

AN UNUSUAL ANGLE



GREG EGAN

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ANGLE

by
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Chapter 1

ESTABLISHING SHOTS

Walking the sun-sleepy suburban streets, it seems like I have all the time in the world.

That's a dangerous illusion!

Any minute now the school will come into view, and I still don't know how I will respond to it, how I will deal with it, how I will portray it (let alone how *it* will respond to, deal with (and portray?) *me*). Any minute now I'll turn a corner, someone will shout 'Action!' and that will be it, no rehearsals, no re-takes; our first encounter recorded forever, so much could depend on it.

Nothing will depend on it. What melodramatic crap!

I'll track-in from darkness, that's a good way to start; isolate the school in a frame of blackness, cutting out all distractions. And then what? It's too late to make more plans, here comes the vital (fatal (unexceptional)) corner.

A white rabbit with a sense of occasion sneaks in front of me just in time, and slams a clapperboard. There's no need for it at all, my synch is guaranteed by other means, but it's a touching gesture, before:

Darkness.

Darkness glows deep blue at first, encouragement from earliest childhood (stay in touch!) warming away some of the tingling extremities of fear and excitement.

Closer to the school, a sickly yellow-green stains through, polluting everything. Enough to make me want to turn and run, but turning won't shift that pale smear from centre field, running will only bring it closer.

I distract myself with technicalities: why black is never truly black (no silver in my head, alack!) but the school will not stop oozing its horrible pus all over the frame. Why can't it stay decently isolated by a tunnel of clean darkness?

This isn't turning out (does anything, ever?).

I drop the device, dissolve the perfect, mind-painted matte, let in once more the blue sky and the sunny street. See at once that this is better, not letting that perfectly ordinary building up ahead dominate disproportionately. Keep it unremarkable, almost unnoticeable the way its trees match those on verges nearby.

Just part of the scenery.

What happened, what went wrong? With the warm roads and silent houses eclipsed, it seemed so smug and so strong.

I try to blot out everything but one single drowsy old dwelling (to see if *it* will become magically endowed with power, with smirking, sneaky strength) but I can't seem to obscure the school at all, and I can't concentrate on the edges of the house, so I give up.

Best to keep my eyes right open. I never know what's about to happen.

Splash.

ADSUMMUM COLLEGE announce raised green letters glued to creamy white with brushstrokes and even a few hairs. Painted by multifunctioned caretakers or cheap professional painters? Why call

them hairs when they are surely not but probably rather synthetic fibres? Hairs of a hundred years ago haunt us still.

Go in by front (formal (firm foundations (fighting for freedom))) entrance, even though some are crossing the unoval oval and using side entrances. I must be careful. A new start and all but one wrong step is all it takes.

All what takes?

Suppress it: static. A clear mind and a heavy body.

Creamy white everywhere, the same streaky standard. Rooms formed in squares, all doors facing inwards. Labouring the point, if you ask (but who would?). With those *oh so narrow* exits, what if there's a fire? If those *oh so strong* doors (no cardboard sets here) were closed and bolted?

Three touching squares, or a long rectangle cut by two parallel lines. On ground level: administration at the front, toilets on the first line, canteen on the second line, storage rooms at the far end. Make the shape out of matchsticks. At every corner there is an opening to the outside which can be sealed by heavy double doors swinging in, thick brass bolts burrowing deep into the concrete floor and ceiling. Elsewhere on the ground level, and everywhere upstairs: paint scratched and peeling off sliding doors into sweaty-chalked blackboard classrooms. Operating theatres.

And yes, the look smells like a hospital, all that white frightening.

Rude belch of static from all directions and many distances. There must be sixty, perhaps one hundred loudspeakers. From what I can see at least one at each corner fixed to the upstairs railing, and surely one in every classroom.

Nothing follows.

Looking around about it seems that first years predominate, but that is only an illusion, they would of course stick out being nervous and unfamiliar, while all others would be almost invisibly at ease, walking and talking in the manner of walls and pillars (and who has ever seen walls or pillars walk?).

—Not I!

said the rabbit, darting between my feet then stopping stock still to support the ceiling.

One year even would be so much, with a grid of reference points against which to measure the fall into the future. Such a temptation to simply let go, to drop for five years, but then looking back for support (structure (scale)) I would find only void (and who would wish for that?).

—Not I!

said the rabbit, flying over my head and far away.

Many first years have clotted neatly: safety in numbers and all that. I pivot (not really, but a nice pretence): I suppose I could join, but I am not prepared for the sacrifices, even considering the isolation otherwise. I mean, think of the binding energy! I am happiest as a charge-neutral, colour-neutral, massless member of another species entirely (my wave function unmixed with others'), wandering about using, of course, real tracking shots and never ever zooming.

The front square is half concreted and half jungle with a tiny lake. The middle square is all concrete, the last is neatly mown grass (not jungle; an irritating almost-regularity). Seek symmetry in all things, says a voice within me, but I do have so many voices within me.

Again the sound of electronic indigestion but this time a grey, nervous voice follows uncertainly:

—Would all students move to the Western Quadrangle, now, please. All students to the Western Quadrangle for a brief assembly before sorting into forms.

Such a mundane voice, such a mundane message. The white paint turns to dust and blows away with an odour of antiseptic, revealing faded blue doors and red brick walls, and a sign reading FENKIRK VALE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL. How embarrassing! I'd hoped to keep a small illusion of exoticism going for a day or two, just a change in surface details leaving structures intact, but the tone of that dreary voice bled away my strength of purpose.

So, who cares? I don't *need* it. I just believe that life benefits from the occasional touch-up, a little contrast enhancement here and there. It's hard enough to tell the days apart that if you don't take steps to make small excitements larger it's like coming off the assembly line time after time (and who can live like that?).

—Not I!

said the rabbit, one of thousands milling about me.

Besides, I had nowhere to go with the white-painted Latin-named boarding school. Clinical eeriness is all very well, but it would have ended unpleasantly with someone stuffing cotton wool down my throat and giving me the last rites, or perhaps it would have just faded weakly away. Better this way, with the lump of a fantasy's sudden demise as the first reference point of my new grid.

I have forgotten which way is westwards but I follow the obvious stream as the communal mind cannot be wrong about west, surely. I am led to the square of grass.

It is hot, I am just beginning to feel, not through the air around but straight from the sun, radiation rather than conduction because it is still early and the air is relatively cool, I suppose. I move into the shade of the canteen.

At the end of the square of grass is a concrete stage with all three sides long concrete steps. A microphone on a stand is there and a cord snakes to a socket on the wall behind. The wall is one piece with a roof corrugated in metre-wide triangles, which comes forward a little over the stage but mainly extends back to be flush with the level of the upstairs balcony but separated by the railing. Behind the back wall of the stage, beneath the corrugated roof, is an empty space for canteen queues on bitumenised ground.

A wave of sitting spreads across us and I comply, not wishing to be accused of propagating a disturbance.

Propagating an acceptance is different.

Betrayal one. Who cares? Shut up.

A tall, thin, balding, black-haired, green-eyed, worried man walks up to the microphone. He is Deputy Headmaster Mr Callow and in a few minutes the Principal, Mr Seward, will be along to talk with us, he says.

With us. Sure.

Odd, that, calling himself Deputy Headmaster and then presaging the Principal. Surely you must have a Deputy Headmaster and a Headmaster, or a Deputy Principal and a Principal? Perhaps it's a new compromise between the new and old waves of administrators in the Education Department, coming to grips at last with important issues.

Silence is awkward and unstable and soon collapses into the lower-energy state of a murmur (after emitting a photon). Poor Mr Callow looks unhappy and nervous and strained. I nearly talk to him, nearly tell him that a few mumbling voices are nothing to be concerned about (but I restrain myself, as it would only have made him feel worse).

And then it happens.

Total silence.

(Except for crickets and other small insects buzzing and chirping loudly, taking advantage of the lack of competition. The grass smells, but does not look, like it has been mown only seconds ago. The heat makes it smell.

Then even the insects are quiet.)

He is tall, broad but not fat, with a lot of red hair that is not very long. His eyes are blue and his face is very white. His head is very large. He looks about fifty. He strides up the stairs along the side of the stage with bitter enthusiasm.

I have viewpoints in place, and I start up 'Thus Spake Zarathustra' on the soundtrack as the picture cuts between his feet on the stairs, a head-on view from the opposite side of the stage, and a highly magnified shot of a swollen red sun rising over the sea.

He walks over to the microphone stand with wide, arrogant steps, then stands in front of it, saying I do not need this electronic crutch when I can project my wonderful, deep, resonant voice across a million parsecs.

And then he begins to speak, projecting his wonderful, deep, resonant voice across a million parsecs.

He talks with his hands thrust so deeply into the trouser pockets of his dark blue suit that the upper part of his body is in grave danger of overbalancing him and throwing him head-first down the steps. But no, he does not stay like this. Like some strange gyroscope he balances by means of motion, regularly bending at the waist, pushing back his torso and pushing forward his stomach and pelvis, also pivoting at the ankles. These stabilising motions usually last about two seconds, and take place every eight seconds.

—Well, kids, this is my first year at Fenkirk Vale. From what I hear, it's been a pretty good school up until now, but I hope that you're going to help me to make it a whole lot better!

The sun stands still above us, slashing time with a wound which he is free to tear open to any width he chooses. Words flow down onto the grass like an irritating warm-dropped rain: a nuisance, but not enough to make me run for cover. A few plucky students take thoughtful-mother-provided cyanide pills and die in paroxysms on the grass, which makes Deputy Something Mr Callow look a little ruffled, but otherwise who cares? I feel a warm, lazy confidence: I can ignore this crap for five years, it's easy. Just keep silent, face in roughly the right direction, and switch off inside.

But I monitor his rantings at reduced volume. Why? Just In Case.

Every now and then comes a Joke. For this, he locks his entire body very firmly in the bent-forward position, opens his mouth wide, and shakes his head back and forth like a carnival clown waiting for a ball down its throat. The Joke ends very quickly with no audience laughter to reinforce it, and the normal pattern is resumed.

Glasses on a beaded chain fly erratically on and off his nose, and the creeping crimson, the rapid reddening of his face: this is not cyclic, but increasing continually.

And then he stops.

Deciding quite arbitrarily that he has finished, he just strides off sullenly. Unbelievably, a dozen students begin to clap. He stops no pauses says:

—Now, no need to clap, this isn't entertainment!
and is gone.

I review my coverage of the event, experiment a little with different combinations of the rising sun and the ascending Seward: superimposing the two, matting-in the sun behind him, and a few more complex procedures, like taking Seward's image and producing a matte which is opaque outside his figure and within his figure is dense in proportion to the magnitude of the gradient of the density of the original shot, and printing the shot of the sunrise through this matte onto the original shot, thus creating a glowing red Seward walking up the stairs, but preserving enough of his features to prevent him turning into a mere patch of light. I'm rather proud of it.

Of course the critics would be all petulant and cross over the use of 'Zarathustra' as they think it belongs solely to *2001* and they don't have the imagination to appreciate its use anywhere else. They would entirely miss the point: sure, it's become a cliché since *2001* but that only helps to strengthen the irony of any mock-climax which it underscores. They drive me crazy, the slimy, stupid parasites, squirming and puffing about trying to force every film they see to fit in with their private obsessions and theories and prejudices, and then clumsily mocking those which will not be twisted into the shapes they desire, deriding film-makers when they break conventions, sneering at them when they use them well, gloating over financial failures, indignant over financial successes. And the public solemnly swallow their bitter, frustrated rantings, the fools.

'Zarathustra' stays. Not that anyone will ever know.

Sallow Callow steps forward from his hiding place and holds the microphone stand nervously, perhaps afraid to speak after such a demonstration of brute eloquence.

He chants solemnly:

—The mass is ended, go forth in peace.

Only kidding. The insects, too. They didn't go quiet.

—First years move to the hall for sorting into forms. Second years move to the end of the quadrangle. Third years move out onto the oval. Fourth and fifth years to the, ah, southern lawn. I'll just repeat that.

Which he did.

And we move, leaving the corpses to fertilise the lawn.

I film this through a viewpoint with a very wide angle, starting the shot looking down from the balcony at the far end of the quadrangle and gradually moving the viewpoint both upwards and eastwards, tipping the line of sight slowly towards vertically downwards. The students look like ants in a maze, but who ever puts ants in mazes?

I kill the viewpoint before the school is seen embedded in the suburb; there's something I don't like about that composition.

The hall is lined with gymnasium equipment, and then with us. A frail, dark-haired woman reads out the names in each form, and I am in One F. Oh good, that's my identity crisis solved.

Quick cut-away: a punched card drops into a slot.

No, overused. Perhaps an ion hits a photographic plate in a mass spectrometer?

Both images are wrong, for both imply sorting according to characteristics. A hand of cards being dealt, then? To whom? To the form teacher, of course, but are we even concerned with the form teacher? Who will relate to the cards?

—Cut out the crap!

calls the rabbit with the Vote For Mailer placard.

Our very own form room, and when we arrive there, we are given government-issue paper and pens. Our form teacher then describes our timetables to us as if slowly communicating via radio telescope with strange and distant beings in a pared-down language capable of expressing only the simplest ideas. The salivating frustration of the information rate is enough to anger me into thinking about ripping the whole thing, gestalt-wise, out of his brain. Only thinking. Of course. I fantasise about him floating around the school perched on a tiny lump of rock wearing a headset and pointing a parabolic antenna at passing people, who all walk by too quickly for him to even discover their names.

Hours pass in the form room with nothing happening, so I make a quick state-of-the-moment documentary: form teacher's name is Mr Nigel, a thirtyish Social Studies teacher with a walrus-like moustache and a generally drooping countenance. Our form room is the second of two classrooms in the shiny, glassy, new library built with Federal Funds (although the ordinality is quite arbitrary as the building is quite symmetric and the classrooms indistinguishable; I wonder (deeply) about the agony of that initial decision as to which room would be called the 'first').

I survey the students, plot their parameters on a multi-dimensional scatter diagram. All parameters have very small variances. The mean boy is wearing green-striped tennis shoes, blue jeans, and a yellow tee-shirt. His hair is light brown and his eyes are green. The mean girl is wearing brown sandals with short white socks, a green skirt, a green blouse, and a pink and white cardigan. Her hair is dark brown and reaches half-way to her waist, but is not plaited. Her eyes are light brown.

My sample point is far distant from their tiny huddle, but nobody notices that I am wrapped mummy-style in metallic foil which is glowing with a faint purple light. Perhaps they are matting me out.

Home now, lying on my bed, editing but more rearranging than discarding. I don't know what to do with the opening shot. Does it mean anything, or is it just a product of my inevitable nervousness? Still I cannot decide on any final interpretation, so I cannot be happy with any final juxtaposition. The untidiness of my impressions nags at me, but it is a good nagging, and along with the voice which says: don't leave it this way, fix it up at once! is another which says: take a lot of care with this, think slowly, think a lot.

I hardly notice the next morning arrive, until I see that I am standing in the middle of the Western Quadrangle and every one of those loudspeakers is emitting a piercing wail. Think what they could do to revolutionise stereo sound with a set-up like this!

As the noise subsides my mind clears. It is Tuesday morning and we are going to our first classes. I reach into my shirt pocket (what foil?) , find my timetable, take a single frame of it which I file with great care, and then throw the piece of paper into a bin. I have English now in Room H. I can barely contain my excitement.

Wonderfully simple scheme gives rooms on the ground numbers, rooms upstairs letters. This means that I have to get upstairs.

Upstairs is reached by one of the strange staircases. One flight of stairs goes half the distance, to a landing, from which two separate flights complete the distance. The lower flight can be used going up or down (take *nothing* for granted) but the upper flights are one-way, the rule being: keep to the left. How do I know this? On my very first ascent I use the wrong branch and a squat minotaur angrily explains the rule to me. I thank him and start to walk away.

—Go back down and come up again the right way!

he says, and I am tempted to mischievously misinterpret his words and thus repeat my former illegality, but he fumes so dangerously that I do not. The rule could easily be explained with signs or enforced by putting one-way turnstiles as used in supermarkets at the tops and bottoms of the upper flights. For some reason they have not chosen to do either.

Lines are forming outside and I join. Girls closest to the room always happens automatically, by instinct. The lines forming remind me of a DNA helix unwinding, but it doesn't mean anything, so I drop it. Sadly.

I sense evil in the quadrangle below. Looking over the balcony I catch a glimpse of a Dalek creeping unnoticed towards an exit. I am forced to zoom (I'm too petrified to send a viewpoint from my body) but it is worth it as I catch a close-up of the glinting salt-shaker swivelling its weapon about in a paranoid frenzy. Then I call out:

—Hey, look out down there!

Annoyingly, nobody down there hears, and the Dalek just slips through the doorway, out of the quadrangle, to some unsuspecting destination.

I look up to see our English teacher about a metre away. Looking angry. She has short black hair, large green eyes, a very straight, very red mouth, is in her late twenties, and resembles a cat. She *is* angry!

—How dare you! How dare you lean over that balcony and shout! Who the hell do you think you are?! That balcony just belongs to me, you understand, to me! And nobody, but nobody, leans over it and shouts without my *explicit* permission!

I glide backwards a few steps and give her a slow, deep, sweeping bow, all the time keeping my eyes fixed coldly on hers, saying:

—Please accept my most humble apologies, your ladyship. You have my word of honour that nobody will ever defile your balcony again without your *explicit* permission.

In my best Malcolm McDowell voice.

Actually, I look sheepish and move away from the balcony.

In the classroom on green plastic sweating bucket seats comes an outline of the year packed with comprehension and essays and poems and debates and one boy anxiously takes notes of it all, page after page, as if hoping to finish the year's work in his spare time after school that day.

Most of the rest of the class sleeps.

No more cyanide suicides, of course; the audience will not swallow that more than once.

And the speakers wail and Social Studies comes next.

—Wait to be dismissed, you arrogant bastards!

In Room 18 a frail old man (late nineties I guess) sits at the desk, quite motionless, and decaying in places. He is a telepath, and talks to us without moving his mummified mouth. He tries to read our minds, and this makes me angry, so I defend the entire class of strangers with a universally permeating mind barrier. This annoys the old man but he is too old and tired to defeat me, and I even manage to conceal my identity from him with very little effort. If he discovered who was frustrating him, he could summon powers far more dreadful than those of his shrivelling brain. From some things only bland anonymity is sufficient protection.

We will be studying Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece this term, broadcasts Ancient Mr Dennis. After a short paper-plane fight it is morning recess. The students rush from the class, but he must sit there at his desk, he will fall apart if he moves. I'd like to cry for him, but.

I decide to cling to the ceiling above the canteen queue and take a wide-angle shot of the customers below.

I am amazed at the amount of money the average purchaser spends. A cheese cake and a carton of chocolate milk. Two cream buns and a pint of orange juice. A dozen sausage rolls. Strawberry jelly and coke. Avocado yoghurt and lemonade. Extrapolating on the assumption of average conditions, ten dollars a week on snacks per person. If not for my position I would throw up. Well, I could do so anyway, it would be a nice shot. And an apt comment. But there might be (gasp!) Consequences, of the kind I don't want.

One especially good sequence shows a boy, his face lined with rolls of fat that surely cannot be real, but must be part of a rubber mask, or inserted objects, surgical implants for some unfathomable purpose, leave the serving window with his arms cradling a monstrous pile of custard tarts and cream buns. He walks blindly into a pillar and drops the whole lot.

Without the smallest sign of anger or despair he walks back to the window and begins to repeat his purchase, thumbing through a thick wad of five-dollar bills.

Assorted teachers stroll around the grounds with saucers and cups of tea, small halos of second-year girls around the younger male teachers.

Again the wail of the surround-sound siren, and it is time for Maths.

The teacher is young but balding, tall with fish eyes, nearly transparent. We are given a huge stack of government-issue textbooks printed on toilet paper. The pages smell and feel like old, dirty pavement. Number theory, set theory, geometric theory.

Made dull by experts on dullness. Bring on the animated graphics. Maybe they will, when that has become dull too.

Science Room Q is lined with jars and flasks but most of the jars contain the same thing and the flasks are all empty, except for a little moist dust and dead flies. The gas outlets on the black benches are stuffed full of pencil leads and chewing gum. The short fat science teacher is also a telepath but he is very, very weak and uses it only to discover which students in the class hate his guts. Again I am angered by such violation, and my screen makes him happy because he thinks we are all indifferent to him.

And then it is lunchtime with strictly defined strictly policed eating areas for each year to prevent cultural shock from mixing.

Now the canteen dispenses pies and pasties and hamburgers and hotdogs, all with shrivelled green apples accompanying them, for Health.

Assorted teachers stroll around the grounds with waxed-paper lunches resting on brown-paper bags, small halos of second-year girls around the younger male teachers.

Pairs of convicts carrying large metal bins around to groups of eating students stare resentfully at the unshackled. Aimed papers always miss, and the bearers limp about picking them up under the amused bored eyes of supervising staff.

Bet it makes them into solid citizens though.

Another sonic punctuation mark indicates that we have just stopped eating and should now wander meaninglessly around the grounds, go into the library and read *Asterix* comics, or play a combination of cricket and rugby on the oval.

The library is like a public bar. When someone finally becomes so noisy and disorderly that nobody else can be noisy and disorderly in their own individual way (surely an appalling

infringement of basic human rights) then that person is kicked out. Other merry-makers can then make merry in (relative) peace.

I stroll along the edge of the oval. With frightening regularity, hard red balls hit the bitumen in front of me.

—Over here!

—Throw it here, mate!

—Chuck us the ball, you bastard!

I wisely ignore all competing cries and leave them to scramble for the hard red balls themselves.

And then it is time for Physical Education. This is like the Army, only even sillier. During the two periods we roll up and down the hill at the end of the oval, then we run around in circles, then we try to connect various widely-spaced parts of our anatomies. I have a sneaking suspicion that this strange training is designed with some goal quite removed from our physical well-being in mind; perhaps we are all to be extras in an orgy scene for *Caligula II*. This is virtually confirmed when we are told to climb up on each other's shoulders and charge into each other chaotically, until a group of human beings is reduced to a panting, twitching pile of flesh. I catch a glimpse of one of the phys ed teachers filming us with a bright blue plastic camera, cheap and nasty Super 8. How degrading! I fog the film.

Afternoon recess lasts five minutes for changing books. Unsatisfied with the lockers provided, I have installed a Chubb safe. With not a little dismay I find that it has been blown open by a direct hit from a hydrogen bomb. Brushing away fall-out I find that luckily none of the books inside has been damaged. I will install a new safe in the morning.

Woodwork explains tools and machines and basic procedures especially safety aspects. There is wood-dust in the air and there are woodshavings and wood-chips coating every surface in the room, making me sneeze fine pine particles into my handkerchief every five minutes. This will be fun.

Days coalesce into weeks, muddily, for their edges are poorly defined. They surrender their identities to the larger beings. I have kilometres of film, but most of it is very dull. There is the French class with too few students to be worth a teacher, so nous jetons avions de papier autour la salle. I read the textbook and learn a little, but with no teacher my accent is unbelievably bad.

There is the Technical Drawing class which gives me a few ideas for computer animation but the objects we draw are all so boring: nuts and bolts and stylised building-block buildings. There is the Art class which I hate because my hands have never been interested in the strange obsessions of my eyes. I would be quite happy to live without hands, for I do not need to hold a camera or a microphone to make my films.

There is the Scripture class consisting of all non-Catholics, which is led in solemn private study of whatever we wish by a grumpy, radiation-diseased Physics teacher, for no local minister has the time (tenacity (trauma-toughness)). There is our weekly period in our form room, when we play cards. Few people in my form are in my lessons, for the student body is dissected in a different way for every different occasion. There is the weekly Health Education period: diet and diarrhoea and gonorrhoea. There is Metalwork, which consists solely of taking large pieces of metal and filing them into large piles of fine shiny dust which adheres to the lubricating grease which is everywhere in the room. I ask why we do this, and I am told that it is training for what goes on in the factories, which is fair enough. I am not permitted to whistle in Metalwork, but I do not ask if whistling is permitted in factories.

This is how I spend my days, in exchange for things I do not need, things I do not want, but what else can I do?

—Duck!

shrieks the rabbit, coming straight out of the sun and passing an inch above my cowering form. What does he want (mean (plan (change)))?

It is very hard to make lumps when everything is so cyclic and several weeks (precisely) might shoot past in a subjective instant (exactly), and I would notice no change at all. Subjective space-time is a strange place to navigate, but it is the only manifold that really matters (cheer up Minkowski, nobody's perfect) and I need beacons, regions of high experience-density which I can see from afar to determine just where I am and where I'm going. If I wander too far along my world-line without leaving lumps behind like crumbs in the forest, then I will end up with nothing in sight, and the featureless region around me will be free to distort, to expand and contract as it chooses, and living will be like walking blind down a huge intestine with no idea of my speed, position, or destination.

Lumps are very, very important.

Sometimes I can still detect the lump of my conception, and more often that of my birth, but such sightings are rare and growing less frequent. The lumps of my earliest childhood form a tiny but perfect jewel-like constellation, formed as best as I could to mimic that of my womb-time. I tried to form the pattern a third time, but botched it, which sometimes makes me very sad.

I wonder about the lump of death. Will it be so bright as to obscure all those which came before? Will it be a single point, or an awesome, complex structure? What colour will it be? What colour is death?

—What colour is death?

I ask my Art teacher.

—We're using charcoal today, so it doesn't matter.

How can I put up with this?

—Hold your breath!

yells the rabbit who merrily melts the polar ice and floods the planet.

If his aim is to help me make lumps then he is not doing too well, as his lightning-fast pranks are strangely insubstantial and I seem to forget them almost as soon as they are over. If only I could catch him and ask him a few questions. There doesn't seem to be much chance of that. He moves so quickly.

Chapter 2

CARNIVAL ATMOSPHERE

—Attendance at the carnival will be compulsory. Students are to remember that this is a *normal school day*.

Now that's not quite true. Carnivals, I discover, are very, very different from normal school days. So why complain? It's not that I don't welcome the lumps (especially as I hope to have a basic reference grid (a 'constellation' in my more sentimental moments) constructed by the end of term). It's just that there are some lumps which make me wonder if it's worth it.

—Ineluctable duality of experience

comments Mr Callow over the public address system.

The swimming carnival is an extremely divisive event.

Firstly, we are split into factions (my dictionary thinks that these are generally subversive, but alas it is not the case): four groups named after worthy local historical (i.e. dead) persons. Each faction is associated with a colour, the idea being that students can perceive the fact of their group identity on a primitive sensory level, without any need for inconvenient and undesirable higher cerebral intervention.

Secondly, we are split according to function into three groups. Competitors are wonderful, enthusiastic, vibrant, and *alive* people, potential Olympic gold medallists, Rhodes scholars, MHRs, senators, Rotary Club presidents; proud, loyal citizens who *give* unselfishly to their community of their time, effort, and high spirits. Cheering-squad members are quite wonderful, pretty enthusiastic, fairly vibrant, and *supportive* people, potential Oscar winners, law students, senior public servants, company directors, Rotary Club vice-presidents; reliable, sincere citizens who *devote* themselves to their community with commitment, energy, and level-headed vigour.

The remainder, the unwilling spectators, are unpleasant, unco-operative, dull, and *disruptive* people, potential communists, environmentalists, homosexuals, authors, union leaders, criminals, rock singers; sick, alienated people who either *ignore* or *disturb* the community with their protests, cynicism, and rash actions.

The net result of this is a partition into twelve groups. I am still searching for a precise but understandable image to apply to this constant splitting-up into competing units. We are supposed to take it all seriously. We are meant to act as if the divisions were fundamental, important, immutable. Why? For the competitors/cheering-squad members/spectators split I may use something about wheat and chaff, although this only describes a separation into two parts. I think that is good enough, in this case.

Weather is of course perfectly fine (and always).

Buses are of course slightly late but not late enough to do any good (and always).

I leave a viewpoint wandering about the empty school, sneaking up on cleaners playing Class in deserted rooms, mocking the teachers with as much ferocity as any student. Cleaners are not permitted in the staff room, but are given their own strange, small closets about the school, a separate race kept quiet and nearly invisible, too close to the real nature of What Comes After to be allowed to occupy the minds of the students.

I sit at the very back of the bus and watch the place recede. I eclipse its surroundings, but no strange, sick light spills out from it. Whatever is the source of that is coming with us. I shudder and let in the sunlight.

The public have been excluded from a local swimming pool just for this ridiculous event, and they cling to the barbed-wire fences in their pathetic, ragged swimming costumes, as if hoping for hand-outs of chlorinated water.

—Why don't you go to the beach?

yells one student insolently, but this has no effect on them at all. They just stare at us with wide, accusing eyes and speak to us with proud, accusing silences. You have to respect them, even though they are clearly unable to help themselves, or at least are too accustomed to their lassitude to break their lazy habits.

Aggressive teachers patrol the grandstand confiscating books, cards, and radios. *We are here to enjoy ourselves and to support those hard-working competitors!*

Even here there is a vast array of loudspeakers. Who needs 1984-style two-way complete communication? One-way is enough. Pump enough garbage at the population and you don't need to look or listen to know they're stuffed full of it, quite incapable of thinking clearly, for the thoughts of most people speak with such soft and uncertain voices that they are easily shouted down.

Enthusiastic English teacher inevitably explodes with 1000 watts (RMS) of ecstasy at every record-rendering result.

—J. Millar, of Hackett, has broken the fifty parsec dog-paddle record of 2.041 microseconds by a phenomenal 54, yes, 54 millimicroseconds, setting a brand new record for the fifty parsec dog-paddle event at 1.987 microseconds! Well done, J. Millar of Hackett! Let's hear some applause from the Hackett stand for J. Millar! That's so feeble I could hardly hear it, surely you can do better than that! Now that's more like it! Have you heard the one about the vacuum-cleaner salesman?

Among the worst discomforts is the unquenchable thirst.

The lower part of each grandstand is filled with the faction's cheering-squad, consisting mainly of girls. The cheer leader puts them all under hypnosis a week before the carnival, then implants a post-hypnotic suggestion that on the day of the carnival they will think they are attending a rock concert by a popular overseas group. They thus behave accordingly. A rather ingenious approach is used to achieve the right chant: the girls are made to forget the name of the sexiest member of the group and to instead associate the name of their faction with that gorgeous body and that explosive voice. A wonderfully effective combination of screaming, hysterical crying, and fainting results. Cheer leaders also occasionally spur on their mesmerised slave-victims by waving large stuffed pandas in front of them. The appearance of the pandas is generally close enough to the appearance of their singing idols to bring on sudden, intensified bouts of frenzied activity.

Hypnotism is, of course, out of the question for the competitors. Their performance may only be augmented by the use of drugs and/or threats of physical violence. Such tricks as the positioning of large masses so as to increase the path lengths of the other factions' lanes, and the creation of spatially limited back currents isolated to specific lanes by invisible monomolecular viscosity barriers, are common practice. I am one of the few who notice such activities, but they don't worry me at all, as the outcomes of the senseless races mean nothing to me. I cannot understand why so many people scream so passionately for such insubstantial victories.

Clowns wander about the poolside, now and then leaping into the water and riding along on competitors' backs. Odd beasts, deformed humans, even the famous Elephant Man, are paraded past the grandstands in cages, between races, to the mocking jeers of the cheering-squad members and spectators, to be spat on by competitors in various stages of undress. Witches and other more frightening creatures who generally hide from civilisation come out brazenly to exhibit their deformed souls, like insolent distorting mirrors. From this I shield myself with the greatest possible care, for the dangers are terrifying, unlimited. I don't know why they have to go and open such doors at all.

—Mythic this

Mythic that

You're just a scaredy-cat!

chants the rabbit, but he doesn't linger, oh, no!

I whistle Beethoven, sound-safe in the noise.

Three or four male staff members avoid normal supervisory duties by prowling around the pool with very expensive German cameras fitted with *very* long telephoto lenses (very odd, for the whole point of the telephoto design is to give a long focal length from a short barrel), clearly all hoping to catch an interesting cleavage. Supposedly they are serving in some semi-official capacity, but I peer through their lenses and ascertain that none of the shots they take would be of any interest from a sporting point of view, and certainly none could be published in the school magazine.

In the untouchables' quarters, we compromise. Clandestine reading takes place, despite the stupid thugs and the heat and the unbelievable noise as the cheering-squad zombies tear out their larynxes (fleshy fragments fly) in orgasms of shrieking enthusiasm. Some students sketch teachers who willingly pose in bizarre positions (unknowingly). Some students amuse themselves with frantic cheering for other factions than their own. What disloyal scoundrels! Some students take fuller advantage of the blanket of sound, and scream unheard obscene insults at the tops of their voices. Some students carve strange and frightening designs on their bodies with knives and razor blades. That's the kind of day it is.

Lunchtime and we are allowed onto the grass above the grandstand but eating only makes the thirst worse so the best part is the shade of trees where we can read unmolested and look out onto freedom. The ragged would-be swimmers of the general public peer in with a different idea of freedom on their minds. The seven-foot electrified barbed-wire fence, designed to keep trespassers out of the swimming pool grounds, unfortunately works in both directions. The flesh chars on the hands of those who grip it from outside, but they cling to it regardless, as if we had something obsessively desirable to them in here. It must be the water, I suppose.

I think of climbing, cutting, and digging, but I have no tools with me, and my telekinetic abilities are too feeble to be of any real help. If the claustrophobia becomes too much I could try to swap bodies with one of the pathetic, skinny wire-clingers, who would no doubt be glad to have gained entry even by such a disorienting ordeal, but I don't much fancy life with charred hands. Not, as I have said, that I much need my hands, but burnt ones are *so* unsightly. Much, much worse: I would probably lose all my filmic equipment, and that would be virtual suicide.

Cut to a close-up of a tiny bird hopping around on the branches of a tree growing beside the fence. Starter's pistol on sound track, very loud and echo-enhanced. Bird flies off, startled by the pistol, over the fence, and glides down onto the branch of a distant tree.

