas he didn't know all that much about just so that he could teach me. My father is a doctor of chemistry, or perhaps biochemistry – I'm not sure. He seems to have known enough about ordinary medicine – and perhaps still has had the contacts within the profession – to make sure that I got my inoculations and injections at the correct times in my life, despite my official non-existence as far as the National Health Service is concerned.

I think my father used to work in a university for a few years after he graduated, and he might have invented something; he occasionally hints that he gets some sort of royalty from a patent or something, but I suspect the old hippy survives on whatever family wealth the Cauldhames still have secreted away.

The family has been in this part of Scotland for about two hundred years or more, from what I can gather, and we used to own a lot of the land around here. Now all we have is the island, and that's pretty small, and hardly even an island at low tide. The only other remnant of our glorious past is the name of Porteneil's house, a spot, a grubby old pub called the Cauldhame Arms where I go sometimes now, though still under age of course, and watch some of the local youths trying to be punk bands. That was where I met and still meet the only person I'd call a friend; Jamie the dwarf, whom I let sit on my shoulders so he can see the bands.

'Well, I don't think he'll get this far. They'll pick him up,' my father said again, after a long and brooding silence. He got up to rinse his glass. I hummed to myself, something I always used to do when I wanted to smile or laugh, but thought the better of it. My father looked at me. 'I'm going to the study. Don't forget to lock up, all right?'

'Okey-doke,' I said, nodding.

'Goodnight.'

My father left the kitchen. I sat and looked at my trowel, Stoutstroke. Little grains of dry sand stuck to it, so I brushed them off. The study. One of my few remaining unsatisfied ambitions is to get into the old man's study. The cellar I have at least seen, and been in occasionally; I know all the rooms on the ground floor and the second; the loft is my domain entirely and home of the Wasp Factory, no less; but that one room on the first floor I don't know, I have never even seen inside.

I do know he has some chemicals in there, and I suppose he does experiments or something, but what the room looks like, what he actually does in there, I have no idea. All I've ever got out of it are a few funny smells and the tap-tap of my father's stick.

I stroked the long handle of the trowel, wondering if my father had a name for that stick of his. I doubted it. He doesn't attach the same importance to them as I do. I know they are important.

I think there is a secret in the study. He had hinted as much more than once, just vaguely, just enough to entice me so that I want to ask what, so that he knows that I want to ask. I don't ask, of course, because he wouldn't get any worthwhile answer. If he did tell me anything it would be a pack of lies, because obviously the secret wouldn't be a secret any more if he told me the truth, and he can feel, as I do, that with my increasing maturity he needs all the holds over me he can get; I'm not a child any more. Only these little bits of bog power enable him to think he is in control of what he sees as the correct father-son relationship. It's pathetic really, but with his little games and his secrets and his hurtful remarks he tries to keep his security intact.

I leaned back in the wooden chair and stretched. I like the smell of the kitchen. The food, and the mud on our wellingtons, and sometimes the faint tang of cordite coming up from the cellar all give me a good, tight, thrilling feel when I think about them. It smells different when it's been raining and our clothes are wet. In the winter the big black stove pumps out heat fragrant with driftwood or peat, and everything steams and the rain hammers against the glass. Then it has a comfortable, closed-in feeling, making you feel cosy, like a great big cat with its tail curled round itself. Sometimes I wish we had a cat. All I've ever had was a head, and that the seagull

took.

~~I went to the toilet, down the corridor off the kitchen, for a crap. I didn't need a pee because I'd been pissing on the Poles during the day, infecting them with my scent and power.~~

I sat there and thought about Eric, to whom such an unpleasant thing happened. Poor twisted bugger. I wondered, as I have often wondered, how I would have coped. But it didn't happen to me. I have stayed here and Eric was the one who went away and it all happened somewhere else, and that's all there is to it. I'm me and here's here.

I listened, wondering if I could hear my father. Perhaps he had gone straight to bed. He often sleeps in the study rather than in the big bedroom on the second floor, where mine is. Maybe that room holds too many unpleasant (or pleasant) memories for him. Either way, I couldn't hear any snoring.

I hate having to sit down in the toilet all the time. With my unfortunate disability I usually have to, as though I was a bloody woman, but I hate it. Sometimes in the Cauldhame Arms I stand up at the urinal, but most of the time it ends up running down my hands or legs.

I strained. Plop splash. Some water came up and hit my bum, and that was when the phone went.

'Shit,' I said, and then laughed at myself. I cleaned my arse quickly and pulled my trousers up, pulling the chain, too, and then waddling out into the corridor, zipping up. I ran up the broad stairs to the first-floor landing, where our only phone is. I'm forever on at my father to get more phones put in, but he says we don't get called often enough to warrant extensions. I got to the phone before whoever was calling rang off. My father hadn't appeared.

'Hello,' I said. It was a call-box.

'Skraw-*aak!*' screamed a voice at the other end. I held the receiver away from my ear and looked at the phone, scowling. Tinny yells continued to come from the earpiece. When they stopped I put my ear back to it.

'Porteneil 531,' I said coldly.

'Frank! Frank! It's me. Me! Hello there! Hello!'

'Is there an echo on this line or are you saying everything twice?' I said. I could recognise Eric's voice.

'Both! Ha ha ha ha ha!'

'Hello, Eric. Where are you?'

'Here! Where are you?'

'Here.'

'If we're both here, why are we bothering with the phone?'

'Tell me where you are before your money runs out.'

'But if you're *here* you must know. Don't you know where you are?' He started to giggle.

I said calmly: 'Stop being silly, Eric.'

'I'm not being silly. I'm not telling you where I am; you'll only tell Angus and he'll tell the police and they'll take me back to the fucking hospital.'

'Don't use four-letter words. You know I don't like them. Of course I won't tell Dad.'

'"Fucking" is not a four-letter word. It's . . . it's a seven-letter word. Isn't that your lucky number?'

