

Colophon

This is issue 40 of *Plokta*, edited by Steve Davies, Alison Scott and Mike Scott. It is available for letter of comment (one copy to Mike's address is fine, we pass them over to each other), trade (copies to each of our addresses if possible, please), contribution, editorial whim, or for a generous second home allowance and an unlimited line of credit at John Lewis.

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Dr Plokta: Chemistry Master



Miss Wynne Jones: Head Girl

Editorial

We've been trying to put it off as long as possible, but have finally faced up to it; this is the fortieth issue of *Plokta* and we have officially reached middle age. Life begins at 40, or so they tell us.

The cover is dedicated to Dave Hicks, who while reviewing our very first issue back in *Critical Wave* #46 said, "...there's less likelihood of there being a *Plokta* #2, 3, 4 and so on in the same vein..."

For those of you getting this at the con, welcome to Sunningdale Park, home of what was for many years known as the Civil Service College for many years, but is now called the National School of Government. Our theme this time is children's literature. We're hoping that it will be a lovely weekend and we can move several of the sillier programme items out onto one of the many lawns. We have the normal <plokta.con> assortment of panels, games, talks, guests, and books for you. And an art display! A larger version of our cover; the 46 covers of *Plokta* issues and their supplements.

We'd like to thank our Guests of Honour for the convention, Diana Wynne Jones and Paul Cornell, both for agreeing to be our guests and also for kindly contributing most of the content for this issue of the fanzine. As we go to

press, we're sorry to hear that Diana is unwell and won't be able to attend the convention. We send her our best wishes for a speedy recovery.

We know *Plokta* has a tendency to look like a round-robin Christmas newsletter, but we still thought you'd like to know that Steven has just won the British Shogi Championship. What's shogi, we hear you ask. It's Japanese chess, distinguished because when you take an opponent's piece, you can turn it round and use it on your side. Cool, huh? Anyway, this game is played by millions of people in Japan, and a couple of dozen in the UK, and Steven's prize, as well as a laughably small trophy, is a free trip to New York to play in the World Amateur Championship. Wish him luck. And apologies to those of you who receive Alison's round-robin Christmas letter, because you're going to read that again in December.

Smoffing cognoscenti will have realised that something odd is going on in the UK. There's a new bid about for a UK Worldcon, probably for 2014, with various sites under consideration, including, most excitingly, London. The bid features an all-star committee and is co-chaired by Steve Cooper and our very own Mike Scott. Deputy Chairs are Alice



Master Cornell: Head Boy

Lawson and James Bacon, and the rest of the committee spots are being filled with a variety of people who combine delusions of grandeur with an inability to run away very fast.

The perceptive amongst you will note that we've done three *Ploktas* so far this year. We're tired now and need a holiday. Fortunately, we're planning one, of the busman's variety; we will collectively be providing the newsletter at this year's Worldcon, Antici-(say it, Frankie!)-pation. See you in the bar. *[Do they have bars at Worldcons?—Ed.]*

YES, "FLUFFY"
IS THE WORD

IT DOES SEEM
A LITTLE
LIGHTWEIGHT

COMPARED TO THIS,
CANDYFLOSS IS
REINFORCED CONCRETE



No locs this time, as the previous issue wasn't long ago, but we have an Illo of Comment from D West.

Samantha's Diary

By Diana Wynne Jones

Recorded on BSQ SpeekEasi Series 2/89887BQ and discovered in a skip in London's Regent Street.

December 25th 2233

Tired today and having a lazy time. Got back late from Paris last night from Mother's party. My sister is pregnant and couldn't go (besides, she lives in Sweden) and Mother insisted that *one* of her daughters was there to meet our latest stepfather. Not that I did meet him particularly. Mother kept introducing me to a load of men and telling me how rich each of them were: I think she's trying to start me on her own career which is, basically, marrying for money. Thanks, Mother, but I earn quite enough on the catwalk to be happy as I am. Besides, I'm having a rest from men since I split up with Liam. The gems of Mother's collection were a French philosopher, who followed me around saying 'La vide ce n'est pas le neant,' (clever French nonsense meaning 'The void is not nothing,' I think), a cross-eyed Columbian film director, who kept trying

to drape himself over me, and a weird millionaire from goodness knows where with diamante teeth. But there were others. I was wearing my new Stiltskins which caused me to tower over them. A mistake. They always knew where I was. In the end I got tired of being stalked and left. I just caught the midnight bullet train to London, which did not live up to its name. It was late and crowded out and I had to stand all the way.

My feet are killing me today.

Anyway I have instructed Housebot that I am Not At Home to anyone or anything and hope for a peaceful day. Funny to think that Christmas Day used to be a time when everyone got together and gave each other presents. Shudder. Today we think of it as the most peaceful day of the year. I sit in peace in my all-white living room—a by-product of Mother's career, come to think of it, since my lovely flat was given to me by my last-stepfather-but-one—no, last-but-two now, I forgot.

Oh damn! Someone rang the doorbell and Housebot answered it. I know I told it not to.

Did I say we don't give Christmas presents now? Talk about famous last words. Housebot trundled back in here with a *tree* of all things balanced on its flat top. Impossible to tell what *kind* of tree, as it has no leaves, no label to say who sent it, nothing but a small wicker cage tied to a branch with a fairly large brown bird in it. The damn bird pecked me when I let it out. It was not happy. It has gone to earth under the small sofa and left droppings on the carpet as it ran.

I thought Christmas trees were supposed to be green. I made Housebot put the thing outside in the patio, beside the pool, where it sits looking bare. The bird is hungry. It has been trying to eat the carpet. I went on the net to see what kind of bird it is. After an hour of trying, I got a visual that suggests the creature is a partridge. A game bird apparently. Am I supposed to *eat* it? I know they used to eat birds at Christmas in the old days. Yuk. I got on the net again for partridge

food. 'Sorry, dear customer, but there will be no deliveries until the start of the Sales on December 27th, when our full range of luxury avian foods will again be available at bargain prices.' Yes, but what do I do *now*?

Oh hooray. Housebot has solved the problem by producing a bowl of tinned sweetcorn. I shoved it under the sofa and the creature stopped its noise.

Do trees need feeding?

December 26th 2233

I do not believe this! *Another* tree has arrived with *another* partridge in a cage tied to it. This time I went haring to the front door to make them take it away again, or at least make whoever was delivering it tell me where the things were coming from. But all the man did was to shove a birdcage into my hands with two pretty white pigeons in it and go away. The van he drove off in was unlabelled. I raged at Housebot for opening the door, but that does no good. Housebot only has sixty sentences in its repertoire and just kept saying, 'Madam you have a delivery,' until I turned its voice off.

We have had a partridge fight under the sofa.

I took the pigeon cage outside into the patio and opened it. But will those birds fly away! I seem to be stuck with them too. At least they will eat porridge oats. The partridges won't. We have run out of tinned sweetcorn.

I give up. I'm going to spend the rest of the day watching old movies.

Liam called. I asked him if he had had the nerve to send me four birds and two trees. He said, 'What are you talking about? I only rang to see if you'd still got my wristwatch.' I hung up on him. Oaf.

December 27th 2233

The Sales start today! I was late getting off to them because of the beastly bird food. When I brought up Avian Foodstuffs, I found to my disgust that the smallest amount they deliver is in



Madame Flick: French Mistress

twenty kilo bags. Where would I put all that birdseed? I turned the computer off and went out to the corner shop. It was still closed. I had to walk all the way to Carnaby Street before I found anything open and then all the way back carrying ten tins of sweetcorn. I had promised to meet Carla and Sabrina in Harrods for coffee and I was so late that I missed them.

Not a good day. *And* I couldn't find a single thing I wanted in the Sales.