Long track with camera looking back along its path, parallel to the fence, past hundreds of black and brown hands poking in through the wire. Very narrow depth of field, so individual hands sharpen briefly and then dissolve again into the murky background-foreground blur. What a lot of hands there seem to be; many more than the number of people present ought to possess. Why do they hang there, trying to make *us* feel guilty? I refuse to feel guilty: I'm suffering, so there!

The public address announces that we must now hurry back to the grandstands. Who can argue? It overwhelms our inputs.

The cheering-squad did not even stop for lunch but stayed to encourage divers to fall in carefully controlled contortions from great heights into tiny tubs of bright red fluid, perhaps wine. Some are coughing up blood-spattered slivers of mucous membrane, and spongy grey matter with identifiable tracery of fine tubing exposed on its torn surfaces, but they still shout on for the greater glory of their faction. No matter how hard I try to fool myself that it is all done with hypnotism and rock group (surrogates), I must (must I?) face the truth, which is that every one of those chanting, screaming, hysterical girls has free will, and is screaming not for women's liberation or an end to war or capitalism or starvation in Ethiopia, but for a brass cup from which nobody will ever drink.

Free will. Mmmm. Lucky for me that I was born after the discovery of quantum mechanics, for the clear impossibility of such a thing under Newtonian mechanics would have depressed me constantly. Maybe the cheering-squad members are just no good at manipulating the wave-functions of the constituents of their brains, and leave everything up to chance and external influences. A brief warm sympathy floods me, then is gone. I will teach you all how to change that; I will ignore you. Despise you. Stay away! They stay away anyway, oblivious. Me and my silly delusions of altruistic grandeur.

A witch meets my eye and cackles hideously. I shudder and divert light around her, making her vanish, almost: an uneasy patch of disturbing distortion takes her place.

Then come the relays and it is *so* exciting and wonderful and always *so* close and the electronic English teacher says:

—Cheer louder! We must have more encouragement! I still can't hear you, Hackett! That's the spirit!

When it is all finished they add up long rows of numbers and then they call the losers first to increase the suspense; of course even they, hopeless failures, receive enormous cheers because who cares winning isn't everything it's how you play just the spirit of the teamwork trying is the most impotent thing honourable striving lends dignity (but will it ask for it back later?)!

—Fourth, with a total of ... third, with a total of ... second, with a total of ... and first, with a total of ...

And you can hear both the increase in total volume of the screaming, and the shift in loudest source position from grandstand to grandstand. Brief thoughts of an audience being persuaded to contribute to multitrack sound, by handing out cue sheets to everyone corresponding to their seating position. They would never co-operate, alas. Audiences are such useless collections of incompetents: the best they can ever manage is singing along (out of tune and getting all the words wrong) with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and all that does is drown the sound of the professionals singing from the screen. Me and my bright ideas.

And then from nowhere arrives our fearless Principal who has been of course all day engaged in tireless (unflagging) pursuit of our collective happiness by mysterious and subtle means (his presence earlier would have been 'undignified').

Why has he assumed material form now? He is going to talk!

What is he going to talk about? About everything, and also about nothing!

Now that's truly profound!

Sometimes I wish I understood what I was thinking about, but it probably wouldn't be worth the trouble to find out.

Here goes.

—Well, kids, I've only been here for about five minutes, yet I have seen some *pretty* remarkable things. I am impressed. I'm really *impressed*. You've shown me that you can be mature, sensible, responsible young people, young *adults* really, even though most of you have a bit of a way to go there, and still enjoy yourselves. Even in the very short time, the *very* short time that I've been here, I've seen this school improve under my very eyes! I've seen a growing sense of co-operation and teamwork and school spirit and sportsmanship and ...

As he talks, the camera turns upwards to the sky, which is very, very blue, and completely cloudless. How beautiful and clear! Foolish divers, to choose to fall into those flimsy barrels of wine rather than taking long, wondering breaths and then dropping gracefully into that huge blue pool, to make ripples concentric with the horizon. By the time the camera is pointing straight up, a gradual fading of the sound track has reduced the babbling (slow babbling, strangely stressed) to a soft mumbling sound which gets lost in the sky.

I think: I can make that dive! I can! I will fall like an anti-Icarus into the sky, and then bask mindless in the sun-warmth. But something anchors me, I can't say what.

He takes the brass cup in his hands, and then somebody starts to come forward to accept it. Quickly, tilt down to horizontal once again, and dolly in with that somebody, very quickly bringing up the sound, bringing in the applause and cheering and the heartbeat and nervous swallowing of the poor fool heading for Seward. Now get right up close, follow that brass monstrosity! Seward's middle must be in the very centre of the shot, with his shoulders and legs out of the way.

The cup is in his left hand, and he has his right hand sticking out in front of him because he wants to shake hands with whoever is getting the cup.

Whoever is getting the cup, however, does not realise this. His mind is in snatch-and-retreat mode, treasure-from-dragon mode. Quite sensible, too. Who would want to linger in Seward's shadow for longer than absolutely necessary?

—Not I!

said the rabbit, darting unseen just inches above the cup.

The cup-receiver reaches for the cup with his right hand, the hand Seward wants to shake. Seward is offended, outraged, apoplectic. He jerks the cup back out of the terrified boy's reach.

—Don't you *want* to shake my hand?

his voice thunders through the grandstand even without electronic amplification, and makes ripples on the empty swimming pool which slop water over the edge onto the hot concrete.

—Of course I don't want to touch your slimy paw, you noisy, flatulent old gasbag!

but that's only me under my breath. In the silence.

Then Seward realises that he has gone too far, the context will not support him, the disbelief will not stay up there forever. There is only one way out: it becomes a Joke.

Demented laughter breaks through his words:

—Well, I guess you're just eager to get hold of this and get it back to your team-mates, eh? Eh? You certainly do deserve it, I must say! What a terrific fight you put up, in that last relay, you were hanging in there by the skin of your teeth, I could see you were just inches, just *inches* in front of that other fellow on that last lap, and out of breath too but you just kept on pushing yourself harder and harder because you knew it was worth it, you knew that the pain, well that was just a bit of pain, that wouldn't last long, that wouldn't last forever, although it might have seemed that way at the time, eh, but that would be over soon and you'd have won. Naturally winning isn't everything, is it? Still you have to try, you have to try to win as hard as you can, and that's what counts. You can be sure, I give you my word on this, you can be sure that if you go out into the world and really try, you will succeed, you will get the things you want, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you've done your best, and people out there aren't going to ignore your efforts, believe me, when they see someone putting everything they've got into it they sit up and take notice! The one really important thing is never to give up and never to do less than your very best, because you *know* you'll be rewarded. Well, son, here's your reward for your splendid effort!

He thrusts the cup into shaking hands, then whacks the poor kid across the shoulders. The boy falls, and does not get up. An alert prefect (slime, slime) picks up the cup and carries it back to the rest of the winning team, who are by now very impatient. Later, perhaps, they will urinate into it, during strange changing-room ceremonies which should not be thought about by decent human beings, anthropologists and documentary-makers excluded.

—And now I'd like you all to show your appreciation for the physical education staff, who worked so *very* hard to make today such a splendid success for everyone!

—Stuff the morons!

I yell but my voice is lost beneath an inexplicable roar, an explosion of applause.

How sick.

Half an hour picking up food wrappers (except for members of the winning faction; was that small privilege their entire motivation?) and then we are on the bus home and oh my we get out from school half an hour early today what a fine end to a day of fun and excitement.

Well, yes, it was a lump. I will be able to see it for quite some distance (by which I mean the path integral along my world-line in subjective space-time of the infinitesimal metric). Where would I be without cretins forcing me into loathsome situations? I would have to think up lots of ways to make lumps by myself. No need to panic: there will always be cretins forcing me into loathsome situations, it is a basic principle of society that cretins will force me into loathsome situations. I am safe in that respect.

I screen and edit and rescreen and re-edit but something is missing, the sequence seems empty. The deformed people and animals, and the charred hands through the barbed-wire fence, are so disturbing that I just don't know what to do with them.

And the next day at school, everyone is just like normal and I see a girl from one of the cheering-squads sitting on a bench reading poems by Byron and there is an expression on her face full of complex emotion and flashback to a shot from the day before which shows the very same girl leaping about and screaming and zoom in on her face ugly with gritted teeth between angry yelling and anguish of tension, then split the frame to bring in her face now as she sits calmly reading the poetry, her eyes scanning the lines three times each and a kind of smile of amusement (awe (astonishment (appreciation))) as the meaning sinks in and I can tell she is thinking that the poetry is brilliant and

beautiful and that she is happy because she never had thought of *that* in terms of *that* and she just cannot get over it, it is overpoweringly wonderful, and as she discovers more and more a wide grin spreads across her face, she is so surprised and entertained and interested that she is almost embarrassed by it, almost feels guilty to be so happy and smiling from mere poetry.

—Ineluctable duality of personality

comments the rabbit rushing past Room 10, then away.

What would he know?

—Oh, this and that

he replies from the top of the flag pole.

Then she drops the book and loses the page and swears and there is yesterday's face once more in every minute detail and just to prove it I send out a viewpoint and move it around until it is taking a shot with exactly the same scale and orientation as the carnival shot, and then I slide the two shots together, demonstrating their perfect correspondence.

In English I write about the carnival exactly as I saw it and the teacher says:

—You know, too much cynicism is not healthy!

Now that's truly profound!

Time, of course, dilutes the depressing aspects and as the day goes on I begin to accept it as just one more reference point in a grid, and yet at the same time I am sad that I feel less nauseated because surely there should be some lasting record (reminder (revolting remembrance)) of the sickness of it all.

And then with a huge shock I realise that there is no need for that at all, for a terrible reason:

It will all be repeated in a year's time.

Lest we forget!

Sudden panic: what if all five years at this place leave me with identical lumps, identical reference grids? How will I tell them apart? Distance is no absolute aid, because the whole point of having reference grids is to make distance easier to measure. I will have to take steps to make certain that there is some observable criterion allowing me to distinguish between the years.

—You take steps? That's a laugh!

Arrogant animal!

The cheering-squad/Byron girl has forced me to think of the contributing components of character in terms of continuous interaction rather than periods of alternating absolute dominance. I contemplate the possibility of a new technique, a new way of using a split screen, to demonstrate the interaction.

Rather than splitting the screen in two, with one half showing shots with a specific character aspect apparent, and the other half showing the complementary character aspect, the screen is split in three, with the rightmost third showing the action that would take place if only the most pleasant aspects of the character were present, the leftmost third showing what would happen if only the most malicious and barbaric aspects were present, and the centre showing the actual events with the actual, mixed-up character.

Mostly the three scenes would run together, and viewers would recognise many independent events occurring together for all three scenarios. However, to avoid confusion at major points of divergence, the vital segment would be shown, filling the whole screen, for each of the three versions, while the action in the other two remained suspended. This would highlight the differences between important events, without the confusion of running them simultaneously. Before any changes,

the three would be virtually identical, and after a major divergence they would be so different that the audience would follow them as distinctly separate sequences. I'm sure that nobody would have trouble understanding the point of it, except for the critics. They would *never* understand.

Chapter 3

TEDIUM

Of course most days are like most other days.

I wake to see what life has vomited into my breakfast plate. Gulp it down fast to avoid the taste, wonder why I'm hungry.

Walking to school I always shoot straight through my eyes, giving me the greatest possible sense of presence in case something interesting happens, but usually (always) what I get is scenic shots rather than drama, and believe me after the first few times my three-block walk is no longer even scenic. No mountain-building takes place before my eyes. Something's missing.

But the cloud patterns are different every single day, so I make a point of always capturing them.

If I look at the clouds long enough I am always amazed that primitive people didn't think they were solid structures floating around in the air (perhaps some did, but I have never heard of it). Of course, many types of clouds are obviously intangible, insubstantial ... but not all that rarely there are ones which look so solid that I find it hard to persuade myself that they are not enormous floating castles and mountains and creatures. The wind pushes them along without changing their shapes at all, and I can imagine them rushing overhead at incredible speeds like the stone head from *Zardoz*.

Even more wonderful is seeing the moon during the daytime. (It is wonderful at night, too, but in the day its magic is so much greater from its intrusion into the mundane dayworld.) It is so easy to think of the moon as commonplace, and to just glance past it, but if you stare long enough the full circle becomes visible, and your brain starts to interpret the perspective intelligently, and you really start to appreciate that it actually is an enormous ball of rock hanging in space a very long way away, half-lit by the sunlight.

The sun, unfortunately, is just too big and too bright and too far away to be grasped correctly visually.

Ever since I can remember, nameless grey people have popped out from behind bushes and told me, warned me, to use the sun only passively, for illumination. Always point the camera away from the sun; always make sure your subject is lit from the front. They'd print their advice on cards to fit in my pocket, and put asterisks next to each point.

Naturally I ignore them and try to get the sun into my shots, directly, whenever I can. Which is probably why I prefer to shoot in the morning or evening. If I can't get it in directly, there's always a way to manage a bright reflection, from water, a window, a watch.

Not that I'm obsessed. I just think there's nothing more boring than flat lighting.

Walking across the oval I pan back and forth, looking for areas of interest. The oval itself is usually empty in the morning, but as I cross diagonally, there is a road running past the swimming pool and the front of the hall, far ahead to my right, where there are usually three or four games derived from hand tennis going on, often interrupted by teachers' cars and delivery trucks. The road goes on past the hall, and alongside the main rectangle that is the school. Straight ahead is the library. To my left is a long, wide parking area perpendicular to the road, which meets it at a point hidden by the library. Behind the parking area are basketball courts, also, closer to the school itself, manual arts classrooms, arranged in the familiar introverted square.

Occasionally there are sprinklers on the oval: long brass pipes made up from jointed segments, stretching from one end of the oval to the other, with a punctured head at the centre of each segment. Alongside the road, opposite the swimming pool and the hall, there is a row of bores to supply the sprinklers. Often there is water fountaining feet high into the air from these bores, and the grass around is flooded ankle-deep. I never find out exactly why this happens.

It may be some kind of ritual.

As I get closer I can see the entrance to the library: a kind of half-open corridor, a strip of concrete with an aluminium roof but only rusty metal railings along the sides, except for the very beginning where the sides are made of bricks and there are racks for bags inside.

I could delight in these details once, but a hundred times makes them dumb enemies.

Exactly opposite the library is an entrance to the Western Quadrangle. I turn left. The way is lined with thin, grey wooden benches, set close to the wall, and moderately populated.

I pass out of the quadrangle and into the concrete rectangle, and in the centre of the perpendicular section housing toilets is my locker, my tiny sanctuary, my little home.

Well, in a hostile place it is nice to have a cubic foot to call your own.

Each time I open it, I change the combination, but I must be sure not to forget. I do not photograph it, for security reasons. I take out my books for the morning, then swing the heavy steel door shut. It is my third Chubb for the year, and they are not cheap.

Waiting for the siren I circle the school, hoping to wander into something interesting, but always it is so like the day before that the differences are almost too small to perceive.

This morning the siren brings one period of phys ed followed by one period of French, as it has for a million Fridays before.

Watch the aimless movements of a hundred people suddenly become polarised as they are given direction and purpose.

Through the exit there where for some unknowable reason only one of the half-doors is ever open and hence it is always crowded, to line up outside the change room built into the hall which is abused as a gymnasium.

Five impatient minutes and then we are let in.

The floor is cold.

Because it is first thing in the morning, the change rooms are relatively clean and dry and the smell is bearable.

Inside we sit on the expensive wooden boards and look up at the ceiling dented by many hard red balls. Strange acoustics in this strange barn, no privacy, vulnerable in the volume.

The air is cold, although it's sunny outside.

Today we will set up an obstacle course in the gymnasium by pulling out machines and structures from the wall, and taking some from cupboards in strange places, and putting all these machines and structures in a closed path which we must run through with maximum effort and minimum efficiency.

This cannot be to train us to go through real obstacle courses, or we would have to do it with minimum effort and maximum efficiency.

I am told that the purpose of it all is to prevent my otherwise inevitable middle-age heart attacks. Isn't science wonderful.

I am told that this is also a great deal of fun, and I ought to enjoy it tremendously.

It is difficult to complain out loud to such sincere and benevolent despots. They are moronic shits. I deny common ancestry. The irritation they cause me is my only reason to acknowledge their existence; they are so boring and stupid that if they didn't prod me with their idiot activities I would never need to know the smallest thing about them. I resent having to take an interest in them.

Always these periods have the greatest subjective length.

Especially near the end, when the subjective length of an interval in objective time is distorted by a factor almost inversely proportional to the time remaining to the end of the period. Marginally greater distortion would trap me in there forever. This may seem impossible, but (purely an analogy) remember that God is everywhere, inside black holes and outside black holes, and there is only one God.

Then we push some of the machines and structures back into the wall, and return the rest to their cupboards in strange places.

Inevitably we finish after the siren, and must change in negative time, but for me teacherless French follows so there is no problem. Others will be rebuked. Sure, it's a small thing, but it makes me angry (and that's what matters).

Always French starts with a determination to work solidly and successfully, to bound over chapters and exercises absorbing all with infinite clarity born of infinite concentration.

So much for the theory.

Decay is started by frustration. As one or two of us lose comprehension, they lose concentration, and almost telepathically it spreads by a kind of avalanche effect until we are all involved in a debate on war or crime or censorship or last night's episode of *Star Trek* ... or we are fighting each other with rulers, pens, books, and whatever else is at hand, always vigorously but rarely with real hostility. Sometimes a few try to cling to original intentions. If they do not try to shut up the rest of us, then they will end the period neither having learnt anything, because their concentration could not survive the noise, nor having enjoyed whatever improper activity or discussion took place. If they do try, and they fail, then their hostility destroys everyone else's enjoyment, and if they succeed, then everyone else's hostility destroys their powers of concentration.

So even teacherless French is not ideal.

Recess shows me consistent consumption assumption correct and I wonder how the school can ever be short of funds considering canteen profits but that is a dangerous thought so I suppress it.

Wander around randomly until siren brings double Maths.

Then graph dozens of dozens of identical single-variable inequalities and each one involves ruling a line and marking off equally-spaced intervals and numbering the points of division and putting arrows on the ends and writing the name of the variable and graphing the inequality.

There are twenty questions we are given; fine, just enough to be sure you can do it, though perhaps twelve or ten or eight or five or two would be better because really they are all so similar that repetition is pointless when it is only possible to have tiny variations from question to question.

Then open the book and see that each question is subdivided into fourteen parts (a) to (n) and that is real *cowardice* doing that instead of coming out and calling them questions 1 to 280.

And we would all love to sleep instead because the air is so drowsy, but they will be checked so they must be done, to avoid Consequences, and neither anger nor apathy can change that fact.

Eighty minutes is of course not enough time ... so half must become homework. Why? Well surely the brilliant and talented and highly-paid people who designed our toilet-paper textbooks would not

include all those problems unless they were sure it was essential to complete every single one. The fact that every chapter in the book is exactly ten pages long and the exercises at the end are always just the right length to make this so is, of course, just a coincidence ...

Always just before lunch the public address network is used to keep us informed on important events but like the six o'clock news it seems to be largely trivia and sport (not that I'm implying that these are mutually exclusive; what I mean is trivia related to sport and trivia not related to sport).

It would be nice to have zero response to all of this, to filter all the inputs and block out the garbage, but no tuned circuit is perfect, no signal is monochromatic (in any space); the world is too sloppy to contain only things of importance.

Then quickly change books because eating lunch must stop at precisely 12.15, no earlier, no later.

Then dutifully I begin filming randomly Just In Case and I must never miss even one lunchtime because the probability of an important event is 0.999999999999999 if I am not prepared. I am tempted to test this but I never have enough courage. I wish it were possible to appear to be unprepared and thus trigger an important event but the all-knowing cosmos cannot be fooled.

Not that I believe this superstitious nonsense. I merely film everyday because it is safest that way. And it is ridiculous to think that my observation of the world can change the world when the camera is hidden so deep in my skull and is only millimetres across.

No matter what Heisenberg said.

It worries me that the Big Event of my camerawork career could come on the opposite side of the school to my position at the time. I could send out a lot of viewpoints, but it's well known that being there is as important as actually taking the shot, so I clone myself and send me to the library, while I stay in the quadrangle, thus covering a wider area.

By the end of lunchtime my clone is usually dead because the technique is not perfect.

Unless it is me who dies.

Not that I mind I don't think if I cannot tell but ...

Confession: I don't really clone myself, I just run back and forth from the library to the quadrangle a great deal, very very quickly, hoping not to miss the Big Event which never comes.

Well, no, actually I do send out viewpoints.

Keep still!

Instead of the Big Event I capture boring brawls and dull discussions and colourless conversations and jejune jovialities which are almost indistinguishable from the footage of two days before or two weeks before or two months before ...

And despite my attempts to make lumps, I find it hard to form a meaningful reference grid. My consistent attempts to make lumps are so consistently unsuccessful that they form a bland, unresolvable background. I am always so frightened when long periods of time pass without any distinctive events to give scale to them; when a week of school is as exciting as sitting in a dentist's waiting room for two hours, then the two become effectively equivalent.

Often unpromising material can be made to stand out by catching it from the right angle to give the greatest contrast and the sharpest relief, but this can only be achieved at the time of experiencing it, because there is no ingenious process or method to alter the angle of a shot after it has been taken.

—Ladies and gentlemen ...

says the rabbit, on top of the flag pole.

—Mesdames et Messieurs, Damen und Herren ...

says the rabbit, doing a very good Joel Grey.

—Allow me to present the one, the only, the sensational, the fabulous ...

Carbon arc spotlight brighter than the sun beams down from the top of the pole, blue dust motes fill the lightcone, all else pales in comparison with:

—Patch Of Lawn!

Oh joy after lunch is double Science which is reasonably lumpy as we learn about the crust and the mantle and the Mohorovic Discontinuity. To spoil it all there are the inevitable inane questions involved at the end, like: What are the major theories concerning the source of heat in the Earth's core? (We are never told, we have no reference facilities. What are we supposed to do? Work it out logically? Guess?) Discuss. List their advantages and disadvantages. (Ditto.) Where is the deepest ocean trench? (Ditto, with high irrelevance added.)

Out of twelve questions seven need reference facilities and time which we are not given, so we jot down meaningless short sentences. Of course from a purely rational point of view inability to answer satisfactorily questions which I find irrelevant should not bother me, but who is purely rational?

—Not I! Not even I!

says the rabbit, twitching pointy ears then dissolving into points of light.

Try not to worry about it.

Enervating English offers imbecilic questions after a comprehension passage written in the 1950s to brainwash American high school students. Sounds fine on the face of it. But the imbecilic questions (which we are expected to '*get right*') were written in the 1950s to test the brainwashing of American high school students after reading the same passage.

With this in mind, I don't find either the passage or the questions terribly relevant or interesting. And I still can't see the connection between long hair and totalitarian communism.

—Year's free subscription to *Reader's Digest*?

offers the rabbit. I can't seem to get rid of him.

It is after two o'clock in the afternoon and hence the perfect time for a siesta but as always the threat of Consequences is there to guarantee at least a little effort no matter how blatantly stupid it all is.

Sleepy Social Studies and our mummified teacher whispers through our minds his views on Ancient Egyptian Religion through years of plague. His sightless blue-veined eyes and his soft, sad speech hypnotise us in the warm cotton air. His vivid descriptions of sacrifices to appease angry gods suggest that he has actually seen them ...

Sacrifices or angry gods? Both? Wake up, he's stopped.

Then there are surprisingly sensible questions to answer on the effects of Egyptian philosophy on social structures. After a day of moronic pap this sign of mild intelligence surviving somewhere in the machinery which churns out our courses and texts stands out as quite a lump and I dwell deeply on it.

Another news bulletin and then a day like most other days is over.

If I were due to die at sunset, would this day become a magical creation? I think not.

As the term's end becomes visible over the temporal horizon, time slows down just as it does at the approach of the end of a period. Each day lasts longer, and the three or four last weeks seem to stretch to twice their previous length with the passing of each day.

That's with the passing of each actual day, not of each time that seems as long as a day ought to seem. Otherwise the term would be subjectively unbounded. In words it's clumsy; in tensor notation it looks like barbed wire.

The arrival of the final day seems impossible, yet it crawls into place with a horrible grin saying I'll take as long as I see fit and don't you complain or I'll stand still.

After two periods pretending that all is normal we are put into form rooms to stretch out the boredom as much as possible.

An endless lunch then an assembly in the hall.

Complicated entrance procedure supposedly streamlines events, but it would have been faster to climb in the windows.

—By Jove, he's right

yells the rabbit. The windows are twenty feet from the ground.

—Take care!

but he's not even there.

Why does he get all the fun?

We wait for the people-sorting machine to miss yet another dozen clock-pulses before finally loading the last subcategory into the hall.

And the longest of all hours begins.

Our nervous Deputy Whatever comes first, but now for some unknown reason behind him a row of people sit on uncomfortable chairs but do not squirm. They are all the Senior Masters and Mistresses. (Teachers are never called masters or mistresses any more, that's old-fashioned, but maybe Senior Teacher would sound funny. And why senior, anyway? They're often not the oldest teachers in their departments. No point in thinking about it ... there is no hidden meaning, nothing to learn ... why do I waste my time pursuing these dreary paths of thought? It must be something in the environment.)

A few insignificant words, and then Der Führer arrives with characteristic vigour.

And he has a sheaf of notes. Nothing can save us.

With a strange growing wariness he lists the wonderful improvements that he has brought to us, the tangible tributes to his ameliorative adroitness. But his attention is on *us* this time more than ever before; today he is going through all this for our benefit, not his. You'd think he was standing for election.

But no, this is a *lesson*, not a PR exercise. When, every now and then, one student out of his class of one thousand strays in his attention, Seward halts suddenly and concentrates on that one lost lamb. The thousandfold increase in intensity is too much for the poor unfortunate, and he decomposes on the spot.

And then there are awards; twitching, terrified students sneak up to meekly accept green felt triangles as symbols of their unfailing energies during the term. He jollies-up each presentation with a short witty comment which leaves the victim in a state between laughing and crying. The absurdity feeds the temptation to laugh, but to laugh would be suicide, so the temptation to laugh feeds the terror and nervousness, which is really rather funny, considering. Positive feedback results in forced vibrations, and the structure collapses.

Then a few more minutes of generalised raving, and it is finished.

A long period of time, subjectively, with almost nothing in it. Which is not to say that listening to Seward is a neutral experience: it's definitely on the unpleasant side. It's just that it's so repetitive, so contentless, so toothache dull.

Slowly as possible back to form room, then wait agonisingly for reports to come and then, says the speaker:

—The school will be dismissed once all report-folders are returned.

The twenty (count them, count their components) minutes before that final siren are twenty (each containing fourteen parts) lies, that's two hundred and eighty lies. Every single report-folder was rushed back at little less than light speed.

Then goodbye for two oh so short weeks to inane questions.

I walk backwards out of the school giving the correct perspective that is missing from zoom.

Chapter 4

MUSIC

As I walk I whistle the theme from *The Collector*, sometimes mournfully, sometimes with a kind of wistful joy.

The rabbit rolls his eyes.

It is locked away securely in my brain, along with so many others: *The Trap*, *Charade*, *The Pink Panther*, *Zardoz*, *Deliverance*, *Summerfield*, *The Last Wave*, *The Terminal Man*, and *Star Wars*. Along with songs, from *A Shot in the Dark*, *Casino Royale*, *The President's Analyst*, *The Ruling Class*, *Cat People*, and *if....* To name but a few.

Cliché!

Shut up.

And whenever I'm depressed, there's that marching music that was played at the very end of *Catch-22*.

Music's such a powerful, choking thing. Mixing it with an image can sometimes just dilute both, but sometimes it produces something different entirely, something more powerful still.

It's like a chemical reaction.

Cliché!

Just testing.

How I hate films when the music is used just as wallpaper for the credits and low-dialogue scenes, or when a thousand florid orchestras spill their brass hearts whenever the film's characters move their eyeballs or take a breath. Almost as bad are the mimic scores, where every movement or mood (numbered from one to ten) is clumsily echoed in the music.

Music should be independent, it should contain the parts of the information that the film image alone cannot convey. It should be another hook to sink into the flesh of the audience, but it must be a different shape, or it will make no contribution to the film's firm grip, it will just slip out of the wound that the vision has made.

Personally, I think that with the right music (along with perfection in all other things) someone could make a brilliant movie out of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Not that you-know-who would let them do it in a million years. But it is a thought.

What a strange expression ... everything's a thought if you think about it.

Good.

And there's the music from *The Omega Man*.

I can drown in music, really I can. Every chord takes me by surprise, floods my eyes and forehead with patterns without light. The difference between hearing sound and perceiving music is just as vast a void as between any two different senses. The same is true of speech. The critics all laugh at me when I say that there are three senses of hearing: one which tells us what is making a sound, like footsteps or the sound of the wind, one which tells us what some human wishes us to do or think, and one which grabs our souls.

—Shit or get off the pot!

scowls a tall American politician.

—Crass ass!

scowls the rabbit, dropping napalm on him.

It's what happens when I try to think things through.

Well.

Where was I?

—In the can by the look on your face!

scowls the tall American politician.

Go away go away go away go away.

He begins to change shape into a swollen-bellied Ethiopian child (isn't make-up marvellous?

Still, since *American Werewolf* everybody has to get in on the act (Cliché! (Shut up.)) but:

—Obscene! Obscene!

screeches the rabbit, filling the belly full of A-bombs and H-bombs and N-bombs. There's not much left.

—Well, better dead ...

smirks the rabbit through the ashes.

Whose side is he on anyway?

All this makes my hands feel wet. I shake them and shake them and shake them but they stay wet. I dry them by wiping them across my face, which feels very peculiar.

That's better now.

I'm still feeling mournful, so I switch to the music from *Summerfield*. Now that movie had a lousy plot. Really lousy. But the music and the scenery were unbelievable. They completely made up for the lousy plot.

It is autumn and hence a little windy, but it is never windy enough in the morning. It's best to whistle when there's a strong, cold wind, so you can impose the tune on the wind by subtle perceptual self-deception. I never whistle very loudly or too well in-tune, but it doesn't matter because I am whistling only to myself. I can actually recall a tune solely in my head, quite entertainingly, but it adds a little 'realism' if I can accompany it with a 'reasonable' approximation. My brain adjusts my hearing to fit the deficiencies. And when there is a good wind, my brain uses the sound of the wind as a kind of starting point, and lies to me to fit the sound in with the tune I want to hear.

Not quite the same as the London Symphony Orchestra.

Good.

Summerfield is so beautiful and intricate that I stay with it until I reach the school, then I change, almost without a choice, to 'Stand Up for College' from *if...* and the strange echoes of stairways and corridors that come with it.

And then the wind gets stronger and intangible clouds fly rapidly across the sky ahead of me (who ever decided that the sky was above? It's mainly at eye-level.) and I change to 'Sanctus' which believe me is hard to whistle but my brain fills in the mistakes like capping teeth.

Then I change to the music from *Slaughterhouse Five* when Billy Pilgrim is walking through the snow. Imagine how hard it must be for the Tralfalmadorians to appreciate music. They would apprehend it all at once, since they see time as a fourth physical dimension. All at once? What could that mean to them? This is getting silly. Still, I close my eyes when I take a record out of its sleeve, so as not to spoil the music by peeking.

It is second term.

Second term will be identical to first term.

It *is* first term.

Effectively.

I'm *trapped!*

Shut up.

Think: the syllabus will be different and I will learn many new and exciting things and there will be lists of many stimulating, intelligent questions to answer every time I have learnt a module of information. (I'd love to say 'a lump of learning' instead of 'a module of information' but the word 'lump' has such a special significance that I really think I'd better just leave it at 'module'. Of course I could start up a system of local and global meanings for words and phrases, but the notational problems are a bit too messy. Sigh!)

Of course I *decided* this morning that *this* term will be exciting and enjoyable, but I seem to have about as much control over the future as I have (in the present) over the past.

Anarchy, it's all anarchy I tell you!

Good.

The critics *love* spontaneity.

What they don't understand is the Cruel Joke. And I'm sure not going to tell them about it.

I can *never* remember all the words of 'Sounds of Silence' no matter how many times I hear it. I suppose I could look them up in a book, or go out and buy a copy of them, but that would be so repugnantly sensible: an example of planning, of foresight, of recognising the likelihood of a future wish to know the words (I am constantly mildly curious, but at times it becomes a regular craving), of doing something not because of a sudden wild impulse, but because of a sensible, reasonable, fully-thought-out motive. That would be a terrible thing to do, surely, because that would not be spontaneous.

Also I'm too lazy.

So I usually just whistle the tune and patch in words haphazardly.

And I would give anything

Careful!

to understand why Mike Nichols or Paul Simon or whoever it was who was responsible chose 'Scarborough Fair' for *The Graduate*. I'm certainly not complaining about the choice ... I think it fitted wonderfully

Too bland thought unverbaised!

Tough! Shut up!

into the film. But I am filled with an enormous curiosity as to why it was chosen, how it was chosen, how anybody could make their mind leap in such a direction. Was it just chance? I mean it was hardly an obvious selection. Descartes, sitting by his fireplace, would not have made that choice.

It was quite unjustified.

It was spontaneous.

I think.

Well it's just a thought.

Just a thought?

It's what happens when I try to think things through.

Crossing the oval and approaching the library could never bring on the welcome disorientation of *déjà vu*; it has been repeated too often and too regularly for that. I periodically wonder (about once a

day during terms, so far) what it would be like to cross the oval in an extremely fast train which crashes into the school at hundreds of kilometres per second. Or on horseback. Or by helicopter. Or tank. Or motorbike. Or in one of those one-man fighters that were used to attack the Death Star in *Star Wars* ...

At least it would be different.

At least winter is coming, and the times of oppressive heat are gone. I love running into icy wind.

—Hello

I say to everyone.

—Hello

it replies (everyone is quite androgynous).