'No. Look, will you tell me where you are? I want to know.'

'I'll tell you where I am if you'll tell me what your lucky number is.'

'My lucky number is *e*.'

'*That's* not a number. *That's* a letter.'

'It *is* a number. It's a transcendental number: 2.718—'

'That's cheating. I meant an integer.'

'You should have been more specific,' I said, then sighed as the pips sounded and Eric eventually put more money in. 'Do you want me to call you back?'

‘Ho-ho. You aren’t getting it out of me that easy. How are you, anyway?’

‘I’m fine. How are you?’

‘Mad, of course,’ he said, quite indignantly. I had to smile.

‘Look, I’m assuming you’re coming back here. If you are, please don’t burn any dogs or anything, OK?’

‘What are you talking about? It’s me. Eric. I don’t burn dogs!’ He started to shout. ‘I don’t burn fucking dogs! What the hell do you think I am? Don’t accuse me of burning fucking dogs, you little bastard! *Bastard!*’

‘All right, Eric, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ I said as quickly as I could. ‘I just want you to be OK; be careful. Don’t do anything to antagonise people, you know? People can be awful sensitive. . . .’

‘Well . . .,’ I could hear him say. I listened to him breathing, then his voice changed. ‘Yeah, I’m coming back home. Just for a short while, to see how you both are. I suppose it’s just you and the old man?’

‘Yes, just the two of us. I’m looking forward to seeing you.’

‘Oh, good.’ There was a pause. ‘Why don’t you ever come to visit me?’

‘I . . . I thought Father was down to see you at Christmas.’

‘Was he? Well . . . but why don’t *you* ever come?’ He sounded plaintive. I shifted my weight on to my other foot, looked around the landing and up the stairs, half-expecting to see my father leaning over the banister rail or to see his shadow on the wall of the landing above, where he thought he could hide and listen to my phone calls without me knowing.

‘I don’t like leaving the island for that long, Eric. I’m sorry, but I get this horrible feeling in my stomach, and though there’s a great big knot in it. I just can’t go that far away, not overnight or . . . I just can’t. I want to see you, but you’re so far away.’

‘I’m getting closer.’ He sounded confident again.

‘Good. How far away are you?’

‘Not telling you.’

‘I told you my lucky number.’

‘I lied. I’m still not going to tell you where I am.’

‘That’s not—’

‘Well, I’ll hang up now.’

‘You don’t want to talk to Dad?’

‘Not yet. I’ll talk to him later, when I’m a lot closer. I’m going now. See you. Take care.’

‘*You* take care.’

‘What’s to worry about? I’ll be all right. What can happen to me?’

‘Just don’t do anything to annoy people. You know; I mean, they get angry. About pets especially. I mean, I’m not—’

‘What? *What?* What was that about pets?’ he shouted.

‘Nothing! I was just saying—’

‘You little shit!’ he screamed. ‘You’re accusing me of burning dogs again, aren’t you? And I suppose I stick worms and maggots into kids’ mouths and piss on them, too, eh?’ he shrieked.

‘Well,’ I said carefully, toying with the flex, ‘now you mention it—’

‘Bastard! *Bastard!* You little shit! I’ll kill you! You—’ His voice disappeared, and I had to put the phone away from my ear again as he started to hammer the handset against the walls of the call-box. The succession of loud clunks sounded over the calm pips as his money ran out. I put the phone back in the cradle.

I looked up, but there was still no sign of Father. I crept up the stairs and stuck my head between the banisters, but the landing was empty. I sighed and sat down on the stairs. I got the feeling I hadn’t handled Eric very well over the phone. I’m not very good with people and, even though Eric is my brother, I haven’t seen him for over two years, since he went crazy.

I got up and went back down to the kitchen to lock up and get my gear, then I went to the bathroom. ~~decided to watch the television in my room, or listen to the radio, and get to sleep early so I could be up just~~ after dawn to catch a wasp for the Factory.

• • •

I lay on my bed listening to John Peel on the radio and the noise of the wind round the house and the surf on the beach. Beneath my bed my home-brew gave off a yeasty smell.

I thought again of the Sacrifice Poles; more deliberately this time, picturing each one in turn, remembering their positions and their components, seeing in my mind what those sightless eyes looked out to, and flicking through each view like a security guard changing cameras on a monitor screen. I felt nothing amiss; all seemed well. My dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island.

I opened my eyes and put the bedside light back on. I looked at myself in the mirror on the dressing-table over on the other side of the room. I was lying on top of the bed-covers, naked apart from my underpants.

I'm too fat. It isn't that bad, and it isn't my fault – but, all the same, I don't look the way I'd like to look. Chubby, that's me. Strong and fit, but still too plump. I want to look dark and menacing; the way I ought to look, the way I should look, the way I might have looked if I hadn't had my little accident. Looking at me, you never guess I'd killed three people. It isn't fair.

I switched the light out again. The room was totally dark, not even the starlight showing while my eyes adjusted. Perhaps I would ask for one of those LED alarm radios, though I'm very fond of my old brass alarm clock. Once I tied a wasp to the striking-surface of each of the copper-coloured bells on the top, where the little hammer would hit them in the morning when the alarm went off.

I always wake up before the alarm goes, so I got to watch.



2: The Snake Park

I TOOK the little cinder that was the remains of the wasp and put it into a matchbox, wrapped in an old photograph of Eric with my father. In the picture my father was holding a portrait-sized photograph of his first wife, Eric's mother, and she was the only one who was smiling. My father was staring at the camera looking morose. The young Eric was looking away and picking his nose, looking bored.