I came home—my Stiltskins were killing me—to find, dumped in the middle of my living room, yet another tree with a partridge tied to it, a second cage of two white pigeons and a large coop with three different birds in it. It took me a while to place these last, until I remembered a picture book my second stepfather had given me when I was small. Under H for Hen there was a bird something like these, except that one was round and brown and gentle looking. Not these. Hens they may be, but they have mean witchy faces, ugly speckled feathers and floppy red bit on top that makes them look like some kind of alien. When I got home, they were engaged in trying to peck one another naked. The room was full of ugly little feathers. I shrieked at Housebot and then made it take the lot out into the patio, where I made haste to let the beastly hens out. They ran around cackling and pecking the partridges, the potted plants and the three trees. They were obviously hungry. I sighed and got on to Avian Foodstuffs again. Problems there. Food for which kind of bird? they queried. Hens, I tapped in. Pigeons. Partridges. They have just delivered three twenty kilo sacks. They are labelled differently, but they look suspiciously the same inside to me. I know because I opened all three and scattered a heap from each around the patio—and another heap indoors because I have had to rescue the partridges. They all eat all kinds.

Exhausted after this. I phoned Carla and Sabrina. Sabrina was useless. She had just found some Stiltskins half price in pink and couldn't think of anything else except should she buy them. 'Toss a coin,' I told her. Carla was at least sympathetic. 'Help!' I told her. 'I'm being stalked by a nutter that keeps sending me birds.'

'Are you sure it isn't one of Liam's practical jokes?' Carla asked. Shrewd point. It does. He probably rang with that nonsense about his watch just to make sure I was home. 'And haven't you told your Housebot thingy not to let any of this livestock in?' Carla said.

'I have, I *have*!' I cried out. 'But the darn thing takes not the blindest bit of notice!'

'Reprogramme it,' Carla advised. 'It must have slipped a cog or something.'

Or Liam reprogrammed it, I thought. So I spent an hour with the manual, pushing buttons, by which time I was so livid that I rang Liam. Got his answering service. Typical! I left an abusive message—which he probably won't hear because of Housebot trying to clean up feathers and making the howling noise it does when it chokes—but it relieved my feelings anyway.

December 28th 2233

I spent a glorious morning at the Sales and came back with six bags of Wonderful Bargains, to find I have four parrots now. *Plus* one more partridge (and tree), two more pigeons, and three more of those unspeakable hens. Housebot has ignored my attempt at programming as if I'd never tried. The patio is now a small forest full of droppings. The pigeons sit on the trees and the hens rush about below. Indoors are four scuttling partridges and four of those large rings on sticks where parrots are supposed to perch. Not that they do. The red one has taken a liking to my bedroom. The green one flies about all the time, shouting swearwords, and the multicoloured two perch anywhere so long as it isn't their official perches. I have put those in the closet because Housebot stops whenever it runs into one. I have ordered a twenty kilo sack of Avian Feed (parrots), which is actually different from the others and which the parrots mostly consume from saucers on the kitchen table. I walk about giving a mad laugh from time to time. I am inured. I am resigned.

No I am NOT!

Someone has taught those damn parrots to shout, 'Samantha! I *love* you!' They do it all the time now.

I put on my most austere beautiful clothes and my Stiltskins and stormed round to Liam's flat. He looked terrible. He was in his nightclothes. He hadn't shaved or combed his curls and I think he was drunk. His flat was just as terrible. I saw it because as soon as he opened the door I marched in with Liam backing in front of me, shouting at the top of my voice. I admit that the nightclothes made me angrier still because it was obvious to me he had a woman in there. But he hadn't actually. He was just lying about. He said, 'Just shut up and tell me what you're yelling about.' So I did. And he laughed. This made me furious. I yelled, 'You are stalking me with *birds*!' and to my great surprise I burst into tears.

To my further surprise, Liam was almost nice about it. He said, 'Now look, Sammy, have you any idea how much parrots cost?' I hadn't. He told me. It was a lot. 'And before you get suspicious that I know,' he said, 'I only know because I did an article on them last month. Right? Since when did I have enough money for four parrots? And I don't even know where you buy hens, let alone partridges. So it's somebody else doing this to you, not me. He has to be a rich practical joker, and he has to know



Mr Cain: Zen Master



Miss Mason: Matron

how to get at your Housebot to make it ignore your orders and let these birds in. So think around all the rich men you know and then go and yell at the likely ones. Not me.'

I gave in. 'So I've walked all this way for nothing,' I said. 'And my feet hurt.'

'That's because you wear such silly shoes,' he said.

'I'll have you know,' I said, 'that these are the very latest Stiltskins. They cost me thousands.'

He laughed, to my further indignation, and told me, 'Then go home in a taxi.'

While I was waiting for the taxi, Liam put his arm round me—in an absent-minded way, as if he had forgotten we weren't still together—and said, 'Poor Sammy. I've had a thought. What kind of trees are they?'

'How should I know?' I said. 'They haven't any leaves.'

'That is a problem,' Liam said. 'Can you do me a favour and let me know if what your stalker sends next is something quite valuable?'

'I might,' I said, and then the taxi came. I don't like these latest taxis. A mechanical tab comes out of the meter that says TIP and it's always huge. But it was probably worth it to know that Liam hasn't been doing this to me.

December 29th 2233

Whatever idea Liam had, he was *quite right!* The usual tree and avians started arriving, one more partridge, more hens, more pigeons and four more parrots, noisy ones. I left Housebot, who had traitorously let them in, to deal with the darn creatures—although I have to feed the things because I can't get Housebot to get it through its circuitry that living things have to eat: Housebot simply goes round clearing up the piles of birdseed unless I order it to stop. Anyway, I left it shunting coops and the latest tree into the patio and set off for the Sales. I was halfway down the steps outside, when a courier arrived and made me sign for a smallish package.

Someone's sent me a book now! I thought disgustedly as I went back indoors. I nearly didn't open it, but, because of what Liam had said, I thought I might as well. What are valuable books? I thought as I tore off wrapping. Antique Bibles? First editions of Winnie the Pooh? But it wasn't a book. A book-sized jewel case fell on the floor. I picked that up quickly before Housebot could clear it away. I gasped a bit when I opened it. There were five rings in it, all of them very flashy and valuable-looking. One bulged with diamonds—or what looked like diamonds—and the rest looked like sapphires, emeralds and equally valuable stones, all in gold settings. And there was a note on top, not in real handwriting, if you see what I mean, but in that kind of round, careful writing that shop assistants use when you ask them to include a message. It said:

From your ardent admirer.
Marry me.

'*Blowed* if I will!' I said aloud.

The rings are all too small. I think that proves it wasn't Liam. He once bought me an engagement ring, after all, and he knows that my fingers are rather wide at the base. Unless he's being very cunning, of course. Whoever sent the rings seems to have very flashy taste. They all reminded me so much of the kind of glass and plastic rings that people give you when you are a little girl that I took the whole case of them with me when I went out to the Sales and had them checked out by a jeweller. And they are

real. I could buy five more pairs of Stiltskins if I sold them. Well!

I meant to tell Liam, but I met Carla in Oxford Street and I forgot. When I told her, she wanted to know if I was thinking of marrying the unknown stalker. 'No way!' I told her. 'My mother probably would, though.'

December 30th 2233

Oh my God! I have six geese now. As well as another tree, another partridge, further pigeons, more hens, and four extra parrots (making twelve of them and bedlam). I couldn't believe these geese. I got to the door just as a whole team of men finished handing them indoors. The last one rode in on top of Housebot. They are *big* birds and not friendly. At least they are too large to attack the partridges under the sofa, but five of them went out into the patio and started subduing the hens at once. The shrieks and cackling out there actually drowned out the yells from the parrots. But one goose stayed indoors and seems to have gone broody on the sofa cushions. She stretched out a long angry neck and tried to peck me when I made an effort to persuade her to join the rest outside. So there she sits, large, boatshaped and white, with her yellow beak swivelling about to make sure I don't disturb her and her shoebutton eyes glaring unnervingly.