—Only thirteen more weeks to the holidays, eh!

jests everyone.

—Yes

I laugh.

—Only ninety-one more days to the holidays, eh!

jests everyone.

—Only sixty-five more week days

I laugh.

—And there are two holidays this term

comments everyone optimistically.

—Yes

I agree cheerfully.

In search of variety I must look elsewhere.

One way is more detail. A smooth, flat surface may be a torn, jagged, mountainous landscape under an electron microscope. Can you imagine MGM forking out money for a movie shot entirely through a microscope ... ?

Well, rather than magnification, perhaps a little unsubtle, there is always the technique of increasing the depth of field and the angle of view. There is no excuse for leaving out peripheral detail on the basis that it is irrelevant when the only subject in sharp focus, the only subject framed, is itself as boring and pointless as anything ever captured on film.

And if you shoot on location, documentary-style, real-life extras are free.

No expensive costumes.

They don't have to be directed or made-up; they don't need copies of the script.

Yet I am still against it ... making lumps merely by staring intensely at everything I see, no matter how irrelevant and petty, lacks interaction. There is a frightening sensual decadence about treating the whole world as music, revelling in the intricacy of what-are-to-*me* background events; drowning, no, basking in my inability to fully appreciate every detail of the big, wide, oh-so-structured surrounding world, when each one of those 'background' events is in a clearly resolved foreground for someone.

With naturally occurring objects, like blades of grass and the moon and the clouds, I feel no guilt because it is the same for virtually everyone. But I cannot deal with manufactured articles in this way, because the hundreds of nuts and bolts which flash past in trivial seconds for me are so much of the lives of miners and factory workers and engineers.

Yet surely a film is a manufactured inanimate object of enormous invisible and partly visible detail, and I feel no guilt in using films as a means of enormous sensory variation.

Because they were made purely for that purpose.

And that makes it all right.

Good.

Suppose I try it just for a while.

The wall to my left is faded red-brick, two decades old, and the mortar in between has turned sour green-grey. At head-height, strips of louvred windows are framed by blue-painted wood. The regularly appearing doors are blue also, some are part-way open, revealing narrow strips of white-painted wall, and glimpses of blackboards.

I feel sick.

Alongside the wall is a strip of concrete two metres wide. Close against the wall are narrow unpainted wooden benches. Just above these are the grey-painted lockers, two-high.

I will die of boredom/stimulation.

—Oh really

says the rabbit, very amused.

Beneath the benches are scattered schoolbags; mainly grey, a few coloured heavy plastic. Similarly scattered above the benches are people—

Enough!

I am the centre of the universe!

I grip something which is a vertical blue metal pole which is very cold and damp from dew and dirty with partly dissolved grime and the paint has flaked off in many places and there are one or two attempts at graffiti which are hard to read because they provided new starts for flaking and hence destroyed themselves revealing dull-shiny grey steel—

NO!

My arms are right around it and my head is slumped up close, my nose and forehead feel the cold dampness mingling with my sweat. My eyes are half shut to blot out the infinite detail which tries to crawl in and swamp my brain.

In the shimmering of tears I see dusty red miners at work in long stony cuts, train drivers waiting for wagons to be loaded, conveyor-belt operators watching tonne after tonne of the red rock slide noisily onto the ship, and then off again at another port beside the blast furnace. More automated shuffling and sorting, more men watching and supervising and guiding, then pig-iron is born in fiery white light.

In seconds it is cool and hard and in minutes by ship to the steel converter and the mill and warehouse and then yet again by ship to another warehouse and then by truck to this building site ...

And all along the way there are invoices and schedules and records, sheet after sheet of paper prepared by accountants and secretaries who have families and cats and dogs and front gardens ...

Get a grip on yourself!

—Cliché!

I say out loud.

A few people stare but I hardly notice.

—Well, pole, you have quite a history

I say laugh crying.

Then I turn and walk away.

Suppose one of those secretaries' cat got hit by a car. What would the children think? They're so young and innocent it would shatter their world.

Shut up!

Well it would. It would shatter their world.

There's too much.

Good.

The critics *love* detail.

There's nothing like a frame packed full of tiny trinkets. Definitely the sign of a great director.

Where would they bury it?

In my brain.

Chapter 5 HOLIDAYS

What else?

Athletics carnival held on the oval and the public oval to the west and a few metres higher joined by a grassy slope where spectators lie in comfort reading and talking, and groaning at the inevitable feeble jokes from the inevitable electronic English teacher.

The inevitable gut-grinding cheering-squads and telephallused photographers, the inevitable endless speech and nervous trophy ceremony, the inevitable garbage collection time.

You see they only have one mould.

Forget it.

What else?

School Council meetings dominated by Seward as he drafts *his* constitution and sits back and watches it work, under the supreme guidance of articles 12 and 13:

12. Any motion may be vetoed without question by the Principal.

13. The election of an executive officer will not be deemed to be official unless the office-bearer is approved by the Principal.

As the camera dwells on these lines of the mimeographed sheet of the Constitution, the soundtrack fills with the voices of an enormous choir, singing (to the tune of 'Stand Up for College'):

Stand up! For the student councillors!

Our Democratic Right!

They are our true inspiration as

They lead us in the fight!

They are the perfect prototypes

Of what we ought to be!

So vote at the next election for

The one approved nominee!

What else?

Very little.

And the year shrinks due to cruel perspective and I have not even the most primitive reference grid.

Near the very end there are picnics to sandy islands but they are not even worth putting on with a C-grade vampire movie.

What else?

The Very Last Day exactly mimics the Very Last Day of Term.

You see they only have one mould.

Seven weeks of holidays and I will go to London and Paris and New York and Montreal.

Or perhaps Milan and Geneva and Berlin and Stockholm.

Maybe Chicago and Minneapolis and Denver and Phoenix and Los Angeles and San Francisco?

Confession: I will probably have to settle for the Grand, the Paris, and the Astor.

Settle for?

In the dark I cannot see the perfect rows of chairs or the intricate pattern of the carpet. I cannot see the people brought here by advertising who have bought tickets by giving money which has come to them by frighteningly tangled paths to the ticket-seller with a house and a front garden and a husband and children and a cat and two dogs.

Two dogs? How excessive! Make it one and one half.

I cannot see the torch of the usherette who has just broken up with her fiancé, who contemplated suicide but got smashed instead.

I can see none of this if I look straight ahead at the flickering reflections which were designed and constructed with mind-boggling effort and thoroughness ... *just for me to look at.*

Why is the air-conditioning always just a little too cold?

To remind the audience that they have real bodies sitting in real chairs in a real cinema in a real city in a real country on a real, solid planet. Otherwise there is the real danger that they will forget and get lost completely.

It is my personal opinion that they showed a very good movie on the *Marie Celeste* that night.

I'm not kidding. My mother knew a girl who fell into an Errol Flynn film and never came out.

I'm only kidding.

What else?

Sleeping in late to eleven or even two, after being half-awake for two or three hours but too sickened by heavy, sweat-drenched skin and air to face the increased sensory inputs of consciousness, and so lying semi-dreaming of solving some problem, breaking some code, reaching some goal—and persuading my elbows to make the tiny but oh-so-hard movements needed to prop me up into a slit-eyed sitting position.

For those first few seconds, the plot of the dream is clear, but it soon fades into inaccessibility.

Why should I need to crack a safe or cross a desert just to wake up?

My dreams are *always* some problem which I must solve before I can wake, and the worst part of it all is that once I am fully awake I can never remember either the exact nature of the problem or whether or not I succeeded in solving it.

As far as I can tell, the problems are never anything to do with real life.

I'm sure a Freudian would find it all *terribly* significant, but I never worry about anything I can't record on celluloid.

Not that it's actually celluloid. That's just an expression.

What else?

Orgies of reading, solidly, hour after hour, day after day, book after book, interrupted only by meals, sleep (mainly from five to eleven in the morning), and trips to the library.

What else?

Occasional enthusiastic decisions to study in detail electronics or physics or French or cryptography.

They last about a day.

And hence are not *terribly* successful.

But they are lumps, if minor ones.

What else?

Occasional visits to the State Library to wander semi-aimlessly around, looking at obscure periodicals and sometimes chasing peculiar facts which are not likely to be found.

Yet sometimes are.

Such as *Datamation's* opinion of *Demon Seed*.

Flicking through huge heavy volumes of *The New York Times Directory of the Film*, a strangely masochistic activity for I violently disagree with most of the smug reviews, the snobbish put-downs, the obsequious eulogies. At least I keep my own muddled thoughts about films deep in my head; at least I admit to myself that they are only guesses and gut feelings.

Cliché!

So?

Reading a review of *Catch-22* makes me twitch and drool; even when the reviewer praises the film it seems more like an attempt to prove his own worth by advertising the fact that he can not only enjoy and appreciate the film, he can say exactly why it was good, exactly why it wasn't perfect, what bits did 'work' and what bits didn't.

I guess it's implicit that all this is just one man's opinion. I hope it's implicit. I doubt it.

There are some things in the film that I wish he had resisted, such as images out of Fellini and a reference to Kubrick's use of 'Zarathustra', which is also being used currently in a Swanson's Frozen Foods television commercial.

What a generous soul. In one small paragraph he grants exclusive rights to a piece of music to *2001* and, much more lavishly, grants exclusive rights to a type of scene to Fellini. That the images out of Fellini are really images out of Heller wouldn't matter to him, he's out to prove that he can recognise this sort of thing. I can imagine him sitting in the audience in the hotel in *Stardust Memories* and, after asking some long pretentious question showing off all the scraps of trivia and bullshit that have accumulated in his brain after all those years of trying to suck dignity out of other people's creations, turning to a companion with a huge wink which says: that'll screw him up nicely, that'll show him who I am.

What else?

Occasional visits to book stores to wander semi-aimlessly around, looking at the latest SF paperbacks and sometimes buying one or two, never sure which I should buy, conned by the covers, wishing that they had a reading room.

I suppose that's not very likely, though.

And laughing at the enormous displays of the latest best-sellers: *How to Cure Migraines with Turnip Technology* and *The Do-It-Yourself Zodiac Book*. And also poorly written novels based on the most popular currently screening films.

And going upstairs to see the photography textbooks which are unbelievably expensive even when in paperback.

And that sort of thing.

What else?

Half-starting a dozen short stories and novels but always giving up because after three re-readings everything I write always seems terrible. I suppose I shouldn't read it all over and over again, but I have to check for typing mistakes and I never believe that I could have corrected them all in one

reading. I'm paranoid about typing mistakes. When I type letters I always have a terrible feeling just as I drop the envelopes into the post-box ... I am convinced that there must be a terrible mistake somewhere.

What else?

Reading the entire morning newspaper, every single article on every single page (but of course missing the advertisements; there are limits to every eccentricity), taking hours, and then regretting having done it because it was a complete waste of time: I can scarcely remember anything that I've read, and what I can remember is trivial and not worth knowing.

I only do it about three or four times in seven weeks.

What else?

Looking out for interesting shots as I walk through the city surrounded by *so many* people. I have a whole library of mothers hitting children, old drunks leaning against buildings, executives out to lunch with young, beautiful secretaries. Public servants in business suits, looking so resigned. All boring and repetitious and predictable. Quite useless. But I keep them Just In Case an inconceivable application suddenly materialises.

What else?

Very little.

And the holidays shrink due to cruel perspective and I have not even the most primitive reference grid.

Near the very end there is buying books for the approaching school year but this is about as exciting as a Woolworths advertisement.

I loathe advertisements.

Especially the type which try to persuade the audience to believe that the product being advertised is responsible for or contributes to certain lifestyles.

Need I name names?

(What a corny thing to say. I beg forgiveness.)

No, I will not give hints. That would be cowardly.

Besides, everybody knows the bastards. Everybody.

What else?

On the night of the last Friday of the holidays I am walking down a very dark street which is especially dark because there are no street lights working for blocks in all directions due to some extremely accurate vandalism, and also although there is a moon the sky is completely overcast with thick clouds making the moon a hazy patch of light blue-grey against the rest of the clouds ... they can be felt like a ceiling, even though it is almost too dark to see them.

Someone is walking down the street towards me in the opposite direction to my direction. (The awkwardness of that sentence is a direct expression of my nervousness at walking down the very dark street. Just thought I'd mention that.) I don't mind people walking down the street in the opposite direction, but I hate it when they walk in the same direction. If they're behind me, I think they're following me. (Not that I believe it ... I just think it.) If they're in front, I think they think I'm following them, and it's even worse if they walk more slowly than I do, because then I catch up with them and have to pass them. Of course I could slow down to avoid this, but that would increase their suspicions about me following them.

Mind you, I'm not paranoid. I just think everyone else is either paranoid or homicidal.

Well as the person gets closer I see he is dressed completely in black and he is carrying a knife.

I actually shiver. How amazing! People actually *do* shiver when something like this happens! I am quite excited to have confirmed it!

He points the nasty-looking (It is *extremely* nasty-looking. It is plainly not new, and looks like he never cleans it, i.e. it has blood stains all over it. *Help!*) knife at me, and says:

—Give me yer fuckin money or I'll cut yer guts out

in an almost-amusing-but-not-under-these-circumstances, *very* Australian accent.

I have no money.

I stand there thinking for a few milliseconds.

I jump backwards, smoothed by slow motion, onto a conveniently positioned crate, and I face my attacker, pointing at him with an accusing finger (Cliché! Not now!), saying:

—Would you kill me? *Would you?* Do you know *who I am*, do you have the faintest glimmering of an idea of the enormity of the act you contemplate so readily, so wantonly?

He shakes his head dumbly, looks a little sheepish.

—Well, I'll tell you who I am!

Now, in a booming, commanding voice:

—I am the needle in the haystack, the two-headed penny, the albino lion! I am the Uranium-235 atom, surrounded by U-238! I am the tenth consecutive royal flush; I am the die which lands balanced on its edge ... NO! Balanced on its corner! I am the misprinted stamp, the two-headed otter, the stallion with a star on its nose! I am the failing failsafe, the possible impossibility, the repeated unrepeatable! I am the piano plant, the Elizabethan furniture mine, the five-hundred-storey skyscraper that grew unaided out of the ground! Do you understand me! I am *unique!*

Short cut to fantasy sequence:

He drops his knife as the realisation hits him; he turns and runs screaming down the street.

Short cut to fantasy sequence:

He looks up with growing comprehension, says:

—Yes, I see now. And every human is unique, so life is a very sacred thing. From this day onwards, I will pay it due respect.

Actually, he says:

—Shit, mate, you're some kind of a freak!

and walks off whistling.

Well, at least it worked.

If not in the way I expected ...

And I didn't even have any money to protect ... there was nobody else around to save.

My life is not too hot as far as dramatic incidents are concerned.

I throw away the film of the incident, flush it away. Why, when I keep so much boring trash? I don't know. Either way, I think I've made a fool of myself again.

Unintentionally, that's the annoying aspect of it. I don't mind mocking myself if it's all planned, but when I'm trying to be serious ...

It would have been better if he'd knifed me.

And *that's* a very depressing thing to say.

And I lose confidence in my ability as an actor for nearly five minutes.

Good.

Everybody needs a little humility.

Oh shut up.

I walk home whistling the music from *Zardoz*, which is a fairly simple tune but it sounds very profound.

When played on the right instruments.

But it is mournful and I want to cheer up, so I change to the theme music from *The Trap*, which is vigorous and rousing and easy to whistle.

As I walk, the invisible hemispherical ceiling above me moves too, keeping me at its centre.

And I am flattered.

And a little scared.

Because it is following me.

I close my eyes and stretch my arms out in slow motion. I grow rapidly until I am nearly as high as the hemisphere of cloud that follows me, and then my fists break through the fragile porcelain backing on which it is painted.

It shatters and scatters on a wind which points away from me in all directions.

I shrink quickly.

Then I open my eyes. Faint in the darkened moonlight, but the clouds are still there.

Nobody can say I don't try.

—You don't try

says the red-eared rabbit running down the road.

—Stew you!

I yell angrily.

—Try it!

retorts the rabbit.

I let him go.

Nobody can say I'm not kind to animals.

—You're not kind to animals

I hear him yell from a distance.

—Oh, funny bunny!

I scream back.

Should be on a leash.

Oh shut up.

Chapter 6 HUMOUR

Annoyingly, as I walk diagonally across the oval (Isn't life a vast, colourful tapestry of ever-changing events? No. It's extremely bland.) I am torn between an impulse to grin broadly, but it's an impulse) and the restraint of the impulse due to the feeling that it makes me look absurd (It does. I once grinned broadly (quite by mistake, I tripped on a banana skin) into a mirror then laughed at myself for five minutes and hiccupped for fifteen.).

Annoyingly, I begin to resonate, grinning broadly for a few seconds, then looking extremely sober for a few seconds, in a hard-to-get-out-of cycle. I soon realise that this must look even more ridiculous than grinning broadly continuously, but I can't bring myself to do that. I try to stay sober-looking, but then I start to remember scenes from *Silent Movie* and *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* and *Annie Hall* and I just have to grin broadly again.

Annoyingly, I have this terrible problem when I have to look serious. I *always* begin to remember scenes from comedies. Whenever I'm speaking to a teacher about something serious, and especially when I'm being chastised, I start to remember the words to 'Everybody Ought to have a Maid' from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and I have to fight with all my strength to stop my eggshell-like expression from bursting with laughter. That's one difference I find between the students and the teachers: you could easily explain something like that to a student, but *never* to a teacher. Even the most broad-minded, good-humoured teacher just could not understand. They think that we can switch our moods to suit them, control our souls for the circumstances. Throttle yourselves now, they are saying, because there is no laughter in the offices, the factories, the dole queue. Laugh at your superiors and starve.

I'm growing morbid.

Annoyingly, during English comprehension exams, I always find the passages and the questions incredibly funny. I sit there, waiting to roar with laughter, to roll on the floor, to cry buckets of hysterical tears, waiting for some sign that I am not alone, but the room stays silent but for the sound of eyeballs scanning lines. I wait a few minutes, to be sure that everybody in the class *must* have read the amusing section, hoping for a quiet giggle or a controlled snicker, but there is nothing. Maybe if I dared to laugh there'd be a chain reaction, but I am no courageous pioneer. I fear detection.

It's times like that when I wonder if I'm the only person in the world with a sense of humour.

Only kidding.

It is a new year but all the faces are the same and so little has changed.

—Would all students move to the Western Quadrangle now, please. All students to the Western Quadrangle for a brief assembly before sorting into tutorial groups.

Sorting into *what*?

They *can't have!* I don't believe it!

They *have!* They've *changed* something!

Tutorial groups. Now *that* sounds *scholastic*.

Yawn.

I don't want to find these pitiful lumps exciting, it's so degrading to lick such crumbs from the hands that knead us.

Tutorial groups. Mmmmm. Yummm. Interested? You bet!

No time to contemplate the implications because I have subconsciously walked to the quadrangle and I am sitting and poor Deputy Question Mark Mr Callow is nervously calling for attention.

And then Seward arrives.

I would definitely use ‘Zarathustra’ again, for consistency. I guess the repetition risks predictability, but at the same time it is aesthetically attractive to associate a piece of music with a character or mood, and stick with it. In any case, the very fact that ‘Zarathustra’ is repeated changes its meaning, for when it accompanied Seward’s first appearance, the audience had never seen him before, and the build-up of the chords was not entirely a mockery; now from the very first sound they know just what to expect, and the awesome introduction is seen as empty flatulence. They can imagine a hundred thousand repetitions of the same event, each one ridiculously heralded as the revelation of something new and remarkable.

Also, I can’t think of anything else to do.

As the music dies, he talks:

—Well, kids, this is my second year at Fenirk Vale, and believe me, in the short time I’ve been here, I’ve seen it improve literally before my eyes. This school is getting better and better every day, and with your help it’s going to keep on doing it, it’s going to ...

Now I have to do *something* here. My integrity demands it (a small, petulant voice). Cut to a talking cockatoo? Split screen with library film of Hitler, subtitles about the progress he’s made?

Not very subtle. Now, in *if...* they managed to mock their headmaster without any clichéd metaphors ... they just shot him through the forehead. However great the temptation, that’s out of the question with mine, because I still need him for dozens of later scenes. Maybe at the end of the film ...

But I need something right now, so the stage rises high into the air by hydraulic magic, and beneath it rises a vast polystyrene cave housing a choir of eyeless pink creatures, singing with soaring sweetness and slow choreography by Bob Fosse:

Stand up! Stand up! For Fenkirk!
The school we all adore!
Stand up! Stand up! For Seward!
Who rules for ever more!
Our name we will send forward!
Our banners we’ll unfurl!
Till everyone knows that Fenkirk is
The best school in the world!

Editing fits the action to the music so he walks off the stage just as the choir fades out, as their bodies implode.

Where would we be without editing?

—First years move to the hall for sorting into tutorial groups. Second years to the end of the quadrangle.

Third years move out onto the oval. Fourth and fifth years to the southern lawn. I’ll just repeat that ...

Which he did.

A short, red-haired woman reads off names in each tutorial group and I am 2A2. The exact significance of the designation escapes me, but it is something to cling to so I accept it gratefully (gracefully).

Oh shut up.

Our tutorial teacher is Mr Houghton, thirtyish Social Studies teacher with a walrus-like moustache and a generally drooping countenance. You see they only have one mould. Our form room is a metalwork room where we sit on blue wooden benches and breathe the tiny iron particles in from the air.

And it is all explained to us.

A new system has been introduced, in an attempt to deepen divisions between students. It is called the House System. There are four houses, named after four signs of the zodiac: Aquarius, Gemini, Leo, and Scorpio. Do not ask why. Perhaps Those Who Plan have left the eighteenth century and entered the mystical nineteen-sixties. A twenty-year lag is better than we have any right to hope for.

Students are divided randomly between the four houses (non-horoscopically, at least; perhaps other parameters from our Files are used). The House System replaces the Faction System in sport, but it is also extended into every other corner of our lives where it can be fitted. Each House has three tutorial groups in each year, each tutorial group being designated by the year number, the first letter of the House name, then the number 1, 2, or 3. Students will keep the same House and tutorial group number every year, so we will be 3A2 next year. And the tutorial teacher will move up with the students, being a solid, constant, dependable presence in their lives.

Like a gall stone.

Sorry, go on. This is really gripping stuff.

The tutorial teacher will be like a counsellor to the students in his tutorial group, and they should come to him with any problem they have, either with school-work or (they must be kidding) their personal lives.

Please sir, I'm a mass murderer, a heroin addict, and I'm failing English. Can you help me?

Sorry, go on.

The extra period on Wednesday formerly devoted nominally to Scripture Classes will now be used as a Tutorial Period. Students will be encouraged to join clubs so they can defend the honour of their House in non-sporting fields, such as chess, model-building, computer games, stamp collecting, handwriting analysis, vivisection, and necromancy. (I'm kidding about the last; this isn't the USA after all.) (Prejudiced? Against the land of the free? Never! Their brave boys on R&R keep our brothels buoyant.) So easily distracted, that's my big weakness. I must get right to the core of this thing, which is to say:

Stand up! For the House System!

Which breaks us into four!

This healthy competition

Is what we've come here for!

The path to a true identity

Leads surely to this gate!

So fight for your House my brother

And you will be truly great!

Just thought I'd keep in the School Spirit of things.

To my dismay, the means have not changed.

What happened to the volatile convulsions of fashion?

Dismay? Why should I care? Not even disgust. At least I've changed the frequency of my purple glow by one or two Hertz. Distress? Claustrophobia? In fact I hardly noticed, did I? I decide to think about something else? Yes.

Like the exciting courses I will be doing this year. In second year, they kindly let us pick, from a wide range of optional courses, what we will do for ten periods of every week.

I asked for four periods of French, four periods of German, and two periods of Technical Drawing.

I end up with two periods of Metalwork, two periods of Woodwork, two periods of Typing, and four periods of Technical Drawing.

Goodbye, Lake Geneva!

Something went wrong. Two things went wrong.

Too few students for a French class.

Too few students for a German class.

So it goes.

Why should I care? Not even disgust.

I'm not very good at Metalwork.

Good.

The critics *love* the intellectual to be forced to work with his hands.

Goodbye, CERN!

What intellectual?

Stop wallowing in self-pity. If you wanted the benefits of a classical education, you should have stayed at ADSUMMUM COLLEGE.

I can always study French and German at home, read Teach Yourself books, perhaps even go to night school ...

But I'm too lazy. It's really all my own fault.

Stop wallowing in self-hatred.

I can't help it. It comes from being so introspective, from spying on myself, filming myself and taping and tapping myself, watching myself and studying myself and brooding and worrying and talking to myself and ...

... And that reminds me: I never did get to learn about reflexive verbs in first-year French.

Even more depressing is the fact that, despite all my morbid self-obsession, I still do not really seem to understand myself; all my detailed analysing and examining seems shallow, looking back. I search for a model which will explain the world lines of my constituent particles, but none I try fit even roughly. I know that I can never understand anyone else deeply, and thus if I do not even understand myself, then I am alone.

That sounds like Shakespeare's sentiments without his eloquence.

Not that I mean anything specific. Just generally sort of *Shakespearish*, the same sort of lonely brooding. I have no idea what his personal thoughts or emotions or goals were.

Unlike Stephen Dedalus.

I haven't even seen *King Lear*.

Snap out of this.

My surroundings come into focus and I am in my new English class.

—This year, we will be working on ten main topics. As I give you each topic, you will have two weeks to write as much as possible on it, then I will collect it up and mark it. I expect at least twenty pages, and anything less will fail automatically. Anything will do: essays, poems, newspaper cuttings

...

Newspaper cuttings?

—... plays, film scripts, pictures, crossword puzzles ...

Crossword puzzles?

(Signal echoes at boundary between two media.)

—... maps, letters, legal documents, advertising copy ...

Forget it!

—... diaries, memoranda, constitutions, operating instructions, road signs, government reports, sky writing ...

(A choking noise.)

—... petitions, autographs, doodles ...

Her voice rises rapidly to a high, hysterical screech.

—... fingerprints, candid snapshots, intimate personal possessions, black lace underwear, *samples of flesh* ...

Three people are calmly writing this down in little pocket notebooks. I have a little pocket notebook, but I only write strange things in it like film companies' addresses, verses of sarcastic school songs, and the fact that BSC stands for British Society of Cinematographers.

—... strands of hair, teeth, fingernail clippings ...

The worst is over. Fingernail clippings are really almost civilised compared with samples of flesh.

English should be fun this year.

—Now, the first topic for the year will be water. I expect you all to do a nice little title page ... 'WATER' ... with a pretty illustration.

At least she's not stereotyped. I hate stereotyped teachers. When I get a stereotyped teacher, I think I'm in a *Peanuts* cartoon.

Not that I have anything against animation.

The next day our English teacher has vanished. Imagine that. She is replaced by a fat young man with lots of hair. He too wants us to do nice little title pages with pretty illustrations.

I take a blue pencil and shade in the entire page. Then I take a green pencil and shade over the entire page. The result looks a little murky. Then I print in large, plain capitals: WATER.

—That's bloody awful

he complains as he looks at mine.

—I can't draw too well

I explain. I really can't.

—Well, what the hell do you think you come to school for except to learn how to draw?

—With all due respect, *learned sir*; I do not expect to learn how to draw from an English teacher in an English class. I'd learn how to draw from an Art teacher in an Art class, if I wanted to learn how to draw at all, but Art is *optional* this year and I did not choose to study it. I do not expect to have my drawing ability either *questioned or improved* in an English class.

—You'll learn what I say you'll learn, you little smart-arse!

Ooh, he's *asking* for it!

I rise from my chair carefully, deliberately, slowly revealing the full splendour of my costume (a perfect copy of Michael York's in *The Three Musketeers*) to the accompaniment of shocked sighs from the crowd (class).

—I challenge you to a duel to the death

I say in Michael York's voice.

The teacher laughs like Peter Cushing, then says, with the matched educated evil voice:

—It will be a privilege to get rid of you once and for all.

We draw our swords; they shimmer with sunbeams in the dawn's light.

I wish I'd taken fencing lessons.

The classroom has vanished, and we are standing a few metres apart in a field glistening with dew and frozen manure. The sun turns a forest to the east into hundreds of mile-long shadows visible clearly from the helicopter filming us from above. We'll have to dub in the dialogue later because of the noise.

We circle our centre of mass like a double star (I'd bet Dumas never gave you that sort of simile!). I thrust my sword forward into his neck. Blood spurts from his jugular at once.

—We were supposed to keep circling for thirty seconds, you fool!

he says in sign language because he is unable to speak.

I look up. The helicopter is gone, and in the distance I hear police sirens. He just lies there, bleeding.

The helicopter has gone up very high, too high for me to see it, but with a telephoto lens they watch as the police arrive and handcuff me, lead me to the car. The shadows of the forest grow shorter and shorter, and then the ambulance arrives. Bill Cosby steps out.

Rewind to 'I can't draw too well'.

—I'm sure you could have managed something

he says then walks on.

I quickly sketch the Empire State Building in one corner of the page. It's one of the few things I can draw reasonably well.

People would think it very odd if I took fencing lessons, and, besides, I can't afford them.

I imagine they're very expensive.

Chapter 7

ENTERPRISE

I used to dream of living in a house built on top of an enormous reinforced-concrete tower. I'd get electricity from solar collectors, water from rain, and food from hydroponic gardens, and hence I could live for free, and wouldn't need to earn any money once I'd paid for everything.

But of course there would be council rates.

So I decided I would defend myself from rate collectors by fitting aerosol cans with fuses and throwing them down from the tower.

But I'd have to buy the aerosol cans.

So I decided I would defend myself from rate collectors by surrounding the tower with a grid of metal. The tower would contain enormous capacitors to store solar electricity, and I'd *zap* the rate collectors with high-voltage discharges.

Non-lethal. I suppose.

Of course!

But they'd probably drop a bomb on me from the air.

So I decided I would build a spacecraft and move to the moon. Assuming a sufficient range of chemical compositions of lunar minerals to make up for small losses in my recycling system, I could survive indefinitely.

But spacecraft are expensive, so I'd have to save a lot of money, somehow.

So I went into films. Look where it got me.

Look closely.

Nowhere.

I have been producing high-quality (really) 35 mm films practically since I was four years old (when I grew the camera), and I have not sold one of them to a major (or even a minor) distributor. This is mainly (entirely) because all the film is exposed, developed, printed, and edited inside my head. And I can't persuade any reputable brain surgeons that they should operate and remove a few of the better final prints. I have limited storage space, so I make only two release prints of each film. The brain surgeons say I can't pay them, and I promise them enormous percentages of my takings once I can get some prints out of my brain. But they have no faith.

I no longer wish to live in a tower or on the moon.

But I'd still like to get some of those prints out of my brain. I may just have to train as a brain surgeon and do it all myself.

Only kidding. My dexterity is zero.

When I tell people I have 35 mm films stored inside my brain, they tell me to project them onto a screen via my eyes. This is of course ridiculous, as I have no light source in there. All my printing is done by special non-optical diffusion methods which I tried to patent. The patent examiner was very polite. He rejected my application. He said it was not practical or useful because film surfaces could never be manufactured to the tolerances I specified, and the enzymes I mentioned could not be synthesised with current technology.

All of which was true, up to a point.

Of course, I could always start using conventional cameras and film stocks. But I'd have to pay for them.

And candid shots would become much more difficult.

Sometimes I even think of expressing myself in other media. It isn't that hard at all.

This line of thinking causes me to reach an important decision. I will publish a magazine. And I do.

I must be very careful not to forget that I am no longer writing screenplays. Screenplays are often very dull to read. Instead of writing screenplays, I must write films on paper. Frame by frame but so fast that the flicker is unnoticeable. Which of course requires fast reading.

Out of pure frustration I screen my ten best films to myself, and write them on paper, frame by frame. The result is exceptionally bulky, as it takes many words to describe just one frame (and each individual frame must be described separately, not in terms of the previous frame; each frame must be a unique and completely independent written image).

In fact the written films are so bulky that I decide to publish only one in the first issue of the magazine. I am sure that it will be enough.

I have four hundred copies printed. I am sure that it will be enough.

And then I encounter distribution problems. I write to ten different magazine distribution companies, sending them sample copies, and none of them even bothers to write back.

And so there is only one market left open to me. The school. So I send a letter, and a copy, to the Principal. And wait.

How could I do it?

It was purely a business decision.

Well I have to take some risks sometime.

A day later coded currents surge through the intricate information network which enmeshes the school, and the speakers summon me; I am wanted immediately in the halls of power.

Immediately is not strictly accurate. I stand outside the office waiting for fifteen minutes while he *persuades* an erring teacher to forget faulty thoughts on free thinking. Slimy yellow-green light, gas, thick fluid oozes out from under the door.

Then I am ushered inside.

—Sit down

he says then does so himself, pushing the chair back and placing his feet firmly on the desk. Then, making strange, conspiratorial chuckling noises, he dons his glasses and squints at my letter, fumbles in a drawer for about a minute, finally finds a packet of cigarettes, takes one out, and begins to smoke it.

With startling suddenness he drops the cigarette in an ash tray, removes his glasses, throws the letter down onto the desk, looks at me and smiles strangely, and says:

—Now, about this. Very good. Very good indeed.

He says 'very' by making a vvvv noise while shaking his head back and forth, then, after a fairly long time, saying 'erry' While he shakes his head his eyes are closed tight. But it is not a stutter.

I make the oddly detached observation that I am sweating profusely all over, and the seat of the chair is vvvvery damp.

—Certainly. Certainly you have my permission to sell these things in the school.

Why does it sound like he's talking about contraceptives?

Well at least he's said that so now I know all will be well I just have to survive for a few minutes surely he has nothing more to say.

He senses my fear like a snake and says:

—Well, don't look too happy, will you? Haha!

He desperately wants me to laugh but I cannot. This makes things worse. He now thinks of me as a specific human being, which is dangerous.

—Come on, now, if I tell a joke, will you laugh? Huh?