The morning was fresh and cold. I could see mist over the forests below the mountains, and fog out over the North Sea. I ran hard and fast along the wet sand where it was good and firm, making a jet noise with my mouth and holding my binoculars and bag down tight to my sides. When I got level with the Bunker I banked inland, slowing as I hit the soft white sand further up the beach. I checked the flotsam and jetsam as I swept over it, but there was nothing interesting-looking, nothing worth salvaging, just an old jellyfish, a purple mass with four pale rings inside. I altered course slightly to overfly it, going 'Trrrrrfffaow! Trrrrrrrrrrrrfffaow!' and kicking up sand on the run, blasting a dirty fountain of sand and jelly up and around me. 'Puchrrrt!' went the noise of the explosion. I banked again and headed for the Bunker.

The Poles were in good repair. I didn't need the bag of heads and bodies. I visited them all, working through the morning, planting the dead wasp in its paper coffin not between two of the more important Poles as I had intended originally, but under the path, just on the island side of the bridge. While I was there I climbed up the suspension cables to the top of the mainland tower and looked around. I could see the top of the house and one of the skylights over the loft. I could also see the spire of the Church of Scotland in Portenere and some smoke coming up from the town chimneys. I took the small knife from my left breast pocket and nicked my left thumb carefully. I smeared the red stuff over the top of the main beam which crosses from one girder to the other on the tower, then wiped my small wound with an antiseptic tissue from one of my bags. I scrambled back down after that and retrieved the ball-bearing I had hit the sign with the day before.

The first Mrs Cauldhame, Mary, who was Eric's mother, died in childbirth in the house. Eric's head was too big for her; she haemorrhaged and bled to death on the marital bed back in 1960. Eric has suffered from quite severe migraine all his life, and I am very much inclined to attribute the ailment to his manner of entry into the world. The whole thing about his migraine and his dead mother had, I think, a lot to do with What Happened To Eric. Poor unlucky soul; he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and something very unlikely happened which by sheer chance mattered more to him than anybody else it could have happened to. But that's what you risk when you leave here.

Thinking about it, that means that Eric has killed somebody, too. I had thought that I was the only murderer

in the family, but old Eric beat me to it, killing his mum before he had even drawn breath. Unintentionally admitted, but it isn't always the thought that counts.

The Factory said something about fire.

I was still thinking about that, wondering what it really meant. The obvious interpretation was that Eric was going to set fire to some dogs, but I was too wise in the ways of the Factory to treat that as definite; I suspected there was more to it.

• • •

In a way, I was sorry Eric was coming back. I had been thinking of having a War shortly, maybe in the next week or so, but with Eric probably going to make an appearance I had decided against it. I hadn't had a good War for months; the last one had been the Ordinary Soldiers versus the Aerosols. In that scenario, all the 72nd scale armies, complete with their tanks and guns and trucks and stores and helicopters and boats, had to unite against the Aerosol Invasion. The Aerosols were almost impossible to stop, and the soldiers and their weapons and equipment were getting burned and melted all over the place until one brave soldier who had clung on to one of the Aerosols as it flew back to its base came back (after many adventures) with the news that their base was a breadboard moored under an overhang on an inland creek. A combined force of commandos got there just in time and blew the base to smithereens, finally blowing up the overhang on top of the smoking remains. A good War, with all the right ingredients and a more spectacular ending than most (I even had my father asking me what all the explosions and the fire had been about, when I got back to the house that evening), but too long ago.

Anyway, with Eric on his way, I didn't think it would be a good idea to start another War only to have to abandon it in the middle of things and start dealing with the real world. I decided I would postpone hostilities for a while. Instead, after I had anointed a few of the more important Poles with precious substances, I built a dam system.

When I was younger I used to have fantasies about saving the house by building a dam. There would be a fire in the grass on the dunes, or a plane would have crashed, and all that stopped the cordite in the cellar from going up would be me diverting some of the water from a dam system down a channel and into the house. At one time my major ambition was to have my father buy me an excavator so that I could make *really* big dams. But I have a far more sophisticated, even metaphysical, approach to dam-building now. I realise that you can never really win against the water; it will always triumph in the end, seeping and soaking and building up and undermining and overflowing. All you can really do is construct something that will divert it or block its way for a while; persuade it to do something it doesn't really want to do. The pleasure comes from the elegance of the compromise you strike between where the water wants to go (guided by gravity and the medium it's moving over) and what you want to do with it.

Actually, I think that life has few pleasures to compare with dam-building. Give me a good broad beach with a reasonable slope and not too much seaweed, and a fair-sized stream, and I'll be happy all day, any day.

By that time the sun was well up, and I took off my jacket to lay it with my bags and binoculars. Stoutstrolch dipped and bit and sliced and dug, building a huge triple-deck dam, the main section of which backed up the water in the North Burn for eighty paces; not far off the record for the position I had chosen. I used my usual metal overflow piece, which I keep hidden in the dunes near the best dam-building site, and the *pièce résistance* was an aqueduct bottomed with an old black plastic rubbish-bag I'd found in the driftwood. The aqueduct carried the overflow stream over three sections of a by-pass channel I'd cut from further up the dam. I built a little village downstream from the dam, complete with roads and a bridge over the remnant of the burn and a church.

Bursting a good big dam, or even just letting it overflow, is almost as satisfying as planning and building it in

the first place. I used little shells to represent the people in the town, as usual. Also as usual, none of the shells survived the flood when the dam burst, they all sank, which meant that everybody died.

By that time I was very hungry, my arms were getting sore and my hands were red with gripping the spade and digging into the sand by themselves. I watched the first flood of water race down to the sea, muddy and littered, then turned to head for home.

• • •

‘Did I hear you talking on the phone last night?’ my father said.

I shook my head. ‘Nope.’

We were finishing our lunch, sitting in the kitchen, me with my stew, my father with brown rice and seaweed salad. He had his Town Gear on; brown brogues, brown tweed three-piece suit, and on the table sat his brown cap. I checked my watch and saw that it was Thursday. It was very unusual for him to go anywhere on Thursday, whether Porteneil or any further afield. I wasn’t going to ask him where he was going because he’d only lie. When I used to ask him where he was going he would tell me ‘To Phucke’, which he claimed was a small town to the north of Inverness. It was years and a lot of funny looks in the town before I learned the truth.