The only good thing about this morning was that the same courier turned up with another parcel of rings. He is a nice young man. He seems awed by me. He said hesitatingly while I was signing for the delivery, 'Excuse me, miss, but aren't you on that media clothes show? Catwalk?' I said yes, I was, but we weren't filming at the moment. He sort of staggered away, thoroughly impressed.

The rings today are all antique fancy gold. With the same message as yesterday. Liam couldn't have afforded any of this, even if he mortgaged his flat, his pay and his soul. I forgive him.

And I supposed I should feed the geese. I got on to Avian Foodstuffs again and they sent round a waterproof sack of slimy green nibbles. The geese don't seem to care for them. They ate all the henfood instead. The hens protested and got gone for again. To shut them all up, I

tipped out one whole sack of henfood in the corner of the patio and this just caused another furious battle. Then it rained and the geese all came indoors. The beam that opens and shuts the sliding doors to the patio is set low so that Housebot can get out there to clean the pool, and it turns out to be just goose height.

I then discovered that geese are the most incontinent creatures in the universe. My living space is now covered with lumps of excrement, and the geese waddle through it tramping it about with their large triangular feet. You interfere with them at your peril. I cracked and phoned Liam.

He said, 'Don't call me. Your phone is probably bugged, if your Housebot is. Meet me at the cafe on the corner.'

How unwelcoming can you get? To make it worse, that cafe is the one where we always used to meet when we were together. But I ground my teeth, got into rainwear and went.

He was sitting outside in the rain. He looks rather good in rainwear. He had even got me the right kind of coffee. He said, 'What is it now? Geese?'

I was flabbergasted. 'How did you know?'

'And five gold rings yesterday and today?' he said.

'Yes, but all too small,' I said.

'Ah,' he said, looking pleased with himself. 'Then you have an admirer who is not only rich but mindlessly romantic. He is sending you items from an old song—it used to be very popular two hundred years ago—called The Twelve Days of Christmas.'

'Then whoever he is, he hasn't a *notion* how angry he's making me!' I said.

'The idiot thinks he's wooing you,' Liam said. 'He probably belongs to one of those societies where they trail about in medieval clothes, or armour and so forth. But he's also up to date enough to tamper with your Housebot and probably bug your phone. So think of any of the rich men you know who fit this description and then you'll have him. Come on. Think.'

I had been trying to think. But you try thinking with a row of parrots sitting on the rail of your bed and the rest swooping about shouting that they love you. I had made no progress. I sat and watched raindrops plop into my coffee and thought hard. I do know a lot of rich men. You do, in my trade. But they were all mostly mediamen and those are *not* romantic. A more cynical lot you can't imagine. Unless I had annoyed one of them of course... And most of the clothes designers are gay.

'Oh,' said Liam. 'My other conjecture is that he's thoroughly unattractive. I suspect he's used to having to pay a lot to get women interested. Rather pathetic really.'

I instantly thought of the truly unattractive set of fellows Mother had introduced me to on Christmas Eve. 'That's *it*!' I cried out. 'Bless you, Liam! I'll phone Mother this evening.'

'I don't think it's your mother doing it,' he said.

'No, no,' I said and explained. He agreed that I might be on the right track and we talked it over for a while. Then he said, 'By the way, the trees will be pear trees,' and handed me a list. 'So you'll know what to expect next,' he told me and got up and left. Just like that.

I was too angry to look at the list. I wish I had.

December 31st 2233 New Year's Eve

I'm going to three parties today, so I'm getting out of my bird infested flat as soon as I can. But I did ring Mother. I raved at her rather. She may have thought I was insane at first, but when I calmed down and described the geese—by the way, the one on the sofa had laid an egg when I got back—she began to see I might be having real trouble. She said, in the cautious, respectful way she always talks about money, 'Well, you *might* be talking about Franz Dodeca, I suppose. Not that he would do a thing like that, of course. He owns Multiphones and SpeekEasi and Household Robotics and he's a multi-millionaire and he's naturally very much respected.'

'Which is he?' I asked. 'Of the freaks you introduced to me.'



Mr Davies: Fencing Master

'Not *freaks*, darling,' she said reproachfully. 'He was the one with the charming diamante teeth.'

I thought grimly of this Dodeca, a short fat man in an unbecoming pinstriped suit. A pale freckled creature, I recalled, with thin reddish hair scraped back over his freckled scalp. He kept baring those dreadful glittering teeth at me in creepy smiles. And this idiot owns my diary, my phone and my Housebot! I hoped he swallowed one of his teeth and choked. 'Tell him,' I said to Mother, 'to stop sending me *birds*. Tell him he hasn't got a chance. Tell him he's destroyed his already non-existent chances by stalking me this way. Tell him no and *go away*!'

Mother demurred. I could tell she was reluctant to pass up the chance of all that money in the family. But after I had told her at least ten times that there was absolutely *no chance* of my marrying this idiot, even if he owned the *universe*, she said, 'Well, darling, I'll phone him and try to put it tactfully.'

If she did phone dear Franz, she has had no effect. The swans arrived this morning, seven of them. Along with six more geese etcetera, etcetera. At least I got five more gold rings. They came with a note of dreadful pleading, signed 'Your eternally loving Franz,' which looked odd in round shop-assistant writing. I suppose Mother must have phoned the man, since he seems to know that his

cover is now blown. But it doesn't seem to have stopped him

The swans had obviously been drugged. The delivery crew carried them in big drooping armfuls, through the living room and into the patio, where they carefully wedged them into the pool. The geese waddled in after. There are now twelve of them and they're laying eggs everywhere. As if it wasn't enough to be overrun with hens—also laying—and a new set of green screaming parrots. The swans were just waking up when I left. Housebot tried to make me an omelette before I went and I nearly threw up.

January 1st 2234 New Year's Day

Thank heavens! Even the Dodeca millions can't make anyone in this country work on New Year's Day. No further birds arrived. Nothing came. Relief! Or it would be if the swans didn't fight the geese all the time. And I realised when I got in around four this morning that the place smells. Horribly. Of bird droppings, rotting seeds and old feathers. Housebot can't keep up with the cleaning.

I shall have to stop wearing my Stiltskins. My feet are killing me after last night. One of my big toes has gone kind of twisted. I have very hazy memories of the fun, though I do recall that I ran into Liam at the Markham's firework party and, besides jeering at my Stiltskins, he wanted to know if I'd consulted his list yet. I said I didn't want to know. I told him about dear Franz too—I think. He



Miss Scott: Headmistress

was, I dimly remember, insistent that I throw away my phone and scrap Housebot. The man has no *idea*!

But this memory has made me realise that I will almost certainly get more swans and more geese tomorrow. I can't rely on Mother to stop them. There is no more room in the patio pool. But it has occurred to me that the big house next door, which belongs to my last—stepfather-but-two, has a large garden with an ornamental as-it-were lake in it. I shall phone Stepdaddy Five. As far as I know, he's still in a hut in Bali, recovering from having been married to Mother.

I got through to him eventually. He was, as ever, sweet about it all. 'Isn't that just like your mother!' he said. 'I know Franz Dodeca slightly. He's a total obsessive, too rich for his own good. Come here to Bali and I'll undertake to keep him off you.'

Well, I couldn't do that. It strikes me as incest. Instead I asked him to lend me the garden of his house next door. He agreed like a shot and gave me the entry code at once. But he warned me that his caretaker gardener might not be pleased. He said he would phone this Mr Wilkinson and explain. 'And keep me posted,' he said. 'Nothing happens here in Bali. It suits me, but I like a bit of distant action from time to time.'

January 2nd 2234

Just as well I made that arrangement with Stepdaddy Five. They brought yesterday's swans etcetera today, plus today's lot. Making fourteen inert, heavy floppy swans and twelve more geese. I showed the lot through Stepdaddy Five's front door and out to the lake in his garden. The geese seemed to like it there. When the trees and the pigeons and the hens came, I showed them out there too. But the parrots had to stay with me because they were not hardy enough, they said. At least I got ten more gold rings.