I stare at him. You are a bloody maniac, I think.

—Trouble is, I can't think of one right now. Except a dirty one, and we can't have that, eh? Can't have a headmaster telling dirty jokes to a student, eh?

—No

I agree in a whisper and smile weakly which is a mistake. He thinks he has degraded himself somehow in the conversation, and he is now on the defensive.

—Of course, this stuff is a bit unusual. Very unusual. Have you shown this to the Senior English Master?

—No

I manage through a throat filled with sweat. I did not know the inside of my throat could sweat.

—Well, you should. After all, this sort of thing is his business. Yes, you write from a very unusual angle. A very unusual angle.

He leans over the desk and peers at me, as if waiting for me to defend my unusual angle. After about twenty seconds (not minutes? I guess not) he realises I'm not going to say anything and he goes on:

—You know, I have this theory about people like you. People who do things like this when they're young. When they're very young. When *I* was very young, I was brilliant at filling inkwells. Top of the class all the time, even stunned the teachers. I was better than all of them.

He smiles at his immodesty.

—Well, I think people like that, people like us, are reincarnated. Perhaps I learned to fill inkwells in my previous life, and you were a writer in your previous life. That's what I think. Of course, I'm no expert on this sort of thing, but I've been a teacher for years, I've studied education, and I've been a headmaster for five years, and I've got a pretty good idea about this sort of thing.

He pauses, hoping I will agree or disagree but I am concentrating on a tiny patch of skin between his eyes, with a super telephoto setting. Examining tiny parasites.

—You know, you should try getting this around to some other places. Not just here. I'm sure you could get some professional people to have a look at it, and get it around to some other places.

—I tried, uh, I tried some distributors and they turned it down.

My face is turned down. As if my heart is / pity-seeking.

—Well. Mmmm. Well, perhaps I can help there. If I ring up a few people and say, 'I'm Malcolm T. Seward, Principal of Fenkirk Vale Senior High School,' we might be able to get some things done, eh? Of course, they won't listen to me because I'm Malcolm T. Seward. That's not very important, is it?

He waits for an answer but gets none.

—No, they'll listen to me because I'm the Principal of Fenkirk Vale Senior High School. Yes, that's why they'll listen. Anyway, we'll see what we can do about that.

He seems to have come to a dead end. He sits perfectly still for a while, trying to remember what he should do next. Then he stands up, goes to the door, and opens it.

—You show that to the Senior English Master. And good luck selling it. Yes. Anytime you want any help, just come and see me.

—Thankyou

I gurgle as my throat is filled with sweat.

An ugly girl with stringy hair, chewing gum, and a blue tattoo on one shoulder looks up at me.

—What was all that yellow muck?

she asks.

I leave, looking like I have been immersed in hair oil, and also not smelling terribly pleasant. My pulse, blood pressure, and respiration are all near fatal levels. I shut off all sensory inputs and stand still for a while until my metabolism is back to normal.

I just can't understand why I am so completely terrified of him.

I try to sell the magazines at 20c each. On the first day I sell two. On the second day I sell none.

I lower the price to 15c. On the first day I sell three. On the second day I sell one. On the third day I sell one. On the fourth day I sell none.

I lower the price to 10c. On the first day I sell three. On the second day I sell one. On the third day I sell two. On the fourth day I sell none.

I lower the price to 5c. I sell no more.

I have sold a total of thirteen copies. I offer the rest free of charge. I give away two, due to the superb aerodynamic qualities of the paper.

Then I give up.

I stand at the far corner of the oval and I scream at the school:

—You don't deserve it, anyway! You stupid bunch of mindless morons!

The school does not answer. I produce a machine gun and fire at the library, but it is too far away ... light years.

I send copies of all my written films to established magazines. I do not get even one rejection slip.

And I know what the problem is. I should not be wasting my time on paper. It is worthless. Only with celluloid can I be successful.

And life has locked all my celluloid (well, it's not actually celluloid, it's some peculiar organic compound which is synthesised by some gland in my head, but if I say celluloid you'll know what I mean ...) deep in my skull, irretrievable.

So I will have to be content with myself as the audience. And surely that is not so bad, considering that I am always quiet and attentive, always pleased with my results and I always give every new film a standing ovation.

Yet I feel awkward and unsatisfied that I cannot show the results of all my painstaking work to even one other person.

Perhaps I should commit suicide. The autopsy (hopefully one as photogenic as the one in *Providence*) would reveal the tiny spools of ultrathin, ultraflat, ultrastrong film in a tiny cavity in the centre of my brain.

Posthumous release.

Only kidding.

I would rather be around at the premiere. Surgery is the only answer but it is no answer because I cannot persuade a surgeon to co-operate. Or even to operate.

Sorry.

When faced with such dilemmas (whether to feel frustrated or feel frustrated), I make every possible effort to ignore them. I try to concentrate on something else. This invariably fails, because my untrustworthy thought trains always take me back to the unpleasant subject. So my only real course of escape is to sit and think about it, immersed in anguish (or at least a mild itch) until I have examined it in such detail, so many times, that a kind of purging takes place in my mind, and, although the problem is not solved, it ceases to worry me.

So I do this. And it works.

What *now* depresses me is the large pile of unsold magazines which takes up so much space in my room.

So I have a small bonfire and burn them all.

The next day, one of the distributors answers, saying it would like a trial batch of two hundred copies.

With a great deal of self-control, I do not tear all the hair from my scalp. I do not bang my head hard against a brick wall (despite the appealing nature of the sound this makes). I merely write a sober apology to the distributor saying that all the copies printed were lost in a fire.

I phrase this carefully so that it is not a lie. I never lie on paper. Only on film. Any lies on film are always simple, mathematically describable transformations of reality, or changes of context. Which makes it all right.

Well, it does not matter. I no longer want to live on top of a reinforced-concrete tower, or on the moon.

But I would like somebody else to see one of my films. All that effort. All the time shooting, editing ...

Stop whining.

Sorry.

The Cruel Joke timed it so well: the day after the bonfire. The logistical problems, well ... I'm almost impressed.

To take my mind off it all, I close my eyes and start going through miscellaneous footage—I have quite a lot of it—looking for any scenes I could make use of in my next pseudo-documentary. My pseudo-documentaries are not filmed from screenplays, but are rather assembled from meaningful similarities and connections I can find amongst randomly selected shots. However, they are not attempts to portray reality. Making one is rather like going through piles and piles of miscellaneous photographs, snipping out little pieces, and assembling them into a picture which appears to be a photograph of something real, but in fact is not.

Most of my miscellaneous footage is boring and repetitive, or boring and repetitive. Some of it is repetitive and boring. Some is boring without being repetitive. None is repetitive without being boring.

I compose a short promotion:

AT LAST! THE FILM EVENT YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR!
THE MOST INSIPID, SOPORIFIC, PROSAIC, SOMNIFIC, TIRESOME, IRKSOME,
UNVARYING MOVIE OF THE DECADE!

YAWN!

AS SCENES ARE REPEATED OVER AND OVER AGAIN!

DOZE!

AS THE UNCOMPROMISING BLANDNESS OF IT ALL MAKES YOU LOSE INTEREST IN
STAYING CONSCIOUS!

YES, ONCE YOU'VE SEEN THIS, WALKING DOWN THE STREET WILL THRILL YOU BY
COMPARISON!

IDEAL FOR PEOPLE WITH WEAK HEARTS, OR ANY OTHER ILLNESS REQUIRING REST
AND RELAXATION.

What is most frightening to me is that it would get enormous audiences, who would love it. The critics would all rave, finding intricate networks of symbolic metaphors.

It's enough to drive you to television.

Only kidding.

I am merely disillusioned with the possibilities offered by commercial exploitation of art.

That sounds vvvvery pompous. But it's true.

Though I'd give anything to get those prints out of my skull. Well, nearly everything.

But nothing I can give can make any difference.

Ho hum.

I really don't care. It doesn't worry me. Not even disgust.

It doesn't worry me.

Much.

I'll just try not to think about it.

STOP WHINING!

Chapter 8 HONESTY

The bus stop is stinging hot and air shimmers above the concrete square in which it is set. Some of the graffiti is amusing, but it is a form of literature notorious for its rather limited range of styles and themes, and a great deal of repetition. I have reels and reels of it which one day I hope to have statistically analysed.

A wide band of ants trek from their nest beneath the cracks of the concrete to the overflowing bin sticky with evaporated soft drink, and back. The net motion is clear, but looking closely each ant seems to move in an almost random manner. Somehow there is an overall guiding trend. Whether they are performing intricately planned specialised tasks, or simply taking part in an unorganised rush, I am not sure.

I half-stand to see if it is the bus each time I hear bus-like noises, but trucks can be very deceptive. Intentionally.

A car stops across the road. A nun leaves the front passenger seat, closes the door. The car leaves. She crosses the road and sits on the seat, beside me.

She is agelessly old but seems physically all right.

—What time is the next bus, do you know?

she asks in a cheerfully young voice and I am glad because frail old nuns always make me sad though I don't know why.

—Two forty-seven and fifteen seconds, I think

I say. I am absolutely positive that it is two forty-seven and fifteen seconds. I am just not prepared to take the responsibility. Isn't that silly?

She glances at a delicate wrist-watch on her brown, furrowed arm.

—Shouldn't be long

she says cheerfully. Why do I feel like she has just done something for me and I should thank her? I cannot help making a short, agreeing noise. I cannot help feeling illogically uncomfortable.

—You go to Fenkirk Vale?

I am not sure if it is a statement or a question, but I must answer:

—Yes. I'm in second year

I add to avoid the inevitable next question.

—That's a nice age to be. A very nice age.

Here we get difficult. Should I be honest and say I think it's a lousy age to be, or be polite and agree? I take the third alternative, and say nothing, which is OK because there was no direct question.

She feels a gap from my saying nothing, decides the discomfort would be unbearable if she left it at that, and so she goes on:

—Yes, I teach at St Bodmas myself. English and History.

A pause. I search my head (literally) for something to say but there is nothing appropriate.

—We used your hall last night for our speech night. It's usually too cold to have it outdoors, but this year it was really sweltering and we should have had it on the grass.

Weather! Common cultural conversation point! Salvation!

—Yes, it's been very hot.

There's weather exhausted. Not what it's made out to be.

—What do you plan to do when you leave school?

she asks, wisely changing the topic.

Now, should I tell the truth and say I want to be an actor, director, producer, cameraman, editor, and writer, or should I pick just one? People usually laugh when I list them all. They don't believe you can set out to become multi-talented. They think it has to come at birth.

—I want to be a film director

I say. Not a lie. Not the whole truth, though. Not that it's any of her business. I didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition.

—NOBODY EXPECTS THE SPANISH INQUISITION!

she roars at me. In a single deft movement she removes her habit and mask, and I am looking at the infamous Cardinal Bellamine.

Only kidding. I watch far too much Monty Python.

—Oh, that's nice. You like English then?

What a day for controversial questions! Should I say that I think it is pure pompous bullshit? That would be accurate. That would be truthful.

—Yes

I agree. I don't go too far. But it's far enough. I am a lying hypocrite but to speak the truth seems unthinkable.

—What novels have you done this year?

Done. That's the right word. You *do* a novel in English. Image: cockney tough-guy pressing *Bleak House* against a brick wall with one hand, the other hand a threatening fist ready to smash the book to a pulp.

—I'll *do* you!

—None, actually.

She smiles in disbelief, then decides that I am joking.

—Now, you can't expect me to believe that. I can't imagine you not doing any novels at all.

And she is telling the truth. *She can not imagine it.* That's scary.

YOU HAVE A DANGEROUS CONCEPTUAL BLOCK, I would like to scream, but I can not.

—What sort of teacher wouldn't do *any* novels in a whole year?

It is a rhetorical question, but I would like to answer:

—EITHER AN EXTREMELY RARE SORT OF TEACHER WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE IN RAPING WORKS OF FICTION, OR AN EXTREMELY COMMON SORT OF TEACHER WHO IS MORE INTERESTED IN THE USE OF COLOURED PENCILS AND FELT-TIPPED PENS, NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS, PICTURES FROM MAGAZINES, FOUR-WORD POEMS ON PAPER DOLLS ...

Kindergarten-style graphic arts, in fact.

I cannot answer at all, of course. Instead I have to half-smile and put an indescribable expression on to my face.

Saved by the bus. I choose a seat well behind her, and stare out the window, wondering if I should feel guilty about being a lying hypocrite when the truth is unspeakable.

Imagine:

—That's a nice age to be. A very nice age.

—I disagree. I think it's a foul age to be, along with every other age. I wish I'd stayed in the womb.

She looks a little ruffled.

—What do you plan to do when you leave school?

—I am going to be a film producer, writer, director, actor, cameraman, and editor. I have a miniature camera inside my skull. Sometimes I film directly through my eyes, while sometimes, by a kind of psi facility I have, I film from a viewpoint outside my body. The film I use is 35 mm, and I use the standard wide-screen frame-format with four-channel sound, but because the film, being made from a special substance produced by special glands I have grown, is unbelievably thin, I can fit spools and spools into a tiny cavity in my brain. I often suspect that the cavity is a little crooked in the fourth dimension, and is hence bigger inside than outside, because I have *dozens* of prints, and quite a bit of equipment in there, and it would have to be *very* small not to interfere with my brain. My head's quite a normal shape, so, you see ...

I *do* rave on.

By this time she has concluded that I'm either a neurotic liar or a psychotic suffering from delusions. She'll probably be all patronising, muttering 'yes' at appropriate points in my explanation, as she wonders if she should do anything about me. In the end she will decide that I'm probably Harmless, allowed outside an institution because of the narrowly defined subject range of my fantasies. And perhaps she'll pray for me for the next two or three nights.

Which brings me to the real issue. Do I restrain myself from telling the truth because I do not want to disturb her, or because I do not want to disturb me?

I don't have much success with public relations—that's really the distributor's job, anyway. My policy is that it's best to avoid people whenever possible.

Not all people, of course. The criterion is the degree of truth that can appear in the conversation without causing a disturbance, merely because something has been said that 'people just don't say'.

The tolerance range among students is, generally, far better than among adults, but too much generalisation is dangerous. Some teachers are quite able to face some truths without cringing, while some students would sooner knife you than know certain facts. (By facts I mean, of course, things I believe to be true.) Both groups have their conventions, and it is hard to say which set is the least logical.

What is sickening and degrading is being forced to have two personalities, two ways of thinking and speaking. What is frightening is the possibility of the switching back and forth becoming instinctive and absolute. I have been terrified after saying something in class which could only be appreciated out of class, and finding the glassy stares of the other students as reproachful as that of the teacher.

I cannot decide whether total honesty would strengthen society or make it crumble. No chance of a practical experiment.

At school next Monday it is lunchtime and we sit in a circle in the shade of a tree on the Southern Lawn, and talk. About whatever comes up. About things that happened in classrooms and things that happened in Cambodia and things that happened in Cretaceous Europe. About war and history and the CIA. About music and books and films and television. Many of us have seen *if...* which we go over in detail again and again and again and again, as we do with *Catch-22* and *Zardoz* and *The Ruling Class* and *Star Wars* and *Altered States* and *Poltergeist*. Once I brought a copy of *Who's Afraid of*

Virginia Woolf? and we read the first act, by the end of which I was screaming out Martha's part so loudly that half the school could hear me.

And that sort of thing.

I used to film from about five metres up, taking in everyone at once, but now my technique with viewpoints has improved enough to allow me to move from close-up to close-up of each person as they speak, with very smooth tracking. It looks much better.

And then the siren shatters the serenity.

—I'm not going. I'm going to sit here all afternoon. *Stuff Science.*

But he comes. And we all change into dull, conservative, boring fools. To avoid disharmony. Ho hum.

We are studying insects. All ten million or so species. In six weeks. Imagine that.

—I want you all to start an insect collection from today. I'll collect it and mark it at the end of the term. Get as many different types of insects as possible, and pin them through the centre, trying not to damage the bodies. You can kill them with normal fly spray, then put them in a shirt box.

He smiles dangerously.

—Is there anyone who doesn't believe in killing insects?

Not in the halves of our beings we present to you.

—Good.

That afternoon I see a beetle scurrying along the ground. I spray it heavily with the fly spray until it is covered in white foam. It keeps crawling. I pick it up and take it to the bathroom sink, and put it under water for thirty seconds. When I take it out, it is still kicking its legs. I immerse it again, this time for five minutes. Its legs still shake weakly. Then I use boiling water, and it is finally dead.

Why does it matter to me how quickly it dies? Is it in agony? Can a beetle feel pain? Why are my hands shaking as I pin it to the cardboard back of the shirt box?

As I fumble with the pin, trying not to crack the brittle body of the beetle, the soundtrack fills slowly with the music from *The Collector* which makes me cry, and the tears slide down my face onto the grey cardboard, making patches of dark sogginess.

Let's replay that scene in the Science class, but with a slight change of setting. I know it's trite hyperbole, but isn't every thought of mine?

—I want you to go out and organise the rounding-up and extermination of every Jew in this city. I will be watching your methods, and judging their efficiency. You must be thorough: even those in positions of respect in their communities, even those with friends in government, must be destroyed along with the rest. But use discretion as you do it; we must keep up the appearance of arresting only criminals and spies. The extermination camps are fully equipped with the most efficient devices; we will even be using the chemicals obtained from the corpses as industrial supplies for pharmaceutical manufacturing for the next sixty years.

He smiles dangerously, strokes his moustache with the tip of his index finger, then says:

—Is there anyone who feels that their conscience will present problems in this matter?

Not in the halves of our beings we present to you.

—Good.

As they stand and leave the room, neat young boys and girls in brown shirts sing in pure, clear voices:

*Stand up! Stand up! For Fenkirk!
Who teaches us right from wrong!
And gives us moral fortitude!
That we may be truly strong!
Though we may face temptation!
We know that we'll not fall!
Our strength does come from Fenkirk
To whom we owe our all!*

During the song, we follow the men from the briefing into their cars. Cut to library film of arrests, scenes in concentration camps. Intercut shots of students insect-collecting.

This is absurd, ridiculous, laughable. There is no way I can make this comparison, the scales are too different, the issues unconnected. I take everything too far and end up with a muddy non-comment.

But that's all right, I'm used to it.

I don't expect anything else.

Should I have 'Who teaches'? 'Which teaches' does not seem to fit. Well, we are always being reminded that Our School is not made of buildings, but of teachers and students and administrators. And legislation.

Should I have said 'Who teach' then? Why did I use the singular? The plural does not seem to fit. To this I have no answer.

It is the last day of my second year at Fenkirk Vale Senior High School, and somebody has decided that we should not sit around in our Tutorial Groups all morning, but instead we should go out onto the oval and take part in peculiar activities like egg-and-spoon races and balloon-bursting competitions. I cannot find out who has decided this. The House Directors (four teachers who run a House each for \$1000 extra pay a year) deny that they made the decision. So who did?

And we go through with it all, every absurd event listed on the mimeographed sheets which appeared from nowhere. I sit and watch. A teacher approaches me.

—Why don't you go in the thirteen-legged race?

—Because I do not wish to.

He gets a little angry.

—Look, we're only doing this for you kids. We'd much rather have you all in classes playing cards or reading, instead of out here having fun and being so difficult to supervise. *We* certainly aren't getting anything out of it.

—My sentiments exactly. *We'd* all much rather be in classes playing cards or reading. It may be a little dull, but this is absolutely ridiculous. Look at that!

I point to a peculiar kind of relay involving quoits and figs. All the competitors, obviously pressured into it, have looks of disgusted boredom on their faces.

I say:

—What I want to know is who organised this thing in the first place. The students don't want it. The staff don't want it. The staff are running things under the illusion that it's 'fun' for us, or something like that, while the students are making it fairly obvious that they're nauseated by the whole idea. Who started the whole thing? Why are we doing it when nobody wants to do it?

The teacher looks frightened. Most of them are extremely superstitious.

The answer should have been obvious all along.

Minutes before the morning ends, I see Seward standing up on the hill at the end of the oval, far from the activity, looking down over everything with a grin of satisfaction. *He* is enjoying it. *That* is the purpose.

There's a simple explanation for everything.

Fade-out the noise of the crowd, and bring in the wind blowing across the hill, as we track in towards his face.

Then, shocking even me, he raises his arms and begins to conduct us with an imaginary baton.

Chapter 9 COMPANY

I am obsessed with light.

Not surprising, considering that movies are difficult to make in darkness.

But I am obsessed with extremes of light: explosive flashes, the sun, fireworks, magnesium flares, searchlights, laser beams, welding torches. And that sort of thing.

I can never get over the scene in *Catch-22* when Yossarian and Dobbs are stumbling about on the runway in almost total darkness, and then the enormous floodlights are switched on and their bodies turn *white*.

To me it is still more memorable than all of the light and magic of *Poltergeist*.

And that sort of thing.

I film all my car chases at dawn or sunset. I find a very straight road with just the right type of hill on it, pointing straight at the rising or setting sun. Then I get a long way back, and use a Cassegrain telescope focussed at infinity. And then the first car comes over the hill, with the enormous image of the sun behind it. And then the second car. From that distance, the cars are virtually silent, and I never dub in anything later. My car chases are very quiet.

And when the cars run out of petrol (yes petrol petrol petrol petrol petrol there's no such thing as gasoline in this country no matter what impression *Mad Max II* might give) or explode or end up in four feet of mud, and the chase goes on, on foot, it takes place around a blast furnace. Which is very bright in some places.

And that sort of thing.

When I wait for buses at night, I stand beside the road staring at the sea of car headlights, the river of white. The bodies of the cars seem almost entirely transparent, there seems to be nothing there but light. If I lengthen my persistence of vision each headlight becomes a flowline, a brushstroke of light. I nearly dive in, it looks so warm and soft to swim in the light.

And that sort of thing.

What I like most about science fiction films is the number of opportunities to use bright lights. The sun is hundreds of times brighter in space, weapons can be much more spectacular, there are spaceship crashes, strange tools, incredible communications devices.

And that sort of thing.

I am lying in bed. It is a warm summer night. There is no moon. The room is very dark. There are occasional faint traffic noises, and a continuous, barely audible hum of insects, probably done with a synthesiser. There is no wind.

I create a viewpoint, run it around the room. Nothing of interest. Why should there be?

It slices through the flywire screen into the still night. The sky is cloudless, and I scan the heavens, bringing in the stars, and Jupiter which is very bright.

Then I start to move it upwards. And upwards. Below, the suburb is dotted with street lights and a few house lights. And upwards. The lights contract to pinpricks against a black, featureless background. And upwards, faster and faster until I can see the dawn approaching.

I am dreaming. I can never keep a viewpoint more than five hundred metres away. After that, they just wander off. I never get to cancel them, and I never see from them again. Perhaps somebody else

grabs them.

Somebody else?

Of all the telepaths I have ever met, none has been even one tenth as strong as me. Could there be somebody else who can manipulate viewpoints? Somebody else who can screen minds, blocking out or deceiving weaker telepaths? Somebody else who can change the boiling point of water by two degrees?

Somebody else with a microminiature camera in a cavity in their brain?

The odds are against it. But I gave up believing in odds when I made a pair of dice give nineteen twelves out of twenty. When somebody else was throwing them. That made me sweat myself sopping wet (more out of fear and nervousness than effort) and I never could repeat the feat. It could have been pure chance, whatever that means ... but the odds are against that.

I think outwards:

—Can anybody hear me?

I hear the answer in my head:

—No.

It is me thinking to myself. The first sign of madness.

But there's nobody else to think to.

Think with? Think at?

Irrelevantly, I get out of bed and stand up. Why should that make any difference? This time in reality, I create a viewpoint. I send it south. At about five hundred metres, the image suddenly vanishes. It is not a gradual loss of signal strength ... it is a snatch ...

The same again, northwards: it vanishes suddenly.

The same again, westwards: it vanishes suddenly.

The same again, eastwards: it vanishes suddenly.

And south-west, south-east, north-west, north-east.

And straight up, forty-five degrees up to the north, the south, the west, the east, south-west, south-east, north-west, north-east.

Always at around five hundred metres. But I cannot judge distances very accurately. I appear to be surrounded by a hemispherical surface beyond which my viewpoints vanish.

I cannot send them underground.

Then I remember a night nearly a year ago, when I felt that I was being followed by an enormous, oppressive shell, always centred on me wherever I went.

So subconsciously I understood that long ago?

Perhaps.

Is it a peculiar limitation of my powers, or something foreign imposed on me by somebody else? Something else? Has it been true for all the time I have been able to make viewpoints? It is difficult to say. Only recently have I become sufficiently skilled at manipulating the viewpoints to be able to tell. Does it mean anything to ask if it was there before I could detect it?

I can never walk out of it, because I am always at the centre. I can never see beyond it, because my viewpoints vanish when they reach it.

I yawn, shake my head, and feel it follow even such a slight movement. I am suddenly overwhelmed by claustrophobia. I dive into bed and wrap myself tightly in the sheets, my eyes closed. An odd remedy for claustrophobia, but it works. It would be logical to go outside, into the

wide open space of the back yard. But then I would feel *its* presence even more strongly, as I did on that night a year ago.

I send a shock wave through my brain which puts me to sleep.

Dreamless sleep so I wake as tired as ever. I once tried to film my dreams, but it never came out. A Great Pity. Just blotchy lights.

I can no longer feel the oppression of the hemisphere. Perhaps it was all a dream and I am tired anyway. I create a viewpoint and send it off in a randomly chosen direction. At about five hundred metres, it ceases transmission abruptly.

And the hemisphere crystallises in my mind. Now why'd I go and do a thing like that? I try to shake it, but it stays in focus. Like an itch. Like trying to forget an itch. It won't go away.

All day it is there at the back of my mind, sometimes at the front. It is not pain or sight or hearing. It's like *knowing* I'm being watched, even though I have no evidence from my senses. It *could* all be in my mind.

It could *all* be in my mind. Everything.

Perhaps.

Late in the afternoon, I try something. I *think outwards*:

—I need room to breathe!

It was the first thing that came into my head. I feel a change in the hemisphere, a lightening of the sensation. But not completely. I send out a viewpoint.

It vanishes after one kilometre.

It could still be all psychosomatic (a strange term to use when it's debatable as to whether my body is involved at all). It's very hard to tell. If the expansion of the hemisphere is a response to my plea, then why is it there at all, and why doesn't whoever has imposed it communicate with me?

If my brain is playing dirty tricks, and simulating it all, then I might as well give up approaching this logically.

I let no thoughts of the Cruel Joke surface.

Much.

I *think outwards*:

—More room than that!

No change.

—That's room enough, quite enough

says a whisper in my head, but it is probably me thinking to myself again. It lacks the certainty, the solidity, the externality of communication. It is just musing.

What would telepathic contact on a conversational level be like? Hearing speech? Would it boom through my brain ... or would it bubble up from the underground springs of my subconscious? Could I manage to distinguish between it and my eternal dialogue with myself, my endless stream of discussion and debate and threats and reminders?

I hope so.

All evening I try to communicate over and over again, yelling, threatening, pleading. Requesting sensibly. By midnight, I am totally irrational. I have decided that I am being heard, but not answered. I am sullen and childish as I *think outwards*:

—Why the hell don't you answer, you stuck-up bastard! I bet you don't have the power! I bet you couldn't make yourself heard if you wanted to!

Then:

—Well if you can hear me do something! Move the hemisphere in and out. Make it vibrate or something! Please!

I send out a stream of closely spaced viewpoints, moving rapidly. The hemisphere stays still at about a kilometre. I think at myself:

—Maybe he's asleep. Maybe he's dead, and the hemisphere will stay there forever now. Maybe he's angry because of all those threats ...

I finally sleep, dream of myself in a dome-shaped birdcage.

I wake and tell myself:

—What does it matter, anyway? Why should I need to send a viewpoint further than one kilometre? I'm not restricted in any other way at all, I can still walk around, travel anywhere in the world. I should just forget all about it. If it's a natural limit to my powers, then I shouldn't worry ... perhaps the extension to one kilometre was triggered somehow by my feeling of stretching the hemisphere when I asked for room to breathe.

I always believe my own arguments no matter how silly and illogical they are.

—If it's to do with some other telepath, then I've done all I can in trying to communicate, and I should just try to forget about it, and if he ever decides to contact me, I'll know about it soon enough. Surely if he's powerful enough to do *this*, then he would have no trouble communicating anytime.

I find myself a dull lecturer, so I tell myself to shut up.

The trouble with any specific situation is that it has specific qualities. I have no trouble with the idea of a problem. I wouldn't even mind an actual problem, so long as there was *nothing about it*. I find attributes aesthetically irritating.

And my perception of the hemisphere's existence will not go away. I cannot forget that it's there. When I close my eyes I can see it as an enormous white dome like an observatory building. Which is where I get the picture when my eyes are closed, because there is a slit and a telescope poking out. Which means that I am not even semi-seeing the real hemisphere when I close my eyes, but my damned annoying mind has to go and search my memory for something that I *have* seen to remind me of the hemisphere.

Downright devious.

I try to distract myself. I light matches and zoom in on them. I film the sun peeping out from behind leaves and buildings and shining off car windscreens and glasses of water.

And that sort of thing.

I crash aeroplanes in the back yard, catching the rich oranges of the exploding fuel tanks. I bomb satellites and space ships and planets with atomic warheads. I blow up ancient gelignite in old mine shafts. I follow a hair-raising fight between the Hero and the Bad Guy armed with an oxyacetylene torch.

And that sort of thing. To distract myself.

My eyes get sore in bright lights, so I stop.

All the time there is the nagging knowledge that everywhere I go I am at the centre of an invisible hemisphere a kilometre in radius. There is no way out. Unless I dig out.

And why not? Just ring up an earthmoving company and ask them to dig a tunnel through the ground from me to a point one kilometre away. So I can send a viewpoint through it to the free space beyond the hemisphere.

I could never afford that. Nobody can say I'm made of money.

—You're made of money. Made of money!

says the red-eared rabbit scurrying across the back yard.

—Wait!

I call out to him.

—Do you know about the hemisphere?

I yell.

Too late. He has jumped into a burrow.

A burrow!

I quickly create a viewpoint and send it down the hole after him.

The tunnel is dark and damp and the sand is falling in trickles all around. I close my eyes and look only through the viewpoint, pushing away the smothering sensation which comes from rushing through a tunnel far too narrow to ever accommodate my body. I light magnesium flares along the way because the sunlight has almost vanished behind a curve in the burrow.

I move faster and faster. Occasionally I catch up with the rabbit, who turns, looks at the viewpoint (which is, of course, like all other viewpoints, invisible) and says:

—Stop following me! Stop it I say! I'll have you arrested!

Then he runs faster and I lose sight of him.

The burrow is sloped and curved and twisted now, and the deeper I get the harder it is to move the viewpoint, as if the air is getting thicker, turning into treacle.

Cliché

Not now, *please*.

But there is no sudden cut-off. I am not sure, but I think the viewpoint has passed the kilometre limit. Which would mean that the hemisphere does not exist underground.

But so many twists and turns, it's hard to judge.

I am tempted to try to move the viewpoint straight up, to get it out of the tunnel and into the open. But I have never been able to make a viewpoint move through the ground—for some reason there must be a path of air between me and it at all times, even if it is not in line-of-sight. The treacle-type attenuation is probably tied up with the damping effect of solid ground. There is still a path through air to the viewpoint, thanks to the tunnel, but with every metre further along, and every twist, that path becomes longer and more warped.

Maybe one day I'll have a formula for all this.

Then I reach a fork in the tunnel and I have no idea which way to turn. I stop, depressed, then inspiration arrives:

I make the viewpoint yell (believe me, it's not easy):

—Nobody can say I can't make up my mind!

—You can't make up your mind!

comes the indignant retort ... from both branches of the tunnel.

Grrr.

I toss a mental coin and choose the right-hand branch of the fork, pushing forward as fast as I can. With a high-power searchbeam, and a very strong telephoto, I catch a glimpse of half of the rabbit. Literally. At the fork he must have split symmetrically down the middle, one half taking each tunnel.

Incredibly, he remains balanced. Squinting, I can make out veins and arteries, and even the bisected heart, all pushing blood into nowhere and drawing it back from the same place.

Then the two branches meet again, and, spectacularly, the two halves arrive at the junction simultaneously, and the rabbit is again whole.

That shot is probably priceless! Not that I'll ever be able to show it to anybody but myself.

I seem to be invigorated by the anarchic impossibility of what has just happened, and from somewhere I draw strength to push the viewpoint onwards faster and faster. Absurdly, I am panting. What is absurd?

The tunnel slopes deeper and deeper, but my curiosity and euphoric adventuresomeness make the viscosity vanish. I am gaining on the rabbit.

Suddenly he stops, with a deceleration that must have been a hundred g at least. From a recess in the side of the tunnel he pulls out a machine gun and opens fire on the viewpoint and its accompanying searchlight.

They are of course untouched, as they are nonmaterial extensions of my imagination.

The rabbit is now flustered and upset. The viewpoint is ahead of him now, staying a few metres in front of him as he runs through the tunnel.

Crash! The viewpoint hits something solid. An elevator door. I quickly swing it behind the rabbit as he runs up to the door, presses the UP button. The doors swing open, and by incredible luck they are the doors to the elevator itself, not to the shaft, which means the shaft is open to the tunnel, which means I can follow the elevator up.

As it rises rapidly, I push the viewpoint into the centre of the shaft and then send it straight up (try doing that with a Steadicam). I can see sunlight around the sides of the elevator, meaning it does not fit the shaft tightly, again assuring me an air passage.

When it reaches ground level, the elevator does not stop. With the velocity given to it by the massive linear induction motor of the shaft, the elevator slides upwards into the hot afternoon air, as if moving within an invisible guiding cylinder. When it reaches the top of its path and is just about to begin falling, there is a brilliant eruption of flame which is soon a dwindling point of light, and then nothing.

I have no doubt: it reached escape velocity.

I look around with the viewpoint, recognise the landscape, and it is confirmed. It is about ten kilometres away.