‘I’m going out today,’ he told me between mouthfuls of rice and salad. I nodded, and he continued: ‘I’ll be back late.’

Perhaps he was going to Porteneil to get drunk in the Rock Hotel, or perhaps he was off to Inverness, where he often goes on business he prefers to keep mysterious, but I suspected that it was really something to do with Eric.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘I’ll take a key, so you can lock up when you want to.’ He clattered his knife and fork down on the empty plate and wiped his mouth on a brown napkin made from recycled paper. ‘Just don’t put all the bolts on, a right?’

‘Right.’

‘You’ll make yourself something to eat this evening, h’m?’

I nodded again, not looking up as I ate.

‘And you’ll do the washing-up?’

I nodded again.

‘I don’t think Diggs’ll come round again; but, if he does, I want you to stay out of his way.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I told him, and sighed.

‘You’ll be all right, then?’ he said, standing.

‘M’m-h’m,’ I said, cleaning up the last of the stew.

‘I’ll be off, then.’

I looked up in time to see him place his cap on his head and look round the kitchen, patting his pockets as he did so. He looked at me again and nodded.

I said: ‘Goodbye.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Right you are.’

‘I’ll see you later.’

‘Yes.’ He turned round, then turned back, looked once more round the room, then shook his head quickly and went to the door, taking his stick from the corner by the washing machine on his way out. I heard the outside door slam, then silence. I sighed.

I waited a minute or so then got up, leaving my almost clean plate, and went through the house to the lounge, where I could see the path leading away through the dunes towards the bridge. My father was walking along it, head bowed, going quickly with a sort of anxious swagger as he swung the stick. As I watched, he

struck out with it at some wild flowers growing by the path-side.

~~I ran upstairs, pausing by the back stairwell window to watch my father disappear round the dune before the~~ bridge, ran up the stairs, got to the door to the study and twisted the handle briskly. The door was firm; it didn't shift a millimetre. One day he'd forget, I was sure, but not today.

• • •

After I had finished my meal and done the washing-up, I went to my room, checked the home-brew and got my air-rifle. I made sure I had sufficient pellets in my jacket pockets, then headed out of the house for the Rabbit Grounds on the mainland, between the large branch of the creek and the town dump.

I don't like using the gun; it's almost too accurate for me. The catapult is an Inside thing, requiring that you and it are one. If you're feeling bad, you'll miss; or, if you know you're doing something wrong, you'll miss too. Unless you fire a gun from the hip it's all Outside; you point and aim and that's it, unless the sights are off or there's a really high wind. Once you've cocked the gun the power's all there, just waiting to be released by the squeeze of a finger. A catapult lives with you until the last moment; it stays tensed in your hands, breathing with you, moving with you, ready to leap, ready to sing and jerk, and leaving you in that dramatic pose, arms and hands outstretched while you wait for the dark curve of the ball in its flight to find its target, that delicious thud.

But going after rabbits, especially the cunning little bastards out on the Grounds, you need all the help you can get. One shot and they're scurrying for their holes. The gun is loud enough to frighten them just as much, but, calm, surgical thing that it is, it improves your chance of a first-time kill.

As far as I know, none of my ill-starred relations has ever died by the gun. They've gone a lot of funny ways, the Cauldhames and their associates by marriage, but to the best of my knowledge a gun has never crossed one of them off.

I came to the end of the bridge, where technically my territory stops, and stood still for a while, thinking, feeling, listening and looking and smelling. Everything seemed to be all right.

Quite apart from the ones I killed (and they were all about the same age I was when I murdered them) I can think of at least three of our family who went to whatever they imagined their Maker was like in unusual ways. Leviticus Cauldhame, my father's eldest brother, emigrated to South Africa and bought a farm there in 1951. Leviticus, a person of such weapon-grade stupidity his mental faculties would probably have improved with the onset of senile dementia, left Scotland because the Conservatives had failed to reverse the Socialist reforms of the previous Labour government: railways still nationalised; working class breeding like flies now the welfare state existed to prevent the natural culling by disease; state-owned mines . . . intolerable. I have read some of the letters he wrote to my father. Leviticus was happy with the country, though there were rather a lot of black people around. He referred to the policy of separate development as 'apart-hate' in his first few letters, until somebody must have clued him in on the correct spelling. Not my father, I'm sure.

Leviticus was passing police headquarters in Johannesburg one day, walking along the pavement after a shopping expedition, when a crazed, homicidal black threw himself, unconscious, from the top storey and apparently ripped all his fingernails out on the way down. He hit and fatally injured my innocent and unfortunate uncle whose muttered last words in hospital, before his coma became a full stop, were: 'My God, the buggers've learned to fly. . . .'

A faint wisp of smoke rose ahead of me from the town dump. I wasn't going that far today, but I could hear the bulldozer they used sometimes to spread the garbage around as it revved and pushed.

I hadn't been to the dump for a while, and it was about time I went to see what the good folk of Porteneil had thrown out. That was where I got all the old aerosols for the last War, not to mention several important parts of the Wasp Factory, including the Face itself.

My uncle Athelwald Trapley, from my mother's side of the family, emigrated to America at the end of the Second World War. ~~He threw in a good job with an insurance company to go off with a woman and ended up~~ broke and heartbroke, in a cheap caravan site outside Fort Worth, where he decided to put an end to himself.

He turned on his Calor-gas stove and heater but didn't light them and sat down to await the end. Understandably nervous, and no doubt a little distracted and distraught both with his loved one's untimely departure and that which he was planning for himself, he resorted without a thought to his habitual method of calming himself down, and lit a Marlboro.