We are getting seriously short of birdfood. I went round to the corner shop, but they don't open till tomorrow. Avian Foodstuffs are on holiday for the week. Again.

I don't believe this! The swans were not all. I was just about to cross the road from the corner shop when I saw, trudging and bawling down the street, a

whole herd of cows. Eight of them anyway. They were being driven by eight young women who, to do them justice, were looking a bit self-conscious about it. People in cars and on the pavements were stopping to stare. Some folk had followed them from Picadilly, apparently. You don't often see cows in London these days.

My stomach felt queer. I knew they were for me. And they were. Honestly, how can this Dodeca even imagine I might want eight cows? Cows are not in the least romantic. Their noses run and they drop cowpats all the time as they walk. They dropped more cowpats through Stepdaddy Five's nice hallway as I showed the lot of them out into his garden. I said to the girls, 'If you want to stay, this house has fourteen bedrooms and there's a pizza takeaway down the road. Feel free.' I was feeling more than a little light-headed by then. The parrots don't help.

Now it's got worse. Mr Wilkinson arrived half an hour after the cows and bawled me out for allowing a herd of cows to trample his lawn. I said I would get rid of them as soon as I could. I was going to phone Mother and extract this Dodeca's phone number from her and then phone him and tell him to come and take his livestock *away*. And see how *he* liked it. Before I could, though, a severe woman with a mighty bosom turned up on the doorstep, saying she was from the Bird Protection Trust and that my neighbours across the street had reported me for cruelty to birds. They had, she said, counted one hundred and seven various birds being delivered to my flat—*busybodies!*—where they were certainly overcrowded. I was to release them to better quarters, she said, or be liable for prosecution.

After Mr Wilkinson, she was the last *straw*. I told her to get the hell out.

January 3rd 2234

No, the last straw was today. I did phone Mother last night and she did, after a lot of squirming, give me Dodeca's private number. The trouble was that I didn't know what to *say*, and all these parrots make it so difficult to *think*—not to speak of yet another swan versus goose fight erupting every five minutes. My God those birds can be vicious! Then I sat on

an egg when I started to phone Dodeca and gave up. I said I'd do it today.

Today started with those cowgirls coming round here whining and whingeing. There were beds, but no sheets or blankets next door, they said, and it was not what they were used to. And where did they put the twenty gallons of milk? I said pour it away, why not? And they said it was a waste. Anyway, I got rid of them in the end, but only by ordering a stack of sheets and blankets online, which cost a bomb.

Then the bird deliveries began. By then we were almost out of birdfeed, so I ushered this lot, swans included, into Stepdaddy's Five's garden and raced off to the corner shop. They only had canary food, so I bought all they had of that. I was staggering towards my flat with it when I saw an entirely new sort of van drawing up and Housebot, that traitor, blandly opening my front door to it. The men in it began unloading and putting together a large number of frameworks. I crossed the road and asked them what the hell they were doing.

They said, 'Out of the way, miss. We have to get all these into this flat here.'

I said, 'But what are they?'

'Trampolines, miss,' they said.

This caused me to bolt into my flat and race about scattering canary food and looking for that list Liam gave me. I found it just as they manoeuvred the first trampoline in. There were supposed to be nine of them. How they thought they were going to fit them in I have no idea. As I opened the list, one of the men got attacked by the broody goose on the sofa and they all went outside to let it settle down. Liam had written, 'Ninth day: Nine lords a-leaping; Tenth day: Ten ladies dancing; Eleventh Day: Eleven pipers piping...'

I didn't read any more. I gave a wild wail and raced into my bedroom, where all the parrots seemed to have congregated, and to shrieks of 'I love you, Samantha,' I packed all the parcels of rings into my handbag for safety and raced out again to the nearest public phone, praying it wouldn't have been vandalised.

It wasn't. I got through to Liam. 'What is it now?' he said grumpily.

'Liam,' I said, 'I've got nine trampolines now. Is it really true that I'm going to get ballet dancers and skirling Scotsmen next?'

'Pretty certainly,' he said, 'if you got milkmaids yesterday. Did you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Liam, I have had enough.'

'What do you expect me to do about it?' he said.

'Marry me,' I said. 'Take me away from all this.'

There was a dreadful, long silence. I thought he had hung up on me. I wouldn't have blamed him. But at length he said, 'Only if you can assure me that I'm not just an escape for you.'

I assured him, hand on heart. I told him that the mere thought of Franz Dodeca had made me realise that Liam was the only man for me. 'Otherwise I'd get on a plane and go to my sister in Sweden,' I said. 'Or maybe to Bali, to Stepdaddy Five.'

'All right,' he said. 'Are you coming round here at once?'

'Quite soon,' I said. 'I have to fix Dodeca first.' We then exchanged a surprising number of endearments before I rang off and raced back to my flat for what I sincerely hope was the last time.

I got back just as a minibus drove up and unloaded half a dozen fit-looking young men in scarlet robes and coronets and three more middle-aged ones, who looked equally fit. Most of them were carrying bottles of champagne and clearly looking forward to some fun. They all poured into my flat ahead of me. I had to sidle among them and past the men squeezing the last trampoline in and past several enraged geese and terrified partridges to get to my phone—a phone dear Franz was certainly bugging. While I punched in his number, the chaps all climbed on the trampolines and began solemnly bouncing up and down. One of the geese accidentally joined them. I had to put my hand over one ear to detect that I had got Dodeca's answering service. Good.

'Franz, dear,' I said after the

beep. 'I'm so grateful for all the things you've been sending me. You've really gone to my heart. Why don't you come here and join me in my flat? Come soon. And then we'll see.' And I rang off, with the delightful thought of dear Franz arriving and the traitor Housebot letting him in among all this.

More than all this it would be, I discovered as I left. Another herd of cows was coming down the street, lowing and cow-patting as it came. From the other direction, I could see the big lady from the Birds Protection or whatever it was, advancing. She seemed to have a policeman with her. And Mr Wilkinson was just storming out of Stepdaddy Five's front door. I ran the other way, past the herd of cows. And who should I see but the nice courier lad just getting out of his van with a fifth parcel of rings.

I stopped him. 'You know me, don't you?' I said. 'Can I sign for them now and save you coming to my door?' He innocently did let me and I raced away with the parcel. 'I've brought you a dowry!' I said to Liam as I arrived—

'No, Liam, don't! I haven't finished yet!'

A male voice: 'Don't be stupid, Sam. You know he'll be listening in. Do you want him to know where we are? I'm going to throw this away before you tell him any more.'

The diary ends here



Signora De Cesare: Home Economics

A Virgin's Guide to Toilet Etiquette

By Phil Bradley

This is in the word of advice column to stop you looking like a total idiot, should there be any danger of this happening—if you're travelling on Virgin Trains (which is probably about as sane as sitting in a car going no-where on the M25), but if you are, and you decide to go to the loo, there are three buttons when you get inside their superdooper water closets. Button one, marked 'close door' closes the door. Button two, marked 'lock door', locks the door. Button three, marked 'open door' opens the door. 3 buttons. 3 simple operations that even a retarded monkey on prozac could manage on a bad day blindfold. Take note of these buttons and use them.

If you don't, it's entirely likely that someone like me, who wants to use the loo is going to come up to the door of the hi-tech hole in the ground and press 'open'. When this happens, several things will occur, almost simultaneously. You'll look up from where you're sitting on the loo, doing your business. You'll see the door opening, people struggling to get past on their way to the buffet car, and other people generally milling around doing nothing because there isn't a seat for them, and you'll realise that you're about to spend the rest of your life with this horror etched deeply into your brain. That's the first thing. The second thing is that you'll scream. The third thing is that I'll scream. After that, the door will continue to open, wider and wider, like a masochists mouth at the dentist, because the high tech super dooper loo doesn't realise what's going on. Your scream of horror, mingled with my scream of surprise is going to make people look around. And they're going to see, as God is my witness, you sitting on the loo. Which makes you scream again. Louder this time.