The treacle feeling returns, strengthens, and I know what is happening. The tunnel is caving in. There is nothing I can do. The link with the viewpoint will be severed, and it will be lost, outside the hemisphere.

I screw my eyes up until I can see only shifting red and violet patterns, and then I feel the treacle effect of the cave-in swallow my image from the viewpoint.

Then I relax my eyes, expecting only darkness.

AND I CAN STILL SEE THROUGH THE VIEWPOINT.

THE HEMISPHERE IS GONE!

Jubilantly I create a dozen viewpoints and send them rushing out in all directions. One kilometre. Two kilometres. Ten, twenty kilometres, and only at about twenty-five does the treacle-like feeling begin. There is no sudden snatch.

I AM FREE.

No I'm not. Not until I can understand why the extra-terrestrial rabbit ever put the hemisphere around me in the first place. If indeed it was him. Stop that. It was.

The elevator-rocket was magnificent! It had to be total mass-conversion, or something involving nuclear binding forces, because there was no room there for bulky chemical fuel tanks.

Unless, like the cavity in my brain, it was a little bit crooked in the fourth dimension, and hence bigger inside than out.

I bring all the viewpoints back, and cancel them. Then I develop and print all the shots, and run through them to see if I missed anything. Nobody can say I'm not thorough.

Faster than sound, the tiny metal cylinder drops to earth, white-hot, melting rock for hundreds of metres where it hits. Then the hole it has drilled in the atmosphere collapses, with a thunderclap to end them all.

Not impressed. What a cliché!

Shut up!

I turn the garden hose onto the cylinder, which must be made from an extraordinary substance. A few hundred gallons later, with the back yard like a tropical rain forest, the cylinder is cool enough to touch. I work open the tiny door with a fingernail (it's so *cute*) and inside is a tape cassette.

Another one of my psi facilities: I can hear magnetic sound tracks without a player, simply by placing them near my head and letting the sound equipment in my brain cavity sort it all out. A 'computer' untangles the distorted signal from a tape wound up on a reel or cassette hub.

I put the cassette to my temple, wait a few moments (each moment being 2.07 seconds) for the computer-processing, then I hear the final sound:

—You're not thorough! You're not thorough at all!

Childishly, I drop the cassette on the ground and stamp on it. The mud makes a dreadful mess.

It seems that the alien bunny has not yet lost interest entirely.

The shots of the falling capsule are magnificent! A shaft of ionised air all the way from the upper atmosphere to the ground! That rabbit is certainly far better than me at creating special effects.

And anytime I want something spectacular like that, all I have to do is ...

—Nobody can say I don't like special effects!

I scream at the top of my voice.

A few metres from my feet, a closed rose-bud opens in slow motion. Inside is a tiny fragment of velvet, on which is embroidered in intricate lettering: YOU DON'T LIKE SPECIAL EFFECTS!

Not quite what I was hoping for.

What a letdown. I might have known it wouldn't last.

Chapter 10

HEAT

It is New Year's Eve so I stay up and watch the seventh television screening of *Singing in the Rain*, which is alas interrupted near midnight for a five-minute summary of news film from the vanishing year, with a commentary that could only be ridiculous with such an enormous span of events shoved into such a short time. Things like: 'There were lots of nasty wars' (as the screen shows a tank assault from one of those nasty wars; he never mentions which one) and 'But some happy times too' (as the screen shows a hundred-year-old lady getting flowers on her birthday).

When midnight finally arrives we see the cretinous commentator sip champagne.

Why do they want to summarise and file away the year so very quickly?

Administrative neatness. Not good to have it lying around too long. Best to tidy it up and put it in a drawer. Sense of clean-slate satisfaction. And they did it last year, so ...

Dunbar (a character in the book *Catch-22* who didn't make it into the film) tried to make his life (seem) longer by staring at the ceiling and generally being as bored as he could. I strongly disagree with the method. The more events I can pack into the shortest possible space of time, the longer I will live. I won't bore anyone with the mathematical details, but if you even glance at the role played by experience-density (generally denoted by the Greek letter ρ) in the integral form for subjective life-time, you'll see what I mean.

The next morning the paper lists the road deaths and acts of vandalism and rapes and murders.

That day, as I watch more television (everybody's decadent occasionally (besides, I watch only films intended for cinema)) I see a wonderful advertisement during which a man with a red nose and a party hat stands in a liquor store filled with streamers and says:

—If you think the party's over, then you're wrong! Fresmark Cellars are just beginning their New Year Liquor Sale, and we've slashed most booze prices by fifteen per cent! Come to Fresmark Cellars, where the party never ends!

Oh, Happy New Year!

The temperature is very high. I would like to live in Switzerland, or perhaps Antarctica (although not, I think, John Carpenter's). I remember watching a children's television program when I was about three years old (I didn't know any better then). It was some sort of animated fairy story—I can't remember much of the plot. But there is one part I do remember. The hero of the story is wandering through a forest, parched, unable to find water. He picks an enormous orange from a tree, punches a hole in it with a stick, then uses a hollow plant stem as a straw to suck the delicious juice from the orange. And the words that the narrator used to describe it! Succulent nectar, cool, refreshing, thirst-quenching perfection!

I went into the kitchen and tried it with a real orange, punching the hole with a pen and using a plastic straw. The juice wouldn't come through unless I squeezed the orange, and when I did that, it spurted everywhere. The little I got in my mouth made it dry and sticky, and I was even thirstier than before.

I have never in my life drunk anything even remotely close to the orange juice described in that fairy story. Which is very depressing. Hot weather makes me drink glass after glass of water until my

stomach is swelling and bloated, but my mouth is still thirsty. As it must always be until I can find that forest, find that tree, find that orange ...

I try to cool myself by telepathy, but it does not work. The greatest thermodynamic achievement I ever managed was raising the boiling point of water by two degrees, and I can only do it on the 29th of December each year. Who knows why?

I play myself skiing sequences from *The Pink Panther*: the only footage I have with snow in it. It was surely illegal for me to shoot it, but as I sat there in the cinema watching all that beautiful white fluffiness, which I knew I could never see first-hand without travelling a very long way, I couldn't resist switching on my camera for just a few minutes. It's the only time I've ever done it (well almost). And the evidence is well hidden.

My equipment still functions excellently despite the heat; it is deep in my temperature-regulated brain. However, the rest of my body does not take things so well, and I find myself half-asleep eighty per cent of the day. The rest of the time it is too hot to sleep or do anything else, so I lie on my bed unable even to think.

In short, I get little filming done.

When finance permits, and a cinema screens something decent, I Go. Cinemas are air-conditioned. Unfortunately, buses are not.

The bus is very hot inside. The only windows that can be opened are high up and the effect is not exactly a breeze on my face. I sit on one of the seats facing forwards, close to the window, where I can look straight out of the window and I do not have to look at anyone on the bus.

The bus jerks and screeches and rumbles as it makes the many-bended trip to the inner city. If it went in a straight line it would take ten minutes but it must cast a net through several suburbs to try and catch as many passengers as possible.

So I sit and look out the window, not filming, seeing nothing because I am thinking about a computerised bus service. Each customer rings up the computer, states his correct position and his destination. The computer locates the bus which will best fit the journey he wants, and detours it to pick him up wherever he is. The efficiency of each bus's route would increase as the number of buses increased, so many medium-sized buses would be used. With such a system, it wouldn't be hard to ban cars, because the service provided would be nearly as good. Of course, the bans would have to be only partial ones, limited to private commuting in the metropolitan area. There would still have to be commercial vehicles, and ...

It will never happen, I realise as the bus brakes noisily at the terminus. Why not? No reason at all. It just won't.

I hate walking so I run down the street towards the cinema despite the heat. I am a few minutes before the advertised time which is of course much too early because there is so much crap on beforehand, but it's hard to guess exactly how much crap there will be, so, to be safe, Just In Case, I always arrive around the advertised time.

Ridiculously.

I am very thirsty so I buy an ice-cold orange drink which is mainly sugar and is artificially coloured and flavoured, and costs six times the combined price of the ingredients, labour, transport, and refrigeration involved.

Approximately.

It is reasonable but it is not the perfect orange nectar that I will never find.

The program begins with wallpaper music and badly scratched advertising slides, then wallpaper music and a cheery narrator and oversaturated-colour film advertisements.

The most oversaturated advertisement of all has lots of confused shots of surfers and hang-gliders and glasses of some bubbly black liquid, as if they were all somehow connected. The link to connect them is not obvious. It does not exist.

Then there is a short film about fishing in the Netherlands.

It is extremely boring.

Then there is a short film about mountain-climbing in New Zealand.

It is extremely boring.

Then there are trailers for *ET* and *Revenge of the Jedi*. These are fascinating but it is sad to see so much money and effort all going in almost the same direction. *Altered States* is the only film I can think of which did something different and intelligent with state-of-the-art effects technology. Everybody else plays it safe.

That's just the way it is.

Then, just before the interval, is something more obscene than all the advertisements, something truly gut-wrenching. A brightly coloured mouth (done in the 'new' style of animation where line drawings are photographed on high-contrast sheet film, which is then backlit and filmed through coloured filters and diffusion filters) proceeds to devour ice-creams, popcorn, chocolates, and potato crisps, then a wide variety of garishly coloured drinks. Mumbled noises of pleasure and lip-licking ooze through the speakers. A sequence of inane, offensive captions interact with the revolting mouth, terminating with 'Got the munchies?' and then 'Head for the snack bar!'. I can't help myself: I vomit at high velocity right into the smug, bright red mouth.

Only kidding. I've eaten too little recently.

Seventy per cent of the audience rush out at once to buy unhealthy pseudofood at a hundred and forty per cent of the normal retail price.

Then there is wallpaper music and scratched slides again (exactly the same slides), and then some (different) film advertisements.

Certainly builds up the suspense.

Huh.

And finally the feature. The audience has waited so long that they clap idiotically although there is nobody to hear them except the projectionist and surely his booth is too soundproofed.

Just as the MGM lion appears on the screen, there is a power failure: projector, air-conditioning, everything.

With the air-conditioning off, the heat rises as rapidly as the jeering of the audience. Some hysterical twelve-year-old boys begin to chase each other around the front of the cinema; the usherettes hurriedly run up and bonk them with their torches.

After fifteen minutes or so, most of the audience has left, and the manager comes in and stands in front of the screen with a battery-powered megaphone (instant involuntary national guard images quickly dismissed) and yells:

—Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid today's program has been cancelled. Your money will be refunded. There is a city-wide power failure due to a fire, and the SEC tell us they can't guarantee restoration for about two hours. The eight o'clock session should be running as usual.

So we all leave. Where would my computer-optimised bus service be now? Grounded. Me and my bright ideas. Of course, the concept really at fault is power distribution. Power should be generated on the spot by either solar energy or hydrogen-oxygen recombination (electrolysed originally by solar energy).

Not in a million years.

The pavement stinks as I walk back to the terminus. The air stinks. The shop windows are covered with sweat. The plastic mannikins are melting slowly. The motorists are all irritably honking at the policemen directing the traffic because the lights are not working. No red, green, or amber.

The bus driver looks at me with barely veiled disgust. I realise that my aluminium-foil mummy-type clothing is reflecting the sun straight into his eyes. I hastily turn to change the angle.

After five minutes, the bus groans into motion. I lift my head as close to the window as possible, but it is too high.

I have seen the scenery on this bus route a few dozen dozen times before, so I pan around the posters inside the bus.

IF YOU NEED A DRINK TO BE SOCIAL, THEN YOU'RE NOT A SOCIAL DRINKER proclaims one.

And there is an anti-vivisection one and a building society one and an irrigation equipment one.

I gradually fall asleep, and dream of a computer-optimised bus service powered by solar energy with ten back-ups of everything in case of malfunction.

Then I dream of lying in a pool of warm blood in the middle of a desert. I have been *separated from the others*. I have been speared through the skull and all the films have been ruined. Yet I am still alive. A big, friendly Chesapeake Bay Retriever is licking up the pool of blood and wagging his tail.

I wake to find that I'm lying in a pool of warm sweat and that the bus has stopped at the far end of the route. No matter; my house is only a few blocks away.

I walk slowly. Luckily the sun, now low in the sky, is behind not in front of me.

Tautology!

But that's half the fun.

Isn't it?

When I get home I drink five glasses of water, each glass tasting worse than the one before. Anything I drink must be inferior to the perfect (etc.) and my stomach is swollen and heavy and it splashes when I walk.

For amusement, I walk out into the back yard and say, very softly:

—Nobody can say I'm cold!

Just to see if he's given up.

This time I'm honoured with a personal appearance. The first since he vanished in the elevator. But no, it's just a holographic projection, which stands before me and says:

—You sir are cold! Absolutely frigid!

I take a swipe at the image and it vanishes. He has become vvvvery impudent lately. There is nothing I can do. Perhaps the elevator is in a geosynchronous orbit. The hemisphere has never reappeared, and he only contacts me when I think or say a sentence of the right form. I now rarely do it by accident.

Then I try something which has never before occurred to me:

—Nobody can say you're an imbecile!

Nothing happens. Ah, well! It's just that I'd *love* to film him insulting himself! It looks like he's only eager to contradict me when I mention myself.

Why? What the hell is the point of it all? What alien purpose drives him to challenge me every time I say 'Nobody can say ...'?

Maybe he just loathes the arrogance of generalisations, he just wants to show me that I'm wrong, and that he can in fact say absolutely anything he damn well pleases.

Chapter 11

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

It is now third year. Like second year, only later.

—The sine of an angle may thus be defined as the y co-ordinate of the point of intersection of the unit circle with the terminal ray of the angle measured counter-clockwise from the positive arm of the x-axis.

At the end of the period he hands out our tests.

—Ninety-five ... try harder!

—Eighty ... shocking!

—Sixty-five ... disgusting!

—Ninety-eight ... showing some promise.

One thing helps me immensely with my studies: I have a photographic memory! Not that that gives me instant understanding, but it does help to film each lesson and go over it later at any pace I choose. I don't think this is morally wrong—there are surely other people in the world with photographic memories, and mine is just literally a little more photographic than theirs!

I put just one limit on the use of my cinematographic equipment: I never play back any films during examinations. Only fair, surely.

I have to force myself to take down notes on paper like everyone else; what's the point when I can capture the entire blackboard in one twenty-fourth of a second, and effortlessly record every word the teacher says with one hundred per cent accuracy (in four-channel, high-fidelity sound)?

With every lesson available to me in a matter of seconds (I use a computerised cataloguing system) I appear to have absorbed perfectly every obscure and boring fact ever mentioned, and I soon gain a reputation as a 'genius' ... a word used very lightly to describe anyone not completely swamped by the ever-growing list of Things We Must Remember. Unfortunately, total audiovisual recall does nothing for my reasoning, and while it aids me enormously under some circumstances, sometimes it makes almost no difference. Teachers, in their infinite psychological wisdom, decide that I am *working to my full capacity* when my perfect information-storage system helps me to get good results, and that I am *lazy* when I am left with only my wits. This makes me angry-but-what-can-I-do? I cannot ascend to an equally high level of memory-irrelevant tasks, and if I stop using my photographic facilities entirely and rely solely on my 'natural' memory, they will become very angry, and will decide that I'm now being *lazy* all the time.

Out of spite, I expect.

I try to convince them that I'm trying moderately enthusiastically at everything, and that I simply have a photographic memory (I do not expound upon its nature) which helps me with certain things.

—Who was Henry the Fourth's father?

—I haven't a clue.

—Then how can you say you have a photographic memory! You *must* have read *that* somewhere!

I think you're just making ridiculous excuses to try and ...

Honestly. I've never in my life read who Henry the Fourth's father was.

And even if I'd read it, I would never have filmed it.

To avoid storage problems I throw out all my 'educational' films after they're about two months old, having made sure that I've memorised the facts they contain to the extent that an ordinary old memory can memorise anything so dull. I treat the tiny spools with a special enzyme produced by a special gland, and then flush them into my veins, and my kidneys are smart enough to recognise them as something that should not be in my blood (or perhaps I should say that my special glands are smart enough to produce an enzyme which reduces my spools to something which my kidneys recognise as something that should not be in my blood). Anyway, the net result is that there is a sharp line of distinction where lessons cease to be totally recallable in wide-screen colour and quadraphonic sound, and from then on I have to rely on my just-like-everyone-else's memory.

I am often tempted to start explaining my unusual facilities to everyone, mentioning every detail as I know it, and then to challenge them to prove me wrong. The detail I can pick up when using an ultra-telephoto lens is indisputably beyond the grasp of the best unaided human eye, and no 'photographic' memory could ever capture a scene as faithfully as my low-distortion optics and enzyme-controlled high-speed perfect-colour film. But reasons similar to those which stop me telling kindly old nuns that I think the high-school English course is a lot of pompous bullshit (*fact*) stop me telling anyone except brain surgeons, who never believe me and won't even test my story because they think it's so absurd, that I have a very small, very complex, and very efficient film laboratory built inside my brain (*fact*).

And what a lab it is! The camera: all the lenses are aspheric, with no chromatic or spherical aberration (of course) and minute amounts of astigmatism, coma, distortion, and curvature of field. The film: ultrafast, ultraflat, ultrathin, ultrastrong, and it records colours by some incredible interference/diffraction process that I can only begin to make guesses about. The development and printing is done by enzyme-diffusion; again I can barely follow the details. And when I 'screen' a film, it is run through a special sense organ which shares my optic nerves with my eyes, and 'reads' the film by chemical rather than optical processes. A similar organ handles the sound tracks.

Of course, it didn't start off like this. When I first grew the camera, it was barely functional, and not until I started reading a lot of books on organic chemistry and optics and photography did my brain begin to modify everything towards what it is today. It's hard to explain how I knew my brain changed the film width from 53.42 to 35 millimetres, and began to use the standard wide-screen frame format, and corrected all the optical defects, and replaced the old semi-mechanical shutter with a biochemical one which opens and closes (purely a metaphor: I should say clears and opaques) only a little slower than the speed of light (Well, perhaps I'm exaggerating there ... the actual figure is around seven per cent of light speed. But that's still quite high.). It just seemed to happen, and I *knew*, quite positively, what was going on.

And then there are my 'computers': extensions to my brain which have grown to handle various functions in my miniature film lab. Now the brain is not *supposed* to be able to grow new parts every now and then. It's also not *supposed* to be able to grow strange little glands which produce unheard-of odd secretions to perform such tasks as developing and printing and certain special-effects operations, on film which is itself produced by a gland which has no right to exist. What do the biologists know? I have the proof right here.

Where?

Shut up. I am in my English class.

—Now I want you all to read that part carefully, when the old man has returned, the fish has been reduced to a skeleton, and he is carrying the mast up the beach. And later when he is lying on the bed

with his arms stretched out to the sides. I think Hemingway is trying to create a crucifixion analogy.

There is a frightening gleam in her eyes. She is a connoisseur of crucifixion analogies. For her they are fetishes. Not crucifixes, but crucifixion analogies. Ho hum. Humour her.

And she's probably right. You never can tell with Hemingway.

In English, I soon discover, marks are assigned by a very novel method. At the beginning of the year, the teacher takes the roll and decides upon the mean that each student shall have at the end of the year. Then she makes out a list of marks for each student, the list being as long as the number of pieces of work to be done that year, and the mean of each list being the mean that each student is to end up with.

And at Fenkirk, to save time, they get the computer at the State University to work out the lists for them. The teacher supplies the program with the desired class average, the number of students in the class, and the number of pieces of work. The program returns the appropriate number of sets of marks, and these always follow a normal distribution quite closely, because the computer assigns the marks according to such a distribution. This provides substantial evidence for researchers into such matters that the normal distribution model is the appropriate one for such situations.

The teacher allocates sets of marks to students. Then, each time a student hands in a piece of work, the teacher merely takes the next consecutive mark from the appropriate list. Simple!

I am in my phys ed class.

—Now I want you all to stand up with your feet together. Put your arms straight up into the air, stretch them out, point your fingers upwards. Now touch your toes. And up again. And two. And three. And four.

(There must be a reason. There *must* be a reason!)

—And five. And six. And seven.

(To accept that there is no reason, that we are doing this merely to satisfy the perverted urges of some demented phys ed teacher, would be to accept the possibility that the entire educational system is of a similar nature ...)

—And eight. And nine. And ten.

(What's so hard about accepting *that*?)

—And eleven. And twelve. And thirteen.

(Now *think*. Think hard. Call up every ounce of reasoning left in your sweating brain. There must be some logic behind it. Surely.)

—And fourteen. And fifteen. And sixteen.

(We are bending over and touching our toes. Fine.

Now that *would* stretch all those naughty little muscles in our stomachs ... the ones we *never* use except when touching our toes. It *would* keep them in terrific shape.)

—And seventeen. And eighteen. And nineteen.

(Now what's the *reason* for keeping them in terrific shape? All those naughty little muscles we need for touching our toes. *What is the reason?*)

—And twenty. And twenty-one. And twenty-two.

(Of course! I have it, I know it! If we touch our toes twenty-five times twice a week, every week, then next year, all those little muscles we need for touching our toes will be in so much better shape. So next year we'll be able to touch our toes about fifty times, twice a week! And the next year, oh

boy, if we're lucky, one hundred times twice a week! I can even imagine the mathematical formula! If our age is A, then the number of times we'll be able to touch our toes twice a week is given by:

$$25(2)^{(A-15)}$$

—And twenty-three. And twenty-four. And twenty-five.

(Just look at that formula. When we're twenty, if we keep it up, we'll be able to touch our toes eight hundred times twice a week! When we're twenty-five, twenty-five thousand, six hundred times! When we're thirty, eight hundred and nineteen thousand, two hundred times! When we're thirty-five, twenty-six million, two hundred and fourteen thousand, four hundred times! When we're forty, eight hundred and thirty-eight million, eight hundred and sixty thousand, eight hundred times!

Ah, but it takes about a second to touch your toes, and there are only three hundred and two thousand, four hundred seconds in half a week ... which means that by the time we are about twenty-eight point five six, we'll be able to touch our toes continuously!

Of course, I could be a little optimistic.

I am awed by the magnitude of the concept. We won't need to get jobs. We won't need to eat, sleep, urinate, or defecate. We won't need houses or cars or TV sets. All we'll need will be patches of ground big enough to let us touch our toes, hour after hour, day after day. Non-stop. That's how fit and strong those naughty little muscles in our stomachs will be.

It is a vision of the perfect future! No hunger. No crime. No pollution. No population increase, and, because we'll be *so* fit from touching our toes continuously, we'll be virtually immortal.

I can see our lives stretching out in front of us, centuries, perhaps millennia long. Lives of perfect health. Lives of blissful obsession with one, single, pure purpose: stretching those fingertips down to those toes just one more time.

And when those muscles finally snap, as even bands of steel must finally snap, we'll all die with the knowledge that our lives were *meaningful*.)

One, two; one, two, three:

*Stand up! Stand up! For Fenkirk!
Who readies us for life!
Without this guiding influence
We'd soon be lost to strife!
And when our deaths draw nearer and
We see that we've gone far!
We will remember Fenkirk,
Who made us what we are!*

Ho hum.

They want to turn our stomachs of white bread into stomachs of raw steak, but it means nothing to me, for I have no stomach at all, just a papier-mâché cavity.

And I'm quite happy with it, thanks very much.

I am in my Social Studies class.

Here is sober sanity as we study the differences between India and the United States of America. Why not the differences between India and Australia? Would that be just a little too close for comfort? Not that it would make any difference. The inertia of apathy is too enormous to overcome. How can we find a ten per cent drop in our standard of living unacceptable, but not the death of a hundred (a thousand (a million)) newborn children a day? Don't we realise that we have to have one or the other?

Perhaps we don't really believe it's happening, despite all the film clips on television. After all, it could just be actors—they can do wonderful things with make-up these days. Amazing things. What about all those aliens in the cantina in *Star Wars*! Incredible. Well, it only goes to show. Yes, it's probably just a plot by the Communists to make us feel that we're too well off. They want to take all our food and give it to lots of nasty foreigners. What would the kids eat? They're *so* hungry lately, and I just couldn't manage with an *ounce* less than what I have now. And I do send twenty-five dollars to Austcare every Christmas.

Ho hum.

Every day after school, I check to see if he's still around:

—Nobody can say I'm incredibly handsome.

—You're incredibly handsome! Not that I really mean it! I was only joking!

—Nobody can say I'm you.

—You are me!

No contradiction at the end. No retraction. I try again.

—Nobody can say I'm you.

—You are me! *You are me!*

He must be joking. Surely. Or lying. That's it. Just because he's told the truth all the time so far does not mean he tells the truth *every* time.

—Nobody can say I am equivalent to you in every way.

—You are equivalent to me in every way. You really are.

—Nobody can say I am the same being as you.

—You are the same being as me. No kidding. Cross my heart and hope to die.

A storm cloud above shudders violently, then a flash of violet and white lightning flies up from the ground to meet it. The rabbit is incinerated.

—Nobody can say I just got hit by lightning

I scream frantically.

—You just got hit by lightning. At least, a holographic projection of yourself. Do you think you'd risk your actual body for a stunt like that?

I don't believe you, rabid rabbit.

—Suit yourself, I'm going home.

The projection vanishes. Far away, there is a brilliant orange light as the elevator leaves its geosynchronous orbit and switches on its interstellar drive.

—Nobody can say I'll miss you!

I scream defiantly.

He's out of range. The orange light has vanished.

I'll miss you.

I really will miss you.

Goodbye.

Miss who? I can hardly remember. What?

Chapter 12

RAIN

Wait for a gap in the loud, aggressive bombardment even though I know it will be too short. Run quickly but never quickly enough because despite the threat it is so good to walk slowly in the dry, icy air into the exhilarating wind filled with the music of a million symphonies.

When it starts again, dash like lightning between the trees which keep out little more than half the icy drops.

I see the pattern of drops on my clothes merge into a homogeneous dampness that soon soaks into my skin with a tingling coolness.

Hurry across the oval but I am nearly breathless so now I merely walk quickly. More rain makes very little difference now, anyway.

Finally under shelter it seems almost hot but that is my sweat which won't evaporate even in the anhydrous atmosphere. My hair drips little streams of water down my face but I wouldn't swap it for summer in a million years.

The sky is pure cloud and it is evening all day long. Fluorescent lights flicker above everywhere. The rumours say that they explode after a thousand flickers but I have never seen it happen.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: I am standing under one of the fragile-looking white tubes. It is pulsing rapidly, faster and faster. I look up curiously. In slow motion, the fracture starts at one end in a shower of purple sparks, then breaks into two branches, each branch then splitting and on and on until the length of the tube is crisscrossed with cracks in the shape of a wind-warped tree. I see this but cannot move. With a slow, deep wail the fragments fly downwards into my face.

What would it look like, on the big screen: A sliver of glass penetrating my eyeball? Seen through that eyeball itself, it would certainly be spectacular.

Not that I intend trying it.

In the classrooms there is near-silence against the howl of the wind. The air is warm from the fires. Everything that makes work impossible in the summer makes it seem only natural now. Almost logical.

A kind of wide-awake, crisp, fresh, *healthy* feeling about everything.

Aesthetically, pretty revolting. But I wouldn't swap it for summer in a billion years.

It is Tuesday morning and double English is endless as the rain makes sounds like a geiger counter at Three Mile Island. Our teacher is sulky because there isn't even a hint of a crucifixion analogy in our comprehension passage, so she just sits at her desk and broods.

The passage is about sixty per cent inanity, the questions about eighty per cent. Relatively, quite good. I screw up my eyes and try to think like the person who set the questions—degrading, but the only way. I manage to write some compatible answers. I quickly move the page out of my sight, knowing I'd rip it up if I ever saw what I'd written.

Recess, and the canteen dispenses hot tomato soup and chicken soup and vegetable soup in china mugs with five-cent deposits.

—Awful weather, isn't it?

says someone.

I look at him incredulously. How can they be like that? *How?*

The wind rises to a moan of agony and the windows and doors shake violently. A bin blows over with a metallic echo. Nearby girls scream.

As if keeping up with the wind, the rain begins pelting down with a new vigour. Out on the oval, the bores fountain water feet high into the air to meet the rain.

In Social Studies the rain is interrupted erratically by loud pops from the fireplace as we read about the Soviet steppe.

Halfway through the second period, there is a bang then a tinkling noise. I look up nervously at the fluorescent tubes but it was a window shattered by wind-borne debris.

Then it is lunchtime eaten upstairs on the benches outside the art room. Avoid the lights dripping water from shorted sockets to puddles below.

In the library, the screaming and fighting barely hide the sound of the violent pounding on the roof and the wind howling against the walls and windows.

Everything that slows the passage of time in summer speeds it up now. Lunchtime flashes past, and Metalwork, cutting cone-shapes on the ends of cylinders, seems almost bearably short.

The air is warm in Technical Drawing and the rain seems miles away as we draw arches and bridges and churches.

Then run home through the rain that promises never to stop.

I lie on my bed and listen.

Hours or minutes later I get up and go outside. The rain has covered the house with metres of water, and what little sunlight had penetrated the clouds is now lost in the water. I switch on the floodlight (to be used only in case of flood) and the back yard turns green-blue. I open my mouth and a cluster of bubbles brush past my nose and eyes, temporarily blinding me. I breathe in water, choking for a few seconds as my lungs adjust.

A rabbit swims past me, pursued by a black-and-white cat. I try to call out to him, but my vocal chords merely beat weakly against the pressure of the water.

I shouldn't sleep. I have Maths homework to be done by tomorrow.

I get up and begin the set of seventy-five identical trigonometry problems.

Outside, trees groan in protest as the wind blindly bashes them into painfully bent curves. They spring back in the brief pauses only to be twisted again by the next onslaught. Like bending coat-hanger wire back and forth with infinite patience, trunks must snap eventually.

The rain stops suddenly with almost an audible click, and the sound of the wind blowing droplets from branches now takes over.

It isn't quite five o'clock so the newsagent will still be open so I walk trancelike to buy the latest issue of *American Cinematographer* and read the first article as I walk home into the wind.

Very low on the horizon is a patch of blue sky which the sun is struggling to reach, but the wind up high is blowing in the opposite direction to the wind below, and the grey cloud stretches over the jewel-like hole and the sun sets without having been seen even once.

The rain starts again a few metres from home so I push the magazine under my jumper. Too expensive to let it get wet.

Home to the sound of boiling vegetable water and the smell of burnt cabbage.

I force myself to finish the final fifteen problems before I continue reading. Why do I do them? These ones will never be checked and doing five is as good as doing five hundred. Just In Case. Might As Well? Habit? Conscience?

I fall asleep in the middle of an article on stop-motion photography techniques and wake disoriented. Sinking in muddy depression I bury my knuckles in my eyes and contemplate suicide. I know it will last until the next morning so there is no point in staying awake so I have a short steaming shower then asleep explode escape.

I dream of being in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, clinging to a packing case as the wind sweeps house-high waves over my head. I wake and my windows have blown open, wrapping the curtain around itself in a complex knot. I switch on the light to make the evil shapes of the tormented trees invisible as I push the windows closed again and untangle the curtain.

I lie awake for hours, listening.

That's what comes from sleeping in the afternoon.

—Meeeeeeew!

I force myself out of bed, walk down the passage, open the door.

He runs in, shakes himself briskly, flicking drops of water all over my feet.

—Meeeeeeeeeeeeew!

I put down food and milk. He runs up to the plate, purring loudly. I switch off the light and go back to bed, leaving him to eat, dropping the occasional mouthful of food into the milk bowl.

I am floating in the limbo that is nearly asleep.

—Meeeeeeeeeeeeew!

I ignore him. Let him mew again if he really means it.

—Meeew!

He's in my room now, just a few inches away. He jumps onto the bed, licks my nose, then mews right into my ear.

I get up. He jumps off the bed, runs to the doorway of my bedroom. I follow him down the passage in the dark. He stops at the end, and I trip on his tail.

—Scroww!

he hisses angrily. I fumble for the light switch.

Cliché!

Leave me alone, I'm tired!

Outside it is pouring heavily.

He stands at the end of the passage, mews again.

—What do you want?

I ask idiotically.

There is still some food in the bowl, and some milk, so it can't be either of those. He must want to go out. I open the door. He takes a few steps towards it, sniffs at the storm outside, then looks at me.

—Meeeeeeew?

Which translates as: You expect me to go out in *that*?

Quite frankly I couldn't give a damn whether you stay inside or go out, just so long as I can go back to sleep.

He hears my thoughts and looks offended.

Tough.

I close the door after waiting about a minute, then I stamp back up to bed.

This time I hardly have time to become warm again. He is sitting in the doorway.

—Meeeeew!

—Go away you stupid animal!

—Meeew! Meeew!

—Just tell me what you want! I'll do anything! Just let me go back to sleep!

He jumps onto my bed, starts to claw the blanket.

I sit up and open my eyes, look straight into his face.

—Meeew!

he says sadly, and licks my nose. Then he jumps off and runs down the passage.

I stick my head under the blankets, swearing I'll ignore him no matter what.

—Meeeeeeeeew!

I jump out of bed, run down the passage. I hear his footsteps. I switch on the light. He's standing by the door. I open it, and he runs away, into the darkness.

The darkness inside the house, alas.

I resist the temptation to cry.

—*What do you want?*

—Meeew!

He runs over to his food and begins to eat it. I wait.

When he finally finishes he walks into the kitchen and sits down under a chair. I switch off the light and start to go back to bed.

—Meew!

He runs to the front door. I follow him, open the door. Outside, the rain has stopped but the wind is blowing litter down the street. A block away, a dog is barking.

Unhappily.

He hesitates in the doorway. I nudge him with my foot, and he runs out, looks around, then darts under the house.

Good riddance.

No malice intended, but ...

Back in bed, I listen to the wind.

And then the rain starts again.

The tiles of the roof shiver in the cold.

A branch tears, hangs miserably to the trunk for a few seconds, then crashes to the ground.

The dog yelps mournfully at the stinging drops.