Out of the blazing wreck he leaped, stumbling around on fire from head to toe and screaming. He had intended a painless death; not being burned alive. So he jumped head first into the forty-gallon oil-drum full of rainwater which stood at the rear of the caravan. Wedged inside that drum he drowned, his little legs waggling pathetically as he gulped and squirmed and tried to get his arms into a position from which he could lever himself out.

Twenty metres or so from the grass-packed hill which looks over the Rabbit Grounds I switched to Silent Running, pacing stealthily through the long weeds and reeds, careful not to let anything I was carrying make noise. I was hoping to catch some of the little pests out early but, if I had to, I was prepared to wait until the sun went down.

I crawled quietly up the slope, the grass sliding under my chest and belly, my legs straining to propel me bulk up and forward. I was down-wind, of course, and the breeze was stiff enough to cover most small noise. As far as I could see, there were no rabbit sentries on the hill. I stopped about two metres down from the summit and quietly cocked the gun, inspecting the composite steel and nylon pellet before placing it in the chamber and snicking the gun closed. I closed my eyes and thought about the trapped, compressed spring and the little slug sitting at the shiny bottom of the rifled tube. Then I crawled to the top of the hill.

At first I thought I would have to wait. The Grounds looked empty in the afternoon light, and only the grass moved in the wind. I could see the holes and the little piles and scatters of droppings, and I could see the gorse bushes on the far slope above the bank which held most of the holes, where the rabbit-runs snaked tiny path-like jagged tunnels through the bushes, but there was no sign of the animals themselves. It was in those rabbit-runs through the gorse that some of the local boys used to set snares. I found the wire loops, though, having seen the boys set them, and I tore them out or put them under the grass on the paths the boys used to take when they came to inspect their traps. Whether any of them was tripped up by his own snare or not I don't know, but I'd like to think they did go sprawling head first. Anyway, they or their replacements don't set snares any more. I suppose it has gone out of fashion and they are out spraying slogans on walls, sniffing glue or trying to get laid.

Animals rarely surprise me but there was something about the buck, once I noticed it sitting there, that froze me for a second. It must have been there all the time, sitting motionless and staring straight at me from the far edge of the level area of the Grounds, but I hadn't noticed it at first. When I did, something about its stillness stilled me for a moment. Without actually moving physically, I shook my head clear inside and decided that the big male would make a fine head for a Pole. The rabbit might as well have been stuffed for all the movement it made, and I could see that it definitely was staring right at me, its little eyes not blinking, its tiny nose not sniffing, its ears untwitched. I stared straight back at it and very slowly brought the gun round to bear, moving first one way then slightly the other, so that it looked like something swaying with the wind in the grass. It took about a minute to get the rifle in place and my head in the correct position, cheek by stock, and still the buck hadn't moved a millimetre.

Four times larger, his big whiskered head split neatly into four by the crosshairs, he looked even more impressive, and just as immobile. I frowned and brought my head up, suddenly thinking that it might just be stuffed; perhaps somebody was having a laugh at my expense. Town boys? My father? Surely not Eric yet? It was a stupid thing to have done; I'd moved my head far too quickly for it to look natural, and the buck shot off.

up the bank. I dipped my head and brought the gun up at the same time without thinking. There was no time to get back into the right position, take a breath and gently squeeze the trigger; it was up and bang, and with my whole body unbalanced and both hands on the gun I fell forward, rolling as I did so to keep the gun out of the sand.

When I looked up, cradling the gun and gasping, my backside sunk in sand, I couldn't see the rabbit. I forced the gun down and hit myself on the knees. 'Shit!' I told myself.

The buck wasn't in a hole, however. It wasn't even near the bank where the holes were. It was tearing across the level ground in great leaps, heading right at me and seeming to shake and shiver in mid-air with every bound. It was coming at me like a bullet, head shaking, lips curled back, teeth long and yellow and by far the biggest I'd ever seen on a rabbit, live or dead. Its eyes looked like coiled slugs. Blobs of red arced from its leaping haunch with every pouncing leap; it was almost on me, and I was sat there staring.

There was no time to reload. By the time I started to react there was no time to do anything except at the instinctive level. My hands left the gun hanging in mid-air above my knees and went for the catapult, which was always hanging on my belt, the arm-rest stuck down between that and my cords. Even my quick-reaction reflexes were beyond reach in time, though; the rabbit was on me in a half-second, heading straight for my throat.

I caught it with the catapult, the thick black tubing of the rubber twisting once in the air as I scissored my hands and fell back, letting the buck go over my head and then kicking with my legs and turning myself so that I was level with it where it lay, kicking and struggling with the power of a wolverine, spreadeagled on the sandy slope with its neck caught in the black rubber. Its head twisted this way and that as it tried to reach my fingers with its chopping teeth. I hissed through my own teeth at it and tugged the rubber tighter, then tighter still. The buck thrashed and spat and made a high keening noise I didn't think rabbits were capable of and beat its legs on the ground. I was so rattled I glanced round to make sure this wasn't a signal for an army of bunnies like the Dobermann of a beast to come up from behind and tear me to shreds.

The damn thing wouldn't die! The rubber was stretching and stretching and not tightening enough, and I couldn't move my hands for fear of it tearing the flesh off a finger or biting my nose off. The same consideration stopped me from butting the animal; I wasn't going to put my face near those teeth. I couldn't get a knee up to break its back, either, because I was almost slipping down the slope as it was, and I couldn't possibly get an anchor purchase on that surface with only one leg. It was crazy! This wasn't Africa! It was a rabbit, not a lion! What the hell was happening here?

It finally bit me, twisting its neck more than I would have thought possible and catching my right index finger right on the knuckle.

That was it. I screamed and pulled with all my might, shaking my hands and my head and throwing myself backwards and over as I did so, banging one knee off the gun where it lay, fallen in the sand.