Meanwhile I jump back and stamp on someone's foot, which doesn't actually impress them too much, and they'll spill their cup of napalm everywhere, and they'll scream as well. By now the Virgin train looks as though it's playing host to the UK All comers National Screaming

Contest (Midlands Division). Then things start to slow down, as time plays funny tricks on your brain. I say as calmly as I can 'push the button! push the button!'. However, the designers of the super dooper hi tech loo have arranged matters so that it's not possible for you to sit on the loo AND push the buttons at the same time. Oh no. So you have to stand up, which isn't easy with your knickers around your ankles.

So then I'm poised... do I try and turn around and block the view? This won't work because that sucker of a door is large, and growing larger at every second. There's probably a camera crew down the aisle somewhere rushing to get it all on video for the 8 o'clock news summary. So that is a nonstarter. Do I reach into the loo, and try and push the button myself? The trouble with this approach is that the bastard thing is going to know, it IS going to know I've just done that, and it'll shut quicker than a trap on a mouse's neck. And then god help me I'll be stuck inside the loo, with a total stranger sitting on it, screaming. A car in a blizzard on the M25 would be preferable.

So I dither. I'm not usually a ditherer. Dithering is not what I do. But I bloody well do this time. Eventually, you stagger to your feet, clothes around your ankles, and make a stab for the button. Relief is at hand. Well, it would be. Except... except that at this precise moment, the train driver decides to put his brakes on. Hard. Which sends you, you poor humiliated bastard thudding across the cubicle, unable to get your balance, given that your underwear is trying to get you in a grip a large python would be pleased with. You fall to the ground. Meanwhile I'm still outside the door, my dilemma even worse now—do I come in and help, or stay outside? What IS the correct thing to do here? I'll bet that it's not in Mrs Fotheringdales Book of Etiquette I can assure you. So I stand by the door, pointing desperately at the buttons, almost hopping up and down in rage, frustration and embarrassment on your behalf 'the button! push the button!' I



*Cain Major: Head Girl (Lower School)
Cain Minor: Bad Example*

scream. Eventually you are able to reach up, and push the button, but by now, I've decided that dithering isn't what it's cracked up to be, and have made a move to reach in, across your prostrate body and push the bloody thing myself.

Again, things happen all at once. I reach in, you push the button and the door decides to imitate one of the more wicked traps from Indiana Jones and the Toilet of Doom and snaps shut on my wrist. Of course, you breathe a sigh of relief, since your part of the ordeal is over. But not so fast my friend with a face hotter than the sun. Because the door, sensing an obstruction, leaps open again. This time however, things go a little better, since I dive out of the way, and you hit the button again.

The door closes, with you safely on the inside, me safely on the outside and peace can once again reign supreme. The good news is that you have now suffered *the* most embarrassing thing that will ever happen to you in your entire life. Nothing will ever be able to match it. Meanwhile, I have to go off and find another loo, since there is no way you're going to open it again are you? In fact, you're going to stay there for the rest of the journey, and will only emerge when you are sure that everyone has got off at Euston.

Traveling anywhere? Trust me, don't do it. It's a Bad Idea.

Science Fiction

By Paul Cornell

Empt tried to ignore the horrible thing that Shant had just said to him. He didn't want to think about it. So he sat there, watching the windows buckle. The light in Shant's office was playing in and out in a slow breathing motion as the glass stretched back and forth. It felt like they were all lightly springing up and down in a piano chord that had just been struck.

The effect wasn't visible everywhere, just in places with a particular sort of window.

And of course, Shant always wanted to have a particular sort of everything.

Empt liked to think that the warp of the windows was caused by the weight of the 2050s bearing down on this end of the Corridor. But that was because he'd lived through the 2050s back in Time Classic, and that decade was a similar weight on his own shoulders.

Being with Shant always made him think about what caused things. Why he did what he did. Why he couldn't do certain things.

He hated being with Shant.

Westerns were popular. Stories about the provenance of antiques were popular. Stories set during the short reign of Phelandeer in North West India were popular, as every culture shouted itself from up and down the Corridor.

Whatever the Tall Men from the other end of the Corridor liked *would* be popular, if they'd ever stop from their walking and find some money in there and purchase something so we could know what that might be.

But what Empt wanted to write wasn't popular.

Shant was the editor of a Science Fiction magazine.

Shant wasn't going to go out of business, obviously, not unless he put in a request to the analogue supervisors for a change to be made. And why would he do that? He was the saint of lost causes. He seemed to like to give a bunch of

depressives, and were *they* all now having the best time, a home to go to.

He especially seemed to like to have Empt come over and pitch him hopeless tales. 'Like' not in a kindly, avuncular, way, but in a sadistic, some small satisfaction derived from the timeful men left drowning in timelessness sort of way.

Exactly that sort of way.

If only Empt could have come up with a better way to say what that sort of way was. Then he'd know himself, and be able to write Science Fiction.

Empt had his arms full of the soft toys, with the big warm rug wrapped around him and a hot drink in his hand. Shant provided these things to make his sadism all the more precise. He'd taken a sip of the drink and asked what it was, but that had made Shant go into a long explanation of farming practices, import duties and global trade, and Empt had had to slurp louder and louder until he stopped. Empt hadn't even heard what the drink was called.

He took another sip of it now, and gathered his confidence to return to the matter at hand. To that horrible phrase Shant had just used. 'They don't suit your present needs,' he repeated, boggled. 'Don't tell me they don't suit your present needs when there isn't a present!'

Genres died. Even now people didn't. *Melodrama. Kitchen sink.* Some, like pantomime, kept the name going through many deaths. The genres that died after the Time Ring came online were now just what played in those places way down the Corridor where nobody fashionable went.

Empt wished he hadn't thought of pantomime. The way it died and resurrected all the time.

That had taken his thoughts back to *Doctor bloody Who*.

Nine different flourishing ranges, each with a different audience and continuity. The readership was factionalised, divided into communities that each emphasised one particular aspect of the Canon. The

interaction between these factions, and the contempt they felt for each other, seemed to keep the whole genre going. Reading a text, reviewing it, not reading another one, had all become political acts. There were some things all the readerships agreed upon: *Doctor Who* was not in any way a children's genre, but there could be no depiction of, or even mention of, sexual practices in genre works; the work of previous authors established a template, a fixed form which it was acceptable to simply repeat elements from, but deviation from which introduced the possibility that a new faction might be developed. There was a complexity of rules behind when that might happen, and when change was acceptable, that Empt suspected had been invented just to keep outsiders in the dark.

Several of the factions had established communities at the absolute lower end of the Corridor, living near the Time Ring, in order to be as close to the 1970s as possible. A more radical group had sent an expedition back in time—that is, they'd taken their bicycles back down the Corridor—to assassinate Margaret Atwood before she invented *Doctor Who* for herself. All it came to was some shouting at her gate and a sinister package left on her step, which turned out to contain some warm milk in small bottles and was marked with a return address.

Empt envied that life from such a distance. He did not have the right stuff to be a *Doctor Who* writer, and thus was barred from the only popular market for his fantasies. Attempting to write Science Fiction was a poor substitute.

He would love to have had the aut.fan geneset. He loved what he saw of those superior people who wanted justice and fairness and the rules to dominate human life, and not frail chaos. The way they cut through social convention to get to the point, to the truth, thrilled him. Their humour was based on dissonance, on things not being as they should be. There was another strand that took huge, cosmic, concepts and compared them in

absurd splendour to the everyday things of home and hearth.

Aren't we still far from the pompous business of the interstellar? the jokes asked. *Aren't we still so far from perfection? Why can't we tell the truth?*

Even now the Corridor had come, it was funny because it was true. It was a subtle wit, an editor's wit, and he tried to emulate it, but he wasn't made the right way, so he couldn't. Ironically.