I float towards sleep ...

... Then float away again because it is morning.

—Wake up, it's seven thirty!

But it can't be later than two. Surely.

Drifting half-way back to sleep, I dream of getting up, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and leaving for school.

—Get up! It's quarter to eight!

This time I really get up. I try to stand, fail, lean my head on the pillow. Then I lift it off, tear my eyes open.

I skim through the paper as I eat breakfast. Rarely anything of interest between the front page and the movies, but you never can be sure. That's where they put reports of nuclear-waste leaks and other unimportant incidents.

And then the breakfast dishes. Not included in the dream. Which makes *that* version infinitely better.

I hurry and manage to finish by eight thirty. Why hurry? Because time *must* be better spent doing *anything* except washing and drying breakfast dishes. Unquestionably.

Wait for a gap in the loud, aggressive bombardment even though I know it will be too short. Run quickly but never quickly enough because despite the threat it is so good to walk slowly in the dry, icy air into the exhilarating wind filled with the music of a million symphonies.

When it starts again, dash like lightning between the trees which keep out little more than half the icy drops.

Reminds me of yesterday. And the day before.

But there is a Rule which says today can be similar to yesterday, but it must not be identical.

But there is so little room for change. What can be different today? Can the walls be a different colour? Not likely. Can the siren go an hour later? Hardly. Can gravity be half of its normal value? Not without upsetting poor Sir Isaac.

Ah, but there is one difference.

Today is Wednesday which means Maths first thing, while it was English yesterday.

But it was Maths first thing last Wednesday too.

Stop complaining. It wasn't raining last Wednesday.

Why am I trying to convince myself that every day is identical to every other? And why am I angry when I fail? Shouldn't I be happy with the realisation that today is *unique*, that it has never happened before and it will never happen again?

Big deal.

Unique boredom is barely better than repeated boredom. There are millions of different states of the Universe which all seem almost identical to me; I guess I perceive a sense-created, soul-created sort of model of the universe, and the mapping is entropy-increasing.

But I'm babbling.

Even the glorious wind seems bland today. I wish the sky would turn green and the clouds would turn orange.

My sisters are always telling me I have poor colour taste.

Some satisfaction in Maths: By an unbelievable coincidence, he decides to collect and mark our trigonometry homework. Then I become depressed because I can be cheered up by such a trivial incident.

Which is silly. What's wrong with getting cheered up by trivial incidents? It's all relative. I decide to be stoically happy all day long.

It doesn't last.

Out of frustration I create a viewpoint and send it up into the rain to take aerial shots of the school. You could never risk a helicopter in this sort of weather, so the footage is, in its own funny way, unique. Nobody else in the world could ever take it.

And nobody else in the world will ever see it.

Let's not get onto that track.

The rain stops, and there is the sound of gutters emptying rapidly, just like the sound of a giant urinating.

The wind rises, and the trees moan complaints.

The rain starts again, tapping on the roof with an irritating beat that sets my teeth on edge.

Cliché!

I wouldn't swap it for summer in a billion years.

But after a trillion, I think I'd start to get sick of it.

Or perhaps even sooner.

Chapter 13

HOCKEY

If I am facing in exactly the right direction, then there is not a single living person in my field of view. Absolutely nobody. I can see only grass, punctuated by patches of naked yellow sand, a few dry and dying brown-leaved bushes, the upper halves of drably painted asbestos houses, and, above all of this, the vivid blue sky populated by a dozen jolly white statues of obese giants going for leisurely strolls along the horizon.

If the wind is strong enough, and comes from exactly the right direction, then the sound that reaches my ears does not betray my conviction that I am alone. It is a confused roar not unlike the noise of waves collapsing on water after trying with breakneck speed to reach the beach. With only a little imagination I can place myself just above the high-tide line, looking into the edge of a seaside suburb. The houses look a bit too plebian to be beachside residences, and the salty acridity of the air is missing, but otherwise the illusion is immaculate.

I could stand here indefinitely; there is nothing to interrupt me, nothing to concern me, or so it seems. The wind falls just a little, and I begin to make out individual voices: there is one high-pitched, enthusiastic tone, mumbling a kind of pleading encouragement, and a deeper, irritable sound with aspects suggesting the bored rectification by smug authority. But stop concentrating, stop increasing resolution by accumulated attention. True, now I can hear screaming and shouting instead of ambiguous rumbling, but while my head is turned this way I am free to imagine whatever suits me: I decide to stick with the seaside (thus avoiding too wide a credibility gap) and give the yells and ululations to noisy children playing on the beach. Perfectly feasible.

But once conscious of what I am doing, my deception is defined by dwelling too long on its mechanism, an irritable feeling of falseness spreads through my mind, and I know that I cannot just stand here and pretend.

If you're going to collapse a fantasy, you might as well do it in the lumpiest way imaginable. Which is what I do.

I create a viewpoint, but I keep it null, that is, not transmitting. I place it at the back of my head. Then I create an active viewpoint about a metre in front of my face, and look through that.

Viewpoints are remarkable things. Their optical systems are solely psionic in nature, and are hence capable of feats far beyond those of any mere glass lenses.

Over a period of about three quarters of a second, I expand the field of vision of this viewpoint from the normal one hundred and twenty degrees up to two hundred and forty. Just as the field is about to include *me* in it, I switch on the second viewpoint, and, using an extension to my brain only eight months old, I patch the images from the two viewpoints together to give a complete sphere of vision which does not include me in it anywhere. Then I do a reverse-iris wipe of the first viewpoint (creating a black disc in the centre of the field which grows until it engulfs it completely), which leaves me with only the normal one-hundred-and-twenty-degree picture from the second viewpoint.

I have just turned my head one hundred and eighty degrees around an infinite number of axes, simultaneously.

How's that?

Then still looking only through the second viewpoint I actually turn around. Then I quickly destroy both viewpoints and look through my eyes.

Feeling just a little dizzy.

Halfway across the field from me, a halo of hockey players is trying desperately to close in on an elusive red sphere a few centimetres in diameter. Four or five metres away, a particularly obnoxious phys ed teacher named McArnold is yelling advice mingled with obscenities at them. He seems upset that everyone on the field has left their appointed positions to join a kind of moving scrum following the ball back and forth across the oval. Responding to his crude comments, a few detach themselves sheepishly and trudge reluctantly away from the excitement.

The ball starts to approach the goal of the team currently in his disfavour, so he arbitrarily calls half-time. The scrum explodes into tiny fragments which are blown in the direction of the taps.

I'm not in the least bit thirsty, and I dislike the faint tang of urine that predominates in all school water, but I move with the masses in the general direction of the taps.

—Nobody can say I'm a nonconformist

I whisper hopefully. No results.

—What was that?

McArnold is looking at me suspiciously. He likes everything to be *cleanly* shouted out loud so *everyone* can hear it.

—Nothing

I say instinctively, looking genuinely surprised. He translates it (correctly) to 'Nothing that's any business of yours', begins to look mean, then says:

—If you have any comments to make about my umpiring, I'd prefer you to come right out and say them to my face instead of muttering them under your breath.

He has a one-track mind.

He walks off quickly, Just In Case I *do* come right out and criticise his umpiring.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: I call out *loudly*:

—Hey, McArnold!

He freezes, turns slowly, his right hand hovering near his gun.

—I'd say you're just about the worst goddamn hockey umpire this country has seen for a *long* time. Not that I give a damn about the halfwit's game—I just thought I'd let you know what I thought of your umpiring, just to give you something to think about on all those *long, lonely* nights of yours.

He reaches, but before he's halfway I've cut his holster off his gunbelt with a perfectly positioned bullet.

Actually, I wait until he's well out of range, then I whisper:

—Nobody can say I don't hate your stinking guts.

No results. Ho hum.

Then he starts yelling himself hoarse:

—You stupid little fucking idiots! Cut that out before I shove your sticks up your arses!

The situation seems to demand that he breaks into a run towards the taps. Phys ed teachers *never* run. He walks slowly, taking steps which are obviously consciously reduced, nurturing his anger so that it will be full-grown, at its peak, by the time he arrives.

The crowd around the taps explodes in a familiar manner, but this time two boys are left behind. There is something faintly repugnant about the crowd's sincere eagerness to detach themselves from

those two, to dissociate themselves from the outcasts, assuring that they are completely physically alone as they receive their Just Punishment.

McArnold arrives. He has taken too long for them to stand there in frozen terror: it just cannot last forever. And so one of them is grinning nervously.

McArnold grabs him by the hair, moves behind him, then tugs, forcing his head to tilt backwards at a sharply unnatural angle.

—You little turd! You're fifteen fucking years old and here you are squirting each other with water! If I catch you fucking around again I'll put you both on detention for a month. Understand?

Not a rhetorical question. He has to answer 'Yes, sir' while his hair is being pulled out at the roots. He realises this, he knows the rules of the game. Don't argue with the umpire.

The boy's face is turning crimson. He is struggling not to struggle, knowing that that is the worst thing he could possibly do. He is struggling not to scream out 'Get your hands off me, you filthy bastard!', knowing that that would be inviting more pain. He is struggling not to cry, terrified by the potential humiliation. And he is struggling to direct all his consciousness to ignore the pain and form those words: 'Yes, sir.'

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: In a single, flowing movement he reaches back with his hands, grabs McArnold around the throat, and throws him over his shoulder to lie broken on the grass.

Actually, he succeeds in whispering:

—Yes, sir.

McArnold is not satisfied.

—What was that, son? I didn't hear you.

I shiver at the word *son*. Castrate the obscenity now. No child deserves that nightmare.

It's easier the second time, but you mustn't let any of the pain or the impatience or the loathing creep into your voice.

—YES, SIR

he says loudly and clearly in a voice absolutely devoid of anything that could cause provocation. It must have taken a great deal of effort to manage that. I feel like giving him a medal. Honestly.

Knowing he can only go so far, McArnold lets go. The boy joins the crowd for safety. There is a tangible uneasiness for a few seconds, then McArnold turns around casually and begins to walk back towards the field. With a perfectly even pace. Nothing unusual has happened.

The crowd waits at the taps for a while. It's not safe to follow *too* closely. Now that it's all over, the isolation ends, they joke with the boy (in low voices), they get as much out of it for themselves as possible. Now that there's no danger for them.

McArnold arrives back at the field, yells:

—Would you kids hurry up and get over here! We haven't got all bloody day, you know! You should all be in position by now!

They break into a run.

He is happy. This is his role in life.

The second half is less peaceful than the first. Three times, the ball comes very close to me, as much as three quarters of the way into the region where, technically, I am supposed to deal with it. But each time it is safe to ignore it, because, running, panting, sweating, screaming, a few metres behind the ball there is an Enthusiastic Imbecile. For the duration of the game, his whole life is

dedicated to making his team win by the greatest possible amount, with as many goals as possible scored, in as dramatic and spectacular fashion as possible, by himself.

With an EI on the trail of the ball, the best thing to do is to simply get out of the way and leave him to his idea of glory. Nobody would ever question that. Indeed, many would frown upon any interference.

So EIs have their uses to me.

I am standing at the edge of the field, looking up at the sky, planning the script for a computer-animated science-fiction epic (I currently have only very limited facilities in that area, but I feel sure that if I dwell upon the benefits of automated animation for long enough, my brain will get the message and grow an appropriate extension).

And then I notice that the nasty little red sphere has rolled up next to me, and stopped just a few centimetres from my feet. I quickly stretch subjective time to give myself a chance to think about the situation.

There is no EI for quite some distance.

The ball is *very*, vvvvery close to me—too close, so that even an EI would now recognise it as being in my exclusive domain. So I can't just stand here.

There is nobody close enough to justify my stepping back away from the ball, leaving it alone, dissociating myself from it. In their eyes, it is definitely now my responsibility. And there is nobody around to take away that responsibility.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: I look down at the ball, and address it in a very polite voice:

—Well, it's your decision. *You* make up your mind where *you* want to go. I'm not going to impose my will, I'm not going to force you into going anywhere.

Actually, it looks like that is my only alternative. There seems to be a wide, jagged semicircle of people, with me at the centre, who are all calling out wildly ambiguous suggestions full of superlatives and obscenities. The general idea is that *every one of them* wants me to hit the ball so that it travels towards *him*. The idea of making a choice, of actually deciding to try to make that ball travel towards one particular deranged paranoid psychotic out of that whole crowd of deranged paranoid psychotics is repugnant to all my personal philosophy (not to mention the prohibitively complex dynamic calculations required to achieve such an aim; the necessity of measuring coefficients of friction, air pressure, and humidity, et cetera, and, beyond all of that, the possibility allowed for by quantum mechanics that when I strike the ball it will tunnel right out of the solar system's gravitational well and end up in interstellar space), so I squint (closing my eyes would be dangerously obvious) to avoid bias, and hit the ball with a pseudo-random force in a pseudo-random direction.

And it's all finally over.

But the Cruel Joke can't resist the pettiest opportunity.

One minor complication: The ball travels directly and without any fuss right in front of one of the biggest EIs on the 'other' team. He elatedly takes control of the ball, dribbles it a few metres, then scores a goal. Which breaks the tie seconds before the end of the game. For some reason, everyone on the 'other' team seems wildly happy, and everyone on 'my' team seems almost to resent me because of it.

Well you can't please everybody. I don't bother trying to explain to them that it wasn't my fault, that I just left it all to chance. I don't mention the Cruel Joke. I don't bother trying to explain to them

that Fate guided that ball to its destination, not me. They'd never understand. They have absolutely no concept of fair play.

As we walk off the field, McArnold approaches me.

He says, very solemnly:

—You know, I sometimes really wonder if you're taking Physical Education seriously. I really do wonder.

And that's all. He walks away looking very smug and very serious, as if he has just achieved a penetrating insight, insulted me terribly, and been brilliantly witty.

I can't help but:

*Stand up! For the Great McArnold!
He teaches us many things!
He teaches us how to handle balls
And run around in rings!
Though some may say it's pointless he
Ignores his critics' cries!
For he's only doing what he does
To keep us salubrifed!*

I have to bite my tongue to stop myself bursting into hysterical laughter. He actually thinks that I'm worried because he doubts my ...

It's too much. I start to chuckle, then I bend over clutching my stomach. I lose balance and fall over, and I lie there on the grass, shaking with uncontrollable laughter, tears streaming down my face.

Fortunately, McArnold is now too far away to notice.

Somebody prods me with the end of their foot.

—You OK?

His head is gashed down the side and is dripping blood onto his shoulder. I look up at his serious concerned face. The crowd is screaming:

—Johnathon! Johnathon! Johnathon!

I collapse into laughter again. It really is funny.

—Fucking disgusting

he says and walks off. I must agree with him ... there is something intrinsically disgusting about laughter.

I lie there laughing until it starts to hurt, then I struggle to my feet and walk to the change rooms.

I would dearly love to film the destruction of those change rooms. By implosion: I'd like to cover them with ten miles of water and watch what happened from the inside.

I'd like to see the concrete roof snap inwards with a shower of grey splinters. I'd like to see the walls fold in, the benches buckle, the showers and associated plumbing twist then tear like licorice.

And that sort of thing.

How about:

A tidal wave hits the school. One hundred thousand tonnes of churning, crushing water.

Water, bending the barbed-wire fence around the swimming pool into a warped, twisted sculpture of violence!

Water, crashing through the steel-plated ceiling of the hall, smashing the polished pine floor into firewood!

Water, spraying around the edges of those double-bolted doors, finally tearing them from their hinges in the ultimate act of liberation!

Water, bending brick walls like plasticine, snapping solid oak doors like plywood!

The camera stays just a few metres above as the force of the wave rushes down the length of the school, mashing the canteen into a swirling suspension of concrete chips, beating lockers into tinfoil, and finally smashing into the foyer of the administration offices. Then it turns right, past the remains of the receptionist's desk, into *that room*.

Where the weight of the water is squeezing *his* body into pure, clean, organic pulp.

The sick yellow light is extinguished.

Cut to an aerial view of the last traces of the buildings collapsing and vanishing below the frothing white surface.

Who needs a plot with scenes like that?

Irwin Allen was *smart*.

I look around unhappily at the change room walls. They simply stand there, refusing even to tremble.

—Please

I whine.

Nothing. I walk over to a wall, kick it sharply.

Not a sound.

Chapter 14 ASSEMBLY

Somebody is obsessed with *structure*.

And this is not amusing.

I can only speculate on the exact nature of the thoughts wandering through that somebody's demented mind, but here is my speculation:

It would be just awful if, when we held an assembly, everyone just casually walked into the hall and sat down without any kind of arrangement. No, it would be so much nicer if the whole thing was properly co-ordinated. And a hierarchical structure just seems to cry out to be used. Just consider it. First, we divide the hall into four sections, one for each house. Then each quarter is divided into five bands, one for each year. Every band is divided into three narrow strips for individual tutorial groups, and each strip is cut in half lengthwise, one half for boys, one half for girls. Finally, in each half-strip, students are arranged in alphabetical order. It's all so elegant. So neat.

(What difference does it make? What is the point of arranging us, cataloguing us, setting us out in a nice, regular array? There *must* be a reason!)

—Aquarius tutorial groups line up at the south-west entrance to the hall. Leo tutorial groups line up at the south-east entrance to the hall. Gemini tutorial groups line up at the north-west entrance to the hall. Scorpio tutorial groups line up at the north-east entrance to the hall. I'll just repeat that.

Which he did.

(To accept that there is no reason, that we are doing this merely to satisfy the perverted urges of some demented administrator, would be to accept the possibility that the entire educational system is of a similar nature ...)

Tutorial teachers stand by a brownish patch of near-dead grass, frantically searching with their eyes for missing members of their groups. In front of them, an amorphous mass of students is slowly crystallising into thirty lines of alternating sexes.

(What's so hard about accepting *that*?)

The lines are formed. Now they must be sorted into alphabetical order. Perfectly. And every line must be sorted completely before anything else can take place. Ho hum.

(Now *think*. Think hard. Call up every ounce of reasoning left in a brain befuddled by complex, apparently purposeless patterns. There must be some logic behind it. Surely!)

And now we go in. Single file, slowly, at exactly the right pace, with just the right expression of sober contentment on every face.

1A1 girls. 1A1 boys. Then 1A2 girls. Then 1A2 boys. Then 1A3 girls. Then 1A3 boys. Then 2A1 girls. Then 2A1 boys.

(We are arranged in a classifying pattern. Which means that our geometric position can be mathematically analysed to yield a whole list of exciting little bits of information about us: our house, our year, our tutorial group, our sex, and our surname. Fine.)

2A2 girls. 2A2 boys. Then 2A3 girls. Then 2A3 boys. Then 3A1 girls. Then 3A1 boys. Then 3A2 girls. Then 3A2 boys. Then 3A3 girls. Then 3A3 boys.

(Now what use could this possibly be? What is the actual practical application of our being categorised in these five levels of subsets? *What is the reason?*)

4A1 girls. 4A1 boys. Then 4A2 girls. Then 4A2 boys. Then 4A3 girls. Then 4A3 boys. Then 5A1 girls. Then 5A1 boys. Then 5A2 girls. Then 5A2 boys. Then 5A3 girls. Then 5A3 boys.

(Of course! I have it, I know it! If, standing there in the hall, insignificant in the company of a thousand other people, we begin to feel depressed, lost, if we begin to feel like misfits, outcasts, jigsaw-puzzle pieces with torn corners, then we will be saved from our depression by the whole ingenious *structure* of the thing! Because simply by glancing around us, we can *see* that we *belong*, that we have an *identity*! *Closest to us* are people with whom we have the *most* in common, and moving further out, the change is gradual, controlled. We are not surrounded by strangers, but by teammates!)

We are all in the hall.

Callow coughs coyly for about ten seconds, realises that it will do no good, so he says (politely but with assertion):

—Could I have your attention now, please.

It works. Fairly well.

Behind him, looking bored with trying not to look bored, are the four House Directors. They are sitting on four green plastic seats. I cannot understand why they are there. They do not talk, they just sit and watch. Silent backing singers.

—The Principal will be here in a few moments. I want you all to give him your full attention.

And then he is up there, all red hair and shining red face, standing about a metre to the left of the microphone. Looking very enthusiastic. The hall is silent.

I suddenly, briefly feel the wormhole links between all members of the equivalence class of moments spent at school assemblies. It is not a place I especially wish to explore.

—Well, kids, it's nearly the end of another year, and I must say it's been a *particularly-good* one. I know I keep on telling you this, and I know I must be beginning to sound like some repetitive old fool

This is a Joke. To be sure that we realise that this is a Joke, he pauses, puts on his glasses, takes them off, shakes with laughter that comes through his nose, thrusts his hands deep into his pockets, bends forward and shakes his head back and forth, slowly, with his mouth wide open. All this without really interrupting the flow of his oration.

—but I'm quite sincere, I'm quite sincere when I tell you that this school has been getting *better-and-better*, every year. It's been improving under my very eyes, and that's a sign that you've been working hard, and that I've been working hard

Merged with a little shaking breath-laughter.

—and that the staff have been working hard. People have been telling me this all year, they've been congratulating me, not that it's me they should be congratulating, it's you, because you're the ones, you're the ones who've been doing it all, they've been telling me 'Look, Fenkirk Vale used to be a *fairly good*

With a scowl.

—school, you know, *not bad*

With a scowl.

—if you didn't mind everything second class. But now it's really improving, getting to be one of the *better* schools about the place'. Now *all sorts* of people have been saying this: people from the Department, Rotary Club members, even other Principals. They're, they're

More shaking breath-laughter.

—beginning to get a little worried

Conspiratorially.

—because Fenkirk Vale has been beating them in places where they're used to being the top.

Swimming carnivals and athletics carnivals and debating and music, just about, yes, *just about* everything.

Near the front of the hall, a thirteen-year-old boy in the Slow Learners class makes a very dangerous mistake. He has been sitting in one position for fifteen minutes (first years come in first) and he is beginning to get a cramp. Logically, he moves. He stretches his legs out in front of him to let the blood flow freely again.

Seward catches this during a pause, finds it distracting, forgets what he was about to say next. Which makes him angry. He puts on his glasses, looks down at the boy, says angrily:

—Look, sonny, would you mind not *wriggling* about while I'm trying to talk to the whole school.

Then he looks away and starts to remember what he was about to say.

But the boy cannot let it rest. He did nothing wrong; he was merely shifting his legs a few inches to stop a cramp. Surely not a major distraction to anyone. Yet he has been publicly reprovved. Hence an unfairness has been committed, and it must be exposed, and the situation rectified. All perfectly logical, perfectly sensible.

All perfectly just.

But not the *done thing*.

He calls out:

—Look, I didn't do nothing. What'd I do wrong?

Seward turns on him.

—Look, sonny, you don't just answer me back like that! You come and see me in my office after this assembly! Understand?

The situation is absurd. This is too much.

—Fuck you

he says casually.

Seward explodes.

—How dare you! How dare you use language like that at me! Get out of here now! Go out and stand outside my office and wait for me! By golly you'll find out what happens when you try something like that! Get out there and wait for me!

By now the boy realises he has gone about as far as he can go, and there is little value in co-operation.

—Get stuffed you silly bugger!

he says. There is no anger in his voice, just a little resentment at all this fuss about nothing.

Seward runs down the steps at the side of the stage, runs up to the boy, tries to grab him by the arm, all the time giving the audience a running commentary of what he's going to do.

—Come with me! You'll come with me, you'll come out and I'll show you some respect you little trouble-maker! I won't stand for this sort of thing!

The boy struggles to get away, but Seward grabs him firmly and drags him to the door.

—NO!

he pleads. He is angry now, fighting mad, kicking and punching and trying to bite. His teacher stands by and watches helplessly (how can I call him a lousy coward when I do nothing myself: I ought to bring the roof down on us all to hide the shame). They vanish out the door.

But the voices carry.

—NOW LOOK! YOU GO AND STAND OUTSIDE MY OFFICE DOOR NOW! NOW, YOU HEAR ME! OR I'LL HAVE YOU EXPELLED! NOW DO AS I SAY YOU DISOBEDIENT LITTLE CHILD OR YOU'LL BE IN BIG TROUBLE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

—You just get your fucking hands off me or I'll get the police onto you.

Some noises, then Seward yelling too loudly for words to be heard.

Then he comes in, composes himself with a few deep breaths, and walks back onto the stage.

The boy's teacher unobtrusively slips out through the door.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: Before Seward can begin to speak, the entire school stands in one frightening rumble, and begins booing and jeering so loudly that even with the microphone he cannot be heard. Teachers are ignored. The front rows swarm the stage, and drag him off. He is carried by the masses to the far end of the hall, where he is lifted up and hung by the collar from a basketball hoop. And then he is pelted with fruit and paper and erasers and ...

Alternative fantasy sequence: As Seward approaches the middle of the stage, the entire school begins to chant in perfect unison:

—Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!

Nobody moves, nobody listens to his outraged yelling, nobody can hear the sharp warnings of teachers moving in. Everyone is chanting at about the same volume, so there are no 'trouble-makers' to grab, to single out. Even the most hysterical girls retain their composure as Seward charges at the front rows brandishing the microphone stand. They just sit there, being bruised, chanting evenly, steadily.

Alternative fantasy sequence: About three quarters of us begin to sing, the rest hum the tune ...

Stand up! For our leader Seward! He's

A truly wondrous man!

A paragon of virtue and

We're all of us his fans!

This school just keeps improving!

While he's around the place!

So bow down and grovel when you see

That truly angelic face!

Just as 'Stand up!' is sung we all rise slowly, without a pause in the singing.

The effect is very hard to predict.

Actually, we are all too collectively gutless to do anything. We just sit there dumbly as if nothing at all extraordinary had happened.

—Now, where was I?

He fumbles for a while with his glasses.

—There are a few things I'd like to particularly mention. One thing this school has produced that's on an *international* level. I'm not talking about just this state, or just this country. I'm talking

about being *among the best* in the world. And that's our band. It went to Europe recently to perform at a Youth Orchestra Festival in Holland. And I've had some very, some *vvvvery* impressive reports about it. In fact, I got a telegram from the Minister for Education, and I'll read that out to you. It says 'Congratulations on the success of your band in Amsterdam stop'. Now that's from the Minister for Education himself. Now our band was there competing

Ugh!

—with other high-school bands from all over the world, the very best of 'em, and it got a special mention in the coverage of the festival by *The West Australian*.

May I point out to you that the only band from Western Australia is perhaps likely to be mentioned in a Western Australian newspaper, and that this does not signify anything particularly outstanding about this band in relation to other bands except that it comes from the same geographical area as the newspaper you read?

—So I'm very proud, you should all be very proud, of our band because they're bringing Fenkirk Vale up to *world standard*.

Trific!

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: He says:

—Yes, like I tell you, this school is getting better and better and better and better!

His voice is rising and trembling.

—And I am the cause of this! You can thank me that we're approaching *world standard*! And in a few more years, we'll be the very best school in this state, in this country, in the world! WE'LL BE THE GREATEST, THE BEST, THE BIGGEST, THE MOST SPECTACULAR SCHOOL IN THE ENTIRE COSMOS!

Then his head blows up. High blood pressure.

Actually, he decides to change the subject.

—Now you probably know that the School Council has voted to change itself into a new form, which will have no lower school members and no teachers represented. It will now be called the Student Council, and ...

Quite a coup, I heard. All engineered by someone who's leaving this year. Aren't politicians incredible?

—Attendances at P&C meetings have been disappointing lately, so I'd like you to all just encourage your parents to *come-along-once*, just so they can see the *wonderful* things our P&C does ...

No comment.

—More miscellaneous, boring trivia.

Ditto.

—Well, kids, I hope you have a good holiday, and you come back next year ready to work hard.

He walks quickly off the stage.

We leave the hall by a procedure which is almost the same as the entrance procedure played backwards.

I spy around for a few minutes with a viewpoint. The boy ran home. He'll go to another school next year.

Hopefully one that isn't improving quite so rapidly.

Ho hum.

Chapter 15

MORE COMPANY

In the morning, I can't do anything until the mail's come.

Well, nothing useful. I can eat breakfast, wash the dishes, read the newspaper, drink glass after glass of cold water because although it's only late morning the temperature is thirty and rising.

And that sort of thing.

I rarely get any letters, but every day I feel an odd, inexplicable disappointment when there is Nothing For Me. It gives me a big kick to write away for camera specifications and price lists for books on film-making, then waiting each day for the stuff to arrive. Is that some sort of landmark in loneliness? It really does give me a big kick.

I could always write to Relatives. But what can you say to Relatives? And what can they say to you? They can tell you all the exciting things your little cousins have been doing, and who's sick, and who's well, and who's going somewhere, and who's come back.

I'd rather not get a letter at all.

It is the 5th of January.

For the third time I walk through the hot, shimmering air to the letter box. A few yellow envelopes (bills) stick through the slot. I open the box.

Four bills and something from the bank for my parents. A letter for one of my sisters. And a *square* red envelope for *me*. Definitely not Post Office Preferred.

It is about five centimetres long. The address looks like it has been printed by an offset printer. I walk back inside, I leave the rest of the mail on the kitchen table, then I take the red square up to my room.

I examine it. It was postmarked at the GPO, midday, 4th January.

I am afraid to open it, so I find something else to do. With a long focal length and close-focussing ability, I examine the address. I can see that it is fairly normal, cheap paper, dyed red. Around each letter of the address is a tiny border of white where there is no dye, and then there is the letter itself, where the paper is dyed black.

Which seems to suggest that the red was dyed on *with gaps for the letters*.

How very unusual.

The envelope has no return address. It is completely plain, monotonous red on the back.

The envelope is seamless.

It is also completely rigid, right up as close to the edge as I can tell. Hence it is stretched very tightly over some unbendable square which it fits exactly.

Almost as if the paper was formed *on* the contents. I think of a square of metal (plastic, wood?), being dipped in pulp, coated ...

But paper isn't made that way. It wouldn't work. It's rolled in sheets, not coated onto surfaces. There's no process that works like that, not for paper.

At least I've never heard of one.

Down to the kitchen for a sharp knife. Using a metal ruler placed about a millimetre from one edge of the square, meticulously parallel (it would somehow seem sloppy any other way), I slice through the paper. It cuts easily, exactly, without any tears, because it is stretched so tightly. But the

cut I make does not pull apart. Although I have cut right through the paper, all I have done is made a very thin slit in the envelope which I cannot tear open. The paper feels soft, but I cannot enlarge that slit with my fingers. With the knife I cut two small incisions very close to the sides, thus freeing a tiny rectangle of paper to flap up, revealing a shiny metallic surface. I try to drag the square out, but the paper grips it too tightly.

Now I am curious rather than neat. I zig-zag the back of the envelope with cuts, peeling off triangular pieces. Soon all of one side of the metal square is exposed. It is polished, almost glassy; it looks like aluminium deposited on a telescope mirror. The edges are *exactly* perpendicular, and hence very sharp. I cut myself three times peeling off the paper from the other side.

The other side is identical to the other side.

Huh.

About as exciting as a letter from a Relative.

There is absolutely no doubt about who sent it.

—Nobody can say I don't appreciate fan mail!

I say to the sharp metal square.

No response.

But who else could it be?

Not Uncle Phillip up to his practical jokes. He wouldn't have the resources.

And besides, he only sends poisonous insects.

I'm not sure about what to do with the paper. Take it to someone? Get it analysed?

I burn it.

And I pick up the square *carefully* and put it in my bottom drawer.

I can't think of anything else to do with it.

Whenever I can't think of what to do with something, I put it in my bottom drawer if it's large, and I put it in my core sample if it's small.

My bed, you see, is supported by four hollow metal posts. Already I have filled two of the posts with small bits of junk that I've been dropping in since I was able to reach that high. The third post is quarter-filled. Together, the posts form a time-vertical sample of my life. The bits of food have probably undergone radical chemical changes, but all the other stuff will be perfectly preserved when, in a few thousand years from now, some archaeologist discovers the core sample, and hence discovers me.

Maybe I'll have a chance to drop a few spools of film in there. Perhaps.

I start reading the screenplay of *Doctor Zhivago*.

The square stays right out of my thoughts, as it should. It doesn't speak. It doesn't move. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't change anything. No writing appears on its surface. It's downright boring.

I decide to forget about it.

After a few pages I put down the book and go to the drawer and pick up the square in my handkerchief. The edges cut my handkerchief in two places. They did not cut the envelope. I put the square on my desk with a corner protruding into space, so that I can pick it up again by the faces.

I tap it in a few places with my finger tip. It makes very little noise. It does not seem to be hollow but it's hard to tell.

Why not do something dramatic? I'm sick of subtlety.

I get a hammer. Then I bash the square violently in the centre.

The hammer bounces slightly, the square vibrates from the impact and bounces off the desk. The corner of the desk top is a little frayed.

I pick up the square with two pens held like tweezers, put it back on the desk. It isn't marked. Let's try some more subtlety.

I say:

—Open!

—Open, sesame!

—*Ouvrez!*

—I am your new master. You will obey commands from me only, from this moment onwards.

Activate yourself.

—ON!

—SWITCH ON!

—PLEASE SWITCH ON!

—PRETTY PLEASE SWITCH ON!

No response. Why do I feel silly?

Then I press my thumb against it. I try the other thumb. All my fingers.

It is not keyed to open on fingerprint identification.

Why am I presuming that it can open?

Maybe it's just decorative. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's a bomb.

I put it under the blankets of my bed to see if it will glow in the dark. It doesn't.

I put it in boiling water, then boiling ammonia (which turns out to be a bit of a waste of time because all the ammonia leaves solution and poisons the air in the kitchen). I find some old nitric acid from a Chemistry Phase I went through. No effect. I heat it a little, still nothing. I'm afraid to boil it because I have no goggles or protective clothing and hot nitric acid is very unpleasant.

Then I wash it in cold water, dry it (little drops of water cling to the surface and won't shake off) on my bath towel, and put it back on top of my desk.

—Nobody can say I didn't try.

No response.

Perhaps there's a new key-sentence form.