I ended up lying in the scrubby grass at the bottom of the hill, my knuckles white as I throttled the rabbit, swinging it in front of my face with its neck held on the thin black line of rubber tubing, now tied like a knot on a black string. I was still shaking, so I couldn't tell if the vibrations the body made were its or mine. Then the tubing gave way. The rabbit slammed into my left hand while the other end of the rubber whipped my right wrist; my arms flew out in opposite directions, crashing into the ground.

I lay on my back, my head on the sandy ground, staring out to the side where the body of the buck lay at the end of a little curved line of black, and tangled in the arm-rest and grip of the catapult. The animal was still.

I looked up at the sky and made a fist with the other hand, beating it into the ground. I looked back at the rabbit, then got up and knelt over it. It was dead; the head rolled slack, neck broken, when I lifted it. The leaping haunch was matted red with blood where my pellet had hit it. It was big; size of a tomcat; the biggest rabbit I'd ever seen. Obviously I'd left the rabbits alone for too long, or I'd have known about the existence of such

brute.

~~I sucked at the little trickle of blood from my finger. My catapult, my pride and joy, the Black Destroyer, itself destroyed by a *rabbit!* Oh, I suppose I could have written off and got a new length of rubber, or got on to Cameron in the ironmonger's shop to find me something, but it would never feel right again. Every time I lifted it to aim it at a target – living or not – this moment would be at the back of my mind. The Black Destroyer was finished.~~

I sat back in the sand and looked quickly round the area. Still no other rabbits. Hardly surprising. There was no time to waste. There's only one way to react after something like this.

I got up, retrieved the rifle, lying half-buried in the sand on the slope, went to the top of the hill, looked round, then decided to risk leaving everything as it was. I cradled the gun in my arms and set off at Emergency Speed, hurtling down the path back to the island at maximum, trusting to luck and adrenalin that I wouldn't put a foot wrong and end up lying gasping in the grass with a multiple fracture of the femur. I used the gun to balance myself with on the tighter corners; the grass and the ground were both dry, so it wasn't as risky as it might have been. I cut off the path proper and charged up over a dune and down its other side to where the service pipe carrying the water and electricity to the house appears out of the sand and crosses the creek. I jumped the iron spikes and landed with both feet on the concrete, then ran over the narrow top of the pipe and jumped down on to the island.

Back at the house I went straight to my shed. I left the rifle, checked the War Bag and put its strap over my head, tying the waist-string quickly. I locked the shed again and jogged as far as the bridge while I got my breath back. Once through the narrow gate in the middle of the bridge I sprinted.

At the Rabbit Grounds, everything was as I'd left it – the buck lying strangled in the broken catapult, the sand kicked up and messed where I'd gone crashing. The wind still moved the grass and flowers, and there were no animals around; even the gulls hadn't spotted the carrion yet. I got straight to work.

First I took a twenty-centimetre electric-piping bomb out of the War Bag. I slit the buck in the anus. I checked that the bomb was all right, especially that the white crystals of the explosive mixture were dry, then I added a plastic-straw fuse and a charge of the explosive around the hole bored in the black pipe and taped everything up. I shoved the lot inside the still warm rabbit and left it sort of sitting, squatting looking towards the holes in the bank. Then I took some smaller bombs and planted them inside some of the rabbit holes, stamping down the roofs of the tunnel entrances so that they caved in and left only the straw fuses sticking out. I filled the plastic detergent-bottle and primed the lighter, left it lying on the top of the bank most of the rabbit holes were in, then went back to the first of the blocked-up holes and lit the fuse with my disposable cigarette lighter. The smell of burning plastic stayed in my nose and the bright glare of the burning mixture danced in my eyes as I hurried to the next hole, glancing at my watch as I did so. I'd placed six smaller bombs, and had them all lit in forty seconds.

I was sitting on the top of the bank, above the holes, the lighter of the Flame-thrower burning weakly in the sunlight, when, just over the minute, the first tunnel blew. I felt it through the seat of my pants, and grinned. The rest went off quickly, the puff of smoke from the charge around the mouth of each bomb bursting out of the fuming earth just before the main charge went off. Scattering earth was blasted out into the Rabbit Grounds, and the thudding noises rolled through the air. I smiled at that. There was very little noise really. You wouldn't have been able to hear a thing back at the house. Almost all the energy from the bombs had gone into blowing the earth out and the air in the burrows back.

The first dazed rabbits came out; two of them bleeding at the nose, looking otherwise unharmed but staggering, almost falling. I squeezed the plastic bottle and sent a jet of petrol out of it, over the wick of the lighter, held a few centimetres out from the nozzle by an aluminium tent-peg. The petrol burst into flame as it flew over the wick in the tiny steel cup, roared through the air and fell brightly on and around the two rabbits.

They took flame and blazed, running and stumbling and falling. I looked round for more as the first two flames near the centre of the Grounds, finally collapsing into the grass, stiff-limbed but twitching, crackling to the breeze. A tiny lick of flame flickered round the mouth of the 'thrower; I blew it out. Another, smaller rabbit appeared. I caught it with the jet of flame and it zipped off out of range, heading for the water by the side of the hill the savage buck had attacked me on. I dug into the War Bag, drew out the air-pistol, cocked it and fired in one movement. The shot missed and the rabbit trailed a thread of smoke round the hill.

I got another three rabbits with the 'thrower before I packed it in. The last thing I did was to fire the blazing stream of petrol at the buck still sitting stuffed and dead and oozing blood in the forefront of the Grounds. The fire dropped all round it so that it disappeared in the rolling orange and curling black. In a few seconds the fire caught, and after about ten seconds the mass of flame blew up and out, throwing something black and smoking twenty metres or more into the late-afternoon air and scattering pieces all over the Grounds. The explosion much bigger than the ones in the holes, and with almost nothing to muffle it, cracked across the dunes like a whip, setting my ears ringing and making even me jump a bit.