The *Doctor Whos* also had the Canon, in all their varying editions of it, their final arbiter of all life. It was said that the Canon contained a reference to everything that could ever happen or had ever happened. Empt had found in Science Fiction only a distant echo of the comforts of the Canon: an urge towards completeness, to creating universes for comfort. But for some reason these SF universes insisted at the same time that they were possible, and realistic, and a word was often used that he didn't understand: 'edgy'.

'Edgy but comfy' Shant had once said to him. 'That's what I'm after.'

Empt felt then that now he should be able to understand Canon completely, because now he'd heard everything.

Empt had tried to change his geneset by the 'taxi driver' method. He'd tried to change his physical brain by changing how his mind worked, as taxi drivers added new detail to their hippocampus by memorising the streets of cities. He had taken the Vaj, the watchthrough, the journey of viewing one episode a day, every day, from the First Story to the Last Certain Canonical Story (very much a misnomer, actually, because it was suggested in some quarters that *nothing* is Canon and everyone else disagreed about where the Canon ended). But the rosy circle on his chart had stayed rosy.

It was said that if you went to the other end of the Corridor, to the Heat Death of the Universe, and drove back one of the hire cars that tended to end up there, you moved your set towards aut.fan for some reason. But Empt wouldn't hear of doing that. A *Doctor Who*, or even a Science Fiction reader, he maintained, would have a Consensus to hand concerning *why* that should work,

whether it was true or not, and wouldn't do it if he hadn't.

Empt had written many stories about a *different* eccentric with some sort of time machine that wasn't the Time Ring. There were markets for those. Like there were markets for tribute bands. So near and yet so far. They made him want to shake the money off his fingers.

So Empt was writing Science Fiction because he couldn't write *Doctor Who*. Or even *Doctor Who Light*. He had fallen that far. And even down here, they wouldn't buy his stories.

'Listen,' said Shant, oh so gently. 'SF is the hardest possible genre. Look at what you've brought me. This first story, quite retro, which is good... hey, maybe there's an audience for SF that could be the SF of the past... the one you wrote about the people marooned on the asteroid... They don't get out of their problem. They just sit there. They talk about "making it go with some sort of mirror, because mirrors reflect sunlight, don't they?" and then they all die.'

'Well. They would. None of them are scientists or engineers.'

Shant shook his head as if Empt was missing some vital point. 'And turning to *The Shift*...' *The Shift* was a story Empt had written about the transformation of current physics into another set of physical laws. 'There isn't really any science here, is there? As far as I can make out, your heroine keeps moving pieces of paper over each other. A metaphor, I see that. Then she mentions the names of some subatomic particles, there's quite a bit of science mentioned, but none of it seems to actually do anything—'

'I am sorry about that. It's just that there isn't really any actual science that would do that. I just wanted to imply there was.'

'No, no, that's fine. SF is like that. We're meant to know things that might happen in science, but of course we don't, none of this stuff ever actually comes true. And with the Corridor, now it never will. We're really talking, as everyone who's written SF has always said, over and over, in every possible publication, but has never been listened to by anyone in the mainstream and why the hell is that anyway?... about what's happening in the

real world now. And for some reason, in order to do that, we've elected to write about anything but the thing we're writing about. But there's something, I don't know, imprinted in the genre itself that means that the science *has* to be *possibly* right, has to give you that feeling of ooh, it might be true! Even though it never is.'

'I understand that. I have male genes, even if they're not aut!'

'Your problem is that you're just not confident enough to bullshit your readers into thinking that the science —'

'Which isn't real—'

'*Could* be.'

'But they and I both know it isn't.'

'Pretend! Be a magician!'

'Write about a magician?'

'No!' Shant roared. 'Absolutely not! *Be* a magician! It's a metaphor.'

'Like my pieces of paper.'

'Only this one,' Shant growled, bending to stare into Empt's eyes, 'is being described with considerably more force.'

He broke off the glaring after a moment and sighed back to his desk. 'It's because of time,' he muttered. 'Now there isn't any, genres have fixed around specific events and locations from before the Time Ring went online. Which leaves us where? SF, after all, is historical fiction about things that never happened.'

'But that's a thriving genre. There are hundreds of books like that.'

'No, no, you're thinking of *Literature*. Stories about history that went a different way. Alternate universes, they used to be called. I should be more precise. SF is historical fiction about things that never will happen. Or it was. When we didn't know what never would happen and what would. Now we do know, SF has become historical fiction about... nothing.'

'Tough call.'

'Indeed. As I said, the hardest possible genre. It's awful to have to do this without a dogma like *Doctor Who* to help you.'

Empt got to his feet, determined. 'I'll find something to write about.'

'Don't find it. If it can be found, it's not SF.'

'I'm a *good* writer.'

'You've certainly got a great imagination.'

Empt glared at him, shocked. 'And your mother was a whore.'

Empt drove home in his *car*.

The vehicle worked by a process called internal combustion. Fuel was forced into a compressed cylinder where it was ignited by an electrical spark. The cylinder was then forced to expand, providing motive power.

Discuss.

The *Doctor Whos* called it 'a sprightly yellow roadster'. One of their most famous topoi. They had a topos for every occasion. No *realism* could exist, or even be conceived to exist, that was not *gritty*. The *Doctor Whos* didn't have the obsession with reduction that the SFs did, so Empt felt naturally more at home with them, but they had all these other rules of mind that he couldn't make himself right for. 'Curate's egg...' he muttered to himself as he drove. 'Good in parts.' One could never just leave the first part of that quotation hanging and expect the world to get the meaning. One had to demonstrate which side one was on. One had to be sure the world got the meaning.

It was as if all the *Doctor Whos*, even if they were just readers, knew what it was to be a writer. As if their culture had been waiting to make writers.

It was like they'd invented a new language not to liberate themselves—though the references back to their Canons and story codes made communication between them very swift—but to confine themselves. To limit thought that might otherwise run amok. To focus themselves on creation. To make a civilisation, a culture that at first nobody knew about, and when it was known about it was derided, and then...

They had created a whole genre as their home, and knew it. A corner for themselves to stand in.

He ran through their drug slang in his head: A, story A, *100,000 BC* or *An Unearthly Child* depending on which of the two most popular interpretations one followed: that stood for amphetamines, speed, not huge with the Doctor Whos because they were inclined to paranoia and nervous tension anyway. Similarly for C, coke, *Beyond the Sun* or *Inside the Spaceship*. Their favourite drug was *The Keys of Marinus*, just a half being halfway through the story, *The Screaming Jungle*.

'Broton,' he whispered to himself. 'Warlord of the Zygons. Yartek, Leader of the Alien Voord.' That had a kind of poetry to it. You could sing that to the tune of *I'm Into Something Good*.

Only Empt wasn't.

The pathetic fallacy is a problem for writers, because it tells you that when bad things happen to you it's because you've been bad. Sometimes the fallacy coincides with the chaos of the universe, and you get on a run: good things happen because you're a good person.

Empt entered his *house*, a dwelling made of ceramic bricks, arranged around a ventilation and heating system, where he and his pet *cat*, a small feline predator of limited intelligence, made their home. He made himself a cup of strong, sweet tea and sat down.

What if, he thought, the pathetic fallacy sets up a kind of harmonic, a standing wave between events and one's mental attitude that produces a kind of emergent behaviour? You might call that God in the world.

He wondered if they'd considered that when they set up the Corridor. Whoever *they* had been. Everyone had woken up one day and realised time was over, and it was only in the chaos of the next few 'days' that people realised that things like the analogue, a big new device which created 'days', were open to individuals, to organisations, to governments.

Whoever had made this toy had left it for everyone to play with.

He wondered if any of them had thought that the Corridor might sustain that standing wave, that time might somehow be intimately tied in with human consciousness... with the depression of being a writer.