I don't have time to try every conceivable permutation, so I try a few likely ones:

—You can't do anything. It's impossible for you to move. You're inert, lifeless, dull, boring, bland. You can't speak! You have no credit rating. You watch *The Young Doctors*.

The square makes no attempt to contradict me.

It clearly has no pride.

It may have been sent just to frustrate me. It *could* be inert and lifeless. It could be solid metal, without any purpose. Just to make a fool out of me.

I put it back in the drawer. Let *it* make the first move.

The next day I receive a second square. It is identical. I try holding the two squares together in all kinds of ways, seeing if they'll recognise each other and attach themselves somehow. Nothing happens. I give up in disgust, and I leave the second one on top of the first in the drawer.

The next day I receive a third square. And again no amount of manipulation of the three together makes anything happen.

The next day is Saturday and there is no mail. I cannot think all weekend. I cannot read, write, or sleep. Wondering if there'll be another one.

On Monday there is no red square in the mail. I take the three out and manipulate them in a few more ways. Nothing.

On Tuesday, nothing in the mail. I decide to forget about it all. Why worry? If they have a purpose, surely it will be revealed to me. Or why bother sending them?

A test? With no questions, no clues? Here is an inscrutable square—scrutinise it!

Nothing on Wednesday. The problem of the squares begins to stop occupying all of my time—I can think of other things, do things without stopping in the middle and running up to my room to try some new test.

Then the thought occurs to me that perhaps the Goal to be Reached for Something Amazing to Happen is not to solve any mystery about the squares, but rather to not think about the squares at all for a whole day, or something like that.

Which makes it hard not to think about them. I start waking up each morning thinking about them. And dreaming about them. I manage to pass three solid days without opening the drawer, except in dreams. Then I open it. Nothing seems to have changed. Nothing special has happened.

I feel like burying them in the back garden where I *can't* get at them, but my mind would always be on them, thinking: *What if they're doing something now?*

And it would drive me mad so I'd have to dig them up again.

If I could only destroy them. It would haunt me for a while, not knowing what their purpose was, but I would forget eventually. I could throw them in the bin! Once they were taken, I'd never ever be able to get them back. Which would be the same as destroying them.

So I do. On Saturday. The rubbish is collected on Mondays.

I delve into the vegetable cuttings and filth four times before Monday, to check that they are still there. Just In Case.

Then they come and take them away.

On Tuesday I receive a square in the mail.

And on Wednesday, and on Thursday.

Three again.

The same three? No way to know. I'm not sure whether the question means anything. It doesn't with electrons.

However.

I'm not sure whether or not I should throw these out too. I can't make myself do it.

Then I decide to experiment.

Throwing them into the river is losing them irretrievably.

Tuesday of the next week, at eleven in the morning, I throw the squares into the Swan River. Illegal pollution.

Wednesday I get the first new square. Postmarked at the GPO at midday, Tuesday.

Another one on Thursday, on Friday.

Monday, at one o'clock in the afternoon, I throw them in the river.

Tuesday, I get a new one. Postmarked at midday, Monday.

And one on Wednesday, one on Thursday, each postmarked at midday on the previous day.

One week of holidays left. Where did they all go?

On the Monday of the last week, I catch the bus at the same time as the previous Monday, and go and stand beside the river. At one o'clock, although I have the three metal squares with me, I throw in three squares of cardboard covered with aluminium foil.

Nothing in the mail the next day.

Were they postmarked at the GPO? If so, the bunny has time travel.

Or a very good understanding of what I will and will not do.

Either one is a frightening possibility.

The squares are probably introduced, pre-postmarked, into the mail bag going to the local post office. Matter transportation.

Now what?

I play around some more with the latent three. I bash them and try to scratch them, I arrange them in every pattern that I can think of, I talk to them, yell at them, sing to them. No response.

I try to contact the rabbit with telepathy. I try sending viewpoints out on long-distance trips, hoping to tempt him into re-creating the hemisphere. I get some shots as good as satellite photographs, but I hardly look at them.

Because there's no response.

In all good science-fiction novels, they bombard the alien artifact with dozens of types of radiation. They X-ray it. They study the mass distribution by spinning it on many different axes and measuring the changes in rotational inertia. And that sort of thing.

Life is never like a good science-fiction novel.

At least not for me.

Maybe it is for Carl Sagan.

If I sent them to a University they'd get lost in red tape and academic jealousy.

If I sent them to the CSIRO then they'd be intercepted by ASIO before they ever reached a scientist, and I'd be imprisoned for espionage and anti-American feelings.

That's the way it is.

If I sent them to a private company, they'd bury them in an underground vault and never let them out, for fear that studying them could reveal an advanced technology that would outmode all current manufacturing processes—and replace them with something *efficient*.

As opposed to cheap.

I'll just keep them here in my bottom drawer, where I keep things when I don't know what to do with them.

Chapter 16 DISSECTION

It never rains.

Cliché!

But I didn't even complete it!

By implication, however.

Leave me alone, I can't help it. I'm suffering.

In Turkey, Iran, Iraq, USSR, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Chile, Argentina, China, North and South Korea, East and West Germany, Kampuchea, Vietnam, Ethiopia, USA, Indonesia, Ireland, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Spain, Portugal, Paraguay, Israel, Libya, Thailand, Czechoslovakia, Brazil, Peru, Laos, Tunisia, Tanzania, Ghana, Algeria, Cameroun, Uruguay, Yemen, Guatemala, Singapore, Bulgaria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan, Malaysia, Poland, Zaire, El Salvador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Taiwan, and, probably, right here too, people are being tortured. They are being beaten and electrocuted and drugged and lobotomised and raped and starved and humiliated.

I try to feel it, but I can't seem to feel any of it. I try to help, but I can't seem to concentrate. Or remember. Hey, woops, sorry. Someone told me you were all out there dying in agony, but I plum forgot.

—Shit or get off the pot!

scowls a tall American politician.

What a way with words he has! It's what happens when I try to think things through.

Like I was saying: it never rains. Everything leaps out and grabs me at once. Quite apart from the thousands of strangers throughout the world undergoing unthinkable (to me, lucky me) atrocities,

—Why get it out if you're not going to use it?

scowls the tall American politician. He is wearing tinted glasses. What a poet he is! I wish he'd go away. I'm so tired and I have a terrible headache, although it is quiet in the operating theatre, and the air is pleasantly cool and dry. I am chained to the ceiling at my wrists and ankles, with a leather strap supporting me at the waist. Two metres of cotton bandage has been stuffed down my throat as a gag, but no blindfold. I can see everything that goes on below.

It's not completely silent. There is the slow, shallow breathing of the patients—or is that sound coming from the nervous theatre staff? No, they're calm and smiling. There is the just perceptible hum of the electronic monitoring equipment. Occasional softly spoken requests for scalpels, swabs, retractors. Faint footsteps every now and then.

I have put green filters on all the lights in the theatre to give a dark, brooding feeling to the scene. Flesh tones are alien, blood is black.

It must make it hard for them to see. Perhaps they'll slip with their scalpels, sever something vital, kill all the patients. I would like that very much, because they are all good friends. What they're doing to them is much worse than death.

They're taking them apart while they're still alive. They're separating them, spreading them out on clean, white sheets, so that their hearts, though still connected to their lungs, sit metres away. They're going to stick in probes at all the important intersections, to measure the rates of flow of body fluids, and the pH factors, and the blood counts, and the temperatures. And that sort of thing.

I am helpless. But I must film it. There must be some evidence which one day I can show the world.

Lot of good that'll do.

Not that I'll ever be able to.

Shut up.

A new incision. Blood spurts high into the air, then stops as the artery is clamped. A muffled sob of anguish.

I start crying in throbbing spasms, my gag becomes soaked with saliva, and I begin to choke. The saliva trapped around the gag blocks off even my nose, and there is no way for air to reach my lungs.

Well.

I am going to die.

Nobody in the theatre will help me. They're having too much fun. I try to force the gag out with my tongue (like Henry Spencer's cute baby rejecting food in *Eraserhead*) but the bandage is packed too tightly.

A quarter of a mile away, in my desk drawer, are three squares of metal posted to me by an extraterrestrial rabbit.

Now they are hovering in the air below me, shining with a blinding blue-white light.

Nobody in the theatre notices.

Even if they looked up, they would not be able to see them. They are too hard to scratch with a scalpel, and in any case they have no structure whatsoever to lay bare. They are without any sensible reason or definable purpose. They are arbitrarily chosen, childish chunks of meaningless magic.

Not *entirely* to my taste, but the perfect defence.

My choking stops. The saliva dries up. The bandage, once swollen with moisture, constricts to a mere wisp of cotton thread. And I can breathe again.

The squares vanish.

—Nobody can say I'm ungrateful

I *think outwards* joyously.

—I wouldn't think of denying it under these circumstances

says a telepathic whisper in my brain.

I've made it! *Contact!*

—Yes, fine, but don't get too excited or you'll choke again. This communication is something of a special effort ... we're having a lot of problems here at Central Control. It seems to be working partially, but it's behaving very oddly. It's over twenty thousand light years away at the moment, you know, and sending this conversation faster than light has all sorts of nasty side-effects, like creating multiple universes and closed loops in space-time, all of which take a lot of work to clean up. Especially the way things are at the moment. I'm not sure when I'll be in touch again. Those squares, however, are with you permanently. They only transmit themselves at a little under light speed, so they're not messy to use. Any time you're really *desperately* in need of help, you'll get it from them ... good luck!

And then it is over and there is no time for the million and one

Cliché!

Shut up!

questions in my mind like why the hemisphere and your eccentric behaviour and why are you helping me now and how did those squares get posted and ...

A faint but just perceptible murmur says:

(Yes, the murmur is not speech, but it speaks to me itself.)

—Squares were beamed down from an orbiting robot satellite with a whole stock of them ... it can manufacture more, if need be. The hemisphere, and all of my behaviour on Earth, was controlled directly by you. Don't expect me to explain it, I could only observe. I was on Earth in a form unable to do *anything* by my own choice, in order to avoid dangerous and non-deletable paradoxes, so every action I performed was controlled by you.

Why me?

—You were where I ended up. I came to Earth to find out what was screwing up Central Control, but precisely because Central Control was so screwed up, I had to abandon my powers of causality. I guess you were the strongest influence. I didn't learn a single thing about our problems, I'm afraid, but I must say I liked some of your films. It really was quite recreational to give up my powers of decision and just be your audience. Anyway, we may actually have found the source of our problem back here. I'm sure that nothing can interfere with Central Control for long. I'm confident that.

It stops again. I wait for more. There is no more.

Central Control? Non-deletable paradoxes?

It is all too much to absorb at once so I turn my mind back to the briefly forgotten dissections taking place below.

One surgeon is probing around through her patient's many far-flung organs, looking desperately for something. But it isn't there, not what *she's* looking for.

That makes me laugh.

Well, if it wasn't for this gag ...

She's looking for a type of tumour in which she has specialised. She had a theory: every organism has a tumour of this type, hidden somewhere.

There goes her theory, literally out of the window: a grey, rat-like, bird-like, bat-like twitching thing. She may never be the same again. Then again, she may stay exactly the same, pretending that she has found the tumour. I just want to get out of here.

—Where are you going?

—I, ah, I, sorry, I thought ...

—Thought what? Sit down, would you.

—Yes. Sorry.

—Now, I'm sure somebody here can remember, somebody can help me, I distinctly remember reading a passage where Salinger describes nail holes in Holden's palms. I can't seem to find it right now.

Every incident, every sentence has been torn to shreds. Every innocent human fear and hope has been forced and battered into the shape of some sterile metaphysical metaphor. As if that is not enough, she insists on ferreting about in the ruins for her ridiculous obsession. Hence my odd position.

Phoebe, I still love you!

Another group of butchers toys with a different victim.

They speed up and slow down the metabolism at will, freeze it, play it backwards. Every emotion, every action, every realisation, is analysed in dehydrating detail.

—Would you like that bit again?

asks the surgeon. They all nod and giggle quietly. He touches the right buttons, and the once-living thing does an automated dance. An act that was meaningful, once through, becomes absurd and comical from senseless repetition.

The pace changes suddenly. What's left of the patient starts to struggle violently. Strange groans come not from the mouth but from the entire disassembled body. A nurse is thrown through the air; she lands with a dull thud against the theatre wall, slides to the floor. Two surgeons and two nurses grab frantically at the wildly flailing limbs.

Something small and vicious bursts from the ribcage, eating its way through the air on a triumphant trajectory straight for the senior surgeon's throat, but he is much too fast for it: he brushes a button and it turns to ice, tiny teeth bared but useless. He takes out a toothbrush and starts to clean them, humming something from a Disney film.

All hail the new technology: total control at last in the hands of the mob. Skim through the boring bits, revisit the climaxes in stilted slow motion again and again.

They watch the *Nostramo* explosion, frame by frame, and laugh with obscene glee at the animator's art revealed. They gawk at every split-second shot for an endless time.

I just hope that the editor of the film never has to witness such a revolting scene. Every decision he made has been undermined: his job has become a do-it-yourself craze, but the idiots with the replay buttons and the freeze-frame switches are not likely to achieve an improved version.

Time means nothing, never will again.

I quit the Media class. What could they possibly teach *me*? They are Neanderthals, barbarians. Let them watch soap operas and play with Super 8 surfing films. It's just a sick joke.

I won't let it become a cruel one, not for me.

English is not so easily disposed of. It's either that or Literature, which is more of the same, only worse. So, within my brain, I build a thick-walled vault where I seal away my thoughts about the books she is about to maim and disfigure. I rescue and repair her first victim, by dipping back into older, as yet unsoiled, memories. Her poison is seeping through my mind, but I am too fast for it. I am king here, and the walls I build are impervious to it.

She doesn't like what I write about *The Catcher in the Rye*.

—Didn't you hear anything I said about it?

No comment. I shrug, almost apologetically.

Coward. Should have said, 'No. Not any more.'

My Media teacher is very disappointed.

—I thought you liked films!

—I do.

(—That's why I'm quitting, vivisector!)

Coward.

Now about those international atrocities. Maybe, sometime in the future, when I'm a little less busy ...

The tall American politician smiles.

It's what happens when I try to think things through.

Chapter 17 REHEARSALS

I am standing outside Room O which is above the canteen. I am leaning on the railing, looking down at people moving across the quadrangle. Then I look up, and see, just below the railing outside Room H, on the other side of the quadrangle, red letters which have been taped to the white-painted concrete. They say:

FAIR IS FOUL AND FOUL IS FAIR

A shuffling, hunched figure cackles as it limps through a doorway, out of the quadrangle. I swallow nervous fear.

It takes a few seconds to click. It is the School Play this year. They always put unsubtle hints in red letters below the railing outside Room H. It's a kind of tradition.

Five years ago, I tried to direct *Macbeth* myself. I rewrote the play as a screenplay, and then I tried to persuade classmates to be in the cast. I got plenty of volunteers, but they spent all their time bursting into fits of uncontrollable laughter at the lines. And I couldn't blame them ... some of those lines are hilarious.

A flash of inspiration: This is my chance for a really novel way of filming *Macbeth*! I could, of course, go and see the play when it is put on, and sit there with a telephoto setting capturing it all from the audience's viewpoint. But there is a *better* way! If I could get on the cast then I could film it all from the inside ... including the players waiting nervously behind the stage, the producers tearing their hair out at each mistake, the reactions of the audience ...

So I go for an audition.

There are two producers who are also directors. Bloody theatre terminology, I can never get used to it. They are both English teachers (but not my knife-happy crucifix-mad one), and they are both spinsters. But they're not quite the knitting types ...

Miss Mulligan is Irish, energetic, dominating, with a volatile temper. Miss McDougall is Scottish, quieter, spectacled, with a soft but bitter voice perfect for making ironic observations.

Miss McDougall ushers me into her office, offers me a chair.

—Now, why do you want to be in the play?

An obvious question. How can I answer? The truth? I gave up doing that long ago. Well, then, which lie is best for the occasion? A stream of intellectual crap about old Shakespeare's relevance to my life, to my need for creative activity? The School Patriotism angle? I Want To Get Involved In Something? To broaden my experience of life? Which lie is best?

—I don't know

I say, which is the honest answer to a different question.

—Mmmmmmm.

She looks suspiciously at me through her washed-out blue eyes and thick, shiny lenses. She's about to make some biting comment which will crush me. I tense myself.

Then Miss Mulligan breaks into the room.

—Occh, he flared his nostrils! Sorry, I lost the key!

she exclaims. She stares at me delightedly.

—Can yer do it again?

she pleads.

I can't. She looks disappointed. I do it. She cackles with joy.

—Ah, but we must have him if he can flare his nostrils!

—But, he ...

Miss McDougall gives up. Arguing will get her nowhere.

—Give him Lennox's part

says Miss Mulligan.

—He says lots of little things all through the play

explains Miss McDougall.

—You know, there's a great soccer player called Bobby Lennox!

exclaims Miss Mulligan. She begins a rapid commentary/mime of some imaginary vital soccer match. I want to send out a viewpoint so I can see the expression on my face but I am afraid that it will make me laugh.

So now I am Lennox.

For three weeks, at lunchtimes, we crowd into the office and go through the play ... not reading it, but putting very thick blue lines through fifty per cent of the dialogue, and occasionally adding a word or two.

Macbeth is tall and thin, with a gaunt, haunted face.

Lady Macbeth has jet-black hair, pure white skin, and eyes like a doe's.

When the rather drastic adaptations have finished, we start to read scenes, starting with Act II. Act I is being 'looked at closely with the possibility of some major revision' says Miss Mulligan. How it can be revised further when it is already unrecognisable I do not know.

Act II starts with Banquo, a Scottish General, and his young son, Fleance, standing in the courtyard of Macbeth's castle in the early hours of the morning. It is hard to feel the atmosphere in a small, stuffy, sunny room.

—Don't try and put feeling in the lines now

warns Miss Mulligan.

—That's our job. You just learn them now, and we'll get around to all that later.

The lines are *still* hilarious, and sometimes when we mispronounce archaic words, Miss Mulligan becomes helpless with laughter.

Miss McDougall titters quietly.

—What's the joke?

demands someone.

—I ... I ...

Tears stream down her cheeks. Miss McDougall has recovered fully, and and is sitting with her back straight and an appropriately prim expression on her face.

—You ... you ...

gasps Miss Mulligan, sobbing.

—It's *absolutely disgusting!* I could not explain it in a million years!

Then she falls onto the floor and lies on her back taking deep breaths until she has regained her composure.

Lady Macbeth begins Act II Scene II in a sober, wary voice.

—Stop!

screeches Miss Mulligan.

—This is how you do it!

She presses her tongue against the roof of her mouth, tilts her head forward, begins nodding loosely and speaking in a tipsy, lisping voice:

—That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold!

Her head falls onto the desk. She snores once, then jerks her head up again.

Well ...

—Wot haf qwenched them haf given me thire, sire!

She belches loudly.

—Hark! Peace!

She looks around the room like a frightened Marty Feldman.

—It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman, which gives the stern'st good-night.

—Cawww, cawww!

crows Miss McDougall, her hands folded over her mouth and nose.

—Toooo, toooo!

she hoots.

—He is about it!

Miss McDougall picks up a chair and drops it, then knocks a stack of books noisily onto the floor. Then she screams piercingly. In the distance, police sirens.

—Like that

says Miss Mulligan.

And that sort of thing.

... Later:

—It was a rough and feverous night

says Macbeth.

Miss Mulligan elbows Miss McDougall sharply in the ribs, winks, and says:

—Aye, it was indeed, was it not, Agnes!

Miss McDougall looks sullen. Miss Mulligan cackles softly.

And that sort of thing.

... Later:

—What is amiss?

asks Donalbain.

—A Miss is a lady who's had a rough night!

cackles Miss Mulligan.

Miss McDougall starts to cry.

The rehearsal finishes a little early.

From that moment on, there is a special sort of tension in the air every time that line is read. Sometimes Miss Mulligan grins mischievously, but only if Miss McDougall is not looking.

Eventually we start to physically act out scenes, without props or costumes, in the drama room beneath Room H. There is an imaginary stage, an imaginary audience, imaginary sheets of cardboard hiding us from the imaginary audience.

Macbeth is in the middle of a long philosophical soliloquy when he takes a few steps too many. Miss Mulligan, in a flash of movement, rises from her chair, rushes up to him, and pushes him over

onto the floor.

—What the hell did you do that for?

he asks, stunned and bruised and bleeding and dying and ...

Sorry.

—You fell off the edge of the stage

she says innocently.

—I ran to catch you before it was too late, but you're much too heavy for a poor old lady like me.

You should be much more careful in future.

Lunchtime soon becomes too short for any serious rehearsals, so they move to the evening.

The school is dark but peaceful as the night-school classes are all at the other end of the building. I pan freely as I approach the drama room. Lights are on in all the rooms but they do little to penetrate the beautiful blackness of the quadrangle. Somewhere in the distance a cleaner whistles.

The drama room is locked and dark. Nobody has arrived yet. I lean against the wall and whistle 'Mrs Robinson' for a while.

Miss Mulligan arrives, smoking a chain, and unlocks the door. Then Macbeth and Lord Ross appear, and a few seconds later, the Porter. We start piling up desks and carrying them out of the room. Miss Mulligan gets a record-player from her office and puts on a record by The Chieftains. The music is eerie and uncomfortable in the silence and night-coolness.

Then we sit and wait. Nobody else arrives.

When we have waited one hour, Miss Mulligan packs up her record-player and takes it back to the office. We get the hint and put all the desks back. And we go home.

The next day she quietly and calmly screams her head off.

The next week, everybody turns up for rehearsal.

One night:

We have nearly done all we can with Act II without starting work in the hall, and we are sitting on the floor drinking coffee.

—Shall I hit them with the heavy stuff?

Miss Mulligan asks Miss McDougall.

—Go ahead, dear, you sock it to 'em!

says Miss McDougall.

—Why are we doing this? All right, it's the school play, and it's something to take up your spare time, and it's a bit different and it's fun, but why are we doing it?

—To give pleasure to the people in the audience
suggests Malcolm.

—Really! Then you are all nothing but prostitutes!

Miss McDougall titters.

—To enjoy it ourselves

suggests someone else.

—That's worse! You'll go blind!

Miss McDougall grins and blushes simultaneously.

—I don't think any of you really understand what Shakespeare was trying to do or say with this play, or how we can achieve something with it ourselves.

Her hair stands on end from sheer intensity.

—Now, you must think about the sort of audience we'll be having. There'll be your friends from school, and your parents, and your friends' parents, and teachers, and teachers' wives and friends and concubines and brothers and sisters and parents. Now what can a play set in Scotland around the eleventh century say to those people, people of, for the most part, the twentieth century? Remember, we've got people from all sorts of backgrounds, all sorts of races, colours, and creeds. Lots of Italian Market Gardeners

She elbows Miss McDougall roughly ...

—and those sort of people. I don't expect you to come up with any instant answers, but I want you to think about these sorts of things, because if you don't, the play will not be a success no matter how big, no matter how enthusiastic the audiences are.

Then we start rehearsing in the hall.

There is an enormous raised wooden stage at one end of the hall, with a white wall at the back with a wide corridor behind it. There is a fair bit of invisible space to either side of the stage. These two spaces both lead by stairs to underground dressing rooms, make-up rooms, costume-storage rooms.

—Into the *very bowels* of the hall

mutters someone as we fumble for the light switches.

The stage is to be extended by a whole series of wooden boxes placed on top of each other. The result is a multi-level structure with a long, low tongue protruding from one side, right up to the audience, where profound soliloquies are said under a single spotlight.

We spend most of the time at each rehearsal unpacking the boxes and setting them up, because they cannot stay there during the daytime. They would interfere with basketball games.

Ho hum.

The boxes are plywood frames which fold out to be fitted with heavy wooden tops. Fingers are snapped and battered as we drop the thick rectangles into place.

All of the acting is to be done on this extension, and on the very front of the permanent stage, the rear regions of which are to be used for the dancing scenes. A curtain of grey-dyed styrofoam chains separates the two areas. As people move back and forth with heavy pieces of wood, the bottom links are all trodden on and broken and crushed, and the stage is littered with tiny pieces of foam.

Then evenings become too short and we rehearse on Saturday afternoons.

Props are minimal: swords, daggers, a bucket of water, a banquet table.

There is music and sound effects and lighting to plan in detail, and soon there are dozens of assistants and helpers involved, dashing around with messages and notebooks.

One afternoon I help carry a table from the library into the hall, for the sound equipment. Miss Mulligan sees me and says sharply:

—You're listed on the program as a Thespian, not a production assistant!

Two weeks ago she had told us:

—Last year the play became very complicated and messy because too many people were involved, too many people were so specialised that they didn't know anything about the play except what they actually *had* to do; their strictly defined tasks. This year I'll want you all to help with props and equipment and make-up changes and everything, so we can have fewer people and less confusion.

Ho hum.

The days we are sure will never *really* come get closer. We are measured for costumes. The extension to the stage gets precedence over basketball games! The script is finalised.

And that sort of thing.

—Seward will come soon. To straighten things out. Believe me, it'll be really bad says Macbeth. He was in last year's play.

—What do you mean?

—Every year, at about the second-last rehearsal, he shows up and takes over. Mulligan and McDougall just go and stand in some corner. Then he makes us go through it, yelling 'Speak up!' all the time as if we had voices like his. And he changes everything.

—You're kidding!

I am horrified.

—No ... but it's all OK ... we ignore all the changes later on. The whole idea is just for him to feel important, to think that he's our ultimate mentor. We don't ever do it like he tells us, even on opening night when he's there, and nothing ever happens. It's just some kind of fantasy for the poor old bugger, I guess.

I won't go. I couldn't stand it.

But I can't not turn up for the second-last rehearsal.

Ugh.

We have a make-up rehearsal with all the lighting and music as it will be. Then the costumes arrive and we try them on and the main characters pose for photographs for the local press.

The entire school throbs with the approaching play. Everyone in the cast is constantly questioned by everyone not in the cast, about such rumours as: Are the swords really razor-sharp? (They are quite blunt, but still dangerous; thankfully I never have to do any fighting with mine.), Is there really a passionate scene on a water-bed? (A salacious rumour seeded by Miss Mulligan to encourage ticket sales.), and Will there really be an actual beheading on the final night? (Well, anything's possible.).

Miss Mulligan gets hold of a copy of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* and the cast (and the school's Literature students) are all invited to the screening. It is not the bloodthirsty violence of the film that makes me feel sick, it is the awful cheering and whistling of the audience during rapes, murders, and executions. There is one shot where Macbeth plants an axe in a soldier's groin; the projectionist, a Chemistry teacher who is also our Properties Manager, quickly stops the film, runs it backwards for a few seconds, and tries to display the scene again. I've had quite enough of that sort of thing. The film jams in the projector, and has to be cut to get it moving again.

Poetic justice!

I grin about it for a day.

On the night of the second-last rehearsal, there is a lump in my stomach as big as the Death Star. Miss Mulligan is late, and we all sit around feeling glum. Miss McDougall arrives.

—Der Führer hasn't come yet

I tell her.

The hours drag on, then Miss Mulligan arrives, jubilant.

—He's not coming

she screeches joyously.

—How the hell did you manage it?

inquires Miss McDougall, just a hint of admiration in her voice.

—A secret, dear, a secret

she giggles. She winks, looks conspiratorial, in her usual hammy way.

—Everybody home! Just remember that it was me who did this for you! The ultimate sacrifice, just for my precious children!

Mmmmm/ahh.

The last rehearsal is on Sunday afternoon. The play is running from Tuesday to Friday.

We sit nervously in the cold concrete room beneath the stage, waiting for our cues. Somewhere along the line, cue sheets were planned, and one of the production assistants was going to watch the action and give appropriate cues. Somewhere along the line this got dropped, and cues turned into the cast remembering who was on soon, and warning each other. Which made it kind of exciting and comradely.

On Monday we are called out of classes half-way through the morning for a surprise rehearsal (Which we are later told had been planned for weeks. Grrr!) which we must carry out in front of the people dragging chairs into the hall.

And then it is Tuesday and I cannot think or work all day. Every time anyone in the cast sees somebody else who they speak with in the play, they quickly go over their lines together.

I try to sleep in the afternoon, but cannot.

I begin to regret (violently, physically) ever joining, but I am happy as much as I am terrified.

Then it is time to go.

Chapter 18

PERFORMANCES

As I cross the oval I notice a miserable huddle of people outside the entrance to the hall. Half an hour ago, the main characters should have been inside having their make-up done. Curious, I zoom in (it is marginally quicker than a fast-track with a viewpoint, and in this case the two-dimensional feel is just right). Everyone from the first scene is there, sitting on the concrete or pacing on the grass.

I arrive.

—What's the matter?

—Mulligan. She hasn't arrived yet, and nobody else has a key
says everyone unhappily.

Oh.

I start pacing on the concrete. You've got to make lumps.

Half an hour later we hear the characteristic roar of her souped-up red sportscar. Everyone looks cheerful. She screeches to a stop in the car park.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: The door of the car opens, she collapses onto the ground. We rush over, find her covered in blood, a bullet wound on her shoulder.

—Thugs from Stratford

she gasps.

—Go on

we encourage.

—Just as I was going to the car, two people approached me. They tried to convince me to cancel the performance! They said they were from the Royal Shakespeare Company ... they said that our version was sacrilege, that we'd made too many changes, that we should never be allowed to go through with it! When I argued with them, one of them pulled out a gun, and ...

She faints.

Somebody gets the keys from her pocket and we hurry over to the hall. The show must go on!

Actually, she gets out of the car, runs (daintily) over to the entrance, and says sheepishly:

—Flat tire. *Sorry.*

And lets us in.

Down the silent aisles with echoes from empty chairs. Will anyone come tonight? It seems unbelievable that pure coincidence can bring five hundred people under one roof all at the same time. We've been told it's a full house tonight, but truth has become irrelevant in every aspect of this play.

Good.

Deceit makes a great theme for my film, especially since *Macbeth* itself is so full of it.

The hall is silent, eerie. I can almost hear W.S. stirring in his grave.

—*Sacrilege!*

whispers the wind through the window.

—Cobblers

I tell it. It doesn't hear me, keeps on whispering.

—Nobody can say this is virgin Shakespeare

I say loudly.

—Shakespeare was undoubtedly not a virgin when he wrote it

says Lord Ross brushing past me.

—*And* stop clogging up the aisle.

—I was looking for a rabbit!

I yell after him but he has vanished into the bowels of the hall.

But I wasn't really. I just felt like saying that.

Ho hum.

Through the door at the side of the hall, into the cold, dark, concrete corridor. Down the stairs at the end into the dressing-room complex.

I film the make-up preparations with a purposefully distorting fish-eye lens, with a one-hundred-and-sixty-degree field. Streaked brown faces loom and stretch. And when it is my turn, the fingers daubed in goo bend and curve like rubber as they move around my eyes.

The critics would call it surrealistic. How can it be, when it's *exactly* as I see it?

I pace nervously. Production assistants dart around everywhere like humming birds, checking on props and costumes and actors and musicians, checking things that have been checked before a thousand times, and things that have just come up seconds ago.

I grab one with a watch and ask her for the time. She hides the watch face jealously and squirms away, saying:

—Nobody, *nobody* is allowed to know the time. Mulligan's orders. She told us that it would only make you nervous, so just stop worrying and leave everything to us.

—I swear I won't get nervous I just want to know the time so I can have some idea of how things are going and ...

She has vanished.

Why do I need to have some idea of how things are going and ... ?

Well it would be *nice*.

I should wear a watch. Or grow one in my head. Now *that* would be very useful. I already have an accurate time-pulse source for other purposes, such as regulation of the film-transport mechanism, so it would be easy, I'm sure ...

Not now. Concentrate, don't wander off like that!

I am not in the first scene but I still feel a shiver pass through my body as the familiar music starts, and the audience grows silent, and Mulligan sticks her head in and says gaily:

—Two minutes, everybody! Two minutes!

Of course there's nothing to worry about, everyone in the first half of the play is made up and costumed and ... ready? Who will *ever* be ready?

Then everybody wishes everybody else Good Luck despite the tradition of saying Break A Leg instead. We're not much for tradition.

With a cast of thirty including dancers and acrobats there are eight hundred and seventy (no kidding) 'Good Luck's to be said, each taking about a second. However, fifteen of those 'Good Luck's can be said simultaneously, as there are fifteen pairs of people, so it only takes about fifty-eight seconds in total. Which makes sense: from each individual's viewpoint, there are twenty-nine 'Good Luck's he must say, and twenty-nine to be said to him.

We are, of course, standing in a preplanned configuration to expedite this procedure. It has been choreographed and rehearsed. It was all worked out by an IBM computer.

Wow!

Then The Play Has Begun.

I sit below as the first scene starts; the words cannot be heard down here but I can follow roughly what is happening by the music. I could always send up a viewpoint, but that would mean opening one of the doors down here to make a free path to the stage, and Mulligan would not approve (and I could never explain). I must work on ways of removing that shortcoming. The little people in my head must work harder!

If I let them, certain things could make me very nervous.

Distractions.

Besides, it is better this way. So I just sit and listen to faint sounds. After all, this is part of the novel way to film the play: through the eyes and ears of an actor, waiting offstage for much of the time.

Ho hum.

I can intercut rehearsal footage of the scenes I will not see performed for real, perhaps some kind of montage. Suggestive of memory? But that would be a lie, I'm not sitting here remembering those scenes, I'm sitting here thinking about editing them. Should I indicate that? Hold on tight, this is getting out of control.

I don't have the courage to dive into wells like that. I'll probably do something simple and dull. I could never record my thoughts without thinking about the fact that they were being recorded, which would give very messy results. Acting with just your body you can hide, but who could manage to act with their whole soul?

Not me.

Not that I *can* record thoughts directly. I'll just lie to cut out the messy bits.

Distractions.