Whatever was left of the buck landed way behind me. I followed the smell of burning to where it lay. It was mostly the head, and a grubby stub of spine and ribs, and about half the skin. I gritted my teeth and picked the warm remnant up, took it back to the Grounds and flung it into them from the top of the bank.

I stood in the slanting sunlight, warm and yellow around me, the stench of burning flesh and grass on the wind, the smoke rising into the air from burrows and cadavers, grey and black, the sweet smell of leaking unburned petrol coming from the Flame-thrower where I'd left it, and I breathed deeply.

With the last of the petrol I covered the body of the catapult and the used-up bottle of the 'thrower where they lay on the sand and set fire to them. I sat cross-legged just by the blaze, staring into it from up-wind until it was out and only the metal of the Black Destroyer remained, then I took the sooty skeleton and buried it where it had been ruined, at the bottom of the hill. It would have a name now: Black Destroyer Hill.

The fire was out everywhere; the grass too young and moist to catch. Not that I'd have cared if it had gone up. I considered setting the whin bushes alight, but the flowers always looked cheerful when they came out, and the bushes smelled better fresh than burned, so I didn't. I decided I'd caused enough mayhem for one day. The catapult was avenged, the buck – or what it meant, its spirit maybe – soiled and degraded, taught a hard lesson, and I felt *good*. If the rifle was all right and hadn't got sand inside the sights or anywhere else awkward to clean, it would almost have been worth it. The Defence budget would stand buying another catapult tomorrow; my crossbow would just have to wait another week or so.

With that lovely sated feeling inside me, I packed the War Bag and went wearily home, thinking what had happened over in my mind, trying to figure out the whys and wherefores, see what lessons were to be learned, what signs to be read in it all.

On the way I passed the rabbit I thought had escaped, lying just before the sparkling clean water of the stream; blackened and contorted, locked into a weird, twisted crouch, its dead dry eyes staring up at me as I passed by, accusatory.

I kicked it into the water.

• • •

My other dead uncle was called Harmsworth Stove, a half-uncle from Eric's mother's side of the family. He was a businessman in Belfast, and he and his wife looked after Eric for nearly five years, when my brother was a toddler. Harmsworth committed suicide, eventually, with an electric power-drill and a quarter-inch bit. I inserted it through the side of his skull and, finding that he was still alive though in some pain, drove to a nearby hospital, where he later died. Actually, I might just have had a little to do with his death, as it occurred less than a year after the Stoves lost their only child, Esmerelda. Unknown to them – and to everybody else, for the

matter – she was one of my victims.

• • •

I lay in bed that night, waiting for my father to return, and for the phone to ring, while I thought about what had happened. Maybe the big buck was a rabbit from outside the Grounds, some wild beast come into the warren from beyond, to terrorise the locals and make itself boss, only to die in an encounter with a superior being who could have no real comprehension of.

Whatever, it was a Sign. I was sure of that. The whole fraught episode must signify something. My automatic response might just have had something to do with the fire that the Factory had predicted, but deep inside I knew that that wasn't all there was to it, and that there was more to come. The sign was in the whole thing, not just the unexpected ferocity of the buck I'd killed, but also in my furious, almost unthinking response and the fate of the innocent rabbits who took the brunt of my wrath.

It also meant something looking back as well as forward. The first time I murdered it was because of rabbits meeting a fiery death, and meeting that fiery death from the nozzle of a Flame-thrower virtually identical to the one I had used to exact my revenge on the warren. It was all too much, all too close and perfect. Events were shaping up faster and worse than I could have expected. I was in danger of losing control of the situation. The Rabbit Grounds – that supposed happy hunting-ground – had shown it could happen.

From the smaller to the greater, the patterns always hold true, and the Factory has taught me to watch out for them and respect them.

That was the first time I killed, because of what my cousin Blyth Cauldhame had done to our rabbits, Eric and mine. It was Eric who first invented the Flame-thrower, and it was lying in what was then the bicycle-shed (now my shed) when our cousin, who had come to spend the weekend with us along with his parents, decided it would be fun to ride Eric's bike into the soft mud at the south end of the island. This he duly did while Eric and I were out flying kites. Then he came back and filled the Flame-thrower with petrol. He sat in the back garden with it, obscured from the windows of the lounge (where his parents and our father sat) by the washing blowing in the breeze; he lit the 'thrower and sprayed our two hutches with flame, incinerating all our beauties.

Eric in particular was very upset. He cried like a girl. I wanted to kill Blyth there and then; the hiding he got from his father, my dad's brother James, was not enough as far as I was concerned, not for what he'd done to Eric, *my brother*. Eric was inconsolable, desperate with grief because he had made the thing Blyth had used to destroy our beloved pets. He always was a bit sentimental, always the sensitive one, the bright one; until his nasty experience everybody was sure he would go far. Anyway, that was the start of the Skull Grounds, the area of the big, old, partially earthed-over dune behind the house where all our pets went when they died. The burned rabbits started that. Old Saul was there before them, but that was just a one-off thing.

I hadn't said anything to anybody, even Eric, about what I wanted to do to Blyth. I was wise in my childishness even then, at the tender age of five, when most children are forever telling their parents and friends that they hate them and they wish they were dead. I kept quiet.

When Blyth came back the next year he was even more unpleasant than before, having lost his left leg from above the knee in a road accident (the boy he was playing 'chicken' with was killed). Blyth resented his handicap bitterly; he was ten by that time, and very active. He tried to pretend that the nasty pink thing he had to strap on didn't exist, that it had nothing to do with him. He could just about ride a bike and he liked wrestling and playing football, usually in goal. I was just six then, and while Blyth knew that I had had some sort of little accident when I was much younger I certainly seemed to him to be a lot more able-bodied than he was. He thought it was great fun to throw me about and wrestle with me and punch and kick me. I made a convincing show of joining in all this horse-play and appeared to enjoy it hugely for a week or so while I thought about what I could do to our cousin.