Erm... somehow.

Empt was sure he had it in him to be one of the *Doctor Whos*. He recalled a defining event from his childhood. This had been in the 2050s. You weren't supposed to know about your own defining events, really, not in real life. But he framed such things, and then found that knowing what made you didn't help you rewrite it. Or even, actually, write it.

It had been at junior school. A huge gang of children, himself included, all aged around seven, had been picking sides for a fight. (They'd decided, all of them, in that infinite time of a couple of days, that they didn't like one particular little girl. They were all girls and boys together then, and it was all the same hitting and name calling, before that got separated out into gender with age and awkwardness.)

So they chose and chose, and it soon looked like everyone would be fighting the little girl. There must have been twenty on one side, ganging around a boy called Martin. And there was just the little girl on the other side. They were all going to fight her.

And last to choose was Empt.

He was going to join the big side. Of course he was. That was the only un-stupid thing to do. He remembered taking a step towards them.

But then he stepped back, and went to stand beside the little girl.

His motives had been complicated. He had wondered, he remembered, if a teacher might come along. He had thought even then that there was something dodgy about being one of twenty all attacking a girl. He hadn't been old enough to fancy her, though everyone on the other side had told him he loved her. Then that he *was* her.

More than anything else, he remembered that he'd had a romantic notion inside him. Or perhaps he'd put that in there with age and remembering. That that was his hero thing, when all the other little

boys had had hero things about shooting loads of people or blowing up jungles with their planes.

He would defend the bullied. And not be one of the bullies.

He would be never cruel or cowardly.

The big gang had hit them both a lot, which wasn't so bad, in the way of fights when you're that age, just a lot of grabbing and useless thumping, armoured by pullovers.

The little girl hadn't even been really that pleased with him, or at least he couldn't remember her being. It had just been something that happened. He didn't even remember her name.

But that was why, he felt, he was a *Doctor Who* inside.

That was why he deserved to be.

Empt worked at one of the installations that maintained the stability of the Corridor. One of the Props. It wasn't a skilled job. He and his fellow workers had to enter code from a read out into a keyboard. Nobody knew why. There were surely computers that could have done all this on their own. Perhaps nobody had asked them nicely enough. Perhaps human random error had to be part of the process. Or perhaps not. They were all told, when they joined, that their work was vital, and that doing what they did kept the Corridor going.

Empt was sure that, if he read up in the technical journals, he could have found out the answer. Well, if he'd first managed to get a degree in mathematics. Anyhow, it wasn't a big mystery, but like so many things, that still meant that nobody really knew what it was all about.

Hundreds of them worked at the Prop, and nobody lasted more than a couple of weeks. They moved the *big numbers* from the *display* to the *boards* and kept them in their heads with the *nursery rhymes* as they walked across the *running floor*. After only a few days, Empt had started to find certain big numbers funny, or fond, or annoying, a process which was called *getting your head on*.

The job meant he got money, which he used to purchase goods and services. He

wasn't sure why there still was money, except that he'd die without it. People said there wasn't, further up the Corridor, but who could afford to move there?

That weekend, he started a new story, and tried to keep all fantasy out of it completely.

It was about someone who rode his bicycle from one end of time to the other.

Halfway, Empt put down his pen and wept.

He found himself walking out of his door before he knew what he was doing.

He knew there was no dramatic imperative for him to do so, but even though he was living a story now, he left a note with his next door neighbour, and his keys, and all his money, so she could look after his cat.

And then he left, to walk forever.

He walked through the mean streets of the near future, and then into the complicated realms of the not quite so near future, where nobody really knew what they were doing and sometimes you saw spaceships launching from tattered old camps of rebels, and everything missed everything else and it all got a bit *Star Trek*. He liked those bits, where there was no real textual authority, where Canons disagreed. They reminded him of home.

He walked, feeling hungry now, night after night, day after day, day after night, through polluted futures with sprawling cities, federations rising and falling, empires replacing them and then being replaced themselves. Nobody stopped him. He saw Surrey invaded, many times, but everything was always okay again in a couple of weeks. Still, he decided to walk through Cornwall instead for a while, and that worked out fine, no aliens in sight.

He was walking, he decided, quite a long time after he'd started, to the end of the Corridor. He wanted to see what was at the end of time. Obviously, there'd be

something. A divine power. A being. At the very least an artefact created or found by whoever had made the tunnel. The latter would be unknowable in SF, but meaningful nonetheless, the author of time and space having known but concealed the meaning. It wouldn't be just one of those things that nobody knew. But in *Doctor Who*, there would be character and comfort to that mystery. Beings in robes, according to the *Doctor Whos*, were in control of time, black holes, death, evil, order and chaos. All the major pantheistic roles had been assigned to portly British men with upper class accents.

And so they should be.

Which was weird, because the hero at the centre of that pantheon, the Prometheus who the *Doctor Whos* followed (all the Canons had him giving fire to mankind in the first story) was a very absurd, very existentialist hero, who couldn't find anything inside himself to take seriously.

Somehow, they'd made comfort out of that. Out of this absurd world.

That was yet another reason Empt wanted to be a *Doctor Who*.

He was heading into the sunlit uplands of the far future, a world where teleportation was possible, and everyone walked around in what looked like leather nappies, but still carried briefcases, when he heard the squeaking sound of hard-pedalled bicycles coming up the road behind him.

They were all around him in a moment, the gallant boys. They were dressed in jaunty waistcoats and long coats. A number of them were trying to keep hats on their heads. Their bicycles surrounded him and forced him to stop.

They looked at him with their fierce eyes.

He raised his hands above his head and shouted. 'Doesn't anybody care about history?'

The looks became quizzical.

They put him to the test. He knew the answers better than they did. Which

nearly got him disqualified, because they wondered for a while if he was making up new ones.

They were so afraid of being mocked. Empt understood. The parodies had been so wide of the mark, never captured how strange these new people were, what odd and functional communities they made. And yet the parodies were also exactly true, by the standards of those who did the mocking.

They didn't threaten him, because they were never cruel or cowardly. But he felt threatened from inside himself. He felt he was crawling through a maze in the dark, a fogou of information. What they asked him turned from information to matters of taste, turned into the worrying area of subjectivity. But he was pleased. That meant he was accepted as someone who knew what they were talking about, and could be confronted with matters of Canon.

To his shame, he *chose* a Canon. When Canon is supposed to choose you. He chose the first, central, basic one, that Canon ended with *Survival* and rose again with *Rose*. It was a hard choice.

They might have just gotten back on their bicycles and gone away.

But instead they nodded, and started to laugh at him and at each other.

Empt felt hope in him. He had been accepted. He had found his home.

They took him with them.

They didn't need to eat, they explained, this far down the Corridor. Life had become separated from commerce here.

Almost every member of the group of lads was the leader of it in some way. They all followed some other, distant, leaders. They couldn't agree. But they were not afraid. They said they had been, in Time Classic, but not now, in the Corridor.

They cycled along with a new bike for Empt, plucked from the side of the road where its last user had left it. They went on. The land around them changed, became shiny and pristine, glorious bridges and silver cities filling the space.

One of the leaders began, in little moments of veracity between a rolling mass of jokes and wordplays that Empt, hesitantly, began to join in with, to explain. He talked about how the *Doctor Whos* had gone, in Time Classic, from loving something at a distance to owning it. They'd taken it to pieces. And then they'd taken it, in pieces.

'First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin,' the leader quoted, but Empt didn't know from what. They'd taken over their own primary text as a mob invading a building, a revolution with no real thought or leader, the only idea being that they just wanted it.

And when they had it, they didn't know what to do. They couldn't find a single passion amongst themselves.

But then some of them had started to meet and talk about the way their continuity ate itself. They'd all lived through, by then, years the content of which their own fictions had predicted. The fiction had talked about the arrival of Earth's twin planet, Mondas, in 1985, and then still been there in 1985 to see it not happen.