I wonder about the audience. We have been told by Mulligan to throw rotten fruit at them if they misbehave, but there is no fruit on the stage, and nowhere in our costumes to hide nice squishy month-old plums. There isn't even any fruit in the banquet scene.

Lousy preparation!

What can you expect?

And then the acrobats from the very beginning of the first scene arrive downstairs with news of the audience.

—They're all old-age pensioners getting in free!

—They're all about ten years old and they *laugh* at everything!

—They're all university students with glasses and they look like they're at a funeral!

—They're all teachers, and their families! Nobody else!

—They're all high-society ladies and their gigolos!

—They're all high-society gentlemen and their whores!

—They're all Neapolitan gangsters!

Huh. I thought that was a type of ice-cream.

—It's too dark. You can't see anyone out there at all!

At least there seems to be a wide spectrum of the community present.

I will be on soon, so I creep up noisily and take my sword from the rubbish bin by the side of the stage where they are all kept. I pick it up in slow motion to avoid banging it but then someone bumps

me and there is a dull thud. A dozen people turn and shush me ... making ten times as much noise.

Ho hum.

My scene consists of standing on the stage looking dumb. (No problem.) Then I get to hand my sword to the King so he can ceremoniously name Malcolm as his heir.

Back in the wings, I can't resist the temptation: I send a viewpoint into the audience to look around. I look through the viewpoint, but keep filming through my eyes. My strange compromise.

I move along the front row: It is all old-age pensioners.

I move along the next row: It is all young children.

I move along the next row: It is all sober scholars.

I move along the next row: It is all staff and their families.

I move along the next row: It is all richly dressed women with fawning male companions.

I move along the next row: It is all richly dressed men with fawning female companions.

I move along the next row: ah, it *is* ice-cream!

Structural seating ... there's something familiar about it! But surely they wouldn't get away with doing *that* to the audience?

Why not? If we let them do it to us now, we'll let them do it to us later. Conditioning is *for life!*

Behind me, Miss McDougall begins to make soft crowing noises.

—Caww! Caww!

Someone shushes her. She giggles.

—You're sloshed

I say. A joke, of course.

Then she leans towards me and I can smell vodka on her breath.

—How can you be shertain?

she asks me with her eyes closed. I feel like saying something scolding, but what's the point? She won't foul things up. She just needs a bit of courage to watch *us* foul things up and not go off her rocker.

Another scene for me. This time I only have to stand on the stage looking dumb. The layer-cake audience snoozes happily.

In the right wing, Mulligan is at least sober. She is sitting with a red-glowing torch (stick plus rag soaked in kerosene ...) reading *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*. Someone else (sorry, animal fat not kerosene) is reading it over her shoulder.

I can't imagine why.

I am on again, this time with speech. I have pre-recorded all my lines from the rehearsals when Mulligan has said I've been OK, and I play them back in my head and say them just as I hear them.

I film the scene with an enormous horizontal compression ratio. Later, during editing, I will select the most important part of each frame and print it with the normal compression ratio ... this saves too much panning as I actually shoot ... panning shots will be simulated by printing a gradually shifting section from successive frames.

At the entrance to the hall there is a noisy struggle, then gunshots. I rush a viewpoint over (the best of intentions ...) to catch the action (I can't resist it). Another crank organisation, Friends of Stratford, are mounting an assault. They have two sub-machine-guns and a mortar. We have grenades and rifles. Blue smoke supplied by a very expensive chemical fills the end of the hall, but nobody notices. The invaders are repelled.

The Show Must Go On.

I hear the reassuring sound of the RAAF jet on patrol above.

I shouldn't worry. We're well protected.

Macbeth has just said his last piece for the scene when Seward suddenly leaps to his feet. He is in a row of the audience all of his own. He booms out:

—Would you just repeat that bit again, a little louder this time, eh? You have to *pro-ject* your voice! You have to use your lungs, my boy!

Macbeth ignores him.

Seward looks a little ruffled, but sullenly sits. There is a faint rustle of comment throughout the audience. Now *that's* entertainment!

My next scene: I stand at the end of the stage with Lady M. and Lord R. as we casually sip sherries and go over the latest castle gossip. Occasionally I glance out at the audience. The row of Neapolitan gangsters is empty ... they have gone to the end of the hall to help defend us from the Friends of Stratford. The seats are strewn with empty violin cases.

At the other end of the stage, Macbeth and Banquo are taking turns at telling each other whoppers. The fine nuances of their voices are lost amongst the resounding rifle reports.

Opening nights are always chaotic.

Mulligan chuckles so loudly that it drowns out even the battle noises. Ought she be reading that at her age, with a weak heart and all?

I am not afraid of the Friends of Stratford. There are always the squares to count on if things get *really* sticky.

There is a long gap before my next scene, so I head for the basement to tell everyone how well it's all going. As I climb down the stairs, the light bulb above me shatters.

—Snipers!

whispers someone in the dark. I fall on my face, wiping my make-up all over the bottom stair. Behind me there are footsteps. I hold my breath. They approach the top of the stairs, where my sheepskin-boot-shod feet are clumsily caught. Then there is a yell, and a suspicious-looking figure in jungle green is lying beside me on the stairs.

—Who are you?

I ask irritably. Things aren't turning out all that well.

—Je suis avec les Amis de Stratford, succursale parisienne!

He bites a false tooth and expires quietly.

This is all beginning to remind me of *Casino Royale*.

The Big Banquet Scene is next, one of the most vital parts of the entire play. There is sure to be an attempt to sabotage it ... perhaps poison. I rush upstairs to tell Mulligan.

She has finished the book (she is a very fast reader) but she has started a new one, *Portnoy's Complaint*. I tap her on the shoulder. She shoves me away. I stand behind her and whisper urgently:

—The Friends of Stratford managed to get a sniper into the basement, and I think they may have got to the food for the banquet and tampered with it. What should we do?

She spins around angrily, says:

—You're all supposed to be responsible actors capable of handling these sorts of minor crises! Don't come whingeing to me every time some little thing goes wrong! Fix it yourself!

She turns back to her paperback.

I stiffen my upper lip, raise my chin, square my shoulders. This is very uncomfortable, but necessary. This is my chance to do something positive, something worthwhile! This is my chance to show them all that I can handle anything, that even when the going gets tough I will never crack!

And that sort of thing.

I rush back down the stairs to the basement. The banquet scene starts in ten minutes, and the barrel of Kentucky Fried and the bottle of Coke are on a tray ready to be taken up. They are both unopened, but careful inspection reveals tiny punctures in the lids of both. I flush them down a toilet then leave the hall by the back entrance. The closest telephone is in the office at the other end of the school, and I have to get that food delivered in eight minutes! In the cool night sky, the RAAF jet is fighting off FOS helicopters armed with atomic missiles.

I sprint along the side of the school, ducking sprays of bullets and dodging infrared lasers. I make it to the office with six minutes to go.

I flick quickly through the telephone book, find the number, dial.

—I want a barrel of chicken and one bottle of Coke immediately!

I gasp.

In the distance I hear the sirens of the police escort. Minutes later, the food is in my hands.

I dash back to the hall, in the back entrance, up the stairs.

At the entrance to the stage, a fire is raging. Twice I try to make it through the heat and smoke, but it is impossible. There is only one solution ... a compromise.

I pour the Coke over the flames. They are vanquished in a cloud of unwholesome vapours.

The servants are just carrying the table onto the stage. I am in time!

The scene goes without a hitch, except that we are forced to drink air from our Made-In-Japan imitation stoneware mugs.

Ho hum.

At least I've managed to get some drama into an otherwise dull evening.

It is intermission.

Everyone is soon downstairs, noisily discussing how terrible and how great everything has been. The FOS take a break in the fighting and come and join us for coffee. Miss Mulligan and Miss McDougall arrive.

—Not bad at all

concedes Miss Mulligan cautiously. Everyone beams.

Miss McDougall hiccups and nods in agreement.

Then they hand out plans for the battle. Modern weapons will be abandoned, and we will fight the Friends of Stratford on the stage with broadswords. It is all, of course, choreographed by an IBM computer. We can't have any nasty accidents.

And then Seward arrives. I start to sweat profusely.

Cliché! (Not really, but it is used *very* often.)

I hide behind a row of costumes.

—Congratulations, everyone, it's been *really good* so far, *really smashing*! You've managed to keep me *really interested* in the play, which, if I may say so, is

A Joke.

—*pretty darn hard* with dull stuff like Shakespeare! Well done! I'd just like to say one thing, though: try to speak up more, *pro-ject* your voices, *use* your lungs, put some *visible effort*

Constipated gestures.

—into those lines. See if you can wake the neighbourhood! I've been interested in Public Speaking for some time, and in my opinion

Someone casually drops a sack over his head. He ignores it and keeps on speaking. Miss Mulligan nods at a production assistant, who discreetly points Seward in the direction of the door and begins to walk him out of the dressing room.

For the next half of the play, we have abandoned the original plot (well, mainly) and decided on a new interpretation of the play's theme ... of all-out bloody slaughter. In deftly executed, perfectly practised strokes, the entire cast cavorts around the stage poking sharp, heavy bits of steel into each other, and into the Friends of Stratford, who do likewise to each other and to us. I am destined to get it through the ribs early in the scene, but the blade thuds harmlessly against a hard square of metal which materialises in just the right spot at just the right moment. To avoid mucking up the whole scene, I collapse and play dead (which means getting trodden on quite a bit, but one really can't be squeamish about these things).

In the basement, the dead are revitalised with large shots of adrenalin and high-voltage electric shocks, ready for the next performance. I sneak away from the queue of cadavers and run home in the brisk midnight air.

Opening nights are always chaotic.

Of course tomorrow will be different ... the experience of our first *real* performance, in front of an audience, will give us more confidence ... Mulligan says we'll probably be too cocky.

And after that there are two more ...

It is the last night. Despite the repetitiveness of doing the play for four nights running, it has not been boring, it has not been monotonous. It has been exciting and interesting every time. And at the celebration, as we present the Producers with large bottles of Scotch, we are all, despite the exhaustion, despite the little scratches, and despite the minor brain damage, sad that it is over.

Chapter 19

STANDING UP

It is very nearly the end of my fourth year here.

Four down and one to go.

Should I feel jubilant or triumphant or relieved or lucky or thankful that I have managed to survive here for so long?

No. Because I have not really survived.

True, I am basically physically intact, and I have not been ideologically altered (corrupted) to any great extent as far as I can tell, but the sheer enormity of the proportion of my time which I have spent (proportion even of my whole *life* which I have spent) at this accursed/cherished (*cherished?*) place over the last four years means that I have become irreversibly and frighteningly bonded to Fenkirk Vale Senior High School.

What a vile-sounding name that is! I hate even to think it aloud in my head. Just 'Fenkirk Vale', or even just 'Fenkirk' still makes me shudder with the ugliness of the sound. I write it on a piece of paper; it even looks ugly. Those two k's have something to do with it, but it's hard to say just what ...

I am terrified of leaving and I am nauseated by being here. I am frightened by the prospect of never again attending a class here, never again eating lunch here, never again wandering around aimlessly recording irrelevant trivia.

There is nothing else I *really* know how to do.

Yet I loathe the place.

Or do I? I loathe Seward and I loathe McArnold, and I am disgusted in varying degrees by almost every teacher in the place. I hate the monotony and the repetition and the narrow-mindedness and absurdity and dishonesty that is school life.

But the place? After spending nearly half my waking life here for the past four years, despite the boredom and the inflexibility and the downright depressing *ideas* behind it all, it has become a part of me sunk in so deep that it cannot be cut out by simple surgery.

Which produces a hard-to-describe feeling.

There is no solution: I am here for a predetermined period of time that is simultaneously too long and too short. There is nothing to be gained by analysing the situation; there is everything to be gained by hiding from the situation: blissful unawareness of any problem.

Today is the last day of high school for the fifth years.

For eternity.

They are not sad, are they? No, they are ecstatic and drunk with freedom as I will be on that day! (Won't I?)

But they are autographing each other's shirts and photographing each other and the school and the teachers because eternity is a very long time

Trite crap clichéd emotional—

Oh, get stuffed.

and they don't want to look back on five blank years; they want as many reference points as possible; they want to fill those years with multicoloured pictures of people and places and events.

Because if five years is empty it might just as well have been a tenth of a second while your mind was blank, a blink of the eye ...

And this is the last day, their last chance to make lumps that they can associate with those five years. If there is a big, bright, clear reference point at the end of those five years, a kind of easy-to-see tag, then smaller lumps will be easier to find, by reference to its presence.

Or that's the theory.

This morning I felt pessimistic about ever getting any spools out of my brain cavity, so I did something unusual. I bought a twenty-shot black-and-white film cartridge, and I brought my still camera to school. It is disgusting to use in comparison with my built-in equipment: it has a fixed focal length, aperture, shutter speed, and focussing distance. But it is outside my head. It used to give me security that all my film was stored in my brain, with me all the time so I could never lose it. I am beginning to prefer to have something that I can hold in my hand or put in a photo album, even if it is an amateur snapshot.

Traditionally, the fifth years are allowed incredible once-in-a-lifetime privileges on the last day. This year they have been 'given' the oval for the morning. There they will throw fruit and eggs and flour at each other and any teachers game enough to come within range.

I have arrived early but there is not much happening yet. I glimpse some preparations going on: groceries being assembled into convenient ballistic units, foul-smelling sticky concoctions being mixed. I take a few photographs of these but they are almost a waste of film.

The 'agreement' was to limit everything to the oval but it is not strictly honoured. As the siren approaches, an egg fight begins in the corner of the quadrangle near the English office.

I try to catch an egg leaving somebody's hand but it is all happening too fast. I'm not used to this dreadful contraption. The best I can get is a splattered yoke on the ground. Not too exciting.

Ho hum.

And then a group armed with choice extra-large sixty-gram ovoids approach the English office, disappear inside. I wait by the door. There is a noise inside, and then they are running out. Miss Mulligan appears at the door, an egg in her hand. She brings her arm back. I click, wind as rapidly as my fumbling fingers will let me, then click again. I miss the egg in mid-air but I catch her arm in a position that leaves no doubt: the egg was thrown.

I also miss the egg splattering on Lady M.'s head.

You can't have everything (with such low technology).

Then the siren goes and I have English in Room G.

I sit near the window and occasionally take snaps of the change rooms: they are being used as 'bases' for the skirmishes on the oval. I capture a few battle-scarred students but the distance is too great for really good pictures. Of course, with my eyes I use a much longer focal length for perfect close-ups, but who will ever see them but me?

At recess another good shot: A Maths teacher and a fifth year struggling with a tube of glue which squirts its sticky contents over bags and benches. I have only a few shots left.

After recess the fifth years have an assembly in the hall: a 'final word' from Seward. I would love to be there. Surely they will jeer at him and interrupt him and scream at him and do everything they have wanted to do since his reign began?

No.

They will not do anything, because habits are too hard to break.

I do not send a viewpoint to peek in through a window. I have no right, somehow. Or maybe I just lack the courage. I don't really want to know everything. I don't really want to know anything much at all. So few bits of the universe really please me.

It is nearly lunchtime, and it is all over. They will never return here, and they will have only memories of feelings which will fade with time.

I sit on the southern lawn eating lunch. I have done it five hundred times before but I will greatly regret it when I will eat here no more.

Ho hum.

The heat becomes just enough to be irritating and depressing. My skin seems dead, thick, dull; my mind also.

I hear a faint sound: singing. I look around but I cannot see the source. Then I recognise the direction. There is something approaching, down the street that runs along the side of the school. I jump up, run to the side of the road.

Coming towards me is a procession. Every fifth year is in it, and many of the fourth years who have done one-year courses. There are about one hundred people.

At the front, two people are holding an enormous banner, which reads: POWER TO THE STUDENTS.

They are half-singing, half-chanting, over and over and over:

We love Fenkirk!

Yes we do!

Fenkirk we love you!

Suddenly the name does not sound ugly any more.

It is not a violent demonstration, it is not a show of dissatisfaction with anything. It is exactly what they say it is: an act of love.

Not love for the education system or the curriculum or the building, but for the indescribable but *tangible* realness of five years of their lives with each other and the teachers and other students, *and* with the building and the curriculum and the education system.

I get directly in front of them and take a photo head on, then as they pass (to the wild cheering of everyone around) I take another one. I have one shot left.

Halfway down the school they turn into the entrance to the Western Quadrangle, and they march down past the canteen. The entire school congregates around them, clapping and whistling and cheering.

As they pass the canteen they try to turn right towards the administration offices, but the Principal Mistress stands like a statue in their path. They will not push past her: there must be no hint of violence. They walk straight on, out towards the car park, leaving her mouth flapping in the breeze.

And *then* they turn right, following the road which starts at the swimming pool and passes the hall to run along the full length of the north side of the main school building. I run after them. Something is going to happen.

As they reach the end of the school, they turn right once more, taking them in front of the administration offices. I try to follow but it is too congested, I double back, go into the small concrete

quadrangle, cross the width of the school, and arrive in time to see that they have made another right turn and they are sitting in the south-east entrance to the school, ten metres away from the offices.

And they are chanting joyously:

We love Fenkirk!

Yes we do!

Fenkirk we love you!

I am drowning in the enormity of it. And I can't get over it: they mean what they say; this is not sarcasm or satire or irony but pure truth. *And they have to get it across somehow!*

And then the inevitable arrives. Seward explodes from out of his office, comes at them, screaming wordlessly, kicking at them blindly. Spilling his sour yellow light.

—Get out! Just get out!

In his rage he says nothing else. There is no logical argument, no witty discourse. Just blind, dumb, stupid, primal anger.

Motivated by fear.

Girls scream. Hysteria spreads. They have failed. They disperse. They run.

I snap Seward standing amongst them, planting his foot in someone's kidneys. But the light is bad and it probably won't come out.

My pupils expand perfectly and I have it all in my head but so what?

And then I run too, suddenly realising that I am afraid. I run back to the southern lawn where I meet some friends and explain what has happened. They tell me that somebody put a plank across the staff-room door to keep the teachers from interfering.

But I doubt that it was necessary. There must have been a dozen 'free' teachers when the marchers came into the school, but the only people who interfered at any time were the Principal and the Principal Mistress.

We walk back into the Western Quadrangle because the public-address system is screaming and for once we want to hear what it is saying.

Seward has the microphone:

—If there are still *any* students on the school grounds by half past twelve, then they will not be allowed to come here and sit for their final exams next week. That had better be *perfectly clear*. *Any* students still here by half past twelve will not sit for their tertiary admission examinations!

We Nazi-salute the speakers.

Of course he means all *fifth-year* students. Slip of the tongue. Minor omission of clarification. We should take him literally and evacuate.

But we haven't got the guts.

Ho hum.

I am still overjoyed that it happened.

It is a Great Big Enormous *Lump!*

For those who witnessed as well as those who acted.

Deep breath.

Stand up! Sta-and up! For Fe-en-kirk!

*The schoo-ool we all adore!
Stand up! Sta-and up! For Sew-ew-ard!
Who ru-ules for ever more!
Our name we will send for-or-orward!
Our banners we'll unfurl!
Till everyone knows that Fenkirk is
The be-est school in the world!*

*Stand up! For our leader Seward! He's
A tru-uly wondrous man!
A pa-aragon of virtue and
We're a-all of us his fans!
This school just keeps impro-o-oving!
While he's around the place!
So bow down and grovel when you see
That truly angelic face!*

*Stand up! For the Hou-ouse Sy-y-y-stem!
Which brea-eaks us into four!
This hea-ealthy competi-tion
Is wha-at we've come here for!
The path (to a) true ide-ntity
Leads surely to this gate!
So fight for your House my bro-other
And you will be truly great!*

*Stand up! For the student councillors!
Our De-emocratic Right!
They are our true inspiration as
They lea-ead us in the fight!
They are the perfect pro-o-totypes
Of what we ought to be!
So vote at the next election for
The one approved nominee!*

*Stand up! For the Great McAr-arnold!
He teaches us many things!
He teaches us how to handle balls
And ru-un around in rings!
Though some may say it's pointle-ess he
Ignores his critics' cries!
For he's only doing what he does
To keep us salubrified!*

*Stand up! Sta-and up! For Fe-en-kirk!
Who teaches us right from wrong!
And gi-ives us moral fortitude!
That we may be truly strong!
Though we may face tempta-ation!
We know that we'll not fall!
Our strength doe-oes come from Fe-en-kirk!
To who-om we owe our all!*

*Stand up! Sta-and up! For Fe-en-kirk!
Who rea-eadies us for life!
Without thi-is guiding influence
We'd soo-oon be lost to strife!
And when our deaths draw near-earer and
We see that we've gone far!
We will re-remember Fe-en-kirk!
Who ma-ade us what we are!*

I would like to add a verse to commemorate this day, but it would not fit. It would be out of place. The song is so disillusioned and mocking, but today somehow feels different from every other day I've spent here. I don't know how to fit it to the rest of my feelings.

Four down and one to go!

Chapter 20

RELEASE

I pick up the razor-sharp square and then I slice open my head. I begin to bleed. I cut a hole in my skull just above my eye. The pain is horrible.

Then with two fingers I reach into the hole and probe around. I am right; the cavity is crooked in a fourth spatial dimension, and it is very big, nearly as big as my entire head. I know intuitively where the release prints of my best works are kept. I grab them. They are, of course, 35 mm high, but the film is so thin that, although each print is a full three hours long, the spools are only a few millimetres in diameter. I drop the spools onto my desk, then withdraw my fingers.

The three squares rise into mid-air, shining a blinding blue-white. The wound is hey-presto healed. The pain is gone.

I feel a little faint from loss of blood but otherwise it all might not have happened.

It didn't happen. I do not have the will-power to cut myself that deeply, and I doubt if the squares would go through bone.

All I can do is fantasise; all I can *ever* do is fantasise. They are locked in there, beyond my reach forever. I have been obsessed with the idea of getting them out for several years, yet my brain has not managed to grow a door, an exit, a chute ... anything.

Short cut-away to fantasy sequence: The surgeon walks into the room, shakes my hand, says:

—I'm sure that I'll be able to help you. Just a minor incision is all that's required. Just sign this document, giving me sixty per cent of your gross domestic and overseas takings ...

Some chance. Not even for one hundred per cent would they do it. Arrogant ignorants.

I want to parachute into the middle of Perth to see what the perspective is like (I've tried it with a viewpoint, but it's just not the same (I think)).

I want to look out the window as I smash a rocket into Mars at a kilometre a second.

I want to fall down a well.

I want to build a fifty-storey building out of pure magnesium, and then set fire to it.

And that sort of thing.

And then I want to project what I have seen onto a very big white screen in front of a darkened room full of people.

That's the hard part.

Ho hum.

I can only dream.

Who will handle my films?

MGM?

United Artists?

Paramount?

Cinema International?

Columbia?

Twentieth Century Fox?

I can only dream.

There is a way around my problem. I could buy a movie camera, start a film company.

But where would I get the money? Even 16 mm cameras cost a fortune, let alone 35 mm. And processing and film stock costs. And editing equipment, and lighting equipment (I get by with what's there, but I couldn't with normal cameras and films). And sound-mixing equipment ...

And it wouldn't be the same. It would all be technically inferior to what I'm used to working with. And it would not be through my eyes, it would be through a heavy, cumbersome piece of machinery.

I *must* find a way.

The rabbit could help me, but when will I hear from him again?

The squares will do nothing to help me, no matter how I plead. They seem to be made only to assist me when it is a matter of life and death.

Well, this is almost ...

Shut up.

I go outside. The air is cool and there is a faint breeze. The sun has just gone down, and the sky is half pale-pink, half pale-blue. There is not a cloud in the sky, but there is a shining near-full moon and Jupiter is easily visible.

It is still amazing to me that the moon does not move when I move; there is no parallax at all that I can detect. It really is as far away as they say. I keep expecting it to move against the infinitely distant sky. Now I must think of it as a glowing white navel painted on that distant dome.

At least, in one half of my mind that does not believe that the Earth and the moon are twin planets circling the sun circling the galactic centre rushing out as part of an expanding (for now) Universe.

I begin to hum the music from *The Outcasts* which was a television series but was good despite that.

Generalisations always have exceptions, and are hence worthless. Always.

It blends without much trouble into the theme from *Exodus* which brings tears to my eyes not because of the sadness of the film, but just because of the music itself. They are not tears of sadness.

The sky seems to get bigger, the horizon to get farther away, but it's just me, subconsciously changing focal lengths.

I start on 'Greensleeves' and the tears pour down my cheeks. What a pathetic sight. Then the theme music from *The Collector* and I am smiling as I am crying.

The tall American politician starts to say something, but I send him away. I'm really not in the mood for his particular brand of taunting.

I send a viewpoint out to catch the silhouette of my head against the pink-and-blue sky. What an odd shape it is.

The sky is *beautiful*. I drop the viewpoint down to ground level, then charge with it up into the pink nothingness until the colour begins to desaturate.

The grass is just beginning to go from green to grey. I have never seen commercial film capture this time of day convincingly.

But I've done it myself.

I seem to remember an ice-cream van somewhere, once.

If I could convince somebody to operate ...

But I've tried for years with no luck. Perhaps if I had the money to pay for an operation like that ... but that would be more than I've got, more than I'm likely to ever have.

Ho hum.

I want to jump through a plate-glass window. How would that look on a fifty-foot screen?

A thought: perhaps I should get my nose cut off. It shows up as a faint blurred shadow superimposed on any shots of very close objects.

Tough: it's ultra-realism. Isn't that the Aim? Every scene looks just as if You Were There. Wearing my nose.

There'd be a lot of publicity, a big Première in New York or London or maybe Los Angeles. Hundreds of important film critics wanting to see the first movie actually shot through human eyes.

What if they don't like it?

There's always that risk. And who cares about critics, anyway! I certainly don't. The public will love it (not that I should care about them either, but) I can feel it in my bones!

Cliché!

I can only dream. *No! I can do something about it!*

I can *keep on* asking surgeons, and I can *keep on* thinking about it in the hope that my brain will get the hint, and I can *keep on* trying to contact the rabbit.

It's better than nothing. It must be.

To cheer myself up, I start to whistle the theme from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, then I switch to the marching music from the end of *Catch-22*.

And then 'Sanctus'.

What's the use in moping?

And then *Cabaret*.

All the recordings inside my head are sure to be illegal by the Copyright Act but the circumstances are probably so exceptional that I would not be prosecuted. How can you be charged with remembering something too well?

(Silly question if you've read *1984* ...)

Though there might be legal problems if I try to exhibit those movies, with their sound tracks pirated from miscellaneous music I've picked up over the years. I'll have to get permission (*buy* permission) from all the individual sources.

And that sort of thing.

Brain, take note: I want a music-composition section built as soon as possible.

I wish I could show everyone what it looks like to fall face down in a field of flowers. They've probably done it themselves but closed their eyes. I get around it by filming through my eyes but looking through a viewpoint, to help stop my reflexes. Of course my inner ear still notices that something is amiss, but my brain believes its eyes (stupid fool). The sore nose is worth it and not too bad when the ground is soft.

My dandruff is getting terrible. I must do something about it.

Maybe I could persuade my brain to grow a light source so I could project the film back with my eyes; the optics are flexible enough to accommodate it, I think.

Work on it. Read books about projectors and lighting devices. There's always a chance. Fluorescent organic compounds? Go look it up, there must be a way.

I wonder how much it cost to film *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. What a dull film, but what a lot of work went into it. I suppose they hired those tanks. I could never be a movie producer: all that complexity, all that administrative work. Of course I'd have assistants and secretaries but still there'd be *so many things to think of* to be sure nothing went wrong. I'd go mad.

Perhaps I should become a humanist film-maker and only produce films revealing evil and injustice, like *Z*. But they all have to be either true, in which case it has to be a foreign government that I expose or I'll get *zapped*, or generally applicable matters, in which case everybody hates me.

Or I could just go around the world filming the sixty or seventy or whatever percentage of the population who are all starving. But what good would it do? If it was All Proceeds to UNICEF then people might come into the cinemas to be air-conditioned for an hour or two in exchange for ten cents out of their six dollars going to India hopefully not for bombs, but it is necessary to completely change half the world's way of thinking before any real good can be done, and I could never make a film that would do that.

Try as I might (won't). Even with a big screen there is not enough impact, not enough certainty of concentration. Maybe *The Exorcist* can drive them insane and *Jaws* can keep them off the beaches, but can a film make them give up their cars and their pot bellies and their colour TVs? Will *Ghandi*?

No.

My head is itching terribly.

My eyes are sore. Blindness is what I fear more than anything else. I don't ever dream about it, I don't dare.

Why should I let myself get so depressed when I realise that there is nothing I can do about it at all? The best thing to do is just to live as simply as I can, without luxuries, give what money I can, trying not to think about the smallness of the effects.

It's the thought that counts.

Bullshit! It is hard cash that counts.

Cliché.

The tall American politician only needs to smile. Or rather sneer. He knows how mad it makes me feel. His glasses are mirrored now.

Should I make films to make people happy or to make them understand what the world is like and hence make them sad? Should I take them away from this grimy planet into the cold, clean depths of sterile space, or should I rub their noses in the ghettos?

And what would I know about either?

I once read that movie-makers should use opinion polls to find out what the public wants to see. *Great!* Positive feedback for every decadent force in society. Reminds me of Rome.

Why the blurriness?

Ah, and how should I portray schools? Sentimentally? Sarcastically? It all depends on where you point the camera and what music is on the sound track.

When I was very, very, very young I kept promising myself that when I was older I would be a champion of 'Children's Liberation' battling for the rights of preschoolers. I was convinced that I would never ever forget what it was like, that I would never betray myself.

I have forgotten and I have betrayed myself.

Sometimes that makes me sad, and yet I cannot bring myself to do all the things that I promised myself I would do. They all seem so ridiculous, and I am afraid of ridiculousness. Besides, children are probably all different now, wanting different things, looking at everything from different angles.

I brood so much lately. Something about the fifth years leaving has put a churning disquiet into my bloodstream. I'm starting to see my future, and I don't know what to do with the mottled shapes and

the mocking voices. I'm so far now from the perfect womb-time. I want crystal-clear certainty of a pattern in the future as perfect as that pattern of the distant past.

Sometimes I just want to go to sleep, to sleep forever. There's no responsibility (what would I know?), no decisions. Everything is quite inevitable in dreams, and even in the worst nightmares the consequences are never that bad.

But I just keep waking up.

I wish the rabbit were here to mock me. His comments were always kinder than the others'. I can't believe that I was responsible for all his actions. I can't. He was too much fun. In retrospect.

Shut up. Switch off. Shut down. Elegant eloquence today!

It is nearly the end of the holidays; there are just two (short) weeks left (well, you have long and short tons ...). So many teachers and students left last year, everything will be different ... but I'll soon get used to it and it will seem eternal once more.

It will be too long and too short.

Happy and sad.

Exciting and boring.

Beautiful and ugly.

All at once, mixed in so thoroughly that you have to look hard to see all the individual components.

Right now, what I want more than anything else is to grab my mind and my life and shake it back and forth until, by magic, it takes on the perfect form that will guarantee that it will be worthwhile and happy.

An explosion of unfocussed light and I am dizzy, panicking, *blind*. My head is burning, my scalp feels like it has been torn with a can opener. I squeeze my eyes in pain and spinning yellow-and-green patterns writhe in front of me.

I wake on the ground, my right hand over my head, sticky with dried blood. The blindness has left me, and there is only a little pain as I take my hand away and disturb the newly formed scab.

Something must have fallen on my head: a rock or a piece of metal.

Fallen? From where, an aeroplane? Perhaps someone hit me.

Think: first thing to do is to wash it, disinfect it, then get to a doctor in case of concussion.

I walk inside. My balance is fine, there is no pain actually *within* my head anymore. I try to feel the shape of the rip in my skin but I pull my hand away from the pain.

Gutless!

Shut up.

At least this has stopped my stupid brooding.

Reality intrudes.

Whatever.

Into the bathroom. I run the cold water through the shower, put my head under, jerk it out with a loud exclamation, then force it back under. Blood splashes on the bath and the wall. My hair has stuck together into a solid mass around the wound, and does not seem to be separating. I turn on a little hot water and the hard clots begin to break up.

Just as I think I have washed away all the blood, the wound begins to bleed again. I turn off the shower, grab a towel, and press it against my head. Then I sit and wait for the bleeding to stop.

I count to a thousand. Then I take away the towel and feel around the wound. There is a roughly circular perimeter which I feel around, not going in any further than the edges. Then I brace myself, move my index finger, up in the air, over the spot where the centre of that circle would be, and then I bring it down, slowly.

It touches *soft membrane*, but there is no pain. I push a little ...

There is no bone underneath.

I explore the velvety tissue with the tip of my finger. As I approach the edge of the circle, there is a slit, like a deep cut, or a fish's gill. There is no pain as I prod the opening.

Then I put my thumb and index finger below the flap of flesh.

Underneath there are five hard, long, thin cylinders. I grip them one at a time and drop them carefully onto the towel.

I just hope hair will grow back on the soft spot.

I pick up one spool, examine it closely.

Standard-position sprocket holes and all!

The film is kept from unwinding by a tiny transparent sheath over the spool. I slip it off. The film begins to curl out from natural elasticity. I hold it up to the light.

I unravel several metres before I recognise which one it is. I have never seen film *this* way before, the way every other film-maker knows it.

Then I wind it up tightly, replace the sheath.

I leave the spools on the towel while I clean up the bathroom, then I slip them into my pocket and put the towel in a bucket of water to soak out the blood.

I think I am grinning. I'm sure I look foolish. I very much like the angle at which the sun comes in through the bathroom window.

I take the spools up to my room, arrange them in a row on my desk. Then I sit there. I just sit there and stare at them.

I go to a mirror and work out how to brush my hair so it covers the soft membrane. I run down to the bathroom and put some detergent in the bucket with the towel. I wash and dry my face, straighten my clothing. Then I walk back to my room and lean in the doorway. They're still there.

Only then do I scream with a voice that shakes my universe:

—I'VE DONE IT!