My other brother, a full brother, Paul, was still alive at the time. He, Eric and I were supposed to keep Blyth entertained. We did our best, taking Blyth to our favourite places, letting him play with our toys, and playing games with him. Eric and I had to restrain him at times when he wanted to do something like throw little Paul into the water to see if he'd float, or like when he wanted to fell a tree over the railway line that goes through Porteneil, but as a rule we got on surprisingly well, even though it rankled to see Eric, who was the same age as Blyth, obviously in fear of him.

So one day, very hot and insecty, with a faint breeze coming in off the sea, we were all lying in the grass on the flat area just to the south of the house. Paul and Blyth had fallen asleep, and Eric was lying with his hands behind his neck, staring drowsily up at the bright blue. Blyth had taken off the hollow plastic leg and left it lying tangled in its straps and the long grass blades. I watched Eric fall slowly asleep, his head gently tipping to one side, eyes closing. I got up and went for a walk and ended up at the Bunker. It hadn't assumed the full importance it later would in my life, though I already liked the place and felt at home in its coolness and dark. It was an old concrete pillbox built just before the last war to house a gun covering the firth, and it stuck in the sand like a big grey tooth. I went inside and found the snake. It was an adder. I didn't see it for ages because I was too busy sticking an old rotten fence-post out through the slits in the pillbox, pretending it was a gun and firing at imaginary ships. It was only after I'd stopped doing that and gone into the corner to have a piss that I looked over into the other corner where there was a pile of rusty cans and old bottles; there I saw the jagged stripes of the sleeping snake.

I decided what I was going to do almost immediately. I went outside quietly and found a length of driftwood of the appropriate shape, came back to the Bunker, caught the snake by the neck with the piece of wood and bundled it into the first rusty can I could find which still had a lid.

I don't think the snake had fully wakened up when I caught it, and I was careful not to jar it as I ran back to where my brothers and Blyth were lying on the grass. Eric had rolled over and had one hand under his head and the other over his eyes. His mouth was open slightly and his chest moved slowly. Paul lay in the sunlight curled up into a little ball, quite still, and Blyth was lying on his stomach, hands under his cheek, the stump of his leg drawn up in the flowers and the grass, sticking out from his shorts like some monstrous erection. I went closer, still clutching the rusty can in my shadow. The gable end of the house looked down on us from about fifty metres away, windowless. White sheets flapped feebly in the back garden. My heart beat wildly and I licked my lips.

I sat down by the side of Blyth, careful not to let my shadow cross his face. I put one ear to the can and held it still. I couldn't hear or feel the snake stir. I reached for Blyth's artificial leg, lying smooth and pink by the side of his back and in his shadow. I held the leg to the can and took the lid away, sliding the leg over the hole as I did so. Then I slowly turned the can and the leg the other way up, so that the can was over the leg. I shook the can, and felt the snake fall into the leg. It didn't like it at first, and moved and beat against the sides of the plastic and the neck of the can while I held it and sweated, listening to the hum of the insects and the rustling of the grass, staring at Blyth as he lay there still and silent, his dark hair ruffled now and again by the breeze. My hands shook and the perspiration ran into my eyes.

The snake stopped moving. I held it longer, glancing at the house again. Then I tipped the leg and the can over until the leg was lying at the same angle on the grass as it had been, behind Blyth. I took the can carefully away at the last moment. Nothing happened. The snake was still inside the leg, and I couldn't even see it. I got up, walked backwards towards the nearest dune, threw the can way high over the top of it, then came back, lay down where I'd been sitting earlier, and closed my eyes.

Eric woke first, then I opened my eyes as though sleepily, and we woke little Paul, and our cousin. Blyth saved me the trouble of suggesting a game of football by doing it himself. Eric, Paul and I got the goalposts together while Blyth hurriedly strapped his leg on.

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Nobody suspected. From the first moments, when my brothers and I stood there incredulous as Blyth screamed and jumped and tugged at his leg, to the tearful farewell of Blyth's parents and Diggs taking statements (a letter even appeared in the *Inverness Courier* which was picked up for its curiosity value by a couple of the Fleet Street rags), not one person even suggested that it might have been anything other than a tragic and slightly macabre accident. Only I knew better.

I didn't tell Eric. He was shocked by what had happened and genuinely sorry for Blyth and his parents. All I said was that I thought it was a judgement from God that Blyth had first lost his leg and then had that replacement become the instrument of his downfall. All because of the rabbits. Eric, who was going through a religious phase at the time which I suppose I was to some extent copying, thought this was a terrible thing to say; God wasn't like that. I said the one I believed in was.

At any rate, such was the reason *that* particular patch of ground got its name: the Snake Park.

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I lay in bed, thinking back on all this. Father still hadn't come back. Perhaps he was going to stay out all night. That was extremely unusual, and rather worrying. Perhaps he had been knocked down, or had died of a heart attack.

I've always had a rather ambivalent attitude towards something happening to my father, and it persists. Death is always exciting, always makes you realise how alive you are, how vulnerable but so-far-lucky; but the death of somebody close gives you a good excuse to go a bit crazy for a while and do things that would otherwise be inexcusable. What delight to behave really badly and still get loads of sympathy!

But I'd miss him, and I don't know what the legal position would be about me staying on here by myself. Would I get all his money? *That* would be good; I could get my motorbike now instead of having to wait. Jesus, there'd be so many things I could do I don't even know where to start thinking about them. But it would be a big change, and I don't know that I'm ready for it yet.

I could feel myself starting to slide off into sleep; I began to imagine and see all sorts of weird things behind my eyes: maze-shapes and spreading areas of unknown colours, then fantastic buildings and spaceships and weapons and landscapes. I often wish I could remember my dreams better. . . .

Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my young cousin Esmerelda, more or less on a whim.

That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again.

It was just a stage I was going through.

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