They had found themselves living through their own imaginative territory.

It gave them the idea that history needn't be a circle. It could be a straight line. Time and space could be made bigger on the inside than the outside.

They finally decided to make the Time Ring on November 23rd, 2063.

'The best the previous geneset could do was global warming,' said the leader.

'They had to make way for homo superior,' said another leader.

Empt understood now. The *Doctor Whos* had finally decided to bully reality like reality had bullied them. Thanks to them, the human race would now be running up and down one Corridor.

Excellent!

How long did it take them to get to the end of the Corridor? How long is a piece of string? Empt found himself in a sexual relationship with one of the lads, but it didn't last. They kept cycling.

The others knew what was there. They just liked to go and see it, to worship themselves and what they had done. It cast a great shadow, across the silvery plains. The shadow was what had been entropy. The first bad and undoing thing: stopped in its tracks. Comfort had been found in the shadow of death.

The *Doctor Whos* had long accepted a future where the Earth would die and be resurrected, many times. But there was an end to the Corridor, because they were also in love with endings. Endings and beginnings, all at once.

Here they became the Tall Men, and sometimes they walked back down into time, and had nothing to do with money.

At the end of the Corridor there was of course, a being. A portly, English being, whose job it was to give everyone who passed here a new body and resurrect every sentient in a time capsule of their own. The mass it would take to do that boggled Empt's physics. But then it didn't: he'd got his physics from the very thing that was doing it. The mass driver at the end of the universe had a grin on his face and a shock of wild, curly hair, and wore a multicoloured costume.

'Oh,' said Empt. 'I was hoping for Tom.'

The Doctor Whos all laughed. And that was when they felt the first rumble underneath their feet.

Shant was talking to another writer when he saw his windows start buckling.

He was listening to the writer explain a very promising idea: what if the universe was a different shape to what we've been told, not just one shape, but a different shape for everyone?

They just had time to fall from one side of Shant's office to the other, and then back.

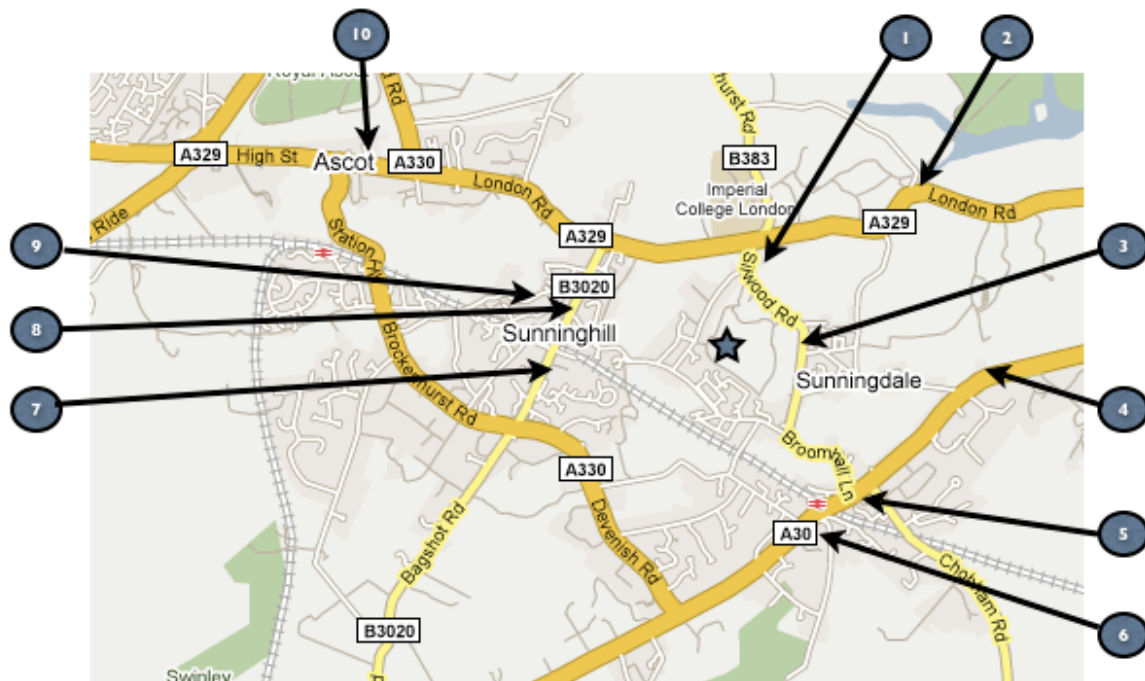
And then the office, the block it was in, and all the streets and homes and businesses and anchors of the past started to slide.

Against their will, the whole of the human race went running down the Corridor.

Towards the future.

Eating Around Sunningdale Park

By Steve Davies



There are three main areas with restaurants in the vicinity of the site: Sunningdale, Sunninghill and Ascot. In general, the restaurants are moderately expensive and we don't recommend just wandering around hoping to find a cheap Indian. You may want to get a taxi (01344 297297 for **A to Z Cars** in Sunninghill) or drive to the area you're heading for. If in doubt, we recommend you try Sunninghill.

The map above shows the location of the site, marked with a star.

1. The nearest restaurant to the site is the **Pazzia Italian Restaurant** (01344 622 038, www.pazzia.co.uk) on the London Road, about 10 minutes' walk from Sunningdale Park (depending which route you take). Pazzia offers an interesting selection of pizzas in addition to the more standard Italian restaurant fare.
2. **Ascot Oriental** (01344 621877, www.ascotoriental.com) is a very up-market oriental restaurant, taking in Chinese, Thai and Japanese elements.
3. The nearest pub to the hotel is the **Royal Oak** (01344 623625) in Sunningdale itself. According to reports, it's pretty variable but it does serve food.

4. **Bluebells** (01344 622722, www.bluebells-restaurant.co.uk) is probably the best restaurant in the area, with aspirations to Michelin star status.

5. Sunningdale is divided into two halves. North of the railway crossing can be found **Pizza Express** (01344 628277), and **Chatts** gastropub (0871 9170007). There are also a coffee bar and **Hamiltons Tea Rooms**. If you prefer takeaway, there is a **Dominos Pizza** (01344 870000) who will deliver to the hotel.

6. Just south of Sunningdale railway crossing, by the station, are a large branch of **Waitrose**, the **Amaro Italian Restaurant** (01344 873333) and **Tigers Pad Indian Restaurant** (01344 621215) as well as a takeaway kebab shop. We ate at the Amaro and weren't especially impressed. The Tigers Pad looks interesting though.

7. Sunninghill is more compact than Sunningdale, but is also split by the railway. South of the railway bridge can be found the **Mezzaluna Italian Restaurant** (01344 876200, recommended by local residents), **Crazy Chicks Cafe** (01344 628600) and an Indian takeaway.

8. North of the railway bridge in Sunninghill can be found perhaps the most promising concentration of restaurants in the area including **The Sun Cafe** (01344 638832), the **Jade Fountain Chinese Restaurant** (01344 627070, recommended by local residents), the **Viceroy Indian Restaurant** (01344 873062) and the **Rajvoog Indian Restaurant** (01344 873636). The Rajvoog does a Sunday buffet menu as well as a selection of thalis (including a vegetarian thali). The Jade Fountain is a large Chinese restaurant with a reasonable selection of vegetarian options.

9. Sunninghill also has a couple of pubs that we recommend, **The Carpenters Arms** (01344 622763), and the **Dog and Partridge** (0871 9170007).

10. The final concentration of restaurants in the area is around Ascot High Street. Because this is next to the race course, prices in this area tend to be a bit on the pricy side. Restaurants around here include **Ascot Spices Indian Restaurant** (01344 623000) and **Ciao Ninety Italian Restaurant** (01344 622285). There is supposed to be a Thai restaurant somewhere in the centre of Ascot, but we haven't been able to track it down as yet.